

*Status and Social Conditions under the Risk of Social Demotion  
(Western and Southern Europe, 16<sup>th</sup> to Early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries)*

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A conference organised by the École française de Rome, LARHRA,  
IDHE.S-ENS Paris-Saclay and the University of Milan

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Social demotion, or downward social mobility, is a major political challenge for Western societies today. Even before becoming the focus of public debate, it was already a topic of study for sociologists who helped define its temporality (i.e. intergenerational or limited to a single lifespan), its multiple dimensions (individual or collective) and its ambiguity, as it is both an objective (therefore measurable) reality and a subjective feeling dependent on the perception of social dynamics. In short, social demotion is both an experience and a fear. Investigating social demotion in any era is thus a way to see the inner workings of the social world.

By taking into account the Ancien Régime, while also encompassing the disruption of the Revolution, we can observe this phenomenon not only within a “society of orders” in which the rigidity of social boundaries evolved over time (alternating between phases of greater or less openness), but also in a transitional phase as statuses were redefined with the triumph of a class society. Social demotion, i.e. moving downward to a lower social status, cannot be understood without the existence of a social hierarchy. In contemporary society, this hierarchy is defined in sociological and economic terms given the absence of legal boundaries between individuals, even though the memory of such boundaries may persist. In Ancien Régime society, social status was based on a hierarchical thinking that materialised in orders, the respect of ranks and the transmission of status. Yet while that society was rigid (because it was conceived as a natural state), it was not immobile. Although historiography has focused more on upward mobility, which also produced more source material, it has looked at the phenomenon of downward mobility by studying cases of derogation of nobility, the situation of the “shamefaced poor” and public assistance institutions, and more recently, the representation of social demotion and the meaning of social trajectories in a hierarchical society.

This conference endeavours to cover the entire social spectrum, organised around a few focal points for reflection.

**Discourses about social demotion.** Studying social demotion under the Ancien Régime raises the issue of the analytical categories used by historians to study societies of the past. Social demotion is thus connected to impoverishment, but the two terms were not synonymous. Reversals of fortune would lead to social demotion if they coincided with a change in lifestyle that materialised a change in status. Social demotion arose from the loss of material and symbolic resources – such as honour – that forced individuals to adopt a behaviour or to make choices deemed to be degrading in light of their social status. Thus, it cannot be defined in absolute terms, but always in relation to individuals’ position. Hence the importance of taking into consideration, inasmuch as possible, the discourses of historical agents. Such discourses were not necessarily comparable to our own and not identical over time. The perception of a decline in social status was dependent on the norms and representations related to the milieu to which an individual belonged. Social agents assessed social demotion in light of the expectations and characters attributed to social groups or families according to their rank. Social demotion took on an eminently moral dimension by being connected to dishonour, downfall and forfeiture. In the production of discourse, the focus was not only on the experience of social demotion, but also

on the fear – proportional to the individual’s position in the hierarchy – that was sparked by the prospect of social marginalisation.

**Social demotion as an itinerary.** We also propose understanding social demotion not as a change in status, whose causes and consequences could be assessed, but as a process that fit into different timescales. The first dimension was that of the individual whose trajectory – based on the point in his or her lifespan – must be pieced together with its breaking points, plateaus and inflection points leading to a change in condition. The difficulty lies in distinguishing between temporary reversals or deprivation, on the one hand, and demotion, on the other. The latter was not necessarily an irreversible process, as shown – for the Second Estate – by the existence of procedures for suspending noble status in order to make derogation practicable. The phenomenon requires an intergenerational scale to be considered, by investigating the methods of social reproduction and transmission of status. In this perspective, care must be taken not to interpret a change in trade from one generation to the next, or between branches of the same family, as a sign of differentiation or of social mobility (either upward or downward) without factoring in the social universes of belonging that gave such changes meaning and enable the direction of a personal or family trajectory to be determined. It therefore seems that a change in status must be viewed in light of a system of reference and in relation to the position of others. Taking account of the period of time also reminds us that social demotion was only partly a question of individual ability, while also being related to contemporary events and what sociologists call “structural mobility”, i.e. the mobility made necessary by changes in demographic, economic and political structures.

**Situations of forfeiture.** In contrast with the aforementioned process approach, we intend to investigate situations that, in the eyes of contemporaries, would lead to forfeiture. Several situations stand out. The first involves a loss of independence during an era when living off of one’s own assets was a source of social distinction and belonging. This situation would include cases of bankruptcy and indebtedness that led to a loss of credit, in all senses of the term, with the risk of suffering a veritable social death. The second situation involves cases of derogation, which led to a loss of privileges or even being excluded from the group to which the individual belonged. Here, preserving the social status came second to the necessity of economic survival. The third situation encompasses mésalliance and illegitimate birth, which had weighty consequences for descendants in terms of status, inheritance rights, access to certain functions and reputation, which in turn was modulated by social position. We can also study the condition of younger-born sons in the nobility, compared to the position of the eldest son who would perpetuate the family’s status. Lastly, it would be useful to look at acts of exclusion, such as the loss of citizenship, which led to individuals being deprived of their rights and excluded from the community, as well as moving to locations or to homes that were deteriorated and therefore materialised social demotion.

**Hurdles to social demotion.** The social hierarchy, since it was regarded as natural, was shored up with legal and institutional arrangements. We intend to emphasise the ways in which these resources were activated by the actors and powers that controlled them. Derogation thus appears in both its dimensions; while it reflected the loss of status, it also enabled status to be recovered once all the associated living conditions were re-established. It is known that institutional aid (in the form of aid at home for the “shamefaced poor” or the provision of lodging by charitable institutions) was inspired by the principle of distributive fairness whereby each individual received according to his or her condition. We can question whether these forms of assistance were not implemented after forfeiture had become evident, such that they did not aim to restore a hierarchical position but instead to hamper an inevitable change in condition by defending the stability of the social order.

## **Language**

English, French, Italian

## **Timetable**

- September 2017: call for papers
- 30 November 2017: deadline for submitting proposals (a maximum of **3500 characters**)
- 31 December 2017: selection of proposals and conference schedule defined
- 30 April 2018: deadline for submitting conference papers
- 24-25 May 2018: conference at the École française de Rome

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