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## DEBATES

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### *The Purchase of Nobility in Castile 1552-1700: A Comment* \*

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In his suggestive essay on the sale of *hidalguías* (patents of nobility) in early modern Castile, Dr. I.A.A. Thompson revises a variety of traditional interpretations of the relation between state policy and social change in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spain.<sup>1</sup> Principal among these is the frequently-repeated view that attributes substantial responsibility for the "decline of Castile" to the crown's overt sale of patents and titles of nobility. According to this argument, the "inflation of honors" allegedly proved instrumental in fostering the *desenbourgeoisement* of Castile - that is, the conversion of its urban middle classes from active producers and taxpayers to passive, aristocratic rentiers. Thompson marshals a considerable amount of evidence to challenge this view. Thorough investigation of the surviving *cartas de privilegio* in the Simancas archives enables him to conclude that the direct sale of nobility by the Habsburg monarchs was a relatively insignificant source of upward social mobility, whose importance has been greatly exaggerated by later historians. He goes on to argue that the direct creation of nobility by the crown was "a far less significant component of social mobility and a far less relevant factor in the economy under the Habsburg than it was at either or later periods, or than it was at the same time in either France or England..."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I.A.A. THOMPSON, "The Purchase of Nobility in Castile 1552-1700," *Journal of European Economic History*, VIII (2), 1979, pp. 313-360.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

Comparable figures on ennoblement by Habsburg kings in neighboring Catalonia shed additional light on the role of state authority in fostering social change. The columns in the table below represent approximate minimum numbers of letters-patent of nobility issued by the Catalan Chancery from the beginning of the reign of Philip II to the abolition of these privileges in the Liberal reform of 1838.<sup>3</sup> The categories in which these are organized reveal an internal hierarchy within the noble estate at odds with that prevailing in Castile. The Catalan nobility was divided into four separate ranks, each with its own privileges, customs, and legal status. At the top of this social pyramid there presided a handful of *magnates*, or peers, roughly equivalent to the titled aristocrats of Castile. Below them came the *nobles*, or aristocrats proper, who were set apart from the lower ranks of the nobility by the distinctive address of "Don." Slightly lower came the largest group within the Catalan aristocracy, the *cavallers* or gentry. The royal creations of 1599 dramatically expanded the size of this group, which would continue to outstrip both the peers and aristocrats in numerical growth throughout the seventeenth century. The *ciudadans honrats* or "honored citizens" -- the leading inhabitants of Barcelona and the half-dozen larger towns -- constituted the final group enjoying inherited noble status in Catalonia.<sup>4</sup>

A clear chronology of ennoblement emerges from the figures in this chart. The first great expansion in the number of privileges of nobility took place during the decade following the conclusion of the parliament of 1599 -- a pattern remarkably similar to the "inflation of honors" in contemporary England.<sup>5</sup> This upward trend continued unabated throughout the seventeenth century, reaching a climax during the final years of the reign of Philip IV. Even if one subtracts the number of patents issued during the French and later Habsburg interregna, it is evident that the high point of royal creations of nobles during the Ancien Régime came at the height of the political and economic misfortunes of the mid-seventeenth century. The rhythm of en-

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<sup>3</sup> The sources for this chart include: the Llaris indices to the Chancery section of the A(rchive of the) C(rown of) A(ragon), Barcelona; the index of noble privileges in the Cancelleria and Cámara sections of the A.C.A. prepared under the direction of E. González Hurtebise; F. MORALES ROCA, "Privilegios nobiliarios del Principado de Cataluña," in *Hidalguía* (Madrid), vols. 23-28, 1975-80, *passim*; and the *Matricula del Bras Militar*, A.C.A./Generalitat G-57. For further remarks on the use of these sources to derive the figures in this table, see J.S. AMELANG, "Honored Citizens and Shameful Poor: Social and Cultural Change in Barcelona 1510-1814," unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1981, pp. 84 and 262-63.

<sup>4</sup> See J.H. ELLIOTT, "A Provincial Aristocracy: The Catalan Ruling Class in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Homenaje a Jaime Vicens Vives* (Barcelona, 1967), vol. II, pp. 125-41; and AMELANG, *op. cit.*, chapters one and five.

<sup>5</sup> L. STONE, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford, abridged ed. 1965), chapter three, esp. p. 41.

TABLE OF ENNOBLEMENT IN CATALONIA 1559-1838

Reign	Honored Citizens Barcelona	Honored Burgesses Perpignan	Honored Citizens Other Towns	Cavallers	Nobles	Total No.	Avg. no. patents per annum
Philip II 1559-98	22	28	23	74	35	182	4.6
Philip III 1598-1621	30	24	34	82	88	258	11.3
Philip IV 1621-65	240	52	14	208	96	610	13.8
Interregnum Louis XIII-XIV 1641-52	194	31	17	65	15	322	29.0
Charles II 1665-1700	201	—	14	150	101	466	13.4
Archduke Charles 1705-14	82	—	—	51	49	182	20.0
Bourbons 1700-1838	213	3	—	181	126	523	3.8
TOTALS	982	138	102	811	510	2,543	9.1

noblement slacked off under the new Bourbon dynasty, and at no point managed to recover the intensity that marked the early years of the "neo-foral" period (1652-1700).<sup>6</sup>

In short, the second half of the reign of Philip IV and the first two decades under Charles II appear to have afforded exceptional opportunities for rapid ennoblement to those willing to place their economic and political resources at the disposal of the crown. Despite the lack of a well-defined institu-

<sup>6</sup> The term "neo-foral" was coined by the Catalan historian Jaime Vicens i Vives to designate those years of the later seventeenth century when the control exercised by the central government over the crown of Aragon slackened considerably, as reflected in the disappearance of the confrontations with local constitutional traditions so characteristic of the tenure of Olivares. The word itself is derived from the medieval "for" or "fur" (Cast. "fuero"), which refers to "privilege" or "franchise." For the most recent study of this era, see H. KAMEN, *Spain in the Later Seventeenth Century 1665-1700* (London, 1980).

tional structure of ennoblement through the purchase of venal offices as under the *paluette* system in Ancien Régime France, during the mid-seventeenth century more Catalans -- in both absolute and relative terms -- were granted privileges of nobility in a shorter length of time than during any other period since the later Middle Ages. Hence the chronology of ennoblement in Catalonia provides a direct contrast to the portrait of Habsburg tightfistedness and Bourbon prodigality drawn by Thompson in his study of Castile.

Nor was this divergent chronology the sole way in which Catalan ennoblement differed from that of Castile. On the contrary, the sheer dimensions of the ennoblement of Catalans seems out of proportion to the less than 300 *hidalguías* which, according to the author, were issued in Castile from 1552 to 1700.<sup>7</sup> If we focus our attention on the single category of *cavaller* -- the closest Catalan juridical equivalent to the Castilian *hidalgo* -- we find that even after excluding the 65 patents issued during the French interregnum of 1641-52, a total of 514 *cavallers* was created in Catalonia during the same period. This seems remarkably high for a nation whose population during this era constituted at best a mere tenth of that of its powerful neighbor to the west. Were we to add to this figure the number of honored citizens created during this century and a half -- hardly an unreasonable procedure, as citizenship closely resembled *hidalguía* in that both represented the lowest, and thus initial, rank of nobility -- this disproportion would more than double.

Obviously something is amiss here. One possible explanation of this anomaly is suggested by Thompson himself -- that other means of establishing *hidalguía*, such as through a lawsuit in Valladolid or by obtaining the post of *regidor* in one of the larger cities, accounted for the great bulk of noble creations in Castile.<sup>8</sup> One could, however, venture a different hypothesis -- that something is missing in the documents Thompson has examined, namely those patents which were not sold, but rather awarded as *mercedes* or "free" grants.

There is little conclusive evidence for the direct sale of patents of nobility in Catalonia along the lines discussed by Thompson. It nevertheless seems more than likely that such sales did exist. While a specific *tatxa* or fee schedule for the sale of various noble ranks has yet to be found for the crown of Aragon, it is clear that there was increased pressure upon the crown to use these privileges as a source of badly-needed revenue, especially during the wartorn decade of the 1630s.<sup>9</sup> However, the outright sale of these patents for fiscal reasons

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<sup>7</sup> THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Thus while privileges of honored citizenship of Barcelona from the eighteenth century note the amount "contributed" at the end of the document, I have yet to find a similar instance for the Habsburg period. For a sampling of these later papers, see J. PLANTADA Y AZNAR, "Hidalguías de Cataluña. Solicitudes de privilegio de Ciudadano Honrado de Barcelona," *Hidalguía*, XVII, 1969, pp. 817-860. James Casey's

probably did not match in overall importance the royal government's attempts to use these creations as *mercedes* or grants designed to drum up support among the local elite, and to reward the loyalty of its beleaguered followers. Hence the coincidence between meetings of the Catalan parliament -- 1585, 1599, and 1626 -- and the issue of a relatively high number of privileges during these years point to a deliberate, if sporadic, policy of granting letters-patent of nobility as a reward for past or future political favors. This was especially true in the case of the *Corts* of 1599, which were followed by the largest single grant of patents of nobility in Catalan history.<sup>10</sup>

Hence the figures from contemporary Catalonia seem to indicate that in the Principality, the majority of letters-patent were issued as a means of gratifying either those whose political support could be assured by the grant of such *mercedes*, or those who directly appealed to the crown for these titles.<sup>11</sup> The crucial question would thus appear to be: why did Habsburg policy regarding the ennoblement of Castilians vary so dramatically from that obtaining in neighboring Catalonia?

It could of course be argued that the distinct historical development of the aristocracies of Catalonia and Castile fostered the emergence of different means by which the monarchy chose to expand their respective ranks. It is this consideration which lends peculiar importance to the fact that the Catalan nobility, in contrast to its Castilian counterpart, was a well-defined social group whose membership could be determined by a variety of pre-existing legal prescriptions. Summons to the aristocratic Estate in parliament; inclusion in the various lists of candidates for specifically noble offices such as the *Diputat Militar*, or leading noble representative in the *Generalitat*; and, after 1605, inscription in the official registry of the *Bras Militar* -- all of these provided a clear and public test of one's status as a member of the aristocratic estate. Hence the hardfought struggles for informal recognition and the endless stream of appeals to the heraldic chamber of the royal appeals court in Valladolid found little counterpart in Catalonia, where more precise mechanisms existed for the

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figures of £ 250-700 for *cavaller* rank, and £ 300-1300 for noble status, were probably the closest equivalents to the prevailing rate in seventeenth-century Catalonia. See his *The Kingdom of Valencia in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 45 ff.

<sup>10</sup> See J.H. ELLIOTT, *The Revolt of the Catalans* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 49 ff; and AMELANG, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Requests for the grant of patents of nobility or citizenship as *mercedes* can be found scattered throughout the voluminous correspondence of the Consejo de Aragón in the A.C.A. Legajo 225 contains a representative selection of pleas for these favors from the most assiduous devotees of crown policy in the Principality, the judges of the local *Audiencia*, or high court of appeals. These documents give little or no indication of money being paid for these grants. On the contrary, the judges seem to view awards of this type as common perquisites of their positions as the most exalted, over-worked, and politically exposed servants of the crown in Catalonia.

objective determination of noble status.<sup>12</sup> One can therefore hardly call into question the far greater prevalence of, for example, the practice of establishing nobility through lawsuit in Castile than in Catalonia.

That the Habsburgs were simply more generous with the Catalans provides another possible explanation for this discrepancy in both the timing and extent of ennoblement. For example, it is conceivable that differing customs regarding the nobility's exemption from taxation in the two countries may have rendered the crown less hesitant about granting patents in Catalonia.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is clear that Catalans garnered relatively few of the standard "alternative" *mercedes*, such as grant of knighthood in the peninsular military orders of Santiago or Calatrava.<sup>14</sup> Compensation for this misfortune may thus have taken the form of the infinitely-expanding royal supply of patents. Finally, it could also be argued that the stubborn resistance of the Catalan elites to their Castilian sovereigns induced a more frequent resort to royal largesse than was the case in the rest of the peninsula. Although recent studies tend to question the longstanding view of the Castilian *Cortes* as the helpless pawn of the monarchy,<sup>15</sup> no one could reasonably doubt the indisputably less tractable character of the ruling classes of seventeenth-century Catalonia. The crown's desire to appease the notoriously quarrelsome and stubborn *Corts* could well have encouraged it to show greater generosity towards the Catalan elites than to their more docile Castilian counterparts.

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<sup>12</sup> This difference was symbolized by the exclusive reservation in Catalonia of the honorific address "Don" to members of the upper nobility, which contrasted with its wider usage -- resulting in greater confusion -- in early modern Castile.

<sup>13</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Catalan aristocrats were less immune to royal, and especially to municipal, taxation than their Castilian counterparts. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of further research needs to be done before this impression can be confirmed.

<sup>14</sup> It is true that the crown of Aragon housed its own military orders. Those of Montesa and St. Jordi de Alfama were particularly important in Valencia, while the Order of St. John of Jerusalem seems to have predominated in Catalonia. However, none of these groups appears to have achieved an importance in local society comparable to that enjoyed by the larger Castilian orders. For remarks on the military orders of early modern Catalonia, see: J. MIRET I SANS, *Les Cases de Templers y Hospitalers en Catalunya* (Barcelona, 1910); FR. H. DE SAMPER, *Montesa Ilustrada* (Valencia, 1669); and L. MAS Y GIL, "La Orden Militar de S. Jorge de Alfama, Sus Maestros, y la Cofradía de Mossen Sant Jordi," *Hidalguía*, XI, 1963, pp. 247-56. For an assessment of the overall impact of the military orders in early modern Castile, see L.P. WRIGHT, "The Military Orders in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Spanish Society: The Institutional Embodiment of a Historical Tradition," *Past and Present*, 43, 1969, pp. 34-70.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. C. JAGO, "Habsburg Absolutism and the Cortes of Castile," *American Historical Review*, 86, 1981, pp. 307-26.

One nevertheless gets the impression that despite their undeniable importance, these discrepancies are not sufficient in themselves to account for the gaping difference between the relative number of patents awarded *per capita* in the two countries. It is difficult to believe that the Habsburg monarchs who were so free with letters-patent of nobility in Catalonia should have refused to award the same privileges as *mercedes* to their Castilian servants and subjects as well. A more likely explanation is that the documents used by Thompson did not mention such grants because they were drawn from strictly fiscal sources like the *Contaduría*. The comparable figures for Catalonia presented in this essay were drawn from a different sample of Chancery and *Cámara* records, and thus include all patents issued, whether sold or awarded as *mercedes*. Finally, it is doubtless significant that the laments bemoaning the deleterious effects of the "debourgeoisification" of society that issued from the pens of Castilian *arbitristas* found scant echo in early modern Catalonia.<sup>16</sup> That there is indeed little contemporary evidence to suggest that the Catalans were more prone to the "lust for nobility" than their counterparts to the west reinforces the likelihood that royal attitudes towards ennoblement in Castile differed little from crown policy in the Principality.

In short, Thompson is undoubtedly correct to argue that the direct sale of *hidalguías* accounted for an insignificant proportion of the total ennoblement achieved in Castile from the reign of Philip II to that of Charles II. He is also right to point to "alternative and quantitatively much more important ways of becoming noble." But to argue from these premises that the Habsburgs "interfered" less actively in the social order than did their Trastámara predecessors or Bourbon successors is clearly a much more risky proposition. It seems misleading to state that "the Habsburgs issued less than 300 *hidalguías* in 40 years," for the simple reason that while the crown sold few patents, in the meantime the ranks of the noble estate grew prodigiously during the early modern period, thanks to a variety of mechanisms fostered by royal policy.<sup>17</sup> And if the figures from Catalonia — drawn from Chancery records instead of the fiscal sources used by Thompson — give any indication, the overall creation of nobles by the crown proved more extensive than he implies, as

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<sup>16</sup> It is true that as early as the thirteenth century Raymond Lull had castigated the universal desire on the part of guild masters to forsake the mechanical arts for the rentier existence of the urban patriciate. Yet most later writers took a much less severe view of this aspiration, and seem to have regarded gradual movement upwards along the social scale as a permanent feature of the natural ordering of society. Elevation in social status that was both gradual and discreet seems to have produced little negative comment during the early modern period. For further remarks on attitudes towards ennoblement in seventeenth-century Catalonia, see AMELANG, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-38.

<sup>17</sup> THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 339 ff; and A. DOMÍNGUEZ ORTIZ, *Las Clases Privilegiadas en La España del Antiguo Régimen* (Madrid, 1973), pp. 35 ff. The Thompson quotation is found on p. 356.

one must keep in mind the *hidalguías* awarded as *mercedes* by the monarch, and which do not appear in the documents he consulted.<sup>18</sup> Thompson's empirical investigation of the sale of *hidalguías* is a valuable first step in the study of the changing contours of the aristocracy of early modern Spain. Nevertheless, it is clear that much more research will be needed before the chronology and dimensions of the expansion of this ruling class can be adequately traced.

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<sup>18</sup> At the root of the problems is what seems to be a confusion between the narrower matter of the sale of *hidalguías*, and the overall creation of patents of nobility. On at least two occasions (pp. 333 and 335), the author takes care to distinguish clearly between the two — obviously an important qualification, as it separates the outright sale of nobility from the more general problem of the "aristocratization" of early modern Castilian society. But this distinction is not always made so clear elsewhere in the essay. On the contrary, at several junctures (e.g. pp. 321, 324, 325, 338, and 356) Thompson tends to identify the number of patents *issued* with the total number of *hidalguías sold*, thus conflating what are in all probability two very different sets of figures.