VERSAILLES, VIENNA AND BEYOND:
CHANGING VIEWS OF HOUSEHOLD AND GOVERNMENT
IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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Introduction

The palace of Versailles encapsulates the image of the European court in the early modern age. The imposing architecture of the palace buildings and gardens, amplifying the monarch in the symbolic heart of his realm, tells a story repeated and embellished since the times of the Sun King. Royal power, restored after the Fronde rebellion (1648–1653), prevailed over unruly nobles for good. Court and palace had served as the king’s instruments in the process. Bringing together the nobles of the realm in Versailles, Louis XIV (1638–1715) managed to ‘domesticate’ these erstwhile indomitable characters. Financial problems had propelled them towards the palace, where they enjoyed the king’s benefits. Once at court, the grandees gradually lost their connections in the regions. Conspicuous consumption made them ever more dependent on royal graces. The ongoing battle for prestige among the nobles in the centre allowed the king to rule by fomenting strife among his former rivals. Occupying and balancing the nobles through the niceties of ceremony and politesse, the king in the meantime renovated and modernized the state apparatus in tandem with his bourgeois administrators. The court catered for the nobles and nominally upheld their position, yet at the same time it imprisoned them in a web of vanities and eroded their regional power bases.

This persuasive image, implicitly present in French literature since the later eighteenth century, was most systematically and powerfully worded by Norbert Elias.¹ His sociological study relied strongly on

the memoirs of the duke of Saint-Simon, son of one of Louis XIII’s favourites whose hopes of favour and high office at Louis XIV’s court had been disappointed bitterly. Elias took over his main witness’ carefully constructed view of the Sun King as nemesis of the French nobility. Their version of Versailles became shorthand for a coherent definition and explanation of court life all over Europe, stressing the centrality of the king in his palace, and depicting the court as a predominantly noble environment secluded from the apparatus of the state. We see a punctilious salon writ large, rather than a centre of power and decision-making; we encounter nobles as participants in an ongoing battle for préséance rather than as councilors, governors and soldiers. The isolation of the nobles in the vacuum of court life offered an explanation for the expansion of courts in early modern Europe, and their increasingly rigid ceremonial: this was a luxurious prison, a gilded cage. The political rationale of the court, then, had been to separate pouvoir from grandeur, ministers from nobles, state from household. The expanding and ceremonializing households had offered a convenient solution for the main obstacle hindering state building: entrenched noble regional elites.

The view of the court as a gilded cage matched a phase in European historiography showing a strong predilection for institutions and offices seen as leading towards the modern state: bureaucracies, councils, ministers, parliaments. The domestic context of dynastic rulership was seen as trivial and unworthy of study. Research concentrated on the political institutions that were to become the heart of the state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—when indeed the domestic establishments serving royalty were receding into political insignificance. With his work, Elias restored the historical relevance of the dynastic household, and provided an incisive analysis of several aspects of court life. His powerful analytical framework, however, was based solidly on the anachronistic notion of a separation of the spheres of household service and state service. Thus, a relatively modern situation, the result of a long and uneven development, was projected backwards onto early modern history.

In recent decades many of the axioms related to the notion of ‘absolute’ rulership and the creation of a ‘modern’ bureaucracy in

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2 See an early and intelligent variant of this thesis in Henri Brocher, A la cour de Louis XIV. Le rang et l’étiquette sous l’ancien régime (Paris 1934).