Jerry A. Jacobs

9. The English Landed Aristocracy and the Rise of Capitalism: Status Maximization and Economic Change

Explanations of social change examine the relationship between developments in the economy and social structure and transformations of values, ideas, and ideologies. Both Marxian and Parsonsian perspectives posit the existence of a basic congruence between value structures and social structures, and hold that value systems change in step with changes in the social system. However, an historical examination of normative systems reveals a more complex picture. Some beliefs evolve in form and content as the social situation changes, while others prove remarkably intractable in the face of seemingly incompatible circumstances. This paper is intended to contribute to the development of a framework to describe changes in the value structure of the European aristocracies which may be extended to other status groups. The development of this framework should be useful not only to students of ideas, but also to students of the social and economic history of the industrial revolution. I draw on a range of historical sources and offer a reinterpretation of this material from a sociological vantage point.

The English landed aristocracy played a vastly different role in the emergence of a market economy than did its French counterpart. However, I believe that these two aristocracies responded in fundamentally similar ways to the emergence of a market economy despite the marked differences in their eventual fates. In each case, the landed aristocracy made concessions to economic reality in seeking to preserve and enhance its social status. My concern is to elucidate in a systematic manner the interplay of social status and its economic underpinning.

Max Weber distinguished class, status, and party as three separate but related aspects of inequality (Gerth and Mills, 1946). While these distinctions are familiar to students of sociology, they are rarely employed in actual sociological research. In this essay I show that the continuity of one of

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these dimensions, status, is crucial to understanding the motivation of the English aristocracy during the transition to the modern economic era. The English aristocracy, I argue, unwittingly aided in the fundamental alteration of class relations in its efforts to preserve its social status.

I propose a model of status maximization that distinguishes the obligations of conspicuous consumption from prohibitions on inappropriate acquisitive behavior. One aspect of this value structure can take on a modern form while the other remains locked in a more traditional orientation. In England, the aristocracy rationalized its acquisitive practices in order to underwrite traditional consumption patterns. The English aristocracy was willing to relax its disdain for detailed attention to estate administration. Thus, it played a crucial role in the emergence of agrarian capitalism, not as a capitulation to bourgeois values but as a means of maintaining its traditional conception of social status.

The Landed Aristocracy and the Rise of Capitalism

The focus on status maximization stems from my dissatisfaction with the two prevailing approaches to understanding the historical role of the English aristocracy. The Marxian view sees the English aristocracy as a capitalist agricultural class that ruled on behalf of capitalist interests. The "open elite" view maintains that the distinctive feature of the English aristocracy was its willingness to accept the successful merchants into its ranks.

The Marxian approach to the emergence of capitalism holds that during decisive moments of conflict the bourgeoisie seized the political reigns of society, and transformed the world in its own image. The English Civil War and the French Revolution are two crucial instances for the application of this thesis, especially the former, since England was the site of the emergence of the modern capitalist order (Moore, 1966).

There are many difficulties with this view. The historiography of the English Civil War remains contested: many historians, for example, dispute the social composition of various factions in the conflict (Hexter, 1961; Stone, 1985; Goldstone, 1986). The bourgeoisie itself, however, appears to have played a relatively minor role in this episode. Equally problematic is the fact that political power in England remained in the hands of the landed aristocracy from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth and even into the nineteenth century (Cannon, 1984).

If the English Civil War is to be called a bourgeois revolution, it must be because the conflict set the stage for the economic emergence of the bourgeoisie. Both political power and social preeminence remained in the hands of the landed aristocracy. While the Marxist approach is of undoubted value in focusing attention on the discontinuities of change, especially on the decisive transformation of class relations, elaboration of the role of particular institutions and values inevitably draws on Weberian concepts.

The "open elite" view has a long history and a coterie of noted proponents, including Tocqueville (1955). This view assumes that the presumed acceptability of business for the English aristocracy resulted from the entrance of sons of commerce into its ranks. Yet there are even more serious difficulties with this view than with the Marxian. Stone and Stone (1984) have presented impressive empirical evidence indicating that this elite was not nearly so open as has been assumed. Further, the English aristocracy remained quite ambivalent about industrialization well into the nineteenth century (Mingay, 1976).

Did the English landed aristocracy aid in the emergence of industrial capitalism? Did the great English landlords acquiesce in this change, or did the wheels of history turn despite their efforts to hold them back? How can we understand the value structure of the English aristocracy that held merchants and industrialists in disdain while it advanced policies that promoted business and commerce? I will examine the value structure of the English landed aristocracy in order to understand its economic and social contributions to the transformation of the English feudal order to capitalism. The contrast with the French nobility will put the case of England in comparative perspective.

Status Ethics Require Consumption and Restrict Acquisition

The term "status ethic" refers to various norms governing the conduct of a status group. I am particularly concerned with norms of consumption and norms of acquisition. Certain expenditures are expected of members of a status group, but there is only a limited range of acquisitive practices that is acceptable to them. Aristocrats must live lavishly, but must not concern themselves with acquiring "filthy" lucre. As Weber defines a status group:

> In contrast to classes, status groups are normally communities. They are, however, often of an amorphous kind. In contrast to the purely economically determined "class situation" we wish to designate as "status situation" every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor. . . . In content, status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from those who wish to belong to the circle. (Weber, in Gerth and Mills, 1946: 186–87)

A status ethic, then, includes a set of prescriptions and proscriptions relating to carrying out the style of life of the status group. For present purposes, acquisition encompasses all action that increases or is intended to increase the income or wealth of an individual or his or her family. Consumption encompasses all expenditures except those intended to increase income or wealth.

The distinction between acquisition and consumption is needed to avoid confusion about the nature and extent of the transformation of the values of the English landlords. It is clear that their attitudes concerning consumption remained firmly aristocratic: oriented to the conspicuous demonstration of status. The transformation of their values involved the limited acceptance of new approaches to acquiring money, and this change occurred precisely to provide the economic basis for their conspicuous consumption.

The aristocratic emphasis on display sets the group apart by indicating its power and social preeminence (Elias, 1983). The restrictions on acquisitive behavior, however, may be more difficult to understand. Why should a dominant group restrict itself from potential sources of income such as industry and trade? This question takes on particular interest in historical hindsight, for the acquisitive practices scorned by the aristocracies of Europe became the basis for riches beyond their imagination.

There is a religious element in the ambivalence toward money makers, as the Catholic Church has historically looked with disfavor on materialism (Weber, 1958; Nelson, 1969). However, the incompatibility of aristocracy and "mean" occupations dates back to ancient Greece, and thus is not simply an artifact of Christian theology (Finley, 1973; Weber, 1976). The aristocratic disdain for commerce and industry goes beyond a religious rejection of worldly affairs: it is a central aspect of its claim to purity and high status.

The systematic pursuit of money interferes with the leisurely pursuits that distinguish the truly established from the merely wealthy. Being rich is the source of admiration, but *acquiring* great wealth makes one suspect because it is incompatible with a life devoted to refinement. Further, the aristocratic rejection of commerce originated at a time when the profitability of such endeavors was far smaller than that of a great estate.

There is a fair degree of autonomy between acquisition and consumption. For example, a group may display a systematic, calculating, and innovating attitude toward acquisition while maintaining a traditional pattern of consumption. Still, the notion of autonomy cannot be taken too far. Total expenditures cannot stray far beyond the limits of total income for very long, only as long as credit holds out. Thus, while attitudes concerning acquisition and consumption are somewhat independent, they also act as constraints on one another. Conspicuous consumption will quickly foil the most systematic and persistent attempts to accumulate wealth, as an empty purse will sooner or later frustrate the extravagant spender. However, the balance of income and expenditure that is of primary interest here is the balance for the status group as a whole. Individuals or families may fall out of the group without significantly lowering the expected levels of consumption for the remaining members. Only when the sources of income of the group as a whole fall, or the levels of consumption rise, are the values of the group modified.

If consumption and acquisition come to be imbalanced, how will the conflict be resolved? Will consumption fall into line with a lower level of acquisition, or will income, through unflagging efforts, be brought up to the level of expected expenditure? Is there autonomous movement of consumption that acquisition must follow? Or does consumption faithfully follow income, increasing as income increases but never acting as an independent agent?

This paper offers a framework for analyzing the choices status groups make in response to these dilemmas. I will argue that consumption may have an independent effect on acquisitive behavior. The demands of conspicuous consumption may help to create a more systematic, calculating concern for ways to increase income, as was evident in the English case. The group temporarily sacrifices one component of its status system in order to preserve the larger whole.

It is ironic that the demands of lavish aristocratic lifestyles—virtually the polar opposite of the Protestant work ethic that Weber described—made a historically important contribution to the emergence of the modern economic order. However, changes in accepted practices of acquisition, historically important or not, need not change the nature of a status group if these changes are designed to maintain other elements of the status ethic.

In the framework I am proposing, Weber's third element, political power, plays a role in helping to set the context for both status and economics. The conflict between nobility and monarchy is a central feature of European politics, from the rise of the absolutist state through the First World War (Anderson, 1974; Mayer, 1981). The crown can be of decisive importance in the status maximization equation. By requiring attendance at court, for example, the king can preclude serious attention to details of estate administration while requiring major outlays for conspicuous display, as was the case in France under Louis XIV (Elias, 1983). Granting of titles was a constant source of concern to the European aristocracies, for it threatened the stability of the status hierarchy (Goodwin, 1967; Spring, 1977). Finally, the legal basis of noble status, including the extent of tax exemption, terms of inheritance, and enforcement of these regulations, were vital to the social standing of the landed nobility and central in their calculations of status. A more complete model of status groups would have to pay greater attention to the political role of the nobility that can be done here.

The Transformation of the English Landed Aristocracy

I will outline the principal elements of the status ethic of the English aristocracy as these existed in the sixteenth century. Subsequently, the effect of changing economic conditions on acquisition and consumption will be sketched. Finally, I will compare these developments with those of the French aristocracy.

The Peerage in England was a much smaller group than the titled French nobility. Moreover, membership in the Peerage did not carry the privilege of tax exemption as in most other European countries. Thus, it is appropriate to include the wealthiest gentry along with the Peerage in the English aristocracy. Many historians have made such a grouping on the basis of important similarities in the social situation of the gentry and the Peerage (Bush, 1984; Stone and Stone, 1984).

By the sixteenth century, the English aristocracy had long since lost its military role, and had become transformed into a landed nobility controlling local politics and influencing national affairs. Remnants of an ideology of chivalry remain to this day as part of the value orientation of English elites, but this is not of concern to this study.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that the great English landlords constituted a relatively unified status group. Several types of conspicuous consumption characterized this group. First, the great landlord was expected to own and maintain a great house.

> The other, unacknowledged, reason for extravagant building was in order to satisfy a lust for power, a thirst for admiration, an ambition to outstrip all rivals, and a wish to create a home suitable for the residence of a nobleman—a particularly urgent incentive to one whose patent was still fresh from the mint. (Stone, 1965: 551–52)

A stay in London during "the season" was a second type of expected consumption. The annual stay in London, together with the ownership of a great house, has been described as the essential status symbol of this group. The practice developed in the late sixteenth century as London grew in economic and political importance, and was well established by the beginning of the seventeenth century (Fisher, 1948).

A third important aspect of the expected consumption of the great landlords was the education of its youth (Stone, 1977). Education is included as consumption because it constituted a considerable expenditure that helped to separate members of the group from outsiders. The English elite's commitment to education also distinguished it from many of the continental nobilities, many of whom remained poorly educated through the eighteenth century (Goodwin, 1967). Even before 1600, the practice of educating the sons, and sometimes even the daughters, of the aristocracy was prevalent. Whether educated by private tutors or at a university, followed by a stay at one of the Inns of Court or a tour of Europe, the aristocracy reinforced its distinctive social position by conferring the refinements of education on its youth.

The English aristocracy was also characterized by certain expected methods of acquisition. The predominant source of income was the reliance on rent from landholdings. The English landlord was expected to be paternalistic toward his peasants, coming to their assistance in difficult times. The land provided great security, but typically only relatively modest rates of return on investment.

A second characteristically noble method of acquisition was the courting of royal favor. Most of the truly large landed fortunes were acquired, at least in part, in this fashion. Such a tactic, however, required a heavy outlay that was difficult to limit once begun. Frequently, the would-be favorite left the court far worse off than when he arrived (Habakkuk, 1967; Stone, 1965: 445).

A third aspect of aristocratic attitudes concerning acquisition is related to marriage. Endogamy is often seen as the defining characteristic of a status group. Yet the emphasis on a proper marriage had pronounced economic implications. The landed aristocracy preferred to marry its children to other members of the squirearchy, while a marriage to a merchant family might bring with it a sizeable fortune. The practice of marrying for money was always present, but was viewed with varying degrees of disfavor. This disfavor was relaxed during periods of economic stress, as were other components of the acquisition ethic. Marriage also involves a specific type of expected consumption. Expenses for jointures and dowries were among the most difficult burdens for the aristocracy to bear (Mingay, 1976; Stone, 1977).

Industrial activities, including coal mining and iron smelting, were considered an acceptable part of the exploitation of one's estate. The great landlords invested in canals and other commercial ventures, as is often noted. Yet the income from such sources rarely amounted to more than a modest percent of an aristocrat's income. Investment in certain business ventures was more compatible with elite status than was active management of a business enterprise. Although there may not have been a clear prohibition of industrial and commercial activity, these sources of income could hardly compete for prestige with the rolling acres of an estate (Mingay, 1976; Stone, 1965: 335–85; Habakkuk, 1967: 6).

In the sixteenth century there began a period of sustained inflation. Prices rose 500 percent between 1500 and 1650 (Goldstone, 1984). This inflation seems to have been caused partly by the influx of precious metals from America and partly by a swelling population, although Goldstone emphasizes the increased velocity of money produced by growing commerce.

What was the effect of this inflation on the great landlords? The aristocracy by and large received its income from rents set at customary levels. In a period of inflation, reliance on relatively fixed sources of income creates a decline in real income. Given this situation, either traditional consumption patterns must be sacrificed or a new method of acquisition found.

Income from royal favor remained inadequate to fill the gap until after 1602, and even then large sums and privileges were conferred on just a few families. Marriage took on an increasingly economic character. The aristocracy began to invest in industry and commerce in a limited way. Most significantly, the landed aristocracy began to rationalize estate management. The paternalistic character of landlord-tenant relations gave way to more careful calculation of profit and loss, to increasing rents, entry fines, and enclosures (Stone, 1965: 307, 375–81, 504).

The growth of markets created financial difficulties for the aristocracy but also offered them a solution. The decline in noble incomes coincided with new opportunities for growth. However, to take advantage of these opportunities, the proscription of certain types of acquisition had to be overcome. Paternalism toward tenants, preference for status over wealth in marriage, reluctance to participate in commerce and industry— all these components of the noble code of honor gave some ground during this period.

Standards of consumption were preserved at the expense of certain rules of acquisition. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the level of extravagance increased during this period. The epidemic of house building, an increase in the size of dowries, and the growth of importance of the London "season" appeared at the same time that the traditional sources of income were being undermined (Stone, 1965:550; Fisher, 1948; Mingay, 1963:59–76).

There is a debate among historians of the English Civil War as to whether or not noble incomes actually declined (Stone, 1973). The present argument assumes a marked decline, but does not depend on a "crisis" in incomes or a subsequent crisis in power and influence of this group. There were some landlords who were more responsive than others to the new market situation. The general level of income of this group would not suffer as dramatic a decline as would those individuals who lagged behind.

One statistic, however, does merit particular attention. The greatest landlords, those with the largest holdings and the most wealth, did not continue to emphasize acquisitions after they had secured a level of income sufficient to sustain their social position. Stone reports:

> There was little sign of active accumulation of more landed capital by the greater families, a policy which was well within their means. There was a financial plateau between 6,000 and 10,000 pounds a year which was ample for all reasonable needs and at which most great families were content to rest. Once arrived at this level by diligent exploitation of what they possessed, they used their income to maintain status rather than to save and reinvest so as to hoist themselves to new heights of affluence. (1965:162)

Acquisitiveness in this group was instrumental for the realizations of status goals, but did not constitute the primary driving force for change. If a landlord would cease to pursue a perfectly accepted mode of acquisition when his status was insured, it is not difficult to believe that nobles would pursue less favored activities only for as long as they needed the added income to preserve their position.

In Weber's terms, the landed elite, while creating agrarian capitalism, did not develop the "spirit of capitalism" that Puritanism bequeathed to the middle classes. The relentless, systematic pursuit of economic gain remained foreign to the orientation of English landed society, even as late as the nineteenth century. Rationalized estate management, so closely related to the fostering of agrarian capitalism, was adopted as part of an effort to preserve an aristocratic ethic. This group remained pre-capitalist in its value orientation, even while it instituted capitalist economic relations and provided a crucial stimulus to the emergence of a capitalist society.

The situation stabilized somewhat after the Restoration. The modified consumption and acquisition patterns of the early seventeenth century became entrenched. The nobility was able to moderate the level of extravagance somewhat with the development of the strict settlement. Prices began to rise again after 1750, with a steady increase in the population pushing up food costs. The English aristocracy was now in a position to take advantage of price increases by adjusting rents upward and enclosing more land. Enclosure increased the value of land two- to threefold by allowing the tenant to use more productive techniques. Enclosure, was, indeed, an expected response from landlords who had become accustomed to calculating in terms of market prices.

The substantial profit now obtained from agriculture was not reinvested in a profit-maximizing manner. Instead, profits were spent to increase consumption. The evidence suggests a sharp increase in conspicuous consumption after 1780 (Habakkuk, 1967:10; Habakkuk, 1979–81; Mingay, 1963:48). Thus, acquisitive behavior for this group can only be understood in light of the consumption patterns expected of it. Consumption and acquisition constrain one another: both must be considered if the economic behavior of the aristocracy (or any group) is to be understood.

The lifestyle of the nineteenth-century English landed elite is further evidence for the usefulness of this framework. Far from adopting bourgeois manners, nineteenth-century English landlords maintained and elaborated a country lifestyle far removed from middle class values. They were not averse to profiting from the burgeoning industrial economy, as their investments in railroads and other commercial ventures attests. However, they were unlikely to pursue venture capitalism very far, and failed to dominate industries such as coal mining in which they had been early participants. The profitability of English agriculture provided a sufficient economic base for leisure pursuits until the 1870s when a prolonged depression quickly followed by political reform changed the terms of English agriculture forever (Thompson, 1963; Mingay, 1976; Stone and Stone, 1984).

A long lineage is a status resource employed by aristocratic groups, even when the lineage in question may be quite recent. In his study of the English Peerage, Cannon found that relatively few families maintained a representation in the Peerage for as many as four generations (Cannon, 1984: 224). The great prestige of tradition was a status resource that all landed elite could draw on, even if a particular family's prominence was of recent vintage.

Yet the circulation of elites should not be understood to imply the unique openness of the English landed classes. Cannon notes that most entrants were scions of well established families, not founders of commercial fortunes. Stone and Stone have emphasized the limited mobility of founders of commercial fortunes into the higher reaches of English landed society. Recent historical accounts have emphasized the similarity in the rate of social mobility for English and continental landed elites (Cannon, 1984; Bush, 1984).

The English landed elites played a decisive role in the emergence of capitalism in transforming the countryside from a feudal to a capitalist system. Whereas feudalism rested on a set of mutual rights and obligations between lord and serf, capitalist agriculture paired independent owners and workers with no mutual obligations other than contractual ones. The decisive change was not cash versus in-kind payments, but the freedom of landholders to maximize their returns from the land, and the freedom of the agricultural workers to take whatever position paid the most. The transformation of agriculture was the precondition for the development of the industrial proletariat. As rationalized agricultural production produced a surplus of agricultural goods to feed the cities, so it produced a surplus of laborers to run the factories. The enclosure of common lands was part of a general movement to change peasants into agricultural wage laborers, a first step on the road to the industrial factory.

Why did English magnates rationalize their estate management and engage in enclosing the commons lands on such an extensive scale? English elites were able to enclose the commons partly because they were the local magistrates; as such they were in a position to advance the interests of the landed aristocracy. The weakness of the crown in protecting the peasantry was no doubt a crucial condition which facilitated this transfer. Of secondary importance was the absence of legal boundaries between the English landed elite and other social strata. Since there were no special tax exemptions linked to a titular nobility, as in most continental nobilities, the rationalization of estates was not encumbered by complication of land changing juridical status as it changed hands.

Thus the English landed classes primarily played a role in the transformation of the countryside. However, the English aristocracy acted more because there were structural opportunities for change than from a distinctive value orientation. As we will see in the comparison with the French pattern, there is a similarity in motives if not outcomes.

The response of the English elite to the crisis of declining incomes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was unique in its consequences, but the framework developed here will apply to other European nobilities as well. Let us turn to the French case for comparison.

The French Nobility

The French nobility was a large group with a complex system of social ranking. There were three major legal divisions: the *noblesse d'épée*, the members the military caste turned into a landed aristocracy; the *noblesse de robe*, the officers of the sovereign courts; and the *noblesse de cloche*, the municipal officials. The three groups shared the common privilege of exemptions from taxes (the *taille*). The nobles increasingly monopolized the higher positions in the army and the church. There was no English group quite comparable to the *noblesse de robe*, and an analysis of the unique economic and political situation of this group would divert the course of our presentation (Ford, 1965; Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1985; Elias, 1983).

Within the French nobility there existed widely disparate levels of income. As the split between court and country was much greater in France than in England, it might be appropriate to consider the gilded nobility and the provincial nobility as two separate but related groups.

The level of extravagance of the provincial nobility in France could not compare with that in England or Versailles. This fact, however, does not mean that the provincial nobility did not constitute a status group. In the context of the provinces their style of life was extravagant. More important, the expenditure of this group was intended for display, and as such can reasonably be termed conspicuous consumption.

The information on the provincial noble is rather sketchy. One study of the city of Toulouse has helped to fill this gap (Forster, 1960). The nobles in Toulouse enjoyed unchallenged social preeminence during the seventeenth century. They typically owned a summer and a winter home, had four to six servants, a pantry and an extensive wardrobe, and could afford an occasional trip to the seashore. The average noble in Toulouse had his own library, which suggests a fair degree of education. This portrait undoubtedly varied from region to region in France.

The provincial noble obtained the bulk of his income from the land. Sharecropping arrangements prevailed over most of France, although regional variations in practice abounded. It is difficult to discern any specific practices which were frowned upon in the administration of estates. The paternalism of England was much less evident. There seemed to be no inhibition concerning selling the produce of the land on the market.

Provincial nobles who had fallen into destitution sought assistance from the crown, perhaps to place a son in the army or the church, or to grant some direct aid. The crown was seen as "necessary, because without it poverty was usually inescapable" (Behrens, 1967 : 58). Resorting to marriage of a non-noble for financial gain was considered somewhat of a last resort to serious difficulty (Barber, 1955 : 99–106): this practice was viewed as a way for "old stock to 'manure its lands'" (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1985 : 123).

The aspect of the aristocratic acquisition ethic that most significantly restricted their income was in the area of industry and commerce. Derogeance, the formal loss of title, was the possible consequence of engaging in occupations thought unfitting for a noble. The institution could not exist in England in a formal sense because there was no juridical status to lose, but was common in other European monarchies (Goodwin, 1967).

How did this system originate? In 1561 and 1583 the French monarchs issued proclamations prohibiting nobles from engaging in retail trade or manual labor, on pain of losing noble status. One explanation for these rules was that the crown wanted to protect merchants from the difficult task of competing against noble businessmen who would be tax exempt. The crown thus preserved commerce as a source of income. Another view is that the enactment of formal rules in this era was a product of renewed interest in Roman law, which had similar provisions. A third view is that derogeance was a creation of the nobility itself for the purposes of justifying its tax exempt status and for defending its honor against the claims of the nouveaux riches (Forster, 1960; Grassby, 1960). If this last view is correct, it would suggest that the nobility did not foresee the extent to which commercial fortunes would rise nor did they see that they would require more flexibility than this restriction would allow.

Whatever the historical roots of derogeance, it is clear that the support of the nobility was instrumental in its continued effect. The poverty-stricken rural nobles resisted the opportunities available in commerce and

industry to preserve their status. Mining, again considered a legitimate part of estate exploitation, was exempt from derogation and was carried out mainly under royal monopolies. Glassmaking was also exempt, probably due to the interest of the crown in promoting artistic products (McManners, 1967; Nef, 1940; Foster, 1950; Moore, 1965).

The nobility of Paris and Versailles were more unified by the expected manner of consumption than by the expected manner of acquisition, the reverse of the provincial situation. Louis XIV undercut the political position of the nobility, and brought many of the wealthiest and most powerful to Versailles to compete for social position and royal favor. Yet it was not solely the court that was responsible for extravagance. Presentation at Versailles required proof of lineage dating before 1400. This requirement excluded many who had more recently attained high social position. These great nobles gathered in Paris. The ostentatious lifestyle of the Parisian salons may have been comparable to that of Versailles. Education was increasingly important in the life of the gilded nobility since wit held priority in the salons.

A high level of income was required to preserve such levels of consumption. The gilded nobility was thus greatly concerned with making money, but not with its sordid details. The bulk of income came from a variety of feudal dues collected from the peasants who worked the land by agents.

> The prejudice against trying to make money out of farming was probably very influential among the highest nobility and those subject even less directly to the mores of court life. A life of strenuous indolence and intrigue at Versailles would certainly be vastly more exciting than superintending cows and peasants, and would soon teach a man to be embarrassed at the smell of manure on his boots. (Moore, 1965 : 44)

The inefficiency in agricultural administration was thus less a case of paternalism than of disdain directed to showing active attention to moneymaking. Land was inherited through a system of entailments similar to that in England, although somewhat less rigid, and with a less pronounced emphasis on primogeniture.

A second source of income was the crown itself. The enforced conspicuous consumption of the court impoverished many of the great nobles. The crown thus increased its power over the nobility, conferring favors and grants on whom it pleased. Marriage with rich merchant heiresses was viewed with the same ambivalence for this group as for their country counterparts.

Increases in prices in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries occurred throughout Europe and affected France as well. The position of the French nobility was already weakened by the deaths and expense of the Thirty Years War. Reliance on the inelastic base of feudal dues during this inflationary period undermined the solvency of the French nobles. The crown courts did not allow charges and fines to be changed into flexible rents. The French aristocracy responded by increasing the intensity with which the dues were collected. Precedents were discovered on which to base additional charges (Bloch, 1970).

The differences in outcomes between English and French agriculture are thus best understood with reference to the structural positions of these two groups. The same pressures that led to agrarian capitalism in England produced an intensification of feudalism in France. This explanation is consistent with the provocative and influential analysis of Brenner (1976; 1982). Yet economic change is not an automatic response to circumstance. The model proposed here provides a context in which to understand the motives of the groups involved.

The prohibition on commerce and industry were modified as the economy developed. The gilded nobility was more active in these areas. The typical case, however, involved investment, not management, and even the investments were often concealed. The policy of the crown on derogeance was ambivalent. It wanted a prosperous nobility, but not one with an economic base independent of the crown. Through a series of halting steps, the crown decided in favor of increasing national wealth. In 1701, restrictions on trade, on land as well as sea, were lifted. Yet, the nobles did not respond well to these new opportunities. The belief that certain practices are inherently degrading is not easily dispelled. "Fifty years after Colbert the only possibility was for a merchant to become a noble, not the reverse" (Barber, 1955:52). The crown initially reinforced the bias against commerce, but the perpetuation of the value was reinforced by the nobility itself.

In the eighteenth century the French nobility increasingly accepted marriages with wealthy commoners. However, this pattern of intermarriage increased despite the persistence of status differences, not because these differences had disappeared.

> The tendency towards noble endogamy was offset by the need to rebuild compromised fortunes, by the narrow range of choice, and by the social importance of a middle-class elite who lorded it in the towns. Marriage between nobles, however, remained the norm which was not flouted except with extreme care. (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1985:127)

I have characterized the nobility as status maximizers, not profit maximizers. They were willing to forego certain base acquisitive activities if the proceeds were insufficient to purchase more status than was lost through participation in such activities. They would venture into unacceptable fields if those ventures held the promise of revitalizing their ability to spend lavishly. The provincial nobles stood to gain less income and lose more status by their participation in petty retailing and small-scale manufacture than the gilded nobles by their underwriting overseas trading ventures. Thus, the more liberal attitude of the gilded nobles toward commerce and industry becomes comprehensible.

Throughout the eighteenth century the income of both groups probably rose moderately, due primarily to squeezing increasing amounts of profit out of agriculture (McManners, 1967; Forster, 1960). The French aristocracy reinvigorated feudalism even as its English counterpart helped to set the stage for the industrial revolution. A desire to solve the same dilemma—maintaining the aristocratic status structure—led the English to become capitalist farmers, while the French intensified the feudal system in the waning years of the ancien régime.

Discussion

The division of values into a consumption ethic and an acquisition ethic is a useful way to analyze the evolution of economic attitudes of these aristocracies. Regulations on acquisition were somewhat flexible, more in agriculture than in commerce and industry. Evidence of this flexibility does not demonstrate that the professed standards were a sham, nor does it show that the view of the aristocracy on economic issues in general had changed. Consumption and acquisition constrain one another: each provides the context in which the other operates. Status-based consumption patterns can foster changes in acquisitive behavior.

This formulation resolves a number of unfortunate complications in the normal discussion of the emergence of the modern economic order. It shows that the transformation of aristocratic values is not necessary for the aristocracy to contribute to economic change: it is precisely the attempt to preserve its status ethic that prompted the aristocracy to transform the countryside. The structural position of the English landed aristocracy, its ability to transform the nature of social relations in agriculture, enabled it to play a progressive historical role.

Moore considered the English Civil War a bourgeois revolution by emphasizing the transformation of the English landed elites into a capitalist elite. But he then restored the schism between landed and commercial interests in order to account for the nature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English politics. The problem is solved by noting that this status group changed its economic base without changing its status-group character. This framework helps to clarify the relationship between landed and industrial interests: there was a congruence of class position between industrialists and agriculturalists, even as a huge social chasm between them remained.

Weber observed that the spirit of capitalism may be threatened by its own success (Weber, 1958). The relentless pursuit of profit is a peculiarly ascetic approach to acquisition. It is a pursuit which, if truly single-minded, resists the temptation to enjoy the fruits of one's acquisitions. Weber noted that such asceticism may not withstand the unparalleled prosperity that modern industrial society produces, and that over time capitalism may give way to hedonism. Bell (1978) worries that the incompatibility of the hedonistic orientation of leisure pursuits and the strict economic calculus of the productive sphere has created a fundamental tension in modern capitalist society.

I am suggesting something slightly different. The continuity of aristocratic values results not in hedonism but in a desire to distance oneself from acquisitiveness. By all accounts, after 1880 English businessmen succeeded in entering the landed gentry and buying up country houses, if not maintaining the massive estates which were rapidly becoming an economic burden (Stone and Stone, 1984; F. M. L. Thompson, 1963). It has been suggested that this pattern of mobility tended to limit economic growth in England, as the energies of the business elite were directed to acquiring social prestige rather than expanding their holdings (Wiener, 1981). The durability of the English landed aristocracy through the nineteenth century may have contributed to the industrial decline of England in the twentieth. The lingering prestige of aristocratic living may have dampened the motivation for economic enterprise. A similar ambivalence toward acquisitive behavior may have contributed to the relative slow growth of France in the nineteenth century.

Paradoxically, it was the very gulf between aristocratic values and the emergence of the Protestant work ethic among the English middle class that constituted a powerful impetus to capitalist development. Rather than encouraging economic growth, a relatively open landed nobility would tend to draw money and energy out of enterprise and into their own rentier class. The contrast with the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is striking: not only did relatively few English businessmen enter the higher echelons of the English gentry but those that did often sojourned only briefly with the country aristocrats (Stone and Stone, 1984). The business elite were not thoroughly imbued with aristocratic values.

The contrast between tradition and modernity is thus overdrawn. Traditional elites were capable of transforming their acquisitive orientations, but seemed less able to transform their desire for social preeminence. The latter changed its form, from chivalrous knight to country lord and eventually to London gentleman. The emergence of a spirit of systematic acquisitiveness was not a permanent feature of modernity, as this can be transformed into hedonism or aristocratic elitism with equal facility.

I am optimistic about the applicability of this framework to other aristocratic groups. Each would require a detailed analysis because the economic and political position of each differed. Yet there are similarities in the dilemmas faced by Belgian (Clark, 1985) and other European aristocracies (Spring, 1976). My emphasis on the continuity in the value orientation of the aristocracy is broadly consistent with Mayer's emphasis on the continued political influence of the European aristocracies through the First World War (1981). Azarya's fascinating account of the Fulbe aristocracy in west Africa also strikes a responsive chord (1978). In all of these cases the continuity of aristocratic status and lifestyles is primary; these groups search for an economic base compatible with this goal. A thorough comparative analysis of aristocratic groups must be left for further studies.

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