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European nobilities in the twentieth century

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Yme Kuiper, Nikolaj Bijleveld and Jaap Dronkers, eds, *Nobilities in Europe in the twentieth century. Reconversion strategies, memory culture and elite formation*, Groningen Studies in Cultural Change, 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015, viii + 357 p., ill., index)

This volume incorporates the outcomes of a conference organised by the editors held at the European University Institute (Fiesole, Italy) in 2009 focused on the comparative study of nobilities in the twentieth century. Since the 1950s the British experience dominated the field led by David Spring and F.M.L. Thompson, whose work concentrated on the adaptability of landed elites in the transformation of an agricultural society into an industrial one. They revolutionised our understanding of aristocratic culture and conceptions of modernity. Gradually, historians from other countries that came later to economic modernisation began to analyse the role played by the hereditary ruling class in social, economic, military, political, and cultural developments. German and French scholars led this effort that in the last few decades has spread widely across Europe. The work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu illuminated new pathways to understanding, which his student Monique de Saint Martin directed particularly to the character of the nobility in the twentieth century. The conference was designed to be interdisciplinary with sociologists, anthropologists, and historians looking together at the same issues. Memory and identity, central concerns among contemporary historians, loom large. The participants were asked to keep the theoretical insights of Bourdieu in their minds as they worked, and his spirit hovers over the whole enterprise. The idea of 'reconversion', turning original political and economic capital into cultural and educational capital, is taken up by many of the authors.

As with any compendium of papers by different individuals, some chapters stand out, notably the conclusions drawn by Yme Kuiper about the Dutch nobility and Monique de Saint Martin's dazzling conclusion surveying a wide array of topics. These are major contributions to the field, but each participant had something of value to offer. Many of the papers are supported by photographs and statistical tables.

Victor Karady notices the 'social *charisma*' of the Hungarian nobility, a class that almost uniquely in Europe in the century before World War II embodied the 'nation'. I would add even their distinctive dress, worn at religious and civic ceremonies until the communist takeover, made them stand out. However, he notices that their use of education as a strategy to sustain elite status was vulnerable to inroads from rivals.

Huibert Schijf looks at the expanding ennoblement of Jewish commercial families across Europe in the years before the Great War. He observes the diversity of practices and outcomes in different countries, but also notes that the process supports the general theme of the adaptation of ennoblement to modernisation.

Göran Norrby's fine account of the evolution of the Swedish nobility over centuries provides a chance to examine long-term trends. Many of the practices seen elsewhere such as continued participation in elite army regiments and diplomacy (most notably in the career of Dag Hammarskjöld) are contrasted to the almost unique survival of the officially recognized House of Nobility and entailed estates that have lasted into the twenty-first century.

Another example of continuity is provided by Nikolaj Bijleveld, who asserts something of a revival in the Netherlands early in the twentieth century. In 1900 nobles were proportionally overrepresented in Parliament and took a leadership role in new organisations and

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The former German Emperor William II at the marriage party of the Baron van Heeckeren van Wassenaer and Countess Van Aldenburg Bentinck, Castle Amerongen, 1922 (photo Home Archive Twickel, Delden)

activities as they ‘reinvented themselves’. Yme Kuiper traces the trajectory of a leading Dutch family, the Barons van Wassenaer since 1900. Two sons-in-law, also nobles, served as Foreign Minister and the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies respectively. However, after the Second World War a ‘Big Silence’ descended around the nobility. In the egalitarian era they became secretive about themselves. They disappeared as a visible elite and thus as a significant entity in Dutch life even while individual nobles still found their way to the top in a wide range of fields. History and memory anchor individual identities but not in the minds of the general population.

Anna-Maria Åström traces attempts by Finnish nobles to emulate the success of the British elite as guardians of national heritage and culture through the celebration of the history of country house life. She is able to draw particular attention to the role of aristocratic women, who spearhead this effort. Many buildings and contents survived in Finland, which was not the case for the East Elbian nobles in Germany. When Countess Marion Dönhoff returned to the palace where she was born in Prussia after the Wall came down, not only was the house gone, but also she could not easily find the site so thoroughly had the remembrance of the Junkers been extirpated. As Michael Seelig shows, all the old ruling class was left with to reconstruct their identities was memory.

Alice Bravard tackles the strategies of adaptation of the Parisian *Beau Monde* during the first half of the twentieth century through statistical analysis of newspaper accounts. The aristocracy retained social position but not political authority, except in the localities. The high aristocracy stayed rich but the rest declined. In Italy during the fascist era the nobility was, as it had always been, heterogeneous. Maria Malatesta’s research shows that regional and other forms of diversity make it hard to talk of an ‘Italian’ hereditary elite. Mussolini made an attempt to create a new aristocracy without any lasting impact. In the Resistance after 1943 a great silence descended around noble identities not unlike that in Holland.

Silke Marburg boldly tackles contemporary history by examining the return of the Saxon royal family to its home territories in the East after 1989. Although some mention is made of associated noble families the focus is on the heirs to the kingdom. In my view to conflate royalty with nobility is a mistake, even in modern times when they were all exiles together. After the former King Simeon won control in Bulgaria as prime minister in 2001, he was not associated with any revival of the old ruling elite. The story of several other kings in waiting may be of national significance in the countries involved, but has little or no connection with the topic of this volume.

Longina Jakubowska provides interesting insights into the history of the Polish nobility under communist rule. They did not suffer the harsh fate of liquidation as a class met by their peers in Russia, but land was confiscated and official and social prejudice hindered their existence, unless, like Prince Krzysztof Radziwiłł or General Jaruzelski, they threw in their lot with the new regime. Radical restructuring of their lives (mostly below the radar) was necessary, and Jakubowska investigates that process skillfully using Bourdieu’s conceptions of symbolic and cultural capital.

Paul Janssens explores the cultural identity of the Belgian nobility through analysis of the language divide that threatens to fracture the country. Philipp Korom and Jaap Donkers look at the legacy of the break-up of the ancient Habsburg domains. Unlike in Belgium the

state is not particularly friendly to titled citizens, but in Austria material wealth among the old elite is alive and well, and, as in Sweden, the government has actually backtracked on official objections to noble traditions affecting inheritance of property. Holding a position in a historic titled family also seems to offer advantages in the world of commerce when climbing the corporate ladder.

It is a pity space in this volume could not be found for some current work on Iberia. The Swiss, once again, are absent. More work must be done on the nobilities of former communist states. In the Czech Republic for example, a number of historic families have regained their possessions. The point of this volume was to promote comparative history, yet the margins of many of these articles are drawn very sharply. It is unfortunate the authors did not have more of an opportunity to look up and over the edges of their individual preserves. The ghost at the feast, of course, is Britain. There was certainly no need to include a chapter on developments in the Atlantic archipelago, where so much work has already been done. But a number of the chapters would have gained value had comparisons with the British experience been made.

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Only a couple of authors devote much space to the discussion of gender, and few chapters make use of data relating to membership in clubs, a source that was exploited with exceptional effect by A.L. Cardoza in his study of the Piedmontese nobility some years ago. Few authors address the crucial issue facing modern nobilities: that they are headed for demographic extinction. Without new creations no nobility can remain dynamic or numerous in the long term.

Monique de Saint Martin raises a fundamental question about many of the studies in this collection. Often historians look only at the survivors not at the fallen. As with the history of warfare, more attention tends to be given to the winning side. This phenomenon creates what in the British context is called a 'Whig' interpretation of history. Because we focus on the present outcome of the past we tend to slip into assuming progress towards it was inevitable, and we look for evidence to prove the case and not for alternative outcomes. She wisely urges us to study those who fell by the wayside. The story of the lesser nobility, in particular, requires much more research. Many of them disappeared in twentieth century Europe. The evidence is scarce. They slipped beneath the surface often without leaving a ripple, and they did so by the tens of thousands. The transformations of agriculture, war, democracy, and communism were successive tsunamis that scraped the landscape of Central and Eastern Europe so clean that we may never know what happened to them. But we should try to find out because they were critical to the creation and breakdown of a way of life that had dominated the existence of hundreds of millions of people for centuries.

The use of Bourdieu's paradigm on a broad scale in many countries was an inspired choice for a conference topic. The questions to what extent did nobles continue to use their inherited social, cultural, and economic capital to sustain their advantages over the bourgeoisie and how modern nobles constructed their identities at various stages in the twentieth century are intrinsically interesting. Answering those queries also helps us understand the European experience after 1789 as political, economic, and social change accelerated across the continent ending in explosive and traumatic experiences between 1917 and 1947.

More and more excellent research and analysis is being done on the nobility after 1789

and the vista of the role of the nobility subsequent to the First and Second World Wars is now coming into focus thanks to work by the scholars represented in this volume and a number of other recent publications. Yet, I do not see much impact on the broader scholarly community. Books on nineteenth-century Europe, to say nothing of more contemporary work, rarely seem to reflect the advances that have been made. Even in Britain, where scholars of the caliber of Sir David Cannadine have made important contributions to our understanding of the role of the hereditary elite in shaping society, almost no impact has been made on the broader understanding of the modern period. General British and European textbooks used by students in secondary and higher education have not absorbed the new work even though some of it has been available for decades. Is it possible that bourgeois prejudices of the professorate stand in the way? Perhaps it is too soon to say. This volume will help move the process forward.

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