# NOBILITY IN EUROPE DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: MEMORIES, LOYALTIES AND ADVANTAGES IN CONTEXT
## Conference review

The international conference on 'Nobility in Europe during the twentieth Century' was held at the European University Institute in Florence, 15-16 June 2009. The organizers of this expert meeting were Jaap Dronkers (EUI) and Yme Kuiper (University of Groningen); they profited greatly from the assistance of Nikolaj Bijleveld (University of Groningen) and Maureen Lechleitner (EUI). The attendees from various European universities presented a total of eighteen papers. Presenters offered a variety of approaches, ranging from history and anthropology to sociology, with the aim to thoroughly study and analyse the nobility in contemporary Europe. It is commonly held that the nobility lost its power and vanished from the world scene after bourgeois revolutions. Undoubtedly this belief is partly responsible for the fact that for decades the nobility has failed to arouse interest of social scientists. The present conference sought to fill in this gap, staging the twentieth century as well as the current nobility.

Several conference papers dealt with strategies employed by the nobility to access economic and other power resources. Nikolaj Bijleveld first of all presented his work on the renaissance of the Dutch nobility that took place around 1900. In his paper, Bijleveld demonstrated how Dutch nobles at that point in time started to organise themselves in response to the upcoming bourgeoisie and consequently a possible downward mobility. Various anchor points of noble identity in the Netherlands, such as the Dutch Nobility Association, the *Adelsboek*, the Order of Saint John and the Order of Malta, were all founded within the twelve year period between 1899 and 1911. The loss of political power and the looming decline of social status, partly as a reaction to bourgeois forces, contributed to the organisation and mobilisation of the nobility. This investment in social and symbolic capital explains the apparent revival of the Dutch nobility around 1900.

Göran Norrby from Uppsala University examined how the nobility tried to withstand the pressure from the bourgeoisie in early twentieth century Sweden. Despite the abolition of economic and political privileges throughout the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Norrby illustrated that the nobility maintained positions of power thanks to three mechanisms: the professionalization of the military officer, growth of industry, and the increasing demand and supply of higher education. Victor Karady from the Central European University centred on Hungary throughout the same time period. As in the case of Sweden, education presented possibilities for the nobility to maintain positions of power. In the final years of the Dual Monarchy (1867-1918) Hungary experienced rapid urbanization, industrialization and social modernization including, which meant that the nobility now had to compete more frequently with a growing number of 'outsiders'. One way in which Hungarian nobles distinguished themselves from commoners was by means of attending universities abroad, primarily in Austria and Germany. Apart from the traditional aristocratic occupations, including military service, law and diplomacy, the Hungarian nobility did not engage in business and commerce. Whereas the latter employment had been 'tainted' by a Jewish presence, the former occupations offered a significant amount of power at little cost and in accordance with an aristocratic habitus.

In her paper on the Parisian aristocracy in the period from 1900 to 1939, Alice Bernard elucidated that in the French Second Republic the situation for the nobility was not all that different from the time prior to that. The development of a capitalist economy and the advent of the Republic led to the political and economic decline of the aristocracy in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, Bernard sought to show firstly that the aristocracy to some extent had maintained its positions, and secondly that after The Great War they in actual fact retrieved their power. By applying new investment strategies the high aristocratic society remained an economically dominating class well until World War II.

Jaap Dronkers and Phillip Korom from the European University Institute have looked into

Attendees at the international conference 'Nobility in Europe during the twentieth Century', held at the European University Institute at Fiesole, Italy, June 15-16, 2009 *(photo Jaap Scholten)*

the contemporary nobility. They conducted their research in Austria in order to see whether or not the Austrian nobility has maintained some of its former power, especially vis-à-vis the world of economics. Despite the abolition of the aristocratic order after WW I (since 1919 no citizen of Austria was allowed to have noble titles or even particles such as 'zu' or 'von'), Dronkers and Korom argue that the nobility still managed to find a way to maintain its power. In the 2008 Austrian economic elite, people of noble descent are highly overrepresented. Yet, the assumption that this happened through the mechanisms of informal social networks has not been confirmed. Hence, Dronkers and Korom proposed another explanation, centring on the possession of social and cultural capital. Although it is not an informal class, the group of people who formerly constituted the Austrian nobility still possesses distinctive features that provide them with social and cultural capital, beneficial in the competitive selection procedures for jobs and positions.

Several case-studies dealing with Western capitalist countries show that even after the bourgeois revolution nobility managed to maintain power. The same is true as regards the abolition of the aristocracy. How did the nobility fare under socialist rule? In her research on the Polish nobility during the socialist-era, Longina Jakubowska, University College Utrecht, reached conclusions similar to the ones found in West-European countries. Despite the opposition of socialist ideology towards the nobility, Polish noblemen managed to acquire highly ranked positions. Already in 1944 the Soviet-backed government introduced a radical land reform that nationalised and divided estates formerly belonging to the nobility. However, in a country where few were literate, with an historically weak middle class and a strong peasant culture, which moreover had already suffered the loss of a large part of its elite at the hands of Nazi and Soviet forces during WW II, the nobility swiftly managed to apply their skills into various professions. It turned out that their managing experience, language skills and international social networks, were necessary for the running of the country.

In an ethnographic research, Jaap Scholten from Central European University, conducted 27 interviews with members of the Hungarian aristocracy in Transylvania. The Transylvania aristocracy, unlike the Polish nobility, survived severe repression. However, despite the stigmatisation and consequently the hesitation to openly manifest their noble descent, Scholten shows that his interviewees managed – even in difficult circumstances – to maintain their customs and habits, including the expensive hobby of horse riding. Silke Marburg and Sophia von Knobelsdorff from TU Dresden, have examined the aristocracy that returned to Saxony after 1989. These nobility groups turned out to be able to maintain a form of group cohesion in which memories and tradition played a key role.

Michael Seelig from the University of Marburg, studying the East Elbian nobility in West Germany from the end of the WW II until 1974, equally found that common values and ideas were of paramount importance in the process of the construction of a nobility identity. Although they engaged in middle class professions, in the private sphere they maintained their aristocratic identity and self-image in which memory played a decisive role.

Marja Vuorinen, a social historian from the University of Helsinki, also discussed the collapse of the traditional noble 'life-world' by means of an analysis of the novels by the Finnish nobleman Arvid Järnefelt. Deep-reading his texts and assessing its semiotic, discursive and ideological content, Vuorinen sought to examine the representation of the nobility in Järnefelt's novels. The latter's literature demonstrates different ways in which the Finnish aristocracy faced social and economic transformations and new circumstances. Whereas some of the characters found in Järnefelt's novels can be classified as an old-fashioned aristocracy which was both conservative and exploitative, Vuorinen demonstrated how Järnefelt proposed a different, progressive strategy through which impoverished Finnish noblemen should become an integral part of the newly created Finnish nation-state.

In his presentation Yme Kuiper, professor of anthropology at the University of Groningen, also dealt with the construction of noble identities in the twentieth century. In order to examine their defensive strategy of cultural transformation, he provided a biographical view on one of the oldest Dutch noble families, Van Wassenaer. An important aspect of its aristocratic lifestyle was the cult of the country house, which occupied the mental world and self-perception of the Dutch nobility in the 1920s and 1930s. During the interwar years, the noble lifestyle on country estates experienced an Indian Summer. According to Kuiper, World War II represented a breaking point; the nobility disappeared as a visible elite – first from parliament, then from court, and eventually from public life. The Dutch nobility became a sort of secret society. From now on it had to reinvent and revitalise a noble identity, on its own. It did so quite successfully, creating family foundations and associations. The future of the Dutch nobility – as a nobility – is inextricably bound to the re-invention of its history (and in transmitting its memories to next generations).

Like Kuiper Anna-Maria Åström from Åbo Akademi University, researched material heritage as the cornerstone of an aristocratic lifestyle. Aristocratic family manors in Sweden and Finland that nowadays serve as tourist destinations are still run by the noble families to whom they historically belonged. Åström showed how noble families in contemporary Finland and Sweden employ their estates in the process of creating a collective identity as well as symbolic capital.

The aforementioned papers discussed various strategies employed by the nobility aimed at the preservation of their noble identity, in spite of various social, political and economic transformations threatening the privileges they enjoyed. Huibert Schijf from the University of Amsterdam, taking a different angle, focused on the topic of Jewish noblemen who never developed noble identities. As traditional ennoblements began to be replaced by modern ennoblements which served as a reward for competence in economic fields, Jewish ennoblements became increasingly common. Schijf demonstrated how these noblemen – excluded from the mainstream social elite – in most cases remained loyal to their Jewish environment and identity, despite their appreciation of the titles that were bestowed on them.

Other topics discussed at the conference were the evolution of family values of the Belgian nobility. Paul Janssens (University of Gent) showed how these family values changed, yet at the same time the nobility maintained its distinctive features. Dina Gusejnova from the

University of Chicago explored the political reaction of German and Austrian intellectuals of noble descent on the social transformations of the interwar period. Despite the abolition of the nobility after the Great War, former noblemen continued to influence political life. However, nobles found themselves in opposition to the neo-Jacobin politics of nation-building that dominated the politics of the early Weimar and Austrian republics, and which was defined by ethnic and social homogeneity. Hence, Gusejnova argued that the nobility played an important role in the creation of a European identity.

Maria Malatesta, University of Bologna, examined the nobility in fascist Italy. The Italian nobility, throughout the period of unification in 1860, represented a social group that, due to its long-standing weakness, fragmentariness, and hostility against the process of unification, was more akin to the French nobility during the Third Republic, than to that in countries such as Germany or Great Britain. Consequently, prior to the Fascist seizure of power, the Italian nobility did not participate in the formation process of the national elites. Given the fact that the nobility was given a political-administrative role during the fascist era, and as a result of the creation of new nobles, Fascism signified a break with the previous period in Italian political history. However, Malatesta asserts, that the aim of this pro-aristocratic policy was not to valorise the nobility or to give it a strategic, political role, but rather to utilise the system of social hierarchies and symbols that it expressed to reinforce the Fascist ideology.

Finally, it must be noted that throughout the conference many, if not all, have referred to the work of Monique de Saint Martin, renowned scholar of upper classes and the author of seminal works on the nobility in Europe. It was therefore highly appropriate that it was she who delivered the keynote address. In her keynote, De Saint Martin (École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris) sought to focus on meta-theoretical issues, concerned with questions relating to the definition of the nobility, and whether they should be defined at all. On the basis of a comparative analysis of the European nobility, she demonstrated an appreciation and understanding for the idea outlined by her mentor and collaborator Pierre Bourdieu that social phenomena should be researched rather than defined. According to De Saint Martin, the key question we should ask ourselves is: what is it that holds the nobility together? It is quite likely that this is related to the nobility's symbolic capital as well as a dissociation with commoners through indirect power of domination. The next question – posed as a means to encourage the participants in their further research – that needs answering is: what is the nature of that solidarity, a community, a social body or a social group?

In the twentieth century the nobility faced many difficulties as their political and economic privileges gradually dwindled. It is often assumed that as a result of this process the nobility vanished from the world stage altogether, relinquishing its position to the rising bourgeois class. The papers presented at this conference, however, have offered a different view. Contrary to the modernisation theory, various scholars who gathered in Florence sought to demonstrate the surprising resilience on account of the nobility, who were well able to cope with the new social order. Not only did they manage to maintain power in monarchical environments in Sweden and the Netherlands; more surprisingly, the same is true for countries where the abolition of their privileges was more thoroughly organised as in Austria or in the socialist environment, such as in Poland. As Kuiper stipulated in his concluding remarks the challenge in forthcoming comparative research will be to avoid sweeping generalizations by taken into account a whole range of contextual conditions and decisive ruptures in time as revolutions and wars.

The nobility employed various strategies, some of which were mentioned at the conference: education, the bourgeoisation of the nobility, the aristocratisation of the bourgeoisie, by means of politics, the creation of social networks, through marriage etc. Yet, what was most fundamental in the process was the upholding of a noble identity and culture. Even in those cases when the reproduction of noble power was not very successful, noble identities showed significant persistence.

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