



Introduction:
*Historians and the Trouble of Defining
Aristocracy*

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Abstract: This introduction to the special issue *Defining Aristocracy* eases the reader slowly into the various troubles historians have in defining aristocracy. It argues for embracing the fuzziness of the term, and building research from there. The introduction also gives an overview of the special issue, and a short summary of the articles. The trouble historians have of defining aristocracy is discussed and contextualised within the broader historiography, but, based on the four articles on eighteenth-century Geneva, modern Swedish historiography discussing early modern aristocracy, nineteenth-century Habsburg, and finally Tudor England, a way forward is offered. Despite the trouble of actually defining aristocracy, speaking about it, thinking about it, and trying to elucidate it is indeed meaningful and fruitful for research.

Keywords: Aristocracy; Historiography; Definition; Research Approach

A trip to the nearest bookshop or academic library yields a large number of books on aristocracy. Just this decade, which started with the extreme disruptions of the Covid pandemic, has seen new books discussing the British aristocracy in modern literature,¹ aristocratic kinship groups as basis for political order in Eurasia 500 to 2018,² and an analysis of the aristocratic Borromeo family in early modern Milan as part of the composite Spanish monarchy.³ Historians seem to have no trouble writing about aristocracy across all historical periods and geographies. What then does this special issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* add to the well-researched scholarly field? Encountering academic presentations and writing about aristocracy outside my own geographic and periodic expertise (early modern Northern Europe)

¹ Adam Parkes, *Modernism and the Aristocracy: Monsters of English Privilege* (Oxford, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).

² Peter Haldén, *Family Power: Kinship, War and Political Orders in Eurasia, 500-2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³ Samuel Weber, *Aristocratic Power in the Spanish Monarchy: The Borromeo Brothers of Milan, 1620-1680* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

forced me to think about my own definitions and preconceptions which were largely connected to legal and fiscal privileges of an elite kinship group. And the more I thought about it, the more fuzzy it became. Who exactly are historians talking about when they are writing about aristocracy and specific aristocrats? I brought this question to other scholars, and I am thankful that some of them are now contributing to this special issue. In a workshop on our research, the sense that attempting to define aristocracy gets more complicated the more one looks at it, especially with comparisons of historical contexts, became a shared experience. This is not just a problem of choosing the right words—there will be a discussion of nobility and elite as alternative terms throughout this special issue, and it is important to think about the *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) of the various terms. It is also a discussion of historical contexts, and of the variety of approaches within historical research. I am thankful that in this special issue four historians working on four different time periods and geographical areas with three different native languages (English, German, and Swedish) came together to open up the question of *Defining Aristocracy* once again. Two further historians brought in valuable ideas, historical knowledge, a fourth native language (Dutch), and an additional important source language (Latin) to our initial discussions, but, due to time restrictions, they were not able to participate in this publication. Their ideas on early medieval prosopographic approaches to this question and on the urban elites of the late medieval Low Countries respectively were a key part of our discussions, and thus informed this special issue.⁴

The aim of this special issue is, in short, to inspire the experience of fuzziness when looking at aristocracy in historical research, and then to build on it. We perceive this fuzziness as fruitful since it both generates new questions and is a useful benchmark to measure our own and contemporaries' understandings against. We are, however, not offering simple answers or definitions. If the reader of this special issue has more

⁴ Birgit Kynast's work on the early medieval aristocracy highlights the importance of the various Latin terms as well as the connection between forms of personal freedom, property and wealth, and political influence to people perceived as noble or aristocratic. Her work also focuses on the role of women, see Birgit Kynast, "Das Ideal einer christlichen Königin? Königin Chrodechilde bei Gregor von Tours und die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen weiblicher Herrschaft im früheren Mittelalter," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 141 (2021). Janna Everaert emphasized the contexts of late medieval Antwerp, and the results a broader quantitative perspective could add to the discussion, see also Janna Everaert, *Macht in de metropool: Politieke elitevorming tijdens de demografische en economische bloeifase van Antwerpen (ca. 1400-1550)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023). Janna first brought the term of fuzzy or fuzziness into our discussion, a word which we felt best suited to our discussions.

questions at the end than at the beginning, based on a wider knowledge of the topic gained from reading these articles, than we have reached our goal. By trying to define aristocracy, the object in question becomes more and more unclear and uncertain. Dominic Lieven famously started his book on the nineteenth-century aristocracy in Europe (1992) with the words: "Everyone knows what aristocracy means until they have to write a book on the subject. Then the problems of definition begin."⁵ And Lieven was just talking about the group of people—not even including the meaning of the word for a form of government.⁶ What actually is aristocracy? Is it an individual identity, a state structure, a class based on political and/or social and/or legal and/or economic similarities? Is it a way of living or just an excuse to avoid being taxed? Or is it a cultural phenomenon which spans generations and is in each generation a widely connected horizontal structure of kinship relations, too? Is it transcending borders and kinship ties with an idea of a European or even global family of aristocracy? Is it transcending time and political structures with existence beyond monarchies? All of these possibilities are part of what aristocracy is, or could be, in a specific time and space.

It is impossible to have a clear definition of aristocracy that would apply to all time periods and in all geographies. This special issue goes a bit further, and questions if it is at all possible to define aristocracy, even in a limited time and space. Are we able in any time period or geography to state with confidence who belonged to the aristocracy, and who did not? Were contemporaries able to state this confidently? And finally, how can we as historians approach this fuzzy group of people, ideas, and institutions?

Historians might choose to focus on individual actors and whether they claimed to be aristocratic, or families in their horizontal or vertical connections, or from specific territories, be they regions, realms, or continents. All this is possible when studying aristocracy. The aim of this special issue is to shed more light on the way historians approach aristocracy, and embrace the fuzziness of the term. Each of the authors has been thinking about historical approaches to aristocracy in their specific area. Nadir Weber uses conceptual history to trace the occurrence of *aristocrat* as a specific figure to eighteenth-century Geneva, a Republic, and the discourse within pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary France. The historiographical debate from the nineteenth century onwards—about a Swedish *Sonderweg* in the early modern social class, then called aristocracy, as analysed by Alexander Isacson—continues with the conceptual approach,

⁵ Dominic Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xiii.

⁶ See especially Nadir Weber's article in this special issue.

highlighting that in addition to contemporary debates, historiographical understandings are crucial in understanding the phenomenon. Administrative and legal contemporary understandings of aristocracy and the practice of "doing aristocracy" are discussed by Marion Dotter for the nineteenth-century Habsburg Empire, bringing the theoretical debate to the actual practice of making and un-making new aristocrats. Finally, court studies, women's, and transnational history provides Nicola Clark with an angle to gain insights into aristocracy and nobility in Tudor England.

If aristocracy is such a broad term, and approachable from various perspectives, does it even still have meaning? Is it meaningful to speak about aristocracy as something different from something else? This special issue takes the position that speaking about aristocracy, thinking about it, and trying to define it, is indeed meaningful. It is a helpful concept for understanding social, political, economic, and cultural stratification when viewed from the macro-perspective on historical societies; it also provides important insights when viewed from micro- and meso-perspectives as a way to understand historical actors within their contexts, or their worldviews. Furthermore, the change of associated meaning of the word allows for fruitful discussions of the negotiation of power, the role of politics and states, and the contemporary and historiographical views on policies and political thought. However, it also presents a challenge due to its troubles of definition, its specificity in time and place, and the functional overlaps of aristocracy in societies. At various times, it was also much more dependent on contemporaries' acceptance and acknowledgement of people belonging or not belonging to the aristocracy; as such it was subjective, fluctuating over time or across spaces.⁷ As Clark shows in her article, translating or transferring ideas of aristocracy from Spain to England was deemed difficult by both contemporaries and historians.

Aristocracy and, related to this, nobility and elites, are a political, social, cultural, and economic phenomena evident in societies across the world and throughout time. This special issue will focus on historical societies within Latin Christianity.⁸ The four societies discussed here, Tudor England, early modern Sweden, the Genevan Republic at the time of the French Revolution, and nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary, have the common background of being part of Latin Christianity. Even still, they each show varieties of aristocracy, and thus caution against using the term without definition and

⁷ See especially Alexander Isacson's article in this special issue.

⁸ See also William Doyle, *Aristocracy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

contextualisation. Aristocracy and nobility as specific legal and constitutional concepts, and also as encompassing specific groups of people (here it gets especially fuzzy) and the elite with its broader political, social, and economic meaning (to the point of being too unspecific), are terms used to understand forms of government, social groups within societies, as well as individual identities. This overlap of meanings, mirrored in an overlap of functions of aristocrats within any society, is one of the reasons why historians struggle with defining aristocracy. In societies, there are usually individuals, kinship groups and functional groups which were elevated from the rest of society, but were still inferior to the rulers within a polity.⁹

The overlap of meanings and functions is especially visible in discussing aristocracy and monarchy. In Aristotelian terms, the rule of the best and the rule of one are two completely different forms of rulership. However, the growing understanding of aristocracy formed out of the nobility makes aristocrats essential within monarchies. In many kingdoms, the relationship between the monarch and the aristocracy is fundamental to understanding royal rule.¹⁰ This relationship goes far beyond the royal court; indeed, the political functions of aristocracy as governing elites within the kingdom often happens outside of court spaces in their own estates, in parliament or council meetings, or on war campaigns. As such, the study of aristocracy is often less spatial or concerned with material cultures—though it can be a part of it—but more with the political, legal, economic, or social leadership of a group of people.¹¹ But it necessarily

⁹ In English-speaking research, aristocracy is often reduced to its meaning as the leading nobility of a (monarchical) realm. Even with this limitation, the difficulties in grasping who these people were have produced rich and inspiring research, such as: Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815-1914*; Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Thomas N. Bisson, ed., *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Anne Duggan, ed., *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000); Paul Janssens and Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, eds., *European Aristocracies and Colonial Elites: Patrimonial Management Strategies and Economic Development, 15th-18th Centuries* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2005); Jörg Peltzer, ed., *Rank and Order: The Formation of Aristocratic Elites in Western and Central Europe, 500-1500* (Ostfildern, Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2015); Luisa Radohs, *Urban Elite Culture: A Methodological Study of Aristocracy and Civic Elites in Sea-Trading Towns of the Southwestern Baltic (12th-14th C.)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2023); Øystein Rian, *Den aristokratiske fyrstestaten 1536-1648, Danmark-Norge 1380-1814 2* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997); Hamish M. Scott, ed., *The European Nobilities in the Seventh and Eighteenth Centuries. Two Volumes* (London, New York: Longman, 1995).

¹⁰ See for seventeenth-century England, Richard Cust, *Charles I and the Aristocracy, 1625-1642* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹¹ On the relationship between court studies and royal studies, see also Elena Woodacre and Cathleen Sarti, "What is Royal Studies?" *Royal Studies Journal*, no. 2 (2015).

is related to the monarch and their rule of the realm, as it was the monarch who was also in control of bestowing new titles and honours. This was usually accompanied by intense disputes, as Marion Dotter analyses for the nineteenth century in this special issue.¹²

Historiography has been aware of the variety of terms: nobility as the quality of being noble (in character and/or by birth right), and the aristocrat as a member of a ruling oligarchy (focussed only on the political sphere). As such, the nobility encompasses more people and has less legal and political limitations. The aristocracy are then the highest social levels of nobility with reasonable expectations to participate in the rulership of the realm, to advise the government or to have an office within the government, and to have a legal and maybe also fiscal special status. Nonetheless, aristocracy and nobility are often used interchangeable in historiography, and the (metaphorical) naming of any elite as aristocratic muddles these terms even more.¹³ Definitions are often both too rigid, and thus fail to encompass the wide range of elites (with the status of families, women, wider households, etc. often left unclear), and at the same time too unspecific in terms of different areas of elite. The wider field of court studies and especially the new focus on dynasties are two current approaches to study noble and aristocratic families and individuals anew, both also dealing with a substantial amount of fuzziness at the edges.¹⁴

Recent research has shown the wide spectrum of aristocracies and/or noble men and women in different realms and times, and even the many different understandings of these terms depending on perspective and context.¹⁵ Definitions of aristocracy include legal conditions (e.g., membership in an institution like *Riddarhuset* in Sweden, or the

¹² See also Cust, *Charles I and the Aristocracy*, 67–68.

¹³ Most recently, Hamish Scott, "Aristocrats and Nobles," in *Early Modern Court Culture*, ed. Erin Griffey (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2022), 99. One of the most creative and fun metaphorical uses of aristocracy seems to me the Disney movie *The Aristocats* (1970). The punny title works because aristocracy has been used widely outside of its original meaning.

¹⁴ See Liesbeth Geevers, "Scandia introducerar: Ny dynastisk historia," *Scandia* 85, no. 2 (2019); and especially the recent Liesbeth Geevers and Harald Gustafsson, eds., *Dynasties and State Formation in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023). See also John Adamson, ed., *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics and Culture Under the Ancien Regime 1500-1750* (London: Seven Dials, 2000); Dries Raeymaekers and Sebastiaan Derks, eds., *The Key to Power? The Culture of Access in Princely Courts, 1400-1750* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016).

¹⁵ See Bougard, François, Hans-Werner Goetz, and Régine Le Jan, eds. *Théorie et pratiques des élites au Haut Moyen Âge: Conception, perception et réalisation sociale = Theorie und Praxis frühmittelalterlicher Eliten: Konzepte, Wahrnehmung und soziale Umsetzung*. Collection Haut Moyen Âge 13. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011, esp. the chapter by Chris Wickham.

Adelsregister in the Holy Roman Empire), political influence (e.g., membership in parliament and council over several generations as well as dominion over land and people), social influence (e.g., the *habitus* of a gentleman, also the idea of noble values), and/or economic wealth (e.g., the ascension from the Fugger merchant family into urban patriciate into formal and legal nobilitation).¹⁶ Furthermore, aristocratic political, social, cultural, or economic influence is ever-changing, and individual families (or individuals) can change their status over time, maybe even several times. Social mobility is as characteristic for aristocracy as it is for other social strata. Moreover, the spectrum of European aristocrats include poor Spanish or Polish aristocrats, rich English gentry without any noble title or legal privileges, Scandinavian influential families from the councils with new titles from the sixteenth century onwards, wealthy Italian or German patriciate, Roman senators, or French *noblesse de robe*, and many more. The French Revolution, as the discussion by Nadir Weber in this issue also shows, changes the discourse, but aristocracy remains an influential group within the political, social, economic, and also legal composition of polities.¹⁷

This special issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* does not add more examples to the varied understanding of aristocracy to our knowledge, but starts from observation of the fuzziness of defining aristocracy, and asks how historians then might approach aristocracy under these circumstances. The articles deal with historical approaches to aristocracy in different times and European geographies and ask the following questions: what or who can be called aristocracy at a certain moment? How can historians approach the different aspects of aristocracy? How can researchers approach aristocratic individuals, families, and structures? Which methods and theories help us to identify aristocracy (magnates, leading people, political, social, economic, cultural elite) of a certain time? What is the relationship between aristocrats, between different levels of aristocracy, between aristocrats (maybe also on different levels) and rulers, between

¹⁶ See Mark Häberlein, *Die Fugger: Geschichte einer Augsburger Familie (1367-1650)* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

¹⁷ See among others Amerigo Caruso and Linda Hamman, "Resilienz und Konstruktion von Sicherheit: Die piemontesische Adelsfamilie Balbo im Zeitalter der Revolutionen," *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 100 (2020); David Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy: Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Torsten Riotte, "Between Politics and Dynastic Survival: 19th-Century Monarchy in Post-Revolutionary Europe (1815-1918)," in *Realms of Royalty: New Directions in Researching Contemporary European Monarchies*, ed. Christina Jordan and Imke Polland (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020); Ellis Wasson, *Aristocracy and the Modern World* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). In this special issue, the article by Marion Dotter discusses this for the modern period.

aristocrats and ruled? Is there a European family of nobility? Which alternative terms and definitions might be helpful? All of these lead up to the final questions: in what ways is the concept of aristocracy still helpful and fruitful? And in what ways do we need to change our understanding of aristocracy?

Form of State or a Group of People in a Society?

Aristocracy is literally the government of a polity (the *-cracy* part of the word) by the best members of this polity (the *-aristo* part of it). Nadir Weber traces the change in meaning of the term "aristocracy" from an early modern understanding as one particular form of rule to the figure of the aristocrat. In his article *Defining the Aristocrat: From Geneva to Revolutionary France*, he acknowledges the central place of the concept and the associated group of people within the debates on and during the French Revolution. Weber takes this as his starting point to understand how and when this change of meaning from political concept to specific group of people occurred, and emphasises the surprising roots of this discourse in the small Republic of Geneva. The *Begriffsgeschichte* of the related terms aristocracy, aristocrat, nobility, and noble shows the early modern understanding of republics as aristocracies, and the openness of these terms. During the eighteenth century, conflict about political participation flared up several times in Geneva with the bourgeoisie demanding more representation. Weber focuses in on the conflict since the 1760s when more and more this debate was observed, and increasingly also shared and supported, by a European intellectual elite outside of Geneva. The banning of Rousseau's *Contrat Social* in 1762 in his place of birth was the start of a renewal of this conflict, and the widespread discussion of it. Tracing the discourse—and the multiple meanings and understanding of the terms "aristocratic" and "noble," "aristocracy" and "nobility," and the connection of these words and concepts to contemporary understandings and critiques of the elite—shows on the one hand the fuzziness of the word and its meaning, but also grounds the various meaning in contemporary texts and views.

Alexander Isacson in his article *Aristocrats and Refined Peasants. The Concept of Aristocracy in Swedish Historiography* picks up the baton from Nadir Weber and discusses Swedish aristocracy from both chronological sides of the Genevan debate and the French Revolution. Isacson contextualises the modern historiographical debate on the use and understanding of aristocracy (or nobility) within the national discourse of nineteenth-century Sweden. Starting from the same observation as Weber, of a change of meaning of

the term aristocracy around 1800, he analyses the debate between Anders Fryxell (1795-1881) and Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783-1847). This debate was on the one hand based on the specific form of elites in early modern Sweden, and on the other hand influenced by nineteenth-century Swedish opinions on aristocracy, usually not seen as very positive factors within the Swedish realm and for the Swedish people. Aristocracy emerged as an "internal Other," a foreign element within the national body. The debate on the role of the aristocracy, now firmly understood as a specific group of people, started anew in the 1950s, showing the continued importance of understanding the role of the aristocracy for a Swedish national identity. Historiography has since turned to understanding early modern aristocrats and aristocracy in their social, cultural, and economic aspects in addition to their political roles, allowing for the inclusion of early modern rich freeholding peasants into our understanding of early modern Swedish aristocracy.

Despite the rich research on early modern Europe as an aristocratic age, the nineteenth century, which Dieter Langewiesche has called the century of monarchy,¹⁸ seems to be a decisive age for aristocracy. From the change of meaning right at the beginning of (the long) nineteenth century to the role of historiography and to the changing administration and institutionalisation of it, as discussed by Marion Dotter in this special issue. In her article, *The Nobility in State and Society. Administrative and Public Ways of Defining and Conceptualising the Nobility in the Late Habsburg Empire (1849-1914)*, Dotter asks about contemporary practices of squaring the circle between ideas of nobility and the selling and buying of aristocratic titles. The multi-national and multi-ethnic Habsburg empire with the emperor as head of this imagined community shows itself a rich soil for research due to the survival of the *Vorträge* (portfolios put together for ennoblement proceedings). These *Vorträge* allow insights into contemporary understanding of aristocracy, but also into the practice of ennoblement and its relation to state administration. They bring together the discussion of individuals and specific families with the broader ideas and concepts of the political, social, economic, and cultural function of aristocracy in state and society, and the need for public acknowledgement. Dotter reminds us of that, contrary to premodern understandings of aristocracy outside of monarchies, historiography now considers monarchy and aristocracy as intimately connected with the monarch the ultimate judge over who belongs and who was excluded.

¹⁸ Dieter Langewiesche, *Die Monarchie im Jahrhundert Europas: Selbstbehauptung durch Wandel im 19. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013), 5.

The role of the court, now so central in many studies of the social and cultural, sometimes even political and economic aspects of aristocracy, is central to Nicola Clark's study of noblewomen. In her article, *Noblewomen, Court Service and Crossing Borders*, Clark addresses the role of women in thinking about aristocracy, and encourages us to expand our definitions. Women often crossed territorial and social borders, blurring the lines between social classes and highlighting difficulties also contemporaries also had with identifying the class, rank or general status of a woman, especially when she also connected two or more realms. Clark emphasises the horizontal kinship connections which become much more visible when looking specifically at women, even more so when they "accumulated" families over the course of several marriages and could have several different titles throughout them. In identifying the royal court as "the one place in England where women could hold office," Clark emphasises the importance of space and institution. Further unravelling the situation of aristocratic women, Clark proposes the consideration of "hard" aristocracy (in England bound to titles), and "soft" aristocracy (role at court, influence, status, etc.). Her discussion of Tudor aristocratic women also sheds light also on the complexity of this status for men—both for contemporaries as well as for historians. In addition to titles, aristocratic lifestyle, acceptance by contemporaries of the same rank or within the local polity, as well as political influence and kinship relations were relevant in determining the status of an individual. Nonetheless, even considering all these factors, defining aristocracy remains a "kaleidoscope" and is subject to change over the lifetime of a historical actor.

Metaphors and words describing the non-specific character of an object such as fuzziness, kaleidoscope, or, as Ellis Wasson uses, a "flickering holograph," are used increasingly in academic discussions of aristocracy.¹⁹ As an approach to it, it does not seem to be a bad idea—embracing the openness of this concept, but also shining light on the many shadowed parts of it. When talking about a specific group of people as the aristocracy of a realm, some individuals are in the spotlight—neither contemporaries nor historians are able to doubt their belonging to this group—many others, however, are only visible if the view through the kaleidoscope is adjusted, in some flickerings of the holograph, and while looking at them from the corner of the eye, even though they might remain a bit fuzzy then. Acceptance of the impossibility of defining aristocracy and embracing the fuzziness is just the first step. This widens the perspective and opens up alternatives of looking at the research objects. However, it also allows us to insist that

¹⁹ Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world*, 8.

there is indeed something distinctive to look at—aristocracy does exist, and by focussing in on individuals, specific kinship groups, institutions (e.g., councils), spaces (particular on courts), or social and cultural habits (hunting, fencing, advising the monarch, fashion, etc.), aspects of aristocracy can be more clearly analysed and then contribute to the bigger (impressionist) picture. Awareness of the theoretical and practical divide, both from contemporaries as well as in historiography, helps to not overstate just one approach. Comparisons, gender history and intersectionality, transnational and *histoire croisée*-approaches all seem well suited to move forward on this path of trying to define aristocracy, even if this really is an instance of the journey being more important than the destination.

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