

The Notion of Nobility and the Impact of Ennoblement on Early Modern Central Europe

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses the problem of why there was a constant demand for ennoblement in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Central Europe, even though those who aspired to it had little or no prospect of integration into the established feudal nobility. Nobility was first and foremost an ideological concept closely connected to power and rule. The Holy Roman emperors ennobled persons who exercised power precisely because, in the premodern social order, the exercise of power was a prerogative of the nobility. However, the newly ennobled had only their title in common with the old aristocratic families and rarely attained the other privileges enjoyed by these families. For this reason, the emperors' practice of ennoblement gradually reshaped the nobility as a whole and simultaneously the ideological notion of nobility. Certainly, ennoblement still served a strategic purpose in the context of social advancement. Particularly for civil servants and military officers, it was the most effective means of preserving their newly acquired status for their descendants and possibly establishing their families in a new bureaucratic and military hereditary elite, which in some places coexisted with the old aristocracy. The central element of the new ideological concept was the notion of the nobility as a hereditary ruling class, both qualified for and entitled to the exercise of power on account of inherited superiority.

Der Aufsatz erörtert das Problem, warum im Mitteleuropa des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts eine anhaltende Nachfrage nach Adelstiteln bestand, obwohl eine Integration in den alten Feudaladel sehr unwahrscheinlich war. Adel war zunächst ein ideologisches Konzept, das eng mit Herrschaft und Macht verbunden war. Die römischen Kaiser erhoben Personen in den Adelsstand, die Herrschaft ausübten, weil in der vormodernen Gesellschaftsordnung Herrschaftsausübung nur dem Adel zukam. Neunobilitierte teilten aber mit den alten Familien lediglich den Titel und gelangten selten in den Genuss von Privilegien, über die alte Familien verfügten. Aus diesem Grund veränderte die kaiserliche Nobilitierungspraxis langfristig den Adel insgesamt und damit zugleich seine ideologische Konzeption. Allerdings konnte die Nobilitierung einem strategischen Zweck im Zusammenhang mit sozialer Aufstiegsmobilität dienen. Für Beamte und Offiziere war der Adelsstand die wirksamste Absicherung des erreichten Status für die Nachkommen und konnte die Familie eventuell in einer Beamten- und Militäradelgruppe verankern, die sich an manchen Orten neben dem alten Adel entwickelte. Das Kernelement der neuen ideologischen Adelskonzeption bildete die Vorstellung des Adels als erblichem Herrschaftsstand, der kraft erbter Überlegenheit zur Ausübung von Herrschaft sowohl qualifiziert als auch berechtigt war.

Introduction

THE question of why a person would want to become a noble in early modern Central Europe appears at first sight a pointless one to ask. So unchallenged was the nobility's position at the upper end of society and so high was its prestige that a commoner's desire for a share in those advantages is entirely understandable. In the course of the sixteenth

century, the nobility came to occupy the highest ranks of society, and in the following century its social, political, and cultural hegemony was fully in place. A commoner's decision to seek ennoblement for himself is therefore, from the point of view of a present-day observer, not only immediately comprehensible but also perfectly rational. Yet, if we bear in mind that unconcealed ambition to improve one's status and to seek social advancement fundamentally contradicted the premodern conception of the role of commoners in society, the assumption that aspirations for ennoblement were simply the result of rational career-planning becomes less satisfactory. Although far from uncommon in itself, ennoblement was by no means the standard avenue for social advancement. On the contrary, promoting somebody into another estate remained the exception; an exception moreover that had to be well founded in each individual case, as it constituted an infringement of the principles on which social order rested. Certainly, anybody could theoretically become wealthy and powerful through personal hard work, but this did not by itself imply the ability to claim a higher social rank. One's place in the social order was hardly affected by such considerations as wealth or other status factors that were dependent on individual endeavor. In everyday life, a nobleman, even an impoverished one, was always given preference over a commoner, no matter how rich and distinguished he was.

Nevertheless, ambition seems to have been the main reason for attempts to be raised to the ranks of the nobility. But in following their ambition, aspirants had to expect rebuke from two sides for setting their sights too high. For noblemen, ambition was an important feature of their social identity, and it was considered a *sine qua non* particularly for those who pursued a military career.¹ Moreover, every nobleman was expected to display ambition in the defense and furtherance of his personal honor and of the honor of his family. In a commoner, however, this would not only have been unbecoming, it would also have been considered by the nobility as an encroachment on the code of conduct of that commoner's betters. In a non-noble context, ambition could evoke associations with envy and could possibly have been perceived as a moral lapse. Signaling an intention to leave one's place in society in search of a more exalted place could ruin a community of equals and harm the atmosphere of solidarity among its members. The intention of attaining ennoblement was an even more risk-fraught undertaking by the seventeenth century, when social climbers could no longer count on becoming integrated into the aristocracy. The odds were high for them to end up in social limbo.

In the period that George Huppert deals with in his book on French Renaissance elites, the reasons for seeking ennoblement were perfectly clear.² Sixteenth-century bourgeois merchants could expect considerable long-term return on investments, if part of their capital was used to secure an ennobling office. As nobles, they stood to enjoy a number of lucrative privileges. They were entitled to purchase noble land and were eligible for fiscal exemption, which was particularly gratifying. Although the amount of financially relevant privileges and the legal conditions for enjoying them varied between states and even between regions, the net benefit was always substantial and worth the investment. Ennoblement entailed a significant enhancement of status, and the investment required

¹Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570–1715* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 25, 43–46.

²George Huppert, *Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes: An Essay on the Definition of Elites in Renaissance France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

was easily retrieved through regular salary and seigneurial rents. This strategy enabled numerous families to alter their social profile completely within three generations from industrious urban businesspeople to respected royal officeholders with a seigneurial background or to country squires without any practical employment at all.

In the seventeenth century, however, the situation changed completely. Once they had established themselves as the state's administrative elite, the newly ennobled families joined the old aristocracy in closing ranks against the next wave of upstarts. Generally speaking, social mobility ceased to be a fairly commonplace phenomenon in society. Although social advancement was never the norm in the full sense of the word, it did occur, and the public (including the old aristocracy) had been relatively tolerant of exceptions. Various explanations have been given for this sudden change. Most historians agree that it was the state that put an end to unchecked usurpation when its officials assumed control over social mobility. In sociological terms, however, the closing off of elite groups is seen as a consequence of their consolidation. Once established, groups generally try to define their identities by stressing the differences that set them apart. This results in demarcation lines between themselves and others; defining a group therefore usually means blocking access to it for newcomers. Early modern nobility provides a fine instance of this.

Ambitious social climbers were the first to feel the adverse effects of this development. The road to the top became ever more arduous. Even for the most enterprising, there was little prospect of joining the nobility under the changed conditions and, in fact, only a lucky few managed to penetrate the upper ranks of nobility. People at the time must have been aware that it was extremely unlikely for them to make it into the aristocracy, regardless of how determined they were to oblige both in terms of the required investment and conduct. Moreover, in closing ranks, the beneficial and profitable noble privileges became an almost exclusive preserve of the old nobility: nobles were relatively undertaxed throughout the early modern period, but their privileged tax status was gradually eroding by the seventeenth century.³ Only if a noble's revenue was primarily based on landed property legally defined as noble and as entail could such privileges bring substantial return. This was rarely the case with the newly ennobled. Furthermore, the high church positions that were so much in demand, particularly the rank of canon, came to be reserved for the offspring of ancient lineages because they required proof of noble ancestry. In addition to the general odium that was attached to social progression anyway, this could have been another good reason to put aside plans to strive for ennoblement.

In this essay, I discuss some of the problems inherent in the question of why so many people persisted in their wish for ennoblement in conditions that made it unlikely for the result to come up to their (or our) expectations. At worst, after all, they risked the kind of ridicule heaped on Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentil-Homme*. What returns did they expect when they applied for ennoblement in the seventeenth or eighteenth century? There must have been additional reasons that made noble status highly desirable or even necessary, despite its inability to automatically open up a path into the coterie of the old families.

As long as ennoblement continued to be an important stepping-stone on the route of social advancement, noble status remained highly desirable, as I would like to propose, for

³Michael L. Bush, *The European Nobility: Noble Privilege*, vol. 1 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 28–39, 63–64.

the following three reasons. First, being a potent status symbol, a noble title enabled commoners to demonstrate a high level of worldly success, which was particularly valuable to those who could not afford more costly means of representation. This was especially important for the growing class of professionals and officials, but in some cases also for merchant-class entrepreneurs. Second, concentrating on such a well-established and highly esteemed status symbol made sense because of the prestige attached to it. The newly ennobled shared in the social capital that accrued from the nobility's long and glorious history by following in the footsteps traditionally associated with the nobility. And third, as opposed to all other material status symbols, noble status was forever. Its loss presupposed a serious breach of the code of conduct on the part of the noble person. Noblemen commanded the respect of society even when they lacked the means to keep up the bright appearance of the rich. To an extent, noble status dispensed its holders from the constant struggle for wealth and prestige. Members of the nobility and their descendants were visibly a cut above the common people, and they were assured of remaining there for life. Clearly, these points refer primarily to the symbolic aspect of nobility, which was to become its most important feature in the course of the development in question.

The Benefit of Noble Status

Generally speaking, nobility is a very special type of status in which modern concepts of status do not apply. Moreover, an understanding of nobility as an early modern social phenomenon is not helped by the ambiguity that is attached to the term *nobility* as used by historians. In order to avoid confusion, we can roughly distinguish among three meanings. First, the nobility was a tangible historical phenomenon. It was a group or a set of groups of families whose members shared a similar economic basis, similar privileges, specific status symbols, and a similar lifestyle.⁴ On a regional level, face-to-face interaction and a more or less close family relationship was typical. When historians talk about nobility as a social and political factor, they usually refer to this tangible aspect of the term. Second, the nobility was a legal entity, that is, it was an entity protected by the law. People who enjoyed noble status were legally entitled to certain privileges, such as specific types of land ownership, fiscal and judicial exemptions, status symbols such as titles and coats of arms, and preeminence in the public space. Nobles whose nobility was only nominal did not belong to the group, which is commonly referred to as *the nobility*. Finally, *nobility*, in the sociological sense of the term, is a general social phenomenon. It can be characterized as a particular type of elite that reproduces its status biologically. According to this very general understanding, nobility occurs whenever a distinguished person has successfully transmitted her or his status to her or his kin. If one's status is primarily based on wealth, this kind of nobility is easy to obtain because the family inherits the status along with the fortune. But this mechanism also applies to meritocratic elites with a more modest economic background. The process of dynasty-building invariably takes place in all societies irrespective of their historical background.

Distinguishing among the different meanings of the term *nobility* not only clarifies its semantic content, but enables us to gain a better perspective on the notion of nobility

⁴With regard to its lifestyle, the nobility met the criteria of a milieu because most of its members had cultural, aesthetic, and political values in common.

itself. This is particularly useful for our attempt to explain why ennoblement did not cease to be attractive for commoners once it had lost its material attractions. Figure 1 shows the constant demand for noble status in the period under consideration on the basis of a random sample of 3,528 cases covering 20 percent of all registered imperial ennoblements.⁵ The data comprises applications for ennoblement throughout the empire including the Low Countries and parts of Italy. It includes both acts of ennoblement the emperors conferred as heads of the empire (*Reichsadelsstand*) and as heads of the Habsburg monarchy (*erbländischer Adelsstand*).⁶

Given that people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were aware of the legal and sociological aspect of nobility, they were likely to perceive that obtaining a noble rank could safeguard their social status for their future generations and transfer their material wealth into the most solid form of symbolic capital. Its main benefit seems to have been its potential to place a family once and for all on the highest level in the hierarchy of honors by providing them with the symbols of highest esteem. A noble title could achieve what individual economic success or high office alone failed to attain: enduring and sustainable prestige, which was independent of material circumstances.

For wealthy merchants and artisans, ennoblement was unlikely to make any significant difference concerning their practical living conditions. Acquiring such options as the right for a daughter to retreat to a convent reserved for the nobility or for a son to take up a career as a military officer added prestige to the family name and enhanced its reputation, yet the benefits were largely symbolic and came at a price. But that was exactly what it was all about: by enabling these burghers to leave their bourgeois standing behind, ennoblement compensated them for the relative lack of dignity commercial pursuits.⁷

Conversely, being noble without living nobly was potentially equally incommensurate. The financially hard-pressed officials of the lower and middle ranks of the administration were in a particularly awkward situation. During his stay in Salzburg in 1777, Kaspar Riesbeck encountered many nobles serving the local prince, who complained that the state did not provide for them according to their status. Riesbeck, though, was unable to tell their status because they neither resembled the highly ranking aristocracy dwelling at court nor did they ever mingle with commoners. Nonetheless, they strongly insisted on being addressed invariably as “*Euer Gnaden*,” and ladies would regard it as a painful insult to be addressed as “*Madame*.”⁸ Case studies on Baden-Durlach, Brandenburg-Ansbach, Brandenburg-Bayreuth, Hannover, Osnabruck, and Württemberg provide further evidence

⁵The data is taken from Karl Friedrich von Frank, *Standeserhebungen und Gnadenakte für das Reich und die Erblände Standeserhebungen und Gnadenakte für das Reich und die Erblände bis 1806* (Schloss Senftenegg, 1967), which is an alphabetical list of the grants of ennoblement at the Adelsarchiv (Archive of Nobility) at the Austrian State Archive. Strictly speaking, the data constitute a clinical sample because failed attempts were not recorded. Thus, the analysis is somewhat biased, and the informative value of its result is limited. Klaus Margreiter, “Konzept und Bedeutung des Adels im Absolutismus” (PhD diss., European University Institute, 2005), 208–16.

⁶We know the applicant’s place of habitation in only 55 percent of all cases. Among these cases, 42 percent were inhabitants of the Habsburg Monarchy.

⁷For commoners, it was of course perfectly honorable to engage successfully in trade and business. For noblemen, however, trade and all kinds of commercial pursuits were totally beyond the pale, and the more successful a businessman was, the more suspect he was in the eyes of the nobility.

⁸Johann Kaspar Riesbeck, *Briefe eines reisenden Franzosen über Deutschland an seinen Bruder zu Paris*. Übersetzt v. K(aspar) R(iesbeck), vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Zürich, 1785), 156.

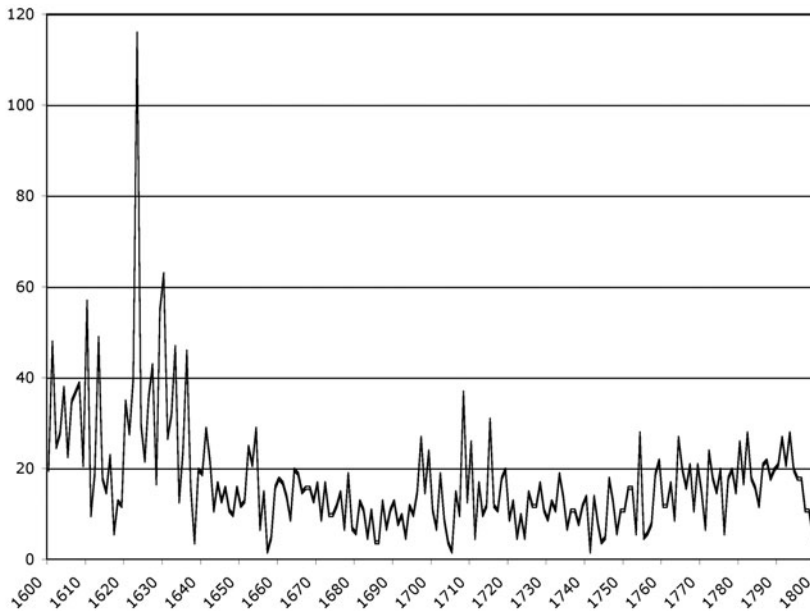


Fig. 1: The trend of imperial ennoblement 1600–1800.

for the specific needs and conditions of a service nobility.⁹ For them, ennoblement became a necessary condition to maintain their status. This group compensated for their lack of wealth by ostentatiously insisting on the symbols of their elevated position. It was evidently a matter of status inconsistency when men laying claim to this kind of position were constantly in danger of derogation on account of insufficient income. The only possible way of preventing loss of status was for them to rely on their patron's favor and on the protection that a noble name traditionally conferred.

This was most likely one of the reasons why officials began to obtain noble status on a massive scale by the seventeenth century. Johann B. Martin Arand, a high-ranking official at Altdorf (*k.k. Oberamtsrat* and *Landschreiber*), stated in his letter of application in 1798 that his current status as a commoner was not only demeaning to him personally but hurtful to the reputation of his office as well. Granting him nobility, he reasoned, would increase the effectiveness of his work.¹⁰ By far the greatest number of imperial ennoblements was

⁹Joachim Lampe, *Aristokratie, Hofadel und Staatspatriziat in Kurhannover. Die Lebensweise der höheren Beamten an den kurhannoverschen Zentral- und Hofbehörden 1714–1760* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963); Christine van den Heuvel, *Beamtenschaft und Territorialstaat. Behördenentwicklung und Sozialstruktur der Beamtenschaft im Hochstift Osnabrück 1550–1800*. (Osnabrück: Kommissionsverlag H. Th. Wenner 1984); Bernd Wunder, "Die Sozialstruktur in den Geheimratskollegien in den süddeutschen protestantischen Fürstentümern (1660–1720): Zum Verhältnis von sozialer Mobilität und Briefadel im Absolutismus," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 58 (1971): 145–220.

¹⁰Adelsakt Johann B. Martin Arand 1798, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv. More on Martin Arand in Johann B. Martin Arand, *In Vorderösterreichs Amt und Würden. Lebendige Vergangenheit. Zeugnisse und Erinnerungen*. Schriftenreihe des Württ. Geschichts- und Altertumsvereins no. 19 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996). In Bavaria, though, the government seemed to successfully constrain

allotted to officials and military officers.¹¹ As a consequence, in the Habsburg monarchy, the lower ranks of nobility came to be associated with the emerging service nobility.¹² In its original function, ennoblement had been a reward for long-standing service and loyalty. This was now almost reversed: noble status became a *sine qua non* for the career of officials who wanted to obtain the position of councillor or an even more exalted one. The more the ranks of civil servants swelled with lower nobility, the more newcomers were expected to follow suit and seek ennoblement in their turn; if they did not, they risked being treated as inferiors by their colleagues and by the people they were supposed to govern.¹³

It is important to note that in Central Europe the service nobility did not merge with the landed nobility. Neither did it create an alternative model of nobility comparable to the *noblesse de robe* in France. Office-holding also did not impart automatic ennoblement as in France, nor did the acquisition of a noble estate alone prepare the way for nobility.¹⁴ *Beamtenadel* (the service nobility) never approached the long-standing noble elites in terms of influence and wealth, nor did they even attempt to rival the aristocracy's social dominance. Most of its members simply did not have the means for independent power; only a few had the resources necessary to sustain a lifestyle in keeping with their rank. Hardly any opted for the noble lifestyle based on feudal traditions and land ownership that was the crucial criterion of real noblesse for the landed nobility. To hold noble estates, which implied membership in the local diets and maintaining some independence from the princes, contrasted even the ancient but shrinking and increasingly impoverished knightly lineages (*Ritterstand*) with most of the newly titled service nobility. A closer look into noble pedigrees of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reveals that even those members of old families who needed to take employment in the administration never intermarried with newly ennobled families and that noble marriage circles remained largely closed.

the evolution of a service nobility as a group. See Erwin Riedenauer, "Zur Entstehung und Ausformung des landesfürstlichen Briefadels in Bayern," *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 47 (1984): 609–72.

¹¹P. G. M. Dickson, *Finance and Government under Maria Theresia: Society and Government*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 79–80; Michael Hochedlinger, "Mars Ennobled: The Ascent of the Military and the Creation of a Military Nobility in Mid-Eighteenth-Century," *German History* 17 (1999): 141–76.

¹²The title of *Freiherr* (baron) and the simple nobiliary particle "von" between first name and surname were characteristics of service-nobility families until the end of the German and Austro-Hungarian monarchies. They were usually augmented with an ornate but noble sounding *Prädikat*, for instance: Merz von Merzburg, Dellacher von Dellachsparg. As a consequence, most families of ancient origin, especially in the Bohemian and Austrian lands, forthwith acquired higher titles, such as *Graf* (count) and *Fürst* (prince) in order to keep social distances intact. The difference in rank and the peculiar form of the new titles made it easy to tell the old nobility from the new service nobility. S. Johannes Arndt, "Zwischen kollegialer Solidarität und persönlichem Aufstiegsstreben. Die Reichsgrafen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert," in *Der europäische Adel im Ancien Régime. Von der Krise der ständischen Monarchien bis zur Revolution (ca. 1600–1789)*, ed. Ronald G. Asch (Wien: Böhlau, 2001), 123.

¹³Josef Matzerath, "Der Adel und sein Funktionswandel in der Öffentlichkeit," in *Aristokratismus und Moderne. Adel als politisches und kulturelles Konzept, 1890–1945*, eds. Eckhard Conze, Wencke Meteling, Jörg Schuster, Jochen Strobel, *Adelswelten* Bd. 1. – (Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 82; Martin D. Sagebiel, *Die Problematik der Qualifikation bei den Bayerischen Ständeserhebungen zwischen 1651 und 1799* (PhD diss., Phillips-Universität Marburg, 1964), 372.

¹⁴Whether non-noble persons were legally permitted to purchase noble estates varied widely from region to region and was subject to respective legal customs. In any case, it was regarded as an irregularity, at least on the part of the nobility.

For the newly ennobled, even if they had wanted to return to the fold of their group of origin, there was no turning back once they had assumed noble status. As a status group that had monopolized the sphere of administration to a large extent and that enjoyed the favor of the rulers, however, they were strong enough to establish themselves as a kind of separate lower upper class between the landed nobility and the bourgeoisie.¹⁵ As a new class without tradition but with considerable influence, the administrative elite was in need of viable symbolic devices to strengthen their claim to privileged status. For officials, a noble title thus served as a status symbol that indicated membership in the administrative elite and justified their social position as a whole.¹⁶

For the children of ennobled officials, the family title was probably the only asset they stood to inherit, but there is no doubt it was a most valuable one. They were the first to benefit substantially from their parents' investments. Their titles and their good names were the most important qualifications for a future career and in many cases the only ones that really carried weight. Economically dependent as they were, they were in need of privileged access to the sphere of governmental decision-making. The people who mattered—most of them high-ranking nobles of ancient extraction—were unlikely to associate even with eminent officials if they were too inferior in rank. In a period in which the society of contacts had not yet fully replaced the society of orders, noble status paved the way both to court circles, where opportunities, grants, and honors were distributed, and to private circles, where appointments were negotiated in an informal setting. A title, to be sure, was never a membership card for high society, but it could be an entrance ticket.¹⁷ In practice, however, it was the title that qualified a name for a place on the invitation list.¹⁸ If sons intended to follow their fathers into the civil service, they required exactly the kind of support that only connections could achieve. Furthermore, nobles in general and the sons of noble officials in particular were invariably given preference over commoners when it came to filling vacancies and the granting of promotions. Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff, a renowned expert in administration, stated that non-noble officials had to compensate for their lack of noble status with better professional skills.¹⁹ In fact, the service nobility benefited more from this significant aspect of noble status than the landed nobility, who had other ways and means at their disposal. Nobility was therefore an asset to its bearer, one that made up for concrete talents and skills; nobility meant being somebody before you became somebody.²⁰

¹⁵Wunder, "Die Sozialstruktur in den Geheimratskollegien in den süddeutschen protestantischen Fürstentümern (1660–1720)," 219.

¹⁶Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1996), 192, 199–200; Hillyar Zmora, *Monarchy, Aristocracy and the State in Europe, 1300–1800* (London: Routledge, 2001), 101–02; Samuel Clark, *State and Status: The Rise of the State and Aristocratic Power in Western Europe* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 163–86.

¹⁷Nikolaus von Preradovich's aperçu. See Gerhard Dilcher, "Der alteuropäische Adel—ein verfassungsgeschichtlicher Typus?" in *Europäischer Adel 1750–1950*, ed. Hans Ulrich Wehler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck + Ruprecht Gm, 1990), 80.

¹⁸Friedhelm Guttandin, *Das paradoxe Schicksal der Ehre: Zum Wandel der adeligen Ehre und zur Bedeutung von Duell und Ehre für den monarchischen Zentralstaat*. Schriften zur Kulturosoziologie 13, ed. J. Stagl (Berlin: Reimer, 1993), 183.

¹⁹Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff, *Teutscher Fürsten-Staat* (Jena, 1754), 92. First published in 1656.

²⁰Beatrix Bastl, "Haus und Haushaltung des Adels in den österreichischen Erblanden im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert," in *Der europäische Adel im Ancien Régime. Von der Krise der ständischen Monarchien bis zur Revolution (ca. 1600–1789)*, ed. Ronald G. Asch (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2001), 283.

This did not mean, as has been argued, that social advancement became generally more difficult as a result.²¹ On the contrary, in technical terms, obtaining noble status was easier than ever when ennoblement became a simple administrative act. But as the act of ennoblement only conferred the legal status (nobility as a legal entity according to the aforementioned definition) and the symbols assigned to nobility, the actual status of newly created noblemen was far from clear. Accordingly, the validity of ennoblement by imperial grant was constantly under debate.²² It clearly did not create the kind of nobles that the old aristocracy was prepared to accept as equals. The old families were not at all impressed by the hundreds of letters patent churned out by the Viennese chancelleries.

This leads to another basic aspect of nobility that has not yet attracted the attention it deserves. Monique de Saint Martin has pointed out that the very existence of nobility depends on whether one believes in the innate substantial superiority of the nobly born.²³ The case of the newly-created nobility clearly shows that this not only applies to Saint Martin's twentieth-century France. The fact that noble status lacked definite criteria as regards its social role and appearance reduced the acceptance of someone as a genuine member of the nobility to a matter of opinion. Of course, the emperor expected all his subjects—including the aristocracy—to respect his decision to ennoble whoever he deemed fit and to treat them according to their new status, but everybody was still free to decide who to socialize with.²⁴ The emperor's subjects did indeed abide by their sovereign's will. In public, in official contexts, and in personal interaction, newly-created nobles were invariably addressed in a meticulously correct manner, and no information about the actual standing of the person addressed could possibly have been inferred from this formal way in which they were addressed. This situation closely resembled the strategy of the French gentry, as described by George Huppert.²⁵ Newcomers acquired the trappings of noble status in order to conceal their real social background.

If we want to understand the mechanism that made this strategy work, we have to introduce distinctions that were alien to the people of the time. Formally, families who received noble status in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries belonged to the second estate, but they only did so in the legal sense of the word. Most of them did not even try to pretend to have genuine noble descent by producing false genealogies or by adopting a consistently noble appearance, as the French gentry did. Imperial ennoblement did not renew the old aristocracy; in reality, it created a new kind of nobility, one that hardly ever lived nobly but was nevertheless legally entitled to make use of noble prerogatives and of all the advantages of a privileged and highly prestigious status. If we are led to the assumption that we are dealing here with a newly emerging elite, the whole issue of nobility as a device for social advancement must be reconsidered. For newcomers wishing to reproduce their status in

²¹Zmora, *Monarchy, Aristocracy and the State in Europe, 1300–1800*, 11, 29.

²²Klaus Bleek and Jörn Garber, "Nobilitas: Standes- und Privilegienlegitimation in deutschen Adelstheorien des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts," *Daphnis* 11 (1982): 49–114.

²³Monique de Saint Martin, *L'Espace de la noblesse* (Paris: Editions Métailié, 1993).

²⁴Cases in which some authority did not recognize imperial grants of ennoblement, which sometimes occurred in imperial cities, provoked sharp reactions from the government. The emperor could not tolerate such disobedience, particularly if imperial prerogatives were at stake. See the cases of Markus Tobias Neubronner, 1692, and Johann Friedrich Sichert, 1696, both at Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Adelsarchiv.

²⁵Huppert, *Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes*, 23.

the most effective way, nobility was obviously the best possible means. The key factor in this strategy was the ambiguity in the notion of nobility. The term *nobility* not only denoted a tangible social group or an order, but a certain state of honor and social grace as well. It was from the latter aspect that the nobility derived its privileged status and formally justified its existence. Furthermore, the symbols of noble status principally referred to noble honor. All the titles and specific forms of address, sumptuous clothing, and armorial bearings did not convey noble power as such but functioned, as it were, as exclamation marks clamoring for that person to be treated with the utmost respect.

Symbols, in turn, can confer power if they are cleverly employed. The right to sit where others must stand, the right to ride where others must walk, among many others, were prone to inspire an internalized and habitual sense of reverence in commoners exposed to these prerogatives on a routine basis. Honorific privileges elicited a response of respect and deference in everyday interaction. A person with such privileges had to be treated with respect regardless of whether she or he was considered to “deserve” it either on account of position or personal qualities. But as honors were originally intended essentially to symbolize respectability and quality of character, anyone who was distinguished as honorable was regarded as endowed with superior morals and accomplishments. This reputed superiority, in turn, justified the claim for leadership in nearly all situations of everyday life and doubtlessly contributed to the constant mystification of the noble race.²⁶

For this strategy to work, the meaning of symbols had to be turned upside down and fed into a circular loop. Marked as honorable, nobles were vested with the authority contingent upon honor—even though it remained uncertain whether they really possessed the qualities required. In other words, noble status symbols were symbols without real objects of reference. They symbolized a claim to honor, as Julian Pitt-Rivers has pointed out, rather than genuine honorableness.²⁷ It is remarkable, however, that this did not make any difference in practice, as if it were the symbols of honor that exacted respect from the commoners rather than honorableness itself.²⁸ Within the framework of institutionalized inequality, it sufficed to acquire honorific privileges and specific forms of distinction by grant (that is, nobility as a legal entity) in order to gain a prominent and advantageous position in society.

Perhaps partly as a result of the growing number of ennoblements, the conceptual gap between nobility as a social group and as a legal entity increased by the seventeenth century. In the course of this process, the notion of nobility split by detaching its symbolic dimension from the concrete social group it labeled. It gradually evolved from a tangible corporate body, legally defined by privileges and kin collectives, toward a pure status symbol. It was this distinction that enabled newcomers to take advantage of noble status for their social advancement, as they were only interested in its easily accessible symbols. This was not the

²⁶Strictly speaking, it was authority rather than power that resulted from this kind of dominance. According to Max Weber’s definition, authority as opposed to power implies a certain degree of willingness to obey on the part of the subordinate. *Power* in the narrow sense of the word invokes force to make people comply, whereas authority causes people to conform voluntarily by bowing to somebody’s superior qualification or endowment. The power derived from honor was, therefore, legitimate authority justified by custom and tradition. See Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 108–20.

²⁷Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame. The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 24–26.

²⁸Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 110–13.

first time in history that the entire notion of nobility underwent a profound change. The idea of nobility was linked to late-medieval knighthood, which did not vanish along with the knights. It survived as a concept, if substantially modified and adjusted to the conditions of the early modern state, as it proved helpful in the legitimization of claims to power.²⁹

Nobility and Absolutism

In Central Europe (the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy), the usual manner of becoming ennobled was simply to apply by sending a petition to the emperor. The applicant would enumerate reasons why nobility was sought and why the applicant was deserving of it. The official act consisted of an examination and, by the eighteenth century, sometimes a formal investigation into the applicant's claim for noble status and, if she or he passed the test—and after payment of the required fee—the presentation of the award by the emperor. (Further information about how the Viennese authorities managed the process of ennoblement is currently unavailable because its administrative aspect is still largely unexplored. Apart from reasons of space not allowing an exploration of the administrative procedure, it is a matter outside the scope of this article.) Approximately 25,000 records of ennoblement are stored at the Archive of Nobility in Vienna.³⁰ The sheer number seems to be evidence of the importance emperors attributed to ennoblement, whatever the underlying reasons may have been. Of course, the empire was no service-sector business that tried to satisfy the public's hunger for titles. We would be well advised to assume that there was a deeper reason as we look at governmental motives for granting ennoblement.

Ennoblement obviously achieved a number of different purposes from the state's point of view. It was a convenient and economical way of rewarding merits and favourites. Moreover, it served a political purpose: the privilege to grant ennoblement was one of the last remaining rights that uniquely belonged to the Roman emperor, thus underlining his supremacy among German princes.³¹ Finally, ennoblement served, according to a still widely held opinion, as a fiscal expedient. We do not know how much revenue the Crown raised by imposing a fee on ennoblement, but we do know that it could have been more. Studies on the ennoblement policy in the Austrian Low Countries have shown that “the demand constantly exceeded the offerings, without resulting in an adjustment of the price.”³² For at least two centuries

²⁹Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

³⁰The register has been published: Frank, *Standeserhebungen und Gnadenakte für das Reich...* The figure of 25,000 ennoblements is an estimation based on a random sample of 5,016 cases covering approximately 20 percent of all acts of ennoblement from 1500 to 1800.

³¹Riedenauer, “Zur Entstehung und Ausformung des landesfürstlichen Briefadels in Bayern,” 662. Alongside the emperor, several other sovereign princes had the privilege to grant nobility. Theoretically, each prince enjoying the *palatinatus in ampla forma* was permitted to raise someone to the nobility by right. Because a bestowal by the emperor was regarded as superior and imperial nobility (*Reichsadelstand*) was formally applicable in all the parts of the empire, only a few rulers risked conferring titles of lower esteem. In some states, such as Bavaria, though, officers were tacitly requested to submit an application for nobility to the respective chancellery in order to avoid being considered disloyal. Most people aspiring for nobility, however, still chose the route of supreme authority for promotion, thus nonimperial ennoblement remained an exception to the rule.

³²Clark, *State and Status*, 166; Paul Janssens, “Coûts et profit des structures nobiliaires dans une société de type pré-industriel: les Pays-Bas méridionaux du X^{ème} au XVII^{ème} siècle” (n.d.), chapter 6; Viviane Richard, “Les anoblissements dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens” (master's thesis, Brussels, 1960), 121.

(1600–1800) the price remained at 300 fl for the rank of untitled nobility. Although it is of course true that the state sold nobility for money, it remains far from clear what the monetary aspect of ennoblement contributes to an overall understanding of the function of ennoblement. In any case, it does not in the least diminish its social significance. Apart from the fact that the fee had the character of an administrative charge to defray the expenses that accrued from the processing of the application, honor and money were not necessarily contradictory but rather complementary in premodern society. Because people were accustomed to showcasing their own and their family's honor in most elaborate manners, and because this cost money anyway, it was not at all demeaning to pay for honor in the first place. What does the fact that noble status was bought and sold teach us about the idea of nobility? Only that it was valuable, which is not new for us.

Generally speaking, the Crown's attitude toward the nobility was ambivalent at best. As a trend that can be observed throughout Europe, absolute monarchs overrode the nobility politically yet strengthened its position socially. In the Habsburg monarchy, the old, formerly Protestant nobility was still under suspicion for being unreliable in its loyalties in the seventeenth century, particularly in the period after the crushing of the Bohemian revolt in 1620. Yet the conservative absolutist idea of how society ought to be constituted overrode these reservations. In spite of its painful experiences with autogenous noble power, emperors still believed in a hereditary ruling class as a necessary and essential constituent of society. Moreover, the state seized the opportunity to stress its sovereignty by claiming to be the only legitimate source of nobility (*fons honorum*). A number of theorists were engaged to produce evidence for the emperor as the only authority entitled to declare a person noble irrespective of a family's lineage.³³ By common consent, the sovereign's duties included safeguarding the smooth working of society and intervening to make necessary changes in its structure. This implied the obligation to promote people in rank within the hierarchy of orders, whenever their current position was not in harmony with their abilities or their worth. Yet sovereignty, according to the concepts of absolutism, affected the status of every person and subjected everyone to the emperor's judgment, including the nobility.³⁴ In theory, every single member of the nobility enjoyed noble status only as long as the emperor allowed him or her to.³⁵ Acquiescing in the proposition that they were nobles only until further notice and that descent counted for nothing certainly meant a considerable strain for families of old stock and was a latent source of conflict.

Prominent specialists in the field have claimed absolutism had its own social agenda concerning the role of the nobility in the new, centralized state: the imperial privilege to grant nobility was used in all likelihood as "the instrument of a considered policy on elites, a way of

³³Important authors were, among others, Dominicus Arumaeus, Johann Moritz Guden, Dietrich Wilhelm Ziegler, Johannes Limnaeus, Josua Nolden, and Matthias Stephani. Most of them owed their basic arguments to Bartolus de Sassoferrato.

³⁴Clark, *State and Status*, 174–89.

³⁵Johann Georg Hanaw stated that the act of ennoblement referred directly not only to the supplicant but *uno actu* to all his descendants as well. Accordingly, the typical wording in letters patent that the emperor grants nobility to the supplicant and to *his legitimate heirs and their heirs' heirs both men and women for ever* ("*seine eheliche leibs Erben und derselben Erbens Erben, Mann und Weibs personen, in ewig Zeit*") can be interpreted as evidence for ennoblement generally conferring noble status to all present and future members of the family. In other words: nobles did not inherit nobility because they had already been virtually ennobled prior to their birth by the sovereign. See Johann Georg Hanaw, *Synoptica resolutio quaestionum ducentarum ... de nobilitate* (Guben, 1672), 482; Bleek and Garber, "Nobilitas," 96.

transforming the content of the idea of nobility, of modifying the composition of the second order in whatever way seemed best.”³⁶ The enforcement of noble status can be interpreted as part of a deliberate state strategy to create a loyal ruling class by redesigning the nobility as a whole. However, we have at present no positive evidence of whether imperial governmental institutions implemented an intentional agenda concerning elites or even whether they paid any attention to the possible long-term effects of their ennoblement policy. We do not even know to what extent they were really aware of the social role of the nobility because nothing of the kind has been established so far. Only circumstantial evidence is available to support the assumption that there was a more or less clear idea about what the nobility was intended to be like and what purposes it was supposed to serve in society.

For the theorists, it was obvious that nobility did play a substantial role in society. In contrast to the supporters of the *ideology of lineage*, who claimed that the nobility’s superiority, founded on blood as it was in their view, was basically an inherited trait, the emperor’s men held a functionalist view. For them, the nobility’s *raison d’être* lay in their specific responsibility for society and particularly the state.³⁷ In this view, the nobility’s main purpose was, on the one hand, to shield the ruler from hostile acts and, on the other, to protect the emperor’s subjects against acts of tyranny in the name of the *summum bonum*. Thus, nobles were called upon to act as advocates of the commonweal and to use their social preeminence to promote that ideal. There was agreement among theoreticians that nobles were qualified to rule as a matter of principle and in all respects and that they could be entrusted with responsibility in almost all affairs of public life.³⁸ The right to rule was not meant to be confined to the local sphere and the duties of a landowning squire; it was considered to be universally valid since the collective capacity to rule made every noble person eligible for a leading position in any field. In reality, nobles could be active in a number of areas, in the service of the state, in the army, in the church, and in estate management, provided that they were active in their capacity as leaders and that there were subordinates to command. Unlimited competence and collective capacity to rule had always been a crucial element of noble identity, and the state was well prepared to use this attitude as an instrument of governance.

Ever since chivalry evolved in the late Middle Ages into what became known as the nobility, the supposed collective capacity to rule had been a core element of aristocratic ideology. This attribute was thought of as an inner quality based on a morally superior predisposition. Some even went so far as to claim that only nobles were capable of rational reasoning or that they were endowed with greater civility and particularly with a deeper

³⁶ Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 33; Bush, *The European Nobility*, 12, 19, 80–84; Clark, *State and Status*, 164, 174.

³⁷ On the *ideology of lineage* see particularly David Gaunt, “Kinship: Thin Red Lines or Thick Blue Blood,” in *Family Life in Early Modern Times 1500–1789*, *The History of the European Family*, eds. David I. Kretzer and Marzio Barbagli, vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 257–87; Gérard Delille, “The Shed Blood of Christ: From Blood as Metaphor to Blood as Bearer of Identity,” in *Blood and Kinship: Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present*, eds. Christopher H. Johnson, Bernhard Jussen, and David Warren Sabean (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2013), 127–33; Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l’État moderne, 1559–1661* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

³⁸ Bleek and Garber, *Nobilitas*, 101–03.

understanding of political affairs and the *raisons d'état*.³⁹ These claims were designed to reinforce the impression that nobles were human beings of a different and higher order along the lines suggested by everyday interaction between nobles and commoners.⁴⁰ Although the nobility's moral superiority was never questioned in absolutist reasoning, its basic element had to be redefined in order to reconcile it with the demands of the modern state. This could be achieved by replacing the traditional notion of noble virtue based on chivalric values with qualities that reflected the principles of the modern state. The traditional notions of honor and total commitment to a cause were to be reoriented toward such categories as merit, service, and loyalty.⁴¹ According to this concept, those who had consistently demonstrated fearless allegiance to the emperor and his house (that is the state) were to be considered fit for the exercise of power. The notion of honor was thus conceptually linked to values that did not explicitly infringe on the traditional idea of noble loyalty; rather, it was a reinterpretation of the feudal relationship between vassals and their supreme lord. Yet the new concept favored by the state's authorities included aspects that were incompatible with the mentality of the nobility. Unconditional obedience and subordination to authorities of whatever kind (with the exception of the Almighty) remained alien to aristocrats brought up in the tradition of noble freedom and prepared by their education to be rulers rather than subjects. As a consequence, the notion of noble loyalty was changed altogether; a knight's loyalty was after all voluntary, whereas the loyalty of modern subjects was enforced and obligatory.

Although absolutism tended to create the impression that it had redefined the standards of government (which has at times even misled historians), its practices were actually deeply rooted in feudal tradition. In the seventeenth century, the concept of office was still based on the institution of *fief holding*: office-holders were charged to exercise power on behalf of the ruler; in return, they received part of the fees as income. Furthermore, holding an office included the exercise of a form of power hitherto reserved to nobles. *Iurisdictio in subditos*, which used to be an essential feature of noble power, was now transferred to non-noble specialists in administration in open contradiction to the traditional notion of legitimate power. Yet at the same time, this enabled officials to meet a necessary condition for noble status. Exercising political authority in the public space was initially considered a noble prerogative; assuming social leadership was part of nobles' duties and a main element of lordship. The reversal of the original concept of legal authority, which derived entitlement to power from noble status and feudal privilege, enabled a noble occupation (such as the exercise of political authority through office) to confer noble quality on the person who pursued it. Imperial authorities tacitly took up this position and—rather unsurprisingly—so did the officials who were the main beneficiaries.⁴² If supplicants for ennoblement had pursued a noble occupation (*adelige Charge*), they unfailingly mentioned it in their letters of application, and it

³⁹Johann Christian Lünig and Christian von Wolff. See Andreas Gestrich, "Höfisches Zeremoniell und sinnliches Volk: Zur Rechtfertigung des Hofzeremoniells im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert," in *Zeremoniell als höfische Ästhetik im Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, eds. Jörg Jochen Berns and Thomas Rahn, *Frühe Neuzeit*, vol. 25 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996), 57–73.

⁴⁰See, for instance, the astutely observed characterization of nobles in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* or in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

⁴¹Clark, *State and Status*, 164; Guttandin, *Das paradoxe Schicksal der Ehre*, 322–23, 347.

⁴²Wunder, "Die Sozialstruktur in den Geheimratskollegien in den süddeutschen protestantischen Fürstentümern (1660–1720)," 209–10, 216.

was equally unfailingly acknowledged by the imperial chancellery as a sufficient argument in support of claims to noble status.

It almost goes without saying that the profile of a person the imperial authorities considered worthy of ennoblement coincided perfectly with the specific qualities habitually found in officials both civil and military. The features required for being judged worthy of ennoblement were the ones that made a person useful for the state. In this respect, too, officials seemed to represent the template for an ideal subject, which was now also applied to the definition of the ideal aristocrat. Officials were active almost by definition; they had a strong sense of duty and they were, above all, absolutely loyal. Moreover, they had the skills required to meticulously carry out whatever task had been assigned to them; in this way, they contributed in a concrete and practical way to the smooth functioning of the state's system. Certainly, loyalty and subordination were not meritorious by themselves because everybody was expected to submit to authority to a certain degree. To make loyalty commendable and a good argument for ennoblement it had to be performed proactively. Although merit was introduced in this way as a necessary condition for ennoblement, the concept of nobility as such did not therefore become meritocratic. The existence of certain qualities of character regarded as specifically noble was still considered the precondition for genuinely noble conduct. Ennoblement was not granted because of one's meritorious deeds, but because the deeds were proof that these qualities already existed in a person.⁴³ Letters patent contained a list of qualities every candidate for ennoblement was required to possess: respectability, probity, good noble conduct, virtue, and reason.⁴⁴ These were the qualities that were rewarded through ennoblement because they were considered to be the only basis for anyone to be truly meritorious and thus useful to the state. Their explicit invocation as the foundation upon which ennoblement rested made them publicly and socially operational.

If the reasoning behind a system of rewards concerns motivating people and strengthening their ambition, we may assume that such a rationale was one of the reasons why emperors granted ennoblement. The significance of this aspect in terms of its benefit for the state was emphasized by contemporary authors, such as Montesquieu and Justus Möser, who stressed that honors and rewards were the strongest stimuli to make people behave to the best advantage of the commonweal.⁴⁵ Nor were the supplicants the only ones to be encouraged by ennoblement: they were intended to serve as models for others. Apart from having a convenient way of rewarding the right kind of behavior at their disposal, governments used ennoblement as a means to communicate their views on what the ideal subject should be like. Noble status was a kind of high-profile reward, and regardless of the frequency with which ennoblements were granted, the neighborhood was likely to find out soon and to adapt to the new situation, for they simply could not ignore their neighbor's new status for long without insulting him. This was in fact not simply a welcome side effect, but it was explicitly intended. The standard text of the letters patent stated that the supplicant was granted noble

⁴³Clark, *State and Status*, 182.

⁴⁴"Ehrbarkeit, Redlichkeit, gute adelige Sitten, Tugend und Vernunft." In special cases, experience (*Erfahrenheit/Experienz*) and erudition (*Gelehrsamkeit*) were added. In contrast to the first set of qualities, the latter pair are accidental (rather than essential) in nature; they can be acquired through application, which made a significant difference.

⁴⁵Montesquieu, *L'esprit des lois*, book 3, chapter 5; Justus Möser, "Den Patriotischen Phantasien verwandte Handschriften," in *Sämtliche Werke* (Oldenburg, Hamburg: Stalling, 1968), 64.

status so that others might likewise feel encouraged and inspired by this gracious reward to follow in good conduct and in doing noble deeds.⁴⁶ Newly created nobles were expected to help spread the state's idea of a new elite as living examples for its program. Seeing what type of character and achievement was singled out for honor and rewarded by the sovereign, the public was able to infer what the sovereign ideally expected of them.

Did Imperial Government Regulate Noble Status?

As has become apparent from this discussion, every single act of ennoblement implicitly constituted a political statement concerning the profile of an elite consistent with the modern state. But is this evidence strong enough to suggest the existence of a deliberate ennoblement policy? On the one hand, it is true that governments succeeded in controlling the recruitment of the nobility. A policy of extensive ennoblement indubitably stressed the state's monopoly over the granting of noble status and the formal promotion in rank in general.⁴⁷ Yet this does not fully account for the extent to which imperial authorities exercised ennoblement. The average number of approximately 87.76 acts of ennoblement a year (1600–1800) suggests that government acted in a principled, nonrandom way.⁴⁸ Emperors would have had many other means at their disposal to reward merits. When they chose ennoblement to single out people for special honor, they probably did not do so only to comply with the request of the supplicants; surely its significance was more than symbolic. They did so because they thought nobility to be the appropriate status for those who were prepared to devote themselves and their qualities, which were desirable ones from a political point of view, to the cause of the empire. In this respect, early modern emperors simply continued the policy of their predecessors and intensified it according to the absolutist view of governance.

Conversely, if ennoblement was to have tightened the emperor's grip on the nobility, it clearly failed to achieve that goal. This was not because emperors did not try to exert its influence on the nobility, but rather because their efforts did not reach the group they were aimed at. Some of the political measures imposed by governmental institutions did of course affect the nobility's cultural profile, such as courtly culture, the confessionalisation of court patronage, and the establishment of the state monopoly on violence. These were important factors, indeed, and they have already been sufficiently analysed by recent scholarship.⁴⁹ However, the impact of these measures on the concept of nobility and its ideological foundation was small. If there was a substantial shift in the development of the notion of nobility, it had already taken place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the notion of nobility

⁴⁶“... damit noch mehrere durch dergleichen milde Belohnung zur Nachfolge guten Verhaltens und Ausübung adelicher Thaten gleichfalls bewegt und aufgemuntert werden.” This quote is from the letters patent for August Wilhelm Crayen from Leipzig and dates from 1788, but more or less the same phrasing can be found in every one of these eighteenth-century documents. Adelsakt August Wilhelm Crayen, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv.

⁴⁷Clark, *State and Status*, 180–81.

⁴⁸The figure of 87.76 ennoblements per year is calculated from the sum of 3,528 cases of ennoblement from 1600 to 1800 out of a random sample covering approximately 20 percent of all acts of ennoblement from 1600 to 1800. The confirmations of allegedly lapsed nobility taken into account, the value is thereby increased to approximately 94.75 per year.

⁴⁹See Karin J. MacHardy, *War, Religion and Court Patronage in Habsburg Austria: The Social and Cultural Dimensions of Political Interaction, 1521–1622*, ed. J.C. D. Clark (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

being a profession was given up in favor of the ideology of lineage. But this was the last development that affected the nobility as a whole. Ennoblement policy affected nobility—whether intentionally or unintentionally—only insofar as it separated the legal aspect of the term *nobility* from the group it previously used to denote. The emperors and their councils must have realized that most of the people they ennobled did not become part of the established nobility and that their influence on the aristocracy's social composition was therefore practically negligible. What actually happened was that the concept of nobility came to be applied to another group which, for the most part, did not live nobly according to the traditional view, but exercised modern forms of power and had the skills the state needed and the inclination to serve it without reservation. Effective rule needed nobles of the old type, though, to perform the tasks they were trained for. The high positions at court and in government remained their preserve and they were also eminently suited for diplomatic and military service. The old aristocracy evidently did not become a meritocratic nomenclature that was focused solely on the state's interests. On the contrary, the old families moved closer together and insisted even more irritably on their exclusivity and their traditional identity.

It was, however, in the state's interest to prevent the nobility from becoming too homogeneous. It would have been simply paradoxical for the emperor to strengthen the old nobility by renewing it with the members of the modern administrative elite after so many efforts to defeat it politically. If the new nobles had been integrated into the old aristocracy, the result could have been a strong corporate body of the kind that had just been deprived of power. An aristocracy vested with the joint power derived from bureaucracy and lordship could hardly have been controlled by anyone, even less so, if those charged with controlling it were members of the group to be controlled. From an absolutist point of view, the only prudent course to take was therefore to grant noble status to nearly anyone who could afford it regardless of their social background. This was likely to see off any convergence between old and new nobility.⁵⁰ It was also the reason why no attention was paid to whether supplicants had the means to meet the cultural and economic standards of the landed nobility or whether they were able to afford a genuinely noble lifestyle. Even if supplicants stated in their letters of application that they had been living almost like noblemen in the past, this was never accepted as an argument for ennoblement by the authorities.⁵¹ Nobility was spread so widely in terms of social background that a common corporate identity among new nobles was extremely unlikely to take shape. Ennoblement policy softened and watered down the notion of nobility as a status group so that it could be reshaped in accordance with the sovereign's needs and wishes. In this respect, the government was successful in regulating noble status, although this was a rather passive form of control.

Conclusion

When specialists on early modern elites summarize the transformation that the nobility underwent in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they usually come

⁵⁰Hochedlinger, "Mars Ennobled," 175.

⁵¹To be sure, an investigation report confirming that the supplicant was well off might have guided the decision in favor of the supplicant. The government would not have requested such information if this had not been a relevant factor. One's economic standing was, however, never part of the formal justification of ennoblement.

to the conclusion that the nobility became more heterogeneous and more complex. Social mobility and ennoblement, so runs the argument, changed the nobility's internal structure considerably and, as a consequence, it gradually lost its uniform appearance and its consistent cultural and ideological profile.⁵² Diversification was, in fact, the common denominator of all the nobility's developments in terms of social structure, but this remains true only as long as one takes the term *nobility* at face value. If we choose to class, for instance, the ruling prince of Liechtenstein and the Salzburg poorhouse administrator Joachim von Mayr (1732–1796) as members of the same status group, we may—if we look hard enough—detect a couple of features the two had in common, but it would surely be absurd to assume that these amount to more than superficial resemblances. In practice, these two noblemen clearly did not share one single socially relevant trait except formal membership in the second estate and perhaps a higher level of education. At any rate, the resemblances do not justify classifying old and new nobles as members of the same status group. Given their actual social standing, conflating both groups under the term *nobility* seems inaccurate and misleading. It would therefore seem to be pointless to take the existence of nobility as a consistent status group for granted and to set out to explain it without first examining the suitability of the term *nobility* as a tool of scientific analysis.

We use general terms in order to denote sets of individuals or phenomena that share a critical number of common features. If we bear this in mind, it would appear that the general term *nobility* ceased to be applicable with the nobility losing its consistent structure. In the eighteenth century, when the process in question was completed, the term *nobility* denoted hardworking professionals as well as leisured grandees, middle-class characters living in modest flats, as well as magnates with lifestyles vibrant with conspicuous consumption, aristocrats quietly assured of their natural superiority and their unique vocation to rule as well as “white-collar workers” focused exclusively on the duties of their job. In terms of social status and identity, the majority of the new nobles actually remained commoners, in spite of their legal status. In a reversal of this general tendency, however, some distinguished commoners of the Dresden or Vienna high society met the standards of courtly culture and noble lifestyle much better than quite a few petty lords. In a word, using the term *nobility* to refer to all individuals formally belonging to the second estate obscures rather than describes social reality. With regard to the different phenomena covered by the term *nobility*, one is consequently faced with the task of identifying common features where there were none.

The fact, however, remains that *nobility* did have a meaning to early modern society; had it been without meaning, the strong demand for ennoblement would be inexplicable. The key to the solution is recognizing the importance of the various aspects of its meaning. We have to be aware that in the process of nobility losing its social uniformity, its ideological and symbolic aspects increasingly gained in importance as compared to the social aspect. With this understanding in mind, we can explain what happened to nobility in early modern Central Europe.

The core group of the nobility remained basically unaffected by governmental policies. Although it had lost its formal right of political participation, this loss was more than

⁵²Clark, *State and Status*, 184; Walter Demel, “Der europäische Adel vor der Revolution: Sieben Thesen,” in *Der europäische Adel im Ancien Régime. Von der Krise der ständischen Monarchien bis zur Revolution (ca. 1600–1789)*, ed. Ronald G. Asch (Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2001), 412–14; William Doyle, “Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?” *Past & Present* 57 (1972): 108, 113.

compensated for by the manifold opportunities the court provided the core group to tend their interests in an informal way. Apart from that, absolutism confirmed the aristocracy's monopoly in the highest positions in the state and strengthened its hold on seigniorial forms of land ownership, which considerably consolidated their material resources and broadened their social scope. As a consequence of their economic reinforcement, the aristocracy was strong enough to control movement into the group and to keep out upstart trespassers. Rank endogamy (*connubium*) came to be more strictly observed than before, which kept the old families *entre eux*. In this way, the landed nobility formed a socially stable body of families, which was not only uniform in terms of culture and mentality, but biologically homogeneous as well.

At the same time, the imperial ennoblement policy and the demand for titles caused a major transformation outside the aristocracy. This was not the result of absolutism having caused a change in the concept of nobility, but, on the contrary, the consequence of the state insisting on the traditional role of the nobility as the only legitimate ruling class. Thus, the same reasoning that lay behind the reinforcement of the old nobility led the Crown to confer noble status on those who bore responsibility in important positions in society, both in the service and in the economy. In accordance with the view that the exercise of power in a well-ordered society should be the exclusive domain of the nobility, the emperors eliminated the anomaly of commoners in powerful positions by ennobling them. Likewise, nobility was conferred on those who had shown good qualities and unconditional loyalty toward the state and had thereby given proof of their suitability for office. This was a clear political statement. The Crown confirmed the traditional role of the nobility as a hereditary ruling class, but it also extended the scope in which power could be legitimately exercised. It recognized the fact that, in early modern society, power was no longer confined to the spheres of government and lordship, as it increasingly shifted toward the spheres of administration and commerce. Thus, people who wielded power in these fields had to be ennobled in order for them to exercise their power legitimately. Power in whatever form was considered legitimate only when associated with nobility, and whoever was powerful was a suitable candidate for ennoblement.

For the Crown, nobility seems to have existed only as an ideological entity, as the idea of a general qualification for leadership. Of course, emperors and their councils were quite aware that the nobility also happened to be a real social group with particular interests and considerable influence, but when it conferred noble status on commoners, it was in denial of this. This attitude inevitably caused the separation of the ideological aspect of nobility from its social aspect. With the number of new nobles increasing, it became clear that nobility in the legal sense and nobility as a group were no longer the same. For those who did not belong to the aristocracy, it was not only the symbols of nobility, but noble status as such that were little more than symbols. Probably the most significant evidence for this development was the changing role of the most important noble status symbol. The nobiliary particle "von" (of) between first name and surname typically distinguished nobles from commoners, although it had been granted in the past only if a noble person owned a noble estate, which the "von" referred to in this (*privilegium denominandi*). In the eighteenth century, it became a necessary and indispensable noble distinguishing mark, when supplicants for ennoblement applied explicitly to be bestowed with the right to use "von" as a quasi-title. Even old families changed their names to keep up with fashion. When noble status became a pure symbol, the importance of its symbols increased. The symbols became its main characteristics.

Nevertheless, for newly created nobles, their new, exalted status served a strategic purpose in the context of social advancement. Paradoxically, noble status (in the legal sense) was the result as well as the precondition for the development of the service nobility. It was unquestionably the most effective means to preserve their current status for generations to come and, thus, met their desire to establish their families and the group they formed as a hereditary elite. Nobility in the general sociological sense was the objective that could be obtained through nobility in the legal sense. Granting that eminent persons generally aspire to preserve their status by transferring it to their kin and that building dynasties is typical of elites, this was even more the case with officials whose material condition was precarious and who lacked the corporate structures that were so important in premodern society. Without a fortune to bequeath and without the solidarity of an institutionalized corporate body to back them up, officials were urgently in need of a well-defined, high-profile position within the hierarchy of orders. Ennoblement helped them to attain this goal because noble status and its prestigious symbols made up for the shortfall. If new noble families succeeded in establishing themselves as a lower upper class on a local basis with a corporate identity and a hold on important positions, and if officials were eligible for membership in this group, ennoblement had finally served its purpose.