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# Elite Formation in Late Nineteenth Century: France Compared to Britain and Germany

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**Abstract:** In a famous and controversial book, Arno J. Mayer has defined European society at the end of 19th century as a persistent Ancien Regime<sup>1</sup>. To defend his thesis, he invoked in particular the recruitment and formation of dominant elites mainly in Britain, Germany, the Dual Monarchy, Russia and more sketchily in Italy, Spain and even France. As I have shown in two of my books (*Les élites de la République* and *La crise des sociétés impériales*<sup>2</sup>), this thesis already controversial in the first quoted countries is not at all relevant for France. This does not mean that France was, as pretended its republican governing elites, a democratic and meritocratic nation, but that it is impossible to analyse elites in France with so broad and unprecise concepts as aristocracy, bourgeoisie and so on. The aim of this paper is to propose a new perspective with new social concepts and to compare them with results of the study of elites in the two other imperial societies, UK and Germany. We shall begin with France and then turn to these countries to show some similarities and differences forgotten by current historiography.

## Old and New elites in France

Compared to British and German middle classes, the position of the French middle class may be seen both as strong and difficult. Strong, since the aristocratic and notable families have lost parliamentary power in 1879 and that the hypothesis of a monarchist restauration seems rather unrealistic at the beginning of the XXth century with the failure of the antidreyfusard and nationalist campaign. Even the monarchist and bonapartist parties are obliged to use a democratic discourse to justify their critics of the Republic. Old elites keep some power and presence in traditional and rural regions such as Brittany or Franche-Comté and south of the Massif Central, or in some elitist corps, such as the diplomacy, upper grades of the army or the Cour des Comptes, but even there the bourgeois and meritocratic elements are dominant. What is called in Paris, “le monde” or the “high life”, dominated by rich aristocratic families, is a social model still alive for nostalgic bourgeois or “nouveaux riches” who imi-

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<sup>1</sup> Arno Mayer, *The persistence of Old Regime. Europe since 1848*, New York, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, Fayard, 1987, 2nd enlarged and revised edition, 2006; Paris, Le Seuil, 2001.

tate their way of life (castles, rich mansions in the West End in Paris, clubs and sports borrowed from the British aristocratic way of life)<sup>3</sup>. But its power is only a symbolic one and relegated to the cultural patronage (charity, artistic and concert life, and so on<sup>4</sup>).

The late American historian Fritz K. Ringer defined the French bourgeoisie a “*thrice blessed bourgeoisie*”<sup>5</sup>, in particular when compared to the German middle class. Thrice blessed, because she gathers three types of power: political power, social power and economic power. In Britain, the *middle class* must share the two first forms of power with the aristocracy and the gentry and is obliged to concede new advantages to the growing counter-power of trade unions. In Germany, the middle classes are divided between a cultural fraction (*Bildungsbürgertum*) and an economic one, a Southern catholic bourgeoisie and a Northern protestant one, big business in heavy industries, middle range businessmen in new sectors, and so on. Its political power is limited to great towns and urban regions and very weak in the government or in strategic administrations like the Army or the diplomacy, still dominated by aristocratic elements<sup>6</sup>.

In spite of the universal suffrage and a parliamentary regime, French bourgeois elites succeeded to preserve their economic privileges: their financial capital and professional income are less taxed than in Britain and Germany since there is no income tax. Land, houses and popular consumption are more taxed than the revenues characteristic of new and bourgeois elites. Therefore income inequalities and inherited inequalities are very high in spite of the official egalitarian ideology of the Republic. This is not very surprising in a liberal and capitalist society. What is more awkward is the absence of any real will to reform them in spite of left oriented governments in the years 1899-1908 (the income tax is only voted in July 1914 and the democratization of elite paths of recruitment is very problematic even after the reform of the baccalauréat in 1902).

The University and school reforms have been launched at the beginning of the 1880s. New universities with stronger faculties of letters and sciences were supposed to develop French science which has declined since the Second Em-

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<sup>3</sup> C. Charle, *Les Élités de la République*, op. cit., p. 379-405 and “Noblesse et élites en France au début du XXe siècle”, actes du colloque de l’École française de Rome, *Les Noblesses européennes aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Rome, Università di Milano, École française de Rome, 1988, p. 407-433; C. Grange, *Les Gens du Bottin Mondain 1903-1987, Y être, c’est en être*, Paris, Fayard, 1996; Ph. Grandcoing, *Les Demeures de la distinction. Châteaux et châtelains au XIXe siècle en Haute-Vienne*, Limoges, PULIM, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> C. Grange, op. cit.; Myriam Chimènes, *Mécènes et musiciens, du salon au concert à Paris sous la III<sup>e</sup> République*, Paris, Fayard, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> F. K. Ringer, *French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, Paris, Cambridge U. P., Ed. de la MSH, 1992, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> J. Kocka (ed.), *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*, München, DTV, 1988, 3 vol.

pire. These new paths of social mobility were supposed to give new opportunities for meritocratic elements compared to the Law faculties or the “grandes écoles” recruited in more bourgeois backgrounds. And it is true, as I have shown in *Les élites de la République*, that lower middle class elements are present both as students or professors in these faculties. But this does not weaken really the dominant access to elites through administrative *concours* and legal training.

The republican governing elite is in fact divided between a fraction who still believes in the virtue of an open elite through a meritocratic selection and a more conservative one who prefers to keep a control on access through social and economic networks and refuses social reform (rejection of income tax), educational reform of the lycée (still expensive with few scholarships) and defends the privileges of the Law faculties and the *concours* for an access to dominant administrative positions<sup>7</sup>.

This absence of radical reforms for elite formation is not only the result of the internal opposition between the two fractions of the governing elites. In a society still dominated by rural regions and small enterprises, the two main decisions taken by Republican elites are:

- 1) building a national school network open to everybody with new possibilities of social promotion through the *école primaire supérieure* and the *école normale primaire*
- 2) option for protectionism and colonial empire to maintain the prosperity of rural sectors and small enterprises confronted to the great depression and concurrence of new dynamic economies those of Germany and the United States.

They answered to the demands of the social and political majority of the country. In a liberal and dynamic prospect, these two options have been criticized later by apostles of a modernized France who saw there the origins of the French malthusianism and economic decline leading to the crisis of the Thirties and the collapse of 1940. But in the years when these major orientations were put into practice, they corresponded exactly to the democratic will of the electorate even if they have been decided by bourgeois elites who should have been more prone to the English liberal vision of economy and society. Here lay the strength and the weakness of the French parliamentary Republic: it allows the presence of bourgeois and petit bourgeois interests to be present or represented directly or indirectly through many places of power or public discussion: Parliament itself, official or semi-official commissions, advising boards, Trade councils, various lobbies linked to MPs. Its failure is the enormous waste of energy and time, because of its instability (linked to the absence of well structured parties like in Germany and the UK) and the multiple interests to be rec-

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<sup>7</sup> C. Charle, *Naissance des "intellectuels" (1880-1900)*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1990, p. 76.

onciled before any reform or decision. The solution to this problem was found in the preeminence of a particular fraction in the Parliament, the legal bourgeoisie. This cluster depends for her political future on the fidelity of the local voters who oblige it to represent their often contradictory interests. But, at the same time, its cultural capital (legal training) gives her a superiority on other traditional interests to achieve the best compromise.

### The legal bourgeoisie (*bourgeoisie de robe*), arbiter of the Republic

This legal bourgeoisie (in French: *bourgeoisie de robe*)<sup>8</sup> is composed of lawyers (barristers, notaries, magistrates, and so on) and upper-level civil servants, all educated in a Law faculty and overrepresented in the Parliament and the higher strata of the state apparatus. Both present in Paris and the provinces, it forms a link between the other clusters of the bourgeoisie (through its professional activities, social origins and matrimonial links). Far more than the other, more isolated clusters of the middle classes, it gathers professional competence, comfortable incomes, and leisure to invest in public activities: businessmen and those with landed interest are uneasy in the new democratic atmosphere of the republican Parliament and lack the time to invest in professional politics. When votes were won through social prestige or administrative pressures, it was easier for them to be elected in rural constituencies. With the new liberal system, they lose more and more this inherited advantage and in industrial districts worker candidates contest even the privilege of bourgeois candidates to occupy parliamentary seats as soon as 1893.

We find deputies or senators coming from this social bracket mainly in the republican parties but they are also present too on the right and even on the far left. Influenced by the legal culture, they defend political liberalism inherited from the French Revolution against any excess of State power. They are attached to individualism as well, free initiative and enterprise, necessary to their professional status, and so may share the liberal vision of business elites. But there is also a segment of this legal bourgeoisie, influenced by a long tradition of a strong State, linked to the centralized monarchy and committed to the defense of public interest against corporatism and localism or Church power and even the help to the weak people against the powerful<sup>9</sup>. This later group is more present in the “*grands corps*” who tries to resist to the clientelism and the

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<sup>8</sup> C. Charle, “La bourgeoisie de robe en France au XIXe siècle”, *Le Mouvement social*, n°181, octobre-décembre 1997, p. 52-72 and “Légitimités en péril. Éléments pour une histoire comparée des élites et de l’État en France et en Europe occidentale, XIXe-XXe siècles”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, mars 1997, 116-117, p. 39-52.

<sup>9</sup> L. Karpik, *Les Avocats. Entre l’État, le public, le marché XIIIe-XXe siècles*, Paris, Gallimard, 1995.

corruption so frequent in the Parliament at that period. The liberal orientation is dominant among this bourgeoisie, but the Dreyfus affair has shown a growing rightist orientation of lawyers too (both among students and barristers) linked to the hostility to dreyfusard “intellectuals” asking for a meritocratic reform of higher education which would weaken the control of these professions on their own reproduction<sup>10</sup>.

To show the importance of this fraction, we may compare statistics of the composition of Parliaments in France and Germany (see table 1). Whereas 47,9% of deputies in France are members of the professions, it is only the case of less than 10% of members of the Reichstag. On the contrary, the presence of members of the administration is almost the double in the German Reichstag as compared to the French Chamber of Deputies.

Table 1: Professional recruitment of the Chambre des députés in France in 1889 and the Reichstag in 1887

Profession	France 1889	Reichstag 1887
Higher civil servants and army officers	17,2	31,0
Professions	47,9	9,8
Landowners	8,2	31,0
Business	14,8	14,5
Farmers	6,2	with landowners
Clergy	?	4,4
Misc.	2,5	5,4
Lower middle class and popular classes	3,2	4,9

Sources: H. Best, “Politische Modernisierung und parlamentarische Führungsgruppen in Deutschland 1867-1918”, *Historical Social Research*, vol. 13, 1988, 1, p. 5-74; M. Dogan, “Les filières de la carrière politique”, *Revue française de sociologie*, VIII, 4, 1967, p. 472.

In both countries, parliamentary representation is still limited to the middle and the upper classes (less than 5% of deputies have popular or lower middle class background) but the economic bourgeoisie or the landowners are equally underrepresented, compared to their importance in the social structure. Whereas in France their interests are defended by members of the professions (mainly lawyers), in Germany it is the administration or the landed interest, which, like in France during the July monarchy or the Second Empire, is domi-

<sup>10</sup> C. Charle, “Le déclin de la République des avocats”, dans P. Birnbaum (dir.), *La France de l'affaire Dreyfus*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 56-86.

nant in the political sphere. It is even far more present than these statistics suggest, since the governing elite is composed of higher civil servants or people linked to the aristocratic elites. Does this mean, as claimed by Arno Mayer, that France is ruled by a liberal and bourgeois elite while Germany is still ruled as under the Old Regime? This would be an oversimplification as we will see now when examining the German elites in more details.

### German Wilhelminian elites

The lasting debate about the German *Sonderweg* has been obsessed by the question of the respective importance of the aristocracy and the middle class in the ruling elites of Wilhelminian Germany. If we stay at the upper level of elites, as in the preceding table, it is true that old traditions seem to stay alive in Germany up to the First World War. Though the growing influence of Social-democracy allows a better representation of the lower classes at the Reichstag, the ruling elite and the higher levels of administration remain unchanged. For some authors that would mean that the German bourgeoisie failed to get the same influence as the French or British middle class in the public sphere and even that it accepted the same values as the aristocracy: authority, State control, defense of rural interests against modern and liberal society based on urban groups and new industrial sectors. The main explanation for this shyness would be both the nationalist mood accepting the army as a State in the State and under the control of the aristocracy and the social panic in front of the growing influence of trade unions and the social-democratic party perceived as a major threat against middle class interests.

Nevertheless more precise studies show some signs of change in the same direction as in France. The main way of access to elites are the universities which have known a marked increase of their alumni. Students are in majority originating from the middle class and the aristocracy (70 to 80%). As well as in France, families linked to the professions or civil service are overrepresented (38 to 42% depending on the faculties). The economic bourgeoisie is less interested for her sons by classical universities and more present in the *Technische Hochschulen* (these institutions know a dramatic growth by a factor five between 1870 and 1914: 11 451 students at this date) or *Handelshochschulen* – a development reminiscent of the strong presence of sons of industrialists or businessmen in the engineering or commercial schools in France at the same period. A marked difference with France is the aristocratic presence at the Law faculties for those who intend to become higher civil servants whereas their brothers are formed in elitist regiments to enter later in the cavalry or the general staff. Even if subtle differences keep alive the difference of origins between university students (fraternities of different obedience, service as reserve officer in specific regiments), the main road to enter the administration is a common legal training followed by State exams and long probatory employ-

ment without salary as “Referendar” in different administrative posts. These rules are applied to both bourgeois and noble students having obtained their diplomas in Law<sup>11</sup>. Religious origins, wealth of the family, proximity to the State have still a great importance in the final selection of those obtaining permanent posts, but Marie-Bénédicte Vincent has shown that the growing competition between alumni put an end to the classical nepotism or aristocratic bias in the recruitment of higher civil servants. The proportion of higher civil servants of bourgeois origin is growing and now largely dominant and there is a kind of division of labour between meritocratic and technical functions, more bourgeois, and representation and territorial posts more aristocratic<sup>12</sup>. In that period, academic titles become in Germany close to equivalent to aristocratic titles for the entry in higher circles. The larger recruitment and decentralization of higher learning give also better opportunities for access to them than the very few and centralized universities existing in France and England<sup>13</sup>.

As a consequence, the main weakness of wilhelminian administrative elites is not the absence of meritocratic selection but its absence of control by a real political power. Higher civil servants may follow their career in preserved settings frequenting only their superiors or inferiors recruited on the same basis and having an apolitical conception of the State. Ministers themselves are mainly stemming from their ranks. They have connections with other economic or rural elites through their family ties but the absence of a true parliamentary control accustoms them to a technical view of their role. In normal period, with the growing influence of the State between 1870 and 1914, it is not an obstacle to progress since civil society through associations and the press or debates in the parliament may exercise an indirect control hindering major excesses or misuse of authority. But during a crisis like the First World War, when the civil administration will be subordinated to the military administration, this culture of obedience will lead to major errors translated by the dramatic degradation of the living conditions of the population, which on its turn will delegitimize the prestige of the State and the administration<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Marie-Bénédicte Vincent, *Serviteurs de l'Etat: les élites administratives en Prusse de 1871 à 1933*, Paris, Belin, 2006, p. 38 ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90-93.

<sup>13</sup> H. Titze, *Der Akademikerzyklus*, Goettingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990, p. 151; C. Charle (dir.), “Les universités germaniques”, *Histoire de l'éducation*, mai 1994 ; Ch. Mac Clelland, *State, Society and University in Germany, 1700-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge U. P., 1980; K. H. Jarausch, *Students, Society and Politics in Imperial Germany, The Rise of Academic Illiberalism*, Princeton, Princeton U. P., 1982; K. H. Jarausch (ed.), *The Transformation of Higher Learning, Expansion, Diversification, Social Opening and Professionalization in England, Germany, Russia and the United States*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Marie-Bénédicte Vincent, *op. cit.* and C. Charle, *La crise des sociétés impériales (1900-1940)*, *op. cit.*



## English Elites, a delayed meritocracy

If French elites were very critical of their German counterparts during the 19th century, French liberals were obsessed by what we may call the English political model: the capacity of English traditional elites to avoid revolutions and maintain their power, prestige or privileges in spite of their contestation by the middle and the lower classes<sup>15</sup>. This success contrasted with the inability of French notables to do so. I have already proposed an explanation for this contrast insisting in particular on the importance of the landed capital, possessed by the gentry and the nobility in England, as compared to the more reduced rural wealth of notables in France<sup>16</sup>. In political systems founded on territorial constituencies, this secured a major advantage to the English ruling class before the extension of the franchise to the lower classes in 1884. But even after this reform the social composition of the House of Commons does not change very quickly as is shown by the professions of MPs of the two main parties on the eve of First World War.

In absence of any indemnity for the MPs till 1911, the House of Commons is recruited in the upper strata of the British population. Upper middle class and aristocracy are the main pools of politicians : among liberal MPs in 1906, 18% are gentlemen, 6% commissioned officers, 21% important businessmen, 20% less important businessmen, 23% lawyers, 7% writers or journalists, 2% academics, 1% physicians, and only 2% trade-unionists<sup>17</sup>. Among the conservatives, there are 31% of gentlemen, 20% of commissioned officers, 17% of important businessmen, 8% of middle range businessmen, 16% of lawyers, 4% of writers and journalists, 2% of academics and 1% of physicians. These class barriers are not only economic ones but also educational, as we see in the emergence of members of the professions taking the seats of the landed classes at the end of the 19th century. Nevertheless this growing importance of academic capital in the recruitment of political elites is much weaker than in France or even Germany at the same period. Whereas more than two thirds of MPs in France are University graduates or alumni of the «grandes écoles», the British data show that for Liberal MPs it is the case of only one third and for Conservatives around 20%<sup>18</sup>. This weakness of a meritocratic path is not lim-

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<sup>15</sup> C. Charle, "French Intellectuals and the Impossible English Model (1870-1914)", in C. Charle, J. Vincent, J. Winter (eds), *Anglo-French Attitudes: Comparisons and Transfers between French and British Intellectuals since the Eighteenth Century*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 2007, pp. "235-255.

<sup>16</sup> C. Charle, "Légitimités en péril. Eléments pour une histoire comparée des élites et de l'Etat en France et en Europe occidentale, XIXè-XXème siècle", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, mars 1997, n°116-117, pp. 39-52.

<sup>17</sup> W. L. Guttsman, *The British Political Elite*, Londres, Mc Gibbon & Kee, 1963, p. 90 et 102-105.

<sup>18</sup> The real figures may be higher since landlords or businessmen may have followed an academic formation but it is obvious that their status was more important for their election

ited to the access of political elites. It is true too for other elites and a consequence of the delayed modernization of English universities and secondary education and their social exclusivity. Before 1900, 77,5% of Conservative ministers, 44,4% of Liberal ministers, 71,1% of higher civil servants, 45,5% of board members of corporate firms, 50% of newspapers directors have been educated in the eleven main public schools<sup>19</sup>. 86% of scholarships for the two elite universities, Cambridge and Oxford, are in fact reserved for students coming from these expensive public schools, while only 7% are offered to pupils from municipal grammar schools, socially more inclusive. Compared to the population of each sector, these percentages imply that grammar school pupils have 12 times less chance of winning a scholarship for Oxbridge than elite public school pupils who, in general, stem from more affluent families<sup>20</sup>. These brakes on meritocratic mechanisms are less visible in Scotland where universities are more open to popular or lower middle classes but, globally, the lack of public investment in education explains why social mobility or access to elites in England is linked to the private sector (journalism, business, trade, emigration to the colonies) and not, like in France and Germany, to education, public service or the professions. In 1911, students in England and Wales represent only 1% of their age-group, while in France they represent 1,7% and in Germany 1,2%. In 1870, there were only 5000 students in Britain and more than the double in German and French faculties. This very small pool of graduates provides the administrative and political elites at the eve of the First World War. Therefore it is obvious that the preliminary social and economic selection is much more important than the intellectual one with so few candidates.

This divergence from the continent is based also on different options in terms of taxation and repartition of expenses between State, local taxes and private initiative. As Martin Daunton has shown in a recent major book, Britain opted in the 1840s for direct and relatively moderate taxes to finance public expenses and reduced indirect taxes to guarantee cheap food to the popular classes and so lower the costs of production to favour its exports in a free trade prospect<sup>21</sup>. As a counterpart, the central State had to be modest with less civil

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than their eventual academic titles. The data for France are drawn from the collective research on MPs of the Centre de recherches en histoire de la France du XIXe siècle (cf. C. Charle, "Les parlementaires de la troisième République, avant-garde ou arrière-garde d'une société en mouvement?" in J.-P. Chaline, A. Corbin, J.-M. Mayeur (eds), *Les parlementaires de la troisième République*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003, pp. 45-63).

<sup>19</sup> H. Perkin, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>20</sup> R. Lowe, "English elite education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries", in W. Conze et J. Kocka (hg.), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, Teil I, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1985, p. 160-161, based on D. V. Glass and J. L. Gray, "Opportunity and the older universities", in L. T. Hogben (ed.), *Political arithmetics; a symposium of population studies*, Londres, G. Allen & Unwin 1938, p. 428-433.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan. The Politics of Taxation in Britain 1799-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2001; see also Nicolas Delalande, "Histoire économique et sociale

servants and military expenses than on the continent. Education and social expenses were financed either by families, or by charities or else by local rates defined by those of the middle classes or the lower middle class who were already electors. While France employed more than 400 000 civil servants at the end of 19th century for a less important population and territory than Britain, which employed only 116 000, or Prussia which employed 312 531 in 1895.<sup>22</sup>

This liberal model is put into question at the turn of the century. British elites are accused to be responsible for the decline of British economy as against Germany or United States and of the catastrophic state of health revealed by the selection of troops called for the Boer War<sup>23</sup>. Better organized workers allied with progressive liberals claim a greater public intervention in social policy and public health to correct the growing inequality since taxation is not progressive nor productive enough to face the new challenges and burdens of a modern society. The defenders of this new conception struggle also for meritocracy and against the reproduction of traditional elites linked to inherited wealth.

## Conclusion

This comparison of elite formation in France, Germany and Britain show that the interpretations founded whether on a modernist vision or on the idea of a persistent Ancien Regime both miss the specificities of each national case. The Third Republic in France is the most advanced in the installation of a new mode of domination based on merit and selective procedures (*concours* and so on). Notables have been obliged either to abandon their positions or to adapt to this new system. But important sectors of elite position are still based on inherited economic capital. This is far more obvious in Germany and England, even if the evolution towards meritocratic procedures is emerging in these aristocratic countries as well. The legal bourgeoisie who occupies a strategic position in the Third Republic is mainly responsible for the incomplete evolution to-

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du Léviathan britannique: Etat société et impôt en Grande-Bretagne aux XIXe et XXe siècles”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 54-1, janvier-mars 2007, pp. 258-264.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Mac Leod (ed.), *Government and Expertise. Specialists, Administrators and Professionals 1860-1919*, Cambridge, Cambridge U. P., 1988, p. 16. For France, figures given by G. Thuillier et J. Tulard, *Histoire de l’administration française*, Paris, PUF, 1984, p. 49). For Prussia, see Tibor Süle, *Preussische Bürokratietradition*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck et Ruprecht, 1988, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> E. E. Williams, “*Made in Germany*”, 4th ed., Londres, Heinemann, 1896, reprint, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1973; J. E. Barker, “The Economic Decay of Great Britain”, *Contemporary Review*, 79, 1901, p. 781-812; A. Shadwell, *Industrial efficiency : A Comparative Study of Industrial Life in England, Germany and America*, Londres, Longmans, Green & co, 1906, reprint Routledge, 1999; G. D. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971.

wards true meritocracy; its leaders present in the governing circles refused to reform secondary education and limited the effects of university reform, in particular at the Law faculty, the most important for the access to power. They also refused the meritocratic selection for magistrates and the prefectural corps in order to maintain social and political networks profiting directly to their own scions<sup>24</sup>. This double standard will be one of the defects of the Republic when various scandals will publicly show the difference between the official ideology of merit diffused in the popular classes and the dubious practices of some members of the political and administrative elites in contradiction with this ideology.

The same tensions will progressively appear in England and Germany between incomplete meritocracy and the growing aspirations of the larger groups a priori excluded from the sphere of recruitment of future elites<sup>25</sup>. So elite formation options as well as fiscal regimes and functions assigned to the State, themselves expressions of a social compromise between different fractions of elites and of the uneven aptitude of dominated groups to influence the field of power, are more important to investigate than to content oneself with the reductive analysis in global terms of “bourgeoisie” and “aristocracy”.

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<sup>24</sup> C. Charle, “État et magistrats, les origines d'une crise prolongée”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 96-97, mars 1993, p. 39-48; Guy Thuillier, *L'ENA avant L'ENA*, Paris, P.U.F., 1983.

<sup>25</sup> See C. Charle, *La crise des sociétés impériales*, op. cit.; H. Best & M. Cotta, *Parliamentary Representative in Europe 1848-2000*, Oxford, Oxford, U.P., 2000.

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