

CHAPTER I

Introduction

HOUSEHOLD AND GOVERNMENT

A court, Furetière noted in his 1690 dictionary, is ‘the residence of a king or sovereign prince’, but also ‘the king and his council, or ministers’, and ‘the officers and the suite of a prince’. To the trinity of palace, council, and retinue, he added a range of meanings connected with either courts of law or refined manners. The 1694 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*, listing the same associated meanings, primarily described the court as: ‘la Maison, les Officiers, les Principaux Seigneurs, & la Justice Ordinaire d’un Roy, d’un Prince’ – ‘maison’ covering dynasty, household, and house. Johann Heinrich Zedler preceded the lengthy discussion of ‘Hof’ in his *Universal-Lexicon* with the succinct but comprehensive traditional formula: ‘Hof wird genennet, wo sich der Fürst aufhält’.¹ All contemporary definitions include both household and government. Indeed, more often than not the officers and attendants following the sovereign and catering for his table, bed, chapel, and stable, had a significant share in the administration of the realm. Moreover, the greater nobles in the vicinity of the court had the right and duty to help and advise the ruler, and the latter was expected to listen to them. From the later Middle Ages until the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries the staffs of most courts expanded – this growth was as relevant for the household as for the administrative services operating within its compass. During and after this phase of expansion, however, household and government slowly but perceptibly drifted apart, a process accompanied by changes in the nature and status of rulership.

¹ Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel contenant generalement tous les mots françois . . .* (Paris 1690); *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* (Paris 1694); *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Diderot and D’Alembert (Paris 1756), VI, p. 355, opens with the same description, but soon turns into a critique of courtly vanities; Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künsten . . .* (Leipzig and Halle 1732; repr. Graz 1961), XIII, pp. 405–406; a parallel Spanish description is cited in Glyn Redworth and Fernando Checa, ‘The Courts of the Spanish Habsburgs’, in J. Adamson, ed., *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics, and Culture under the Ancien Régime 1500–1750* (London 1999), pp. 42–65, here at p. 43; the court is ‘the place where the king is to be found with his vassals and his own officials, who constantly advise and wait on him, as well as the great men of the kingdom, who are present’.

Thus, when Louis XVI (1774–92) in 1791 deplored the National Assembly's eagerness to isolate financially and administratively the services rendered to him personally, 'comme si... les services rendus à la personne du roi, ne l'étaient pas aussi à l'état', his contention reflected a partisan perspective.² In the preceding five centuries rulers themselves had frequently attempted to disengage government and household. The administrative agents and institutions expanding from the later Middle Ages remained linked to the services catering for the ruler's personal needs, but in the course of the early modern age they increasingly operated as an autonomous segment connected only with the apex of the household: the ruler and his circle of advisers. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the steady growth of government by paper secured a more conspicuous place at court for administrative specialists of various kinds – a challenge to those among the sword nobles who saw executive power, high court office, and military command as their birthright. Whether subservient to the court's dignitaries, or responsible only to the ruler himself; whether competing with the great nobles, or assimilating with them: high-placed robe administrators had come to stay. Everywhere specialised administrative services grew larger and developed 'bureaucratic' routines. Robe and sword had to come to terms with each other, establishing a new division both of responsibilities and of status.

From the later seventeenth century onwards several practices emerged that further qualified the pre-eminence of the noble household officers and their clans. Through the 'ordre du tableau' Louis XIV's (1643–1715) war minister François-Michel Le Tellier, marquis de Louvois (1641–1691) reorganised promotion in the army, stressing seniority and restricting the privileges of noble status. More importantly, the Sun King did not readily include princes and great nobles in his councils: only the most trusted among his noble companions were allowed to participate in the formal machinery of decision-making. The officers of the royal household were no longer responsible for the government of the realm, and they shared the responsibility for the household staffs with the *secrétaire d'Etat* for the *maison du roi*. In 1662–1665 and in 1685, the restored English court was much reduced, and it must have lost some of its allure. In the century following the institution of the 'civil list' in 1698, this parliamentary grant sustaining the royal household helped to secure a clearer separation of the budgets of household, warfare, and government.³ Moreover, it underlined the fact that the court could no longer unequivocally claim to be the centre of the realm.

² Louis' declaration is printed in the *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, ed. M. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent, première série, vol. XXVII (Paris 1887), pp. 378–383, at p. 379.

³ See John A. Lynch and E. A. Reitan, 'From Revenue to Civil List, 1689–1702: The Revolution Settlement and the "Mixed and Balanced" Constitution', *Historical Journal* 13 (1970), pp. 571–588; J. Adamson, 'The Tudor and Stuart Courts 1509–1714', in *The Princely Courts of Europe*, pp. 116–117.

Elsewhere, different developments pointed in the same direction. In the years of Frederick III/I (1688–1701–1713), the Prussian court had attempted to emulate the greater European courts. The Soldier-King Frederick William I (1713–1740), however, almost totally abolished his father's household. Frederick the Great (1740–1786) restored a bare minimum, but concentrated on government and military exploits, leaving representative courtly responsibilities to the separate establishments of his spouse and siblings.⁴ After the debacle of the Silesian Wars, Maria Theresa (1740–1780) fundamentally reorganised the administration and the army, following enlightened precepts but carefully maintaining the compact of dynasty and magnates. She did put the household, and even noble rank in general, on a more equal footing with the administrative and military hierarchies – a development echoing a similar 1680 Danish ordinance, and Peter the Great's 1722 Table of Ranks.⁵ The share of the senior court officers in Maria Theresa's administrative machinery was hardly as comprehensive as had been that of their predecessors, though we can only guess the extent of their influence. Joseph II (1765–1790) further transformed and reduced the Austrian court; his recurring attempts at sweeping reform temporarily upset the balance between elites and dynasty.⁶ In France, where the initial bureaucratic impulse had been quite strong, and the administration undoubtedly became more professional in the course of the eighteenth century, the challenge of the robe administrators diminished. The most prominent among the ministerial dynasties were integrated into noble dynasties, several of whom had again secured a key position in the machinery of decision-making around court. In the last decades preceding the Revolution, military and financial debacles did cause fundamental reforms in two quintessentially noble domains: the army was reorganised by the comte de Saint-Germain in 1776, and the royal household was reformed and curtailed from 1780 onwards.

By the end of the eighteenth century, service and merit, traditionally connected with noble status, were no longer necessarily based on genealogy: noble birth and merit could indeed be perceived as opposing principles. Nobilities may or may not have served their rulers, but service itself, on the battlefield, in the bureaucracy, or in finance, became the ennobling principle *par excellence*. European court fashion reflected this evolution: military uniform replaced traditional court dress at the Swedish, Prussian, and Josephine courts – most other

⁴ Thomas Biskup, 'Queen Elisabeth Christine of Prussia as Consort', paper presented to the conference of the Society for Court Studies, September 1999; the author kindly gave me a copy of his text, to be published in Clarissa Campbell Orr, ed., *Queenship in Europe 1660–1815: The Role of the Consort* (Cambridge 2004). See also Markus Völkel, 'The Hohenzollern Court', in *Princely Courts of Europe*, pp. 211–229.

⁵ Robert Molesworth, *Etat du Royaume de Danemark, tel qu'il étoit en 1692* (Amsterdam 1695), pp. 205–211, the 'Ordonnance' of 31 December 1680.

⁶ P. G. M. Dickson, *Finance and Government under Maria Theresia 1740–1780*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1987); Dickson, 'Monarchy and Bureaucracy in Late Eighteenth-Century Austria', *English Historical Review* 110 (1995), pp. 323–367.

courts followed, or sported the simple *frac* instead of the rich French-inspired *habit habillé* and the traditional Habsburg *Mantelkleid*.⁷ The forms of social advancement the early modern state had provided for its servants had closely mirrored the traditions and social patterns of the noble elite, creating a multi-layered stratum of service elites that sought to legitimise their position by genealogy; the service elites emerging in the nineteenth century, however, were subject to more rigorous forms of training and selection, and genealogy became less important. This ‘modernisation’ of the state and its service elites was a long and confused process. We can point to late medieval ‘new’ monarchies, to the great phases of state building from the sixteenth into the eighteenth centuries; we may want to stress the watershed of 1770–1830, choose to focus on the remarkable mixture of innovation and inflated traditionalism characteristic of nineteenth-century monarchy, or emphasise structural affinities of ‘modernising’ states in all ages. In no country, however, did the professionalisation of bureaucracies and the insulation of the ruler’s household reach a conclusive phase in the early modern age. At some courts the formal connections between household and government remained strong, while the separation achieved on paper in other realms inevitably proved highly permeable because of the accumulation of offices from both spheres in one person or dynasty, and the courtiers’ easy access to the ruler’s ear.

Emmanuel Siéyès forcefully made this point in his famous 1789 *Qu’est ce que le Tiers Etat* where he deplored the pervasive influence of court nobles.⁸ For Siéyès’ contemporaries the argument may have been evident, but a further century of bureaucratic development and constitutional debate obscured it. Indeed, with the erosion of monarchy itself in the nineteenth century, the political relevance of court office dwindled as well. Access to the ruler through noble familiarity or domestic service lost its prime importance as other centres of power and patronage came to the fore. Without a doubt, the personal environment of heads of state, whether crowned or chosen, will always retain a certain influence, but the primacy of institutionalised processes of decision-making, and the public functions of representative agencies strictly limit such influences – or force them to domains less visible to public scrutiny, as informal contacts bypassing regular procedures threaten to bring scandal or crisis upon discovery. In the early modern age, household and government were equally ‘public’, and the household was by no means subservient. Thus, in a process of many centuries, the priorities were inverted: the subservient administrative compartment within

⁷ Philip Mansel, ‘Monarchy, Uniform, and the Rise of the Frac’, *Past & Present* 96 (1982), pp. 103–132, cites the fact that in eighteenth-century France, the fortunes of the silk industry determined the court’s decision to maintain the *habit habillé*.

⁸ Emmanuel Siéyès, *Qu’est ce que le Tiers Etat*, ed. R. Zappéri (Geneva 1970), pp. 132–133. Siéyès presents robe, sword, and church as functional categories within the ‘toute-puissante’ aristocracy ruling the court. Compare Malesherbes’ complaint to Louis XVI during his short incumbency as secretary of state for the household, AN O 1 749, no. 51, stating that the minister could not reform the court, or give orders to court dignitaries.

the ruler's household now reigns supreme, whereas the modern equivalents of the household are either relegated to a constitutionally defined compartment within the state, or have no formal significance.

Not without reason, nineteenth-century historians looked for the origins of this development in medieval and early modern Europe – one of the contentions of this book is that in doing so, they seriously antedated the isolation and marginalisation of the household. They judged dynastic Europe with the standards of the late nineteenth century, and saw ministers, councils, and bureaucracies in isolation from their courtly environment, treating the early modern household as the largely irrelevant environment of these modern-day institutions. An obsession with the antecedents of the modern state prevented them from granting the household its proper place, and from understanding the crucial unrecorded and informal component of collegial decision-making. In France, the court could be viewed with some indulgence, because it was thought to have consolidated 'national' state building by allowing the 'absolute' rulers to overcome 'feudal' opposition – and establish favourable boundaries. Nineteenth-century German historiography had more difficulties in reconciling the heritage of the Holy Roman Empire and its multi-dynastic mosaic with the ideal of the national state: the multiple courts came to symbolise German impotence, equally ineffectual Habsburg suzerainty, and French triumph. Versailles was equated with the blatant proclamation of victory, demonstrated again in 1871 and 1919. Everywhere, the ideals of national state building dictated the interpretation of dynastic Europe: this prolific generation of historians laid the foundations for our knowledge of the early modern court, and their copious source editions still mould it. Nor was their heritage soon to be corrected by twentieth-century historians. Royalty became ever more marginal, and from the early 1930s until the early 1970s, the court was seen as a quixotic topic, suited only for reactionaries or eccentrics.

REDRESSING THE BALANCE

After fifty years, the court was roused from its historiographical somnolence. Probably, Norbert Elias was the main actor: his epoch-making studies restored the relevance and legitimacy of the court as a theme for research among a generation of historians that had been inclined to ignore it. Indeed, he made it acceptable for those frowning upon the traditional forms of political history, for whom the court and its mannerisms had represented a historical non-entity carrying politically offensive associations. Elias combined the nineteenth-century thesis of state building with the equally classic notion of a *civilisation des mœurs* from the later Middle Ages into the eighteenth century; a connection that would hardly have surprised Voltaire or other *philosophes*. They would probably have been slightly more sceptical about the nature of this connection as proposed by