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Redefining nobility

Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*

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‘Anyone interested in systematic analysis [will find the German nobility to be a] disturbing paradox’, the famous German social historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler explained in 1995.¹ What caused this cognitive labour? While Wehler regarded German society transforming from one based on birth estates (*Geburtsstände*) to one based on class (*Klassengesellschaft*) during the nineteenth century, the German nobility did not disappear, as it should have. Following the theory of class society, wealth became the dominant marker of social inequality between the Revolutionary Wars and the First World War. For the German nobility this should have meant its dissolution within society, as it was very heterogeneous – some noblemen owning huge estates and large fortunes, most possessing modest wealth, and a not insignificant number being literally poor.² Thus, the first group should have been joined by rich bourgeois industrial-

* I am thankful to Christopher Miller (Glasgow) for improving my English, though, of course, all mistakes remaining are mine. For a more extensive coverage of the problems debated in this article and the sources used, see D. Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung in der Moderne. Adlige Familienstrategie und Gesellschaftsentwürfe in Deutschland 1840-1945* (München, 2014).

1 H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Vol. 3: Von der ‘Deutschen Doppelrevolution’ bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges 1849-1914* (München, 1995) 107. All quotations, unless English titles are cited in the footnotes, are my translations. See also: T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918. Vol. 1: Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist* (München, 1998) 417-418.

2 On the heterogeneity of the German nobility see as an introduction E. Frie, ‘Armer Adel in nachständischer Gesellschaft’, in: R.G. Asch, ed., *Adel in Südwestdeutschland und Böhmen 1450-1850* (Stuttgart, 2013) 207-221.

ists as the new leading class, the second should have joined the bourgeoisie (*Bürger-tum*) and some noblemen should have become members of the working class. Yet this did not happen. The German nobility remained a clearly visible group in society at least until the mid-1940s.

Lately, accounts of the transformation of German society have been more cautious.³ There seems not to have been a fully-fledged class society at the end of the nineteenth century. The working class came closest to this model. The bourgeoisie, instead of turning into different classes based on income, retained strong connections between most of its constituent members, relying on a system of commonly shared values as a group marker, instead of wealth. Nevertheless, the attempt to explain the continued existence of the nobility remains problematic. As a traditional estate defined by birth, the nobility's survival is usually explained in historical research by its capacity of economic adaptation, the reception of a certain degree of professional motivation in other occupations, and the support of monarchs and their governments. While some modernization took place, according to these studies, the German nobility's mentality remained wedded to centuries-old traditions. Within a society affected by industrialization, parliamentarization, urbanization, nationalization and so many other major processes, the nobility's mindset would have remained the same. Of course, this is what the nobility's family histories, autobiographies and reflections about the noble estate from the end of the nineteenth and during the twentieth century tell us as well.⁴

However, William D. Godsey in his monograph on the German Imperial nobility around 1800 raises doubts as to whether the noble mentality was really so unaffected by societal changes during the nineteenth century. In an excellent case study he shows how the Imperial nobility adapted its historical memory to the nationalization of German society, thus preserving its preeminent place within it. Traditionally, the Imperial nobility's historical memory had been based on pedigree, ancestry via the maternal and paternal lines. Having the right pedigree allowed noblemen and women access to cathedral chapters with their large fortunes. Around 1800 the cathedral chapters were closed down and pedigree lost its importance while at the same time nationalism gained significance in society. Following this shift during the first half of the nineteenth century one can witness that the paternal line alone became dominant in the historical memory of the Imperial nobility. The maternal line was largely forgotten. Tracing one's paternal ancestors back to the middle ages, instead,

3 See, for example, J. Kocka, *Das lange 19. Jahrhundert. Arbeit, Nation und bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 2001) 98-138.

4 See, for example, the autobiographies studied by M. Funck and S. Malinowski, 'Geschichte von oben. Autobiographien als Quelle einer Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Adels in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik', *Historische Anthropologie*, VII (1999) 236-270; *Ibidem*, "'Charakter ist alles!' Erziehungsideale und Erziehungspraktiken in deutschen Adelsfamilien des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts', *Jahrbuch für historische Bildungsforschung*, VI (2000) 71-91. Also, the more general introduction by H. Reif, *Adel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (München, 1999).

became a way of linking the nobility to national history and memory.⁵ Thus, changes in society, in this case nationalization, resulted in a partial redefinition of the Imperial nobility's mentality. Godsey cautions the reader: 'our own understanding of nobility has become so different from what was earlier prevalent that it tends to be projected back in time.' But: 'Noble identity was not eternal and unchanging, depended decisively on its context, and existed in relation to the whole. When the frame of reference changed, then so did self-understanding.'⁶

With Godsey's case study in mind, we should be careful to imagine any group of the German nobility in the nineteenth and early twentieth century whose mentality remained fixed while the world around it was changing. Historians may have trusted the German nobility's claim to continuity too much and paid too little attention to changes in their notions of nobility. Yet, at the same time, this raises the question why the nobility did not transform along the lines ('frame of reference') that social history proposes, from estate of birth to class? This article will argue that in the perception of the nobility class society was only one possible outcome after the dissolution of the old estates based on birth (*Geburtsstände*). But there were other possible perspectives in society formulated during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. To be precise, by the mid-nineteenth century the nobility in Germany was envisioning and striving for a future society that was based on professional estates (*Berufsstände*). This was the 'frame of reference' (Godsey) in which the German nobility redefined itself and ascribed itself a new societal function. The emergence of a class society, on the other hand, was something it feared, condemned and fought. Thus, the findings of this article do not only shed light on the history of the nobility, but also on perceptions of social change during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in general.⁷

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The argument will proceed in three steps. First this article will take a look at how the nobility in Germany imagined society – the supposed advantages of a society based on professional estates instead of classes. The second part will examine the debate about the nature of the German nobility and possible reforms during the middle of the nineteenth century. The third part will describe new perceptions of the nobility that emerged and persisted into the twentieth century.

Imagining society

The German people are made neither for despotism nor for anarchy, its history teaches this on every page. We are probably not at fault, when we ascribe this advantage to the

5 W.D. Godsey, *Nobles and nation in Central Europe. Free imperial knights in the age of revolution 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 2004) 48-71.

6 *Ibidem*, 10, 140.

7 Dovetailing with findings of P. Nolte, *Die Ordnung der deutschen Gesellschaft. Selbstentwurf und Selbstbeschreibung im 20. Jahrhundert* (München, 2000)

still not died away consciousness of the necessity of organizing society according to estates (*Stände*). ... It was a temporary infatuation, unnatural to the character of our nation, when *one* estate wanted to be all by itself.⁸

This quote from a prominent nineteenth-century nobleman and historian from southern Germany shows several characteristics of the nobility's perception of social order, at which this contribution will look, and which can be found among different regional and confessional noble groups. Firstly, talking about society in these circles usually involved dichotomies. There is one desirable way in which society can be ordered, any other would cause chaos and most likely violence. Secondly, if society seems disordered in the present, there is always a possibility that it will evolve into the desired direction in the future.

172 During the nineteenth century, the negative counter-image to the nobility's envisioned social order changed. At first, France and the French Revolution appeared threatening, but towards the middle of the century it was the liberals' social vision that members of the nobility all over Germany fought for. By the end of the nineteenth and during the first half of the twentieth century socialist visions of society appeared most frightening. When talking about liberal and socialist models of social order, noblemen did not argue rationally by pointing out advantages and disadvantages of the competing models. Instead, these models were condemned with a stereotypical set of words and images. The competing visions were first of all deemed unnatural. Supposedly, materialism and atheism were the constituent parts of liberal and socialist visions. The individual would be unbounded in its interests and actions from family, tradition or anything else, thus encouraging a dangerous egoism. If society developed in this direction, the result would be continuous violent conflict between social groups.⁹

The concept of a society divided into professional estates (*Berufsstände*) proposed by the nobility, however, was not a particularly noble one. Instead, it can be called conservative. Therefore, it is important to note that the adherents to this model did not only come from the nobility but also from the educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*), from craftsmen threatened in their occupations by industrialization, and

8 K.H. Frhr. Roth v. Schreckenstein, *Geschichte der ehemaligen freien Reichsritterschaft in Schwaben, Franken und am Rheinstrome* (2 vols; Tübingen, 1859), I, 12.

9 G. Heinickel, *Adelsreformideen in Preußen. Zwischen bürokratischem Absolutismus und demokratisierendem Konstitutionalismus (1806-1854)* (Berlin, 2014) 654-656, 664; M. Seelig, 'Der Kampf gegen die Moderne. Krisenwahrnehmung und -bewältigung im "Deutschen Adelsblatt" um 1900', in: M. Grundwald and U. Puschner, eds, *Krisenwahrnehmung in Deutschland um 1900. Zeitschriften als Foren der Umbruchszeit im wilhelminischen Reich* (Bern, 2010) 451-476; M. Raasch, *Der Adel auf dem Feld der Politik. Das Beispiel der Zentrumsparterie in der Bismarckära (1871-1890)* (Düsseldorf, 2015) 181-252; S. Wehking, 'Zum politischen und sozialen Selbstverständnis preußischer Junker', *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte*, CXXI (1985) 395-398. In general, see C. Nonn, *Das 19 und 20. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 2007) 129-162.

from the peasantry, although it is of course difficult to say how many people exactly believed in it. Nevertheless, support for this model of social order created alliances between the nobility and other groups in society that felt threatened by the social and economic changes in the nineteenth century and saw no promise in Marxist theory. Moreover, talking about one model is somewhat flawed, as there were minor differences between Catholic and Protestant versions of the model, and it was always something one aspired to, but in reality never really achieved. Whenever political reforms were aimed at reordering parliamentary representation according to professional estates, it quickly became evident how difficult it was to delineate those estates (aside from the nobility). This was a problem that persisted until the 1930s.¹⁰ Nevertheless, one can describe the main constituents that formed a frame of reference in relation to which all groups of the nobility redefined themselves during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The counter-model of professional estates (*Berufsstände*) was based on the belief that while individuals could act virtuously, the masses never could. The people, therefore, should be subdivided into groups. Individuals should always be attached to the body of society by the means of strong patriarchal families and estates. ‘True freedom can only be experienced within an estate (...), identity is never individuality, instead, it is embedded within families and estates.’¹¹ Besides individual rights, everyone has duties towards his family, estate and the body politic. Within the family, the estate and the state, individuals would face hierarchies, which they should obey. Natural hierarchies cause differences between humans. Within the system of professional estates, however, these are no longer based on birth but on occupation. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the advantage of professional estates in contrast to birth estates was their adaptability to market circumstances – they could be considered as signs of social differentiation instead of socialist polarization. Also, they opened up avenues of social mobility, as children could choose an occupation different from their father’s. Each professional estate was to fulfill a function for the organically imagined and grown society. If every estate worked properly, social harmony would be achieved and the commonweal better served.¹² And noblemen strongly believed that they would be a fundamental part of this new society based on pro-

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¹⁰ M. Noe, *Berufsständische Elemente in den deutschen Staatsverfassungen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt, 2000); H. Spenkuch, ‘Herrenhaus und Staatsrat in der preußischen Verfassungsgeschichte (1849/54-1933)’. ‘“Familiientag der ostelbischen Junker” und “Futterkrippe für politische Nullen”’, in: Bundesrat, ed., *Der Bundesrat im ehemaligen preußischen Herrenhaus* (Berlin, 2002) 43-61.

¹¹ A. Schildt, ‘Konservatives Menschenbild. Konstanz und Wandel’, in: B. Schmidt, ed., *Menschenrechte und Menschenbilder von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Hamburg, 2006) 224.

¹² Raasch, *Adel auf dem Feld*, 181-252; Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung*, 35-42, 74-84; D. Avraham, *In der Krise der Moderne. Der preußische Konservatismus im Zeitalter gesellschaftlicher Veränderung 1848-1876* (Göttingen, 2008) 36-131; M. Greiffenhagen, *Das Dilemma des Konservatismus in Deutschland* (München, 1971) 200-211; P. Kondylis, *Konservatismus. Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang* (Stuttgart, 1986) 262-272, 414.

fessional estates. Thus, Joseph Freiherr von Laßberg wrote, with the revolutionary events in mind, in early 1849

That some say today: the nobility has been abolished and: there will be no more noblemen in the next generation, only makes me laugh and sounds to me as if somebody would say: there will be a time where there will be no more tailors and no more shoemakers and no more millers and no more weavers.¹³

For Laßberg, being a nobleman was an occupation alongside others, all necessary for the proper functioning of everyday life and society.

This new societal frame of reference to which conservatives in general and the different groups of the German nobility in specific ascribed and whose realization they considered possible until the 1930s,¹⁴ had the advantage of accepting the dissolution of the traditional birth estate society (*Geburtsstände*) of the early modern period through the governmental reforms of the early nineteenth century and the economic changes which started to have impact by the 1850s. It was an updated conservative counter-vision to the socialist and liberal visions of society. However, it also had a distinct disadvantage from the nobility's point of view. Traditionally, being noble was a claim to universal leadership in society. But which function, which profession, were noblemen to take up in a society based on professional estates?

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Reforming the nobility in Germany

During the first sixty years of the nineteenth century, there was a lively debate in Germany concerning a reform of the nobility. The fundamental belief within and beyond the nobility was that the early modern estate would have to adapt to the circumstances after the French Revolution and its effects on the German states. Many measures were discussed and some put into practice. But by and large, all steps taken by governments towards reform did not succeed in the long run and were ambiguous at best. The kingdom of Württemberg tried to turn its public officials into a building stone of a loyal nobility. Thus, if a public official was bourgeois, he became noble for life automatically upon attaining a certain rank in the administration. The same applied to the military. However, this practice did not get rid of the old nobility and some of the newly ennobled officials were reluctant to use their new title anyway. A true service nobility never emerged. In Prussia in the 1840s, Fredrik William IV contemplated an association nobility with landownership and an introduction of primogeniture for estates and titles. This was supposed to turn the nobility into a gener-

¹³ Cited after K.S. Bader, 'Zur Charakteristik des Reichsfreiherrn Joseph von Laßberg', *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte*, V (1941) 127.

¹⁴ For the persistent thinking about social order in terms of professional estates until the mid-twentieth century, see Nolte, *Die Ordnung*; Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung*, 78-84.

ally more wealthy and, thus, politically more influential social group. However, his plans met with resistance from his government and the nobility. In the end, he never achieved his aims.¹⁵ After governmental attempts to reform the nobility had failed, a redefinition could only come from the nobility itself. The main task was to redefine the profession of the nobleman.

Reading through the proposals for a reform of the nobility put forward by different social groups, it becomes clear that the discussions revolved around various topics.¹⁶ What can be called the 'political' and the 'moral' or 'virtuous occupation' of the nobility appear to have been the two most important concepts for the future definition of the nobility in Germany – two ideas that will be explained within their specific contexts, as they reflected a number of changes that German society was experiencing during the middle of the century. Prior to the 1840s the nobility had been envisioned politically within the *societas civilis*. In this society, the nobility had been an intermediary between the ruler and the ruled. The political occupation proposed for the nobility within this society was to be the mediator between the king and his government on the one hand, and the people on the other. This seemed necessary, as the first tended towards absolutism and the latter towards despotism. Large landed property was to provide noblemen with the necessary means for an 'independence of character' to serve the mediator's role.¹⁷ However, the dissolution of the birth estate society and the *societas civilis* by the middle of the century made clear that it would be hard to imagine a nobility that was not part of the general population. During the 1840s and 50s noble authors and their bourgeoisie supporters started to abandon the nobility's role as a mediator and redefined its political role. In his *Natural history of the German people*, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl associated the nobility and the peasantry with persistency and the bourgeoisie and workers with movement. According to Riehl, the task of the nobility in politics was to ensure that old institutions were not abandoned too quickly by the government in response to the pressure of the bourgeoisie and working class for change.¹⁸ Following this idea the government was no longer in opposition to the nobility as a mediator, but became itself the mediator between interests in a society to which the nobility now belonged. This new political definition had a number of implications. For one thing, it provided the nobility with a new argument to be leaders of the peasantry. Its leadership would stem from its better education and its wider horizon, and it would be based on supposed common interests, not upon superiority. By adopting this definition, two options for voicing political opinion would be possible, and here the differences between noble groups in Germany came into play. One could either become a bulwark in front of the throne,

15 B. Wunder, 'Der württembergische Personaladel (1806-1913)', *Württembergische Zeitschrift für Landesgeschichte*, XL (1981) 494-518; Heinickel, *Adelsreformideen*.

16 For a more in depth discussion of the following ideas see Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung*, 42-56.

17 M. Graf v. Moltke, *Ueber den Adel und dessen Verhältniß zum Bürgerstande* (Hamburg, 1830) 57.

18 W.H. Riehl, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1854) 125.

protecting everything that seemed organically grown throughout human history, or one could become the spokesperson of the province/periphery, rather independent from and in opposition to a modernizing and centralizing government. The first option was more or less, but not always, chosen by Prussian nobles, the latter in Westphalia, where Catholic belief created suspicion against the Berlin government, and by Hanoverian nobles, who were unhappy about Bismarck's deposition of their monarch.¹⁹ Finally, redefining the nobility as conservative by nature made a noble liberalism in Germany unlikely. This may explain why there was no real noble liberalism after the 1860s.²⁰

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Concerning the 'moral' or 'virtuous occupation' of the nobility, one finds two, often intermingled, models in the reform programs. On the one hand, noblemen suggested that there was a set of specific noble virtues to which other estates could only aspire. The other model was one of a nobility of virtues (*Tugendadel*). In this case, noblemen represented common virtues, but they embodied them to a higher degree – the nobility was the 'paradigmatic estate of virtue and simplicity'.²¹ However, when trying to define specific noble virtues, authors constantly ran into trouble. Replying to a question of what constituted the 'chivalrous mind', Friedrich Baron de La Motte Fouqué replied: 'Indeed, we should have thought that the meaning of it is so evident to every noblemen, so clearly defined, that a definition would be unnecessary.' Nevertheless, he provided a list of characteristics: 'a feeling of honor in the strictest sense', 'valor and steadfastness in times of danger', 'fighting for the commonweal and the fatherland', 'reverence of the memory of ones ancestors', 'attachment to truth and justice', and 'religiousness and morality'. Yet, at the end of the list he admitted that all estates should adhere to these virtues. They were not specifically noble after all. Thus, whoever tried to define specific noble virtues, usually ended up with common ones. Noblemen, authors insisted, just had to cultivate them to higher perfection.²² This would turn the nobility into something special in society. In comparison, it was easier to define what threatened this moral occupation. Frequently, jobs in the crafts, banking or industry were regarded as promoting selfishness and materialism, whereas the traditional noble jobs in the church, military, administration or farming of landed property supposedly promoted virtuous behavior and an interest in the commonweal.²³

Of course, redefining the nobility as a professional estate whose occupation in society was to be a conservative force and a moral and virtuous role model did not

19 Raasch, *Adel auf dem Feld*, 186-231.

20 C. Dipper, 'Adelsliberalismus in Deutschland', in: D. Langewiesche, ed., *Liberalismus im 19. Jahrhundert. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich* (Göttingen, 1988) 172-192.

21 NN, 'Sammtverein des teutschen Adels, zum Artikel: "An den Adel teutscher Nation"', *Zeitschrift für den deutschen Adel*, I (1840) 338.

22 F. de La Motte Fouqué, 'Nachschrift der Redaction', *Zeitschrift für den deutschen Adel*, I (1840) 67.

23 NN, 'Wonach sollen wir streben?', *Zeitschrift für den deutschen Adel*, II (1841) 21, 29.

create a lot of difference between the nobility and the rest of the population at first sight. However, this redefinition had significant advantages. On the one hand, it allowed noblemen to pursue careers in very different fields – something that was necessary with regard to the heterogeneity of the German nobility. Moreover, it did not detach the nobility from the rest of the population and create a cause for envy. Everybody could pursue a noble occupation, but only noblemen had the duty to do so. Finally, as Count Carl von Hülsen claimed, not every nobleman could be perfect, but he should strive to be.²⁴ Thus, individuals could become exemplary representatives of the estate, and if a nobleman did not live up to the ideal, it was a personal problem, not a problem of the estate. Or, as Laurenz Hannibal Fischer a supporter of the nobility aptly phrased it:

mainly [the book] is not about *noblemen* (*Adeliche*), because of those one could certainly tell some juicy follies (...); it deals with the *noble estate* (*Adelsstand*), with its characteristics as a *moral institution* (...) I am putting much effort into providing a definition: of what the nobility really is, should be and can be.²⁵

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The idea of nobility in Fischer's writing was detached from one whose membership was defined by birth – nobility had become a cultural idea. To be a true nobleman, one had to follow the ideal example.

In a society ordered by occupational estates, just as in a class society, the nobility could have dissolved, according to its occupation or wealth. This was especially true after governmental attempts at redefining the nobility in German states as either large landowners or government officials had largely failed. The dissolution of the birth estate society and the *societas civilis* caused additional troubles for determining the nobility's role in society. However, the idea of specific noble occupations, independent of what noblemen actually did for a living, countered these problems within the system of occupational estates (*Berufsstände*). Being noble was redefined as an occupation above all occupations. Anyone could aspire to a virtuous life and be politically conservative of course – if everyone did, so much the better for society. But it was the noble estate's duty to adhere to these principles. To have this professional estate was a necessary precondition for a harmonious and well-functioning newly ordered society. However, all this only worked if the move towards a class society could be stopped. Then, this redefinition of the nobility also tells us something about its experience and imagined ability to interfere with social change at large.

24 Count C. v. Hülsen, 'Einige Bemerkungen über den Aufsatz: "An den Adel deutscher Nation" – von einem Bürgerlichen', *Zeitschrift für den deutschen Adel*, III (1842) 219.

25 L.H. Fischer, *Der teutsche Adel in der Vorzeit, Gegenwart und Zukunft vom Standpunkte des Bürgerthums betrachtet* (2 vols; Frankfurt, 1852), I, XII-XIII.

The new concept of nobility

If one looks at a wide array of sources from the nobility in Germany, a definition of the estate emerges from the debate about conservative politics and virtuousness from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. It consisted of four sequential parts. Firstly, nobleman and women had to be virtuous. This, secondly, institutionalized them as role models in society. Being such shining examples, thirdly, constituted their claim to leadership in society. Fourthly, this leadership was to be exercised for the benefit of the commonweal and not for personal satisfaction. Looking closely at these parts and the consequences they had, it is also possible to pay attention to regional and confessional variations within the German nobility.

178 1. Virtuousness. If one creates a catalogue of virtues noblemen claimed to uphold at different instances, it contains numerous items. For example: loyalty to God, the monarch and the family, frugality, a love for truth and justice or upholding religion at all times. More frequently, however, virtues were not clearly defined, as demonstrated in an exclamation by Max Freiherr von Woellwarth shortly after the First World War:

Especially in these times, it is the most prominent task of our estate to nurture and maintain the chivalrous virtues, to turn them into an integral and common property of the members of our estate and to control their observance.²⁶

The unspecific nature of this definition and its numerous virtues emphasize that the ‘chivalrous virtuousness’ was a fairly open and flexible concept, adaptable to changing times and different regional and confessional nobilities.

Thus, Markus Raasch has emphasized the importance of the idea of the *miles christianus* for the Catholic nobility especially between 1860 and the 1880s.²⁷ Being a prime example of devout Catholicism was one way of proving one’s virtuousness, especially at a time when that confession was under attack by Bismarck and the National-Liberals in the War of Culture (*Kulturkampf*) in Germany. The *miles christianus* also utilized the political options that the redefinition of nobility provided: he was conservative, fighting against a government on the wrong track. Religion equally played an important role for the Protestant Prussian noblemen’s self-definition, although religion may have diminished in importance more quickly.

Another set of noble virtues can be found in the work of Stephan Malinowski and Marcus Funck.²⁸ Studying a vast number of autobiographies written almost exclu-

²⁶ Archive of the St. Georgenverein (AStG), Bü. 139, Proposal of Max baron v. Woellwarth at the St. Georgentag, Essingen, 18 March 1922.

²⁷ Raasch, *Adel auf dem Feld*, 192-219.

²⁸ Funck and Malinowski, ‘Geschichte von oben’; Idem, “‘Charakter ist alles!’”; S. Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer. Sozialer Niedergang und politische Radikalisierung im deutschen Adel zwischen Kaiserreich und NS-Staat* (Berlin, 2003) 47-118.

sively after the First World War, they identified a set of noble virtues that constantly reappeared. One was an ideal of family that went beyond the nuclear family and included basically everyone with whom one was connected through paternal ancestry, living as well as dead. A second virtue was a strong attachment to landed property and rural existence. Most frequently, this was contrasted with negative images or even hatred of cities and urban life. The village population in the autobiographies seems attached to noblemen and rooted in tradition, whereas the workers in the cities appear uprooted and unattached to anything but revolutionary socialism. A strong emphasis on the formation of a character in opposition to learning formed a third virtue. Real leaders were not created by schools. In order to be a leader, one did not need education, but a strong will and commitment. The fourth virtue which frequently appeared was frugality, which was again contrasted with the opulence of the bourgeoisie and Jews in particular. However, in opposition to Funck and Malinowski one can claim that the virtues were not specifically noble or exclusive to that estate – they can be found in conservative ideology from noblemen and bourgeois alike. And the propagators of this ideology usually claimed that everyone should follow these ‘conservative’ ideas.²⁹ Noblemen in their autobiographies presented themselves as principal representatives of these concepts. But they also frequently claimed that their virtuousness was attempts free of any traces of wanting to create a special caste and ‘far removed from ridiculous junker pride’.³⁰

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2. Role models. In the introduction to his family’s history Sigmund baron of Crailsheim claimed that the nobility ‘should be a guiding example in knowledge, noble spirit and other merits to the other estates’.³¹ Pronouncements like this can be found frequently, especially in family histories and obituaries. One regularly encounters family histories proclaiming that the deceased were simply not good noblemen or women. Instead, one female member of the Schilling von Canstatt family was described as ‘an example and archetype of an active, unselfish and faithful German mother’.³² She, thus, was representative of a nation, not an estate. For men, war was the best opportunity to be a role model of virtuousness. As officers in the army they guided their men into combat, supposedly ‘loved’, ‘honored’, and in case they perished ‘deeply mourned’ by their subordinates.³³ The emphasis placed on the noble death toll during the First World War was another way of claiming that noblemen had been exemplary. Thus, being a role model was always connected to action, some-

²⁹ Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung*, 109-167.

³⁰ C.W.L.F. Stocker, *Familien-Geschichte der Freiherren von Gemmingen* (Heilbronn, 1895) IX; Archiwum Panstwowe w Szczecinie (APS), Archiwum rodu Dewitz-Krebs, #26, Eine deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft, Berlin March 1880.

³¹ S. Frhr. v. Crailsheim, *Die Reichsfreiherren von Crailsheim* (München, 1905) xlviii.

³² E. Frhr. Schilling v. Canstatt, *Geschlechtsbeschreibung der Familie Schilling von Canstatt* (Heidelberg, 1905) 342.

³³ APS – Archiwum rodu Dewitz-Krebs, #80; any Family news of the v. Dewitz, 1914/15, 4-5, 9.

thing that can also be seen in the idea of the *miles christianus*. The list of possible activities for Catholic noble role models is long: participating in pilgrimages, protesting against the abolition of papal suzerainty in Italy and financially assisting the pope, fighting the *Kulturkampf* laws in Germany politically, supporting its 'victims' and countermeasures financially, organizing Catholic newspapers and associations as well as presiding over the latter.³⁴

Anyone could be a role model, but the difference was that it was the nobility's duty, its occupation. But there were other ways to show superior virtuousness and to claim a crucial difference between the nobility and the rest of the population. To take just one example: the conservative concept of family provided various means for the nobility to claim superiority. For instance, the Schilling von Canstatt family proclaimed that 'the sense of family is the most basic sense of all senses for the fatherland'.³⁵ Publishing one's family history proved this. Since it was possible for many noblemen to trace their families' history back to the Middle Ages, a time to which hardly any bourgeois families could trace their ancestry, the nobility appeared superior. Also, starting in the 1850s and gaining momentum towards the end of the century, nobles founded family associations. The aim was to bring all family members into closer contact. Foundations were created to collect money for the publication of family histories, for supporting poorer (most often female) members of the family and to pay for the education of sons.³⁶ Forming these institutions was another way to prove the leadership of the nobility in adherence to the conservative family ideal. By the late 1920s these associations and family histories were becoming more popular with non-noble families too, which was regarded as a positive sign by the nobility.

Where all kinds of forces are trying to destroy the family, the occupation with family history obviously signifies a remembrance of the moral necessity of the family and its role as the germ cell of the state and for the life of the fatherland.³⁷

3. Claim to leadership. The nobility believed that superior and exemplary virtuousness would result in the acknowledgement of its leadership.³⁸ However, with regard to this aspect, one can detect a difference between the nobility in southwestern Germany and in Prussia. This may be due in part to the closer relationship between the Prussian monarchs and their nobility in comparison to, for example, the Grand Duchy of Bade or the Kingdom of Württemberg. Whereas nobles in these territories simply believed that the population acknowledged their role, Prussian nobles doubted

34 Raasch, *Adel auf dem Feld*, 192.

35 Schilling v. Canstatt, *Geschlechtsbeschreibung*, iii.

36 For more detail, see Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung*, 173-200.

37 *Nachrichtenblatt des Verbandes des Geschlechts v. Brauchitsch*, XXVIII (1930) 1.

38 Stocker, *Familien-Geschichte*, ix.

this. Instead, they relied more heavily on the government and monarch in recognizing their claim:

It is utterly wrong if many people believe (...) that the nobility is outdated (...) Unfortunately, the majority of our contemporaries are further away than ever from understanding the necessity of an aristocracy and its influence on all people! Aristocracy means rulership of the best.³⁹

Considering this remark, the defeat of Germany in the First World War could have been perceived as a failure of the noble model of leadership or as the result of a lack of noble virtuousness. Yet, the nobility managed to interpret the downfall of the monarchy and the revolution of 1918 as the failure of others. The main reason for all the troubles, they claimed, was the lack of virtuousness within the German population. It seemed to have lost 'morals', 'faith in God', 'loyalty' and 'honor'.⁴⁰ This idea worked perfectly together with the 'stab-in-the-back' legend, which suggested that it had not been the French, English and American armies which defeated Germany in 1918, but the revolution from inside. From this point of view, the nobility's task in the Weimar Republic was to help to re-inculcate the people with virtues. Once they had regained those, they would also acknowledge noblemen as their leaders again.

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4. Caring for the commonweal. In an invitation in 1880 to join the *Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft*, a national noble association, the authors stated that the real occupation of the nobility is 'to put its forces, above and beyond the private pursuit of income which the other estates follow, but to put them at the disposal of the fatherland and the commonweal – thus, to form an estate for the public welfare primarily.'⁴¹ This was the main noble task. But yet again, a difference within the nobility is apparent. Prussians promised to employ 'property and blood in the service of the fatherland for the throne and altar'.⁴² This defined their role as forming a defensive cordon around conservative institutions. The people, rural or urban, were absent from this description of the nobility's task. On the other hand, in southwestern Germany nobles more often claimed that they wanted to serve 'their fellow men and the state'.⁴³ They wanted to keep in touch with the rural people in particular. This difference, however, largely disappeared after 1918. With the resignation of the monarchs, the experience of fighting a war together with the people in the trenches, and the proclaimed goal to get the people (*Volks*) back on the conservative track against the now

³⁹ APS, Archivum rodu Dewitz-Krebs, #80, speech of Kurt v. Dewitz at the family gathering, Berlin, 5/6 November 1912, 10.

⁴⁰ AStG, #139, dinner speech at the meeting of the St. Georgenverein, Stuttgart (23 April 1921) 1.

⁴¹ APS, Archivum rodu Dewitz-Krebs, #26, Eine deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft, Berlin March 1880.

⁴² V.J.V.D. v. Eickstedt, *Fortsetzung des von dem Oberst Carl August Ludwig v. Eickstedt verfaßten und von demselben 1860 herausgegebenen Familienbuchs des dynastischen Geschlechts der v. Eickstedt* (Stettin, 1887) 439.

⁴³ Crailsheim, *Reichsfreiherrn*, xlviii.

democratically elected governments, the Prussian nobles also started to emphasize their attachment to the *Volks*. In contrast, Wilhelm II and the Prussian monarchy diminished in importance.⁴⁴

Before 1918, very little discussion on the question of which jobs could best serve the commonweal took place. Going into politics was one option. Of course, it is easy to claim that the policies pursued by noblemen in the German parliaments were guided by their own private interests. However, in practice they usually aimed at stabilizing a traditional order and, thus, from their point of view, in the long run everyone would benefit from a more harmonious society – of which they undoubtedly were an important component. Another way of serving the commonweal was to become a member of clubs, many of which by the end of the nineteenth century had turned into pressure groups. Seeking leadership positions in these associations was a way of claiming that the people actually regarded the nobility as a natural elite. From joining and developing the Catholic movement in the 1860s, to the Agrarian League (*Bund der Landwirte*), to debates on how to regain leadership status in all kinds of conservative associations after 1918, social life played an important role in caring for what was understood as the common interest.⁴⁵ Besides these, social commitment and the work and presidency in welfare organizations were means, especially for noblewomen, to underline their commitment to the benefit of larger society. Autobiographies present a multitude of stories of how the nobility cared for the peasants and workers in ‘their’ villages.⁴⁶ By 1900 noblewomen also frequently used their reputation and social connections to mobilize the public and collect money for social purposes on a regional or national level.⁴⁷

Noblemen also needed jobs to cover their living expenses, but preferably also supported the commonweal. Working in industry, banking and the crafts appeared to promote egoism, therefore jobs that seemed to be in alignment with the common interest of society was preferred. Thus, the strong presence of German noblemen in the state administration and the military can not only be explained as a ‘strategy of visibility’ – an argument that has been put forward by Heinz Reif.⁴⁸ Officers and public officials also seemed to be in a key place to promote the commonweal.⁴⁹ Finally, the question of the large landed estates was more tricky: were they not a sign of individual noble wealth? A number of arguments could counter that claim and attest to the

44 Landeshauptarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt, Außenstelle Wernigerode (LHASA-WR), Rep. H Frankleben, #1279, speech by Dietrich v. Bose at the family gathering, Merseburg, 8 October 1927.

45 Raasch, *Adel auf dem Feld*, xxx.

46 Malinowski, *König*, 111-115.

47 M. Wienfort, ‘Gesellschaftsdamen, Gutsfrauen und Rebelinnen. Adelige Frauen in Deutschland 1890-1939’, in: E. Conze and M. Wienfort, eds, *Adel und Moderne. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Köln, 2004) 181-203.

48 Reif, *Adel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, 25-26.

49 On the interpretation of these occupations as serving the commonweal, see also E. Frie, ‘Preußische Identität im Wandel’, *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCLXXII (2001) 353-375.

benefit of these estates to society as a whole. For one thing, the strong emphasis on the necessity of self-sufficiency of the fatherland in terms of food production was one way of explaining that large estates served everybody in the country. The protection of forest, especially by entails, was a second argument. Society needed these resources and in turn forests need long term planning and careful nurturing. Finally, it was argued that entails were beneficial for the population of the immediate surrounding area. It was proclaimed that:

On only 500 of the approximate 1300 entailed properties in Prussia, there existed 167 collections of art, 154 libraries, 42 schools for infants and cripples, 2 orphan houses, 82 homes for the poor and old, 46 hospitals, 66 nurses' stations, 8 department stores for employees and workers and 79 foundations for church and school purposes. It would certainly be interesting to find out (...) how many of these facilities can be found on 500 un-entailed properties. Most likely not a single one!⁵⁰

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Property was an obligation and not created for personal indulgence. Therefore, large estates from the nobility's perspective were also capable of serving the commonweal, as long as they were managed correctly.

Following the strong identification of the commonweal with positions in the government administration and the military, the founding of the Republic and the Versailles Treaty in 1919 created serious problems. On the one hand, the military was drastically downsized to 100,000 men. This left a large number of officers, many of them noblemen, unemployed. Also, it was felt that due to their conscience and the perceived illegitimacy of the Weimar Republic they could not serve the new democratically elected governments as public officials. Thus, some left their jobs. However, because of the need to find work, noblemen now declared that it was possible to serve the commonweal in any occupation – it only took the right attitude. As Albrecht Freiherr von Stotzingen said: 'any job performed with an ideal, truly noble attitude, can be ennobled, any job exercised only for acquiring money with a base attitude, can make the bearer disdainful, unworthy of his noble character.'⁵¹

Of course, this model of nobility was a stylization. Not all members of the nobility fitted the description empirically. But after it had been turned from an estate into a cultural idea, this did not really matter. If somebody did not act according to the ideal, it was his personal failure, not the problem of the model. He or she just was not a 'true' noble. Besides, there were sufficient examples of noblemen and women who lived according to the ideal (at least in public). Even the famous German sociologist George Simmel claimed around 1900 that the nobility should not be meas-

⁵⁰ Cited after Malinowski, *König*, 417.

⁵¹ Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLAK), 69 Oberndorff, A109, Comment of Albrecht Frhr. v. Stotzingen at the 2nd meeting of the members of the Verein katholischer Edelleute Südwestdeutschlands, Beuron, 15 May 1923, 6; *Nachrichtenblatt für die Familien von Hake, Hacke, Hagke*, VIII (1932) 91.

ured by its average members but by its top representatives.⁵² To claim that the nobility tended to act selfishly as employers or politicians also misses the core of its self-understanding. From the nobility's image of society and understanding of nobility many things that tended to favor the nobility were also regarded as being in the best interest of society as a whole. At the same time, the difference between the nobility and the rest of the population was only the claim of a specific duty of superior adherence to conservative virtues and morals. There was no longer a claim to characteristics that only the nobility possessed. This claim could of course be contested. But, as pointed out when addressing the idea of family, history provided the means to support the assertion of noble superiority. If others tried to emulate the nobility, that was not a problem, because from a conservative point of view this would help to stabilize society.

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Conclusion

During the first half of the nineteenth century the traditional social order of estates based on birth (*Geburtsstände*) was dissolved in Germany. That posed a serious problem for a nobility that did not want to lose its status and identity as a special group within society. At the same time, the future ordering principles of society, the way it would and should evolve, were unclear and contested. Some, especially socialists, envisioned a class society – in this society the nobility would have been ranked according to what it possessed. Conservatives on the other hand regarded a renewed estate society (*Berufsstände*) as the desirable aim, this time, however, based on occupation and not on birth. The nobility in Germany subscribed to the later model and in a debate around the middle of the century and came up with two ideas for its own within the professional estate society. One was to be the political representative of persistence; the other to be the main exponent of morality and virtuousness. The chosen model of social order and both these professions, as a matter of fact, turned the German nobility into a socially and politically conservative group. At the same time, this conservatism was flexible enough to incorporate different regional and confessional groups of the nobility. Politically, conservative ideas could be used to support and shield the government or to attack it. During the last third of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the newly developed cultural ideal of nobility was explicated in four parts: noblemen and women had to be virtuous persons – this was understood in a thoroughly conservative way. As such they would be role models in society and also be acknowledged as leaders. Finally, the nobility should support the commonweal. Again, this model was flexible enough to incorporate different historical groups of the nobility.

52 G. Simmel, 'Exkurs über den Adel', in: Idem, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Frankfurt, 1992) 816-831.

In the end, the nobility in Germany was able to survive into the twentieth century as a distinct group, because the nineteenth century did not witness the transition from estates of birth into class society. Instead, the nobility adapted to its own vision of a future society and thereby fundamentally redefined itself. Historians should, therefore, pay particular attention to the openness and contested nature of the development of a new social order from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards and the nobility's role within that process of redefinition.

Daniel Menning

Redefining nobility

Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

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The nobility in Germany should have disappeared in a society based on class during the nineteenth century, according to social historians. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, it still existed as a distinct social group. It is argued that, from the point of view of contemporaries, the transformation from a estate of birth into a class society was only one of the possible outcomes of the social transformations during the nineteenth century. Noblemen did not ascribe to the idea of a class society. Instead, they perceived social change as heading towards a social order based on professional estates (*Berufsstände*). This was an inherently conservative vision that allowed the German nobility to create alliances with other likeminded groups. Within the framework of professional estates, the nobility reinvented itself and its role in society. The article, thus, does not only draw attention to the nobility's redefinition but also calls traditional historical narratives about social change into question.

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