



Josef Matzerath. *Adelsprobe an der Moderne: Sächsischer Adel 1763-1866.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006. 611 pp. EUR 68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08596-0.



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No Stone Left Unturned

Adelsprobe an der Moderne is the result of the last ten years of Josef Matzerath's research on the Saxon nobility. This volume, his published *Habilitationsschrift*, leaves no facet of the Saxon nobility between 1763 and 1866 untouched, unexplored, unanalyzed, or unaccounted for. Books of this type are difficult to review, if for no other reason than the sheer weightiness of the topic, because one can only criticize, if criticism is necessary, on theoretical rather than empirical grounds. The amount of information collected here would make even a Marxist shake his or her head in admiration over the statistical leviathan. Overall, Matzerath's work addresses the question of how a pre-modern elite adapts to the realities of the modern world. This question is not just important for understanding the nobility, but Matzerath's answers fundamentally alter our perception of how modern German society actually (as opposed to theoretically) evolved.

The book is divided into three major sections (from estate to group memory; noble cohesion; and strategies for maintaining dominance), with multiple subcategories in each section. In the first section, Matzerath outlines the theoretical underpinnings of his work. This is eas-

ily the briefest section of the book. Matzerath follows with a short exegesis on the Saxon nobility and the development of modern Saxony. He concludes this section with a brief introduction to his object of study: families of the Saxon nobility with estates were in Electoral Saxony both before and after 1815, excluding Lausitz. Section 2 covers the various entities and institutions that (in theory) either helped develop or enforce noble cohesion. Here Matzerath explores numerous topics: noble law and privilege; styles of communication within the group; nobles in the Saxon estates, later *Landtag*; nobles at the court; nobles in Dresden (where they lived, what professions they followed, whether they rented or bought their homes); family relationships both within the immediate and greater family; and social conventions of the nobility—from childhood through education, career, and marriage. Section 3 concentrates on strategies nobles used to remain at the pinnacle of Saxon society. Matzerath considers the changing constitutional order and various voting privileges; he also examines nobles in state service and nobles on the land. Here he reflects on the construction of legal devices, such as *Fideikomisse* and *Familienverbände*, which nobles used

to preserve and build family stability. Finally, Matzerath applies his broader arguments to a few different families of the Saxon nobility (SchÅ¶nberg, BÅ¼nau, Metzsch) to solidify the validity of his argument further. These families were picked in part because of their antiquity, their incontestable association with Electoral Saxony, and not least, because the family and estate papers have remained almost wholly intact in the Saxon Central Archive in Dresden.

If one can sum up what Matzerath is trying to establish via this detailed analysis, it is this: it is useful to interpret the nobility in a particular locale or region as a “social formation” that both adapts to change and reinvents itself through time. Nobles were not mired in the theoretical La Brea tar pits, but instead continually re-invented and re-codified what it meant to be noble—who was included in the nobility, who was excluded, and on what terms this was done. Nobles, an inherently modern group, were constantly reprogramming themselves and their families for success. Consequently, Matzerath concludes that the nobility was a permeable and malleable social formation, suggesting that our understanding of the transformation from estate to class society is based on an artificial construct propagated by Marxist and western theorists alike. This analysis calls the term “nobility” itself into question, since Matzerath concludes that one cannot essentially speak of a unified nobility, a noble point of view, or a pure noble political and social authority.

Because Matzerath disputes the notion that the nobility had explicit characteristics, he disagrees with Heinz Reif’s definition of *Adligkeit* (qualities that are shared by all nobles). His analysis minimizes the impact of the French Revolutionary wars and nationalism. The implication is clear: if it is impossible to classify and define a relatively tiny privileged order, it calls into question every theoretical explanation for the transformation of European society in the nineteenth century. Whether one accepts his premise or not, Matzerath has made an exceptional and explicitly revisionist argument equivalent to Georg Schmidt’s contention that the Holy Roman Empire was a constitutional state. Perhaps more importantly and less controversially, Matzerath makes, for me at least, a convincing argument about the engagement of the nobility with modernity. Nobles’ malleable “adjustments” with the times, and permeable absorption of people and ideas that would reinforce their position of leadership, tell us why (in many ways) they were incredibly successful at maintaining status and leadership in the modern era, from traditional politics to the politics

of culture. One almost begins to wonder, after reading Matzerath, whether the prevailing theories about aristocratic decline were elaborately developed myths propagated by the former feudal elite to hoodwink the gullible and self-congratulatory bourgeoisie.

Matzerath also makes important contributions to our understanding of Saxon society. For instance, he posits that very few noble families actually felt or thought of themselves as Saxon or part of a Saxon tradition. He suggests that this attitude only developed among some families in response to nationalism and as a repercussion of the division of Saxony in 1814-15. Those that did feel a specific sense of Saxon consciousness were among a small group of nobles who had seats in the MeiÅen and Merseburg cathedral chapters. After 1814, these same families dominated positions at court. Moreover, the nobility of Lausitz, part of the Saxon Kingdom since 1619-20, were never fully integrated with the nobility from the core provinces of MeiÅen, Leipzig, and Thuringia, much less the Vogtland.

Matzerath goes on to discuss the odd circumstance that while Saxony was unaffected by Napoleonic political reforms, it still industrialized earlier than any other central European territory. For Matzerath, this schizophrenic political/economic order fits the critical *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history much better than the Prussian example, although the Social Democratic party in Saxony insisted that Junkers did not exist in the “Red Kingdom.”[1] The reason for this dichotomy lies perhaps in the behavior of the Saxon nobles. Even the growth of socialism in Saxony during the *Kaiserreich* did not cause a huge rupture, but instead Saxon nobles made “adjustments,” by reintroducing the three-class voting law under Count Hohenthal and later reinstating universal manhood suffrage after a speech in favor of the idea by Alfred v. Nostitz-Wallwitz, a significant political and cultural figure in Saxony during the fin-de-siÅcle. Saxon nobles were not unique, just different. In every region and sub-region of Europe, nobles used varying strategies appropriate to local circumstances. In other words, every nobility of a land could be considered to have its own special path—similarities and parallel developments would exist, but not differently from those of any other social formation, ethnic, or confessional group. Matzerath is insisting on the primacy of region, local conditions, and family culture—factors we should be familiar with as German historians, but which we sometimes forget when confronted with a dazzling new theoretical construct. Ultimately, studying Saxon nobles will give us insight into some problems faced by the traditional elites

in the transformation to modernity, but one should be careful to draw sweeping comparisons—Saxony was not Bavaria or Prussia or Hesse, any more than it was not Sweden, Spain, or Sardinia.

This is a superb, albeit difficult work. Anyone working on the Saxon nobility or Saxony in the transition from the early modern to the modern world should consult it. Despite its interesting overarching conclusions, however, it is probably too rich a feast for anyone but spe-

cialists on Saxony or the nobility. All other historians of the central European nobility have been put on notice—the gold standard for empirical research has been established.

Note

[1]. Donald Warren, *The Red Kingdom of Saxony: Lobbying Grounds for Gustav Stresemann 1901-1909* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 19.

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