

**Dina Gusejnova**

**Longina Jakubowska. *Patrons of History: Nobility, Capital and Political Transitions in Poland*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. xii+236 p. ISBN 978-1-4094-4373-5.**

**Sofia Tchouikina. *Dvorianskaia pamiat': "byvshie" v sovetskom gorode: Leningrad, 1920–30 gody*. Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2006. 259 p. ISBN 5-9438-0055-7.**

*Dina Gusejnova. Address for correspondence: History Department and Centre for Transnational History, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK. d.gusejnova@ucl.ac.uk.*

As Nietzsche once remarked, “only that which has no history can be defined” (Nietzsche 1886). Ironically, within the social sciences and humanities, it is historians who often give their objects of research rigid definitions. Longina Jakubowska’s anthropology of Polish gentry and Sofia Tchouikina’s sociological study of noble memory in Soviet Russia provide complementary ways of studying social formations in Nietzsche’s sense.

The task Jakubowska sets herself is to explain the endurance of aristocratic prestige in socialist and postsocialist Poland. She explains the identity of this group in terms of its position in the economy of material and symbolic values, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1996), which she charts from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania via the divisions of Poland to its twentieth-century history, when Poland became a modern nation, a state under German occupation, a Soviet satellite state, and a postsocialist democracy. In the market of prestige, the stability in the value of aristocratic capital throughout these regimes is indeed astonishing, considering that under socialism the material and symbolic basis of aristocratic power was systematically eroded.

For Tchouikina, in twentieth-century history the function of aristocratic identity, *dvorianstvo*, is its importance as a foil of counterconduct against the overwhelming success of the Soviet regime, which enforced the “reconversion” of former imperial status groups into new social figurations. Her analysis amounts to a sociological archaeology of aristocratic memory, a vanishing object that can be reached through such sources as oral interviews with a surviving (although by now, probably dead) generation of a little over twenty witnesses (mostly women) born in the 1910s, personal archives (including those of her own grandmother), as well as the things and social practices they left behind.

Jakubowska cites around thirty in-depth personal interviews from an originally larger sample of one hundred, looking mostly at generations born during or after World War II, supplemented by a database of 647 so-called biograms (effectively an equivalent of the Dictionary of National Biography) (26) of aristocratic members of the Polish Academy of Science, all individuals who classified themselves as “gentry” on public questionnaires, and draws on unpublished correspondence and transcripts of public trials from the late 1940s. The Polish gentry, or *szlachta*, Jakubowska shows,

has many characteristics in common with other aristocracies by descent, notably the connection between property and heredity, direct loyalty to the emperors, and cosmopolitan culture. But there are also some distinctive peculiarities: notably, the importance of aristocratic identity for the Polish Republic, which was officially known as the Szlachta Republic (Rzeczpospolita Szlachecka); a greater scope of privileges gained from emperors and commoners alike, including hereditary rights in female lines of succession; and a unique adaptability, particularly to twentieth-century political regimes. Whether under the Nazis, Soviet socialists, Polish national democrats, or in exile, aristocratic families deployed their connections strategically. Even under socialism, their craft of persuasion was such that some were allowed to bury their family members on the (nationalized) grounds of their ancestral estates. They managed to preserve their position in Polish society despite the fact that concepts that used to be specific to aristocratic modes of establishing social distance had become common markers of Polish social and national identity: the *dwór* (manor house); the myth of having descended from the Sarmatians, an ancient tribe of valiant warriors; the dialectic of the *pan* and the *cham*, which produced *chamstwo*, a term describing boorish behavior based on the name of biblical Noah's son Ham. The title *pan*, originally reserved for the gentry, has come to be used by every educated Pole.

After the collapse of socialism, one left-wing politician in postsocialist Poland asked rhetorically: "While striking in August [of 1981, with the Solidarność movement], did you really have in mind the Radziwiłłs, the Potockis, and the Zamoyskis?" naming three of the most prominent aristocratic families that had returned or reestablished themselves in Poland (207). In a nation that has grown more tired of ideology than indignant about inequality, the nobility embodies the ethos of patriotism without politics. In 1990, this brings a Marcin Zamoyski "back" to the city of Zamość, which his ancestors had founded, but this time in the capacity of democratically elected mayor. The return of aristocratic politicians to municipal government confirms Jakubowska's hypothesis that it is symbolic and not economic capital that establishes the modern foundations of their power. As the descendant of one of the Grand Duchy's eminent aristocratic families, Krzysztof Radziwiłł, attested: "culture is *ce qui reste, quand il n'y a plus rien*" (200).

Despite de facto material losses due to expropriation, it was Jakubowska's choice to identify the gentry in terms of class *and* self-ascribed criteria, presenting the phenomenon of "ethnographic seduction" as an occasional obstacle to critical understanding. In this context, I would have welcomed some more historical reflection on the genealogy of anthropology as a discipline in connection with studies of aristocratic *and* Polish identity. I was particularly surprised by the absence of references to Bronisław Malinowski, one of the founders of the discipline and himself of minor gentry descent. Flirtations with nobleness and Polish identity were also characteristic of the aforementioned Friedrich Nietzsche, whose concept of a "transvaluation of values" generally lends itself to discussion in this book.

Sofia Tchouikina's study of aristocratic memory in Soviet Leningrad, which problematizes the concept of "class" in relation to studies of Soviet socialism,

provides an example for sociological analysis in a more reflexive sense. Drawing on Sheila Fitzpatrick (1993), she emphasizes the difference between the instrumentalization of class by regimes and the meaning of “class” for anthropologically versed social theorists such as Bourdieu. She opts instead for Norbert Elias’s more malleable notion of a “figuration,” which also avoids the “seductive” awe with which Jakubowska encounters her subjects (Elias [1969] 1983, [1970] 1978). For the Soviet regime, the nobility was merely one of several types of tribe in the empire’s “former people” (*byvshie liudi*): groups that no longer had a place in the logic of future Soviet society, which also included nonaristocratic types, such as merchants, large landowners, and clergy. Under the Soviet regime, the status “former” indicated the stigmatization (Goffman 1990) of imperial elites.

Tchouikina draws effectively on Norbert Elias’s figurational sociology (Elias [1969] 1983) together with Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of the “social cadres of memory” (Halbwachs [1925] 1994), opting for a functional understanding of the “aristocracy” as a group of people who participated in a “social game” with the aristocrat as one of its roles. Ultimately, all characteristics of the nobility, including the distinction between authentic descent and impostors, are ascribed; gold is valuable because it plays the role of something valuable. Where Jakubowska looks for the material sources of what one might call the “use value” (in the sense of the “original” social function) of nobles in medieval history, Tchouikina avoids this reconstruction of origin; instead, she draws attention to the successive transformation of the “exchange value” of noble identity as a potentially infinite process of conversion.

Public displays of humor about social groups demonstrate the validity of a functional and performative understanding of the aristocrat in this sense. But this figurational and performative approach to social memory could be taken even further in resisting not just the terminology of class but also the idea of national or even socialist uniqueness. In one Polish cartoon, a former *pan* refuses to enter the library because he had heard of the socialist literacy campaign and will not “read with the mob” (Jakubowska, 165). In a Soviet counterpart, a member of the “old intelligentsia” is shown sucking the juices from a newly established Scientific Institute (Tchouikina, 103).

Where did the word *intelligentsia*, which came into circulation in the 1860s—the heyday of Polish resistance against Russian imperialism but also of internal Russian reforms—first appear? Does the idea of *khamstvo*, also crucial for Soviet intelligentsia circles, have Polish roots? Does Russian *dvorianstvo* (nobility) owe its ideas of *dwór* to the Polish *szlachta*, and do the Polish and Russian cases force us to rethink Norbert Elias’s idea of the French *cour* (court) as a site of national identity making? Certainly familial aristocratic networks and courtly fashions also fostered forms of diasporic cosmopolitanism, particularly in the twentieth century, with French as a supranational mother tongue shared by nobles, diplomats, and all educated people. The same can be said of the myths of origin and racial difference, which all European nobilities have in common. This comes into play when we consider the juxtaposition of nobles not only with “boorishness” but also with Jewish identity. The Polish derogatory word for Jew (*żydek*, derived from *żyd*) became not only a

marker of distinction from Polish national identity but also a marker of Soviet identity in virtue of being associated with “rootless cosmopolitanism”; it was also, characteristically, a defining moment in the Nazi ideology of the Aryan race.

Both scholars address questions of conversion and transformation through words and things as triggers of social memory, and the books are replete with depictions of luggage, or *bagazh*. I wish there were a follow-up study in which they pursued jointly what seems to be an entangled and transnational history of motion, charting the way things as well as words move across national and spatial boundaries. As Appadurai (1988) and Kopytoff (1988) showed based on anthropological case studies, things are embedded in social lives, and by tracing the way objects and concepts get passed on from one social context to another we can understand more about the transnational connections that shape the fabric of modernity. One more theme both authors address deserves a much more extended discussion, and that is the reliance on female narrative in excavating aristocratic memory and the gendered dimension of social memory. Following Jakubowska, autobiographic narration was a marker of privilege that distinguished aristocratic women from their lower-class peers; but if the patrons of history are in fact often patronesses, why are the aristocratic politicians who assume authority after socialism typically male? Is it just that women live long enough to tell the story, as was the case with Tchouikina’s sample of surviving witnesses? Questions like these make aristocratic memory a great test case for rethinking genealogies of modernity.

#### REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. 1988. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1996. *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Elias, Norbert. [1969] 1983. *The Court Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert. [1970] 1978. *What Is Sociology?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 1993. “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia.” *Journal of Modern History* 65(4):745–771.
- Goffman, Erving. 1990. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. [1925] 1994. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 1988. “Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process.” Pp. 64–91 in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1886. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. Leipzig, Germany: Naumann.