

**The persistence of the aristocratic model :**  
**Adaptations and preservation strategies of the Parisian aristocracy**  
**1900-1939**

The decline of the old elites is a major phenomenon in the history of post-revolutionary France. If today no one can deny the meaning of this evolution which gave birth to the democratic society we know, it seems that the definition of the nature and the rhythms of the decline brings to the fore theoretical problems. Indeed, for a long time, as historians have focused on bourgeois dynamics, they have striven to show the slow and steady fall of the old elites after 1789. The ambitious commoners were then seen as the main cause of the planned extinction of the old elites, completed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. This point of view was widely put into question in the 1980's, by a new generation of researchers. They wondered about the real progress of egalitarianism in contemporary societies. Among them, Arno Mayer, in *La persistance de l'Ancien Régime*, saw the theory of the final decline as a unilateral point of view in the historiography, which could be contested.<sup>2</sup> According to him, as historians were too willing to explain the evolutions and to stress the ruptures, they have forgotten to underline the continuities. This new conception of the balance of forces which animates the social history of large nations has inspired researchers who have focused on the evolution of the old elites' influence in the post-revolutionary French society. They successfully showed the persistence of the aristocratic powers and identity well beyond the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and in fact, they have all agreed to postpone the date of extinction of the old aristocracy to the end of the Great War<sup>3</sup>. Now, today, the First World War is considered as the pivotal period symbolizing 'the end of a world and the birth of a new one'<sup>4</sup>, and as the landmark event by which the past was rushed into the era of the masses. But

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<sup>1</sup> On these questions, a very large bibliography can be found. See for example the works of Adeline Daumard, *La bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848*, Paris, 1963 ; *Les Bourgeois de Paris au XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, Paris, Flammarion editions, 1970 ; *Les Bourgeois et la Bourgeoisie en France*, Paris, Aubier Ed., 1987

<sup>2</sup> Arno Mayer, *La persistance de l'Ancien Régime. L'Europe de 1848 à la Grande Guerre*, New Scientific Library, Flammarion editions, Paris, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Claude-Isabelle BreLOT, *La noblesse réinventée. Nobles de Franche-Comté de 1814 à 1870*, Besançon, literary Annales of Besançon University, Paris, Les Belles-Lettres editions, 1992 ; Eric Mension-Rigau, *Aristocrates et grands bourgeois, éducation, traditions, valeurs*, Paris, Plon editions, 1994, and *L'Enfance au château. L'éducation des élites françaises au 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, Rivages editions, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> While bringing a few qualifications to this statement, Cyril Grange wrote in his conclusion: "The 1914-1918 war appears as a pivotal period, as the symbol of the end of a world and the birth of a new one. For the nobility, it represents the end of its domination, both economical and political.", in Cyril Grange, *Les gens du Bottin Mondain 1903-1987, Y être c'est en être*, Paris, Fayard editons, 1996.

this “turning point” theory has been taken for granted instead of being demonstrated and it relies on dubious arguments. In order to explain the “1914 rupture”, which was early on the scale of Europe but very late to that of France, historians generally stress the role of the conflict, which led to the integration of the old elites to the nation, the latter having abandoned the monarchy to support the Republic. This historical turning point is also justified by the social diversity implemented at the front, supposed to have deprived the high society of its hereditary superiority. Integrated in the trenches and faced with tough fights; the war is said to have imposed on the aristocracy the notion of equality before death. Thus the war is supposed to have brought down the masks of high-society party life, forcing the fashionable society to pay the blood tribute. At last, the rigid war economy, the inflationist chaos and the destructions are also mentioned to justify an economic decline which to this day, has never been the object of deep investigations.

Indeed, if these explanations can be considered as credible, a demonstration is nevertheless needed to validate them. In order to measure the impact of the First World War on the destiny of the old elites, it first seems necessary to break away from the traditional time divisions, and to elaborate a comparative study of the aristocratic positions before and after the war. In this way, one shall determine if the 1914-1918 period should be considered as a rupture, with regards to long-term evolutions, but also in view of the events which marked the history of the first 20th century in France. For the *Crisis of imperial societies*<sup>5</sup> which after 1914 disrupted the unequal balance on which the French republic was founded, certainly contributed to reduce the power of the old dominating classes. Moreover, a reassessment of the exact nature of the predicted decline is essential, for if according to some, the old elites lost most of their political and economic power after the war, others have them enter a phase of identity crisis, leading them up to social extinction. In order to reassess this decline, a prosopographical method was resorted to. A sample of 517 persons (263 men and 254 women) was created, by choosing the most cited individuals in the society gossip column of the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* during the year 1900. This chronicle relates on a daily basis the events which took place in Paris or in the prestigious holiday resorts of the aristocrats between 1890 and 1939. It also relates the dates, the type of reception, the names of the hosts, the guests, the programme and

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<sup>5</sup> In his work, Christophe Charle defines the term « crisis » as the manifold changes which followed the war, and which were often consequences of the latter. They provoked strong social tensions leading France to the defeat and to the Vichy disgrace, in Christophe Charle, *La crise des sociétés impériales : Allemagne, France, Grande-Bretagne, 1900-1940, essai d'histoire sociale comparée*, Seuil editions, Paris, 2001, from p.28 on.

the atmosphere of those events. Thanks to society-life yearbooks, biographical dictionaries, genealogical indexes, and private sources such as declarations of succession, family files were created, paying a special attention to the positions of the parents and their descendants. In this way, an important data basis was elaborated, illustrating the evolution of the powers of the Parisian high society, which was cosmopolitan and sociable. Indeed, even if the group appears to be heterogeneous, studying its composition reveals its aristocratic, and even possibly nobiliary character.

Indeed, one first notices that this elite was of old descent since it is composed of 75% of noble persons. The bourgeoisie is a minority in this group, and it is essentially represented by the descendants of families formerly promoted, which were linked with the most prestigious nobilities through business ties or alliances. Moreover, the group is a caste composed of heirs : born between 1820 and 1880, those aristocrats worked their way up to the top of the pyramid of fortunes during the *Belle Epoque*. Enjoying very high capital incomes, most of them still followed the model of the idle aristocrats living on their private incomes, who were big landowners, or civil executives temporarily working for the state. Through law universities and military schools, they acquired a general training which completed their previous economic and social background, and it allowed them to integrate the most prestigious bodies in the army or the diplomacy, but if they wished, they could also live in idleness, while cultivating a more or less active amateurism in politics, the arts, sciences and art. Without professional constraints, the wealthy Parisian high society could spend without counting its time and money in an busy social life, founded on a main and a secondary residence, on travels, and lavish spendings. Thus, this elite was representative of the old aristocracy, which thanks to its origins, values, education, the extent of its wealth and its way of life, was distinguishable from both the new bourgeois classes which had recently climbed the social ladder, and the provincial nobilities, less rich and more discreet. This study aims at measuring the impact of the Great War and the disorders it brought more or less directly on the economic, social and cultural positions of the representatives of this elite. Therefore it will not answer to a more general questioning about the evolution of the French nobilities in the first half of the XXth century.

### **Survivals of the Ancien Regime in the Republic**

In France, the political decline of the old elites was early, since it began as early as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, even though they were traumatised by the popular violence, the

abolition of privileges in 1791, the emigration and the consequences of the Terror, and had to accept the appearance of recent and sometimes dubious nobilities in power, these elites regained an official identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the political level, they still had a great influence in the first half of the century. This influence was founded on their landed wealth, and their rural background.<sup>6</sup> 58% of the members of Parliament were of noble descent in 1821, 49% of them in 1827, while under the reigns of Louis Philippe and Napoleon III, a third of the House's members belonged to that group<sup>7</sup>. In local assemblies, one out of ten regional councillors was of noble descent in 1840, and almost three out of ten at the end of the *Second Empire*<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the nobilities kept numerous functions in the high civil and military service. If the proportion of noblemen in the corps of the French officers continually fell after the Restoration, the group nevertheless kept a dominant role in the prestigious regiments such as the Cavalry and the staff, and maintained important positions in the highest ranks<sup>9</sup>. The group was also very represented in the diplomatic body, especially at the highest levels.<sup>10</sup> Thus the nobility was still overrepresented in the high civil service, despite the progressive democratisation of the recruiting. However, after the advent of the Third Republic, this political power, skilfully preserved, declined; so much so that this high society could no longer be considered as a ruling class. The victory of noblemen as candidates in the House in february 1871 was followed by a serious downgrading of the nobility's positions in the French national assembly fourty years later. Indeed, its number passed from 33% of noblemen elected in the House in 1871 to 9,5% of them after the 1910 legislative elections, a weak result that was confirmed after the war. Jean Estèbe showed that between the beginning of the Waldeck-Rousseau Cabinet in 1899 and the declaration of war, the arrival of non aristocrats in the ministries accelerated. He also showed that the democratisation process in the recruiting of the top political staff, begun in 1877, was confirmed after 1899. Often hostile to the Republic,

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<sup>6</sup> On the role of these landed elites in the first half of the century, see André-Jean Tudesq, *Les Grands notables en France (1840-49), étude historique d'une psychologie sociale*, volumes 1 and 2, PhD thesis, Bordeaux University, Delmas, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Adeline Daumard, « Noblesse et aristocratie en France au 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle », conference of the *Ecole française de Rome*, “ *Les Noblesses européennes aux 19<sup>ème</sup> et 20<sup>ème</sup> siècles*”, Rome, Università di Milano, Ecole française de Rome, 1988, p. 91. See also the works of Eric Anceau, *Les députés du second Empire, prosopographie d'une élite du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, Paris, Honoré Champion editions, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> André-Jean Tudesq, *Les Grands notables....*, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

<sup>9</sup> Serge William Serman, *Le corps des officiers français sous la Deuxième République et le Second Empire. Aristocratie et démocratie dans l'armée au milieu du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, PhD thesis of the Paris IV-Sorbonne University, December 18th 1976, three volumes, 2<sup>nd</sup> part, chapter 1 : « Le déclin des vocations héréditaires » .

<sup>10</sup> Isabelle Dasque, *A la recherche de Monsieur de Norepois : les diplomates de la République (1871-1914)*, PhD thesis of the Paris IV-Sorbonne University, under the supervision of Jean-Pierre Chaline, 5 volumes, 2005.

the important notables were dismissed because of their political opposition more than because of their birth. However, they kept positions in the department and town assemblies, and were still present in the administrative bodies that were the least affected by the republican purge. Thus, the *Elites of the Republic*<sup>11</sup>, that is to say the men at the top of the political and administrative hierarchies, now predominantly belonged to this legal profession, made up of lawyers and doctors with an intermediate and provincial bourgeois background. They became the source of the moderate Republic. But the presence of those representing the nobility was still important, at all levels of power.

In our case study, 94 men carried out at least one official position or political term in their lifetime, that is a proportion of 36%. Among them, some accumulated local political responsibilities (mayor and regional councillor), with national (member of Parliament and senator), and government responsibilities (ministers). In total, those men carried out 169 functions or terms. Comparing the nature of the political responsibilities and the social origin of these men, one notices the strong commitment of the nobilities in the local political life. 76% of town responsibilities and 89% of the functions of regional councillors were indeed carried out by men of noble origin. Almost one half of the noblemen who carried out a political function did so in a local context. Moreover, a strong presence of noblemen in parliamentary representation can be noted : 43% of the noblemen whose career was in politics were a member of Parliament at some point, and 12% became senators. On the contrary, the evidence suggests a weak number of noblemen within the category of “governmental functions”, since their participation in it was of about 10%. Their long-standing local roots gave to some families of the high nobility a political legitimacy, which they took advantage of until the eve of the Great war. During the elections, a part of the French citizens naturally gave their votes to powerful noble squires, who still lived on their estates like real lords. Despite a hard blow during the 1910 elections, the old elites’ influence in the countryside, and their aspiration to play a political and social role in the rural world was confirmed and extended at least until 1914. Thus globally, if the nobilities’ political powers faded after the advent of the Republic, the members of this group, limited in number on the national scale, were still overrepresented among the ruling institutions until 1914.

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<sup>11</sup> The phrase is taken from the title of Christophe Charle’s work, *Les Elites de la République 1880-1900*, Paris, Fayard editons, 1987, 2<sup>nd</sup> édition, 2006.

But did this honeymoon period go on after the war? If the First World War cannot be considered as a real historical rupture, since the democratisation process had started several decades before, can it be said to have marked the entry into a phase of acceleration of the old aristocracy's political decline? In an attempt to measure the evolution of the group's political powers between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a comparison of the functions carried out by the aristocrats of the given sample on three generations was established, by taking into account their dates of birth. Firstly, an increasing number of noblemen in local assemblies can be noticed between the first and the third generation. Indeed, town and regional responsibilities represent 43% in the first generation (men born between 1820 and 1840), 51% in the second generation (men born between 1841 to 1860), and 68,1 % in the thrid generation (born between 1861 and 1880). It needs to be said that the participation of this elite in the local political life is not representative of the global importance of the French nobility within this kind of assemblies. As Parisian, wealthy, and close to political circles, the high society enjoyed a particular local power. While insisting on the persistence of the presence of noblemen in the town councils, Maurice Agulhon showed their global setback as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the share of noblemen having carried out a political term in the Senate or in the House continually diminished, passing from 50% to 43,1% and then to 31,9%. Within governments, while there were already but few noblemen in the first generation, those who were born after 1860 - that is to say those who became adults between 1890 and 1940- were no longer represented in these institutions. This study does not allow us to determine very precisely when the definitive erasement of the old elites from national politics took place. Yet it confirms the idea that the decline started after the advent of the Republic and went on until the Great war, and came to its completion during the 1930's. One must say that after 1914, there was less and less hope that the old aristocracy would come back on the French political stage. Even though diversity of opinion prevailed within the group, the latter was mainly located on the right of the political exchequer, within the three trends that had been dividing the larger monarchist movement ever since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: legitimism, orleanism, and napoleonism. Now, this traditional rightist movement entered an era of irreversible decline as the regime was taking root, and this decline was quicker and quicker after the French Republic had won the 1918 victory. Divided, unable to elaborate a coherent political project likely to counter the progress

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<sup>12</sup> Maurice Agulhon, Jean-Louis Robert, (et al)., *Les maires en France du Consulat à nos jours*, Paris, Sorbonne Publications, 1986.

of militant republicanism, this rightist movement was also without an heir to a throne and which had very little chance of being restored. After 1914, the movement also went through a succession of electoral defeats, which were a proof that its influence was slowly fading, and that it was progressively losing its electorate<sup>13</sup>.

However, if without any real leader monarchism had trouble renewing its ideological background, and if its electorate decreased and the number of its representatives in the Houses continually diminished, the traditional right to which noblemen were attached remained a major political force in the French society during the first three decades of the new century. First of all, the conservative circle still counted prestigious political personalities until the interwar years. Among them, one can mention baron de Mackau<sup>14</sup>, or baron Denys Cochin, of recent noble descent from his father, and from a family ennobled in the 18th century on his mother's side. As an Orleanist, he supported a parliamentary monarchy and belonged to the rightist opposition. On October 29th, he entered the Union government of Aristide Briand as State Minister. Then, during the war, he was undersecretary for Foreign affairs, before resigning in 1917. He then won back his seat as a member of Parliament, which he kept until the 1919 elections. In the wake of the war, as he was 67 years old, he attempted, with 14 royalist members of Parliament, to reconstitute a force of opposition to the House, and to reorganise a movement by relying on local committees, a network of influent notables and a local and national press. His attempt remained marginal, but his action shows the persistence of an individual political dynamism within the most conservative rightist groups. Moreover, this residual resistance was extended well beyond the *Palais Bourbon* as numerous associations scattered in the French provinces worked more or less outside the official political system for the spreading of conservative ideas. The nationalist leagues which had appeared during the Dreyfus case constituted melting pots of new ideas on the right of the French political stage, and were also used to train modern executives potentially able to restructure the conservative group, which increasingly appeared unsuited for its purpose. Among these leagues, the *Action française* was certainly the political organ that was the most linked with the monarchist networks. Its propaganda strategy, as well as its uncompromising

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<sup>13</sup> On this question, Jean-François Sirinelli, *Les droites en France de la Révolution à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard editions, 1992 was consulted, as well as René Rémond, *Les droites en France*, Aubier Montaigne editions, Paris, 1982 ; and Michel Winock (under the direction of), *Histoire de l'extrême droite en France*, Paris, Seuil editions, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Phélippeau, *L'invention de l'homme politique moderne. Mackau, l'Orne et la République*, Socio-histoire, Paris, Belin editions, 2002.

nationalism and its sharp eloquence, repulsed from the beginning a part of the representatives of the traditional right. But it constituted an ideological synthesis of the three trends of the old right, and became the main body of royalist promotion after 1911. It thus gave to the monarchist networks an impulse that was no longer hoped for until the middle of the 1920's. At last, there can be no doubt about the decline of the old elites in the political life of the nation: its electorate progressively disappeared, which for the aristocracy meant the loss of the rank and file supporters of its ideological orientations as well as the loss of its positions within the Houses and governments. But the aristocracy also proved able to reinforce its position in local assemblies. The nobilities were still elected in the town and regional councils, as well as to the House, particularly in some Catholic and conservative regions in the West of France, which were traditionnally attached to the notables' system. Through a phenomenon of intragenerational transmission, which allowed the sons of notable families to take up the positions of their fathers, and even sometimes grandfathers, uncles, or brothers, the nobilities from Brittany and Normandy were maintained in the local and national political institutions<sup>15</sup>. The persistence of this transmission process in politics went on - even though declining - until the end of the 1930's, thus showing the *Ancien regime's* embeddedness in the French political system, well beyond the Great War.

### **A very relative economic decline**

As mentioned above, these families from the high Parisian aristocracy were globally wealthy. The statistical study elaborated from the declarations of succession reveals that despite a few important gaps within the group, the value of the noblemen's capital left after the members died was still very high at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, on average, those aristocrats left a legacy worth 2 million francs (1914), which sets them at the level of the very large fortunes. Even though the high bourgeoisie committed in business seemed even more wealthy, and if the recent nobilities accumulated larger fortunes than the old nobilities; about half of the noblemen in the study case declared a capital superior to one million francs, which was considerable. In most cases, the accumulation of wealth came more from legacies and from the quality of the alliances passed in their lifetime rather than from the revenues of their

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard Ménager, « La succession des mandats : une affaire de famille », in Jean-Marie Mayeur, Jean-Pierre Chaline and Alain Corbin, *Les Parlementaires de la Troisième République*, proceedings of the international conference organised by the Centre of research in 19th century history, on October 18th and 19th, 2001, Paris, Sorbonne Publications, 2003.

activities. Those aristocrats often lived on their private incomes, they were big landowners or civil servants, and they essentially lived from the revenues of the family legacy acquired through time. This legacy was largely diversified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because the high Parisian aristocracy knew how to adapt to the evolutions of the national and world economies. Indeed, the sons of these families kept strong links with the places of their estates of origin, but they also progressively invested in urban property, for the sake of profitability. They also speculated on more or less risky transferable securities. Very much divided into different levels of fortune, the high Parisian aristocracy globally remained among the highest classes in the pyramid of French fortunes. This leads us to the question of what happened after 1914. Did the generation of aristocrats who died after the war leave significantly less important fortunes? Did the war and the inflation as well as the 1930's crisis lead the old elites to a collective ruin? In the case under study, the consequences of the chaotic economic circumstances of the postwar period are clearly apparent. Two simultaneous phenomenons took place which are quite revealing. Firstly, one notices that after 1914, small fortunes of between 0 and 10 000 francs appeared, while they did not exist in the previous period. At the other end of the pyramid of high society fortunes, it is noted that on the contrary, the fortunes superior to 2 millions decreased, and those superior to 10 millions altogether disappeared. Now, before the war, those two categories represented about 47% of the files. After the war, their share was of only 17, 2%. Whatever the sex of the individuals, it seems that the level of successions went through a global decrease after 1914, and maybe more particularly after the economic crisis, since half the successions that were found on the second period were written after 1930.

Furthermore, in terms of the average capital at the time of death, a difference appears between before and after the war. At the lesser levels of successions – between 0 and 499 000 francs- the average capital slightly progressed. Beyond 500 000 francs, it evolved but little, and on the contrary, in the bracket of fortunes superior to 2 million francs, it went from 11 millions to less than 5 millions, which represents a loss of 61% of its value and a division by more than 2,5. While the value of the small fortunes rose, that of the average fortunes stagnated, and that of the very large fortunes plummeted. The category of the pre-1914 multimillionaires thus entered a phase of extinction. Meanwhile, on the whole, the category of the large fortunes resisted the ups and downs of the economic context. This phenomenon needs to be qualified, since 97% of post-1914 successions can be located above the average value of 5% of the most elevated fortunes in France. About 20% of the aristocrats of the case study still reached at

their deaths the level of fortune of the 200 richest families in the country. Until the end of the interwar years, the aristocracy was still located at the top of the French pyramid of fortunes. Despite the difficulties stemming from the war period - the fall of private incomes in the inflationist context of the 1920's, the sharp increase in tax rates, and the fall of the capital's categories of revenue after 1930 - the high aristocratic society was still an economically dominating class on the eve of the Second World War. Other hints confirm this point: the monographical studies of the budgets of certain large French families show that on the whole, the latter were able to maintain their expensive way of life until 1939<sup>16</sup>. They kept numerous household staff, spent as much money in food, clothes, and jewellery, often kept their family castles and Parisian private mansions, without massively getting into debt. Though a few families were in financial difficulty, few of them actually had to sell their property after a definite ruin. Moreover, if one examines the professional activities of the sons of these families at the following generation, it is apparent that most of them were able to keep a sufficient capital in order to live on their private incomes or to exercise a function that was but little profitable, in accordance with their ranks.

In fact, even if sometimes the evidence shows the real instability of the nobilities' budgets during the period, the group as a whole definitely survived despite the threats now hanging over the wealth that had been formerly acquired. For this reason, it is relevant to wonder about the potential collective and family strategies elaborated to protect the legacies' perpetuation. We will distinguish three main strategies. The first means was to modify the investing strategies of the Parisian aristocracy. Indeed, the sharing out of investments between transferable securities and property values was still a relatively stable investment option during the period before and after 1914. But slight differences in the composition of legacies reveal that the aristocracy knew how to adapt to the economic circumstances of the afterwar period. For example, as far as transferable securities are concerned, it appears that the bonds and the government stocks were relatively abandoned, as their fixed incomes decreased because of the inflation, they were thus replaced with more profitable investments. While the shares represented only 15% of the declared capital before 1914, they constituted 30% of it on the wake of the war. Among these, it seems that French shares were relatively well

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<sup>16</sup> See my study on the Joachim Murat family in Alice Bernard, *La persistance du modèle aristocratique. Mode de vie et sociabilité du grand monde parisien (1900-1939)*, PhD thesis under the supervision of Christophe Charle, presented at the Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne University, 2 volumes, 2008. See also Bruno Goyet, *Henri d'Orléans, comte de Paris (1908-1999). Le prince impossible*, Paris, Odile Jacob Ed., 2001 ; and François Lalliard, *La fortune des Wagram, de Napoléon à Proust*, Paris, Perrin Ed., 2002.

maintained, while there was a true collective enthusiasm for foreign shares. The property business also seems to have moved forward, since the share of rural property decreased, passing from 15% to 11% of the total, while that of urban buildings slightly progressed, from 17% to 20%. Thus it seems that the old aristocracy quickly understood that after the war, the accumulated fortune had become precarious. Facing the rates' fall and the property depreciation, the old aristocracy defined new investment strategies which allowed them to benefit from the buoyant values during the world growth of the 1920's. In this way, they also reduced the importance of the investments that were the most affected during the 1930's, while still being faithful to the principle of the division of risks. Here again, certain monographical studies allow us to confirm this idea, since despite the difficulties created by the economic circumstances, some families were able to make more money by speculating on world markets in the 1920's, while other families clearly proved able to avoid the disastrous effects of the 1930's crisis by bringing their capitals back in France or by placing them in less risky stock market values. After the war, the stock market speculation and a bold management of the family legacy were the keys to an increase in capital that was now vital to their livelihoods. But the perpetuation of inherited fortunes now also depended on the ability of the aristocrats to transmit their property. To do that, they had to limit the natural effect of the intragenerational division and the impact of the redistribution. It appears that in order to limit the risks of social downgrading hanging over their descendants, the men and women of the high aristocracy preserved, adopted, or generalised a series of means by which they could prevent the family legacy from being scattered, or by which they could favour the recomposition of the children's capital. Firstly, to secure the continued existence of the family fortune, one had to give birth to heirs. But to prevent the legacies from being scattered, their number also had to be limited. Now, it can be noted that malthusian behaviours became common in the families of our case study, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: while from a fifth to a quarter of the couples had between 0 and 2 children at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this proportion rose to a third in the generation of the aristocrats who lived in the interwar years. However, since the two thirds of the case study still had more than three children on the whole of the period, other solutions had to be found to limit the scattering of the property. By examining the declarations of succession of the aristocrats who died after 1914, we have noticed that writing wills in order to favour one of the heirs became a common practice. For according to French law, even if the birthright had been abolished in 1789, and even if the heirs were to receive an equal share of the part of the succession reserve, the dead kept the freedom to dispose at their discretion of the available quota in favour of their spouse, or of

one child, to the disadvantage of the other children. On the other hand, to reduce the level of inheritance taxes, the rates of which considerably increased after the war, the families used legal means such as legacies and donations to the State, to the Church, or to charity works. But they also used illegal means like fraud, the extent of which is impossible to measure, but which seems to have become a very common practice in the wealthy categories of the interwar years. Furthermore, given the new difficulties hanging over the very large fortunes of the capital, they now, more than before, had to help their heirs conclude advantageous alliances by which they would add to their own property the contributions of their spouses. Thus, in the case study, persisting endogamic behaviours among the couples' children can be noted. Finally, the last collective strategy during those hard interwar years was mutual help. Frightened by the prospect of ruin and social downgrading, the aristocrats elaborated systems of mutual help which indicate a degree of class solidarity despite the manifold divisions within the group. Two examples illustrate this point: the creation of the *Demeure Historique* in 1924, an association of squires allowing its members to support each other in case of difficulty to keep and maintain their family estates. One can also mention the creation of the *Association d'Entraide de la noblesse française* in 1932, which both allowed them to check the proofs of nobility of the member families and to centralise donations that were used for the education and care of the heirs who were the most affected by the crisis. Therefore, the old elites went through a "setback" rather than through an "economic decline" since if they did enter a period of instability and weakness after 1914, it seems that they were nevertheless able to preserve most of their economic power by adapting their decisions to the new constraints of the economic circumstances of the interwar period.

### **The fascination power of a prestigious social and cultural elite**

In the press during the Belle Époque, the nobilities and the high bourgeoisie were systematically presented as the masters of the social game and as major activity leaders of the French cultural life. The chronicle of the *Figaro*, as well as other newspapers, daily presented a clearly positive portrait of this elite. It was described as dynamic, innovative, elegant, both perpetuating the traditions of the Ancien Régime court society, and at the same time continually renewing its own distinctive social practices. In the "salon" column, the chroniclers described the conduct of the daily meetings at which high-society personalities gathered. The women received distinguished guests on their respective "at home" day: politicians, writers, diplomats, generals, and representatives of the large aristocratic and cosmopolitan families. As elegant, witty, and refined hostesses, they appeared as the prime

movers of the Parisian social life. They entertained their guests with musical and theatrical performances that could be very elaborated. They cultivated the tradition of the aristocratic patronage by imposing to the newspaper's readers a certain idea of what artistic creation should be. In the "charity" column, the chronicle highlighted the numerous acts of devotion of high-society women, who organized sales, concerts, and balls with subscription in order to gather funds for the poor. In the "Circles" column, the writers described the liveliness of those centres of male social life, where the art of conversation and the pleasure of parlour games were still being practiced. In other columns entitled "In the castle", "On the beaches" or "The hunts", the reader discovered the doings of the Parisian high society, which was divided into three main moments : the winter and the spring were spent in Paris, the summer was spent away in holiday places, and the fall outside Paris, on the family estates. These social practices, highly ritualised, then seemed unchanging. The society sharing those rituals, presented as the supreme elite of the French nation, then seemed immortal.

During the war, the hustle and bustle of these activities diminished. Indeed, a slowing down can be noted as early as the end of August 1914. The elites fled Paris and took refuge in the provinces, in Normandy or on the French Riviera. Generally, they behaved more discreetly in their comfortable exiles. The society advertisements almost completely disappeared from the column, but the chronicle, maintained throughout the period, replaced them with hommages paid to the soldiers of noble origin who were injured and to those who died in combat, or to the generous donors and organisers of charity works settled outside Paris. In the "society Information" of October 1<sup>st</sup> 1914, one could learn that "the lieutenant Cossé-Brissac died in combat by charging the enemy with bayonets at the head of his troops"<sup>17</sup>. In the same column from October 11<sup>th</sup> 1914, one can read that the Count Guillaume de Pracomtal, lieutenant of Dragons, son of the Count and Countess Rostaing de Pracomtal, was slightly hurt by a shell fragment and was now being taken care of in Compiègne<sup>18</sup>. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, the chronicler indicated that numerous personalities settled in Dinard devoted themselves as best as they could to help the numerous injured scattered in the many hotels and residences, turned into ambulances. Among them, the marquess de Jaucourt and her daughter-in-law the baroness de Rothschild, the princess de Faucigny-Lucinge, Madame de Saint-Paul, the baroness Leonino,

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<sup>17</sup> *Le Figaro*, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914, « Le Monde et la Ville », column « Renseignements mondains ». MICR-D-13 oct-dec 1914, BNF (French National Library).

<sup>18</sup> *Le Figaro*, October, 11<sup>th</sup>, 1914, « Le Monde et la Ville », column « Renseignements mondains ». MICR-D-13 oct-dec 1914, BNF (French National Library).

the countess de Rohan-Chabot, the countess Pierre de Segonzac, etc... The daily narrative of the high society's frivolous activities disappeared and was replaced with a systematic praise of the aristocracy's acts of devotion. From then on, only charity works could give cause for festive gatherings. As the elite of a nation which was threatened by invasion, the high Parisian society cast a veil of decency over its social life for several months. But its discretion was shattered after the enemy was pushed back and the front stabilised. Back in Paris after the victory of the French troops on the Marne, the socialites resumed some of their distinctive habits, though to a slower rhythm. As early as the end of 1914, the authorities allowed the reopening of theatres and cinemas. Even if their functioning was disrupted by the mobilisation of the staff, the problems of public transports, and the 11 p.m curfew, Parisian theatres reopened their doors, even if they had to welcome their visitors in underground rooms during the bombings<sup>19</sup>. The audiences of Parisian theatres progressively came back, ever more numerous to attend the musical *matinées* organised for charity purposes. The number of tickets sold in Paris passed from 6,5 millions in 1914-1915 to 9,5 millions in 1915-1916, and then to 10,5 millions in 1916-1917<sup>20</sup>. As the war went on, the demand for entertainments increased. In the years 1915-16-17, an almost carefree and happy atmosphere pervaded Paris. Queues could be seen along theatres, and fashionable restaurants were full. Even the racecourses, which for a time had been turned into pastures to facilitate milk supplies to Paris; resumed their activities in 1916. In the West of Paris, in the private mansions' salons, if the liveliness of the high society remained rather moderate and essentially of a charitable nature, the private receptions resumed the same year. The increasing number of intimate dinners and lunches can be as much perceived in the society press as in memoirs and family papers. After the short interruption of September-October 1914, the aristocratic elites, sheltered in the wealthy areas of the capital or in fashionable resorts outside Paris thus indulged in a very active social life, renewed thanks to charity associations.

Moreover, far from declining after the victory, this social activity largely persisted until the end of the 1930's, as it is shown in the contents and the form of the *Figaro* chronicle. Indeed, the formal evolution of the column reveals the continued existence of distinctive practices

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<sup>19</sup> For example, the *Comédie-Française* had an underground room with 1400 seats, the *Opera* could welcome 2200 persons, and the *Opéra-Comique* could welcome 1500 persons in its cellar. On this question, see Aurélie Pons: «Les théâtres parisiens sous la Grande Guerre », Master's dissertation under the supervision of Christophe Charle, Paris I-Sorbonne University, sept-2005.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

among the French aristocratic high society in the interwar years. Even though its title was slightly modified in the middle of the 1930's, the slight evolution of the columns composing the chronicle reveals the continuation of social practices typical of the aristocratic way of life before the war. The very limited reorganization of the column dedicated to society information offered its readers the very same contents. On the contrary, it seems that those contents clearly invaded the media represented by the seven daily pages. Indeed, the volume of information concerning the doings of the Parisian high society remarkably increased. The life of high-society people was progressively exposed outside the narrow frame of the column. Society information grew thicker, social events were confirmed as media objects. At the end of the 1920's, the introduction of photographs of elegant women, and of aristocratic couples as they were on holiday, or of the fancy dress shows during Parisian balls shed a new light on them. Beyond the chronicle itself, the society report appeared on page six: the reader could then see high society women attending horse races, high society men playing polo, high society couples in Cannes, Vichy or Deauville. Thanks to photography, the social dream still embodied by the aristocracy became a tangible reality. So all in all, the evolution of the presentation of high society and the extent of media attention shows that the Parisian aristocracy was far from just surviving with difficulty in a uniform bourgeois society. On the contrary, the latter still flaunted their busy social life, and kept on embodying a real social and cultural model.

In fact, never had this social group shone more in the press than during the two decades of the interwar period. It was presented as both faithful to the traditional society ritual but also open to all kinds of novelties, such as artistic vanguard and jazz, or fashion and open-air sports and car races. Its image was exposed in the everyday conservative press but also in women's magazines and in newspapers of a more general interest which sold more. It was seen very positively, in spite of the democratisation of the French society and the advent of the left in power. In order to determine whether or not the nobilities were still the masters of the social game, and if they still strongly embodied this "aristocratic model" displayed in the press, the names and titles of the most cited personalities were picked up in the society gossip column of the *Figaro* in 1938. The results are final: the overrepresentation of persons with noble blood is obvious. On the first 300 most cited couples, the number of descendants of the old aristocracy remains disproportionate in comparison with the perception of this group in the French society. The share of noble people in the chronicle was of 75% during the *Belle Epoque*, that is to say at the apex of the aristocracy's social power and significance in Europe. Forty years

later, it was of 60% and was still composed of representatives of the high nobility with titles. If the decline of the relative share of the nobilities clearly appears, the slow rhythm of the phenomenon invites us once more to reassess the history of the aristocratic decline in contemporary France.

Finally, on the scale of Europe, this study shows that France appears as a very paradoxical case. With all the necessary qualifications, if one attempts to draw comparative conclusions, two main ideas stand out. Firstly, the aristocratic decline appears to have been relatively more important in France than elsewhere before 1914. The development of a capitalist economy and the advent of the Republic necessarily led to its political and economic decline as early as the second half of the 19th century, at which time the aristocracy was still a ruling class in most of the European countries. From this point of view, it appears to be an exception in the pre-war European social landscape, or like a vanguard model given the turmoils affecting monarchical Europe after 1914. However, after 1914, its relative position compared with the other European nobilities evolved since paradoxically, the French aristocracy maintained both a political influence and economic power, as well as an acknowledged social prestige. Meanwhile, in the interwar period, the rest of Europe was affected by the red agitation, the advent of fascisms, in a word, the entry in the era of the masses. While it had a vanguard status before 1914, the French aristocracy then became a dynamic survival of the past in republican France, which seems to have put up with its historical pre-eminence.