THE ARMY IN THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT: REFORM, REACTION AND REVOLUTION*

FEW TODAY DOUBT THAT IN THE AGE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT A CERTAIN number of French aristocrats were enlightened. Nobles, after all, comprised half of Voltaire's correspondents and one-third of the membership in academies; at least three thousand belonged to Masonic lodges. In 1789 many *cahiers* of the nobility sounded surprisingly liberal, filled with language favouring equality, merit and talent. And yet, most would agree, this was also an age of aristocratic reaction, one of whose measures was the growing emphasis on birth and noble exclusivism. Four *parlements*, several provincial estates and a number of noble chapters became stricter in their insistence on genealogical proofs. In the most notorious case of all, the one of its type most frequently cited as a grievance by the third estate, the army in 1781 demanded for entry as an officer a pedigree of noble ancestry extending to four generations. In the nobility the spirit of caste and reaction appears somehow to have mingled with more "enlightened" and liberal views to form a mentality that at first glance seems illogical and inconsistent.[1]

What explains the simultaneous expression of such sharply contrasting tendencies? Whence came the diverging liberal and conservative points of view? One answer that has long had currency resolves the problem sociologically: the opposing ideas were rooted in different social soils where they reflected the ideas and interests of dissimilar groups. The poor, provincial nobility, usually seen as ignorant, defensive, tenaciously holding on to ancient privileges and the traditional rights of birth, is set in opposition to an urban, cultivated, cosmopolitan élite that hob-nobbed with wealthy commoners and could afford to be liberal.[2] To make much of that division, however, is to

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[1] For the strongest statement about the nobility's liberalism, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La noblesse au XVIII^e siècle. De la féodalité aux lumières* (Paris, 1976). Figures on nobles as academicians, Masons and the like, are from Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province: académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978), i, chs. 4-5.

[2] Chaussinand-Nogaret, *op. cit.*, chs. 3-4; Denis Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: élites et despotisme", *Annales. E.S.C.*, xxiv (1969), pp. 1-23.

obscure a problem: the structure of social exclusion was designed not by poor and culturally deprived rural nobles, but by highly-placed, well-off aristocrats who came from illustrious families, persons who had access to the wide world of cities, education and new ideas. It should be remembered that the pre-1789 state, administrative and authoritarian in form as it was, had no elections, and its officials no constituencies. Thus social groups, when discontented, lacked any direct means to express and advance their interests, whether by lobbying or voting. Nothing required that their views be considered at all. In short the little-studied poorer nobles, whatever their ideas, lacked a mechanism for turning their thoughts into action. Where thought was effective in producing action, or reaction, was not among the scattered poor nobles, but nearer the centre of power, in the institutions that formulated the rules, and among the higher nobles who staffed and dominated those institutions. It is here that we need to reconstruct the patterns of attitudes and ideas. The purpose of this article is to undertake such a reconstruction for the army, and for the nobles who directed it at the end of the *ancien régime*. That compound of ideas is worth looking at closely, for on analysis it appears to contain elements that we might not have expected to find mixing together.[3]

I

The evidence for the army's ways of thinking is abundant. There, as elsewhere, talk of reform was in the air in the 1780s as it had been for half a century. Disquiet over the performance of the army, widely believed to be inefficient and indecisive, had become acute during the mid-century wars. Those wars came as a shock, especially the Seven Years' War when France, populous and wealthy, and even allied with the Austrians and Russians, could not defeat tiny Prussia! Mere military stalemate at enormous expense was frustrating and seemed unworthy: a national disaster. What was wrong? As most people explained it, the troubles were not minor technical ones; they were much broader, involving the whole of society and its values. Seeking to locate and define the trouble, military reformers from the 1740s onwards drew on moral themes and ideas that were sounding everywhere: in the army as elsewhere men were not serious enough; frivolous, inclined always to idleness, they were failing to work at their professions, or *états*. How accurate this picture was as a description of the army is hard to know. It is probably true that various causes — demographic pressure, new values tying status and personal identity to social function, and deepening boredom with isolation and the

[3] This article takes up and expands themes concerning the army's ideas that were set out only briefly in D. Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l'exemple de l'armée", *Annales. E.S.C.*, xxix (1974), pp. 23-48, 505-34, at pp. 521-5.

rustic life — were pushing more young nobles than ever before into activity and serious occupations. In that "enlightened" culture, where idleness was everyone's enemy, even lazy men needed a profession and at least the appearance of work. New values may have brought into the army a wider range of personalities and types, some of them like the ones the critics were denouncing. Examples of anything, good or bad, could no doubt be found. But to the critics the bad cases were the ones that seemed typical, set out in generalizations where rising professional standards reinforced a pervasive moralizing and sense of outrage. These observers were in no mood for making fine distinctions and recognizing range or variety in behaviour. For them the ill was everywhere and probably getting worse.

Critics agreed that the crucial role, in reform as in defeat, was that of the officers. With bad officers, no wonder that the French troops could not manoeuvre, had no precise discipline! "Inclined to libertinage", wrote one officer as early as 1742, the French soldier "needs to be led". Several years later another, more "Prussian" in outlook, insisted that officers must train their soldiers more rigorously, "reducing them to the most servile obedience, and making the most indocile of men into machines activated only by their officer's voice". The first complained in particular about the colonels who spent little time with their regiments. The other was equally certain that the junior officers were the main source of trouble. The young officers had never seen discipline, knew nothing and did not want to learn, were easily bored. They wanted to be popular, and often took the soldiers' side when the men voiced insults or complained of being tired; these officers were simply boys "who far from knowing how to govern others scarcely know how to govern themselves". In the regiment they turned to the "idle and libertine life", which the writer understood to mean going "in good or bad company to the billiard hall or café" where nothing was heard except complaints about discipline and authority. Officers were unprofessional: captains, for example, routinely served only twenty-five or thirty years before returning home with a pension, there to sink into "a criminal idleness".[4] Throughout the century the theme recurred frequently in military writings, and in 1786 the baron de Besenval, an experienced inspector of the troops, was writing to the minister of war on the same subject:

[4] Archives de la Guerre, Vincennes (hereafter A.G.), a[1]3072, no. 61, "Réflexions sur l'état présent du militaire en France" [15 Dec. 1742]; Archives départementales de l'Hérault (hereafter A.D.H.), C6565, "Mémoire sur l'infanterie" [*circa* 1748], pp. 1-13, 19-23, 30. On the role of the officer, see also Jean Baptiste Paris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel françois à M^r . . . sur l'École royale militaire* (Middelbourg, 1753), p. 80 (attribution of authorship by Barbier); and the letter by Paris-Duverney in Camille Rousset, *Le comte de Gisors, 1732-1758: étude historique* (Paris, 1868), pp. 357-9, 454-5.

> Every time I have seen troops and found them good, I saw that the cause was the talents of the colonel, or the lieutenant-colonel, major, captain, sometimes a lower officer. Often, seeing the same regiment again, I no longer found it to be anything because the one who was its moving spirit was no longer there. In the same way the corps that did not have officers of merit were pitiful.[5]

The complaint followed:

> Why, in a country where the officers are, so to speak, only like temporary sojourners in their regiments, since they only put in an appearance, why, I say, do we rely on such men for the instruction of the troops, and why do we give up the means for employing subjects who by their talents and ambition would assure the success of so important an object?[6]

How did one answer Besenval's question? Why were the officers bad? Their lack of education was part of it, most people agreed. Young nobles were supposed to serve, but to do so they needed instruction which they rarely got. For some, the sons of relatively poor army officers who could document their noble descent over four or more generations, establishing the École militaire in 1751 was thought to be the answer. In 1776 new military schools in the provinces made specialized education available also to the wealthier nobles who could pay for it. Some found this schooling too cloistered and bookish, and evolved other schemes for teaching the young officers within the regiments, as *cadets gentilshommes*. But all recognized that actual knowledge, if important, did not in itself resolve the problem, which was in essence moral. How could the boys be given zeal and made to work? Somehow, it was believed, they and the army had to be insulated from the values and habits of a civilian society that was increasingly seen as corrupt and corrupting. Real merit was to be measured by work, and not by what one had, especially if what one had was only money. The army, if one listens to the grumbling, was locked in a cold war with the court, wealth, cities, the whole French "constitution". It was a struggle to realize a professional ideal that was at once bureaucratic and moral, modelled on exaggerated pictures of public virtue in Sparta, the Roman republic and Prussia.

The problem was that nothing worked, or at least nothing worked well. Succeeding ministers of war emphasized various solutions, but there seemed little movement. Eliminating purchase of office, first in the infantry and then in the cavalry, was projected in the 1760s but proceeded only very slowly during the 1770s and into the 1780s. Schemes to make promotion depend mainly on seniority, and thus on experience, ended in compromise arrangements that were at best only a partial solution. During Saint-Germain's ministry in the 1770s reformers had to settle for trimming, rather than uprooting, the overgrown ornamental units of the royal household. Requiring young

[5] *Mémoires du baron de Besenval*, ed. Saint-Albin Berville and F. Barrière, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Collections des mémoires relatifs à la Révolution française, iii, Paris, 1827-8), ii, p. 189.

[6] *Ibid.*

officers to learn by serving an apprenticeship in the troops was by 1780 a clear failure. Whether officers' behaviour was becoming better or worse is uncertain, but the complaints did not diminish in number or tone. Frustration at always having to compromise the ideal were visible, and the irritation that was evident around the middle of the century was being expressed systematically in Saint-Germain's day.

That irritation shows through in records left by a committee of lieutenant-generals who were working a little later, under the maréchal de Contades, to codify and to reform the army's procedures and regulations. Those records, once thought lost and evidently not used by historians, deserve close scrutiny, for in them we see at first hand the operating ideas and assumptions of an especially interesting group.[7] From 1780 to 1784 the generals met weekly, from December to May, to argue over and to co-ordinate the proposals and views that emanated from lower committees. Each of the four lower committees, under the presidency of one of the lieutenant-generals, had five other members who were also the inspectors of the regiments. These were generals — twenty-five of them in all — who actually worked and were in close touch with the army's specific problems and organization, well placed to know the common complaints and the terms in which they were expressed. They were talking about and for the army, both broadly and in detail, and they were often not happy.

The superior committee considered everything: provisions, tents, uniforms, quality of bayonets, pay, size of companies. Most were practical matters, routine and easily handled, but a few touched sensitive areas, stirring anger and evoking statements of principle that were recorded in the minutes. The question of officers' leave was one such issue. Two lower committees looked into the question and reported heatedly that no more than one-third of the infantry officers and only a quarter of all cavalry officers were remaining with their regiments for winter-training. Officers, it was said, faked reasons for *congés*, pleading as pretexts the demands of health, a lawsuit, or marriage. In addition there was an arrangement, called the *semestre*, which gave a certain percentage of the officers the right to be away from their regiments from October to May. The practice was itself an abuse, asserted the committee, its introduction one of the frightening "disorders"

[7] The reports and minutes of meetings are in four registers, one for each year, at the Bibliothèque du Ministère de la Guerre, Procès-verbaux du code militaire, Archives historiques supplémentaires (hereafter B.M.G., A.H.S.), MSS. 173 to 176 (1781-4). The comte de Ségur reported in his biography that the committee's papers, whose whereabouts were known in 1840, had since disappeared: [Pierre Marie Maurice Henri], comte de Ségur, *Le maréchal de Ségur, 1724-1801, ministre de la guerre sous Louis XVI* (Paris, 1895), pp. 234-6. Albert Latreille used that biography and seems also to have thought the papers lost: Albert Latreille, *L'armée et la nation à la fin de l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1914), ch. 5. For some unknown reason, the committee's records found their way into the manuscripts collection of the war ministry library rather than the military archives now at Vincennes.

brought in by the minister Chamillart late in Louis XIV's reign. The richer officers bought up the *semestre* rights of the poorer ones and thus went off every year. To get away from the humdrum of regimental life, the officers disappeared into neighbouring cities, or worse, they went to Paris to be corrupted, and to Versailles to solicit undeserved favours. When away, they learned "bad habits" and picked up "dangerous maxims"; back in their units, they found their duties boring and passed on their own lack of interest to their comrades. They made staying with the troops seem a punishment. "Everyone intrigues to get positions, and no one wants to fulfil his duties", said one committee. Some members wanted to eliminate the *semestre* altogether; others proposed that no officer be permitted leave before passing an examination to show how much he knew. In the end there emerged a new, more stringent regulation that at least limited the frequency of departures.[8]

The pay scale for generals was another issue that quickly had the members of the superior committee arguing angrily. All understood that the cost of living had risen, but three opposed the suggested pay rise. There were too many generals, it was said, mainly idle and useless, and there would still be too many even if they were paid nothing. Demand for that prestigious grade was very high. The solution favoured by the majority was to pay the useless ones as little as possible, and to continue giving bonuses to generals who had limited means and who worked in both winter and summer. This was the conservative position, for it supposed, as the duc du Châtelet stated, that having too many generals was inevitable: the French "constitution", favour and intrigue at court, and the operation of wealth meant that France could not have "a military establishment militarily organized". He went on to say that because it was in the nation's character "to love to seem to be something and for individuals to live beyond their means", paying more to generals could only aggravate a bad situation and "perpetuate in our armies the frightful luxury that has caused operations to fail on more than one occasion". The marquis de Vogué referred to the "progress of luxury" and talked of vanity leading to superfluous expenses that ruined those who met them and humiliated those who could not. The comte de Caraman complained about "fancy stews" and silverware. Both sided with du Châtelet. But the baron de Besenval, beside himself with anger, objected strongly; against the others, he argued that real reform required raising the pay scale and selecting as generals only men of talent without regard to wealth — then it would no longer be necessary to keep the less able generals who served merely because they were rich and could afford to. He wanted radical reform, to attack directly the working of

[8] B.M.G., A.H.S., MS. 173, fos. 63-9; MS. 176, fos. 36, 104-16, 186.

favouritism and intrigue. He denounced the bonus system that required endless lists and notes, the paperwork "that makes an inspector's pouch like a petty lawyer's, and turns the war department into a notary's office". Besenval set all this in grand terms, involving almost the collapse of French civilization: the nobility impoverished, confusion of ranks, corruption, a lack of education that "caused the nation to degenerate . . ., caused also the thirst for money in which, I believe, luxury shares and which has extinguished every other sentiment".[9]

If the personalities and recommendations sometimes clashed, however, the members' diagnoses and rhetoric were largely the same. Luxury and money, and the non-professionalism to which they gave rise, were the enemy. But, as the duc du Châtelet reminded his colleagues with some impatience, the question of generals' pay was less important than remedying the situation of the soldiers and the thousands of regimental-grade officers. In fact it was the lower officers who occupied vastly more of the committee's time. There emerged two main approaches to that fundamental problem. One was to change the army's internal arrangement, its structure, so as to encourage and reward merit and to discourage as far as possible the effects of opulence and favouritism. Several policies, mentioned above, were designed to meet this need: from the 1760s onwards, the gradual elimination of the purchase of commissions, and a heavy emphasis on promotion by seniority. The second approach was to recruit as officers boys whose family origins were believed to be less contaminated by the virus of luxury and indifference to work. Better structures and better raw material, these were the needs that army reformers defined. In its own way the committee worked at satisfying each.

II

In the 1780s reform of structure was especially concerned with the definition of grades, the hierarchy, and arrangements for advancement. In discussing all this the committee's members talked and argued about many practical problems and concerns. The first of these was the horde of junior officers who were merely attached to the regiments, not actually serving but nevertheless forever building their seniority. What would happen in time of war when these officers claimed the positions for which no training or experience equipped them? If these officers were absorbed into the regiments now, could space be made for younger ones as they came of age? If there were too many officers, how could each have a full test, a real record of performance that would stand in place of influence and arbitrariness as the

[9] *Ibid.*, MS. 174, fos. 91-2 (Vogué), 93-101 (Besenval), 108-13 (Châtelet), 114 (Caraman).

basis for judging his merit? The committee thought it had to be fair to all the officers who really wanted to serve, and it believed also that all nobles *should* serve. Finally, it was well aware of the worsening fiscal crisis within the state, that called for saving money, not spending more on officers, or in fact on anything. The aims were contradictory, and there was perhaps no complete solution, no plan that would really work. There would remain too many officers, many not fully trained or tested, and the choice of young officers would still have to depend on the capacity of many of them to live with little or no pay. And whatever plan the committee and war office settled on had to be made consistent with the actual needs of regiments. The result was a compromise that satisfied no one, and a number of bitter quarrels in which the army's leaders expressed and applied their ideas about the profession, about merit and talent, and also about equality as they understood the meaning of that difficult word, that is, as equality of opportunity for officers to advance within the army.[10]

The committee had its own ideas, but it was soon confronted by quite different ones from the war office. Ségur's plan, the one eventually advanced by Guibert and adopted by the council of war on the eve of the revolution, was designed to use everyone, although in different ways. The minister wanted, he said, a structure that would absorb and make useful as officers nobles of all kinds, the rich as well as the poor, those either with great names or with ordinary family credentials, conventional as well as superior talents, some with wills merely subordinated to duty and others having unusual zeal and ambition. The trick was to create the right military "constitution". Ségur would absorb all the reserve officers into regiments for at least part-time service, and would also continue to recruit the younger candidates who wished to enter the army for the first time. The plan required the expansion of the officer corps at the lower levels, but Ségur claimed that he could achieve this without extra expense. The heart of his proposal, a segregationist arrangement to separate the officers according to wealth and name, would accomplish that.

Ségur's plan set out two "columns" or tracks along which officers would advance, and turned the *de facto* distinctions that had determined choices for centuries into regular and explicit categories. Those with money and the "high nobility . . . destined to succeed to great places", but needing more instruction and experience than they commonly got, were to enter by new places of *sous-lieutenant surnuméraire* created in all the regiments, one for each company. From there they were to jump to other places reserved for them — second captains, second majors, second colonels — before themselves becoming colonels and often generals. Other nobles, less rich and less known,

[10] *Ibid.*, MS. 173, fos. 13-54, 240; MS. 174, fos. 253-72, 318-28; MS. 175, fos. 11-20, 200.

would enter in the old way, advancing more slowly through the two ordinary grades of lieutenant to regular captaincies and beyond, as far as lieutenant-colonel but only rarely higher. The two tracks were distinguished, first, by wealth — the supernumerary lieutenants had to be able to serve without pay and their higher grades paid little; secondly, by name, for the great families would be in the first column; thirdly, by rapidity of advancement, fast in the first column and slow in the second; and finally, by their annual term of service, the ordinary officers serving throughout the year and the unpaid, richer ones for four months only. Under repeated attack by the committee, Ségur defended his plan: it was cheap, and the money saved on the officers in the first column could be used to pay those in the second a decent salary; it provided at least some active service for officers who often had none and who would rise to high places anyway; it gave some possibility for judging merit. The exclusion was not complete — fathers were free to pick either column for their sons — and at several points in the hierarchy it might be possible to shift from one to the other. Even if there was exclusion, Ségur went on, it only mirrored the social and economic distinctions that existed in the civil order; therefore it should not offend anyone. And, in a curious way, the system guaranteed emulation or competition between equals; the segregation by wealth would make the rich compete only against the rich, the poor against the poor, and thus all would work harder. Merit would emerge more clearly out of the struggle between equals. This is what Ségur stressed when he noted that there would always be far too many wealthy officers in the first column for the available places as colonel or general, and most would not attain this rank.[11]

The committee also believed strongly in the efficacy of equality and competition, but it did not understand those words in the same way that Ségur did. The members said so, loudly and at length.[12] They spoke of the "unfortunate commotion in opinion" that Ségur's plan would set off, of the "irreparable ills" it would bring. In fact, they argued, Ségur's arrangement was certain "to destroy competitive striving based on the possibility for each officer to reach the highest ranks, and to confuse . . . the consideration owed to merit with that of high birth and opulence". If in practice the great nobles would, and perhaps should, advance faster and further than the others, the committee insisted that "those distinctions must be allowed to operate within the king's cabinet, secretly, with nothing announced so that no one is either discouraged or puffed up with pride". Ségur's plan was dangerous, for it marked "nuances" and differences too clearly, and would destroy the officer corps's unity. The premier *classe*, sure to adopt "a very insulting tone of superiority" and scorning the other,

[11] *Ibid.*, MS. 174, fos. 165-72, 179-83, 191-3, 210, 295-310.
[12] *Ibid.*, fos. 253-72.

would be detested in return. The ordinary lieutenant, having to regard himself as "second class", would grow disgusted with his profession, and poorer nobles who often made the best officers would not enter the service. Almost reflexively, the committee predicted that the plan meant more luxury and less instruction. Existing arrangements were not good, but under them the officer of high birth did not humiliate the lesser class, and was pardoned for moving ahead rapidly when he had at least followed the same path and shared the experiences of the others. Much more offensive to his comrades was the officer "who being at their level has a clearly marked-off situation". The committee found many details and practical objections to discuss, but repeatedly it came back to the question of equality. It is crucial, the members said:

> to keep veiled, in a good military constitution, distinctions of name, dignities and opulence, since in a well-regulated service none other than distinction of places should exist. Everyone admitted must be able to aspire to anything. Courage, merit and good conduct are to be the assured means to a great military fortune . . . By the committee's plan a man of the highest rank enters the service the same as the poorest *gentilhomme*, same route, same grade . . .[13]

For the moment, in 1782, Ségur's plan lost.

Aristocratic and military ideas of equality, then, were real, discussed and implemented in practical matters. Equality was more than an ideal; it was seen as an energizing principle favouring competition and work. Even if he applied the idea differently, Ségur too accepted that view. And yet, even without the financial crisis or pressure from court favourites, it is clear that the military leaders would not have pushed the idea further. Outside their organization, in society at large, it was not equality but a more systematic inequality that they called for. The strict limits to their belief in equality appear clearly when we look at the second part of the programme, that is, at recruitment rather than structure. For this was, after all, the same group that was responsible for issuing the *règlement* of 22 May 1781, the so-called "Ségur law". As noted above, this measure, which applied to the whole officer corps the system of genealogical proofs long required for entry into the École militaire, did more than any other to crystalize and dramatize for non-nobles before the revolution the issues of birth, aristocratic exclusiveness and legal inequality. Henceforth, to enter the army as a lieutenant, a man had to show that his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had been nobles. On this the committee's silence is eloquent. They made the recommendation in March, and the minutes show no dissent either within the committee, or between it and Ségur.[14] Here was an issue on which, unlike the question of generals' pay, agreement was so solid that there was no need to evoke principles. Everyone seemed to understand the policy —

[13] *Ibid.*, fo. 264.
[14] *Ibid.*, MS. 173, fo. 230.

exclusion on the basis of birth — and to agree on the need for applying it. Equality inside, inequality outside; the two policies evidently co-existed easily in the generals' minds.

Since 1789 that emphasis on birth, on genealogy, has been hard to understand; an anachronism at best, it has more often seemed frivolous or worse. We need to try to get inside the thinking, to locate the assumptions of men whose actions today seem so strange. What made them do it? How could they justify such a course? First, it is worth recognizing that their snobbery, if that is what it was, did have some limits that were consistent with their particular views on equality. In 1781, a month after the lieutenant-generals had made their recommendation for the genealogical proofs, they received through the war office a *mémoire* suggesting a first, more limited, creation of unpaid *sous-lieutenances*, two per regiment.[15] In the proposal was the stipulation that those new places be given only to nobles of three-hundred-years standing. The committee was of course familiar with the notion, and even rule, that officers should be nobles — the idea and the regulation were not at all new. And in the 1760s and 1770s a number of *mémoires* were suggesting that mere nobility was not enough — Rochambeau, the baron de Closen and others had already proposed that only *gentilshommes*, meaning fourth-generation nobles, or sons of officers be admitted. But more extreme proposals were also circulating; some wanted one hundred and fifty, two hundred, or more years of nobility. When the proposal requiring three hundred years for the new officerships reached it, however, the committee said straight away that it was nonsense, and reacted strongly against the idea — in the name of equality. Any distinctions within the army such as "two classes of [genealogical] proofs", the committee's members stated, "would give pretensions to those making the longer ones", and could only have "very unfortunate effects". The four generations required at the École militaire were enough, and that rule should be applied uniformly to all. Later, discussing the "track" system of advancement that they disliked, the committee's members returned to the question: "*Militaires* form only a single corps. The proofs [of nobility] of the highest seigneur . . . would be the same as those of a student from the École militaire, and since there is no apparent exclusion, emulation is equal everywhere".[16]

Still, the committee had not hesitated to write into the army's

[15] *Ibid.*, fos. 79-80.

[16] Quotations from *ibid.*, fos. 240-1; MS. 174, fo. 265. For earlier proposals of longer genealogical proofs, see A.G., Mémoires et reconnaissances (hereafter M.R.), 1709, no. 21, "Mémoire sur l'infanterie" (by Rochambeau, 1761); *ibid.*, 1709, no. 25, "Réflexions sur le militaire en tems de paix" (by Closen, 1760s); *ibid.*, 1727, no. 3, "Mémoire concernant la cavalerie et les dragons" (for proofs of one hundred and fifty years). Other examples are cited in Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789", pp. 525-6.

regulations a systematic inequality between Frenchmen. With four or more generations, a man was admitted as officer and equal; with less, he was out. Why? The generals all knew why and did not have to argue the point. We have therefore to look not at what they said but at the context of their thinking. It is their unstated assumptions and their particular understanding of common words that need probing. The generals' aim was of course simple: they wanted better officers to staff a renovated army. Thus they talked about the importance of zeal, merit and talent, and they sounded very enlightened. But what did it mean when one said that a lieutenant or captain of infantry was talented? What in fact did the army need in its officers? We know that all institutions, the army no less than others, underwent profound changes in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The growth in government, in both function and size, began to require of civil servants new capacities for handling and managing routine, knowing the rules and adhering to them, filling some organizationally-defined and limited role. For the member of a "team", work and attention to detail were what mattered; initiative and free-wheeling imagination were not yet admired — in the early stages they were precisely what had to be overcome. As civil organizations grew, they kept records and built a lore about rules and procedures that the bureaucrat needed more and more time and effort to master. One has only to look at any archive inventory to recognize that by 1700 our own age of the filing clerk had begun. And although the army had some obvious differences, there occurred in it a similar transformation. In the army the officer might still find that simple bravery, a commanding presence and a robust physique helped, but those qualities were coming to mean less and less. The good officer had mainly to be willing to work and to learn. He had to understand his trade enough to know that in battles fought in linear formations the essential quality was attention to duty, constant training and a habitual response to fixed situations. Shifting from marching column to line, although theoretically not difficult, could be managed well under fire only through constant practice. Officers at all levels had to know what they were doing, and they had to be willing to spend time teaching and training the soldiers in the stylized and intricate formations. Honour was now not so much the great act and episodic heroism, as simple work and the acceptance of subordination — wanting to discuss an order, being a *raisonneur*, was a common derogatory reference found beside the names of junior officers in the regimental registers. Living with dull routine was the new heroism.[17]

It is this institutional and professional change that is reflected in

[17] On bravery, see Paris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel françois*, pp. 19, 71. Any grenadier in the kingdom is brave, Meyzieu said, but an officer needs more than that.

some new meanings for old words, such as "talent". The talent of army officers had mainly to do with learning, conditioning and experience; it was not something with which one was born. The development can be gauged from the dictionaries, remembering, however, that dictionaries are by nature conservative; they are not written to pioneer or to innovate in the use of words, and there can be delays in recording changes or additional meanings.[18] The late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dictionaries do not in fact associate talent with learning and conditioning; they assert instead that talent is a gift of nature, a strong natural aptitude for certain things, for example, poetry or, after 1740, business and war. Talent meant a capacity and a particular bent or inclination; it was thus "natural" or innate. Its synonyms were *disposition*, *génie* and *qualité*. When by the 1770s *génie* added its modern meaning of genius, that is, extraordinary creativity above or outside the rules, beyond simple intelligence or study, talent was distinguished from genius by the fact that it was more external and that it was linked with execution — a composer has genius; a singer has talent. At the same time there appeared the expression *gens à talens* to describe those who practised the arts, such as music, painting and writing. But these men of talent too, if not necessarily geniuses, were persons whose skills were inborn. Not everyone can sing well, no matter how much one wants to or tries. Only in 1835, in the sixth edition of the dictionary of the Académie française, was added at last the usage we are seeking: "to acquire talents". Thenceforth, side by side with the others, that definition remained, and the current edition of Robert cites Gide as saying it: "talent is what is acquired".

That additional meaning is the one that expresses views that were in fact developing earlier, in the eighteenth century. The idea was already there. The Littré gives it negatively: Rousseau talking about slothfulness that leads "to acquiring only half talents". Abbé Sieyès, explaining the liberalism of some nobles in 1789, referred to "talents" coming from "long habit" in men well placed to comprehend the society.[19] About the middle of the eighteenth century a *mémoire*, proposing that diplomacy be added to studies at the École militaire, discussed the great talents required in negotiations, and its writer took pains to distinguish from natural talents which he believed insufficient the "acquired talents" which were more important. For him acquired talents meant, he said, a large fund of knowledge directed by experience.[20] This is the idea that was growing. Not all activities and

[18] The dictionaries used for this analysis are, in addition to Robert and the nineteenth-century Littré, those of Richelet (1680), Furetière (1694 and 1727), Trévoux (1771) and the Académie française (1694, 1717-18, 1740, 1762, 1798, 1835).

[19] Quoted in Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française", p. 13.

[20] Archives nationales (hereafter A.N.), K 149, no. 2[2], "Project d'un plan d'instruction rélative à l'art des négotiations pour quelques élèves de l'École royale militaire".

professions demand innate qualities and inclinations; in many — and the army was no doubt one — the needed skills were learned. The army was not looking for geniuses. It did not think that its problem lay in a shortage of grand strategists with imagination, and could not have used many of them anyway. What the army had to have, it was believed, were large numbers of serious and hard-working men whose talents could be shaped, formed and developed in them.[21]

If talent could be acquired, so might also the individual's inclination. The army did not concern itself with aptitude tests. No one thought it odd that students were recruited into the École militaire at the ages of eight or nine, that is, long before their particular aptitudes could be known. At an age when Mozart's genius was already very visible, these children as individuals gave no clear sign to show which of them were the lieutenants and captains of the future. And the larger number who entered the regiments directly, without having been students, became officers at sixteen. That age seems young for a day when childhood was imagined to be lengthening, a protracted adolescence increasingly conceived as extending the immature years.[22] If deciding on a career required evaluating developed tastes and special or inborn talent, one might have expected the age for choice to have been set even later than before. That was in fact done in the church, where in 1768 the state raised the legal age for taking monastic vows from sixteen to twenty-one. But not in the army. The military vocation could evidently be engineered into men.

To see what the army really thought about all this, it may help to look more closely at the École militaire. There, in the institution that dealt only with young boys, assumptions about them had to be specified and ideas set out explicitly. By educating them correctly, it was said, the needed discipline, subordination, unquestioning obedience and unvarying adherence to rules might be implanted in at least

[21] The newer use of the word "talent", and how it varied by occupation, appears in Talleyrand's discussion (1791) of how to select scholarship students in the reformed system of education. For the arts and sciences, where "talent" was cumulative and visible in a single work, the competitive exam, or *concours*, was appropriate. But choosing the best students for the professions required a different procedure, one using instead the teachers' evaluations of classroom performance of the students over a long period. This was because what was being measured in pre-professional schooling was "less a question of 'talent' than of *dispositions* . . . less a matter of rewarding what has been done than encouraging what can be done". By *dispositions* Talleyrand meant what we would call the student's "potential", and he distinguished sharply between that quality and the actual "talent", which only came later and was an accomplishment, achievement or developed ability. Talleyrand, "Rapport sur l'instruction publique", in *L'instruction publique en France pendant la Révolution: discours et rapports de Mirabeau, Talleyrand-Périgord, Condorcet, Lanthenas, Romme, Le Peletier Saint-Fargeau, Calès, Lakanal, Daunou et Fourcroy*, ed. C. Hippeau (Paris, 1881), p. 137.

[22] Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960), pp. 262-3, 289-90.

some future officers, and from those the better behaviour might spread to others by emulation and example. At least that is what the school's director of studies hoped.[23] Nearly all who were there or who prescribed for the École militaire were convinced that this was only a matter of the right training and forming proper habits. Denying that insubordination was invincibly rooted in the French character, one writer described how the school would remedy the ill by "accustoming the young people raised in it to duties exclusively those . . . of the *état militaire*".[24] Another, rejecting the study of Latin as a waste of time that turned the young to idleness and libertinage, talked of how everything depended on the good use of time in a boy's early years. This was the period when all impressions were retained; according to the nature of those impressions, he said, the youth rises above himself or remains forever in darkness.[25] From the provinces came echoes. At Montpellier, Pepin du Montet proposed taking nobles even before they could be admitted to the École militaire and preparing them for that school. How else, he asked, could one hope to change "these indocile characters, these difficult humours produced by a lack of education, cemented by bad example, sustained by pride, and nearly impossible to conquer if they are not corrected from the cradle"?[26]

At the École militaire Paris-Duverney, the financier and the school's real founder, was similarly concerned about early impressions. The aim was to make "subjects who are capable, docile, devoted, filled with zeal; above all, grateful subjects who dedicate themselves entirely to His Majesty's service, who take pleasure in dependence . . ., who serve only one master and who cannot even form the idea of another . . .". The task was not difficult, he said, when everything the student saw — examples of bravery, good conduct, subordination — strengthened "these good sentiments". The impressions had to be carefully selected. This was one of the reasons why Paris-Duverney abandoned his earlier idea for a *collège* to educate into a healthy discipline all kinds of nobles, future magistrates and bishops as well as army officers. Arguing in the end for the narrowly military education, he demanded strict exclusion of church and robe whose "idea of independence is the falsest of all opinions, . . . the favourite chimera of the two *états* in question". Letting other careers be visible in the school might even lead students to choose the easier and better-rewarded existence of the churchman in preference to the "hard and laborious"

[23] Paris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel françois*, pp. 61-4.

[24] A.N., K 149, no. 15[1], "Mémoire sur les principaux motifs qui peuvent influer sur l'établissement du collège académique qui a été proposé à sa Majesté", 6 July 1750.

[25] A.N., H 1459, "Mémoire sur l'utilité de l'établissement d'un collège académique pour la jeune noblesse de France", 11 Jan. 1750.

[26] Bibliothèque nationale, Lf[60]14, *Requête au roy, tendante à obtenir la confirmation de l'établissement d'une petite école militaire pour les pauvres enfans nobles de France, fait au mois de juin 1752*, p. 4.

one of an army officer, who must also risk his life. After all, he concluded, it was a mistake to talk about the "natural taste" of young men for the army, and to nurture such a taste in boys required that they be insulated from other vocational models.[27] This was the basis on which the council at the École militaire decided to allow the boys to return to their homes only once a year, for several weeks in August, and argued that it was better if they did not go at all. Their mail was censored, and frequent visits by relatives discouraged.[28] In these conditions, precisely controlled for moral temperature and humidity, the formative impressions could be carefully regulated.

The theme — that boys were malleable — was developed further by the director of studies at the École militaire. Paris de Meyzieu's credentials for that job included, in addition to being the founder's nephew, a career in military administration and also some reading. At least he had read John Locke's *De l'éducation des enfans*, then in the sixth of the eight French editions it went through from the time of its translation in 1695 until the revolution. Meyzieu found Locke's views on the forming of virtue congenial, and cited them in his own discussions of the École militaire. He observed that, the human mind being limited, men could excel in only one activity. A few geniuses aside — they were exceptions and not relevant to the military case — anyone at the top of his *état* must be continually occupied with what is peculiar to it, and it was never too early to start professional learning. The École militaire had a single object: "to cultivate minds and bodies so as to form men of war". Everything should be related to that; nothing should distract from it. In discussing who was to do the new teaching, the director of studies excluded ordinary teachers and spoke bluntly: "A teacher from the university is as unsuited to describing in detail a military manoeuvre as is an infantry major to interpreting Pindar or Demosthenes".[29] From the exclusively military education the students would learn things not taught elsewhere: for example, the religion suited to military men, a religion stripped of all vain subtleties and disputes, one stressing instead only the faith's simple beliefs and its lessons against libertinage. Above all, they should learn what constituted real honour, that is, simple duty. Let no one doubt that the habits of duty could be acquired. Human nature might not permit

[27] A.N., K 149, nos. 6 and 7, *mémoire* and *mémoire secret*, both dated 24 Apr. 1750.

[28] Concerning the censorship of mail, see A.N., AD_{VI} 10^{A}, *Règlement général pour les élèves*, pp. 56-8, in *Règlemens généraux arrêtés le 13 décembre 1759* (Paris, 1760); A.N., M 254, no. 1, "Extrait du registre des arrêtés et décisions du Conseil de l'hôtel de l'École Roïale Militaire", 20 Apr. 1773; A.N., MM 658, *delibérations* of the councils of the École militaire, pp. 1-2, 32-3, 81. On students' contacts with their families, see A.N., MM 667, *procès-verbaux*, pp. 76-7. In 1775 a student asked for a vacation before resuming active military service; he had neither seen his family nor been home for eleven years: A.N., MM 681, p. 88.

[29] Paris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel françois*, p. 57.

perfection, but the view that certain passions are irreducible, that they mingle with tastes and temperament to carry us along in spite of ourselves, is in fact a "gross error". "Provided that one sets about it early", it is not impossible to check the passions:

> Vices are not at all a necessary attribute of humanity; we are what we are made into: we are not born courageous or timid, inclined to evil or to virtue. It is the first impressions we receive that form our ideas, and since ordinarily no attention is paid to rectifying them at the beginning, their consequences are often dangerous . . .
>
> Scorn for life is not natural to man: on the contrary the idea of his self-preservation is commonly the first to appear in him: that does not require proof. We see among us, however, some who do have a scorn for life. What is the reason for it? It is because for the one idea [of conserving oneself] has been substituted another, that of honour, which orders us to sacrifice ourselves for our Religion, our Sovereign, our Country, our Families, a Friend.[30]

What followed from this, for Meyzieu, is that if the one substitution could be made, so might others. Why could not honour be stretched to replace all the sentiments that remove us from virtue?:

> Would it, therefore, be so difficult to make a young man think that debauchery is as dishonouring as cowardice? That attachment to his duties is as glorious as bravery? . . . I conclude . . . that here is the world's finest occasion for inspiring in the young the sentiments and taste for true honour, which is the one that extends into all the branches of virtue.[31]

The issue of the École militaire's location — some said that placing it near Les Invalides where old soldiers were to be seen, crippled and sometimes mutilated by wounds, would discourage the students — gave Paris de Meyzieu the opportunity to warn his adult readers that their views were incorrect because they were culture-bound:

> It is very well known that inclination and aversion do not come from nature at all, that the one and the other depend exclusively on our ideas, and that our ideas are artificial, if I may be permitted to use that term; they are only the result of the impression that we are given. Savages look in cold blood, and even with pleasure, at spectacles whose sight would horrify us; their organs have been fashioned early to things which ours reject from lack of the habit . . .[32]

From there it seems but a step to Pavlov and B. F. Skinner. For some of us it may come as a relief to know that the system did not work as well as its designers hoped. Under it the human material did not fully yield, and in 1768 the school had to respond to critics in the army who said that the young officers coming out of it were not only ignorant but tough, unpleasant, hard to get along with, and not easily absorbed into their military units. The observer who was asked to criticize the school's performance thought that the internal discipline was too harsh, its emphasis on law and rules too heavy and the use of persuasion too limited. But if the programme and practices he

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-4, and see pp. 65-73.
[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 74-6.
[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

favoured differed sharply from the old ones, the observer was talking the same language as those he criticized. He returned to familiar ideas:

> Let . . . [education's] lessons, which begin almost with the birth of the child, grow and strengthen with him, putting down deep roots, passing soon from the mind and memory into the heart, being imprinted each day in his ways so that he practices virtue by habit, becoming in him an almost unchangeable second nature, a legislator ever present for the rest of his life, showing him on every occasion his duty and causing him to practice it.[33]

Now, all this does not mean that the army, and in particular the École militaire, was unaware of the natural differences between individuals, differences that rested on more than just education and that were innate. No one could have failed to recognize that there were boys who had more *dispositions* than others; some were simply quicker and brighter. But those differences in intelligence, if sometimes useful, were not what mattered most. Assumptions that underlay the army's rising mania for mathematics, increasingly seen as the study most appropriate to the military profession, illustrate the point. There were plans to employ teachers of mathematics for all the regiments, and the subject was at the heart of the École militaire's curriculum. There every morning the students spent fully half of their time in class on that subject, and from the 1770s onwards sixteen of the thirty-one professors were teachers of mathematics. Here, in principle, was a way of assessing candidates on the basis of intellect, or rather of mathematical aptitude. But that was not done. The École's administrative council was always happy when a few of their students, forty of the first three hundred who completed their studies there, proved to be adept enought in mathematics to pass the competitive examinations for entry into the so-called "scholarly" services: artillery, engineering and the navy.[34] But that was not why mathematics was so heavily stressed. The comte de Vaublanc, reminiscing later about his student days, commented that in his class of fifty, only four or five had really been interested in mathematics and had done well in it. Had he heard the administrators' weekly discussion, however, Vaublanc would have realized that they were less troubled by that result than he thought. They knew very well that most of their students would be lieutenants and eventually captains of infantry, roles in which they would have to work hard but where they would surely not have much use for all the algebra and geometry that was forced on them. The purpose of such study was different. Successive directors of studies explained it: mathematics was useful in forming the mind, distinguishing and comparing objects, developing precision and order in reasoning. Provided that they worked at it, the students were sure to profit from the method even when they lacked

[33] A.N., K 149, no. 2[5], *mémoire*, pp. 17-18.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

skill and gained little actual knowledge. If he had the other, more important, qualities that were called "good will" and "zeal", the student who was slow in mathematics would nevertheless get from it what was needed; he was invariably designated "good for infantry" in the placement lists.[35]

The "talent" that a good army officer was thought to need, then, was not creativity, not what we would call imagination and initiative, and not even a well-defined or quick intellectual capacity. Those characteristics could be useful, but they were not essential. The evidence from the École militaire illustrates the army's belief, perhaps correct, that any young man of even mediocre intelligence could, if serious, acquire the necessary attributes to be a good officer of infantry or cavalry. Some learning, joined to practice and experience, would implant in him the mundane, practical skills and the knowledge that were needed. The main thing was to have a will properly inclined, to have the right values and habits. The renovated army might not be much cleverer, but it would surely be more moral and work harder. This was where forming and conditioning became crucial, for the important qualities were not gifts of nature. It was never too early to start instilling them into the future officer.

The environmentalist view, then, was pervasive, so pervasive in fact that it was shared even by the growing number in the army who were convinced by the 1770s that, as presently constituted, the École militaire was a failure. In 1776 the school's critics had won: the students were distributed among eleven provincial schools where not only were the curricula and discipline less narrowly military, but other boys in the classrooms no longer represented the single occupational and social type. The provincial schools received students destined for non-military careers, and some were not even nobles. In these institutions there was now more to see, and the programme to control completely the range of formative impressions was much weakened. Yet the change ought not to obscure the continuity — for although its specific expression and application were altered, the environmentalist idea survived. We will find its new form when we remember that the instrument for shaping the young did not always have to be an institution. Many were coming to think that it could more easily be the family. After a brief excursion into other ideas, it is the army's use of the family that we will need to examine closely in order to make sense of its policies in the 1780s.

[35] A.N., H 1459, "Mémoire sur l'utilité de l'établissement d'un collège académique pour la jeune noblesse de France", 11 Jan. 1750; *Encyclopédie méthodique: art militaire*, i (Paris, 1784), "Capitaine", p. 473; D. Bien, "Military Education in Eighteenth-Century France: Technical and Non-Technical Determinants", in Monte D. Wright and Lawrence J. Paszek (eds.), *Science, Technology and Warfare. Proceedings of the Third Military History Symposium, United States Air Force Academy, 8-9 May 1969* (Washington, 1971), pp. 51-9.

III

The point about environmentalism and where it might lead is a simple one, but it is not always obvious. It might help our understanding of that earlier outlook to contrast it briefly with several other ideas that were spreading. We easily take for granted the Enlightenment's modernity, and sometimes fail to recognize that our own social assumptions contain additional ingredients. Looking back beyond the revolution, our view is easily obscured by the newer developments, perhaps linked, of democracy and of tendencies sometimes associated with Romanticism. These two sets of ideas were congruent, and together they penetrated deeply into later thinking. Romantic views about individuality as inborn and unique, laying stress on feeling, on what was internal and different and special because ineffable, these views fitted easily after 1789 with the idea that under the *ancien régime* it was non-nobles with individually distinct talents whose rise had been unfairly blocked. It is true that this way of seeing things may have been less pronounced early in the revolution. At first the men of merit who were visibly excluded were not those whose claim to advancement rested on innate qualities and special talents; rather they were older men whose principal credentials were simply long experience — officers of fortune and non-commissioned men in the army, *vicaires* in the clergy, *commis* in government bureaux, men who had worked, knew a lot, and had waited long. Leading the regiments at Valmy in 1792 were colonels usually ten to fifteen years older than those of 1789.[36] But soon that would change, and the problem would revert to one of recruiting the young. With democracy and the Romantic temper, however, the terms of the problem changed to those with which we are familiar. The new task was to find in a vastly larger pool of children or young men, a pool in principle as wide as society itself, those whose particular and special inclinations and talents matched the needs of various kinds of activities and jobs. It would seem that the ideas about talent that were current earlier in the arts began to spread into other spheres. In the arts no one had doubted that talent was innate and unique, varying by nature between individuals. When applied now on a wider scale, that idea implied for each institution and profession that talent lay in some natural aptitude for its work. It followed, therefore, that talent should be sought everywhere. How else could one cull enough of it to staff institutions imagined to be distinct in their needs, to exercise activities that were separate, that were not simply interchangeable in the bents and skills they required? Ideas about individuality and special talent could lead to demands that the net be cast wide. At that point there appeared a new social ideal:

[36] Samuel F. Scott, "The French Revolution and the Professionalization of the French Officer Corps, 1789-1793", in Morris Janowitz and Jacques Van Doorn (eds.), *On Military Ideology* (Rotterdam, 1971), pp. 30-2.

equality of opportunity for all. It was an ideal that for the Enlightenment had meaning mainly *within* single institutions, and that the logic of democracy and Romanticism transformed by extending it to the whole of society.

A pamphlet in 1789, attacking the Ségur law and the genealogical proofs for army officers, shows the newer ideas and how they could be linked.[37] The greatness of Rome and the ancient success of French arms, the author said, came from having permitted all individuals to follow their own particular bents. True, the nobles always had an advantage: "Birth, education, the continual reciting of the history of ancestors prepare the heart and dispose it naturally to virtue". But great men continually arose also from the bosom of the people; these were men whom "nature had distinguished by various qualities of soul and mind". Government rightly gave them distinctions, and "natural inequality led to political inequality; because there were virtues, there had to be titles". Why should that process stop? There was the problem. Under the *ancien régime* the government was acting "as if nature, by a new compact, had reserved absolutely all talents, all qualities, to the first class in society . . .". But, on the contrary, because nature is constant, "why would it reserve the germ of warlike qualities to the nobility alone?" Suppose one were born with "the most superior and transcendant *dispositions*", having "from nature" the most distinguished talents for the *état militaire*, that whole natural endowment became useless without the proofs of *noblesse*. The writer went on to argue that requiring the proofs destroyed emulation, stifled talent, and violated the historical rights of the third estate. The message, however, was clear: nature being uniform, military talent could be found everywhere — not in everyone, certainly, but scattered at random throughout society. Because that talent was special, seemingly innate, and fairly rare, it had to be sought in all social groups. This view of talent seemed to demand the democratic solution.

Equally interesting are several articles that appeared during the revolution itself, in an encyclopaedia of the military art. Their author, Lacuée de Cessac, was before 1789 a captain of infantry but also a *roturier*, a member of that small minority (about 5 per cent) of army officers who were non-nobles. In the revolution he rose fast and far, serving on the legislative assemblies' various military committees in 1792 and again in 1798, a general from 1793, minister of war three times between 1799 and 1810, and finally peer of France.[38] He wrote many important articles for the first volumes of the military encyclopaedia in 1784 and 1785, but his strongly democratic views were

[37] *Observations sur le règlement du 22 mai 1781, concernant les preuves de noblesse exigées pour entrer au service* (London, 1789).

[38] A.G., GD 396, dossier Lacuée; and his biography in Georges Six, *Dictionnaire biographique des généraux et amiraux français de la Révolution et de l'Empire, 1792-1814*, 2 vols. (London, 1934), ii, p. 26.

set out only in 1789-90 when he prepared other pieces that appeared eventually in the *Supplément* of 1797. In one, entitled "Examen", he proposed selecting officers by competitive tests open to all, regardless of birth, and developed also a plan for subsidies and *bourses* that would give an equal chance to the poor. An article called "Âge", however, is especially instructive.[39] In it Lacuée argued strongly the case for no longer admitting officers at sixteen, but making them wait until the age of twenty before entering. He met the various practical objections, and listed reasons favouring the change: at twenty years of age the officer was physically stronger, had had more time to learn his trade, and could better command the grey-haired veterans who would serve under him. Staying longer at home would "form his heart" and control the "stormy passions" which at the younger age led to gambling, financial disorder, and an incapacity to resist the "venal favours" offered by corrupted women. But it was the likelihood that delaying entry would also make for the more careful selection of a profession that Lacuée particularly stressed. This was a serious matter. On the proper "choice of an *état*" depended the happiness of men in society, and in fact the happiness of society itself. To choose well required several kinds of knowledge that would match the particular individual and his work: "one must not only know oneself perfectly, but know also the different *états* that could be taken up, and have an exact idea of the duties they demand". At sixteen that was not possible, and Lacuée asked:

> is it possible for a young adolescent, who has scarcely begun to feel his own existence or who has at least not yet seriously questioned himself, to bring to this choice the maturity and reflection it requires: I ask whether an adolescent who has not yet seen the world except in the most superficial way, who distinguishes the groups into which society is divided only by the clothes they wear, I ask whether he is able to judge to which one he is most suited.

It is the notion of being suited to one's work that is important, as though something distinct and internal had to ripen into an inclination. Parents should not push their sons into a profession, for too often they "embellished the *état* for which the young citizen was least suited, and . . . covered with an unappealing veneer the one for which he was born". In the army especially, where prejudices more powerful than laws worked in families to force the choice of vocation, customs and fathers mistakenly "chain [the boy], by fear and from childhood, to an *état* he hates, or to which he is not suited; and so they make him forever unhappy, and sometimes prepare him a deserved shame". The boy's qualities and talents were again special and unique, and he was not at all malleable in the way they had thought at the École militaire.

The contrast, then, is sharp. Lacuée, writing his articles very early

[39] *Encyclopédie méthodique: art militaire*, iv, *Supplément* (Paris, 1797), "Examen", pp. 315-18; "Âge", pp. 8-10.

in the revolution, knew that many in the army did not agree with him — he himself noted the common objection to the higher age for entry into the army, which was that military men "have to have learned early to bend their own will to that of others". Lacuée's answer was that the officer's obedience should be reasoned and thus arrived at when older; it should not come from mere "habit" or "prejudice". That answer, however, would not have satisfied Paris de Meyzieu for whom the function of the École militaire in fact had mainly to do with the forming of habit, and who, describing the school's recruitment of very young boys, explained that the students' "choice of profession is made in advance, and is a condition for the thing itself". In the conflicting views over age lay also differing emphases and ideas about human nature and the degree to which man can be formed.[40]

It is the later views, those of Lacuée, that usually seem most sensible to us today, but that common-sense judgement has to be peeled away in order to reach what the army's leaders had in mind before the revolution. Their tendencies were far from Romantic and not at all democratic. Perhaps now, in their quite different, environmentalist ideas, we can see also how they could detest democracy and believe strongly in social exclusion. For understanding the connection between these ideas, however, we have to return to their growing emphasis on but one part of the whole environmental conditioning, a part that was becoming more important in its affective power and in the thinking of nearly everyone in the later eighteenth century. This

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 8; Paris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel françois*, p. 66. It should be emphasized that the two ideas were tendencies and matters of emphasis; they were not polar opposites, the one believed to the entire exclusion of the other. Each pole in the nature v. nurture controversy was barren. Consider again Talleyrand's report on education in 1791, printed in *L'instruction publique en France pendant la Révolution*, ed. Hippeau, pp. 33-184. In it he identified three principal qualities in man — reason, the capacity to communicate, the moral sense — and he showed how the development of each depended heavily on correct conditioning by family, school and society. None the less there were also important differences of inclination and *disposition* between boys, and it was these that reinforced the demand for a democratic system of education and recruitment into occupations. Talleyrand denounced the old order, bad because it was "a time when one had to occupy an *état* to which some reigning prejudice attached honour, when one was born into being magistrate and warrior just as into one or the other sex, when as a consequence profession was a product of the species (*espèce*) rather than choices . . .": *ibid.*, pp. 173-4. To prevent that, Talleyrand wanted the district schools, planned as the second of three levels of education, to confront students with a wide range of teaching subjects. This was to let the individual find the activity for which he was especially suited. Whereas the old *collèges*, indifferent to the aptitudes of individuals and teaching the same classical curriculum to all, instilled in students a disgust for "the honourable yet scorned professions to which nature had called them", the new schools would "enlighten early on all life's possible routes, so that each student may recognize in a sure way to what end nature calls him . . .": *ibid.*, pp. 59, 72.

For a very interesting and more extended analysis of similar themes (differing in that the Enlightenment seems a bit more, and Romanticism less, egalitarian than I am suggesting here), see Frank E. Manuel, "From Equality to Organicism", *Jl. Hist. Ideas*, xvii (1956), pp. 54-69.

part was the role of the family, and it was the family's formative influence that the army would rely on more heavily by the 1780s in its particular kind of reform. This is the link that will help us to make sense of the army's chain of reasoning on the eve of the revolution. The main quality that made the good infantry officer, we should remember, was little more than that he *wanted* to be one, and was prepared to work hard at his profession. The military reformers knew that the child's earliest experience was in the family. It was there that traditions and values formed inclinations and habits. Even if roughly equal at birth, equal at least in the capacities that were important to the army, children soon lost that equality in the first environmental conditioning. What followed, in the army's thinking, was that the best officers of the future were likely to be from families that had given officers in the past. If the home was Spartan and military, if austerity infused its life, the young men it produced brought right inclinations that had only to be reinforced. Actual poverty in the family might help, but it was not essential. Where there was wealth, however, the home should at least not be one dominated by money and luxury; it should have in it healthy military traditions. In the end it was family that created what was most important: values, inclination, will, and eventually good habits.

In society at large, then, scattered everywhere, were thousands of tiny units, small military schools called families, that could do what the École militaire had tried but failed to do, and do it for the whole officer corps. If in the end the same family names recurred in the regimental lists, if there was nepotism and a trend towards making the profession a caste, so much the better — the military units would be healthier and more efficient because of it. Guibert put it clearly in his recommendation to the council of war in 1787, when he urged that the colonels be instructed to fill vacancies in their regiments:

> to supply the requests of . . . this precious class of sons or brothers of the old officers in the regiments, a type to which it is so essential to assure places because it furnishes a great many good officers, and because it is the one that puts into units the spirit of family which attaches to the king's service fathers by sons and sons by fathers.[41]

In 1788 the council of war wrote a preference for these family types into its ordinance creating new positions in the regiments: "His Majesty recommends that the colonels propose preferentially to fill these places with the sons, brothers or nephews of the old officers in their regiments, a precious type that he had in mind when creating these positions".[42]

[41] From Guibert's report, printed in Latreille, *L'armée et la nation à la fin de l'ancien régime*, p. 433.

[42] "Ordonnance concernant la constitution de l'infanterie française, 17 mars 1788", in *État militaire de France pour l'année 1788* (Paris, 1788), p. 429. See Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789", pp. 524-6.

As conceived at the time, then, the task of the army was to filter the society and to gather into one group those families whose sons were of the kind to be absorbed into a renovated officer corps. The group was defined by a single characteristic: all the families in it should be military. The families' other characteristics did not matter much. But including the military families of course meant excluding the others. In this sense, the task of reform was not at all to widen the pool from which officers were drawn, but to narrow it. Increasingly it was discrimination against certain social and professional types that the army's insiders would find to be reformist and progressive. Now the army freely acted on its stereotypical views of whole groups. Apparently it felt justified in so doing — at least there were no signs of guilt or doubt at the time.

The present-day social historian might find the military reformers' view of society and the actual offending groups imprecise and their use of words loose. The word that recurs is opulence, and the professional enemy existed wherever opulence was to be found. The enemy could be noble or *roturier*, and if it is frequently difficult for us to know which was meant, it is because contemporaries themselves were not always clear on the point. They were surer about opulence, which was the kind of wealth that implied frivolity, and made boys independent and unmanageable. The captain who in 1739 wanted a permanent corps for poor nobles explained the trouble with the wealthy: they were used to living "indolently and affluently" and so could not endure the fatigue of war and usually quit the service early. His conclusion was simple: "rich subjects are not at all suited to the infantry".[43] The École militaire was established specifically to deal with this problem. In the most recent war, complained Paris de Meyzieu, several cavalry captains carried with them as much baggage as had generals under Louis XIV, and the tone that they set drove out the good officers. Necessarily the service suffered:

> A rich man who experiences the slightest annoyance, the least rebuff . . . regards it as a legitimate reason for discontent [and a pretext for quitting the army] . . . I could tell you that it is not in the rich officer that we see the most attachment to his profession, the most exactitude in serving . . . the most care in seeing to his troop, or vigilance over discipline . . . It seems that in him wealth replaces everything else and, because he controls his own fate, he thinks himself independent. In the end, if one really examined this point, one would perhaps find here the principle explaining how little subordination there is in our troops. I could add that softness and debauchery which so often accompany opulence . . . enervate corps which soon become unsuited to sustaining the fatigues of war . . . It is very rare to see great wealth and great talents in the same subject.[44]

The argument was embedded in all the military writings, and we have seen the committee of lieutenant-generals expressing outrage over

[43] A.G., $A^1$3072, no. 51, *mémoire* by Chevuin de Rivière, "Sur la nécessité qu'il y auroit de lever une compagnie de cadets gentilshommes".

[44] Paris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel françois*, pp. 108-9.

luxury and opulence in the 1780s. If the proffered solutions changed from decade to decade, the definition of the essential problem remained remarkably consistent over fifty years.

Some of the hostility towards opulence was clearly aimed at *roturiers* or "bourgeois". The army was fully prepared to dislike many non-nobles when they entered its sphere. Sons of merchants, lawyers and civilian office-holders were inclined the wrong way from birth and were often in the army only because they were rich. In the generals' committee the term "bourgeois", used in passing, meant exactly what the military should not be. The maréchal de Contades, arguing against garrisons permanently settled in fortified towns, made his case on the grounds that after several years the troops there "will become in a way bourgeois".[45] But it is misleading to suggest that the hostility towards a non-military social origin was aimed exclusively, or even mainly, against *roturiers*. When their outlook and formation were not military, nobles were in fact no better than bourgeois. Nobles were often civilians, and their number was always increasing. For the army, the roughly 5 per cent of the officers throughout the century who were non-nobles were a less serious, more easily controlled, problem than was the presence of other, officially noble types more commonly seen.[46] The difficulty lay in the French "constitution", which military men detested. What they meant by the term was the system that until 1789 manufactured new nobles at a rapid rate. With money, buying one's way into the legal élite remained easy. Thousands of offices in administration and the courts conferred nobility on their holders and were readily available to financiers, merchants and others. The new men, entering office at advanced ages, often had living grandsons who were thereby transformed instantly into third-generation nobles. The state seemed determined to allow, even to encourage, the nobility's expansion to include a plutocracy whose personal wealth and credit the king had to use. The ennobled families were from cities and lived well, too well, the army thought. Often they remained in finance and trade after they became nobles, and it was their bad example that diffused through society the taste for luxury and non-military ways. The social orders were overlapping and mixed, all seemed confusion, and the army did not like it. Emulation, good when it had as its object duty and service, was infecting and ruinous when wealth and manners were what conferred prestige. Somehow, reformers thought, against that "constitution" and society the line had to be drawn. If the society could not be transformed, perhaps at least the army might be insulated against its virulent influence.

As the line was drawn, then, it closed out from the officer corps a

[45] B.M.G., A.H.S., MS. 174, fo. 89.

[46] For the basis of the 5 per cent estimate, see Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789", pp. 29-36.

large world that, no matter how mixed in its occupations and legal status, appeared uniform and threatening to those who sought a higher standard of professionalism. To the army, new nobles and rich bourgeois did not look very different from one another. In a *mémoire* complaining about the cavalry's unsatisfactory social composition about the middle of the century, one military writer had argued that only proofs of one hundred and fifty years of nobility could remedy the situation. A critic who objected to the sons of bourgeois and merchants among the officers, objected also to the usually noble financier and robe families that were also there. This is what Paris de Meyzieu had meant when he talked about the "real nobility" being left out. Besenval said much the same when he complained that the army's low pay forced "*militaires* or the nobility, which are synonyms", to sell their lands. To whom did they sell? To *financiers* and *gens de plume*, and "what can be expected from the examples those new landed seigneurs give to their vassals"? Besenval knew the answer. New people were the problem, and they were not just bourgeois. So long as the French "constitution" remained as it was, simple nobility would not be enough.[47]

Against this background it becomes easier to see what Ségur and the lieutenant-generals were doing in 1781. Thinking to reform, they demanded of officers entering the army four generations of nobility or substantial military service by their fathers. Perhaps now at last they could bring in more of the families that were seriously military, and could come closer to keeping out the opulent, the city types, the civilians who straddled and blurred the line dividing nobles from *roturiers*. The army, if it had been free to apply all its ideas, might have gone even further — it might have required for entry that one prove also that one had a father, other relatives, or ancestors who had served. But for practical reasons that was out of the question. The *parlements* were highly sensitive to slights and quick to defend the equality of nobles. Given the difficult political and financial situation of the state, it was not worth risking their anger. Anyway, the requirement of four generations seemed even-handed, and "without stating it", as Guibert noted with satisfaction, it accomplished the work of excluding most of the previously eligible civilians. Six of every seven who entered the highest judicial and administrative offices during the last fifteen years of the *ancien régime* had three or less generations of *noblesse*; now each of them knew clearly he could not have been an army officer.[48]

[47] A.G., M.R., 1727, no. 3; A.D.H., C6565, pp. 17-18; Jean Baptiste Paris de Meyzieu, *Réflexions sur l'École royale militaire* (London, 1755), pp. 4-7; B.M.G., A.H.S., MS. 174, fo. 95.

[48] For the civilian office-holders excluded, see Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789", pp. 43-8, 505-15.

IV

In their own day the military reformers were important men whose work was considered significant. Perhaps that is reason enough for studying them and their ideas. But these men and their ideas also seem to throw light on some of the larger subjects and themes that interest us: the nobility as a whole, and its relationship to society, the Enlightenment, revolution and counter-revolution. Of course the generals were by no means an exact cross-section of the nobility, and to generalize broadly and categorically about the entire class from such a sample risks distorting and exaggerating a picture that will come into clear focus only with additional work on other groups within it. Nevertheless, to refrain now from proposing what the army's story *might* mean for the larger questions would be a needless pedantry, and so I will put forward several tentative "conclusions", really suggestions, that raise several questions and should not imply certainty.

The first is that the evidence for the army implies that reform and revolution should be seen as separate and distinct; they were not, as we sometimes imagine, simply alternative and parallel paths to modernity, differing only in their means, the one violent and the other nonviolent. Rather, the two seem diametrically opposed and in conflict. It often appears that what caused the revolution was the failure to reform, and that the revolution then implemented what reformers had been prevented from doing. But this is to miss the point that a "reformed" France might not have resembled the revolutionized France very closely at all. Ségur, the committee of lieutenant-generals, and other military reformers, were highly professional in outlook, and they shared a genuine zeal for professionalization. Our modern assumptions, derived as they are from an ideal of open and democratic recruitment that seems both fair and efficient, do not prepare us for understanding these "modernizers" of the *ancien régime*, who saw in the formation of caste the essence of military reform. The generals' ideas of reform were so clearly opposed to the revolution's democratic ones that it is not surprising to learn that nearly all the committees' members later sided with counter-revolution. Of twenty-two who lived on into the revolution, fifteen emigrated and another five, remaining in France to defend the king, went to prison or were killed; only one made peace easily with the new order.[49] The others made it quite clear that the equality they once preached was not at all the equality of 1789. Their reform and the revolution were wholly incompatible.

The second suggestion is related to the first, and to a current debate over how enlightened and revolutionary the French nobility actually

[49] The biographical information comes from *État militaire de France pour l'année 1789, ... Réimpression avec ... des notes biographiques, généalogiques et historiques*, by Sidney Churchill, i (Carnac, 1913).

was in 1789. One side has it that the nobility, at least its better-educated and wealthier strata, was embedded in a wider élite that crossed class lines and was unified by common adherence to enlightened ideas and the revolution's principles. The argument maintains that the nobles imbibed from, and shared with, the upper third estate the values associated with property and talent; together the members of this élite wanted to end despotism and to advance claims of merit against privilege and inheritance.[50] But this view of the situation does not easily explain either the nobles' counter-revolution or the views and reactions of the generals. No doubt the reforming military aristocrats could have talked easily with others in the putative élite about abstract virtues, merit, talent, and a kind of equality. The general proposition concerning the environmental formation of man was not likely to cause trouble. But the peaceful consensus would not have long survived the discussion of how the army combined and applied those views in a programme for recruiting its officers. For, as we have seen, the effectiveness of that programme required not unity but, on the contrary, a fragmenting of the wider élite of wealth and culture along social and professional lines. The army grew convinced that its own health required that it be insulated against many of the

[50] The argument about élite was strongly made by Denis Richet in his "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française". Richet, however, was well aware that the enlightened élite, even if unified in opposition to despotism and in favour of liberty and rights, was nevertheless sharply divided over questions of privilege, birth, and how open the élite should actually be. The insistence by many nobles on the separateness of their order in the Estates General, and their subsequent emigration and counter-revolution, were facts requiring at least a brief explanation. This Richet found not in ideas — *lumières* evidently could lead only to revolution — but in sociological and psychological factors that must have limited the receptivity of some groups to the whole range of *lumières:* for example, the humiliation felt by country nobles in the army, an especially strong attachment to privileges by some *parlementaires* because they were new nobles, possibly the court nobles' stake in pensions. Recently Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret has carried the argument further. His élite, the fusion of upper nobility and upper third estate, included new nobles carrying "bourgeois" ideas and values, and old nobles who then absorbed and adopted those same ideas. This élite was not only anti-despotic, but solidly hostile to privilege and the claims of birth; it was egalitarian and meritocratic in outlook and programme. Chaussinand-Nogaret's nobility is even more thoroughly revolutionary than Richet's. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La noblesse au XVIII^e siècle*, esp. chs. 2, 4, 7, 8.

For a Marxist critique of the idea of élite, see the lengthy analysis of Chaussinand-Nogaret's book by Philippe Goujard, " 'Féodalité' et lumières au XVIII^e siècle: l'exemple de la noblesse", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, ccxxvii (1977), pp. 103-18; for *lumières*, see esp. pp. 114-15. Goujard thinks the nobles' attachment to *lumières* doubtful — how many sincere ones were there, he asks rhetorically — and the content or "model" of their thinking was different from that of the bourgeoisie. The *discours nobiliaire* was indeed anti-despotic, continues Goujard, but in affirming equality, the nobles did not mean to extend that equality to the nation at large. To understand the nobles, he concludes, one must recognize the reality of class power based on a common type of economic domination and exercised through the control of institutions. The nobility was unified by its common "feudal" interest, and necessarily shared little with the bourgeoisie.

social and occupational types who belonged to that supposed élite. The theory of the single élite, then, obscures several fissures in it that were deep and deepening. One split separated noble from *roturier* — in 1781 the Ségur law made that older dividing line more visible. The other split, new in the 1780s and less obvious and commented upon, distinguished between military and non-military families within the nobility. In short the army's reform worked directly against the formation of a unified élite.

Finally, it is interesting to consider how the ideas of the generals were related to those held by others at the same time. Could we even find a place for them within the Enlightenment? The difficulty here is in large part one of definition. The answer to the question is a clear "no" if we understand by the Enlightenment the ideology of revolutionaries, and want to imagine a smooth intellectual and cultural transition from *lumières* through revolution to modernity. The political test leaves our men out. And again the answer is "no" if we take the Enlightenment to mean only letters and literature. But another assessment is possible. The army's leaders were secularist in outlook, and practical in approach; they were reformers who favoured change and wanted to resolve problems, almost like engineers, by altering a structure or tinkering with the institutional machine. They also believed strongly in a kind of equality, that is, equal competition to meet objective qualifications, and they saw in that the fundamental principle that made institutions function well. To egotism, idleness and self-indulgence they opposed values of selflessness and work. Defining what those values produced, they talked frequently about merit and talent. Their powerful hatred of luxury was in the intellectual mainstream of eighteenth-century France. The environmentalist ideas, so strong in the army, could have been acquired anywhere, but if the generals read the avant-garde, in particular Condillac and Helvétius, their own unsophisticated epistemological convictions were only reinforced.[51] It is more likely that they read the *Esprit des lois*, in which Montesquieu needed but one page at the beginning to dispose of the outdated view that human nature was fixed and unyielding: "Hobbism", or the idea that aggression is rooted innately in humans, was wrong, he said; on the contrary, aggression is a complicated idea that takes a lot of learning. The Rousseau who wrote about politics was much the same. As for the family, many besides generals were expressing a new enthusiasm for it. In short the army evidently shared a language and a number of fundamental ideas with

[51] The Bibliothèque nationale catalogue gives nine of the eleven French editions of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, all four editions of the abridgement, and eight of fourteen editions of the *Thoughts on Education*, as having appeared prior to 1789. Twelve of the twenty-one pre-1789 editions were published in the years 1730-60.

others whom we would usually call enlightened. And it fashioned its policy of social exclusion from what at that time must have seemed quite up-to-date ideas. If speculation on reasons for the Enlightenment's including or excluding military men should lead to sharper definition and specification of that culture's ideas, so much the better. And if in the end we should ever define an "Enlightenment" broad enough to embrace generals and their exclusionary policies, incipient counter-revolution as well as revolution, nothing, after all, says that we have to like either the reformers, or their programme.

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