Review by Michael Wolfe, St. John's University.

Until recently, ideological differences aside, most schools of historical analysis have generally agreed on the historical antagonism between the nobility and the bourgeoisie when accounting for the rise of modernity in the West. The conflicting worldviews of these two social groups have been invoked almost reflexively to explain the advent of the bureaucratic state, industrial capitalism, religious individualism, cultural secularism, experimental science and so on. However, since the rise of social history in the 1960s and the ensuing collapse of *histoire marxisante* in the 1970s, Europeanists who have spent any time in the archives--be they medievalists, early modernists like myself, even specialists of more recent eras, and certainly the authors of the essays under review--have readily found evidence that complicates, if not contradicts, this long familiar binary view of the past. While not completely discarding this dichotomous trope, they have set it in more relational, indeed dialogical terms within networks of court and ecclesiastical patronage, the workings of provincial politics and credit markets, and the business of the new print culture, to name just a few fascinating areas of recent research. The sixteen essays in this collection now take this revisionary project a step further by putting nobles back into the towns across francophone Western Europe and beyond from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries. Of course, the nobles never really left these urban areas except in the imaginations of nineteenth-century historians. The collection represents the fruits of two conferences held at the Université Paris-Sorbonne in 2005 and 2006 and assemble a distinguished cast of relative newcomers and established *grands maîtres* of the French and (in one case) Belgian scholarly firmament.

The opening chapter by Thierry Dutour lays out the *problématique*. He acknowledges that the view pitting nobles against bourgeois, however wrongheaded, remains deeply entrenched in modern historiography. It quickly breaks down, however, once we recognize that neither social group ever existed as a unitary, cohesive whole but were instead fluid, dynamic (and largely heuristic) categories whose members often affirmed common values about honor and service and pursued likeminded metrics of status and power. New interpretive models drawn from network analysis, he suggests, permit historians to appreciate how individuals can play a multiplicity of roles depending on particular circumstances, while performance theory opens up the improvisational capacity of social action. The next four essays offer several variations on these themes in different urban milieus. Alain Marchandisse demonstrates, for example, that the elite who ruled medieval Liège was formed by a constant mingling and intermarriage between merchant clans in town and neighboring noble families in the immediate countryside such that their identity might be styled as "rurbain," to borrow Marchandisse's very evocative term. Emmanuel Grélois takes us to *la France profonde* with his study of late medieval Clermont, where a sizable number of bourgeois families held rural fiefs and noble families with local seigneuries resided in town or, more commonly, just on its outskirts in suburban manors. In Reims, Pierre Desportes finds the presence of older noble families, while never really strong to begin with, steadily diminished and became replaced by newly ennobled royal officers who, in time, invested in local *terroirs* and the trappings of the traditional rural nobility. Florian Mazel discovers that while noble

domination in Provençal towns declined in the late Middle Ages, it continued to enjoy a presence through the foundation and patronage of urban religious institutions, such as mendicant orders, convents, and chapels. Problems of typicality abound the more deeply one probes each particular place, it appears.

The next three essays further collapse the distinction between rural and urban by considering noble relations with towns through the optic of service to the crown. Citing local studies and recent work in sociology, Romain Telliez points out that nobles had always dominated the upper rungs of the official hierarchy in judicial and financial affairs and continued to monopolize nearly all leadership positions in the military. As royal government became steadily more fixed in towns in the late Middle Ages, so it strengthened the ties between nobles and urban society, thus setting the stage for the evolution of a new service elite formed through intermarriage and patronage and which shared common cultural values, practices of sociability, and a ferocious appetite for marks of privilege. The crown's policy of ennoblement encouraged this process while also raising capital to underwrite its own dynastic ambitions. While these patterns varied across France, this service nobility became increasingly homogenous into the early modern period as its numbers, power and wealth grew, much of which they plowed into the purchase of rural manors and more exalted royal offices. The next two essays offer close looks at these processes in two major political centers, Burgundian Lille and Capetian Paris. Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin argues that the dukes of Burgundy fostered and depended upon an interregional noble network centered in Lille that persisted after Charles the Bold's defeat at Nancy in 1477. Few historians have fully appreciated the roles which nobles played in medieval Paris, according to Boris Bove and Caroline Bourlet, even though a noble presence in Paris clearly predates the rise of the Capetian monarchy. Indeed, the crown, especially during the reign of Philippe II, subjugated the indigenous noble families or more usually replaced them with loyal servants (often clergymen), much as occurred elsewhere. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a service nobility devoted to the king dominated both the society and economy of Paris. Philippe Hamon wraps up the first half of the book by stressing the deep medieval roots of Old Regime France.

The essays in part two introduce comparative perspectives. Bernard Ribémont explores the evolving "urban imaginary" found in aristocratic *chansons de geste* from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. While disparaging urban values, this body of literature also reflected the extent of the nobility's ambivalent identification with urban life and their progressive commitment to an ideal of princely service based on personal merit, not blood. The next three essays move to consider the relations between nobles and towns in regions outside greater France. As in much of France, the nobility of late medieval Flanders was a fluid social category whose members often moved back and forth between their rural manors and urban townhouses. Frederick Buylaert uses the case of Bruges to examine the origins and motives behind these episodic movements and the shifting character of this semi-urban noble identity, as new families melded into the ranks of the old. The engagement of the Flemish nobility grew in towns like Bruges, he argues, because urban milieus, not the countryside, served as the primary place for social advancement through service to the prince and commerce, which Flemish nobles avidly pursued. The binary distinction between noble and bourgeois in late medieval Germany and northern Italy, like much of the rest of Europe, was largely rooted in legal and political discourse, not social praxis, argues Joseph Morsel. Modern historiography has privileged these oppositional categories because of its traditional reliance upon these types of archival sources. More recent, critical work in social history using new kinds of sources reveals a more complicated, mingled reality. For Adeline Rucquoit, this same biased taxonomy also lies behind the distinction long made by historians of late medieval Castile between *caballeros* and *hidalgos*. Urban *caballeros* came to be viewed as a kind of bourgeoisie *avant la lettre*, while *hidalgos* living in the countryside became the supposed quintessential expression of Castilian nobleness. Yet thinkers in late medieval Spain all agreed that the only natural place for human society to flourish was in towns (*ciudad* and *villa*), not the countryside where barbarism held sway. Nobles of all different sorts perforce inhabited this civic world; indeed, one could only

become noble by succeeding in this world. Separating nobles from towns represented not the historical past, but the distorting influence of French historiography, she concludes.

The next two essays carry the discussion into the early modern period. Jean-Marie Constant proposes two different models of "urban nobility" in the sixteenth-century Orléanais and Maine predicated on the relative abundance in the former or paucity in the latter of opportunities for ennoblement through holding royal office. Granted, sword nobles and country squires with little direct affiliation with towns continued to exist, though tracing their genealogical origins with any accuracy is quite difficult, as Colbert first discovered in the 1660s. Before Colbert's investigations, it was enough to live nobly to be considered noble. Evidence suggests that entry into these noble ranks was also fairly open to prosperous *laboreurs* and varied locally depending on economic conditions, inheritance practices, and laws regulating enfeoffed lands. Robert Descimon considers these debates from a more theoretical perspective in his essay. He notes that some historical sources confirm the contrast between nobility and bourgeoisie, while other sources reveal the permeability of these two categories. What historians see thus depends on the kind of evidence they use and how carefully they parse the language they find. It is essential, above all, to resist the trap of normative, binary thinking. He proposes that historians collapse the distinction between town and countryside and instead consider them along a continuum as sites of social domination. That domination takes polymorphous, ubiquitous forms keyed to specific situations, relations, and modes of expression. Using these tools, historians can achieve a richer understanding of the past. Bernard Chevalier quite fittingly concludes the collection by noting the successive phases of development in this *longue durée* stretching from 1100 to 1600. Initially, to be noble meant a life of military service regardless of whether one resided in towns or the countryside. However, in time, nobility came to encompass a mode of personal comportment, not just a profession of arms. The rise of the medieval state encouraged this distinction by adding service to the prince as a pathway to nobility. Nobility proved so plastic because of its relative openness, at least until the seventeenth century. The binary oppositions long seen between nobles and bourgeois, town and country, existed mostly in the minds of nineteenth-century historians as they tried to explain the sudden collapse of the Old Regime after 1789. This reviewer could not agree more.

The essays in this collection, all well researched and conceptualized, will be of considerable interest to medieval and early modern specialists. They continue the revisionary enterprise underway in the past thirty years to rethink and, where possible, jettison the encrusted and deeply rooted interpretative paradigms which historians have inherited (until recently unknowingly) from the nineteenth century. Post-modern suspicions of fixing the past into some new historicist *synthèse* perhaps means that historians will need to accept as permanent the polysemous nature of what they do. But that's okay, at least in the opinion of this reviewer, for what they may lose by way of grandiose ambition, they more than make up for in terms of intellectual honesty toward the past.

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