

Sternberg, Giora: *Status Interaction During the Reign of Louis XIV*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. ISBN: 978-0-19-964034-8; 224 S.

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Do we need another book about elites in the reign of Louis XIV? Is there anything new to learn about court ritual other than that it forged groups into rigidly prescribed, yet practically contested boundaries of status difference?¹ Giora Sternberg's „Status Interaction during the Reign of Louis XIV“ claims as much. Historians, he suggests, have perhaps not studied the details of court societies that actually mattered. ‘Status’ did not radiate from the Sun King, it was relational and relative. Rivaling noble families shaped it in day-to-day interactions. To explain how, the author focuses on an abundance of hidden codes in French elite society. The length of mantles, types of chairs and handling of pens come to life as pawns in subtle court tactics in an ‘inherent duality’ of royal and extra-royal agendas (p. 25). Underlying the thematic chapters of Sternberg's book, from ceremony, over dress and gesture to writing, is the creation of precedent after precedent that de facto elevated royal bastards to Princes of the Blood; a structural shift de jure only in 1714 that Louis' reign made conceivable.

Sternberg begins with a moment of transition: the proxy marriage between the niece of Louis XIV and Charles II of Spain. Choreography, the signing of the marriage contract, and sartorial distinctions offered high-ranking nobles chances to claim status (ch. 1); if they could not claim it in practice then in historicizing the events ex post facto. Here the family of the *Grand Condé*, first cousin-once-removed of Henry IV, Prince of the Blood, and former rebel leader, makes its first appearance. Instead of having the precedent recorded that – unlike his higher-ranking relatives – *Monsieur* had to dip the pen into the ink for the marital agreement himself, he avoided such public embarrassment. The Condé absented himself.

From this marital passage rite, Sternberg delves into everyday status negotiations surrounding the new Queen of Spain (ch. 2). The

‘private’ correspondence between the Grand Condé and his intermediary shows how a simple question („Would Princes of the Blood and Granddaughters of France sit on the same type of chair“?) turned into a full-blown ‘arms race for arm-rests’. At Louis's court, matters of status were relational and at this point in time the rank of the Condé vis-à-vis the Orléans-family was at stake.

While status interaction in practice was important, recorded precedent seemingly ranked higher. At obsequies, where the monarch picked three members of his family to represent deep mourning, rivalry and claims to precedence ensued (ch. 3). After Condé's death, for instance, blue bloods hoped for longer mantles and higher-ranking bearers to underline their status. Bearers of trains simultaneously accepted subordination as they experienced personal triumphs in relation to non-bearers. The mourners of varying ranks competed not merely for the longer train, but tried to have precedents recorded and immortalized.

In the eighteenth century, mantled visits of social inferiors at the house of their superiors underline that Princes of the Blood were often unsuccessful in protecting their status (ch. 4). Paying reverence to a mourner in a mantle was a form of subordination. Junior members of the Bourbon family, for instance, coerced friends and social climbers into paying them mantled visits if senior members of the royal family died. Precedent by precedent, the distinction between junior and senior Bourbons waned, and so did the solemn privilege of Princes of the Blood's mantled visits.

With a reinvestigation of the handing of *chemise* and *serviette*, Sternberg takes up one of Norbert Elias' classics (ch. 5). As Sternberg shows, already in Louis XIV's reign courtiers associated rituals like the formalized passing of a napkin to the monarch with subordination. They engaged in it nonetheless, because it allowed them to access a system of secondary services. Condés and Orléans used the *chemise* to deliberately humiliate one another; dauphins could claim superiority over former social equals through the *serviette*, and marriage ceremonies symboli-

¹ See Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Rituale*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 44–46.

cally reversed chemise-giving.

Sternberg's last chapter deals with language in the arms race for status (ch. 6). Manuals unsuccessfully attempted to structure the shifting language of noble rank. When a letter-writer acknowledged a previous letter, mentioned 'pains' of his addressee or the 'honour' of writing, the author targeted different status groups. Even material aspects pointed to existing hierarchies: For some time, only near-equals enjoyed the honour of a line below the salutation and the Condés distinguished themselves by maintaining the tradition of ending letters with a passage in autograph. As the author suggests, inflation of form, however, should not be mistaken for egalitarianism.

In this nuanced work, many details merit critical appreciation. Even though Sternberg is sceptical of diachronic comparisons, his approach to status interactions in early modern Europe seems useful to a larger readership. Firstly, Sternberg drives home the dependence of ritual on record-keeping, of status on recorded precedence. This was a process that often went hand in hand with 'cooking the books'. By contrast, early ritual theory contrasted 'tribal' or 'primitive' societies with the authors' own pen-pushing age. According to Sternberg's work, however, practice and paper together formed an essential part of the ritual apparatus and drove societal change over time. The latter was 'the continuation of status interaction by other means' (p. 164). But if paper and practice both yielded such results, why does Sternberg suggest an overall tendency to have precedents recorded?

Secondly, the author shifts court society's centre of gravity away from the Sun King himself. Instead, we learn about the women and men who swam with the currents of favour surrounding the entire royal family. At times, they deliberately clotted a pipe to cause a stir. Here Sternberg finds himself in the good company of others, who have come to embrace an understanding that the minutiae of status served more goals than making a 'court society' manageable for the monarch.² Rituals did not 'go wrong' when they became contested. The contestation of a rule played a role in its constant reiteration.

Thirdly, Sternberg makes a contribution to

the history of material culture. Certain garments did not just communicate information about the person who wore them. Dressing up in a mantle for mourning signified deference to the mourners and laid claim to a privilege of Princes of the Blood. Wearers dressed to address the status inconsistencies in French high society. Objects like mantles lost some of their quasi-magical quality, when they were no longer set apart from everyday circulation and use.

Fourthly, some of Sternberg's important findings stem from his creative use of sources. He reassembles letters, dispersed by nineteenth-century French archival shuffles, or hastily scribbled marginalia in epistolary protocols and uses them to their fullest. The Condé-Gourville correspondence (ch. 1, 2) is one example: letters flew back and forth between the absent Grand Condé and his agent, Gourville, at court. What the head of the Condé family tried to avoid through constant letter writing was a codification of a loss of status.

After so much due praise, a critical note seems in order as well. Staunch social historians sometimes sneer at the infinite caveats of cultural history. Having read Sternberg's study, we may disagree. Dissatisfying as this may be, small things mattered greatly in this early modern world. And, as Sternberg aptly shows, historians have not always understood, which small thing actually mattered. Readers who are familiar with the German literature on *Ritualforschung* and symbolic communication in the early modern period, will find some of Sternberg's insights on these details less innovative.

We may, however, also agree with the critics in one respect: that it remains the task of future scholarship to connect these courtly minutiae to the impending European succession crisis. Sternberg's volte-face away from the monarch disallows us to see that the (proxy) marriage ritual of Louis' niece and Carlos II needed to paper over troubling ru-

² See recently e.g. Leonhard Horowski, *Die Belagerung des Thrones: Machtstrukturen und Karriere-mechanismen am Hof von Frankreich 1661–1789*, Stuttgart 2012; Christian Kühner, *Politische Freundschaft bei Hofe: Repräsentation und Praxis einer sozialen Beziehung im französischen Adel des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 2013.

mours: that her Spanish husband was bewitched, impotent, and prone to an early death.

In sum, Sternberg has given historians an example of approaching different layers of rituals under one umbrella. Much like Elias, Sternberg shows that the status interaction he chose to study may stand in for many others that structured early modern societies. Unlike Elias, he makes a convincing case that in a world where courtiers used aberrations in performance to stake their claims, the well-ordered ritual did not exist. Conflicts were built into status interactions. If historians are to understand this world, Sternberg reminds us, they need to couple attention to detail with a better sense of which details mattered: Only then can we appreciate why after 1700 courtiers knew that a European war would unfold, because the Grand Dauphin's son started dining alone: Denying status interaction laid claim to a superior status as king of Spain and its empire.³

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³ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Saint-Simon, and the Court of Louis XIV*, Chicago 2001, p. 55.