

The Culture of the Aristocracy A Central European Perspective

In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton suggests that the young Dorian seize the day. Lord Henry is a diabolic figure who violates social norms, who does not care about the sensitivity of other people, and who convinces young and talented gentlemen to set off on the path of sin. In this *fin de siècle* novel, the aristocracy are portrayed as being evil, perverted and hedonistic. In addition to the image of the perverted and socially very active aristocrat, another one often appears: that of the amateur dilettante. The aristocrats are bored and they have enough time to write, paint or compose musical pieces. They are not really artists; their artistic activities are not derived from an existential depth (like those of real artists). Prince Mishkin, the main character of Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* suggests to Adelaide Epanchin, who had asked him for a subject to paint, that she should paint the face of a condemned man a minute before the guillotine falls. The young girl was offended by Mishkin's offer, because the dilettante artist could not understand the depth of the artistic moment.¹

These two faces of aristocrats are often seen in nineteenth-century literature, when the noble classes were searching for their place in modern bourgeois society. On the one hand, they had the economic power to support individual artists and cultural institutions, to consume artistic products, and to produce works of art themselves as well. On the other hand,

1 On the literary representation of aristocracy see David Quint: *Noble Passions. Aristocracy and the Novel*, in: *Comparative Literature* 62.2 (2010), pp. 103–121; on the problem of aristocracy in Europe see Werner Conze and Christian Meier: *Adel, Aristokratie*, in: Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.): *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Vol. I, Stuttgart 1972, pp. 1–48; Jerzy Lukowski: *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, New York 2003; Ellis Wasson: *Aristocracy and the Modern World*, New York 2006, pp. 8–19; William Doyle: *Aristocracy. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2010, pp. 60–76.

the economic and political power of their class was based on an inherited tradition. Not only did the access to politics between the aristocracy and bourgeoisie differ, the logic of how they used their political and economic power did too. Because of these contradictions, the gap between the different elite classes became deeper and deeper. This is why the cultural praxes of the aristocracy are regularly underestimated in Central European history. Nevertheless, it would be worth changing our scope and reinterpreting the historical role of the aristocracy at the birth of modern society. A number of studies have considered how the early modern aristocracy sought to modernize its embeddedness in society, so that it could also maintain its hegemony of power.² If we narrow the study down to the field of culture, or to how the social position of the aristocracy is examined in the field of culture, a microscopic perspective can also help us rewrite the great historical narrative of the ascension of the bourgeoisie. Recently, several studies on different cultural praxes, and the everyday use of culture, have drawn attention to the fact that aristocratic culture not only mimicked, followed and reflected what we call *Aufklärung*, but was itself the shaper and a part of the process.³

If posterity has so sharply drawn the aristocratic figure of the hedonist and the dilettante, let us start from here. In the eighteenth century, the amateur was not a direct opposite of the genius, just as the dilettante was not the opposite of the professional.⁴ Moreover, being an amateur and a dilettante was seen as a way of setting a social example. The more someone dealt with the arts (as a creator and a recipient), the more educated and useful a member of society he or she became. In this sense, society evolved when its members engaged in conversation with each other. The society that carried its citizens was able to polish their taste by

2 On Central-European aristocracy see Robert Kann: *Aristocracy in the Eighteenth Century Habsburg Empire*, in: *East European Quarterly* 7 (1973), pp. 1–13; Hamish M. Scott (ed.): *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, vol. 1–2, New York 2007. Without digging too deeply into the historiography of early-modern and modern nobility, it is worth mentioning István Hajnal's non-Marxist approach to social history: *Istvan Hajnal: From Estates to Classes*, in: János M. Bak (ed.): *Nobilities in Central and Eastern Europe. Kinship, Property and Privilege*, Budapest–Krems 1994, pp. 163–183.

3 See e.g. Ivo Cerman's wide-ranging summary of the Viennese aristocracy: *Ivo Cerman: Habsburgischer Adel und Aufklärung. Bildungsverhalten des Wiener Hofadels im 18. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 2010.

4 Georg Stanitzek: *Dilettant*, in: Klaus Weimar, Harald Fricke, Klaus Grubmüller and Jan-Dirk Müller (eds.): *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft. Vol. 1*, Berlin 1997, pp. 364–366.

way of permanent conversation. The aristocrats were amateurs, and they thought that it was the only way to improve their manners. In the case of aristocratic culture, this positive sense of amateurism was able to survive for such a long time because the nobles enjoyed the arts without any kind of financial interest or hope for compensation.

We may remember that art is free from any interest if we recall the Kantian reflection on aesthetics.⁵ It is a specific historical paradox that one of the most important features of the eighteenth-century genius was that geniuses practiced arts by, for and in themselves. Interestingly, being a genius coincided with the aristocratic ideals of art at this point. While the genius and the professional looked down on the dilettante and the amateur as the opposite of real artists, the same reasoning was followed by the aristocrats, as they remained dilettantes and amateurs.

Any national aristocracy pursued a transnational way of life. Not only does it go without saying that aristocrats spoke several languages, they also tried to adopt the values of the culture of other nations as well. In Central Europe, the ideas of the Enlightenment grew out of the French ideal (and no doubt the aristocracy also lived under the spell of the French Enlightenment), but the great model of the aristocratic way of life was the British gentleman, or at least, the French and English patterns were mixed. In Central Europe, the ideal of the gentleman arrived with some delay. Mark-Georg Dehrmann, in his monumental work on the Shaftesbury impact, reconstructed the various waves of influence in German discourse.⁶ In the countries of the Habsburg Monarchy, the discourse on politeness appeared through a German and French linguistic filter, and it can be reconstructed sporadically. Thus, while the most intense waves of aristocratic politeness had already diminished in the German discourse, the impact of this political language was beginning a revival in the Habsburg Monarchy. Moreover, the emergence of politeness was not Shaftesbury's direct influence, but it rose indirectly through the oeuvres of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Johann Gottfried Herder, Martin Wieland or Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

In addition, Central European nobles (and above all aristocrats) aligned themselves with the British aristocracy. And it might have even appeared that the political system based on the power of the estates was related to

5 Paul Guyer: Interest, Nature, and Art. A Problem in Kant's Aesthetics, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 31.4 (1978), pp. 580–603.

6 Mark-Georg Dehrmann: "Das Orakel der Deisten". *Shaftesbury und die deutsche Aufklärung*, Göttingen 2008.

the English political system. (This setting was only reinforced by Montesquieu's philosophical masterpiece, *De l'esprit des lois* in which the French *philosophe* presented the Hungarian nobility and the political system of the Hungarian kingdom as an example to follow.)⁷ Thus, in cultural and political terms, the Central European nobility appeared to be part of a tradition that could either only be partially known or could only be obtained from secondary sources. A good example of the former is John Locke's phenomenal theory of education (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1639), which was well-known in aristocratic circles and was translated into several languages, excerpted and quoted by many.⁸ For the latter, Edmund Burke's impact is worth mentioning. His work (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790) was known through Friedrich Gentz's German translation and commentaries, while Burke himself was a frequent reference for political pamphlets and diet speeches.⁹

- 7 Julius Schwarcz: Montesquieu und die Verantwortlichkeit der Ráthe des Monarchen in Aragonien, England, Ungarn, Siebenbürgen und Schweden, Leipzig 1892; Olga Penke: Lectures et traductions hongroises de Montesquieu entre 1779 et 1829, in: *Revue Française d'Histoire du Livre* 118 (2003), pp. 127–144; Péter Balázs: La fortune des Considérations sur les Romains et de l'Esprit des lois dans la pensée politico-philosophique hongroise des XIX^e et XX^e siècles: Traductions et interprétations, in: *Revue Française d'Histoire du Livre* 128 (2013), pp. 145–158. On the Hungarian nobility and Aufklärung see Éva H. Balázs: La noblesse hongroise et les lumières, in: Lilla Krász and Tibor Frank (eds.): *L'Europa des lumières / Europa der Aufklärung. Œuvres choisies de Éva H. Balázs / Ausgewählte Schriften von Éva H. Balázs*, Budapest 2015, pp. 108–121.
- 8 Let us stick to the Hungarian examples. The first one was translated from Pierre Coste's French translation by a Hungarian aristocrat; the second one, János Pavlik's translation is a manuscript: A' gyermekek' neveléséről, melyet Lock János, egy Ángliai nagy Tudományú Philosophus, és Orvos Doktor Ángliai Nyelven írt, a' Londinumi Királyi Tudosok' Társaságából való Coste nevű tudós Frantzia, Frantzia nyelven adott-ki. Most pedig, Nemzetéhez és Hazájához való szeretetéből, Frantzia Nyelvből Magyarra fordított B. J. G. Sz. A. [Borosjenői gróf Székely Ádám]. MDCCLXIX. esztendőben [On the education of children, written in English by John Locke, an English erudite philosopher and physician, and published in French by a French scholar named Coste from the Royal Society of London; and now, due to his love for his nation and homeland, Count Ádám Székely translated it from French into Hungarian in 1769], Kolozsvár 1771; *Loke Gyermekek neveléséről [Locke on Children's Education]*, trans. János Pavlik, 1811, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Kézirattára (National Széchényi Library, Manuscript Collection), Fol. Hung. 112.
- 9 See László Kontler: La république en danger. Burke and Gentz to the Rescue of the Old Regime Commonwealth of Europe, in: Jaroslav Miller (ed.): *CEU History Department Yearbook 2001-2002*, Budapest 2002, pp. 67–88; Gábor Vaderna: Censorship and the Faces of Hungarian Conservatism in the First Decades of the Nineteenth Century, in: *Austrian History Yearbook* 48 (2017), pp. 91–105.

The idea of gentlemanliness, which would later be a decisive element of aristocratic culture, manifested itself together with the increasing sensibility at the time.¹⁰ Central European discourses on taste and refinement were thus less separated from the political language of politeness,¹¹ as sets of arguments that had infiltrated the political language of the noble estates in the era of Josephinism, and later in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, encountered the sophisticated language used by a few men of letters following Western examples. It was easy for the polite discourse of aristocratic culture and the discourse of sensibility promoted by literary authors to meet. In this region, artists were able to earn a living by serving a noble family (as a tutor, librarian or secretary). The publishing or performance of cultural products largely depended on the support of nobles and could only be marketed on a small scale and essentially in a different socio-cultural environment (especially in cities). However, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the first small steps of a structural change in the public sphere were taken, and the political and cultural goals of these two strata of society (aristocracy and artists) seemed to coincide. Culture was increasingly institutionalized, and generous and wealthy aristocrats were at the forefront of this process.

The concept and institutional system of art were simultaneously transformed in the eighteenth century. One of the turning points in the story is well known. After the French Revolution, in the era of constitutional monarchy, the *Assemblée Nationale Constituante* (National Constituent Assembly) decided that the genius of artistic treasures could not be questioned, and that the role of artefacts in national education was crucial. Private property from looted castles and churches that were in the possession of the privileged orders of the *Ancien Régime* became public property. *Le Comité Pour l'Aliénation des Biens Nationaux* (The Committee for the Alienation of National Assets) decided that objects of art were worth preserving not only because of their aesthetic value, but also because they express the historical continuity of a nation. Talleyrand set out the three principles of national culture in his speech at the National Assembly on 13 October 1790. Firstly, French art and history together reached the level of development at which they were at the moment, secondly the

10 George Barker-Benfield interprets this change as a reform to masculinity: George J. Barker-Benfield: *The Culture of Sensibility. Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago 1992, pp. 37–103, 215–286.

11 Cf. Lawrence E. Klein: *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness. Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England*, Cambridge–New York 1994.

genius of freedom and art is essentially the same, so French politics was also based on art, and thirdly monuments play an important role in education.¹² This episode is noteworthy not only because it focused on preservation rather than destruction of artistic treasures, but also because the idea that monuments express the identity of a nation was a new one. I am not claiming that the French Revolution was the direct and necessary cause of the process of private property becoming public property. But in any case, as a result of the revolutionary events, the institutionalization of art accelerated, and art's ability to create a communal identity was reinforced. Another turning point in the story is also well known. The trade in art works was growing quickly in the eighteenth century, with valuable artefacts being bought mainly by English merchants and aristocrats. Private connoisseurs then began to sell their collections to rulers one by one, so that art no longer represented the power of court culture but rather the cultural power of nations. When Napoleon looted Rome in 1798, an earlier frontier was certainly crossed as he subjugated not only Italy but art as well.¹³

Why is it worth taking this detour in the direction of the birth of modern museums? The new institutions that managed the arts were working on a radically new concept of art. Firstly, art started to be seen as a way that nations could express their continuous history. However, this kind of art was not only created by the artists of a nation, but by all the art the state had collected. As a result, artefacts and monuments broke away from their original (e.g. religious) context and virtually became the property of an imagined community. Secondly, art was associated with freedom. "The Beautiful prepares us to love disinterestedly something, even nature itself," said Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*.¹⁴ This lack of interest ("ohne Interesse") became one of the important but extremely problematic principles of aesthetic reception at the late eighteenth century. If this freedom could be combined with the political freedom of community, problems would arise immediately. Kant's solution approaches the issue from the perspective of individual experience: "For since it does not rest

12 Édouard Pommier: *Le théorie des arts*, in: Édouard Pommier: *Aux armes et aux arts! Les arts de la Révolution 1789–1799*, Paris 1988, pp. 167–199, here pp. 177–178.

13 Dorothy Mackay Quynn: *The Art Confiscations of the Napoleonic Wars*, in: *The American Historical Review* 50.3 (1945), pp. 437–460.

14 Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgement*, second, revised edition, trans. J. H. Bernard, London 1914, p. 134. Original: "Das Schöne bereitet uns vor, etwas, selbst die Natur, ohne Interesse zu lieben". Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Gerhard Lehmann, Stuttgart 2004, p. 193.

on any inclination of the subject (nor upon any other premeditated interest), but since he who judges feels himself quite *free* as regards the satisfaction which he attaches to the object, he cannot find the ground of this satisfaction in any private conditions connected with his own subject; and hence it must be regarded as grounded on what he can presuppose in every other man.”¹⁵ However, reconciling political freedom with aesthetic freedom is not easy: politics, of course, relies on interests; and those involved necessarily represent someone or something, i.e. they act for their own or their community’s interest. Thus, the freedom of subject and community are different in nature. And thirdly, art institutions created by the community to balance and mediate between the aesthetic freedom of the subject and the political freedom of the community. Museums, libraries and theatres were in principle open to everyone. This created the illusion that all members of a community had free access to art in the same way. It is clear from this point of view how much was at stake politically for those who governed the newly founded institutions, and who determined the principles according to which they operated.¹⁶

The French model is exceptional, of course. In Central Europe, castles and churches did not have to be looted in order for a similar processes to begin. Here, the first cultural institutions were founded by large private collections being donated. The Habsburg emperors had a huge collection of natural sciences. The Holy Roman Emperor, Franz I Stephan von Lotharingen, purchased a collection of more than 30,000 pieces by the Florentine scientist Jean de Baillou in 1750. He established a zoo and a botanical garden, and his wife, Empress Maria Theresa, asked Ignaz von Born, the famous mineralogist and geologist, to build and run the Naturhistorisches Museum (Natural History Museum) in Vienna in 1776. Count Ferenc Széchenyi donated his collection to the Hungarian nation in 1802, and thus the Nemzeti Múzeum és Könyvtár (Hungarian National Museum and Library) was established. Széchenyi took care of compiling

15 Kant: Critique of Judgement (see fn. 14), 56. Original: „Denn da es sich nicht auf irgendeine Neigung des Subjekts (noch auf irgendein anderes überlegtes Interesse) gründet, sondern da der Urteilende sich in Ansehung des Wohlgefallens, welches er dem Gegenstande widmet, völlig *frei* fühlt: so kann er keine Privatbedingungen als Gründe des Wohlgefallens auffinden, an die sich sein Subjekt allein hinge, und muß es daher als in demjenigen begründet ansehen, was er auch bei jedem andern voraussetzen kann; folglich muß er glauben Grund zu haben, jedermann ein ähnliches Wohlgefallen zuzumuten.” Kant: Kritik der Urteils kraft (see fn. 14), pp. 124–125.

16 Cf. Andrew McClellan: A Brief History of the Art Museum Public, in: Andrew McClellan (ed.): Art and its Publics. Museum Studies at the Millennium, Oxford 2003, pp. 1–50.

the catalogues, the building and the custodians of the museum. Count Franz Sternberg-Manderscheid founded the Společnost vlasteneckých přátel umění (Society of Patriotic Friends of Art) in 1796, which also cared for the art collection in his Prague palace (the Národní galerie v Praze still operates here). His cousin Count Kaspar von Sternberg, himself a well-known mineralogist and botanist, founded the Czech Národní muzeum (National Museum) in 1818 with Franz, Count Franz Klebelsberg-Thumberg, and Oberstburggraf Franz Anton von Kolowrat. Kaspar von Sternberg was appointed the first chairman of the Gesellschaft des Vaterländischen Museums in Böhmen, the society that organized the museum's professional work. Emperor Francis II decided to establish the Arheolski muzej Split (Archaeological Museum) in 1818. He suggested that the ancient finds of Dalmatia be collected there in order to express the continuity between Latin and Croatian culture. This list is by no means exhaustive.¹⁷

Privately owned cultural property became public property. The institutions thus created, which managed this property, continued to be ruled by aristocrats (and sometimes royal courts). In the second step, these institutions were already operating from public donations, but retained their attachment to court culture for a long time. In the third step, institutions that already had their own income came into being. These were not museums or scientific societies but institutions that also provided entertainment, such as theatres. The venues of aristocratic culture merged into a community-funded system of institutions, which later became more or less commercialized.¹⁸ This process lasted for more than 100 years and its territorial distribution was not uniform. There are two possible stories about why this happened. One is about the regression of aristocratic culture. In this story, the aristocrats could do nothing but hand over to the community all the cultural goods that the community would have taken away from them anyway. Their participation in the new culture was nothing more than self-defense and this is how elite members tried to preserve their power. And the other story is that of a great attempt at

17 See Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (eds.): *Building National Museums in Europe 1750–2010*. Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museum: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28–30. April 2011. EuNaMus Report No 1, Linköping 2011.

18 See Sándor Hites: *A Pandora's Box of National Hostility? The Széchényis and Aristocratic Donations in Nineteenth Century East-Central Europe*, in: Tudor Sala, Tracey Sowerby and Alexandra Urakova (eds.): *Dangerous Gifts & Pernicious Transactions from Antiquity to the Digital Age*, London 2022, under press.

modernization. If we accept this story, it is noticeable that only a narrow layer of aristocrats were at the forefront of the process. They believed that the basis of a society's culture was aristocratic culture itself, based on refinement, politeness, and social manners.

The connoisseur is an art expert whose taste is sophisticated and dependable. The figure of the connoisseur may also be suitable for characterizing aristocrats, because they were not only recipients and creators of art, but people who live their lives aesthetically. Their dilemmas included the curiosity (or even rarity) versus the beauty of objects, historical concern versus aesthetic reception, and the cognitive versus sensual acceptance of fine arts. From the end of the eighteenth century, in parallel with the transformation of the concept and the institutionalization of art analyzed above, these dilemmas were no longer perceived as opposites, but as aspects to be enforced in parallel.¹⁹ The connoisseur (as opposed to today's wine connoisseurs) was trained in several branches of art. Not only were they able to ask aesthetic questions about the artistic side of life, but their everyday social practices were also determined by the attention they paid to art.

Aristocratic culture had *longue durée* traditions. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the spread of Baroque court culture, cultural practices aimed at creating works of art became more and more widespread among aristocrats. Their sons played as actors in the castle theatres and not only were aristocrats the audience for classical music, but several trained themselves to be composers. They wrote more and more, sent their writings to each other and read them out at social events. Much can be known about the rich cultural world that arose in the aristocratic courts. Important books and essays appeared on the history of certain families and the lives of certain historical figures. Lichtenstein, Esterházy, Patačić, Kinsky, Czartoryski, were just some of the well-known families. It is important to point out that aristocrats at this time were able to freely create and enjoy art because they had the financial resources to remain independent of any interest. That is why respect for art could only be partially attributed to the need for representativeness. Of course, the refined gentleman was able to express his social rank with his manners. At the same time, the connoisseur could move to a higher rank of social existence precisely because, through art, he was able to transcend the social order, to transcend the rules of society. This means that being an

19 Cf. Krzysztof Pomian: *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux*. Paris, Venise: XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle, Paris 1987.

aristocrat was also a duty. Through wealth, it was a duty to educate oneself, so that one could forget the social conditions that had enabled one to learn. It is a real paradox.

Finally, another paradox. The more differentiated the new institutional structure supported and often led by the aristocrats became, and the sharper the boundaries between professional and non-professional uses of culture were, and the more the traditional forms of aristocratic culture faded into the background. The practices of aristocratic culture, of course, did not cease, and some of its traditions even persisted for a very long time, but professional artists and the artworks they created pushed all those who did not engage with modern media in the public sphere to the periphery. Let me be blunt. While the aristocratic culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries undoubtedly represented the culture of *the elite*, by the mid-nineteenth century it was the public institutions that defined the values of culture for an imagined community. The paradox can thus be grasped in terms of the fact that the newer institutions set up to transform and reform aristocratic culture expelled all those who originally created them. (It is worth recalling at this point that this periphery of culture can only be measured in canonical rank and publicity, rather than in access to material goods. Aristocratic patronage remained a crucial element of culture in the long run.)

Therefore, on the one hand, the aristocratic culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be examined on the basis of the cultural-historical processes summarized above, and, on the other, we can approach it as if it functioned as a kind of *olla podrida*. It may seem strange at first glance, but despite all the conservatism of aristocratic culture, it was perhaps the most open cultural field of the era, as it absorbed and adopted techniques and cultural practices from the emerging elites, embedding them in its own hundreds of years of tradition. I cannot stress enough that the aristocrats not only had a cultural incentive to do so, but also the financial resources to embark on this path. For instance, rich lords who had been educating their children abroad for years; young aristocrats who organized and ran the Grand Tour, possibly other peregrination routes (the destination increasingly became Paris and London); mushrooming aristocratic clubs and casinos in cities (e.g. in Vienna, Prague, Pest and Buda).²⁰

20 On the different dimensions of Central European culture (supplemented by several aspects omitted from this introduction), cf. R. J. W. Evans: *Culture and Authority in Central Europe, 1683-1806*, in: R. J. W. Evans: *Austria, Hungary, and the Habsburgs. Essays on Central Europe, c.1683-1867*, Oxford 2006, pp. 56-74.

However, one or two restrictions are worth adding to all of this. Firstly, the unshakable awareness of the superiority of aristocratic art, which was nourished by the large accumulation of wealth and cultural capital, which in itself had already blurred the boundaries between the elite and the popular. What connoisseurs used and enjoyed was culture itself for them, while they naturally neglected the rest. This means that aristocratic culture *used* art, and in doing so shaped everything into its own image immediately. The result could not be adapted to its own origin. For example, a connoisseur could write popular folk-style songs, but the end result was certainly not sung in the fields at harvest time. Aristocratic culture used popular culture, but popular culture received nothing in return. Many ingredients could be thrown into the melting pot of culture, but not everyone had the chance to eat from the dishes made from them. The exclusivity with which court and aristocratic culture is often characterized in cultural histories can be traced back here. Secondly, not the entire social class, that is, not all aristocrats were artists themselves or at least patrons of the arts. Although the products of culture were consumed by most aristocrats, the political language of politeness was spoken by relatively few. They could be successful precisely because, through their special sensibility, they were able not only to understand the problems of the lower classes, but also to speak their language. The situation was especially interesting in the Kingdom of Hungary. There, some of the magnates spoke the political language of the lower noble classes, and thus were able to have a say in the county's politics and the debates of the lower house of the diet. A political cult of these magnates then developed, which the Habsburg court could not ignore. Nevertheless, these refined aristocrats were in a marked minority within their own class. Political fame gained through education was thus only slowly converted into political capital.²¹

There is much to know about the culture of aristocracy, but there is still more to learn. The historical narratives of the Enlightenment used to take little account of aristocrats. If the Enlightenment went hand in hand with the rise of the bourgeoisie, then aristocrats had to fall. If the Enlightenment was the rise of "modern paganism", religious aristocrats had to be suppressed. If the Enlightenment was no more than the rise of a rational mode of thinking, then cherishing family traditions were fated to fail. If the essence of Enlightenment was in progress, aristocrats were

21 See on the Hungarian example again Károly Kecskeméti: *La Hongrie et le reformisme liberal. Problèmes politiques et sociaux (1790-1848)*, Rome 1989, pp. 293-323.

lagging behind history. And if one also looks at contemporary eighteenth century discourses, a typical aristocrat appears as an indolent, pompous and redundant person, who has no goal, no achievement and no ambition in their lives. However, in Central Europe, the aristocracy played a special role in the history of the late eighteenth century. Their erudition and financial background made it possible for them to stay close to social and cultural innovation. The Habsburg Monarchy invited world-famous artists to visit them, and they gave them their patronage, while they also produced their own pieces of art. They collected scholarly books and gave money to several lower-class people for educational peregrination. They used their family networks to further their social careers and thought that only cultured people had the right to wield power. They established new institutions (academies, press media, libraries, etc.), and they honestly believed that the new “bourgeois public sphere” would reinforce their position in society.

This volume takes steps in several directions. The contributors pay special attention to the following topics:

- reflections on the culture of aristocratic families: how they supported culture and how they participated in arts by making their own artistic works;
- forms of political communication through the arts: how aristocrats expressed their political thoughts via art, especially literature;
- educational practices of the aristocracy: how they reflected on the new waves of pedagogy, and how they organized their children’s education;
- aristocratic careers: how an aristocrat could gain influence within their own families and beyond;
- family strategies: how family members were able to contact each other, and how they used manuscript culture for communication;
- science and culture: how aristocrats interpreted and adapted the new paradigms of knowledge to their thinking;
- comparative family histories: what territorial differences can be recognized within the multi-ethnic Habsburg Monarchy.

In this short introduction, I have argued so far as if Central Europe were a particular region and as if the aristocracy as a social class could be defined in isolation in this particular region. The starting point is necessarily simplified for this type of project. As we move on to the minutiae, the big picture suddenly incorporates these, and it turns out that the super-

imposition of the micro and macro levels also corrects our hypotheses.²² So, we can proudly say, this project is effective only inasmuch as it forces us to reinterpret history.

I hope that the essays that follow will give us a better understanding of the social history of the culture of Central European aristocracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, we read about Lord Fermor, who is “a genial if somewhat rough-mannered old bachelor, whom the outside world called selfish because it derived no particular benefit from him, but who was considered generous by Society as he fed the people who amused him”; and who “set himself to the serious study of the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing”. In the new capitalist world, he could not get along. It means, partly, that he did not understand how to make money, and partly, that the new modern world did not understand him either. His art is no longer the art of the connoisseur, but of doing nothing. At least that is how it looks. Wilde notes, drily but with some empathy: “His principles were out of date, but there was a good deal to be said for his prejudices.” The reception of the aristocracy’s declassification in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries cast a shadow over how they participated in the process of shaping modern society. We hope we can show something from this side of history as well.

22 On the critique of the standardisation of Central European enlightenment, cf. Teodora Shek Brnardić: *The Enlightenment in Eastern Europe. Between Regional Typology and Particular Micro-history*, in: *European Review of History* 13.3 (2006), pp. 411–435.