

Nobility under transformation

Noble strategies and identities in nineteenth century Sweden

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Until the 1980s it was almost considered a mere historical fact that around 1830 the aristocracy in Europe was superseded by a new ruling class of grande bourgeoisie – and that the nobility henceforth removed itself, adopting bourgeois values and policies. However, European historians nowadays generally accept the idea that the aristocracy (skilled at continuous social adaptation) managed to vindicate their positions until World War I.

In contrast to recent European historiography, among Swedish historians an older image – that of a protracted struggle between a challenging middle class and a defensive, reactionary nobility, ultimately resulting in the downfall of the Swedish nobility – still prevails. This idea is predominantly based on research carried out by Professor Sten Carlsson (dating back to the 1940s) and on a demographic study by Ingvar Elmroth (started in the 1960s). Carlsson, first of all, maintains that the Swedish nobility was “pauperised” following a contest between noble capital, invested in land, and non-noble commercial and industrial capital. Elmroth, on the other hand, suggests that an innate demographic quality of the nobility caused its downfall.

In Sweden there is, however, throughout the nineteenth century also clear evidence of a strong and continuing noble presence within the government as well as the army, and in the upper echelons of Swedish society. This article sets out to clarify how well the Swedish nobility succeeded in adapting themselves to structural changes in the 19th century, and to what extent it thereby managed to maintain its socially dominant position, at a time when a society of orders and corporations yielded to a new bourgeois society.

The Swedish nobility: a brief outline

Noble status with feudal characteristics was introduced in Sweden in 1280, when the king granted freedom of taxation to those who furnished the state with a knight and a horse. A noble rank only became hereditary in the late 16th century, concurrent with the introduction of the more elevated noble titles of count and baron (thus separating the titled higher aristocracy from the non-titled lower nobility).

In 1626, during the reign of Gustavus II Adolphus, the noble order was formally organised in the Swedish *Riddarhus* (House of Knights), an institution that still exists



Riddarhuset: For four hundred years the Swedish parliament was a diet of four estates. The last estate to accept parliamentary reform (based on limited male suffrage) was the nobility. When the noblemen finally voted for such a reform in 1865, cheering crowds gathered in front of the House of Nobility (*lithografie, particuliere collectie*)

today and a unique source of information on all noblemen and noblewomen since its foundation.

The Swedish nobility experienced its zenith during the so-called Swedish “Age of Greatness” (roughly between 1630 and 1718), when Sweden counted as a great power. The noble order (originally consisting of some 400 adult men only) grew immensely as a result of widespread ennoblements, while the older noble families greatly enriched themselves with spoils of war and donations from the Crown. In 1680, however, noble feudal powers and privileges were considerably curtailed by King Charles XI who introduced royal autocracy, reclaiming half of all noble estates for the Crown (for the financial benefit of the state), and abolishing many noble prerogatives. Charles XI also changed the rules of precedence by introducing an ordinance that proclaimed a forty-stage ranking system (*rangrullan*) within military and administrative professions (military men, civil servants and court officials). Since this ordinance did not differentiate between nobles and non-nobles, merit was thereafter supposed to take precedence over high birth.

The period between 1719 and 1772 has been labeled the Swedish “Age of Liberty”. Sweden lost its powerful position and, domestically, a new constitution was introduced, granting the diet power over the king. Although the diet consisted of four estates (nobility, clergy, citizenry and peasantry), it was dominated by the nobility, which maintained its firm grip on power until the *coup d'état* of Gustavus III, who reintroduced royal autocracy in 1772.

The Gustavian era, which lasted until 1809, proved detrimental to noble power. Having resisted the attempts of Gustavus III to transform the Swedish nobility into a court nobility à la Louis XIV, this failed as factions of the nobility clashed with the king over various policies. In 1789 Gustav reduced the exclusivity of the noble privileges as regards the right to non-taxable land and the right to high office. In 1792 this conflict ended in the murder of the king by noble military officers. Nevertheless, autocratic government continued under the incompetent Gustavus IV Adolphus, whose policy of opposition to Napoleon resulted in the loss of Finland to Russia (Finland having been an integral part of the Swedish kingdom since the Middle Ages). Noble military officers and state officials reacted by deposing the king in 1809.

A new constitution with equal power for king and diet was then installed, abolishing the last economic privileges of the nobility. A new royal house was introduced in 1810 following the election of the French marshal Jean Baptiste Bernadotte as the new Swedish king. As the effective ruler of Sweden, he was crowned Charles XIV John, king of Sweden and Norway in 1818, (Norway having been forced into a loose personal union with Sweden in 1814), and continued to rule until 1844.

Gradually, noble rights had been reduced to a point where they no longer formally existed. After the reforms of 1680, and the loss of privileges in 1789 and 1809, the one remaining political prerogative was removed in 1866, when the old diet of four estates was replaced by a two-chamber diet, for which eligibility and the right to vote were dependant upon income and fortune. The rate of ennoblements declined after Sweden's loss of power, yet considerable numbers were still ennobled at a regular pace during the 18th century as well as during the reign of Charles XIV John; it is only after the latter's death that a cessation of ennoblements occurred. It is a remarkable fact, however, that relatively more *titled* families were created during the first half of the 19th century than ever before: in 1719 titled families ("the aristocracy", Swedish *högadel*) formed 12 % of the nobility, as opposed to 25 % in 1854.

In Sweden the nobility accounted for 0.3–0.4 % of the population, a small proportion compared to Great Britain, France and Prussia. In comparison with other Nordic countries, however, its importance was greater, and more or less on a par with that of most German states, Prussia being the exception. In Norway nobility was abolished altogether in 1821.

When comparing the Swedish nineteenth-century nobility to other European nobilities, it is clear that it lagged behind in terms of wealth and power, but enjoyed a markedly stronger position than its Nordic counterparts. Three important factors distinguished Sweden from most other western countries:

- Sweden could never boast on a fully developed feudal society. The nobility never held legal rights over the peasantry, the majority of which may be considered free peasant proprietors, represented in the Swedish diet as the fourth estate since the beginning of the 16th century.
- During the 17th century, Sweden was a militarised state, more or less continuously at war. In the 18th century, wars on a more limited scale continued to make an impact on society, mentalities and state finances. However, the last war Sweden was involved in transpired in 1814; since then Sweden has enjoyed an unprecedented period of peace.

- Throughout the 19th century, Sweden was still structurally undeveloped. The larger part of the population lived on the land (in 1870, 72 % of the population was still employed in agriculture), towns were small and the range of professions was extraordinarily limited. Emigration to North America offered the best opportunity for a million Swedes. Ultimately, industrialisation dramatically altered Swedish conditions, yet it was slow in developing. No significant industrial breakthrough occurred before 1870 and it has often been argued that its full impact was not felt until the period 1890-1920.

In Sweden, not only did the dismantling of noble privileges meet with little resistance from the nobility, many noblemen even went so far as to initiate and renounce them of their own accord. By the 1790s, in line with a contemporary emphasis on human and especially equal rights, hereditary prerogatives could no longer be defended as legitimate. Thus, a consequence of the spirit of the times was a *crisis* in noble *self-identity*; to find a new social platform, with an appropriately altered social identity, now became a matter of ever-increasing importance.

Research questions, method and theory

This article centres on the level of success of the Swedish nobility as regards the social reproduction of its traditional position into a new role in the power structures that were newly developed in the nineteenth-century. Especially the *strategies* noblemen used, and the way in which their *social identity* was affected during the process, are emphasised. My main questions are:

- 1) Did the Swedish nobility, like the European nobility, manage to maintain, during the 19th century, the socially and culturally dominant position that it had previously held – and, if so, how?
- 2) Which (intended and unintended) strategies were chosen when challenged by the new, bourgeois society?
- 3) What shifts regarding a noble identity occurred, when its classic “feudal” identity could no longer be considered legitimate?

Three separate approaches have been combined in order to optimise both research approach and results:

- A quantitative, statistical analysis of the Swedish titled nobility (8,000 counts and barons, countesses and baronesses, born between 1770 and 1939), in terms of marriage, education, profession, wealth and social status.
- A qualitative analysis of ‘ego-documents’ such as memoirs and auto-biographies and of a large number of encyclopaedic data.
- A comparative approach including the nobilities of France, Great Britain and Germany, as well as Sweden’s Nordic neighbours Denmark, Norway and Finland.

The transformation of society into a bourgeois society – as described by Jürgen Habermas – introduced citizenship and capitalism. A free press was instrumental in the creation of a public opinion, challenging old structures in the state apparatus as well as in society itself, thus bringing about a separation of society and state. In

Sweden, freedom of press was reintroduced in 1810, and old corporate barriers were brought down through a series of reforms in the middle of the same century.

It is often stated that feudal society was replaced by a class society. In the pre-industrial era, however, the meaning of class was very different from that of today, and it is highly unlikely that any nobleman abandoned his inherited noble identity for a class identity. The dissertation on which this article is based, discusses various relevant class models, hierarchic, triadic and dichotomous models, as well as their elusive definitions. In the case of Sweden the definition of middle class is of particular interest, since earlier historians have assigned an emerging middle class the crucial role in the restructuring process. However, it is evident that a non-noble middle class of intellectuals and businessmen was politically weak and passive, with most reforms being devised by (noble and non-noble) civil servants under noble leadership. The term “middle class” must in this case be considered a catchword in a battle for discursive hegemony and political reform, employed by a new, liberal (noble and non-noble) elite challenging the governing “class” of high office civil servants, as opposed to a non-noble middle class pitted against a noble upper class.

Considering that a nobleman would probably think more in terms of elite versus non-elite than in terms of class, the concept ‘elite’ is presented here as an alternative to class. In this context the theories of elite formation and the circulation of elites, as proposed by Mosca, Pareto, Bottomore and others are discussed, as well as the elite-forming characteristics of the French *grandes écoles*, debated by Pierre Bourdieu.

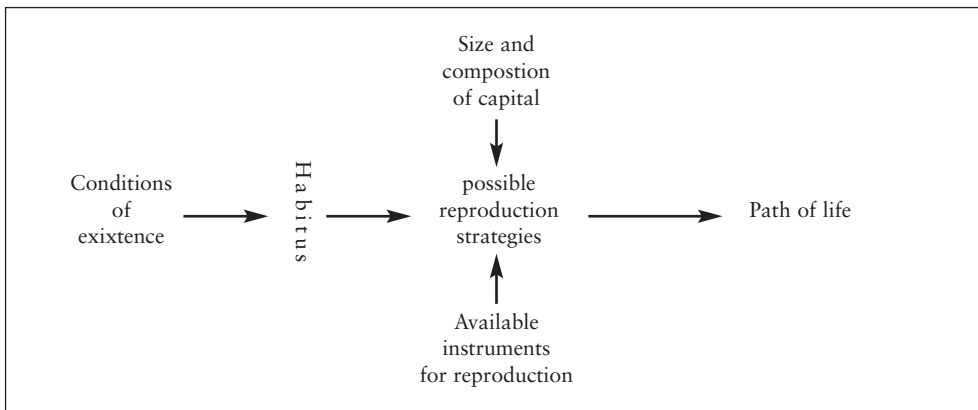
My contribution also discusses the practical implications of the gradual dissolution of corporate bodies in society, thereby placing a new emphasis on *individualism*, a notion heatedly discussed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the support of De Tocqueville and René Girard, among others, it is argued that real individualism was lost in the urge to imitate other individuals or groups of individuals, and that individualism thus became the basis for the formation of status groups in the consumption-oriented Weberian sense.

A common drawback of all of the above concepts – class, elite, status group – concerns the limited scope they provide to evaluate all material and non-material resources possessed by noblemen; at the same time they provide no natural explanation as to how change and social transformation can be effected. A much more suitable concept is offered by Pierre Bourdieu. The latter’s theories on capital, habitus and ‘fields’, are the reason why Bourdieu’s work has been chosen to provide the theoretical corner-stones of this study and analysis. Alongside this approach, an additional perspective has been used, inspired by gender-based aspects regarding manliness vis-à-vis shifting power bases in society.

The usefulness of noble capital

Bourdieu’s sociological concept provides the nobleman with rich and varied capital resources – economic, symbolic as well as social. It also opens a world of life expectancies other than that of simply climbing up or down a one-dimensional social ladder, by making it possible to reallocate one’s capital (whether economic, symbolic or social) to other ‘fields’, or even to be active in multiple fields at the same time. Based upon ideas expressed in *Distinction*, the following analytical tool has been

developed for the analysis of the re-conversion (or non-conversion) of the Swedish 19th century nobility:



Graph A. *A model of social reproduction*

Although conditions of existence for the nobility as a whole varied considerably from one country to another, as well as from one family within Sweden to another, it is obvious at the same time that many noble values were shared, not only within national borders, but also across borders. Regarding 'habitus', it is also evident that noble values continued to differ considerably from those obtained by non-noble, even at the end of the 19th century. Whereas noblemen valued character, external appearance and position, intellectuals chose intelligence and merit as their ideals, whilst businessmen favoured the concept of the successful self-made man; these different conceptions were converging only slowly.

Sten Carlsson has demonstrated that the Swedish nobility gradually, from 1700 onwards, lost much of the non-taxable land to which it had once held exclusive right. This, however, did not necessarily imply pauperisation; the nobility, and the aristocracy in particular, remained by far the richest social group in the country.

As regards economic capital, the nobility still held about 20% of the arable land in c.1850, and the largest estates were nearly all owned by noblemen, as were most of the Swedish iron-works factories. The symbolic capital provided by family name, titles, estates, rank, honours etc., was particularly prominent among the aristocracy (and often considered within this group as more valuable than economic capital), who also took special care in acquiring a good education for their offspring, including a university degree for those who could afford it. A widespread and substantial social network operating at the highest levels of society, including court circles, enabled the accumulation of a considerable amount of social capital, a prerequisite for the conversion of symbolic capital into economic and other forms of capital, and the subsequent re-conversion to other social fields and paths of life.

At the beginning of the 19th century the aristocracy could boast of a considerable amount of symbolic capital, yet unfortunately it proved to be both fragile and transient. This study measures three indicators of noble symbolic capital: land ownership,

military titles and court titles. For those born between 1770 and 1799, at least 60 % (the sources are not sufficiently complete for a more definite statement) of the titled nobility were landowners, 80 % held military titles (although most were not in active service) and 30 % possessed court titles (mostly honorary ones). For those born after 1900 these figures rated respectively 30 %, 10-15 % and 3 %. Concerning military titles, it is worth pointing out that the introduction of reserve officers in 1901, met with considerable noble interest.

The noble presence in the Royal Swedish Academy is used to exemplify the competitiveness of noble cultural capital. When the Academy was inaugurated in 1786, noblemen occupied eleven of the eighteen available seats; a hundred years later only three noblemen remained. It seems that this 'cultural field' was the first one that the nobility lost, taken over as it was by non-noble university professors (ten in 1885), the representatives of an intellectual *Bildungsbürgertum*.

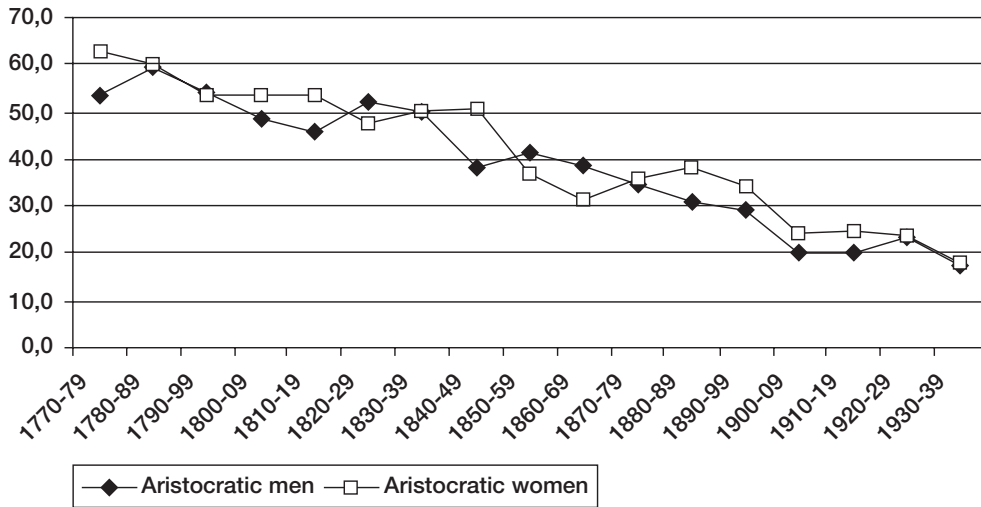
When noble symbolic capital was at its zenith, instruments for social re-conversion were very limited. At the beginning of the 19th century few professions and other means of subsistence were available to a Swedish nobleman beyond the traditional ones. As time went on, progressively more new opportunities for professional education and employment were created; conversely, the value of their symbolic capital was decreasing steadily.

The model for social reproduction employed here is by no means a deterministic one; it has been used only for analytical purposes. The final section of the chapter discusses and exemplifies the elements of chance and crisis – considered important triggers for re-conversion by Bourdieu – as well as various biases and propensities for re-conversion or non-conversion between and within different noble families, as discussed by Monique de Saint Martin.

Marriage strategies

All over Europe marriages between a noble and a non-noble partner – “mixed” marriages – increased in frequency during the 19th century. In Sweden mixed marriages were considerably more common than in many other European countries, but less so than in the neighbouring Nordic countries. Marriage practices of the titled nobility and the lower nobility differed considerably, yet, the behaviour of the titled nobility in Sweden was quite similar to that of the Continental aristocracy.

Chart B shows how endogamous marriages (aristocrats married to noble partners, whether titled or non-titled) became less frequent during the course of the 19th century. A detailed study of the professions of non-noble fathers-in-law of male aristocrats clearly shows that the large majority of non-endogamous marriages were made into the highest non-noble social circles available – businessmen being represented in surprisingly large numbers. These findings indicate that the rules and norms of society were rapidly changing and that marriage provided the nobleman with a market where his symbolic capital could be successfully converted, thus facilitating his movement from the old social world into the top strata of bourgeois society. Mixed marriages should be interpreted as a form of adaptation, not as a nobleman's social degeneration.



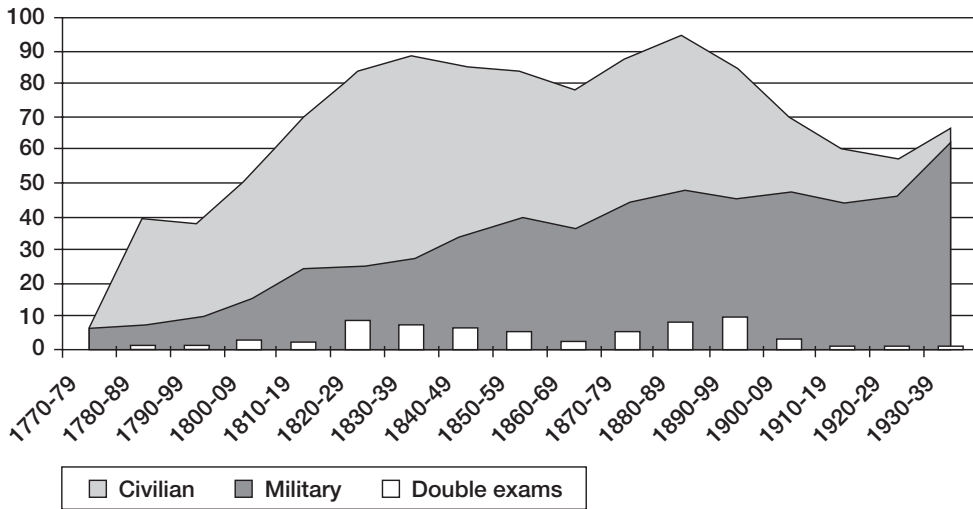
Graph B. *Marriages by the aristocracy with noble partners. Proportion of marriages between aristocratic partner, as a percentage of the total number of aristocratic men or women (married and unmarried)*

The results of mixed marriages differed, depending on whether the aristocratic partner was a man or a woman. In general non-endogamous marriages of aristocratic women seem to have been less successful socially than those of aristocratic men. In addition, the proportion of aristocratic women who failed to marry at all was much larger than that of men (on average 20 % of the men and 30 % of the women born between 1770 and 1869 never married). Various reasons for this discrepancy have been put forward (such as, for instance, place of residence and male superiority/female subordination: although it should be remembered that loss of noble status had no legal bearings at this time). Probably the most important, single reason was the maintenance of the noble family name: whereas a noblewoman lost her family name whilst marrying a non-noble man, not only did a nobleman keep his family name when he married a non-noble woman, he also provided his wife with this aristocratic name, and hence a noble status. The social ('noble') capital of a noblewoman was thus simply less valuable than that of a noble man.

Educational strategies

The 19th century witnessed growing professionalism. As elsewhere, the need for professional education and formal examination certificates grew steadily during this century in Sweden, while new opportunities for education were increasingly offered.

The nobility had always taken relatively good care of its cultural capital, but had shown little interest in formal exams and certificates. As this need arose, noblemen were quick to adapt (as shown in graph C: within a relatively short space of time, over 80 % of all titled noblemen acquired a certificate of some kind. For a long period of time, however, a military education (preferably at the cadet school of Karlberg) was the favoured choice).



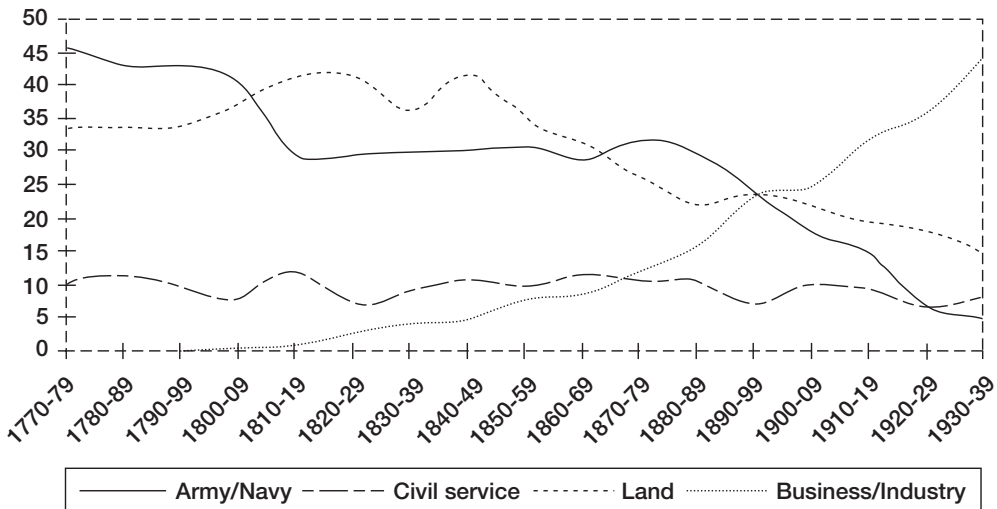
Graph C. Educational level within the aristocracy (men with certificates of examination). Proportions in %, per year of birth

Nevertheless, no equivalent of the elite-forming French *grandes écoles* or to the public schools and venerable colleges of England existed in Sweden. The cadet school of Karlberg did offer leadership training, however, this should be classified as an instrument for a family-dominated mode of reproduction than an education-mediated one. Ultimately, after World War II, business schools became the much-preferred choice of titled noblemen, the first school of that type having been founded as recently as 1909. Like the French nobility (as shown in the researches of Monique de Saint Martin and other scholars) Swedish noblemen tended to avoid too much specialisation. Instead they preferred a more general education that left ample room for character-building and upbringing, thus providing a good basis for leadership and management of people and assets of various kinds.

For all their education, many noblemen avoided direct competition with others; they were often in a position to benefit from a powerful social network that assisted them in gaining their first professional employment.

Professional strategies

Various prominent scholars have provided evidence that it is choice of profession that constitutes the most important element in the forging of a self-identity. The epoch under scrutiny here (covering titled noblemen born between 1770 and 1939) shows a dramatic, if slow, overall shift from the public sector to the private sector: of those born before 1800, roughly 90 % of titled noblemen were active in part- or full-time professional public services, whereas approximately only 20 % of those born in the 1930's were publicly employed. Graph D shows the major employment trends:



Graph D. *Professional watersheds. Aristocratic choice of professions. Proportions expressed as % of male aristocracy*

Military officers

The Swedish army was unusual in that only some 10 % of it consisted of enlisted regiments that did full-time service during periods of peace as well as during wartime 90 % of the officers were expected to do service in the event of war, however, in times of peace it was permitted to serve for only two months each year (three months after 1892). It was only in 1901 that a military service applicable to the entire male population of Sweden was introduced, where after the profession of military officer became a full-time, specialised vocation.

The last wars that involved Sweden occurred between 1806 and 1814; in the long-lasting period of peace that followed employment as a military officer became an incidental occupation, complementing a civilian career. Originally, agriculture was the usual occupation, but as various new professions developed towards the end of the century, these were increasingly preferred. Hence, many noblemen had military titles without really being professional soldiers.

As is to be expected, levels of military professionalism were at their highest during times of war: some 40-45 % of all titled noblemen born before 1800 may be considered as professional officers. The level there after steadily declined to 30 % between 1810 and 1890. Later still a noble interest in the army abruptly dissipated. The research results point towards two explanations for this dramatic development: on the one hand the unwillingness of noblemen to become full-time specialised army officers (or rather 'drill masters', following the introduction of general military service in 1901), and on the other hand the changing face of war, as witnessed in World War I. Nevertheless, considering that an army profession could serve many purposes and strategies 30 % of all titled noblemen still opted for a military career throughout the 19th century. Firstly, it was favourable to strategies of *social reproduction*: military rank held considerable social status, as it promoted noble values such as leadership,

character and superiority. Moreover, the noble roots of a military profession were unmistakable. Secondly, an army career was also valuable as a strategy of *subsistence*: whilst the pay on its own was not sufficient to provide a comfortable living, for those noblemen employed in other occupations for ten months a year, it provided an important contribution to financing a noble life style.

A military profession could furthermore be employed as an *elite* strategy: the official table of precedence (in forty steps) provided military officers with favourable rankings (e.g. an army captain held the same rank as a university professor). Quantitatively the titled nobility maintained its position in the army (16 % of all officers were titled noblemen during the whole of the nineteenth century), but the proportion of titled nobles that attained the rank of general or colonel decreased steadily.

A fourth potential strategy was that of "*positioning*" oneself favourably for re-conversion. Competent officers, who had ample time to test their career prospects in management positions in the growing business world, were in a good position to decide on a business career. If they felt anxious about this move (or if they failed), they could always fall back on the high social status that their military rank provided them with. If anything, the part-time two-monthly military activity offered many provincial (and otherwise bored) noblemen a welcome and undemanding *change* to their everyday rural routines.

Civil servants

When the titled nobility left the army, it was not in order to transfer to the civilian side of the public sector. The proportion that chose to remain in the civil service, 10-11 %, remained remarkably consistent during the entire period.

Before parliamentary rule became a reality in 1917, affairs of state were managed by civil servants appointed by the king with members of the nobility strongly represented in the top positions. During the reign of Charles XIV John, for instance, only four out of fifty-four appointed government ministers were non-noble. The non-noble share increased after that, yet many government offices continued to be dominated by the nobility, above all the army, navy, finance and foreign offices. The first non-noble prime minister was appointed in 1883, and the first non-noble foreign minister in 1914 (as was common in other monarchies, foreign office appointments tended to be reserved for the nobility until the 1920s).

The position of provincial governor (*landshövding*; of which there were twenty-five in total) seems to have held a special interest for nobles (in spite of the fact that the expenses entailed by it did not come near to matching the salary) since it involved conditions favourable to a noble habitus. Originally all provincial governors were noble, and still in 1910 fourteen of them were noblemen.

Conditions changed considerably for civil servants during the course of the 19th century. The corps was professionalised, pay was improved and the service expanded considerably, yet its political power had definitely diminished. In this respect it is quite remarkable that the number of noblemen working as civil servants remained constant. However, the composition of the noble contribution to the corps changed: the law courts, to give an example, were no longer dominated by a noblemen, whereas the foreign office maintained its attraction and remained predominantly in noble hands.

Landed estates

Once Swedish involvement in wars ceased, the landed estate (incl. iron-work factories) became a more prominent symbol of nobility than the sword. Land ownership and estate management peaked as the preferred occupation of the titled nobility around the middle of the 19th century, but thereafter landed estates became progressively less important.

Four different strategies were involved in estate ownership. First, an obvious strategy was that of being a landlord, who lived leisurely from the returns of his rented estates without busying himself with the day-to-day management – a sort of “*abdicated elite*”. Second, the agricultural revolution, which occurred in Sweden in the 1820s, made many noblemen decide to *rationalise agriculture* and to make it their career. Preferably as model farmers, they found a way to exert leadership and to show public spirit (looking beyond mere financial gains). A third strategy could be that of establishing (or maintaining) a *local elite* position, with the estate as one’s own, independent “kingdom”. Finally, the role of estate owners in the political affairs and the management of counties and parishes was also strengthened considerably by political reforms in the 1860s.

Very important, however, was the new political power base supplied by the parliamentary reform of 1866, which granted wealthy estate owners favourable conditions for acquiring a seat in the two-chamber diet or *parliament*. As a result of this, in 1867 noblemen were elected to 31 % of the seats, a higher proportion than in the former diet of four estates.

The assertions of various historians that the nobility became pauperised through loss of land cannot be confirmed, and this claim is certainly not valid regarding the majority of the titled nobility. Although exact figures are not available, it is highly probable that even if the difference between the wealth of nobles and that of other social groups diminished, this did not happen to the extent that the aristocracy was pauperised – on the contrary, it continued to be relatively well off financially. The decline of noble family’s fortunes resulted from poor business cycles, unprofitable agricultural investments and mismanagement; at the same time, numerous noblemen grew richer through favourable land purchases, the proliferation of profitable mass markets, and additional investments in emerging financial instruments.

With time, however, most noble families seem to have grown tired of rural life, and in increasing numbers set up life in the growing towns (they may even be considered as the forerunners of a forthcoming, more general urban migration). It is nevertheless worth noting that even today a larger proportion of the titled nobility (perhaps a percentage as high as 15) live on agriculture and estate management in comparison to the population as a whole. Of the various strategies open to the owners of landed estates, the adoption of rational agriculture (i.e. farming and other forms of land management) turned out to be the only one that secured continuity.

The iron-work factories constituted an early Swedish export industry, controlled by a narrow sector of society, the nobility. Small iron-work factories lost out in the dramatic development of the late 19th century: in 1860, still 440 iron-work factories existed, yet in 1913 only 140 remained. As business cycles grew more complex and investment needs increased persistently, the owners of these iron-work factories (noble or non-noble)

lacked sufficient capital to transform them. As profit margins decreased, heirs to iron-working families decided to invest their family fortune elsewhere. During the period 1890–1920 most of the renowned noble iron-working families sold off their enterprises. Even in cases when they were excessively wealthy, it is evident that noble families did not make any major investments in the rapidly emerging new sectors of Swedish industry, such as saw mills, pulp and paper mills, metal-working and textile industries. The nobility seems to have preferred real estate, private loans and secure bonds. On the whole, therefore, noble families did not play an active role as industrial capitalists in the great transition from agriculture to industry.

Business and industry

Although the emerging industrial sector could boast of few noble owners, it nevertheless became a significant employer of noblemen. Noble employment in privately owned companies grew remarkably steadily, and eventually turned out to be by far the most preferred career choice. This was a slow process though, since the real industrial breakthrough did not occur until the 1890s. Nobles were employed in all service and industrial sectors, but with a clear preference for banking and insurance and only a minor interest in the engineering professions.

Of the titled noblemen who went into business and industry, more than one third reached positions as managing directors/presidents, directors/vice presidents, general managers and similar top positions, whilst countless others had careers of comparable status. To sum up, it may be said that the noble re-conversion to occupations in industry went smoothly and with obvious success.

Other occupations

Before the industrially sector offered attractive occupational fields for noblemen, the building of a Swedish railway network (begun in the 1850s) provided the first really acceptable opportunity for pioneering noblemen to leave the old and worn professional paths. With 4 % of all titled noblemen occupied in this predominantly private sector, it might be said that the Swedish railways became something of a noble project (until 1914, when the state took over). Noble estate owners invested in railway companies, noblemen became managers and directors of privately owned railway companies, they worked on the engineering side, some even as station-masters.

Newspapers and magazines provided further opportunities in “modern” professions, with several noblemen playing important roles as newspapermen and moulders of public opinion during the first half of the nineteenth century. On the whole, however, journalism seems to have offered only limited attractions to noblemen.

A similar attitude was initially shown towards the professions of lawyer and physician. Both of these were relatively underdeveloped in Sweden, and never played the role in political discourse and public opinion that they did in many other countries. As a result, noblemen were slow in entering these professions; it was not until the end of the 19th century – when the lawyer and physician began to establish themselves as elite professionals – that noblemen started to choose such careers in greater numbers. The true elite occupation of the latter half of the century, however, was that of the Member of Parliament. The new two-chamber parliament gave MP’s real political

power, at the expense of senior civil servants, who had monopolised this power for so long. As previously mentioned, many of these MP's were noble landowners, sufficiently wealthy to meet the financial criteria necessary for their eligibility as MP. Nevertheless, their period of political dominance was to last for just half a century; when universal male suffrage was introduced in 1909 any opportunity for future noble political power was lost.

It is evident that the nobility avoided some of the professional fields that were introduced during the 19th century. This is particularly true of academia: the specialisation involved and the tough competition at university faculties seemingly discouraged noble participation. Occupations as schoolteacher and clergyman also tended to be avoided; both of these professions in stead provided opportunities for the middle and lower classes in their quest for social re-conversion upwards.

The royal court, with its "branch operations" in the guards' regiments and the foreign office, continued to uphold a rather exclusive principle of noble recruitment. However, the political power of the king decreased steadily during the century, and the court lacked any real power after the middle of the 19th century. A final blow to the power of the monarchy came in 1905, when Norway deposed King Oscar II and dissolved the union with Sweden.

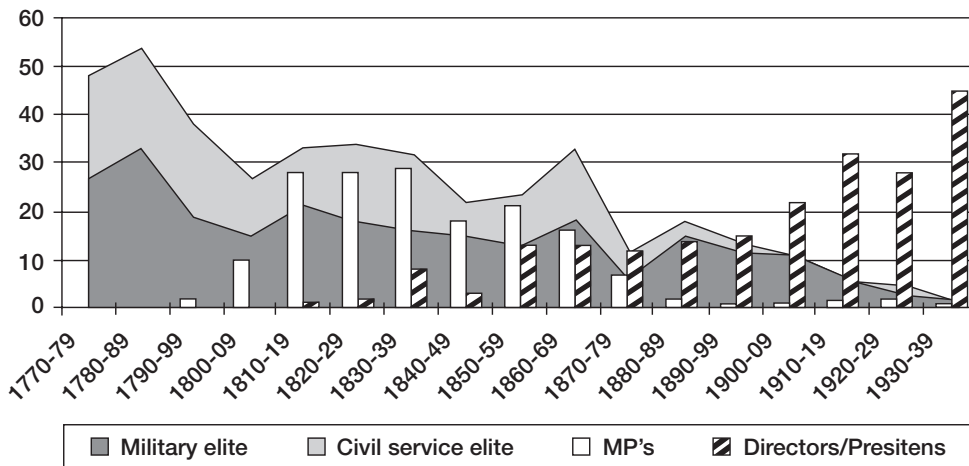
Shifting power bases

The concept of shifting power bases has proved to be a fruitful one in this article. The first power base, *high birth*, dominated during the 17th century, but was curtailed in 1680, when Charles XI introduced his ordinance of precedence, thereby making *merit* the only official norm. The parliamentary reform of 1866 made *wealth* the basis of political power, handing authority to the rich MP.

Up to this point the nobility had managed to adapt rather well to changing circumstances. As long as nobilitation continued, they functioned as a well-organised elite corps. But the rise and diversification of bourgeois and industrial societies, as well as the diminishing political role of the monarchy, changed all that. The formerly fairly homogenous elite stratum was broken up into pluralistic elites, active in different social fields. Furthermore, as democratic reforms were introduced, the once unified political elite was divided into two separate groups: one holding political power, the other economic power. The nobility decidedly favoured the latter as a power base.

Chart E illustrates the noble adaptation to shifting power bases during the 19th and 20th centuries. The traditional sources of power of the aristocracy: military high command and civilian high office, were gradually lost. In stead, the new parliament provided the aristocracy with the opportunity to maintain political elite status for an intermediary period of time, but eventually top management positions in business and industry offered a much-preferred basis for a new economic elite. The industrial and democratic society of the 20th century created yet another new power base, *education*, and in this sphere the well-educated aristocracy was positioned very favourably from the outset.

It should be pointed out that these developments as regards power were not sudden and dramatic shifts. This process of gradual change explains why noble adaptation proved to be so successful. High birth continued to be valued throughout most of the



Graph E. *Modern elites – shifting power bases. Number of aristocratic men, per year of birth*

19th century (although clearly not to the extent that it was in the 17th century). Noble social status was high, and the traditional noble values (such as character, manliness, leadership and public spirit) were widely emulated by the upper strata of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, wealth had always been useful for success in society, as it boosted the power of individual merit. As Bourdieu stated in his work *The State Nobility*, family values and fortune played a decisive role in terms of success even at the supposedly merit-based *grandes écoles*.

Noble identities

One of the aims of this contribution has been to evaluate the way in which noble social identities were influenced by bourgeois society. Because of the ever-changing nature of 'the self', it is however impossible to establish a generalised picture. Identity differed from one nobleman to another, and the additional relational and situational characters of the self-identity make the analysis even more difficult. Nevertheless, four separate identities of a somewhat typical nature can be extrapolated from the sources as representative of various families and groups within the 19th century aristocracy. One group of aristocratic families, characterised by old noble blood and ownership of landed estates, continued to cultivate their *independence* as well as their agricultural endeavours; many of the traditional noble values were maintained within this group of people, who by and large also continued to marry noble partners. The institution of *fideicommissum* was instrumental in upholding this life style; although the right to found new entailed, permanent, estates was abolished as early as 1810, it took until 1963 before the final decision was made to liquidate the remaining ones, later than in other European countries.

A large proportion of the 19th century nobility continued to display *public spirit*. The maxim of *noblesse oblige* obviously hampered a devotion merely to the improvement of one's own prosperity. That is why we find so many 'model farmers' among the

estate owners and why so many noblemen engaged in voluntary religious and social ventures. During its first two decades, the upper chamber of the new parliament (with a large and dominant noble presence) also proved to be the initiator of progressive, public-minded and modern reform (before socialism and the Great Depression of the 1880's changed it into a more conservative body).

As might be expected, many noble families hesitated to take the potentially dangerous step into the new society rephrase. On the other hand, numerous families were highly successful in establishing themselves in prominent positions in science, industry and public assignments, as representatives of a *modern elite*. Finally (and probably unavoidably) many noble families chose to squander what remained of their noble origin by displaying *upper class*, caste-like attitudes of vainglory and arrogance towards parvenus (behaviour especially common, or so it seems, at the royal court).

In the search for a common element in the various identities described above, it becomes evident that *superiority* or dominance as a feature of social identity persisted amongst the aristocracy (even well into the 20th century) – i.e. a sense of belonging to a group of families that still felt to be superior, either within a certain status group or towards other status groups in modern society, even when the nobility simultaneously, and openly, acknowledged the liberal principles of equal rights and personal merit.

Sunset

All over Europe, the dissolution of feudal rights and noble precedence and domination took several centuries to be fully realised. In Sweden, where feudalism had never really developed as it had in most other European countries, the reforms of Charles XI mark the beginning of the end for the nobility. The reforms of 1789, 1809 and 1866 brought this levelling process to its peaceful conclusion.

The Swedish nobility never put up much of a fight to protect its privileges. By 1790 at the latest it was obvious that noble privilege could no longer be defended as legitimate – in fact, many noblemen assumed a leading role in removing noble privileges and the remaining barriers of the corporate state. It is nevertheless true that all did not change without a ripple in the sea. Instead of a conflict between the nobility as a corps on the one hand and the other orders or classes of society on the other hand, it was essentially a conflict between noble and royal power, between a progressive noble elite and senior civil servants, between wealth (noble and non-noble) and officials dependent upon public salaries. Noblemen could also assume the discursive label of “middle class” in their challenge to the dominant upper class of civil servants, those in possession of real political power.

A striking feature of the Swedish process of social levelling, as shown in this article, was that this process was gradual, undramatic and peaceful. In fact, it is almost impossible to point towards one specific critical point in the dissolution of noble power, status and life style.

The final phase took place during the last two decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, and was aided by the formation of a unified workers' movement in the 1880s, the industrial breakthrough in the 1890s, and the democratic

Strindberg: The 1880's was a decade of rapid industrial growth and intensifying political discourse. This period possibly marks the final breaking point for the nobility in Sweden. In any case, the cartoonist claims jokingly (in 1894), that it was the famous Swedish writer August Strindberg who then split the Swedish population in an upper and a lower class (*tekening, particuliere collectie*)



reforms of the first and second decades of the new century, not to mention the dissolution of the union with Norway in 1905.

In comparison with the other European countries, the decline of the Swedish nobility thus stands out as a smooth and uneventful process. There were, in contrast to France, no revolutions, no restorations of monarchy or empire, nor any divisive and conflicting noble political interests; equally there was no strong social quest for democratic and economic reforms, or Irish independence, as in Great Britain, where, furthermore, the negative effects of the Great Depression were also more devastating to aristocratic wealth. At the same time, the Swedish nobility did not further its own selfish interests as a corps, as the Prussian nobility did so stubbornly, leading to their dislodgement from power in a catastrophic war.

It is perhaps surprising that the process of dissolution of noble power was concluded almost simultaneously in all countries under scrutiny. The fact that it was so undramatic in Sweden meant that it occurred more steadily. In Sweden there existed only a small elite of politically minded intellectuals. The restructuring of society into a bourgeois one was largely organised and managed by the (noble and non-noble) civil servants themselves.

Conclusions

This article has shown that the process of social levelling that took place in Sweden during the 19th century cannot be characterised as a struggle between noble and non-noble factions; instead, it is better described as a peaceful process of integration.

Although the differences between income and fortune grew successively smaller, the nobility was not pauperised. In addition to their economic assets, noblemen benefited from considerable assets of symbolic and social capital. In the minds of others they still enjoyed wealth, status and power, particularly the estate-owning counts and barons, who, more so than most non-titled noblemen, were not wholly dependent on a salary for their subsistence.

Gradually noblemen adapted to the conditions and possibilities of the emerging bourgeois society. For most aristocrats, this adaptive process proved to be very successful: they married into the best non-noble families, they were quick in acquiring a suitable

formal education, and already at an early stage they reached top management positions in the expansive private sector. Clearly a market existed, where they could convert their symbolic capital profitably and consequently reconvert from the order of the nobility to the highest strata of a new society. Noblemen showed a considerable capacity to adapt to shifting power bases; eventually they chose the economic power block as their preferred base.

The self-identities of noblemen were not effaced and replaced by purely bourgeois ideals. Instead, a process of mutual acculturation took place: whilst noblemen adopted bourgeois values, the bourgeoisie emulated various well-established noble ideals. Moreover, noble families continued to look upon themselves as the dominant strata of society.

A noble elite (roughly consisting of titled families and the wealthier part of the lower nobility) seems to have had more in common with a non-noble elite than with a noble non-elite. During the 19th century, this noble elite played a crucial role in a restructuring of society. For these noblemen, the nation had become more important than the noble order itself.

References

The article is an English summary of a Swedish dissertation in history, with the title *Adel i förvandling. Adliga strategier och identiteter i 1800-talets borgerliga samhälle* (Uppsala 2005).

The quantitative data in this study have been extracted from *Riddarhusets stamtavlor*, a CD-ROM containing complete basic information on all noble families in Sweden from the 17th century up till now. The qualitative study has made use of a large number of biographical information in letters, memoirs, biographies etc. Of course, all this material is in Swedish – which also goes for most of the literature. The following short list of literature may, however, provide some relevant background reading:

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Samenvatting

Deze bijdrage richt zich op de vraag hoe succesvol de Zweedse adel was in de aanpassingen aan de opkomende nieuwe burgerlijke samenleving in de negentiende eeuw. In het onderzoek is gebruik gemaakt van kwantitatieve data over huwelijk, opleiding, beroep en rijkdom alsmede van kwalitatieve gegevens gebaseerd op onder meer egodocumenten. Daarnaast wordt een vergelijking gemaakt met de adel in andere Europese landen. Als theoretisch kader dient Pierre Bourdieu's theorie over kapitaal, habitus en veld. Concluderend wordt gesteld dat de Zweedse adel succesvol was in zijn ontwikkeling van strategieën die bijdroegen aan de handhaving van zijn maatschappelijk vooraanstaande positie. Bourgeoisie en adel kwamen nader tot elkaar en vormden tezamen een elite die de nieuwe Zweedse samenleving sterk ging beïnvloeden.