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Martin Wrede

Nobles and nations in modern Europe. A reply to Paul Janssens

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In *Virtus*, XXIV (2017) verscheen een recensie van de hand van Paul Janssens over de bundel *Adel und Nation in der Neuzeit. Hierarchie, Egalität und Loyalität, 16.–20. Jahrhundert*. Beihefte der Francia, LXXXI (Ostfildern, 2016), onder redactie van Martin Wrede en Laurent Bourquin. Namens de auteurs schreef Martin Wrede een reactie op deze recensie.

In his review of the collective volume *Adel und Nation in der Neuzeit* (*Virtus*, XXIV (2017) 244-248), published by Laurent Bourquin and myself, the reviewer Paul Janssens comes to the gratifying conclusion that this might, in fact, be a 'valuable volume' ('waardevolle bundel'). However, he seems to think that the book itself and what is of scholarly relevance among the individual contributions came about against the intentions of the editors as they were laid out in the introduction. In his detailed presentation of the introductory text, Janssens, however, falls short of grasping what the introduction really is about and what its author is arguing.

The introduction and thus the volume itself by no means want to demonstrate the incompatibility of nobility and national consciousness or patriotism. Quite the opposite is the case. The first sentence of the book quoted by Janssens does indeed read: 'Nobility and nation, one might think, do not really fit together' ('Adel und Nation, so könnte man meinen, passen eigentlich nicht recht zueinander'). But this does not express the affirmation of a fact; it is a provocative statement to call attention to the subject and to define the framework for the ensuing debate. Janssens, by the way, shortens and distorts the sentence by omitting the restrictive 'one might think' and thereby falsely transforms it into an assertion! At least, the omission is marked as such.

The introduction does mention a number of historical events and episodes when tensions between the nobility and the nation as a political ideal emerged – for instance, during the French Revolution (Sieyès contemplating sending back the nobles to their ‘German’ swamps and forests...), in the French Wars of Religion, or with regard to the criticism of the German nobility in the seventeenth century by non-noble writers, and even more so in the great age of nationalism, the nineteenth century. However, this only serves to emphasize the significance of the subject. My conclusion is therefore by no means that ‘nobility and nation really do not rhyme, neither metrically nor conceptually’. This is already evident because the citation neither resumes the text nor concludes it. It merely summarizes a certain anti-noble perspective, as developed in the introduction’s first section. This already emerges from an insertion, which the reviewer unfortunately ignores once more, this time without marking the omission. The sentence reads in its entirety: ‘Nobility and nation, *so one could deduce from these few examples*, really do not rhyme, neither metrically nor conceptually’ (‘Adel und Nation, so könnte man aus diesen wenigen Beispielen folgern, reimen sich also wirklich nicht, weder metrisch noch konzeptuell’).

In the following sections the opposite perspective is then developed, among other things by the statement ‘nobility and nation had a lot to offer each other’ (‘Adel und Nation hatten einander also einiges zu bieten’). The text thus builds up an arc of tension – a process that is certainly not unheard of or unusual in terms of rhetoric. The chain of arguments developed in the introduction makes the point that the relationship between nobility and nation in history could indeed produce problems and conflicts, but that it cannot exclusively or even primarily be defined in terms of such conflicts.

Neither does Janssens do justice to the second important approach the editor chooses in order to present the subject of the book, that is the (in some cases) transnational character of the nobility. It is rather surprising to see Janssens arguing that the introduction overlooks the fact that transnationality applies only to some sections of the nobility – usually the high nobility. Again, this criticism is unfounded, as the phenomenon is explicitly (and extensively) addressed. Among other things, the question is ‘whether and where this horizon [of the nobility] was at all a national one, whether and where it was not clearly limited to a regional or also a local level’ (‘ob und wo dieser Horizont [des Adels] denn überhaupt ein nationaler war, ob und wo er nicht deutlich auf eine regionale oder auch lokale Ebene beschränkt blieb’). Here it is stated ‘that nobility could cross, transcend or evade national borders before and long after 1800. It could also fall below them’ (‘dass Adel vor und auch noch lange nach 1800 nationale Grenzen überschreiten, transzendieren oder sich ihnen entziehen konnte. Er konnte sie auch unterschreiten’). Having criticized the editor for overemphasizing the transnational character of the nobility, Janssens then regrets that the introduction and the volume tacitly ignore the transnational character of other groups (‘stiltzrijgend voorbijgegaan aan (...)’), such as the high clergy, grand merchants and financiers, military men and scholars. On the one hand this is certainly true, because these groups as such are not the subject of the book, but on the other hand it should of course be noted that high clergymen and military officers were often recruited among the nobility. Another comment, directed at a section commentary by Rainer Babel, and regretting that there is no mention of the development of national sentiment in conquered territories,

seems also to ignore how the matter of the volume was defined at the outset.

It is therefore preposterous to argue that the authors of the volume or most of them were lucky enough to ignore ('gelukkig geen (...) rekening gehouden [met]') the editors' guiding ideas and – largely erroneous – premises and assumptions ('vooronderstellingen'). These allegedly erroneous assumptions and premises did not exist: they only exist in professor Janssens' mind, as expressed in his review. In this respect, it needs to be pointed out that the brief presentation of my own, French-written contribution to the volume is also highly misleading. The chapter by no means 'searches in vain' ('peilt tevergeefs') for a national contrast between nobility and the 'commoners' or for a 'national' exceptional status ('uitzonderingsstatuut') that probably would go beyond the social and political. Rather, it explains where and why explicit identification with the nation could be attractive for the nobility and promised distinction.

Contrasts and similarities, conflicts and agreements, moments of symbiosis between nobility and nation are the subject of the volume. It also deals with migration and transnational networks, identities and competing loyalties, the increasing weight of the national in the nineteenth century. To say that the nobility did not differ too much from the non-noble classes of the population in this respect, as Janssens does, seems to me, however, to be too simplistic an approach ('hun [the nobles] binding met het eigen land, lijkt nauwelijks of niet te verschillen van dat van niet-edelen'). It ignores the particular tradition of criticism directed both against the nobility and the royal or princely court, and neither does it take into account the migration history of noble families or the specific phenomenon of political nations constituted exclusively by noble families ('Adelsnationen' as in the case of the Polish nobility). The fact, however, that national and noble identities could in fact coincide is completely in harmony with the perspective the editors of this volume have chosen. The volume does indeed emphasize how important it was for most noble elites to be able to define themselves in terms of being rooted in the history and the culture of a nation – as the reviewer rightly states in his conclusion. The fact, however, that this result should have come about against the intentions of the book's editors, as Janssens insinuates, is an idea which is rather implausible and even, one might say, downright outlandish.

Surely, we are confronted here with a number of misconceptions and misinterpretations. The reviewer has unfortunately misread the introduction, by – or so it seems – not paying enough attention to the underlying arguments. These things happen, given the load of work one has to shoulder in postmodern European universities. And perhaps the obvious misinterpretations are also due in part to merely linguistic problems caused by the fact that neither German nor French can any longer be regarded as truly international scholarly languages, a fact we unfortunately cannot ignore. If one seriously wants to resist the prevailing tendency towards an all-encompassing 'broken English' in the Humanities, one should, however, read papers and books in, say, German, French or Dutch with the attention they seem to be needing. The author of this rejoinder certainly considers this as highly desirable and indeed necessary for a truly European exchange.

Antwoord van Paul Janssens

Mijn recensie poneerde dat de bijdragen in de bundel aantonen hoezeer de adel zich vanaf de late middeleeuwen met de groeiende staatsvorming en het bijhorend nationaliteitsbesef identificeerde. Wel voegde ik eraan toe dat de inleiding van Martin Wrede haaks staat op deze bevinding. Naar verluidt heb ik zijn inleidende tekst onjuist geïnterpreteerd. Ik laat in het midden waaraan deze misvatting te wijten kan zijn: aan een te geringe kennis van het Duits? Wellicht niet, want ook de Franstalige bijdrage van Wrede zou ik niet goed begrepen hebben. Misschien dan aan een gebrek aan subtiliteit bij de lectuur? Of ligt het aan een tekort aan helderheid van de beide teksten van Wrede zelf? Wie de bundel ter hand neemt, zal zichzelf een opinie kunnen vormen. Uit de reactie van collega Wrede leid ik alleszins af dat ik de overige bijdragen wel goed heb ingeschat. Wie mijn bespreking heeft gelezen, werd dus niet misleid. De lezers van *Virtus* zijn correct geïnformeerd over de teneur van deze bundel. Was een rechtzetting dan echt nodig? Het verheugt me alleszins dat onze beide visies op de conclusies van de bundel toch niet zo ver uit elkaar liggen. Om het met Voltaire te zeggen, ‘tout est au mieux dans le meilleur des mondes’.

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Repliek van Martin Wrede

Paul Janssens’ reply gratefully acknowledges the possibility that the volume’s introduction may, in fact, have been led by other ideas than those expressed in his review. And I very much agree with the suggestion that an interested reader should consult the volume itself! Unfortunately, I cannot subscribe to his ‘Candide’ quote: master Pangloss’ conviction, after all, is most heavily (and quite rightfully) attacked by Voltaire. And historical research should be about careful reading: to avoid any *contre-sens*.

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