LOCAL OFFICE-HOLDERS IN THE LANDGRAVIAVE OF HESSE-KASSEL, 1750-1830
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR THEIR CAREERS AND DAILY LIFE

The article presents some findings of a research on local office-holders in the Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The research is based upon a prosopography which embraces the lives and careers of 234 persons. What relevance has this research for the conference? To talk about notables and caciques implicitly means that you have a certain conception of a social and political system. This idea: that social networks, consisting of more or less durable ties between persons, shape the manner of decision-making within a political system and even more: that social networks are at the root of the process of state-formation, is somehow incompatible with the way German historians think about these topics. During the last years it has become quite fashionable among them to talk about networks, but normally in a more metaphorical rather than in an analytical sense.
There has been a recent approach to work upon the influence of kinship, friendship and patronage in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire. But these ideas have not been integrated within the most


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influential concepts of our historiography. All those German words you can’t translate, such as «Sozialdisziplinierung» suggested by Gerhard Oestreich, or «Konfessionalisierung» invented by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, or «Kommunalismus» put into debate by Peter Bickle, do not quite urge the historian to undertake an investigation of personal ties.

It is not absolutely clear whether this hesitation is rooted in historical facts; in other words, in the circumstantial fact that social networks were of little decisive influence for the political system of the princely states north of the Alps, or if it is only due to a historiographical tradition which rests on a common prejudice about national character. What seems to be different between the Mediterranean on the one hand and the North on the other, are the prevailing languages of dependency and subordination. Probably these differences indicate a gap between the political cultures.

German historians writing about 19th century history normally locate personal networks within a perspective of backwardness. They judge factors as the influence of kinship, friendship and patronage to be typical of corrupt political systems, as had been the case with the town-councillors, modern Empire and using prosopography or network-analysis. N. Bulst, La recherche prosopographique récente en Allemagne (1250-1650) : essai d’un bilan, in F. Autrand (ed.), Prosopographie et genèse de l’Etat moderne. Actes de la table ronde organisée par le Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris, 1986, p. 35-52.


the catholic church or the administrations of the Holy Roman Empire. According to this view, these notorious things would have been swept away in Prussia and the other German states after 1800 by bureaucratization and modernization. In this perspective the last importance of personal networks for political life in Italy or in Spain could only be seen as a reminant or as part of a specific Mediterranean mentality. German historians normally assume that decision-making inside of modern bureaucracies and parliaments has something to do with nation-building, with class-formation, with the struggle between nobility and middle-class, with associations and freemasonry, with the emergence of a public sphere, mass culture and a market of political beliefs. But how the transition to modernity came into being, how personal loyalities shaped this process, is not a focal point of historical research.


It is possible that state-formation in Germany followed such a different path compared to the French\(^\text{11}\), Italian\(^\text{12}\) or Spanish\(^\text{13}\) cases, that it is not reasonable to investigate social networks in order to learn something about the political system. But I am sure, that this opinion is wrong. How could we operationalize the question as to how far social networks shaped the process of state-formation? We have to look for a relevant object of observation and for a suitable region. I chose local office-holders of a medium-sized German territory because they were situated at a strategic point within the political system. Local officials had to translate princely or parliamentary will into action. Without their willingness to co-operate, any instruction of the political centre would fail. And every local official functioned as a broker\(^\text{14}\), who to some extent controlled the channels of information running from the political and administrative centre to the province and vice-versa\(^\text{15}\). In pre-constitutional times, the subjects of the princely state even had a sparse opportunity to feed their wishes in the process of political decision-making without taking the local official into consideration. Therefore it was of great importance, what kind of person held these positions, how they managed to get there and how they interpreted their professional role in relation to their superiors and to the local environment. In all these contexts – recruitment of personnel, advancement of career, attitude towards service, forms of contact with the population and political principles – social networks were of decisive significance. It should be emphasized, that local officials got into trouble if they simply followed the orders of the political centre. Instead they had to act very cautiously to ensure a precarious equilibrium between the demands of their superiors, their subjects and local dignitaries. But the position of a local official offered a fascinating scope of action for clever individuals\(^\text{16}\).

In 18th century Hesse-Kassel the local state-officials were called «Amtmänner». They were the judge and at the same time the government official of their district, comprising a small town and some villages with all together about 6,000 up to 15,000 inhabitants. Since they had only one constable and a secretary under their command, they had to co-operate closely with local dignitaries in order to be able to implement their orders. Here mention should be made of the mayor and the members of town council, some wealthy merchants and the protestant pastors. The Amtmann and town-council met weekly at the local court-session, and so it functioned as an institution, where information flowed and arrangements were made. In the countryside, they had to take landed nobles and the so-called «Greben» into consideration, village-chiefs who originated from the ranks of the wealthier peasants. As a rule the local officials were designated to office at the age of 30 years and above, after they had passed through a phase of practice as advocate, secretary of a town or quartermaster and judge of a regiment. In the eyes of contemporaries a local office-holder should embody the authority of the princely state in a patrimonial form\(^\text{17}\).

\(^\text{11}\) G. E. Aylmer, Centre and locality : the nature of power elites, in W. Reinhard (ed.), Power elites cit., p. 59-78.
Once appointed, Amtmänner remained in this position until they died, even if some of them were transferred to another place.

In the 18th century local officials were recruited from within the ranks of an educated territorial elite. More than 80% of the fathers and even grandfathers of the Amtmänner had been Hessian state-officials or pastors as well. The local office-holders belonged to a social group which completely depended upon the existence of this special princely state. They were non-noble, not very wealthy and quite well educated at the universities of Marburg, Rinteln and Göttingen. They tended to marry women coming from the same social background. They were not locally bound but went to every town, where the prince sent them. But wherever they were installed in the Landgraviate, they had relatives and friends, since this elite was quite neat and densely intertwined. This kind of a territorial elite is well known to historians. You find it in all protestant territories of some importance and even in small counties. In catholic Germany patterns of recruitment were slightly different owing to the factor of celibacy among the clergy.


My short description of the local officials as members of a social group says nothing about the reasons why prince, court and central bureaucracy were inclined to employ men coming from this background. And it says nothing about the paths an individual had to take to attain such a position. So let us take a look at the strategies that led the way into the Hessian civil service. Here, family relationships were of the greatest importance. On the one hand, successful relatives approached the prince or influential persons on the applicants' behalf. On the other hand, the applicants themselves used their background as an argument in their favour. The affiliation to a kinship group which had produced a lot of princely servants in the past, was seen to guarantee a vivid sense of loyalty to the dynasty and common weal. It's obvious that most of the Hessian princes and their courtly environment shared this view.

As a rule kinship links of local officials did not extend to the court. So if a person coming from a provincial family tried to enter the civil service, he had to activate contacts with other influential persons. Two different patterns of connections can be found: on the one hand, a young man could try to obtain the patronage of a noble with excellent connections to the court and the ministers. This was the usual way for social climbers in the 18th century. On the other hand, the secretaries of the prince could pave the way for an applicant. Their influence was informal but extremely profound. Secretaries normally came from the so-called Regierung Kassel; they had been councillors at this civil authority before they entered the political arena. Socially they belonged to respectable middle-class families of the capital, which were interrelated to the provincial families through loyalties arising from common origin, often renewed by god parenthood.

Different phases of patronage can be distinguished in Hesse-Kassel depending on the nature of the princely regime. The reign of Landgraf William VIII in the middle of the 18th century can be characterized as a patronal one. He interpreted his role in the tradition of a princely housefather struggling for the position of his dynasty inside the Holy Roman Empire and for the Calvinist creed. William was suspicious of the...
noblity's loyalty and so he preferred to depend on experts coming from the old middle-class families. The representative body of the estates seldom met and was of no great influence. This constellation opened the floodgates for an uninhibited family-clientelism which at first glance appeared politically neutral, but which tended to prop up the status quo.

In contrast, the reign of Frederick II, from 1760 to 1785, was a more courtly one, inspired by his Prussian namesake23. His enlightened despotism was influenced by a handful of excellent Prussian officers, who were appointed Hessian ministers. They looked for support from within the ranks of the domestic nobility, whose influence was correspondingly strengthened. Therefore noble patronage became much more important for ambitious young men. These 25 years can be characterized as a phase, when French culture deeply influenced the sociability of the Hessian court and the whole capital. Freemasonry and enlightened associations flourished in the Landgraviate. A number of eminent German scholars found well-paid jobs at the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel24. In this intellectual climate social climbers got a real chance to enter the civil service, if they were able to convince a courtier that his support would increase the prestige of both, patron as well as client. These circumstances explain, why we find a new type of local office-holder in Hesse-Kassel in the last third of the 18th century, officials who publicly argued for social and economic reform. They supported «enlightened reform supposed from above», without calling for political participation in a more democratic way. Nobody would have thought of a political system as it was found in the radical phase of the French Revolution.

Landgraf William IX – since 1802 an elector of the Empire and called Kurfürst William I – reigned from 1785 to 1806 and again after Restoration from 1813 to 1821. William discharged the Prussian junta of his father and his rule sought a return to patrimonial roots. He depended on a small number of servants he knew and trusted since his youth and he was eager to keep in personal touch with every office-holder even in the most remote provincial town. During the French Revolution, his rule underwent radicalisation, condemning the French habits and abolishing all institutions of the enlightenment. Since then, networks of kin were re-established as the decisive channel of recruitment and career advancement. Most civil servants, who were members of associations and lodges, were not established but had to step back to a secondary position. Increasingly they resigned politically and clung to their private bonds of friendship25.

Change came from abroad. In autumn 1806 after the battle of Jena, the French army conquered wide areas of Germany and William had to go into exile in Prague. Hessa became one of the main regions which made up the new founded Kingdom of Westphalia, a model-state under the rule of Napoleon’s youngest brother Jérôme. People in this region underwent experiences similar to those of large sections of the European population elsewhere. To conquer the hearts and minds of his subjects, the newly enthroned king enacted a liberal constitution following the French model26. This was convincing for the intellectual elite of the country, because it could now put political beliefs into practice, which had been denied in the past years. So it was not in pursuit of material interest alone that most of the former Hessian officials tried to obtain a position inside the Westphalian bureaucracy. It must be emphasized, that their attitudes differed diametrically from the views of the majority. The Calvinist faith and patriotism led most Hessians to cling to their old dynasty. And Napoleon’s never-ending demands for taxes and soldiers increasingly damaged the precarious prestige of the new regime. Legitimist peasant-surrections shook the rule in 1807 and 1809. As long as French supremacy lasted they could be quelled easily, but in winter 1813 after the battle of Leipzig the Hessians took bloody revenge27.


The birth of the Kingdom of Westphalia gives us the opportunity to examine a state-building process in the literal sense. We can find answers to the question, how social networks shaped such a process, when a new regime didn't have to show much consideration to old loyalties and antiquated opinions. Local officials need not have worried about this institutional change, since to reform administration meant to enlarge the state apparatus. For example, the competences of a former Amtmann now were shared by three persons, by a justice of the peace, by a mayor as the government official and by a notary public. The new regime urgently required skilled personnel. Therefore institutional change opened public service to homines novi and it opened the gate wider to career advancement for the old provincial elite. And what is more, the improved chances resulted in a rejuvenation of local authorities.

Before and after 1807 it was necessary to care about personal relations if a local official aimed to accumulate honours, to gain advantages and to avoid disadvantages. But for an individual who tried to remain in or to enter civil service, conditions had completely changed. The few unfamiliar Frenchmen at the top aside, it was very advantageous if a local office-holder enjoyed a relationship not only to members of the provincial elite but to persons from other regions as well. Friendships dating from the university and contacts with freemasons coming from other parts of northern Germany were now of great importance. And the nobility came back into business because Jérôme tried to enhance his reputation by surrounding himself with members of the old-established families. Only those middle-class officials who could activate an enlarged social network derived benefits from these improved chances. They got the opportunity to leave local administration behind and to enter regional or central authorities, which had been entirely unusual in 18th-century Hesse-Kassel. Then, local and central administration had been worlds apart. Now, the branches of the Westphalian bureaucracy were set up as modern career-systems. But to enter into regional and central administrations it was necessary that the former local official had to adapt himself to habitual change, to new styles of contact, to a different language and even to the latest fashion.

Personal networks were reshaped through changes in customs, institutions and power, but also as a result of the very fact that the Kingdom of Westphalia comprised four times as many inhabitants as the Landgravate of Hesse-Kassel. And this state by the grace of Napoleon was integrated within a wider web of mutual dependences to the French Empire and the states of the Rheinbund. So it was just a question of scale that regional leaders acquired a strategic influence on the process of intra-state decision-making. Local office-holders had to learn that they needed support from the provincial sub-centers to attain their goals successfully. Before, most of them had retained contacts with persons at the Hessian court or in the central bureaucracy. Now, it was necessary to live in harmony with the prefect or to find support among some members of parliament. Face-to-face contact with the king was impossible and it was quite difficult to establish personal ties with a member of the conseil d'etat. But men of ambition found a way to create contacts in the leading circles. Freemasonry, now re-organized and centralized, came to be of greatest importance for them, because inside of distinguished lodges, persons coming from all parts of the kingdom met. Here local officials could catch the political motto of the day and they could demonstrate their enthusiasm for the programmes of reform. As influential men searched for retinue, chances opened up for further careers.

But new chances brought with them new dangers. Local officials are invariably a point of attention among their subjects. In the 18th century too, the inhabitants of a provincial town were suspicious of the Amtmann's habits and actions. But the local officials of the Kingdom of Westphalia had to be prepared for a much more vivid aversion that could escalate to open violence against their person and property. The reason why people disliked them had to do with the lack of legitimation that marked the whole regime, but it also had to do with other circumstances. By abolishing the traditional town-councils the new regime unwillingly contributed to the social isolation of its local officials. As long as they were identical with the old Amtmänner, the «Westphalian» judges and government officials only had to contact their local acquaintances to be informed about the mood of the people and of the reasons for political unrest. But newcomers often were completely isolated and when under pressure, they sometimes showed all signs of a persecution mania. All depended on the question, whether the local dignitaries made their peace with the new regime or not. Stubbornness and resistance grew with the duration of the regime, because those who former enjoyed privileges now had to pay ever rising taxes. In addition, many of their sons were killed as soldiers, fighting in Spain and Russia – a fate that in former times befell only peasants and poor burghers.

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25 S. Brakensiek, Fürsten-Diener cit., p. 139-150.
27 S. Brakensiek, Fürsten-Diener cit., p. 349-356.
For all these reasons the first attempt to build a modern state on Hessian territory failed. In contrast to southern Germany and Prussia the French defeat brought real Restoration to this region: the old prince came back from exile and with him ancient laws, institutions and customs returned. As a rule the old officials were to return to the positions they had held seven years before. So it is not astonishing to see, that in 1814 a great number of the Westphalian local officials were dismissed. If a position could not be restored, for example, because the old office-holder had found a better job or because he had died, the network of provincial elite families helped to push their members into the vacancy. Youngsters and social climbers who had benefited from the expansion of offices in the Westphalian bureaucracy were dismissed. They only got a chance to get reinstated, if they had married a woman coming from one of the traditional families. Naturally, the losers of the Restoration formed the backbone of the future political opposition.

Restoration remained incomplete because the political experiences of many people during the Napoleonic era had changed their expectations for the future. Most of these ideas were frustrated so that political discontent slowly grew. If peasants and craftsmen expected that restoration would bring back the lower taxes of the past they were disappointed. If the volunteers of the war of liberation thought their readiness to make sacrifices would be rewarded by a greater deal of political participation they were wrong. And if the noblemen imagined they could dominate the representative body of the estates as they had always done, they underestimated the opposition of Kurfürst William who never forgot that most of them had fraternized with the French. Until the death of the old prince, Hessa was remade as a caricature of its 18th century self.

Only when his son William II succeeded to the throne in 1821, modernization of the administration was possible. But this prince did not concede a liberal constitution as many had hoped, he only reformed the bureaucracy in a neo-absolutist sense. Some institutional elements of the Napoleonic era and some of the Prussian reforms were adopted. One major effect was an institutional and personal bifurcation between the courts of justice and the administration. As a consequence new authorities were created and new personnel was engaged. Again the system of careers was completely changed with drastic consequences for members of the old provincial elite. A substantial number of them refused to adapt themselves to the changed conditions. Since they had an identity as jurists they tried to remain in positions as judges. And what is more, they really disliked the pronounced conservative esprit de corps which dominated the newly-established administration. They were not inclined to follow commands slavishly but thought to maintain the gradual autonomy they were used to enjoying as an Antmann. The courts became gathering places for them. Even if they momentarily defended their positions, they were not able to enter careers leading them to the top, in the way it was possible for officials subscribing to values of orthodox officialdom.

Under the calm surface of the twenties a liberal movement developed. As clubs and lodges were forbidden and censorship was intensified, there were no legal institutions left where an opposition could meet and information could be exchanged. Private reading of foreign papers, private correspondence and private meetings were insufficient remedies. In this situation, the network of old families functioned as a substitute for the public sphere. In their drawing rooms angry young men and the dissatisfied met. Prominent sections of the metropolitan bench and nearly the whole provincial judiciary joined a modest liberal opposition to the conservative course of the prince and his courtly surroundings.

William II lived in perfect harmony with the Metternich system. He was quite unpopular, because personal incertitude led him to harsh reactions. A life-long affair with a mistress was strictly disapproved by the nobility and by members of the middle-class elite as well. Therefore his wife, a Prussian princess, stood at the centre of a courtly opposition which retained a somewhat loose contact with the liberals. William relied on a clique of nobles coming from all over Germany, and on the new formed administration. The recruitment of its personnel had been managed by the prime-minister, a confidant of the princely mistress, and by the chief of police who was in close contact with the Austrian court. The main criteria for employment was loyalty to the conservative court-party. The chief of police, above all, used his position to weave a dense network of personal connections with local officials all over the country. These new appointed officials originated from different regions and from a broad range of social

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and professional milieus, with former officers as the largest group. For the traditional middle-class elite it was embarrassing to see that newcomers and persons of doubtful background got attractive positions and enjoyed the protection of powerful patrons at the princely court.

We could observe how organizational decisions to some extent predisposed the political attitudes of the members of different authorities. Like in a system of communicating tubes the conservative esprit de corps of the administration produced the liberal attitude of the bench and vice-versa. If one looks at the language in which contemporaries understood this antagonism, we find the well-known vocabulary of court and country factions. Until the revolution of 1830, which won a liberal constitution in Hesse-Kassel, the antagonism between liberal judiciary and conservative administration prefigured the political parties of the thirties and forties. But at the core of this figuration we find a politicized clientelism.

The situation of the twenties was decisive for the later development of the political system in Hessa. During this phase we can observe a liberal party coming into being, whose leaders originated from the traditional educated elite. After 1830 the offspring of Amtmänner and pastors and the judges themselves formed the liberal majority in the parliament. The voters in the provincial towns reposed their trust in them as their traditional mediators with regard to the capital. But this traditional attitude was cloaked in the garb of the new liberalism. It is an irony of history that neo-absolutism prepared the ground for this political constellation. The modernization of the administration released the Amtmänner from their functions as authority and only left the jurisdiction to them. So voters could see in them the defenders of local interest and of the law against an unjust and authoritarian state.\[34\]

While concluding my presentation I would like to mention some open questions. Up to now my research was focussed on the bonds of subordination and co-operation between local office-holders and powerful individuals in the capital and the provincial sub-centres. I have now begun to investigate the sociability of the small towns, where the officials lived, but there is a great deal left to do. To get a more precise picture of local networks, which were essential for their daily work, it is necessary to focus on relationships not only with the wealthy and powerful but also with bailiffs, lower forestry officials and – above all – with the Greben, who were

the links of the princely state inside of the villages. As the studies of Thomas Fox, John Theibault and Robert von Friedeburg have shown, the relationship between Amtmann and Grebe lies at the centre of the process of state-formation in the countryside.\[35\] While these studies have focused on the social origins and the material interests of the Greben they have not taken the nature of contact between these unequal partners into account. This could be a starting point for future research. A micro-analysis could reconstruct the channels of information, benefits, loyalty and power connecting the officials of the princely state with the people in towns and villages in the true period between the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Revolution of 1848.

Does the Hessian case provide lessons to be learned in a broader sense? In this princely state alliances of kin were normally decisive for the success of careers and reform projects, whereas patronage only gained importance during the shorter phases when «French habits» prevailed. I suppose that these findings have something to do with different political languages. The culture of patronage – the formation of a symbolic order with its pertinent rituals and languages of obedience and loyalty – as well as its counterpart – the languages of favour and grace, of counsel and support – is bound up with a specific Catholic piety. Its codes of mediation, the intercession of saints and the confession, provide the cultural patterns for patronage. Protestantism on the contrary, offers no comparably developed codes. Yet the Hessian case suggests that in Protestant regions the family provides a large variety of languages, symbols and rituals.

The question of how to establish criteria to be able to ascertain the differences as well as common ground between the Mediterranean and northwestern Europe remains in my view an open one. What are well fitting facts of the case for comparison? I think the specific situation of the Napoleonic era gives us a good opportunity to compare, how different societies and cultures responded to this disturbing challenge. And I would claim that local officials are of particular interest because their behaviour is a clear indicator of political change.

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