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Mirella Marini

Between cosmopolitanism and nationalism

The House of Arenberg in the long nineteenth century

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Bertrand Goujon, *Les Arenberg. Le gotha à l'heure des nations 1820-1919* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2017, 1067 p., ill., index)

Les Arenberg focusses on the analysis of the House of Arenberg in its 'European dimension and historicising its transnational, transregional and translocal methods' (p. 35) during the long nineteenth century. By doing so it aims to 'clarify the complexity and flexibility of aristocratic strategies' (p. 35) against the backdrop of the formation of several national Arenberg branches, each the result of their specific geopolitical context. In essence, this summarizes the intent of this book, published in 2017 and resulting from the author's doctoral dissertation defended in 2006 at the Lumière University Lyon 2. With its 1067 pages it does not make for a quick read, although this is not exceptional for French dissertations. However, although its scope might daunt the average reader, the researcher willing to make the effort will find a very well-written, extremely well-documented and pioneering study of one of Europe's leading aristocratic transnational families.

In many ways, *Les Arenberg* is the quintessential handbook of nineteenth-century European aristocracies. It contains an impressive bibliography, a general index and an index of names. The latter is of great importance given the sheer number of individuals the author incorporates into his study. The chosen time period – 1820 to 1919 – marks a family history caught between two '*ruptures radicales*' (p. 42), as Goujon states. In fact, the last Arenberg duke to have lived in the Ancien Régime, Louis-Engelbert, the so-called Blind Duke, passed away in 1820. He had had to endure the execution of his mother-in-law at the guillotine during the French Revolution, the loss of his Arenberg duchy under Napoleon and a profound redesign of the European political stage after the Congress of Vienna. After World War I

and the end of the aristocratic ‘Old World’, the family’s ducal branch was chastised for its German war effort. Its transnational, ‘cosmopolitan’, way of navigating the European chessboard finally clashed with the political interests of the nation states. For those not familiar with the history of the Arenberg, suffice to say that after a dynastic breach in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ducal title devolved upon a younger Arenberg branch. In any case, this history takes place between the two events that shaped our contemporary world, the French Revolution and World War I.

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In his introduction the author elaborates on the chronological, political and social background of his study. He also offers a detailed overview of past historiography and sketches his theoretical framework. Notions like ‘family history’, ‘dynasticism’, ‘transnationalism’ or ‘cosmopolitanism’ are discussed at length, which presents an interesting, albeit sometimes difficult to grasp overview of the purpose of his study. The author almost avoids to define his research questions, taking us on a theoretical, at times philosophical, journey in which he positions himself carefully at the crossroads of social history, political history and history of the nobility. A very thorough reading of an otherwise well-written introduction is needed in order to grasp the author’s ideas. The reader should be able to read between the lines in order to understand the pitfalls Goujon wants to avoid. The study of the nineteenth-century nobility had long been avoided by ‘serious’ researchers and left to amateur historians, whether or not in the employ of noble families. The result was often a veritable swamp of

complicated genealogies, dynastic hagiographies, or far-fetched family histories, *petites histoires* without much context or family histories with fabricated national sentiments. Since then, much has changed, but the role of the European aristocracy on the nineteenth-century social stage is to this day often regarded with a certain disdain. No wonder that Goujon strongly insists on describing what he does not do, versus what he will do.

One of the main reasons why Goujon's study is so impressive, is the body of sources he had access to. He devoted considerable time and effort, not just to visiting quite a number of European state archives, but also to exploring private archives in France as well as abroad, some of which had never been opened up to research before. Such a devotion to sources can only be admired and commended. Moreover, he is fully aware of the intricacies of private archives, the way in which the very system of classification is set up to communicate a certain dynastic narration and avoids following into the dynastic and often anachronistic reasoning that results from it. In his conclusion he rightly states that these private archives reveal the complexity and the subtleties of family strategies, which are so often lacking in public sources.

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The only hiatus Goujon encountered, is a lack of sufficient sources about the dynasty's behaviour during World War I. The archives of the 'French branch' were lost in a fire, while the 'Belgian' branch's archives in Enghien (in the province of Hainaut) adhere to a strict policy of prohibiting the consultation of all documents relating to the Great War. Even after a century these documents are unfortunately still considered to be of too delicate a nature to be explored. Despite this setback, Goujon nonetheless pieces together the wartime experiences of the Arenberg family. With assets all over Europe, branches set up in France, Belgium, Prussia and Bohemia/Austria, the family's resolve to adhere to its ancient principles of honour, loyalty, military service and duty, as well as an almost religious belief in the quality and virtue of their rank, would inevitably lead to the development of conflicting interests across national borders. Despite its 'foreign' origins, the French branch firmly sided with the French Republic against the forces of the German Emperor, which included their Belgian and German cousins. Several Arenberg sons lost their lives, on both sides of the conflict. This episode also exemplifies the ambiguity and, in this case, the impossibility of maintaining a trans- or should we say supranational identity in times of war. Duke Engelbert-Marie would feel conflicted about his loyalty to the Prussian cause, often interceding in favour of family members whose assets were pillaged by Prussian troops or who were suspected of espionage activities. After the war a general confusion about the nationality of the Arenberg family led to several court cases. These cases were concerned with determining whether or not the government's sequestration of the Arenberg assets in Belgium was lawful or not. Goujon frequently refers to Belgian newspaper articles about these affaires, giving a tangible idea of what the general public thought of these 'traitors'. If the duke was Belgian, he clearly betrayed his fatherland by siding with the Emperor. Treason was punishable by death. If he was German, it was deemed only just that the sale of his assets would serve to compensate for the agony suffered by the Belgian people during the war. By incorporating a chapter on the Great War in his book, despite the archival difficulties, the author presents us with a story hitherto largely unknown. This only benefits the quality of the work.

When presented with a work of this nature, a dissertation no less, a reviewer's task becomes quite difficult. *Les Arenberg* is so thoroughly researched, that criticism almost seems

out of place. For this reason, it is also a pity that it took so long to publish the book. The publication of dissertations in France is not a given. The Dutch tradition of publishing dissertations is non-existent, and as such, the French also lack the tradition of transforming dissertations into books that could attract a wider audience. Goujon clearly devoted considerable time to updating his dissertation. Yet he might have considered publishing his work in volumes, despite the fact that he already needed to attract funding to support this publication. His work is so rich in detail that one fears some of those details are lost in the overall size of *Les Arenberg*.

Despite the book's copiousness, the reader willing to persevere will discover a family history which by far transcends the notion of 'family history' itself and which offers an indispensable addition to nineteenth-century political and social history, against the backdrop of a continent in almost constant turmoil. This is a must-read.

Brest, France – marini.mirella@gmail.com

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