

Fanny Cosandey, *Le rang. Préséances et hierarchies dans la France d'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016. 491 pp. Bibliography. €28.00 (pb). ISBN 9782070105564.

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Sometime in the early seventeenth century, the jurist, historian, and student of ceremonial, Théodore Godefroy, began work on a “colossal” manuscript the purpose of which was to record and formalize the rules and protocols that determined the organization of ceremonial events in which king and court participated. Based on a careful reading of earlier treatises on rank and ritual, and a close examination of the many accounts of ceremonial precedents preserved in the king's archives, Godefroy's work aimed to “dégager les logiques internes” illustrated by the many examples of ceremonial activity that informed his text (quoted in Cosandey, p. 165). The enumerated list of rules and principles he finally deduced from his corpus of precedents included the following:

39. Le milieu est plus honorable entre trois qui marchent ensemble.
40. Ceux qui marchent les premiers sont en rang plus honorable.
41. Ceux qui marchent les derniers sont en rang plus honorable.
42. La main droite est plus honorable que la gauche.
43. La main gauche est plus honorable que la droite (quoted in Cosandey, p. 165).

In her ambitious, deeply researched and subtly argued new book, Fanny Cosandey acknowledges the surface absurdity of this list, but she shows that, like the peculiar betting practices surrounding Balinese cockfights, the apparently contradictory set of rules inscribed in Godefroy's text rewards close reading.[1] Rather than dismiss the list as evidence of confusion (or the sly expression of a specifically seventeenth-century sense of humor), Cosandey uses it to exemplify the conflicting claims and inherent dynamism in a developing system of court ceremonial too often interpreted as rigid and static. Codes, she notes in her introduction, “sont producteurs de conflits,” and “les querelles de rangs et préséances naissent précisément avec le développement du cérémonial” between the middle of the sixteenth century and the early decades of the eighteenth (pp. 14-15.) Competing claims to ceremonial priority could be and were advanced on the basis of blood, antiquity, gender, the rights of the eldest, the dignity of one's office, and proximity to sovereign power. The personal favor of the king or the political imperatives of the moment introduced other variables. Directly opposing claims could be supported by different but seemingly compatible principles for determining rank. Godefroy, with his down is up and up is down chronicling of royal ceremonial history, thus provided a perfectly accurate transcription of the competing logics that underlay various claims to ceremonial precedence in the context of an emerging “absolutism.”

The conflicts to which these competing logics gave rise, Cosandey argues, should be seen as proof of the essential vitality of the system. The regulation of court ceremony began in earnest under Henry II, intensified under the last Valois rulers, and proceeded steadily through the seventeenth

century. The process served the interests of both the monarchy and the noble actors whose dignity and high status contributed to the monarch's power and glory. By placing new emphasis on the perspectives of those who initiated the conflicts and quarrels that dotted this ceremonial history, Cosandey refines and corrects Norbert Elias's influential approach to the study of ceremonial interdependency at court. Because Elias took the findings from his *The Court Society* of 1933 and largely assimilated them to the broader claims of his *The Civilizing Process* (1939), he ultimately came to emphasize the centralizing and civilizing effects of the seemingly mechanized rituals that surrounded the person of the king, especially at Louis XIV's Versailles.[2] As the nobility learned to suppress its violent inclinations so as to compete effectively for the status that could be affirmed only by the king, the monarchy represented its power and grandeur to an increasingly awed court and society. The king himself may have been caught in the gears of the machine—Elias himself of course emphasized the point—but the machine served mainly to advance the interests of a monarchy determined to assert the irresistible will of the king.

Cosandey aims to restore the reciprocity of the relations between king and subjects while also reclaiming a certain autonomy of thought and action for those embedded in the highly regulated hierarchy of rank developed by kings and their agents. She does not deny that the elaboration of ceremony enhanced the image and power of the king. It is hardly a coincidence, she notes, that the first aggressive efforts to “mettre de l'ordre dans la maison” came at a time of vulnerability for the crown, when even the safety of the king's person pressed in as an everyday concern (pp. 59, 72, 186). One of the profound turning points in the history of royal ceremonial was the edict of December 1576 that established the superior dignity of the princes of the blood over all dukes, peers, and foreign princes in the realm. The edict established “la prééminence absolue du sang de France” and reinforced the dynastic character of sovereign power (p. 69). This theme would recur in the history of royal ceremony over the next century and a half, as each of the first three Bourbon kings exploited the principle of the superiority of royal blood to make new claims for their progeny (pp. 111, 191). Cosandey emphasizes that the crown's skillful handling of ceremonial between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries served to affirm royal sovereignty; she even suggests that it is through the fine-tuning of royal ceremonial that one can glimpse the “modernité politique d'un Etat en train de se construire” (p. 267).

Still, the making of rules and the asserting of rank order always provided fresh ground for contestation. By taking those contests seriously and examining them from every angle made available by the sources, Cosandey shows that “la pensée hiérarchique” under the old regime was comprised of a set of assumptions predicated on conflict (p. 23). Hierarchy could never be reduced to mere “classement.” Classification implies fixity, firm boundaries, and categorical findings. Hierarchy, by contrast, was perceived as a system “marqué par la fluidité” and always subject to new testing (p. 460). Proximity to persons of roughly equal rank within a finely calibrated official hierarchy required the perpetual vigilance of all concerned. Surviving and thriving in a world defined by gradations of honor and dignity required steady determination to preserve one's rights and, even more important in the face of an ever-shifting social tapestry, to prevent the degradation of one's rightful status. Rank proved a vital component of the family patrimony, after all, and preservation of the patrimony stood out as the first imperative for every family affected by innovations at court. “Des nouveaux venus perturbateurs”—particularly the multiplying possessors of state offices, like the *gardes des rôles* of the grand chancellery, who contested the preeminence of the *contrôleurs* and *audienciers* within the same corps (p. 146)—appeared with an

upsetting regularity in this period of ceremonial standardization, and quarrels over standing therefore emerged as an inevitable product of social and political change.

Tellingly, both the aggrieved who saw fit to challenge ceremonial order and the kings who defended it (or acceded to requested modifications) spoke a language of immutability. In some of the most stimulating pages of her book (pp. 253-264), Cosandey lingers over the meanings of the word representation, and the ways in which a particular, somewhat anachronistic, understanding of the term has shaped recent historiography. In the recent literature, the emphasis has been on the representation of royal power to the world over which the king exercises dominion, with the word representation suggesting “une reconstruction mentale faisant appel à la mémoire, ou à l’imagination” (p. 254).[3] The representation—in this case, of the king's sovereign power—requires “un exercice intellectuel” on the part of the spectating subject, an active construction of associations that finally conjures the idea of a power relayed outward towards its various points of reception. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the term representation had a more restricted meaning. The word, ubiquitous in contemporary writing on rank and ceremony, referred to a process whereby “le représentant tient lieu et place du sujet représenté au point de passer pour lui” (p. 254). The act of representation, according to this narrower connotation of the term, amounted to the strict act of replacing, or standing in for, an absent other. Cosandey suggests that historians' recent concern to map the cultural effects of the monarchy's displays of power and authority, a concern that betrays “une obsession de communication propre à notre époque” (p. 257), has occluded their perception of the contemporary meaning of representation. This has, in turn, impeded understanding of the function and meaning of ceremony.

For the represented object, in any royal ceremony, was a person no longer present, a person possessed of a rank and dignity and standing that had to be properly and exactly replicated. The concept of representation, in other words, proceeded from the presumed existence of an immutable order of things, one that could be symbolically recreated as circumstances required. (It was because a royal effigy represented the deceased king at a royal funeral that the living king could not also be present at the ceremony; the presence of redundant representations would call into question the representative order itself [p. 259].) Because of the patrimonial implications of every decision that concerned rank and precedence, and because of the strict necessity of replicating what was thought to be a hierarchical ordering inherited from the past, those who had assigned roles to play in the ceremonial apparatus that surrounded the king demanded occasional adjustments not out of a taste for novelty, and not to satisfy (an unseemly) ambition, but out of a strict desire to obtain “justice.” “Les sujets,” notes Cosandey, “réfutant toute référence au privilège dans l'assignation de ce qu'ils estiment d'être leur dû” (p. 253). In challenging the ceremonial script, they asked not for favors but for what they knew to be rightfully theirs.

Kings, too, avoided creating the impression that ceremony was subject to the vicissitudes of politics or personal whim. The seventeenth century stands out as a period in which “les spécialistes du rang fleurissent” (p. 212). Entire libraries came to be filled with ceremonial histories and compilations of the kind Godefroy composed, and the existence of such documentary traces of earlier customs and past precedents both provided ammunition for new claims and informed many royal decisions. Despite the existence of these experts and their texts, however, the crown tightly limited the publication of texts bearing on royal ceremony. Very few treatises ever made their way into print. (Their near-absence from published literature is surely one of the reasons earlier

historians underplayed the centrality of conflict and contestation in the fitful elaboration of the rules of royal ceremony over the course of the old regime.) Kings closely guarded their authority and resisted the creation of independent sources of validation for claims to rank for several reasons. They intended to make clear their status as sole and unquestioned arbiters in disputes over rank and precedence; they wished to maintain the illusion that their decisions reflected a sovereign and transcendent justice; and they clearly intended to preserve for themselves an advantageous room to maneuver. Henry IV, for example, capitalized on the principle of the ultimate superiority of royal blood, first inscribed in law in the edict of 1576, to legitimize in 1595 his first-born bastard son by Gabrielle d'Estrées. By later awarding him the duchy of Vendôme, which also conferred the dignity of high title, the king even placed his son in the theoretical line of succession to the throne (a decision that would subsequently be challenged by Marie de Médicis at Louis XIII's inaugural *lit de justice*) (pp. 93, 308). Kings presided over a world that liked to “se déclarer immuable sans cesser de changer” (p. 21), and in the realm of ceremonial this meant that kings could discreetly innovate so long as the changes they introduced remained consistent with one or more of the acknowledged principles that made up the “grammar” of rank.

Lineage, titles, and fiefs stood out as the most prominent elements of what Cosandey specifically identifies as the grammar of rank (pp. 162-203), but the author suggests that it was the growing visibility and importance of office in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that finally forged a path toward modernity in the never-ending competition for ceremonial status. The first steps toward the standardization of ceremonial in the second half of the sixteenth century had reinforced the personal and domestic character of sovereign power and service for the king, as the functions of the king's household were effectively merged with the operation of public power. Catherine de Médicis established an “horaire rigoureux” for the *lever* and other daily activities, and according to this schedule the king made himself available to his subjects “selon leurs qualités” (p. 62). Entrance into the courtyard of the royal château was likewise codified and turned into a formal mark of favor by the end of the century. But the personal fealty and mutual pledges of respect and obligation that constituted a core element of the feudal inheritance—the negation and eventual obsolescence of which Cosandey sees as the key precondition for the coming of modernity—became increasingly attenuated over the course of the long seventeenth century. There existed under the old regime “deux modalités de service au roi,” one of them animated by the existence of fiefs and the other animated by office. Royal power slowly but surely shed its reliance on personal bonds “en valorisant, à travers l'office, un mode de service rendu au royaume tout entier et rattaché au principe monarchique plutôt qu'à la personne du roi” (p. 266). The tensions between “le régime féodal et celui de l'office,” mediated as they were through a conflict-ridden ceremonial order, finally served as a “moteur de l'Histoire” (pp. 266-267, 469). Cosandey persuasively argues that this meta-competition, the traces of which are evident throughout the quarrelsome history of royal ceremony between about 1550 and 1715, eventually yielded a conception of public power that showed itself to be increasingly incompatible with a system of ranks “que le temps fossilise” (p. 469).

Both Habermas and Tocqueville could have been used profitably to underscore the hardening contradictions that Cosandey emphasizes in her last pages. Tocqueville attributed the waning credibility of the traditional social hierarchy on the eve of the French Revolution to the seemingly endless and increasingly pointless proliferation of privileges the original rationale for which everyone now struggled to remember. And Cosandey's reflections on a representational order that

gradually bequeathed a new form of authority connected to the abstract sovereignty of the crown overlap in intriguing ways with the transition from the representational to the bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas. More broadly, a more extensive engagement with eighteenth-century developments would have provided the author an opportunity to fill out the contours of “modernity” as she understands it. But in reinterpreting ceremonial forms as a constant source of contestation, social confrontation, and political innovation, Cosandey has reinvigorated a subject that old regime specialists thought they already knew. In so doing, she brings to light new sources and provides fresh interpretations of seemingly familiar events—such as the quarrel between the dukes and peers and the Parlement of Paris in the 1660s. She has also modeled a style of analysis that will interest all who are drawn to the intersections of institutional, social, and political history. For all these reasons and more, *Le rang* deserves high rank.

NOTES

[1] Her methods informed by both ethnography and sociology, Cosandey invokes the phrase “thin description” to describe her own approach to the sources tracking the history of court ceremony (p. 20.) Because they are scattered, spread over two centuries, often undated, and only partially contextualized, these sources often resist the deep probing one associates with Geertzian thick description. Cosandey argues persuasively, however, that by juxtaposing these sources and reading them for their underlying assumptions one can glimpse the common principles—the grammar—that animated often-diverging claims and assertions.

[2] Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); id., *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). For Elias’s later thinking, Cosandey particularly refers to a “récit biographique délivré en 1980” (p. 13), but she does not cite it.

[3] Although the book is not cited by Cosandey, Peter Burke’s *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), with its emphasis on the production of the king’s image, represents well this conventional understanding of representation. Cosandey’s prime example is Louis Marin’s *Le Portrait du Roi* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1987).

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