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Citation

A global social history of princes, courts and elites. (2024). A global social history of princes, courts and elites. *The Historical Journal*, *67*(4), 692-711. doi:10.1017/S0018246X24000165

ARTICLE

A Global Social History of Princes, Courts and Elites

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Abstract

Royals abound in global history. Kings were served at court by domestic, administrative, and military elites who connected the centre to the provinces. Contemporary observers as well as modern historians have often stressed the contrast between oriental despots and limited monarchs in the West, downplaying structural resemblances. This article moves beyond clichés commonly ascribed to East and West, and asks to what extent social practices of court life were shared across early modern Eurasia. Then it reviews the profound changes in European court life during the long eighteenth century. Can parallel reform movements be found in other parts of Eurasia? Finally, it moves from comparisons to connections, by tracing fundamental shifts in the relationships between European royals and royals across the globe from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. This *longue durée* examination questions common views about European exceptionalism and corrects persistent clichés about rising middle classes and declining nobilities.

I

Not without reason, early modern observers pictured the princely household as a world of vanity and intrigue. An echo of their moral censure can be found in the antipathy of social historians towards this elite institution. This is a missed opportunity: the court should be seen as a necessary component of social history. First, it is important to note that courts were never elite environments only. The princely household and the machinery of political decision-making comprised under the term 'court' formed a social pyramid with a broad basis. A large workforce was responsible for the day-to-day logistics of the household, as well as for the organization of its pageantry; government, too, included multiple low-paid servants. Court personnel held a special status, but comprised all social classes. Even paupers formed part of this world, as the indispensable recipients of conspicuous largesse. Secondly, and more

importantly, courts were centres of recruitment, promotion, and distinction of a variety of groups. Court office, court titles, and the right to attend court occasions helped to define the ranks of local and regional elites. Even such perks were not limited to the upper layers: guards, artisans, shopkeepers, labourers, and purveyors connected to the court enjoyed exemptions and special privileges, although their remuneration was unremarkable at best and often went unpaid. The ruler, as the fountain of honours, was an important factor in social change. Any effort to understand the dynamics of social ascent and descent that excludes the court risks reproducing a rather antiquated view of social history, revolving around bustling merchant elites and declining nobles.

An examination of this grand theme with a global perspective entails other risks. On the one hand, it is easy to accumulate resemblances: palaces, chamberlains, ministers, and viziers can be found across the globe. Engelbert Kaempfer, a seasoned traveller who visited the Persian court in a Swedish embassy before he continued to Siam and Japan in the service of the Dutch East India Company, recognized the offices and artefacts held by court elites and unhesitatingly renamed them using European terminology.[1] This sense of equivalence should not lead us to downplay differences, as Kaempfer himself would have understood.[2] There is even less ground, however, to accept the classic assumption that 'servile' elites, 'autocratic' royals, and social rigidity characterized Asia, whereas European limited monarchy went together with social dynamism.

The first part of this article traces the diversity of court practices and at the same time highlights functional equivalences. I argue that this was a differentiated but shared experience, a formula to which other royals and their agents could relate. My examination deals mostly with the empires and states arising in Europe and continental Asia during the early modern age, matching the regional bias of the debate on economic and political divergence. In the second part of the article, I examine whether divergence in court practices increased in the long eighteenth century: to what extent did Europe escape from the shared formula?[3] Finally, the third part considers the connections between courts: it shows how these relationships reflected the rivalry of separate

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[1] Engelbert Kaempfer, *De beschryving van Japan, behelsende een verhaal van den ouden en tegenwoordigen staat en regeering van dat ryk ... en van hunnen koophandel met de Nederlanders en de Chineesen. Benevens eene beschryving van het koningryk Siam* (The description of Japan, containing a history of the ancient and present state and government of that empire ... and of their trade with the Dutch and the Chinese. In addition a description of the kingdom of Siam) (Amsterdam, 1729); Walther Hinz, ed., *Engelbert Kaempfer am Hofe des persischen Grosskönigs, 1684–1685* (Leipzig, 1940).

[2] On intermediaries translating and bridging the differences between various court cultures and the notion of 'commensurability', see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly encounters: translating courtliness and violence in early modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA, 2012). On a more proximate outsider and its understanding of the formula of royalty and ritual, see Jan Hennings, *Russia and courtly Europe: ritual and the culture of diplomacy, 1648–1725* (Cambridge, 2016).

[3] For a global comparative framework notably including Africa and choosing a very different methodology, see Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: a global history of power* (Cambridge, 2016). A concise but wider-ranging interpretation can be found in Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasty: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2019).

'competing universalisms' before European hegemony gave rise to a global hierarchical view of 'royalty' and reshuffled other categories of social history.[4]

II

In the mishmash of court practices some structures stand out; together these can be seen as a recurring formula. Almost all larger polities across the globe were governed nominally by a single person. Princes held various titles and enjoyed differing levels of power, yet they all claimed legitimacy through a combination of force, lineage, and divine support.[5] Eligibility for paramount office was usually confined to members of a ruling family or clan. Yet, while dynasties were ubiquitous, forms of succession show great variation, ranging from male primogeniture to full-fledged election or violent competition. In a minority of cases, most conspicuously present in Africa and Austronesia, succession was arranged strictly through the female line: royal fathers could only secure succession for their sons if they married women from their own blood. Sideways diffusion of power to brothers and sisters' sons became more likely than concentrated downwards next-of-kin succession. The defining trait of dynasty under patriliny, father–son succession, was exceptional here.

The accoutrements and accomplishments of supreme rule everywhere were gendered: sovereignty was almost invariably associated with masculinity. Women were accepted on the throne as regents for their minor male wards because merciful mothers fitted gendered stereotypes more easily than queens regnant. Only in the absence of male candidates did women step in as sovereign rulers; in these cases, royal blood overruled gender. Ruling queens needed to battle to be accepted; their force of character could be portrayed as intractability, their acumen as slyness.[6] While regions where matrilineal forms of kinship were common left more room for women in positions of authority, here, too, men were the preferred candidates for paramount power: matriliny did not coincide with matriarchy.

Spaces that housed the ruler and his entourage show the same pattern of variation within a familiar structure: palace-like compounds from diminutive to gigantic can be found across the globe, in fixed urban settings or as nomadic tent encampments. Polygynous dynastic reproduction was the standard in premodern world history; only Europe from the twelfth century onwards forms

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[4] See Nadine Amsler, Christian Windler, and Henrietta Harrison, eds., *Transformations of intercultural diplomacies: comparative views on Asia and Europe (1700 to 1850)*, special issue, *International History Review*, 41 (2019), with numerous strong contributions on changing balances in the *Sattelzeit*.

[5] Marshall Sahlins, 'The original political society', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7 (2017), pp. 91–128, at p. 92, and Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, *On kings* (Chicago, IL, 2017) p. 2, connect religion, cosmologies, and kingship, stating that 'There are kingly beings in heaven even where there are no chiefs on earth.'

[6] See Duindam, *Dynasty*, ch. 1, on matriliny and polygyny, and ch. 3, on women on the throne in world history. For extensive literature references, see Duindam, *Dynasties*, ch. 2. On palace women and notably on the role of mothers, see the strong introduction in Anne Walthall, *Servants of the dynasty: palace women in world history* (Berkeley, CA, 2008). The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr Walthall for liberally sharing her knowledge on Tokugawa Japan.

the exception. Polygyny shaped the status and location of women. Multiple consorts made likely the presence of a secluded inner quarter, often guarded by eunuch harem guards. In addition to this gendered inner zone, all palace compounds included more public outer zones, functioning as the podium for a recurring ritual calendar, with festive and solemn meetings bringing together many people. The inner–outer division of space can be seen as a structural phenomenon of dynastic households; to some extent it is an elaborated form of common household practice. The near-universality of polygyny reinforced the boundaries between gendered inner–outer spaces and more often than not coincided with the rise of eunuchs. There may have been an element of diffusion here, although it seems clear that eunuchs arose independently in West and East Asia at an early stage. Interestingly, eunuchs were not systematically used either in Japan or by Inca and Aztec rulers.

Dynastic households invariably comprised three groups, to some extent matching the inner–outer divide: servants catering for the daily life of the ruler and his kin; councillors assisting the prince in the government and defence of his realms; and royal relatives or high-ranking nobles. Concubines, eunuchs, and chamber servants were not as a rule active in government office, nor did they necessarily enjoy elevated status. Nevertheless, their frequent access to the prince allowed them at times to wield enormous power. Leading office holders might act as key advisers, but could see their access barred or limited by inner court servants. Finally, princes and magnates might seem to be the prince's natural companions, yet they could easily be perceived as rivals and thus were frequently kept under some sort of surveillance or banished to the periphery. This was particularly the case for royal brothers and their offspring: rights of succession inevitably engendered conflict. Shifting hierarchies of access, office, rank, and succession defined the dynamics of competition at court.

Everywhere, the strengthening dynastic state relied on an upper echelon for service in leading positions, yet no single social group monopolized this role. Exam licentiates from the gentry elite dominated civil office in late imperial China; *devshirme*-recruited and household-trained 'slave' elites prevailed in Ottoman administration and military; noble descent characterized the upper echelons of early modern European leadership; religious disciples served the early Safavid shahs; and a mixed bunch of elites assisted the Mughal padishah. Moreover, no single group ever dominated in all domains: personal service in the household was often in the hands of eunuch harem guards; religious elites were responsible for moral guidance and devotion; some differentiation existed between service in royal councils, local government, and the military. The recruitment of elites took different shapes in various regions and changed over time. In addition, elites would legitimize their status with contrasting arguments, mixing in varying degrees valour, learning, devotion, service, wealth, and pedigree.

Which criteria deserve priority as starting points for a global social history of elites? The functions fulfilled, patterns of recruitment, forms of heredity and social reproduction, self-representation and legitimation? Every category will lead to a different picture; in some cases the similarities will be obvious, in

others the contrasts glaring. In Europe, the universally powerful tendency towards patrimonialism had led to the acceptance of heredity for royalty as well as for noble elites; in most Asian empires, hereditary legitimacy was reserved for the ruling house alone. Yet, while royal houses remained small in Europe, they could inflate to thousands elsewhere. Polygyny, practised by Chinese emperors as well as by their junior relatives, in the longer term created substantial numbers of princes: by the end of the Ming dynasty they totalled between 100,000 and 200,000. Imperial clan members stood apart from others: they enjoyed numerous privileges but at the same time were severely circumscribed in their actions. Under the Ming, the stipends paid to the inflating numbers of princes, who were forbidden to enter regular careers, emptied the state coffers. The problems caused by the proliferation of idle mouths, connected through descent from the founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–98), were keenly discussed by Chinese magistrates. They considered lifting the ban on examinations and thus making available a career as a magistrate, a plan never put into practice in Ming times. In West and South Asia, violent competition for the throne prevented the inflation of numbers: royal brothers were systematically maimed, executed, or imprisoned. Reproduction rights of incarcerated or maimed princes were curbed to prevent dynastic proliferation and reduce the risk of rebellious dynastic have-nots. Fratricide and incarceration of royals were common in African polities from Solomonid Ethiopia to the Buganda kingdom and beyond. However, dynastic proliferation could also be solved in a non-violent way, by granting royal status only to sons and grandsons of kings: after one or two generations, princely status would simply dissolve.[7]

Neither Chinese selection through mass civil service examinations nor Ottoman levies of Christian boys created elites who could count on heredity in office. The same can be said for the religious disciples brought together by the charisma of the Safavid Shah Ismail (r. 1501–24). Yet, whatever form of recruitment was practised and whichever style the elites cultivated, patrimonialism was a force to be reckoned with: elites used every nook and cranny to transmit status and wealth to their offspring. Chinese gentry families were able to stay close to power and retain wealth through the centuries, even if they could not continuously produce successful exam licentiates, let alone leading magistrates. Ottoman janissaries and dignitaries recruited through *devshirme* obtained more rights, and gradually turned into a multi-generation power bloc. Marrying the sultan's daughters, leading office holders fathered semi-dynastic children, disenfranchised because of their descent through the female line, but still notable. Within two generations, Shah Ismail's devoted disciples had become truculent landowning magnates.

In the core lands of Asia, Turco-Mongol traditions left room for heredity and noble lineages. The Qing Manchu conquest dynasty typically relied on the support of Manchu and Mongol nobilities, in addition to the predominantly Han Chinese magistracy selected through the examinations. As in Europe, Japan, parts of South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Americas

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[7] See details and references in Duindam, *Dynasties*, ch. 2.

accepted hereditary noble status as a complement to the paramountcy of the prince. Victor Lieberman's sweeping comparison of Eurasia suggests that the lands frequently overrun by Steppe conquerors were less likely to develop vested hereditary nobilities, whereas such groups stood a better chance of survival in zones more distant from the Central Asian heartlands.[8]

Perhaps the status of monogamous dynastic reproduction can help to explain the remarkable strength, as well as the loudly proclaimed legitimacy, of hereditary privilege in Europe. From the twelfth century onwards, pushed by an exceptionally powerful institutionalized clergy, European princes accepted the standard of succession through legitimate monogamous marriage. They might engage in illicit love as much as they wanted, yet in principle only their legitimate offspring would be accepted as eligible for succession; full legitimization of bastards remained the exception. Monogamy and dynastic intermarriage turned Europe into a dense web of dynastic succession rights. The extinction of a senior line inevitably engendered wars among rival competitors, supported by the military machinery of the great monarchies of Europe. Notwithstanding the formula attributed to the Habsburgs, to win through marriage what others obtained through war, succession wars were endemic and bloody. However, princes gaining the upper hand in these wars could not simply impose a new political order: accepting the contested inheritance entailed the duty to maintain at least some of the local rights and privileges. Only outright rebellion legitimized the crushing of regional and elite privileges by the new prince.

Traditional views of social order from across the globe depict an unmoving ideal rather than social reality. They present a hierarchy with royals at the top, descending via warriors and scholars or priests to artisans and peasants, and characteristically attributing a marginal position to merchants.[9] The priority accorded to soldiers and priests or scholars varied. Without the outspoken religious-righteous allure of European clergy and Muslim ulama, Chinese gentlemen-officials, with their stress on learning and cultural sophistication, occupied high moral ground. More than prelates or ulama, Chinese literati monopolized government positions. Elsewhere, soldiers usually predominated in the upper ranks of executive power, supplemented and at times challenged by religious specialists and scholars.

Overall, merchants were the underdogs: moral and religious censure was never far away from money makers. Newly acquired wealth threatened to undermine the social order by making possible conspicuous luxury and steep social ascent. Sumptuary laws tried to prevent status dissonance by explicitly tying apparel to rank, yet such methods were never wholly effective.[10] Wealth, moreover, was always a tempting target for predatory social

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[8] Victor Lieberman, 'Protected rimlands and exposed zones: reconfiguring premodern Eurasia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50 (2008) pp. 692–723; Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830* (2 vols., Cambridge, 2003).

[9] See Jeroen Duindam, 'Pre-modern power elites: princes, courts, intermediaries', in John Higley and Heinrich Best, eds., *Handbook of political elites* (London, 2017), pp. 161–79.

[10] See recently Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack, eds., *The right to dress: sumptuary laws in a global perspective, c. 1200–1800* (Cambridge, 2019).

superiors. In the premodern world, wealth more often than not had to bend before status and power. Everywhere successful entrepreneurs were able to assimilate into the lower levels of the socio-political elite; in many places the rich could secure rapid social promotion with the help of patrons, particularly the prince and his proximates. This 'rise of the middle class' most often entailed assimilation into the privileged layers, including the espousal of their norms. Yet the most conspicuously successful risked falling as rapidly as they had climbed, and some paid with their lives.[11] Social ascent engendered by wealth caused status dissonance and negative judgements everywhere: this seems to have been a constant in premodern global social history.

Kingdoms and empires in history inevitably show oscillating power balances between centre and periphery, princes and regional elites. The shifts were captured in powerful moral rise-and-fall narratives. The Chinese 'dynastic cycle' presented history as an inevitable sequence of moral decline and rejuvenation, framed in didactic examples of good and bad emperors – powerful images for the education of rulers. Ibn Khaldun's view of dynasties losing the support of their stalwarts as well as their moral fibre within three or four generations reflects a similar moral-didactic worldview. There was always the expectation of moral decline and political disintegration.

Quite apart from this traditional moral narrative, which retained much of its charm, it can be argued that polities in the early modern world experienced a more consistent process of dynastic consolidation. Major kingdoms and empires in Eurasia consolidated in the course of the early modern age. Not only did the establishments at the centre tend to expand, but they also occupied a more conspicuous place in the realm as a whole, a process examined by Lieberman.[12] The development peaked at different moments in various regions, and was punctuated by reversals and political upheaval. Dynastic changeover wreaked havoc in China between the Ming and Qing; the phase of founders, system-builders, and 'classical ages' was followed by periods of reform and disintegration in the Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid empires. Europe's process of state-building was a bumpy race, with initial frontrunners such as Spain and France facing severe drawbacks after their moments of success. Attempts have been made to establish Eurasian convergences not only in the process of integration and state formation but also in its timetable, with construction, crisis, and reform roughly fitting the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.[13] The convergence thesis has on the whole received far less attention than the divergence debate, mostly concentrated on the period after 1750. To what extent can we see a global divergence in the practices at the royal court?

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[11] Duindam, *Dynasties*, ch. 3; Jan Hirschbiegel and Werner Paravicini, eds., *Der Fall des Günstlings. Hofparteien in Europa vom 13. bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Ostfildern, 2004).
[12] Victor Lieberman, 'Local integration and Eurasian analogies: structuring Southeast Asian history, c. 1350—c. 1830', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), pp. 475–572.
[13] See e.g. Geoffrey Parker, *Global crisis: war, climate change and catastrophe in the seventeenth century* (New Haven, CT, 2013).

III

In the course of the early modern age, Europe gradually diverged from patterns shared in the social setting of rulership worldwide. Widening opportunities for social mobility, more effective restrictions on the predatory actions of the powerful, and a blurring of boundaries between old and new elites have been seen as typical for the onset of modernity, a process that can be witnessed in Europe and elsewhere. Local elites rose to prominence through commercial success in many realms – but their wealth had in part been siphoned off by the upper layers, in part been invested by these social climbers to secure a place closer to the heart of the political establishment by seeking assimilation into the traditional upper echelon. The aristocracies taking shape around the royal courts of Europe comprised an alliance of prestigious old families with the upper crust of social climbers keen to consolidate their ascent. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Ottoman local elites obtained an increasingly strong role in the regional machinery of government, mostly through various forms of tax farming. From the late Ming onwards, a rich commercial upper group concentrated in the cities of the Jiangnan area played a key role.

Moreover, merchant elites across Eurasia became increasingly interconnected. Silk Road networks had long since linked the outer reaches of East and West Asia; a rich variety of 'trans-imperial subjects' facilitated commercial and cultural exchange along the hubs of this connection. Now large-scale European commercial ventures were added to these long-standing *traits d'union.* Luxury consumption with an increasingly global twist can be recognized in Europe, as well as in the Ottoman Empire and Qing China.[14]

Did this process of change deepen the differences between European courts and the establishments of their global fellow rulers? From the late seventeenth century onwards, early modern Europe was more dynamic than other parts of the globe. Until the 1650s, dynastic government here had reflected much the same practices as found elsewhere, with a dominant household at the centre, supported by relatively small government services. A latecomer in government-by-paper, Europe had rapidly caught up with Persian–Arabic practices of government, and approached the level of the rather impressive administrative machinery of imperial China. Permanent competition among the courts of Europe, and the benefits of a global network of conquest and trade, entangled with changes in culture, religion, and mentality, now turned the laggard into a motor of change. Authors from Paul Hazard to Timothy Blanning have noticed profound changes separating later seventeenth-century princes and courts from their successors in the later eighteenth century.[15]

A sequence of reforms changed the balance between households and governments in Europe. The Spanish, French, and English courts underwent a series of reductions and budget cuts from the 1660s onwards. Contrary to clichés

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[14] Elif Akçetin and Suraiya Faroqhi, eds., *Living the good life: consumption in the Qing and Ottoman empires of the eighteenth century* (Leiden, 2017).

[15] Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris, 1961); T. C. W. Blanning, *The culture of power and the power of culture: old regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002).

repeated by modern historians, Louis XIV seriously reduced the numbers of office holders that had swelled the court during the regency of Anne of Austria, the crisis of the Fronde, and the turbulent ministry of Mazarin. In his short reign, James II of England implemented an even more stringent reform, soon to be softened by his Protestant successors, Mary and William. Likewise, the Spanish court did not expand after the first half of the seventeenth century. Only in the Holy Roman Empire did competition among leading houses cause households to continue their growth into the second half of the eighteenth century. Between the crisis of the 1740s and the Seven Years' War (1756–63), Maria Theresa's court reached a peak to be surpassed only in the course of the nineteenth century.[16] The courts of the worldly electors, too, peaked in the eighteenth century, with Brandenburg-Prussia as the exception.

From the 1760s onwards, the fiscal–financial crisis caused by spiralling military expenditure gave rise to a series of comprehensive reforms in most combatant states, replacing incidental wartime elite taxation with structural taxes. Privileged groups, regions, and corporations were now forced to contribute more heavily to the political and military efforts of the state. At the same time, the political centre itself changed face. In the early 1780s, royal households across Europe were severely curtailed. Until this point, most central administrative services were smaller than the combined staffs catering for the daily life of the dynasty. Now, households were further reduced, while administrative services proliferated. Under Joseph II, the Habsburg machinery of central government finally eclipsed the household. In France, the draconian reductions of the court in the 1780s did not coincide with expansion of government.

Overall, the changing balance reflected shifts in the practice of government, adhering increasingly to formalized written procedures. Typically, petitions and requests now went systematically through the official channels of ministries rather than *ad hoc* through the hands of noble courtly brokers. As the archives show, abundant printed forms made their entry in administration. To be sure, influential courtiers would still have plenty of opportunities to support the ambitions of their clients, yet they, too, needed to accept changing procedural conventions. The court, always the amalgamation of dignified servitors and agents of government, was still the cockpit of power, but its internal hierarchies and balances were shifting.

Another fundamental change took place in the connections between court and society. Traditionally, moments of contact had taken shape mostly in religious contexts: petitioning during frequent royal processions to the chapel;

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[16] See an overview of developments in Jeroen Duindam, 'Royal courts', in Hamish Scott, ed., *The Oxford handbook of early modern European history, 1350–1750* (2 vols., Oxford, 2015), II, pp. 440–77; Hannes Stekl, 'Der Wiener Hof in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts', in E. Bruckmüller, F. Eder, and A. Schnöller, eds., *Adel und Bürgertum in der Habsburgermonarchie 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert. Hannes Stekl zum 60. Geburtstag gewidmet* (Vienna, 2004) pp. 35–69; Jeroen Duindam, 'Early modern questions about the post-revolutionary royal court', in Bärbel Holtz, Wolfgang Neugebauer, and Monika Wienfort, eds., *Der preußische Hof und die Monarchien in Europa. Akteure, Modelle, Wahrnehmungen (1786–1918)* (Paderborn, 2023) pp. 52–84.

extended progressions of court and city corporations on the occasion of several religious celebrations; the washing of the feet on Maundy Thursday. In France and England, the 'royal touch' formed the most conspicuous case of direct contact. Interestingly, Stuart kings touched far more people than their predecessors and successors. Charles II's reign formed an all-time high: in the decades following the 1660 restoration, nearly 100,000 scrofula sufferers eagerly sought the king's touch.[17] William III discontinued the practice; it was briefly resuscitated under Anne, and finally abolished by George I in 1714. A different pattern obtained in France. Under Louis XIV it seems that the practice was suspended temporarily because the king's extramarital affairs prevented him from taking communion, disabling him from acting as the vessel of God's grace. Under Louis XV this exceptional situation became the rule after 1739. When in 1775, after a break of several decades, Louis XVI restored the royal touch for his *sacre*, several thousand people flocked to Rheims in anticipation.[18]

Typically, both the French *dauphin* Louis and the Austrian junior sovereign Joseph had themselves been depicted behind the plough in 1768 – a scene familiar from the annual opening of the agricultural season by the Chinese emperor made famous by Jesuit missionaries.[19] The message and language of contact had been changing profoundly. Where formerly royal piety decreed moments of justice, humility, and popular interaction, now royal beneficence and accessibility were broadcast in a more pragmatic and enlightened format.[20] A changeover from baroque display to this more austere and didactic stance can be seen across Europe, though with differences of timing and nuance. This did not represent a final opening of the court after a long phase of self-centred pomposity, but rather a change in style. New forms of court sociability infused or replaced religious interactions with the populace. An expanding urban non-noble or recently ennobled elite was now invited to take part in courtly social occasions. The increasing social relevance of these middling layers between court nobles and the population at large was reflected in court practices. In Vienna, this opening took shape during the very decades that witnessed a shift away from the traditional forms of religious contact. In Versailles, always more open to the public, changes were less marked; in any case, Parisian social life eclipsed the attractions of the court.[21]

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[17] Stephen Brogan, *The royal touch in early modern England: politics, medicine and sin* (Woodbridge, 2015).

[18] Anne Byrne, *Death and the crown: ritual and politics in France before the revolution* (Manchester, 2020), stresses Louis XVI's reign as a new start, with the king in an unexpected but plausibly depicted role as political operator and ceremonial communicator.

[19] Susan Richter, *Pflug und Steuerruder. Zur Verflechtung von Herrschaft und Landwirtschaft in der Aufklärung* (Cologne, 2014).

[20] Blanning, *Culture of power*, overstates the powers of the king, as well as the format of royal representation in the first of his two periods, enhancing the contrast with the later eighteenth century.

[21] Byrne, *Death and the crown*, underlines the popular appeal of royal ceremony and questions the notion of desacralization (far more outspoken in the case of Joseph II).

Can such changes in the scale of households and governments, and in the style of court life be found outside Europe in this period? In dynastic terms, Europe's most exceptional characteristic was monogamy. Polygyny created a different balance between household and government: it entailed the presence of a female inner court staffed by women and eunuchs, a gendered inner sanctum where the prince spent a substantial share of his time. This necessarily led to an early division between inner and outer services, overlapping to some extent with the boundaries between household and government. Gendered inner–outer divides were thus a long-standing structural component of most courts, and they did not undergo major change in this period. In Europe, women who served in the households of queens and princesses interacted with men during court occasions. Moreover, the ruler's inner domains were as a rule accessible for leading servants and advisers. Princes were served by men rather than by women or eunuchs in their sleeping quarters – and these male servants often acted as confidants or even leading advisers. The slow and partial separation of household and government that took shape in Europe from the later Middle Ages onwards emerged elsewhere as a side-effect of gendered space dictated by polygyny. Here, the question was which persons and institutions could move between the two domains: this quality defined them as the key actors of the political set-up. The points of contact changed between the Ming and the Qing, and took formal institutional shape under the Yongzheng emperor, yet this process can in no way be likened to European patterns of change.[22]

Numbers can assist comparison; yet they cannot be established with precision on the basis of the available literature for the Ming–Qing, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal courts. In addition to the household, all courts included government agencies, workshops with labourers, and soldiers; particularly in the last two categories, numbers tended to be very substantial. How many of these people do we include in our computations? Only where materials allow a full breakdown of personnel can comparison be effective.[23] Consequently, it is even more difficult to compute numerical development over time. Dynastic and political collapse intervened in the case of the Mughals and the Safavids. The Ottoman court seems to have reached its highest point roughly at the same time as its European competitors, in the first half of the seventeenth century.[24] Qing emperors criticized the inflated court of their Ming predecessors and prided themselves on a smaller household establishment with fewer eunuchs and concubines. While during the reign of the three 'high Qing' emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong the court did expand somewhat, there are no parallels here for the sharp turning points we find in Europe, particularly the drastic reductions of the 1760s to 1790s.

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[22] Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and ministers: the Grand Council in mid-Ch'ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley, CA, 1991).

[23] See attempts in Duindam, *Dynasties*, pp. 193–5, and Jeroen Duindam, 'The court as a meeting point: cohesion, competition, control', in *Prince, pen, and sword: Eurasian perspectives* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 69–80.

[24] Rhoads Murphey, *Exploring Ottoman sovereignty: tradition, image and practice in the Ottoman imperial household, 1400–1800* (London, 2008).

Repeated adaptation of interactions and styles of rulership are evident in the Ottoman and Qing cases, yet the changes do not seem to reflect a fundamental turn away from tradition. The Qing emperors were far more outgoing than their late Ming predecessors, and engaged with people during their hunting excursions and inspection tours.[25] Manchu and Mongol allies could engage with them without the burdens of Han Chinese ceremonial. In Beijing, however, the emperors maintained the grand sacrifices, performed in a closed circle of protagonists rather than for the public eye. Notwithstanding its enlightened and didactic-European reading, the imperial rite of 'ploughing the first furrow' was dictated by early texts and performed by a continuity of dynasties – it was a novelty only in Europe. After the protracted stay of Ottoman sultans in Edirne, Ahmed III and his grand vizier redesigned the sultanic ritual presence in urban Istanbul by organizing a series of processions.[26] Ahmed's sons, reigning in the second half of the eighteenth century, overshadowed by the military successes of Russia, 'moved from an authority derived from war to an authority based on social stability', and redefined their relationship with the Islamic law scholars accordingly.[27]

The military–fiscal emergencies that engendered some of the changes in Europe were even more urgently felt in the Ottoman empire, faced by military defeats against the Habsburgs after 1683, and against the Russians in the course of the eighteenth century. Ahmed III's grand vizier, Damad Ibrahim Pasha, keenly followed John Law's experiments in France while considering ways out of the financial straitjacket.[28] In France, the experiment imploded and was followed by the reconstitution of tax farming; the Ottomans, too, opted for a variant of the same age-old formula. Typically, in the short run the Ottoman central state improved its capacities, but the contractors and subcontractors of the system would reap more benefits in the course of the eighteenth century. These intermediaries gained strength while the gap in fiscal–military capacity between European states and the Ottomans was widening, in the second half of the eighteenth century. The clash of reforming ministries with the privileged that shook so many European states in the 1780s would occur only during and after the challenges of the French Revolution and Napoleon in the Ottoman Empire.[29] Selim III's attempted reforms of

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[25] Michael G. Chang, 'Historical narratives of the Kangxi emperor's inaugural visit to Suzhou, 1684', in Jeroen Duindam and Sabine Dabringhaus, eds., *The dynastic centre and the provinces: agents and interactions* (Leiden, 2014) pp. 203–24.

[26] Tülay Artan, 'Royal weddings and the grand vezirate: institutional and symbolic change in the early eighteenth century', in Jeroen Duindam, Tülay Artan, and Metin Kunt, eds., *Royal courts in dynastic states and empires: a global perspective* (Leiden, 2011) pp. 339–82.

[27] Madeline C. Zilfi, 'A medrese for the palace: Ottoman dynastic legitimation in the eighteenth century', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 58 (1993) pp. 184–91, at p. 191.

[28] Personal communication from Tülay Artan.

[29] K. Kivanç Karaman and Şevket Pamuk, 'Ottoman state finances in European perspective, 1500–1914', *Journal of Economic History*, 70 (2010) pp. 593–629; Virginia Aksan, 'Breaking the spell of the Baron de Tott: reframing the question of military reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1760–1830', *International History Review*, 24 (2002), pp. 253–77; Ariel Salzmann, 'An ancien régime revisited: "privatization" and political economy in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire', *Politics and Society*,

government and army were at least in part a result of the ongoing European military challenges.

Qing China followed a different trajectory, with Europe still very much in the margins, and an overall picture of military and political consolidation: the co-optation and defeat of the Mongols offers a prime example. The granaries of imperial China allowed the Qing emperors to feed hungry urban populations or reduce market prices by selling on a large scale – a situation that European governments could only dream about, as the predicament of France in 1788–9 underlines. Provinces hit by natural disasters or famine could be granted tax reductions. There was no urgent need for fiscal escalation; on the contrary, the moral cyclical narrative about overextending empires and profligate emperors may have helped to convince Kangxi to make a radical move: in 1711 he froze the head tax.[30] Under Kangxi's grandson, the Qianlong emperor, social conflicts, rebellion, and troubles along border areas were again in evidence. The ageing emperor spent lavishly on his court favourite Heshen – but fiscal urgency and the need for dramatic reform became apparent only under his successors.[31]

This cursory attempt to juxtapose Qing China and the Ottomans in the eighteenth century with the European case highlights the differences between the three experiences, and suggests the problems of comparison once we move from *longue durée* structural institutional similarities of princes and households to the volatile oscillations of political change. Moreover, it leaves out most other polities across the globe, where change along these lines cannot be found, or only as a direct reflection of European intervention. The changes in Europe, engendered by competition and made possible by increasing global hegemony, represent a special case, yet they should not be exaggerated. Radical as the initiatives of some of Europe's enlightened princes might seem, they renounced neither the paramountcy of their position nor the special statute of nobility. Their experiment, moreover, ended abruptly with revolution, empire, and restoration. The French Revolution opened new vistas, but its increasingly radical stance inspired high hopes as well as grave hesitations. The question of continuity and change in the style and instruments of monarchical government, including the persistence or end of its compact with an upper elite, remains under-researched. Napoleon's wholesale renovation broadened the social basis of the traditional reward system, but retained its fundamental purpose. His fusion of elites was an enlarged and more systematic version of earlier reconstructions after protracted phases of crisis, always combining social mobility with restoration of order.

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21 (1993) pp. 393–423; Rhoads Murphey, 'Westernisation in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire: how far, how fast?', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 23 (1999) pp. 116–39.

[30] Jonathan Spence, 'The K'ang-hsi reign', in Willard J. Peterson, ed., *The Cambridge history of China*, vol. 9, part 1: *The Ch'ing Empire to 1800* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 120–82, at pp. 124, 178; Madeleine Zelin, *The magistrate's tael: rationalizing fiscal reform in eighteenth-century Ch'ing China* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), p. 12.

[31] William Rowe, 'Introduction: the significance of the Qianlong–Jiaqing transition in Qing history', *Late Imperial China*, 32 (2011), pp. 74–88; Yingcong Dai, *The White Lotus War: rebellion and suppression in late imperial China* (Seattle, WA, 2019).

After 1815, all monarchs needed to recalibrate their position vis-à-vis the people at large, representative institutions, noble elites, the upper layer of tax-payers, ministries, the army, and international fellow leaders, now including several presidents. The experiments of the first post-revolution generation have been examined largely in the context of emerging practices of parliamentary government. Restoration courts await closer examination: for most European courts, we simply cannot answer the questions of which *ancien régime* practices were skipped, continued, or expanded. How was the connection with the people at large reframed in these decades, among royals who feared the spectre of popular violence as much as they understood the need to maintain or expand forms of contact? A first glance at the materials suggests that courts retained their importance and invited in new audiences, continuing a process that had started in the later eighteenth century.[32] From the 1820s onwards, the greater courts of continental Europe expanded in numbers and practised redesigned traditional forms of interactive ceremony on a grand scale – long before the 'media monarchs' of the later nineteenth century unlocked the potential of new techniques of communication.[33] Moreover, the first waves of decolonization tended to increase the number of monarchies worldwide. In 1934, Churchill argued that there was no need to fear a 'holocaust of crowns', pointing to the remarkable persistence of monarchy.[34]

IV

Before their ascent to hegemony, Europeans had presented themselves to the most powerful distant sovereigns as juniors; in the nineteenth century, this was no longer the case.[35] Diplomacy and trade had long since connected empires and kingdoms of Asia, North Africa, and Europe. Typically, contacts had taken shape along various axes: a trickle of *ad hoc* missions between the distant centres of East Asia, West and South Asia, and Europe; long-distance trade routes extending from east to west; and, finally, dense and ongoing traffic in frontier zones such as the Mediterranean, the Indian ocean, or the Steppe corridor of contact.

The three Eurasian 'competing universalisms' were each characterized by the presence of a dominant classic language and a religious–moral code: European *latinitas*, the Turco-Arabic-Persian worlds of West and South Asia, and the East Asian 'sinosphere'. Within each of these zones, communication was facilitated by a shared language and religion. Yet, at the same time,

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[32] Stekl, 'Der Wiener Hof'; Susan P. McCaffray, *The Winter Palace and the people: staging and consuming Russia's monarchy, 1754–1917* (Dekalb, IL, 2018); Duindam, 'Early modern questions'.

[33] John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: first media monarch* (Oxford, 2003); Laurence Cole and Daniel Unowsky, eds., *The limits of loyalty: imperial symbolism, popular allegiances, and state patriotism in the late Habsburg monarchy* (New York, NY, 2007); Laurence Cole and Eva Giloi, 'Copyrighting the Kaiser: publicity, piracy, and the right to Wilhelm II's image', *Central European History*, 45 (2012), pp. 407–51.

[34] Winston Churchill, 'Will the world swing back to monarchies?', in M. Wolff, ed., *The collected essays of Sir Winston Churchill* (4 vols., London, 1976), IV, p. 269.

[35] See Amsler, Windler, and Harrison, eds., *Transformations of intercultural diplomacies*.

perhaps the fiercest rivalries existed within the zones. Ottomans and Safavids were more consistently at loggerheads than each of these two players with Europeans, who were themselves permanently riven by internecine conflict. The Reformation exacerbated tensions within Europe. The French, English, and Dutch approached the Ottoman sultans not only to obtain trade rights but also to seek alliances against Habsburg 'universal monarchy'. The shi'ite Safavids sent numerous missions to Venice, hoping to harness its powers against the Ottomans. In their turn, the Safavids were seen as potential allies both by the Habsburgs and by the papacy.[36] Conflict between contestants from different universalist traditions mingled with internal rivalries on both sides. The conquests and alliances of European powers overseas invariably coincided with intra-European clashes.

The European expansion into Africa, the Americas, and South and Southeast Asia pushed to the fore competing European trading companies, who cultivated the support of local princelings to outsmart their rivals and increase their share in the bonanza. Luxury items from the East had long since been imported into Europe; new regions gave rise to new fashions. American feathers found their place next to Persian tapestries and Chinese ceramics or lacquerware. Famously, Henri II's 1550 royal entry in Rouen included a Brazilian village and enacted a battle between two tribes. The main performers in tournaments and carousels across Europe sported imposing feather headdresses.

Imitation and exotic vogues in courtly contests for prestige were not limited to Europe. The language of power and display was readily understood across cultural boundaries. In 1530, Sultan Süleyman, noticing his rival Charles V's coronation by Pope Clement VII in Bologna, replied with an outspoken visual message. Venetian jewellers made a splendid object for the sultan, combining the imperial crown, the papal tiara, and a feathered Ottoman war helmet. Addressing a European audience rather than his own subjects, the sultan claimed a dignity superior to that of emperor and pope combined.[37] European Jesuits at the Qing court introduced European arts and sciences in addition to their religious message, and exerted a powerful influence in China as well as in Europe. The practice of imitation and emulation among rulers and their courts expanded with the horizon of all involved, and gradually extended beyond the upper layers. Chinoiseries flooded eighteenth-century Europe; European arts, mechanical objects, and weapons were increasingly present in palace complexes around the globe.

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[36] Among numerous recent titles, see Enrique García Hernán, José Francisco Cutillas Ferrer, and Rudolph P. Matthee, eds., *The Spanish monarchy and Safavid Persia in the early modern period: politics, war and religion* (Valencia, 2016); Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig, eds., *Iran and the world in the Safavid age* (London, 2012); Christian Windler, *Missionare in Persien. Kulturelle Diversität und Normenkonkurrenz im globalen Katholizismus (17.-18. Jahrhundert)* (Cologne, 2018); Giorgio Riello, Zoltán Biedermann, and Anne Gerritsen, eds., *Global gifts: the material culture of diplomacy in early modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2018); Anne Gerritsen, *The global lives of things: the material culture of connections in the early modern world* (London, 2016).
[37] G. Necipoğlu, 'Süleyman the Magnificent and the representation of power in the context of Ottoman–Hapsburg–papal rivalry', *Art Bulletin*, 71 (1989), pp. 401–27.

In a protracted first phase of contacts lasting until the early seventeenth century, European competitors were received as junior partners only, whose access depended on the magnanimity of sultans, shahs, padishahs, or emperors. Ottoman sultans granted special rights to their European allies, but made clear that these could be revoked anytime. Ming and Qing leaders would consider Europe as marginal until the later eighteenth century. Typically, they viewed European diplomats and merchants as bringers of tribute, assimilating them in the margins of the existing tributary system. The series of agreements that Qing China concluded with Russia, beginning with the treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), was an exception, demonstrating the priority of the Asian Steppe land border over the maritime frontier.

The presence of Europeans depended on the sultan's grace and the emperor's forbearance; it did not resemble the nineteenth-century practices of capitulations and concessions, creating European enclaves from Ottoman Turkey to Qing China. Europeans needed to accept the standards of the courts they visited, adopting forms of deference and subjection not practised among European sovereigns. Many stories can be told about the intricacies of ceremonial encounters, where spatial details and different views about ranking of the protagonists created ample opportunities for conflict. Every region would have its specific rules and appurtenances for ceremony, yet shared practices had emerged within each of the 'competing universalisms'. Within each cultural domain, the scripted rules for encounters could be contested: the ceremonial stage was a testing ground for usurpations. Such manoeuvres relied on a collective repository of practices. How far did the language of rank and ceremony differ from one zone to another? The relative status of standing, sitting, and reclining might be recognizable across boundaries, and the same held true for the variants of bending, from a slight nod to a full kowtow. Communication with the sovereign was restricted everywhere, but levels of access and forms of interaction differed widely and could create misunderstandings. The import of messages written in the sovereign's hand, too, could be interpreted in diverging ways. On the whole, however, the language of rank and *préséance* was readily understandable for all involved. Cultural misunderstandings might occur, but they could also be used instrumentally in the ongoing battle for prestige.[38]

Changing power balances had immediate consequences for ceremonial interaction. Military defeat and unfavourable peace treaties could be broadcast in the European printed press, but they took a particularly conspicuous form in violent clashes among European diplomats. In 1661, shortly after the 1659 Peace of the Pyrenees, a bloody incident between the French and Spanish ambassadors in London was followed up by formal apologies of another Spanish ambassador before Louis XIV – an occasion widely broadcast in medals and paintings. Incidents forcefully communicated shifting balances of power to a wider European public sphere more effectively than treaty texts.[39] A similar

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[38] Examples and discussion in Subrahmanyam, *Courtly encounters*.

[39] See, for example, Lucien Bély and Géraud Poumarède, eds., *L'incident diplomatique (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 2010).

mechanism can be observed in the changing interaction between European diplomats and Asian princes: the junior role of Europeans at the greater courts of mainland Asia was transformed into a marked superiority. After the failed second Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, the military and ceremonial balance tilted towards Europe. Typically, now the Ottomans needed to adapt to European practices. They sent their first official ambassador to Paris in 1721, and by the end of the century were experimenting with permanent embassies. In the nineteenth century, Ottoman court fashion as well as political culture increasingly showed the impact of the European model. A century after the Ottomans, Japan and China were likewise forced to accept the conventions of a European concert of states, entering into a system of diplomacy in a junior role. Typically, even palace architecture now reflected European examples, as the Ottoman Dolmabahçe (1843–56) and Japanese Akasake (1909) palaces show. This was not the invention of a new world diplomacy, but the extension to global dominance of one of the competing universalisms. The rules and rankings of European diplomacy, unclear and contested even in the century following the Peace of Westphalia, were rectified and consolidated during the Congress of Vienna. While the leading European sovereigns defined the outlines of their diplomatic exchange on the basis of nominal equality, outsiders could enter into the system only by accepting its norms as juniors.

Separate but interconnected systems of contact between the various spheres, in which Europeans had needed to accept the rules of local power holders, were replaced by a single overarching set-up that basically represented the extension of European diplomatic practice as it had taken shape from the later seventeenth century into the nineteenth century. The fundamental novelty here was the emergence of a single dominant model, integrating outsiders largely on its own conditions. A mutual understanding of royalty, court officials, and ceremonial practices had been present far earlier: languages of power, prestige, and fashion differed in form, but idioms could be learned, imitated, and transferred. Asian and African princes under the umbrella of European dominion could still find substantial room for manoeuvre by adopting the language of the hegemon and profiting from rivalries among European countries or within the diverse institutions and groupings of each country. Several Indian princes of the later eighteenth century achieved considerable power through such strategies.[40]

Global royalty became something of a hype in nineteenth-century Europe (see the article by David Motadel in this issue). Several sovereigns for the first time in the history of their realms went on tour, mostly to Europe. During his protracted 1867 tour of the capitals of Europe, the Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz received the Order of the Garter from the hands of Queen

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[40] On competing universalisms, see Christian Windler, 'Performing inequality in Mediterranean diplomacy', *International History Review*, 41 (2019), pp. 947–61; Tanja Bührer, 'Intercultural diplomacy at the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad, 1770–1815', *International History Review*, 41 (2019), pp. 1039–56, outlining the nizam's attempt to fit into international diplomacy. For an extended discussion of one Indian prince's adaptation, see Pimmanus Wibulsilp, 'Nawabi Karnatak: Muhammad Ali Khan in the making of a Mughal successor state in pre-colonial south India, 1749–1795' (PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2019).

Victoria. In 1873, Shah Nasir al-Din of Persia followed his example; the shah would return several times, in particular to Berlin, where his visits became something of an embarrassment because of their adverse impact on relations with Russia. Kalakaua, King of Hawai'i, went on a world tour in 1881, visiting the USA as well as India, China, and the most important European capitals. In 1897 and again in 1907, King Chulalongkorn of Siam engaged in lengthy travels to Europe, visited many cities, and encountered several sovereigns. Maharajah Abu Bakr of Johor went on numerous visits between 1866 and 1895. He died while visiting London with his successor, notwithstanding the intervention of Queen Victoria's personal physician. These royals viewed themselves as modernizers and shared a keen sense of the need to engage directly with their peers in Europe, who might assist their entry into the club of 'civilized' states.[41] Enthusiastic audiences cheered the exotic royal visitors, and friendship among royals may not always have been an illusion – yet European supremacy and the global balance of power defined the parameters of the visits.

A rich literature has demonstrated beyond doubt that the imperial European nations were as much formed by their colonial experiences as the colonies were formed by the impact of European imperialism. Asymmetries in power, however, defined the contact with polities across the globe. Political and economic innovation, coinciding with the emergence of indubitable European military preponderance, turned Europe and its changing social structures into a model to be imitated – or rejected. The global categories of princes, nobles, and burghers were redefined in the age of European hegemony. Colonial rule tended to flatten differentiated local practice into a more uniform mould. In Africa, colonial administrators had no patience with the intricacies of matrilineal succession and were troubled by the prospect of potentially bloody interregna caused by all open forms of succession. A European format of male succession and primogeniture better matched their preferences. Even places beyond Europe's direct control were inevitably impacted by the European example: how could they pursue a strategy of modernization without betraying local ideals and standards? And what elements of modernity could be bent to fit cultural expectations?

V

What can the examination of the society of princes tell us about Europe and the world? The shared language of conspicuous display and rank of premodern court cultures facilitated contact and exchange long before the onset of the post-medieval wave of globalization. At the apex of hierarchical society, certain marked convergences can be found that were recognized by contemporaries:

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[41] Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık, 'The sultan, the shah and the king in Europe: the practice of Ottoman, Persian and Siamese royal travel and travel writing', *Journal of Asian History*, 50 (2016), pp. 201–34; David Motadel, 'Qajar shahs in imperial Germany', *Past & Present*, 213 (2011), pp. 191–235; Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery, eds., *Royals on tour: politics, pageantry and colonialism* (Manchester, 2018), where the travels of European princes outside Europe are also discussed.

they viewed mirror images of their own courts, and the most perceptive observers wondered about similarities and differences much as we do now. In a similar vein, Victor Lieberman has pointed out that kingdoms and realms across Eurasia show convergence in their integration around political centres. The recruitment and legitimation of the upper levels of society, however, show marked differences. The social reproduction of elites was relevant everywhere, yet heredity and pedigree as status markers were particularly pronounced in Europe. Machiavelli and Montesquieu prized this European exception as creating liberty through entrenched rights and privileges, contrasting it with their exaggerated image of Asian 'oriental despots'. Their view of political liberty through elite privilege fits awkwardly with the standard image of European modernity: bustling cities, thriving companies, and the ascent of burghers. A *longue durée* global social history perspective cannot fail to underscore the persistent power of European nobilities, as well as their close entanglements with the state. This nexus at the heart of Europe's dynastic states is as remarkable as the dynamism of urban elites and globally active entrepreneurs, yet it is rarely stressed in global comparisons. The same can be said for the remarkable institutional strength of Christian clergies.

Somewhere along the road, the balance between leading European kingdoms and their global peers started changing. Processes of reform changed the roles of households and governments and altered religious-ritual orientations and practices. Change escalated sharply in the decades following the Seven Years' War. Change and reform – or better, permanent adaptation of classic formulas to the demands of the moment – can be found elsewhere. Yet this marked acceleration, triggered by fiscal emergency but made possible by a series of long-term changes in the global economy, as well as in mentality, cannot be found elsewhere at the same level. Moreover, the revolutions starting in Europe in part as a response to top-down government reforms would profoundly change global balances: they launched a final push towards European hegemony. Henceforth, where fundamental reform occurred outside Europe, the European military challenge invariably ranked among the causes triggering it.

The ascendancy of Europe created an asymmetry of wealth and power that set the stage for a profoundly different phase of globalization from the *Sattelzeit* onwards, where Europe became the example, whether negative or positive. The rise of 'global' royalty, nobility, or bourgeoisie cannot be separated from the rise of a global economy centred on the European hegemon. Whether European examples were embraced and imitated, or gave rise to a conscious refurbishment of local traditions, everywhere the image of Europe was present. Conversely, European courts were always conscious of the legacy of the French Revolution and Napoleon – and were happy to add colonial grandeur to their repository of royal appurtenances.

A plausible global social history needs to begin by disentangling the various phases of interaction, with Europe starting out as a peripheral player gradually catching up with the others, before achieving a special status as hub of a military–commercial network, and, finally, transforming itself into a global hegemon riven by internal competition. This form of global social history

would need to embrace a cautious attitude towards the classic European categories of social history and their ramifications in models of modernization – rising middle classes, declining nobilities.