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William Ritchey Newton, *Derrière La Façade--Vivre Au Château de Versailles Au XVIIIe Siècle*. Paris: Perrin, 2008. 268 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes. 19€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-262-02930-2.

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In traditional national histories of states and state institutions, the dynastic household long played a marginal role at best. Ministers, councils, and representative institutions were deemed more important, as they pointed toward the future. Household offices and their routines did not conveniently fit the image of the modernizing state, and hence were relegated to the margins of historiography. In the French case, the household was traditionally granted one important 'political' function: the transformation of unruly nobles into unctuous domestics burdened with honors but separated from power. In his challenging 1969 *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, Norbert Elias took this classic image as starting point for a powerful analysis of the court that dictated the agenda of a first generation of court historians.[1]

From the late 1980's onwards, however, critical voices started questioning the standard depiction of the court as a gilded cage, of courtiers as a group secluded from power and enmeshed in quarrels about rank. The image appeared highly questionable for Versailles itself, downright anachronistic for most other courts—at least before the 1750's. Court dignitaries were usually closely integrated into the upper echelons of the state, and in any case enjoyed status as well as a measure of power through their access to the ruler. They were not invariably able to influence major policy decisions, yet they were often key figures in the distribution of honors—an essential element in early modern politics, and arguably in any political system. Ceremonies and rituals, moreover, cannot be understood merely or primarily as a ploy absorbing and redirecting the energies of an otherwise unmanageable warrior elite. Clearly, the show of rank was important for rulers, elites, and wider audiences: it was inseparable from the ideology and practices of power. Both in terms of decision-making and the representation of power, household staffs and routines deserve to be studied as an integral part of the early modern body politic.[2]

Indeed, from the 1990's onwards, a widening stream of publications has given the early modern court a more differentiated and human face, stressing its mobility and changeability, the less than dignified settings of daily court life, the 'below stairs' servants forming the bulk of most courts, the frugality hidden behind a screen of magnificence, the dense transactions between court and city. It has also underlined the role of courts as meeting places of various social groups and institutions. At court, elites from far-flung territories of dynastic composite states would regularly converge, attracted by offices, titles and privileges, as well as by the opportunity to meet their peers. This process could help to create a common court culture and a sense of cohesion. Religion, curiously absent from Eliasian interpretations of court life, was restored to its primacy as main structuring force for the court's daily and annual rhythms. State formation, decision-making, faction and favoritism, and patronage are now all seen from a perspective that includes the household. To be sure, a separation and professionalization of household as well as government services did take place, leading to major changes in the course of the

eighteenth century: but this gradual and erratic process needs to be examined carefully rather than taken for granted.

While these new approaches gathered force rapidly among German and Anglo-Saxon historians, their French compeers generally followed more hesitantly. In France historians of the sixteenth- and eighteenth-century court connected to the international reorientation more rapidly than specialists of the *grand siècle*.^[3] Recent publications and initiatives indicate that this is now changing. Versailles has founded a *centre de recherche* which publishes a bulletin and a series of monographs, and a pan-European study group on courts bringing together earlier national initiatives has been established.^[4]

Palaces, and the lively memoirs of their former occupants, continue to attract the interest of tourists and connoisseurs. A rich literature, ranging from academic to popularizing studies, serves their interests. Palaces are the focus of historians of art, music, literature, and a variety of related fields. At the juncture of the reinvigorated new court studies, the arts, and the general public, the work of William Ritchey Newton takes up a special place. Newton has a profound knowledge of eighteenth-century memoirs and court archives, particularly those pertaining to the topography and occupancy of apartments at Versailles. This was amply demonstrated in his *L'Espace du roi* (2000). Newton's reputation was definitively established by his prizewinning study *La petite cour* (2003), outlining in detail the organization, finances, hierarchies and staffs of lesser servants at Versailles.^[5] These two preceding books are more ambitious than *Derrière la façade*. They number 600 pages or more, whereas the current study reaches a more modest 268; they include lengthy annexes, absent in the latest book. In many respects, however, *Derrière la façade* has greater cohesion and unity of style than the preceding titles. After a seventy-page introduction *L'Espace du roi* becomes a series of annexes outlining courtiers' careers and apartments. *La petite cour* consists mostly of coherent exposition, yet more than one third of its 662 pages were still reserved for a sizeable annex on staff organization.

Derrière la façade describes the mundane aspects of living in the Sun King's palace in the century following his death. Newton systematically traces categories of daily life in his seven chapters, going from his original starting point, the apartments, to eating at court, provisioning of water, and use of fire, lighting, cleaning, and washing. The honor of living under the king's roof—or at least under one in the palace complex—came with many discomforts. We read details about cramped and dark living spaces, cold and unpalatable food, freezing or smoke-filled rooms, the permanent danger of fires, leaking sanitation, overflowing sewers, rampant rats—all presented with colorful detail and evocative quotes. Courtiers and servants adapted to the situation in manifold ways—constructing illegal stoves to heat their food, chimneys to heat their chambers. Palace administrators in turn sought to control the deformations and dangers arising from the situation. Understandably, Newton's introduction and conclusion ('*arrière-pensées*') dwell on the contrast between the proud façade of the chateau, and its less refined—sometimes downright repulsive—backstage practices. Royal magnificence was the main point of the palace, but its occupants were well aware of its less glamorous aspects. Newton writes in a pleasant, accessible style, and his work will undoubtedly appeal to a general French readership. On the other hand, it raises questions and provides information quite relevant for specialists in the field.

One such point, already put forward in *L'Espace du roi*, is the sense that Versailles in the second half of the eighteenth century could not live up to its own standards. Newton repeatedly mentions the expanding royal family, forcing court dignitaries from prestigious and comfortable apartments to humbler lodgings. War and financial crisis made palace administrators increasingly stingy and hesitant to grant demands of courtiers to repair or improve their quarters. At the same time, standards of comfort and luxury were rising rapidly: courtiers asked for larger mirrors, new-style windows, and improved amenities. In terms of room, finances, and expectations, the match between the noble elite and the palace became increasingly problematical. Newton does not explicitly relate this change to general ideas about the changing balance between court nobles and royalty on the eve of the revolution. Neither does he unveil his views of other works on the eighteenth-century court, such as the re-

evaluation of Louis XV's court by Bernard Hours.[6] The notion of a Versailles in decline, finally, could have been substantiated more thoroughly by looking back to earlier instances of rising war debts, reform and penury—at the French court under Louis XIV or at other European courts. The practical details of living at court never matched glamorous palace façades, although changing standards and expectations in the eighteenth century may have exacerbated the contrast.

One phrase offered in the context of the right of lesser officers in the king's chamber to pocket for their own benefit the remains of candles is worth quoting. It is not given special emphasis by Newton, but seems to be entirely typical for patterns of service at court, particularly in France, where venality aggravated general tendencies toward patrimonialism:

“. . . cette pratique, l'origine marque de la bienveillance royale, s'était transformée en une prérogative âprement défendue" (p. 134).

Favors tended to turn into rights, and dependent followers could prove to be stubborn defenders of their privileges—a perspective correcting the outside view of the court as a temple of glory. Newton provides many suggestive instances of courtiers' complaints and requests, as well as the usually level-headed responses of palace administrators, but doesn't venture far beyond these engaging dialogues. This book is very rich in examples and quotes, but Newton doesn't use the opportunity to connect his ample materials to current discussions about courts and courtiers. Newton's examples, for instance, can be connected to other instances of "backstage" court life familiar in recent court historiography; yet we can also read them as a narrative of gradual decline following the glories of the Sun King's reign. This book can painlessly be fitted into both the traditional and the revisionist modes of interpretation, and it is not altogether clear whether the author knows this. The notes consist largely of references to archival material and memoirs, with only incidentally references to secondary literature. I would have appreciated a more comprehensive introduction into such matters as court quartering, the right to eat at court, or court staffs' material rights and privileges, reflecting standard practices of European court life from the Middle Ages into the eighteenth century. Where, when and why did the French court depart from general tendencies? Newton's descriptive stance seems to reflect a choice rather than a weakness, and it may not be appropriate to criticize an author for omitting matters he considers outside of his purview.

In *Derrière la façade* Newton shows himself unsurpassed as a specialist on the apartments at Versailles in the eighteenth century, including the details on the courtiers living there, and the administrators organizing maintenance. He loses some strength when he describes earlier phases of household life; more importantly, he declines to connect his expertise to scholarly debates or wider comparative horizons. Newton's book offers a welcome antidote to some specimens of our occasionally over-conceptualized culture of scholarship, but in the end he leaves his fellow researchers with important unanswered questions. Clearly, however, the succession of these three books on Versailles and its occupants confirm Newton's status as an established authority in the field. His erudite, colorful and accessible style of writing, moreover, makes this latest book particularly attractive for a general readership.

NOTES

[1] Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie. Mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Darmstadt; Neuwied 1969); *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols. (Bern: Verlag Francke, 1969). See Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power. Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995) for a critical discussion and bibliography.

[2] A random choice among the many titles indicative of a ‘new court history’: David Starkey, “Representation Through Intimacy. A Study in the Symbolism of Monarchy and Court Office in Early-Modern England” in Ion Lewis, ed., *Symbols and Sentiments. Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism* (London: Academic Press, 1977), 187-224; R.G. Asch and A. Birke, eds., *Princes Patronage and the Nobility. The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age c. 1450-1650*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); John Adamson, ed., *The Princely Courts of Europe. Ritual, Politics, and Culture under the Ancien Régime 1500-1750* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999). See <http://resikom.adw-goettingen.gwdg.de/index.php> for an overview of the important conferences and volumes of the Residenzen-Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Attempts at comparison of European courts: Malcolm Vale, *The princely court: medieval courts and culture in North-West Europe, 1270-1380* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jeroen Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[3] See, for example, the impressive and wide-ranging study by Nicolas Le Roux, *La faveur du roi. Mignons et courtisans au temps des derniers Valois (vers 1547 – vers 1589)* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), or the concise and lucid re-evaluation of Louis XV by Bernard Hours, *Louis XV et sa Cour. Le roi, l'étiquette et le courtisan* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2002). On the seventeenth-century court, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie pioneered an anthropological approach in: “Auprès du roi, la Cour” *Annales ESC* 38 (1983): 21-41; and his “Système de la cour (Versailles vers 1709),” *L'Arc* 65 (1976): 21-35. His major book following upon these early articles, *Saint-Simon ou le système de la cour* (Paris : Fayard, 1997) effectively attacked Norbert Elias’ model, and restored the religious component of French court life, but still relied mostly on the memoirs of Saint-Simon, and hence remained limited in its revisionist potential. Jean-François Solnon, *La cour de France* (Paris 1987), based mostly on literature and printed sources, did not diverge widely from the classic views of the Ludovician court. Although not focused on the court, the work of Katia Béguin challenges the traditional image of the Sun King, see her *Les princes de Condé. Rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du grand siècle* (Seysesel : Champ Vallon, 1999) and “Louis XIV et l’aristocratie: coup de majesté ou retour à la tradition,” *Histoire, économie et société* 19 (2000): 497-512. The same holds true for Daniel Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir et société au grand siècle* (Paris : Fayard, 1984). Revision of Ludovician absolutism and reassessment of the traditional analysis of the court, however, was initiated largely by British and American historians.

[4] See <http://www.chateauversailles-recherche.fr> for the various activities of the *Centre de recherche du château de Versailles*. Recently, several European groups studying court history joined ranks and founded the Court Studies Forum linking the Society for Court Studies, the Centro Studi Europa delle Corti, the Centre de Recherche du Château de Versailles and La Corte en Europa, Institute of the Independent University of Madrid. Two careful recent scholarly works on the French court are Sophie de Laverny, *Les domestiques commensaux du roi de France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002); and Mathieu da Vinha, *Les valets de chambre de Louis XIV* (Paris: Perrin, 2004). While these works rely on impeccable archival research, they do not seem fully in touch with previous English-language scholarship.

[5] William Ritchey Newton, *L'espace du roi: la Cour de France au château de Versailles, 1682-1789* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); *La Petite Cour: services et serviteurs à la Cour de Versailles au XVIIIe* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

[6] On dissatisfied nobles see Munro Price, “The court nobility and the origins of the French Revolution” in Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms, eds., *Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Daniel Wick, “The Court Nobility and the French Revolution: The Example of the Society of Thirty,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 13, 3 (1980) 263-284; Hours, *Louis XV et sa Cour*.

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