JÖRN LEONHARD UND CHRISTIAN WIELAND

Noble Identities from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century

European Aristocratic Cultures in Law, Politics and Aesthetics
Nobility is one of the very few elements of a *longue durée* perspective on European history from the Middle Ages to the present.¹ In almost all European societies there existed a group – more or less homogeneous, more or less internally stratified, more or less permeable from below and outside, more or less strictly defined through explicit legal norms – called ‘noble’, ‘nobility’, or ‘aristocracy’. It formed an elite in almost all respects: politically, economically, in matters of culture, behaviour and habitus. Although there were always alternative, rival élites from different social backgrounds – university-trained administrative and legal functionaries, the clergy, or intellectuals and artists – these groups usually claimed a leading role only in one specific area, whereas noblemen considered themselves to be a sort of ‘total’ élite whose field of action and whose pre-eminence was not restricted to any certain segment of life.

Rather, its distinctiveness was based on a dual acknowledgment: externally by others and internally by the different groups that regarded themselves as ‘noble’.² In premodern contexts the acceptance of noble persons and the nobility as such usually implied a more general belief in the rightfulness of a hereditary ruling class; it implied nobility as a social norm. In modern contexts, however, the acknowledgement of nobles and nobility has become mostly one of an individual fact – not of a social ideal. The question remains

¹ The best known protagonist of the *longue durée* perspective on the European nobility from the early Middle Ages onwards is probably Otto Brunner, who, in his influential study *Adliges Landleben und europäischer Geist*, described ‘nobility’ as a primarily intellectual phenomenon rooted in classical Greek thought. For Brunner, though, the world of *Alteuropa* – and, consequently, that of the traditional European nobility – ended with the emergence of capitalism and the modern state in the eighteenth century. More or less similar conceptions of nobility lie at the heart of the following contributions on the medieval and early modern aristocracies of Europe: Tellenbach, “Mentalität”; Conze/Meier, “Adel/Aristokratie”.

² See Wieland, *Bayerischer Adel*, 94f.
whether there is any substance to this long-lasting phenomenon besides the concept of 'nobility'. In other words: Did and do those individuals and groups who called themselves 'noble' and who were regarded and called 'nobles' by others have anything in common except that they shared the same label? When, how, and why did these external and internal criteria change over time?

This question is important both from a synchronic and from a diachronic point of view. Was there, for example in 1630 (from a synchronic perspective) any essential substance to the self-view, the circumstances of everyday life, the political outlook, the religious convictions of Florentine patricians, Spanish hidalgos, Polish Sarmatians or English peers which made them not only a group distinct from their fellow Florentines, Spaniards, Poles or Englishmen, but also part of a uniform European entity, one nobility? Was there a spectrum of shared political values, similar socioeconomic foundations and equivalent cultural representations that allows us to speak of a single European nobility? Or do we have to give up this concept in favour of European variations of nobles and nobilities? From a diachronic perspective one may ask whether continuities exist between early modern gentlemen and their contemporary namesakes in more than the word gentleman still being used today? Names, titles, sites, places of religious practice and memoria such as vaults and places of pilgrimage served as elements of such continuity. Yet is that sufficient to warrant applying the label 'nobility' to both pre-modern and modern phenomena alike?

The fact that certain social strata throughout Europe were called and called themselves 'noble' already implied a form of participation in shared intellectual debates: Although the differences between northern and southern, eastern and western concepts of nobility were striking, they can nevertheless be considered to be different realizations of a common and basic principle. Though there was no essentialist identity between the different European élites that came to be called 'nobilities', the self-image was constituted through this nominalist marker. The concept, instead of describing a common reality, generated a common reality.

If we go beyond a merely conceptual or semantic approach, we can still identify nobility as a particular phenomenon. According to the ideal-type definition of Otto-Gerhard Oexle, nobility was rooted in the conviction that particular qualities, once acquired by an individual, could be passed on to a corporation of descendants ("Adel beruht gewissermaßen auf der Überzeugung von der Vererbung einmal erworbener Eigenschaften"). Whereas this definition is most convincing as far as medieval and early modern periods

---

3 See Asch, Europäischer Adel, 22–32.
4 Oexle, "Aspekte der Geschichte", 21f.
are concerned, it remains doubtful whether this description of what ‘nobility’ actually consists of – a collective belief in some hereditary superiority of a certain social and cultural group – can be easily applied to modern times as well. The idea of the legal and social equality of all humans, once in the world, had enormous consequences for the concept and the reality of nobility.

1. Aims, Methods and Premises: Noble Identity, Diachronic Change and Synchronic Diversity

Against this background this volume aims to understand nobility as an exemplary case and to analyze both the unity and variety of its history from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. From this perspective we suggest as a general hermeneutic premise the use of the example of nobility to focus on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in societies, the development of images of the self and the other, of identity and otherness, of self-positioning in different historical contexts, and the dialectical relations between all these processes; and to research strategies of assertion in periods of change. All these general questions point to the longue durée dimension – looking at turning points, transitions and transformations, but also at possible long-term continuities.

As a primary tertium comparationis we suggest a particular concept of ‘distinctiveness’ going beyond mere inequality with its dominantly legal and socioeconomic connotations. It is a concept that indicates a ‘space of one’s own’ and a medium, an instrument for giving expression to a certain self, be it individual or corporate. It points to a space and a tool of self-creation and self-realisation, mainly in the company of others and before an auditorium, a certain public. Noble distinctiveness conveys a particular experience of autonomy as well as collectivity, even homogeneity. The continuous and highly successful production and reproduction of noble identity should not be considered mere traditionalism, the conservation of a socioeconomic distance to other social strata or the successful struggle for an elevated position;

---

5 This specific value of the nobility for the historiography of the modern period as a whole has already been emphasised by Schlögl, “Vorbemerkung”, 313–316; see also Frie, “Adelsgeschichte”, 398–415.

6 The concept of noble distinctiveness owes much to the conceptual works of Alf Lüdtke and Richard van Dülmen on “Eigensinn” (self-will, self-reliance or tenacity), a notion that serves to describe modes of self-assertion and to create a collective identity by the urban working classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the early modern rural lower classes; see van Dülmen, “Vorbemerkung”, 7–12.
rather, it is a characteristic way of dealing with the various and ever-changing realities of life.

It has been widely argued that in the long-term perspective the nobilities of early modern and modern Europe became victims to modern or modernizing developments, such as the growing juridification of social conflicts, the bureaucratization and professionalization of politics, state and nation building since the late eighteenth century.7 If individual nobles in Europe and the European nobility as a collective managed to maintain their established superiority during the centuries from 1500 to 1800 (and often beyond), it was because of their ability to adapt to and shape these developments originating from sources alien and even hostile to the concept and reality of nobility. If this holds true for the early modern period we have all the more reason to ask how nobles responded to the changes in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In an age of dynamic social and economic change as well as political transformation there was hardly any room left for those representatives of the old regime who did not contribute to changing social and political environments and remained in a state of mere opposition. The many ‘impossible restorations’ after 1815 made it clear for many contemporary nobles in Europe that there was no simple return to the pre-1789 world.8 Similarly, in the fields of literature, music and arts, it became obvious that the development of ‘modern’ and ‘good’ aesthetics could be described as a process of emancipation of the arts and the artists from the feudal supremacy of kings and noblemen alike.

The application of the concept of ‘distinctiveness’ to nobility allows us to consider their activities in certain fields of experiences and action, self-representation, self-creation and interaction not along the strict dichotomy of ‘agency’ on the one hand and relegation on the other, but as genuine expressions of individual and collective originality. Thus, it forms part of a wider network subsumed in a system, but not completely determined by it.

To anticipate one of the principal results of this volume: The nobles, in forming their private and public personae and in acting with and reacting to social, political and cultural challenges, were characterised by a particular ambiguity. On the one hand, they tended to represent themselves as a fundamentally homogeneous entity, whether they moved in family circles or fought on the battlefield; on the other hand, they showed a certain distance to whatever they did, as if all their actions never comprised their real and complete individualities.

The methodical approach of this volume is based on a combination of diachronic analysis and synchronic comparisons that transcend a merely

8 See Sellin, Die geraubte Revolution.
chronological framework. Instead, we identify three thematically defined fields of noble experiences in areas of fundamental importance to noble action, self-positioning and self-images: law, politics and aesthetics. Within these fields the volume covers different European cases and different periods, allowing us to explore in more detail diachronic change and synchronic diversity. The result is certainly not a systematic comparison, but rather a panorama with several asymmetrical comparisons and symptomatic observations. Yet already this combination makes it possible to go beyond both established models of periodisation and national historiographies, and to overcome the simplistic notion of nobility as a mere victim of modernization processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From these methodical premises a number of general questions and thematic complexes can be derived that define the analytical focus of this volume:

(1) The volume combines different noble experiences and actions, understood as social practice, on the levels of law, politics and aesthetics. At the same time, we ask how noble distinctiveness could best be represented and communicated. If nobles were “masters of visibility”⁹, they had to rely on a specific combination of economic, social and cultural capitals, referring here to the model developed by Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁰ How did their role in producing and converting these capitals change over time? And what was their function in these processes? In which areas did nobles maintain a bargaining position?

(2) Where can we identify noble persistence and continuity, where do we see a particular ability to adopt and adapt? When and why did noble cultures of distinctiveness become permeable? What were spaces of noble experience and how did they change over time? What was the relationship between ‘lieu’ and ‘milieu’ in various historical periods and different societies?

(3) Does the European comparison point to convergences or divergences over time and space? When and why did European models and their underlying criteria of an ideal nobility change from Spain to France to Britain? Was there a transnational language of nobility that survived well into the era of European state and nation building in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

⁹ Reif, Adel und Bürgertum, 14.
2. Patterns and Models of Nobility in European Comparison: A Bird’s Eye Perspective

In a way, it seems much more complex to describe what the European nobility in the early modern period was like than to give an adequate picture of the aristocracy’s morphology in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century. This impression may reflect the fact that between 1500 and 1800 the nobility came close to be regarded as a homogeneous group instead of being one from the very beginning, discernible as a distinct caste in law, politics and culture throughout Europe, with common attitudes, values and modes of behaviour. In contrast, at the beginning of the early modern period, the noble phenomenology appears much more heterogeneous, as the following preliminary examples may illustrate.

The process of proto-nationalisation was, at least in the Holy Roman Empire, very much fuelled by the lower nobility, notably the Free Imperial Knighthood. Together with humanists and church reformers, the knights became the spearhead of a movement – more an intellectual than a political one – that aimed at freeing the *natio Germanica* from the superiority of the Italians, in matters of both religion and culture. At least in one respect this proved successful: The knights from various regions of the Empire formed a united body of nobles who were not subject to the princely territories but only to the Emperor and the Empire, thus being the only ‘real’ Germans in a period when Bavaria and Saxony, Württemberg and Mecklenburg had established themselves as territorial states and as the main focus for the great majority of all ‘Germans, whether nobles or not.” An important by-product of this development seems to be that in Germany the lower nobility formed the image of what ‘nobility as such’ actually consisted of, that the prototype of the German nobleman was a gentleman of rather moderate means and outlook, whereas in England or France the aristocracy’s higher strata, ‘peers’ and ‘pairs’, seemed to have occupied the leading roles in politics and culture.

The Italian aristocracies underwent a process of transformation that might even better be called ‘formation’ from the 1500s onwards, when former patricians, descendants of baronial families of medieval origin or relatives of newly created ecclesiastical princes, amalgamated into a court society. This was a reaction to the experience of political heteronomy, which in turn was a result of the rivalry between the Spanish-Austrian and the French monarchies fought out mainly on Italian soil. Italians had to look for alternative means of self-assertion, a certain mode of behaviour that was to become a model for the rest of Europe. Baldassare Castigilione’s important

Libro del Cortegiano, though by no means depicting what courtiers in Mantua, Florence or Rome were really like, became an instant bestseller and conveyed an extremely long-lasting image of nobility. Whether this is also true for the modest Protestant gentleman from north of the Alps who considered himself more a “house father” than a “man about town” (let alone court), and whose library was stocked by guidebooks of a completely different outlook – notably of the Oeconomia-kind – is open for debate. One might ask whether the boundary between those nobles who frequented the princely courts of Europe and those who didn’t was not to become the inneraristocratic distinction for the early modern period.

Although the Italian model of nobility as codified by Castiglione proved to be particularly influential, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century the higher ranks of the Spanish aristocracy markedly affected the political and cultural outlook of large parts of the European nobility, at least those from the southern and Catholic regions. Obviously this phenomenon related to Spain’s leading position in Europe and the world of that time, and one could argue that from the later seventeenth century onwards this position as a cultural model was assumed by the French nobility and later on by the English peerage. However, the situation seems more complex since the higher ranks of the Austrian nobility and magnates from the Erblande who centred around the imperial court in Vienna and who shaped the capital’s morphology through their vast and sumptuous building activities exercised considerable influence over the aristocracies of catholic Germany, Eastern Europe and even Italy far into the nineteenth century.

Next to the ‘courtier model’ there existed the ‘farmer model’ for noble behaviour. Whereas the élites of the various European nobilities called vast lands their own, thus combining the amenities of court and country, the majority of noblemen possessed not more than a few moderately sized estates. Their revenues did not enable them to take part in the polished court society. They were confined to the country and a rather narrow radius, and it was among those nobles that a very pronounced anti-court discourse became highly popular. It served to depict what aristocrats should be like: not victims of the overrefinement of the capital’s temptations, but preservers of originality, simplicity, rurality and traditional morals, good Christians and patrons of country, people and the Church.

Whether urbane, rich, cultured nobles from such families as the Liechtensteins, La Rochefoucaulds or Orsinis had, as far as their life worlds and lifestyles were concerned, anything in common with simple country squires,

13 Burke, Geschicke, 71–97.
14 See Pečar, Die Ökonomie der Ehre.
15 See Burke, Geschicke, 119–137, esp. 135 sq.
Junkers or other landed noblemen, is still an open question. But both nobilities participated in a shared debate on the values, character and norms of nobility. Although it was an antagonistic one, this common contention served as an important factor for the unity of the nobility. Which model was to prove more successful – the modern or the conservative one? Common memory in Germany seems to prefer the retrograde variety of nobility, but this has much to do with nineteenth-century experiences and debates.

The nineteenth and twentieth century witnessed the apparent inevitability of nation- and state-building in Europe, rendering pre-modern groups and their cultures of corporate representation apparently superfluous. But the long-held image of a merely passive and defensive nobility and nobles as victims of the transformations since the last third of the eighteenth century, of the dual revolutions in politics and society, is often mistaken. Research has rather underlined phenomena of successful “staying on top” (“Obenbleiben”, Werner Sombart).\textsuperscript{16} In addition, the primary function of nobles in revolutionary moments has attracted attention, for example by Simon Schama, with regard to the role of nobles in the constitutional period of revolt and revolution between 1787 and 1791 in France,\textsuperscript{17} or by Thomas Kroll, who focuses on the importance of liberal nobles, or noble liberals, for the Italian Risorgimento.\textsuperscript{18}

Already these preliminary observations highlight the problem, as to how far a more detailed and comparative analysis of the role and the function of nobles in the nineteenth and twentieth century can help to differentiate our understanding of the various patterns of nation- and state-building. From a bird’s eye perspective, the variety of political crises and social experiences since the 1770s led to different constellations of nobility in the long nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{19} Three examples shall be highlighted here:

France after 1800 was a postrevolutionary society, and all Napoleonic attempts to fuse old and new elites were meant to stabilize this postrevolutionary constellation. In the long term, and despite attempts of a restoration, a social fusion developed between bourgeois and noble elements in the new elite of notables. At the same time, the social practice and culture of French notables incorporated many elements of noble culture. Thus, landed property remained the basis for social and political influence, although the so-

\textsuperscript{17} Schama, Citizens, e.g. 21 (on Talleyrand), 24 (Lafayette), 96 (Malesherbes), 112–121, 189–194.
cial profile of land owners changed from the Ancien régime to the post-1814/1815 period. A noble restoration after 1814 that deserved the name remained a minority phenomenon as the White Terror and the Chambre introuvable demonstrated, yet it took well into the Third Republic and until the 1880s for noble notables to lose their last posts of political influence, as the retreat of the Maréchal de MacMahon in 1877/1879 demonstrated. For Alexis de Tocqueville the French aristocracy had simply missed the chance to develop along the lines of a functional elite as in Britain. Without being a moral tutor for the nation, a mediator between state and society, a guarantor for political decentralisation, constitutional checks and balances – and hence freedom from tyranny – it had no argument to defend its privileges. In Tocqueville’s eyes such an aristocracy had not played any positive role in avoiding the cataracts of violent revolutions in France from 1789 to 1852 and had thus contributed to the tyranny of both Napoleons framed by plebiscites and egalitarian promises.

Britain, on the other hand, saw the successful invention of an aristocratic tradition, based on a dual myth that survived well into the historiography of the twentieth century: English nobles appeared to be an open elite, with noble Whigs interpreting themselves as natural trustees of the liberties of all Englishmen. Nobles, in contrast to absolutist regimes on the European continent, were characterised as historical defenders of liberties against monarchical tyranny. The Whig interpretation of history used history as politics and could easily be instrumentalised by English nobles in order to defend an anachronistic constitutional system, but its success went well beyond the Isles. From Tocqueville’s idealisation of the British aristocracy, building on a French tradition since Montesquieu, over Hegel’s, Mohl’s and Dahlmann’s idealisation of the British constitution and the nobility’s role in it, over contemporary debates about the apparent lack of ‘German Whigs’ since the 1840s, to Max Weber’s critique of the mediocrity of German parliamentarians in comparison with the noble charisma of British politicians: The invention of aristocratic tradition as a means of British stability explaining the avoidance of revolution as well as the apparently harmonious modernisation of Britain’s economy, society and political system served as a suggestive paradigm in many European countries

20 See Haupt, Sozialgeschichte, 115-158.
21 See Tocqueville, L’Ancien régime, 85-122.
incarnation of national heritage. In the long-term perspective a tradition of noble dominance in political representation was thus transformed into the cultural image of nobles as preservers of the nation's historical memory.\textsuperscript{23}

Against this background, nineteenth-century Germany was characterised by highly segmented and heterogeneous noble cultures.\textsuperscript{24} This had geographical dimensions, looking at the differences between Prussian Junkers and nobles in Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria with their tradition of state reforms after 1804 favouring equal state citizenship. But it also included various vertical dimensions (taking into consideration the wide spectrum of Standesherrn, military nobles or noble corporations), confessional boundaries as well as diachronic changes if one thinks about the differences between old and new nobles.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, there existed clear lines of political, social and cultural demarcation between nobles and the bourgeoisie as could be seen in marriage politics, the existence of strong noble institutions such as a Herrenhaus, the importance of nobles in local politics and a three-class franchise in Prussia until 1918, but foremost in the noble monopoly of positions in the military, the higher ranks of administration and the diplomatic corps.\textsuperscript{26} This had a lasting impact on historiographic interpretations of the German nobility in the twentieth century: Whereas advocates of a German Sonderweg focused on the apparent "feudalisation of the German middle classes" and the decline of liberalism when confronted with persistent noble strongholds and impermeable milieus, more recent research has concentrated either on the role of nobles during the erosion of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism, or else on their role in the resistance movement against Hitler.\textsuperscript{27}

A particular challenge developed in all of Europe and towards the end of the nineteenth century. It can be characterised as a dilemma of modern politics in an age of dynamic mass societies that became less integrated through religious confession or social corporations than through mass media and mass communication. The result was a paradoxical constellation based on growing expectations, fuelled by promised changes in politics and society on the one hand and an ever more reduced freedom of concrete ac-

\textsuperscript{26} See Wagner, \textit{Bauern, Junker und Beamte}; Wienfort, "Gutsbesitzerliberalismus", 305–324; Spenkuch, \textit{Das Preußische Herrenhaus}.
tion in modern bureaucratic systems on the other. The dominant question in an age of political mass markets and promised mass participation was hence: How could politics be communicated, how was legitimacy to be generated? What was the role played by nobles or the role attributed to noble models of politics in that context? The relationship between, and partly the fusion of, bourgeois and noble notables in France and their function in a permanently postrevolutionary society on the one hand, and the role of Prussian nobles as Landräte, the monopolisation of social and political positions in pre-1914 German society on the other, signify a broad spectrum of contemporary responses to that challenge.

There are many indications that the idea of a unity of nobles comprising a variety from ruling families to newly ennobled and forming a coherent social, political and cultural action-unit originated from an invented tradition in the later nineteenth century. Contrary to a still widely held image, which is itself a result of this invention, the nobility in the early modern period was far from a static pillar, but was characterised much more by continuous co-optation, reshaping and interaction between the nobility and other elitist formations of society. As a response to social transformations and the advent of mass politics in the long nineteenth century the nobility tended to shield itself against the rest of society and increasingly became a petrified and impermeable social unit.

3. Noble Spaces of Experience and Action: Guiding Questions and Preliminary Results

The fields of noble distinctiveness we have chosen as fields of historical analysis and comparison – law, politics and aesthetics – were spaces in which and through which nobles acted, and where noble self-images could be created, represented and communicated. They were essential fields for the maintenance of supremacy and at the same time for its symbolic representation in particular spaces of experience and through particular instruments and media. Contrary to religion, which became a private matter in the long term, the three fields were also marked by their essentially public character. They allow us to analyse specific patterns of noble behaviour and, simultaneously, to understand the norms that lay at the bottom of noblemen’s activities, which they wanted to communicate both to their equals and to others, nobles and nonnobles alike. Other missing areas, most notably religion and economics, indirectly play into the discussion of the spaces of law, politics and aesthetics.
Nobility and Law

Noble concepts of honour, the right to defend oneself and one’s reputation by means of physical violence, were not easy to reconcile with a law that tended to restrict the legitimate use of armed force to the emerging states and their representatives. Nor was it easy for noblemen to adapt their lifestyles and their methods of solving conflicts and pursuing their interests to Christian ethics, canon law and the ideal of peacableness. On the contrary, aristocrats tended to consider the domain of the learned law, which was governed by a new class of professional men, as alien and even hostile to their pre-eminence as a privileged order of society, and they openly resented the idea of a juridical system subjected to individuals who were their social inferiors. Whereas noblemen themselves claimed a marked distance to the spheres of civil and penal jurisdiction, ecclesiastics of the new confessional churches regarded the nobility as a whole as the most potent threat to religious discipline and the churches’ supremacy in all matters ethical and moral.

If aristocrats intended to keep a space of their own, apart from the world of the emerging territorial states, the churches and the rising bourgeoisie, they could do so only by defending their own specific law against a law comprising all strata of society alike, and by building this clearly defined aristocratic space with the help of the law. In the long run, it seems that the modern law became one of the most prominent tools for contributing both to disciplining the aristocracy and to integrating them into the homogeneous state of the modern period. Equality before the law was to become a key characteristic of the modern state, as was the disappearance of the aristocracy as an order in the strict sense of the word. If this is really the case, how then did the nobility adapt to these intertwined processes? As the contributions to this chapter suggest, the nobles’ response to the ever-growing juridification of virtually every aspect of everyday-life from the sixteenth century onwards was threefold: First, aristocrats maintained traditional ways of solving conflicts internally, without the interference of third parties, let alone the state. Second, they developed and refined these methods in the course of the modern period, thus becoming more modern without subjecting themselves to the agents of modernity. Third, they used the new juridical norms and institutions in order to pursue their own economic, political and social interests – they even contributed to constructing the new legal world as legislators, judges and high-ranking bureaucrats. All this, though, was accompanied by a discourse conveying a deeply rooted aristocratic distance to the legal sphere – the nobles’ approach to the law was characterised by a mixture of confidence and distrust, arrogance and shrewdness.

The nobility’s use of the ordinary judiciary gives insight into specifically
aristocratic strategies of self-preservation. The refutation of the worldly and ecclesiastical courts of law from the part of the aristocracy has been mentioned; both the continental legal system, which was inspired by Roman law, and the English common law were characterised by certain privileges for aristocrats which served to demonstrate their exemption from the laws that applied to ordinary men, and to ensure the nobility's integration into the legal system. In the Holy Roman Empire, at least during the first half of the sixteenth century, aristocrats did not refrain from taking recourse to traditional violent instruments of self-justice, such as the feud, which was a widely accepted element of noble policymaking. This did not imply, however, that they vigorously opposed the new judiciary that had been installed in the course of the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1495, or the princely courts of law that had been transformed according to the principles of Roman law. On the contrary, as Christian Wieland demonstrates in his paper, aristocrats not only followed a progressive, 'bourgeois' juridical pattern of applying to the new tribunals, but they actually made it by using the judiciary in virtually all matters and against all kinds of opponents in order to pursue their interests. Noblemen dominated the institutions of the higher courts and their proceedings.

It might be argued that the aristocracy actively contributed to a process of juridification and rationalisation, which, in the long term, produced a more homogeneous society. Although this is undoubtedly true from a very broad perspective, it seems more appropriate to consider the nobility's extensive use of the judiciary for the longest part of the early modern period as one of the key elements serving to consolidate their social and political supremacy. In many respects, the law helped to shape an inner-aristocratic society, whose members were able to translate their established ascendancy into a new code, a new language and new arguments.

The duel is considered the most visible medium of aristocrats serving as a means of distancing themselves to the directives of early modern criminal and civil law—a genuine expression of autonomous justice and one that helped to create a noble space closed to social outsiders. By excluding nonnobles and by developing a set of more and more refined rules for its performance, nobles transformed the duel into a manifestation of aristocratic independence next to and outside the state, the church and the dominating social and moral values of their times. The attitudes of early modern and modern princes and magistrates towards the duel were ambiguous, to say the least: Although almost all sovereigns officially condemned the duel as unlawful and immoral, and especially as a threat to their authority, many of them not only tolerated the practice of duelling, but even encouraged it and turned their courts into arenas for notorious duellists. This clearly indicates that the story of the duel cannot simply be written as one of a strong and relatively long-lasting aristocratic rebellion against early modern 'absolutist' monarchies with their
legal apparatus and its gradual decline in the course of the intensified and successful state building in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. There is no linear development and clearly no teleology to the history of the duel. As Marco Bellabarba's paper shows, the origins of the modern duel lay in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy and Spain. From the south of Europe it spread to France, England and Germany.\textsuperscript{28} In Italy, considered as the homeland of this aristocratic mode of self-defence by early modern contemporaries, the duel began to disappear in the course of the early seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century there was virtually no trace left of this established mode of representing the liberties and privileges of a traditional caste of warriors. It had to be re-imported by French troops invading the peninsula at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, whose officers taught their Italian fellow nobles their own long-forgotten invention. The practice of duelling reached a new peak during the nineteenth and early twentieth century – a paradox, since at the same time the modern state became a reality.

Whereas in seventeenth-century England and France the duel was a very frequent and highly visible practice of aristocrats, in Italy the post-Tridentine papacy and the numerous territorial states alike seem to have successfully squashed the duel. Now, nobles regarded themselves more and more as true \textit{milites Christiani} who fought under the guidance of and for the church and not for their own particular interests. Furthermore, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Italian noblemen became less and less prominent in the armies of the great warrior monarchies. Italian aristocrats simply lacked the opportunities to display their chivalrous past as an ideal still of importance to their present-day lives.

The ambiguous attitude towards the formalised, institutionalised and new jurisdiction, outlined in Christian Wieland’s paper – the refusal of ordinary legal proceedings for their own social order and its simultaneous acceptance from the part of the higher nobility – can also be applied to the ‘trial by peers’ in early modern England, analysed by André Krischer. It was an extremely rare occurrence, but nonetheless it had very far-reaching implications because it served to make the learned law and its officials acceptable to the aristocracy. By providing the peers with a forum, which in ceremonial and symbolic matters never failed to underline the exalted social position of the accused, the trial by peers never felt or looked like degradation. On the contrary, its rules made the noble status of the respective participants known to a wider public. On the other hand, the privilege of being judged by one’s equals – one’s ‘peers’ – implied not only the acceptance by

\textsuperscript{28} See Peltonen, “Francis Bacon”, 1–28, and, above all, Idem, \textit{The Duel}. 
the noble defendants of this specific juridical act, but the acceptance of the legal system as a whole. The defendants bent to the rules of the game, though at the same time they were supposed to play with them. In many respects their way of dealing with the law and its hard and fast rules can be characterised as an aesthetic mode of behaviour.

In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, aristocrats very shrewdly managed to employ the new, bureaucratic legal system to strengthen their position as nobles – one might even say: to shape their noble existence, as Monika Wienfort demonstrates in her contribution. The abolition of the manorial jurisdiction in Prussia, for example, cannot simply be considered a victory of the modern state and its bureaucrats, let alone the bourgeoisie, over helpless traditionalists. Instead, it freed the majority of regional landowners of a heavy financial burden. The establishment of entailed estates in the latter nineteenth century did not simply deprive the heirs of noble properties of innovative means of exploiting and multiplying their wealth, it enabled them to organise a profitable forestry. Furthermore, it ensured that the family, together with the property, remained intact, and that the name, the memory and the regional dominance of the noble house were preserved despite adverse economic and social tendencies and individual whim. Finally, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, aristocrats founded numerous regional, national and European associations, which, after 1918, as far as the definition of ‘nobility’ is concerned, became a sort of substitute for what had been the monarchs: Nobles themselves decided what it meant to be noble, who was to be a member and who was not. On the one hand, the formerly almost insurmountable differences between rich and poor nobles, old and new, between the recently ennobled ‘von Müllers’ and the former ruling dynasties, such as the Habsburg-Lothringen, became almost irrelevant, since they all were styled ‘nobles’ and were members of the same associations. On the other hand, these associations finally created an homogeneous and closed nobility. In contrast to the early modern period, when the aristocracy had played a major role in politics, the modern nobility became rather impermeable, a huit clos, unthreatened by newcomers or social climbers.

Nobility and Politics

The political behaviour, political habits and the historical-anthropological decoding of the behaviour of noble politicians can be examined in contrast to that of bourgeois political actors. With the dichotomy between politici and zelanti, early modern politicians were divided between mildness and reconciliation on the one hand and severity and unyieldingness on the
other. Can these also be interpreted as contrasting noble and scholarly political cultures? Within the party system of the nineteenth and twentieth century did there also exist particular patterns of behaviour or strategies that were typically noble? Or did nobles accustom themselves to the political habits of the majority? How did they react to the developing political mass market and the medial conditions of politics in the modern age?

The contributions regarding nobles’ use of law and legal systems underline a close connection between law and politics which is of primary importance in order to better understand the contemporary noble understanding and the nature of nobles’ political action. Thus, all contributions in this section show that the delineations between law, politics and aesthetics are often difficult to draw, that in fact all three spheres were constantly intertwining. The contributions in this section of the volume reveal a broad spectrum of noble cultures of ‘politicising’, both diachronically and synchronically.

In his contribution Hillay Zmora looks at the complex relationship between violence, politics and aristocratic identity in early modern Franconia. Proximity to princes had defined noble reputation in the thirteenth and early fifteenth century. Behind this constellation two models of generating and communicating a particular aristocratic identity become visible: one focusing on the relationship between nobles and territorial princes, defining noble reputation with regard to the political and social proximity of nobles to princes; the other arguing from the quasi internal relationship among nobles themselves. Feuds in this context were fundamental for nobles in order to present themselves as virtuous warriors and to demonstrate the potential use of violence. The second model of ‘familiarity’ took its reputation as accepted by peers and communicated to the public by acts of controlled violence as a primary factor to understanding noble politicising. Nobles thus used feuds and symbolic violence to mark their political presence, but from the later fifteenth century onwards, nobles began to distance themselves from the princes and organised their own corporations in Franconia, thus reflecting close personal relations among nobles in this region. Ritualised acts of violence such as those in tournaments were now sanctioned, and feuds became regarded as Landfriedensbruch. The noble corporations tried to prevent any return to the former practice of feuds.

Poland marked an extreme case of political practice in early modern Europe, characterised by a far-reaching system of institutionalized consensus among the Polish nobility, the szlachta. In his paper Robert Frost looks at forms of corporate decision-making in the Polish-Lithuanian Union from the mid-fifteenth century to the end of the Polish state in the 1790s in the

context of the partitions. Political decision-making in the Sejm was based on
the idea of a broad consensus to make decisions more acceptable. Contrary
to the negative image of Polish anarchy as propagated by many European
contemporaries, a closer look at the beginnings of the aristocratic republic
reveals not only the practical limits of consensual politics, identified with in-
stability, contested elections and even the installation of anti-kings. At least
at the beginning corporate decision-making had been more efficient than
the later image of a failing state suggested. It was not the model of nine-
teenth-century state-building, but the commonwealth understood as the re
tpublica which mattered for many contemporary nobles when they referred
to Roman ideals of a senate in which “more eyes see more than one”. The
practice of decentralised political power in the Union corresponded to the
political function of magnates and found its expression in incremental
political decision-making with the king often presenting himself as a
member of the magnates’ nobility. In a social microcosm a public developed
with parliamentary reports being printed and read. Yet from the mid-seven-
teenth century onwards problems became obvious, as it was unclear whether
members of the Sejm represented the whole noble nation or only the Sejmik
of their particular home region. The introduction in 1652 of the liberum
veto, i.e. the unanimous vote necessary to pass each and every political act,
could easily paralyze the whole regime: Up to 1763 more than thirty of the
eighty Sejms were terminated without any concrete result, making the re-
public an easy target for her neighbouring powers in the later eighteenth
century. Despite the progressive efforts during the 1790s, constitutional re-
forms came too late to prevent the dissolution of the state.

Changing the perspective from structures of political decision-making to
individual figures, Jonathan Dewald’s contribution on the French duke
Henry de Rohan (1579–1638) exemplifies the self-image of a leading French
aristocrat in the early modern period. He combined several role models:
from feudal lord and warrior, to the exiled intellectual and Machiavellian
author. Rohan did not have the traditional career of a regional landowner.
Transcending the traditional boundaries of a French noble became a leitmo-
tiv of his life: Although Rohan never won Cyprus as his own dukedom, in-
dividual bravery in war, translating the ideal of the roi connétable into the
reality of a French noble, remained his ideal. He derived his ideal type hero-
ism from the life of Caesar and deeply admired Machiavelli, from whom he
took the premise that religion should not have a major importance in
politics. This particular mixture – distancing himself from the traditional
role of a feudal landlord, referring to hero-models of antiquity and looking
at new concepts of politics – underlines that being a noble did not necess-
arily mean resisting change. The example of Rohan also shows the import-
ance of ‘theatricality’ in noble politics, as idealised in the self-image as an
independent prince, in the hero images of the past as well as in the ideal of a ‘glorious death’ in battle. Against this background ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ seem no adequate concepts to illustrate a seventeenth-century aristocrat. It was rather the complex overlapping of old and new elements characterising a particular ambiguity.

In stark contrast to the continental societies, the British nobility succeeded in maintaining a political role well into the nineteenth century by apparently giving up its social exclusion. This particular feature marks the background to Peter Mandler’s contribution. Not so much noble privilege allowed their assuming this political role as the function of a noble landowner and member of parliament. Despite the actual difficulties to be admitted and integrated into this élite, public schools, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge as well as military offices offered opportunities for well-off gentlemen to approach and mix with the nobility. This difference between self-image and structural changes continued to be a particular characteristic of the British case. The reforms of parliament in 1832 and in the 1860s led to an expansion of the franchise, including the upper strata of the industrious middle classes who did not own land. But until the 1870s and 1880s the noble landowning elite still formed the majority in the Houses of Parliament. Only then and in the context of an economic decline did their presence in parliament erode. In the twentieth century, the landed elite became more aristocratic but less visible. Landowners not only profited from the post-war boom in the 1950s and 1960s as well as from tax exemptions and other legal advantages. Now national heritage became more and more identified with the noble lifestyle as based on landownership and noble country houses. This particular development and the national function of the landowning noble to symbolise the national heritage may also explain why noble associations were and still are far less important in Great Britain than in continental societies.

Tatjana Tönsmeyer offers a comparative insight into the practice of local politics as exercised by nobles in Bohemia and England between 1848 and 1918. Although noble landlords in Bohemia severely criticised the reform of local administrations in 1848, they took over many offices in this system in order to strengthen their patriarchal rule over peasants. They used a progressive institution to preserve a traditional role. In Bohemia as in England noble landowners used the premise of landed interests to justify their position as spokesmen, if not trustees, of all electors. Contrary to the Bohemian case, the reform of local administration in England was implemented only in the 1880s and did not provoke a similar conflict between regional nobles and the central government as in Bohemia. In England decentralised decision-making and the tradition of local self-government were not questioned by the reform: Nobles could continue to perform an active role in local politics.
The fundamental importance of a continuous reinvention of the nobility in periods of dynamic change becomes obvious in the Dutch case. In his chapter on nobility and politics in the Netherlands in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Yme Kuiper corrects the view that, from the early modern period onwards, The Netherlands were a nation of citizens. Contrary to this image, after 1814 old and new elements of the nobility began to mix with the traditional patricians and formed a stable elite of notables, a compound elite, from which many influential politicians, military officers and members of the administrative elite were recruited. After 1900 and in the context of modern mass politics and the regime of parties, this milieu of notables began to disintegrate. Although military and administrative offices in the colonial service offered at least some compensation for this relative decline, nobles became much less visible in politics. As a consequence, and in contrast to the British case, Dutch nobles began to organise their interests by founding noble associations and publish noble almanacs in order to reinvent their exclusive status.

If we look at this spectrum of nobles` experiences of politics in the long-term perspective, it becomes obvious that, for the early modern period, the delineation between law and politics on the one hand and between politics and aesthetics on the other is difficult to define. Instead of applying these categories in a compartmentalised way, implicitly using nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideal types, the examples presented in this volume rather point to the interference and interaction between law, politics and aesthetics – certainly in the earlier periods, but to a certain extend also thereafter. Whether in the juridification of politics, the politicisation of law, or in the theatricality of politics and the essentially political meaning of noble culture with its performative character: The interactions and overlapping between these fields of noble action and experience proved to be an essential mark even under changing circumstances and in different historical contexts. A broader concept of aesthetics in politics, as in the ideal of a noble’s good death in contrast to the bourgeois image of noble decline and failure, indicated means of social distinction and grandeur which in turn was essential to generate political reputation and influence.

Another common feature of all papers in this section is the focus on mechanisms and codes of inclusion and exclusion. Despite the very different kinds of nobles in Germany, Poland, France, Britain, Bohemia or The Netherlands, there existed a particular necessity for nobles to stand apart from the general public in order to mark the peculiar self and the other. Against this background the change of role models over time, from the Roman Republic and Senate to the war hero and to the trustee of landed interest in local politics as points of reference, played a vital role. Noble and nobility proved to be relational and situational concepts, defined by mechanisms of
being accepted as noble both by peers and by the social and political environment.

In a look at the nineteenth and twentieth century, the examples presented here demonstrate very different ways of adapting to a changing world. Despite a declining visibility of British nobles in parliamentary politics, noble landownership and presence in local politics survived well into the twentieth century. Transforming the traditional role of parliamentary trustees into that of symbols of national heritage and cultural memory may explain the relative success of the British aristocracy as the queen of the landowning elite today. In very different contexts, such as in Britain and Bohemia after 1850, local politics and administrations mattered for nobles’ ability to adapt to a changing pattern of politics. In contrast to Bohemia, where nobles slowly grew into the local administration, in Britain an open conflict with a centralising state never developed. In the Netherlands a ‘national’ nobility existed since the nineteenth century, and the later elite of notables was a result of a complex fusion between nobles and traditional patricians, thus contributing to the pillarisation of Dutch society. Yet with the erosion of political monopolies a reinvention of the noble arcanum and mechanisms of symbolic exclusion took place in the twentieth century.

All these examples underline that a political power status that had been an undisputed norm in the early modern period became questioned in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The rise of a centralised, bureaucratic state (even if we must not underestimate the gap between program and practice), the advent of mass politics and the combination of eroding political power with economic shifts, especially between 1880 and 1940, contributed to this process. But despite this relative political invisibility and the loss of privileges, there also existed strategies of successful survival, as the involvement in local politics and the aristocracy’s cultural function in Britain demonstrates.

**Nobility and Aesthetics**

It is by no means clear whether there was something like a specific aristocratic ‘taste’ – whether the cultural productions of noble poets, painters and musicians or the art collections and the art patronage of the early modern and modern nobilities were in any material sense different from those of their princely or bourgeois contemporaries. It remains very obvious, though, that aesthetics – comparable to educational concepts, the art of warfare or religion – was a key arena that served to communicate specific social and cultural concepts of the self, of one’s place in society and one’s claims to any sort of leadership. The importance of aesthetics to the aristo-
Noble Identities from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century

cratic lifestyle has already become evident in the context of the contributions on law and politics: Aristocrats, by obeying the rules of the judiciary and by displaying a certain distance to them at the same time – or by imitating the heroes of classical antiquity, when they fought battles or meddled in politics – tended to style themselves as works of art; they had a propensity to explicitly ‘fashion’ their public persona. Aesthetics in the narrow sense, therefore, were not simply a more or less superfluous aspect of aristocratic life; they lay at the heart of any nobleman’s existence.

Klaus Pietschmann, by examining the relationship between musical skills and notions of ‘aristocracy’ in the early sixteenth century, shows that this liaison was highly ambivalent: On the one hand, the perfect courtier, even an ideal prince – whether secular or clerical – was supposed not only to be a sound judge in all musical matters, he should also be able to perform music himself. On the other hand these abilities should never be demonstrated in a manner too openly public, and a noble musician had to avoid being associated with professionals. Music, it could be concluded, was a *conditio sine qua non* for every aristocrat at least of the higher orders, though intimate familiarity with its rules was to be linked to a certain distanced discreetness – a “never too much” rooted in profound knowledge.

This sort of wavering between professionalism and dilettantism was also a characteristic feature of early modern noble poets and poetry in seventeenth-century Germany, as demonstrated by Claudius Sittig. The *Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft*, a ‘language association’ of nobles and nonnobles alike, has been regarded to the present day as a forerunner of the enlightenment insofar as social differentiations seem to have been secondary to a common intellectual and aesthetic goal. However, a closer look at the inner life of the *Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft* reveals that its organisation was by no means democratic. The literary products of its aristocratic members were quite different from those of its bourgeois writers: Aristocratic writing was inspired by conversational values (as opposed to a scholarly attitude), a sort of studied dilettantism and a close connection to applied literature (as opposed to an ideal that might be called *l’art pour l’art* or science for its own sake). Noble writers used their writings in order to form a noble *habitus* that was essentially non-bourgeois and non-academic within a context that – at least in part – was characterised by learned men from the lower orders; nearness without identity, one might say.

Architecture was a basic means of expressing aristocratic modes of self-perception and indispensable for every family who wished to perpetuate their memory and existence as a ‘house’. The stone house of a noble family was much more than a place to live. It conveyed the idea of a dynasty that might have a historical starting point, but no end in history. Andreas Pečar interprets the dwellings of aristocratic families from the seventeenth and
eighteenth century in this light: Both houses in the capital and manors in the
country served as a long-lasting, if not a permanent mark of the wealth,
power and taste of an aristocratic family. In the Habsburg monarchy, indi-
viduals of princely rank had constructed mansions in Vienna – the most vis-
ible sign of their belonging to the court society that formed the core of social
and political power in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Aus-
tria. It is remarkable, however, that the houses of the Kinskys, Schwarzen-
bergs, Batthanys and, above all, the Liechtensteins, did not, with the help of
their iconographic programmes, express any deeply rooted gratitude to-
wards the emperor or the ruling dynasty of the Habsburgs. Although the
monarch’s favour was directly accountable for the spectacular social rise of
all of these families, they tended to shape an image of almost total autonomy:
The aristocracy claimed that they owed their position to their own merits or
to those of their ancestors, and that they had always been preeminent and
particularly prominent and did not depend upon the personality of some
monarch or other person who might give or withdraw his favour. Thus,
architecture in Vienna became an instrument for displaying aristocratic in-
dependence in the face of the emperor. By employing the best architects of
the time, the princes and counts of the Habsburg Erblande embellished their
monarch’s capital and transformed it into a forum of aristocratic indepen-
dence. Similar results apply for families of the higher nobilities of Rome,
England or the Holy Roman Empire: Their houses, most of them quite spec-
tacular and showing a most advanced refinement and ‘contemporariness’ in
aesthetic matters, were intended to blur any trace of their builders’ or their
families’ indebtedness to some other, superior power – the Pope, the King of
Prussia or the King of England. They were meant to represent them instead
as powers in their own right, distinguished by an almost unlimited com-
mand over the forces of history and beauty.

Hubertus Kohle’s interpretation of Hyacinthe Rigaud’s portrait of Gas-
pard de Gueidan, a member of the noblesse de robe at the time of Louis XIV,
shows that this strategy of imitating royal or courtly models of self-represen-
tation, while at the same time expressing a certain detachment from the
monarch’s authority, applies even to persons whose noble status was of very
recent origin indeed, and whose rise into the ranks of the aristocracy was di-
rectly traceable to the reigning king. Gaspard de Gueidan’s principal aim in
life was to be considered a member of the old noblesse d’épée, and with all his
might he tried to make the world forget his and his ancestors’ comparatively
humble origins. The portrait he had painted by the most fashionable artist
of his time, Hyacinthe Rigaud, who had depicted not only the heads of the
leading aristocratic houses of his time but, above all, the sun king himself,
must be interpreted as an integral part of this strategy of aristocratic self-
fashioning. But the sociocultural message conveyed by Rigaud’s portrait is
not simply one of adherence and loyalty to the monarch and his dominance in art matters – though, of course, these elements were part of what the artist and his commissioner intended to communicate with the help of this work of art. Simultaneously, Rigaud presented an unmistakable allusion to the pastoral themes that were highly appreciated by the French aristocracy of the period. This sort of premoderne romanticism allowed the nobility to imagine a counterculture to the dominant world of the king and his court. Without ever really belonging to the inner circle of the powerful and grand families who made the core of Versailles’s society, Gaspard de Gueidan not only imitated the symbols that showed the nobility’s closeness to the sovereign, but also their more or less playful distance to him.

Since Reinhart Koselleck’s reflections on the so-called Sattelzeit – the period between 1750 and 1850 which shaped the modern world as we know it – we recognise that ‘modernity’ is characterised by the fact that contemporaries perceived and perceive their own time as clearly distinct from both the past and the future: People began not only to consider change as inevitable, but also as profound and fundamental, and even as a positive reality that made progress thinkable – and possible. The transformation of the concept of ‘revolution’ around 1780-1790 is a clear indication of this process. The enthusiastic conception of ‘newness’, progress and history was accompanied by a sort of conservatism, very much different from early modern traditionalism: It was an attitude (which might lead to a political programme, though not necessarily so) marked by the knowledge that the present and the past were not merely variations of a constant theme, but that the present marked a break with the past, and the conviction that certain elements of the past – notably the most worthy, the most beautiful ones – were irretrievably lost. Both, a passionate commitment to a new future and a melancholic sense of loss concerning the immediate past, became essentially modern attitudes towards time, development and change. In his paper on the writings of two major novelists of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, François-René de Chateaubriand and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Edoardo Costadura shows that literati-noblemen – the “gentilshommes écrivains” – gave the conservative consciousness of new times an adequate form. By adapting the Don Quixote motive (which itself is a reflection on changing conditions, ideals and realities of ‘nobility’ in sixteenth-century Spain), they depicted the aristocrats of the postrevolutionary period as acute witnesses of a new era, who despite their intelligence, education, refinement and sensibility were unable to adapt to new social and political conditions. For Chateaubriand and Lampedusa, aristocrats could only be described as the “last”
of their families, their order and their times. The conviction that the past was gone seemed to be the ultimate victory of the aristocracy. The belief that everything that had been could never be revived was by no means restricted to the nobility.

In many respects, the dominant interpretation, according to which ‘progressive’ and therefore qualitatively ‘good’ art developed primarily through the emancipation of the bourgeoisie from feudal society, can still be considered valid. Against this background, this section offers an alternative reading of cultural developments in the early modern and modern periods. It seems that aristocrats not only participated in great numbers in the aesthetic experiences of their time, but that they shaped them to a very large extent, and that bourgeois concepts of art might often be considered adaptations of aristocratic modes of self representation and theatricality – and not vice versa.

5. Perspectives: The Nobility and the Understanding of European History

Norbert Elias, in his magisterial studies on the “process of civilisation” and the “court society”, made the nobility the focus of his attention; mostly, it has been argued, as a victim of “modernising” and “civilising” developments, particularly the building of the early modern state, the monopolisation of power, the lawful right to exercise physical violence and of financial means in the hands of the king and the continuous integration of individuals into wide-ranging networks, the growing dependence of each and any member of society on others. Thus, spontaneity was replaced by self-control, immediacy by “Langsicht”. The nobility became transformed, from a community of individual knights into a collective court society whose etiquettes exercised a vigorous rule on the newly tamed, domesticated nobility. This attending of the royal court, though, ensured that the aristocracy would maintain their supremacy for a surprisingly long period, since the rules of behaviour governing courtly life were to become the accepted rules of all elites – aristocratic and bourgeois alike – and, later on, of all strata of society. According to Elias, the new modes of acting individually and together with others which ensured one’s survival in modern, in civilised times, were more or less invented by the aristocracy. They were at first a mark of the traditional ruling class in nontraditional circumstances before they became the accepted and adopted codes of behaviour for the majority.51

31 Elias, Die höfische Gesellschaft.
Much – one might say: almost everything – about Elias’s analysis has been criticised. Particularly his view of the court as a sort of gilded prison where an essentially powerless nobility was subjected to the continuous scrutiny of an overpowerful and extremely jealous king has been replaced by an interpretation of the early modern court as a point of contact both between the monarch and his most important subjects and allies and among the aristocratic society – a sort of stock market where news, people and resources could be discussed, promoted and exchanged. Far from being an instrument of deprivation of power, the court proved to be a means of intensifying, maintaining, demonstrating and bargaining noble power. However, Elias’s idea that the nobility, and not the so-called modern elements of early modern societies – lawyers, merchants and bankers – were the most important factor of change, does still exercise its fascination on historians of the aristocracy. The maintenance of a distinctly ‘noble’ identity – of a specific mixture of tenacity and mutability, of a highly refined ambivalence towards virtually every aspect of life – was the means by which nobles, early modern and modern alike, not only adapted to change, or resisted it, but actually made it possible, contributed to it and profited from it.

Against this background one can argue against a simplistic notion of European history being reduced to a mere history of winners and losers; pioneers and latecomers in political, socioeconomic and cultural matters; as a history of ever more rationalisation, which tends to mark a clear cut between modernity and premodern periods and derives its suggestive explanation from retrospective causality, that is, thinking from the end backwards. Instead, the history of European nobilities underlines that this clear cut between modernity and ‘the rest of history’, reduced to the function of preparing modernity, did not exist as such. Although the nobility’s political, social and cultural supremacy eroded during the nineteenth and twentieth century, the concept of nobility continued to serve as a point of reference for many nonnobles. Do we, ourselves, fall into the trap of retrospective teleology if we argue that, compared to the many invented traditions of the nineteenth century, including nation and nation-state, the *longue durée* of European noble cultures has an importance at least similar to that of the modern nation-state for any balanced understanding of European history?

***

Acknowledgements

The articles presented in this volume stem from an international conference held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in June 2009. We would like to thank the FRIAS for its generous support and the Scientific Board of the FRIAS-School of History for accepting the manuscripts for publication in the Institute’s new book series. In preparing the publication of this volume we relied on an experienced and highly professional team in Freiburg. We are particularly grateful for Jörg Später’s continual pressure and assistance, which has made it possible to publish this volume in good time.

Freiburg, November 2010

JL and CW