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GIRTLER, Roland: Ethnographies of Austrian Social Groups - High and Low



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Roland Girtler. 1989. *Die Feinen Leute (The Upper Set)*.
Frankfurt:Campus, new edition: Böhlau 2002.**

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Lower Nobility, pp. 66-70

A special place is awarded to people of “lower nobility”, in other words those who do not own land or castles, and those whose only claim to nobility is a name. Their lives and the lives of gentry intent on emulating the aristocratic ways are characterized by very specific rituals. They place exaggerated emphasis on supposedly aristocratic rules of conduct to stress their affiliation with noble society. One lady of higher nobility who is very sensitive to the social situation of these “small aristocrats” puts it this way: “landed gentry abides by these rules a lot more than we do, we (of higher nobility”) tend to be more open.”

Her friend has similar albeit less polite words for this: “the small aristocrats are the worst. They show off like peacocks, it is quite unbearable. They really lay it on thick. Many of them can’t cope with having lost their money.”

This is also how one tailor whose customers are mainly aristocrats sees the “lower nobility” with nothing but a title to call their own. He refers especially to the Hungarian aristocrats who came to Vienna as penniless refugees and now stress their noble origins most obtrusively: “the worst that can happen to you is a small “von” from Hungary. They are so arrogant it stinks. With some exceptions of course. The real aristocrats are rather modest by comparison.”

These comments seem to prove what I observed earlier, namely, that aristocrats with few property assets or only a short line of ancestors are particularly keen to stress their noble origins. Members of the old nobility like to tell the rather amusing story whereby Emperor Charles (the last Austrian emperor) ennobled some people only in the final hours of the monarchy, on his way into exile, so to speak.

This kind of nobility they humorously refer to as “Coupé” (compartment) or “Wink” (waving) nobility because in fact the Emperor signed the relevant letters of nobility in the compartment of the train which took him away from Austria and those he no longer had the time to confer this grace upon because the train was leaving were

ennobled by a wave of his hand from the moving train. The noble gentlemen who were granted the favour of nobility in the final moments of the monarchy were generally rather affluent in the light of which the above anecdote assumes a disparaging tone and reflects a sense of aloofness on the part of old established nobility. Similarly the *ancienne noblesse* and higher nobility must have made fun of and distanced themselves from the *Beamtenadel* (nobility with administrative functions) created in the 18th and 19th centuries.

So “lower” or “young” nobility is faced with the problem of not being accepted properly by noble society. A lawyer of lower nobility who had his office decked out as proof of his aristocratic origins is well aware of such differentiations: “there is certainly a distinction between higher and lower nobility. I am of the lowest kind, the kind conferred by patent, approximately 1850 or so. I am not quite sure how old my family is, but from about that time I would say. I have a feeling that higher nobility does not accept lower nobility at all. They do look down on us, especially when we boast of our noble origins.”

Members of “lower” nobility have a hard time emphasizing their noble origins and proving their noble identity alongside the *ancienne noblesse* and those with a long line of noble ancestors. I also gathered this from a conversation I had with a member of an old family who had studied the history of nobility. In addition, he gave me a rather interesting account of the different types of nobility: “there are families who claim they can trace their roots back to the 11th and even the 10th century. Well that is a difficult undertaking at the best of times. Serious documentation only dates back to around 1200. It does seem likely, though, that my own family goes back to 1130. A certain Mr Heintich was born that year and he is regarded our progenitor. A figure not without myth I have to admit. This is why the R.s are said to have first been documented around 1200. Which ranks them among Europe’s 100 oldest families. Now that is one kind of nobility. The Habsburgs are a borderline case. They used to be civil servants and that is why they are older still. Regnant families are often older. Noble families with roots from around 1200 are considered *ancienne noblesse*, the oldest kind of nobility. From 1350 onwards sovereigns began to issue letters or patents of nobility. People were granted hereditary nobility by imperial decree for special services to their country. It is safe to say that nobility conferred by patent started around 1350. Persons ennobled this way were mostly estate officials. And then there is a third kind of nobility, one which I would say originated around 1800.

The military and administrative nobility. They are of minor importance considering the inflationary number of ennoblements which took place in the 19th century. Especially during the later years of Emperor Francis Joseph's reign and that of Emperor Charles after him. It is difficult to say whether they are real nobility or not. After all nobility is a social class which has developed its skills and some of its weaknesses too over many centuries. And this, of course, is true for any class so closely knit both socially and geographically. You can hardly say that Mr XY is capable of acquiring all the characteristics typical of a noble person in the course of one generation only. That is quite impossible. I think that people ennobled in the last years of the monarchy really belong to the bourgeoisie. Incidentally, there has always been a clear distinction between high nobility and ancienne noblesse. The latter, in the course of centuries, moved up to the next class of nobility in rank. There is hardly a family among them not raised to the rank of count or prince. We have remained barons, however. My great grandfather refused to be raised to the rank of count. We are a good family. We have been barons for centuries and that we shall remain!"

These reflections show the man's pride in belonging to an old family. Clearly it is very important to him to distinguish himself from the "small" nobleman and upstart. He draws a clear line between old and "new" nobility. In establishing this genealogical distinction from "lower" nobility he also quite implicitly intends to make fun of these people and their "young" nobility.

Such "classical" arrogance peculiar to old nobility is also described by Berta von Suttner. She was made painfully aware of the barriers between old inherited nobility and the "young" nobility her mother belonged to at a ball they attended: "I entered the room with happy anticipation. I left deeply disappointed. The mothers of high nobility all sat together. My mother sat by herself. The countesses stood together in packs chattering away.....I was left to myself!"

Incidentally, Beatrix Kempf, Berta von Suttner's biographer in her novel "High Life" has an American travelling through Europe criticise European aristocracy: "English aristocracy I thought proud, French aristocracy I thought vain, but Austrian aristocracy I found arrogant!" It was this arrogance which hurt the Peace Nobel laureate to be so deeply (see: Reden, 1984, p. 86).

"Young" nobility or moneyed aristocracy which owed its existence to money and the emperor's magnanimity also came to feel that higher nobility kept their distance and spoke of the former rather derisively. This "new" nobility which never succeeded in

being on an equal footing with traditional aristocracy is also referred to as a “second” society which from the early 19th century onwards persistently edged in between aristocracy and the common people (see Wandruszka, 1971, p. 57). No doubt some of the moneyed gentlemen of “lower” nobility, by acquiring property, hunting grounds, etc., managed to gain a social status close to that of the old aristocrats yet to this day the latter, it seems, have kept the classical distance described above.

It is a long and recognized family tree which makes the “real” aristocrat and let there be no misunderstanding he wants to stand apart from that “second society”.

Modern-day Rise to Nobility, pp. 71-90

In search of a family tree

Some people’s special interest in nobility and its noble way of life is expressed most vividly in their elaborate aspirations to obtain a suitably noble family tree. A straight line of ancestors that can be traced back over centuries is supposed to legitimise their claim to noble respectability and recognition. That a respectable number of ancestors makes for a noble man is an old tradition ensconced in Mediaeval German law. This in turn explains the proud belief in a natural and biologically noble superiority of those born into nobility. By the same token having a family tree ensures that property owned by one line will always be linked to one and the same name. Behind this biological proof of descent lies the intention to lay a claim to an often mythical ancestor whose holiness and charisma one believes to have the right to draw one’s own holiness from.

Nowadays this concept is often compounded with the idea, albeit a covert one and one not admitted to, of joining “good genes” or “good family” with “good blood”. In talking to members of the nobility I found they rather circumvented such topics but one steward of a princely estate did mention the biological value of family trees: “people ought to take better care of their lineage. They do it with animals, with pigeons, pigs and dogs. Yet they deny that having a good lineage themselves can only be in their interest. They would be well advised to consider that. They must take into account the genes. One has to say ‘you have ten ancestors, now you had better

make sure you find a wife with equally as many!' You have a sense of nobility if you can say you have 10 or 12 ancestors. That is how you have preserved your genealogy. We expect the same of horses or cattle. Human beings should be no exception. We should also breed quality in human beings. I am all for promoting nobility, after all plants and animals have their genealogies too. We do not accept wheat of uncertain origin, we do not accept pigs without knowing they have been carefully selected. It is only human beings' genealogy we do not take care of. On the contrary, you are looked down upon if you so much as ask somebody where they come from. Not so before Hitler came to power. Such questions became highly disapproved of only under his regime. We need to advance quality in human beings as well. A common family continues to exist for no more than three generations. Nobility has to survive for much longer. It is not enough to have a good name, you need a woman of similar standing to pass on quality in human beings."

Human superiority has to do with a series of excellent ancestors is what the man wants to say. Thus a nobleman has a duty to preserve this alleged superiority by making a choice splendid woman his wife. Only very few aristocrats have recognized and addressed the fact that this very attitude also bears the risk of incest. A daughter of princely family told me she was rather sorry to see that her kind continued to intermarry so religiously without understanding what potential damage this meant to body and soul.

Haemophilia in some families of the higher nobility is said to have been passed on for generations, as is the case with a certain disposition for various other diseases. Furthermore, according to my interview partner some signs of degeneration, such as a receding hairline or specific mental indications were quite frequent with the higher aristocracy. She could not understand why despite all this, noble offspring still had to intermarry.

Regardless of these and similar arguments against meticulously preserving one's family tree and seeking spouses of the same class, both are painstakingly adhered to. Behind all this, no doubt, is a desire to keep a legacy to one line and one larger family. After all it is money and property which have kept some noble families in power in the world of finance and economics.

While families of old nobility have no problem coming up with a series of ancestors of some importance, commoners in search of a family tree really have to make a serious effort. During the Nazi period national comrades were called upon to produce

a family tree. As with the aristocrats the idea in principle was to prove they belonged to a “race” which supposedly and contrary to all humanistic or scientific thinking was “better”, nobler and holier than other “races”. Again this bears upon a biological category which essentially constitutes the “Vollmensch” or “Übermensch”. People of “inferior race” therefore had to bow to the “Aryans” as being the most “valuable” human beings.

Incidentally, as Levi Strauss points out, such thinking is above all characteristic of the most “primitive” tribes who would call themselves “humans” and refer to neighbouring tribes as “animals” or “non-humans”. Thus the Hottentots call themselves Khoi Khoi – the most human of humans. Such thinking and behaviour, however, stands in stark contrast of the “cosmopolitanism” practiced by travelling scholars (vagrants) in the Middle Ages. It seems that vagrants were unaware of such biological thinking.

Roaming different cultures and learning about different cultural and human realities obviously did and does not allow vagrants of the old style to raise themselves above others. They may call themselves “princes of the road” but not because they consider themselves “better” people. It seems to me that the “family tree thinking” has to do with a settled way of life, it is typical of the nobleman and his castle or fortress which he associates with a handsome line of ancestors.

It is interesting to see that today – republics and democracies aside – there are middle-class families who following the old tradition continue to search for a noble family tree and coat of arms to symbolize their superiority. In Vienna there is the “Heraldisch-genealogische Gesellschaft Adler” (A. society for heraldry-genealogy) with an extensive library and precious archives for members and guests to investigate the stories and histories of their families. Various registers, extracts from baptismal registers, obituary notices, wedding announcements, etc., provide a valuable source of information for the inquirer. Many are thrilled to simply find out where their ancestors came from, what they did for a living, and so forth. To know about their ancestors improves their self-image and makes them feel they themselves are a link in a remarkable chain of ancestors.

If all that research fails to provide satisfactory answers the inquirer may find help with institutions specializing in such investigations that will invariably produce “successful” results. Sometimes these institutions become active of their own accord. The “heraldic” or “genealogical” associations, as they usually call themselves, have their

own tricks to work with. If they think a person might be interested in a noble line of ancestors and a noble coat of arms they will first of all write a letter to their potential noble customer informing them that one of their ancestors was probably a nobleman of such and such a name. To endorse this assertion they will indicate an old nobleman of the same or a similar name thereby raising the boldest hopes of a noble line of ancestors. I also received such a letter from the president of one of these “societies” based in Innsbruck. I was told that: “we have been looking into the history of the Girtler(!) von Kleeborn family for several years now. You may be aware that there are two noble families of that name, one from Bohemia and one from Lower Austria. We are gathering all relevant information. We ask you to kindly let us know which of the two your ancestors belonged to.”

The letter was signed “the executive president”. The signature was illegible and there was no indication elsewhere in the letter as to who the president was. The letterhead depicted two knights holding up a shield. The shield said something about a roll of arms and below the ostentatious name of the “heraldic-genealogical” society on the left you could read: “registration of nobility letters, chronicles, research”.

This society took it upon itself to register “nobility letters” – a most unusual way of “raising a person to nobility”. I replied to the president that I knew my family tree very well and that he was wrong in thinking there was a “Girtler von Kleeborn” line from Bohemia and one from Lower Austria. In fact there was only one family which sometimes appeared in the various textbooks as “nobility from Bohemia” and sometimes as “nobility from Lower Austria”.

I also asked him in what way his “society” differed from the serious and respectable “Heraldisch-genealogische Gesellschaft Adler”. I received a friendly response from the “president” where he thanked me for my letter and told me that his “society” was quite similar to “Adler” but unlike the latter had begun to “reissue nobility letters provided these had been lost”.

In concluding the letter he said: “you (that is I) will hear from us shortly”. That was in 1984 and I have not heard from them since.

By making reference to the “Girtler von Kleeborn” the president had tried, or so I assume, to arouse my interest in a noble line of ancestors. His intention, provided, of course, I received this wonderful news as a pleasant surprise, obviously was to offer me an elaborate deed on my line of ancestors and coat of arms, against suitable payment. Mr. “president” probably went through all the various registers of nobility

and then wrote to the people whose names also appeared in the books. His was to interest people in “acquiring” a title which he would then “bestow” upon them with a generous “nobility letter”. I can say with some certainty that those who react to such letters and offers are not of genuine noble origin. If they were they would know about their families’ traditions, they would most likely be in possession of a coat of arms and would hardly be interested in this kind of “society” and its “president”. The “president” was fully aware of that. He very ingeniously proposed to the “new nobility” he addressed that they knew of their magnificent past. His trick was to tickle their vanity – mostly they were academics and established business people. The prospect of having noble origins and thus being equal to those who have always enjoyed a high status in society have induced a good many of them to react to such written proposals.

To find out whether one particular “ennobling” society was serious I took a closer look at the “noble” origins of a certain businessman who had had a title bestowed upon him by a “letter of nobility”. His name was Rothe (a fairly common name which is why I mention it) whose forefather had lived in the Tyrol in the 15th century and had been raised to nobility by Emperor Maximilian, or so the “nobility letter” has it. The coat of arms on the “nobility letter” depicted the usual shield, beast of prey and several bars. The man asked me to look into his forefathers and the coat of arms. There had indeed been a man by the name of Roth who had lived in the Tyrol in the 15th century and who had been raised to nobility. Unfortunately, though, this baronial line had not been blessed with fertility and had become extinct as early 1700. No direct link with Mister Rothe was to be found and in fact would have been quite improbable.

Admittedly, the coat of arms bestowed upon Mister Rothe was not his supposed forefather’s original one but only looked like it. The cat of prey was in the right section of the shield whereas in the original it had been placed on the left. The “society” had clearly invented a new coat of arms which looked like the baron’s but was not identical to it. This was very likely to avoid any copyright issues.

Mister Rothe, who had been so proud of his coat of arms and Tyrolean ancestors, was quite dismayed when I told him. A world of nobility and distinction crumbled before his very eyes.

Another businessman, a fashion designer in Vienna’s First District, was also bestowed nobility and coat of arms by one of these societies. The coat of arms takes a prominent position in the store interior and the proud entrepreneur tells his guests

about his supposedly noble ancestors who I am quite sure never existed. The scion of an old noble family told me about the practices of having coats of arms prepared and noble lines of ancestors invented. The young man showed little interest in his university studies and instead was all the more keen to look into these forms of “raising to nobility”. “Heraldic institutions of questionable credibility abound around here. These honourable institutes bestow fantasy coats of arms upon Mr. Smith and his likes. Mr. Smith is very proud of this. But this is a highly dubious business. It has to be said in their defence, though, that such practices already existed 800 years ago. Forging documents and producing questionable family trees are not just typical of our times but were also well known even in the past. There is a case in my family where an ancestor of mine produced dubious family trees which were wrong left, right and centre. In this case, though, the forgery was discovered in time. Incidentally the most famous forgery in all of history is that of the Privilegium Maius commissioned by Rudolf the Founder. It was fabricated to trace the line of the Habsburgs back to the Roman Caesars. It is because of these incorrect findings that Rudolf falsely bestowed the title of archduke upon himself.

During my visits to the “Heraldisch-genealogische Gesellschaft Adler” I got to know several gentlemen of lower nobility who spent months at the society trying to complete or extend their family trees. When I enquired about their objectives one of them told me he had not stopped searching until he had found a link to the brave Götz von Berlichingen. Another one tried to trace his line of ancestors back to Charlemagne. Such undertakings are facilitated by genealogical tables carefully prepared in advance. All one has to do is find a link or ancestor on these tables and then extend one’s family tree to the desired beginnings.

As we have seen there are many ways to acquire a family tree, be they serious, dubious or (downright) fraudulent. All of them have one aspiration in common which is to ennoble themselves by referring to a noble background. And as we shall see the strategies are supported and set off symbolically with coats of arms and “nobility rings” either handed down in the noble family, or found or invented.

Crooks have long perfected the art of meeting man’s desire for an old, noble background and a noble family tree. Today’s frauds who sell family trees and nobility letters as described above follow in the finest tradition. According to the

Ganovenbuch (book of crooks) of 1793 (Schäffer) there were professionals even then who knew very well how to forge documents. Mostly they were people of excellent education and cunning intelligence who hunted for passports, nobility letters (!) and family trees (!). They bought, stole or begged for them and often gathered substantial collections in this way. They used these to model all kinds of documents. In other words they used trickery to obtain genuine documents on the model of which they created noble family trees and other noble certificates for people who wanted to show off their noble origins. Crooks have always found this to be a highly lucrative business.

Modern “rise of Nobility” by Adoption

If all efforts to obtain a veritable family tree fail the only course left for being accepted to noble society is to be adopted by members of higher nobility against payment of a certain fee. This form of ennoblement is of particular relevance in countries like Germany and England where a title is still officially considered part of the family name.

In recent years there was much talk about such an “adopted” prince in the German “rainbow press”. His new noble name suddenly aroused certain journalists’ interest and he truly enjoyed his fame. Small scandals and his highly aristocratic appearance laced with a dose of sarcasm and self-irony made him a favourite subject to write about. The man had his obligatory Rolls-Royce adorned with a banner depicting the princely coat of arms. Like a head of state and to the amazement of lookers-on he had himself chauffeured about the countryside. He married an ageing film actress of international fame in the hope of adding further ennoblement to his name. The following is an extract from an article which appeared in a German weekly magazine under the title “people we talk about”: “Frederik, Prince von A., 39, owner of a Rolls-Royce and a title befitting of a film plot is in mourning. On July 8, Marie Auguste, Princess von A., daughter-in-law of the last emperor was laid to rest in the cemetery of E. A funeral which Germany’s higher nobility should have attended. All of two princes appeared, none of them registered in the official peerage book. Frederik Prince von A., known as Robert L. until recently, used to make his living as an occasional actor and also has a record with the police. It was only in 1980 that, with the help of “Consul” W., he succeeded in talking the 81 year old Marie Auguste into adopting him. Since then he has been busy making sure the most honourable family

of “von A.” does not become extinct. He has already made four ladies princesses by marriage. Frederik has raised three men to nobility. The latest addition to the von A. family who also appeared by the grave was not ennobled by the grace of Frederik, however. Michael Prince von A., whose name in civilian life was H., was bestowed this honour by marriage and because of the new law on the right to use a name. His wife Princess Beatrix, who before her adoption by the real Princess Alexandra von A. bore the simple name Turnhuber, made him a prince with her consent to marriage.” Another illustrated magazine had a full two pages dedicated to the adopted prince. The photographs accompanying the text show the new nobleman in front of his Rolls-Royce, mounted on horseback, with the ageing film diva, and in various other positions, all of them reflecting his noble ambitions, castle ownership being one of them. The text also points out that the “Prince” in his former life had come into substantial money from not so noble people who had adopted him. About the prince and his lifestyle it says: “The handsome Frederik was born the son of a criminal police officer. The trained office clerk with a monthly salary of 2,200 DM before tax had yet to run into the title dealer Hans-Hermann W. (still on the run in South America) before he could launch his career as a nobleman. That was when Auguste von A. adopted him. Consul W. was to receive 80,000 DM for this. He has not been paid yet. As for the 100,000 DM promised to the emperor’s daughter-in-law, they have not materialized either. Eduard von A., official head of the noble family: “she has not seen a penny.” Adopted son Frederik thinks otherwise: “she got the money.” Unfortunately, the old lady is in no position to settle this ugly family dispute, as she has long passed away. Adopted Frederik von A. at any rate has benefited enormously from his new noble existence. He is copying old W.’s ways and his happily adopting people destined for greater things. Much to the genuine Eduard von A.’s annoyance: “there are almost 150 von A.s already. We are multiplying like rabbits.” Frederik is quite unimpressed: “my cousin ought to be grateful. Finally there is some new blood in our family.” Zsa Zsa Gabor, platinum blonde future Princess of A. for her part insists it is not the title but the man that counts. “I just love young men like my prince. Old men are always impotent.”

Frederik, like his “adopted children”, believes he stands out from “common folk”. He quite rightly assumes the press will, albeit condescendingly, take notice of him. His title, which he skilfully displays with noble symbols, such as an exclusive car, a horse and a famous wife, has granted him the aristocratic life he envisaged.

Noble titles are not the only respectful titles sought after by some of our contemporaries. I know lawyers and gentlemen from the world of business who spared no expense to be made consuls. A “title dealer” in Germany gets paid a round sum of money for obtaining these cherished consulates from small, inconspicuous African countries which also make a good profit from awarding consul titles. These and other practices employed to reach such supposedly high positions of honour are described by one member of higher nobility who has no need to strive for such high ranks: “thinking of all the diplomas and certificates of honour issued by dubious institutions makes me laugh. There is the well-known Consul W. in Germany who sold all kinds of titles, or questionable US universities which are quick to hand out doctorates for the right sum of money. Students write their theses in the hope of climbing up the social ladder, others work less hard but pay plenty of money for noble titles, doctorates and other high ranks to achieve the same.”

“Ennoblement” by Entry in a Lexicon

Yet another, pseudo-aristocratic way of being raised to nobility is to become listed in a lexicon. For scientists to rise in esteem means to appear in a scientific lexicon, or any universal encyclopaedia for that matter. The same is true for athletes, actors, technical experts, and many others. Personal commitment, work in a specific field, as well as intensive relations to the public make a person known and respected. There are certain encyclopaedias which make it possible for nameless people to appear among the illustrious and be named along with them. These are mainly reference books of persons which have acquired some fame under the titles “Who is Who in Austria”, “Who is Who in Germany”, “Who is Who in America”, etc. A closer look at the various “Who is Who” lexicons reveals that there are in fact two distinct undertakings, the “real” “Who is Who” publisher and a competitor officiously seeking for distinguished customers. The individuals addressed by the latter usually belong to the middle class and are only too happy to pay substantial amounts to be listed in the lexicon.

The real “Who is Who” also plays on potential customers’ vanity. Along with genuinely prominent people, such as politicians and actors, it contains a host of names who quite possibly have a say in business, science or sports, but are fairly

unknown to the public otherwise. They are of eminent economic value to the “Who is Who” editors.

What exactly are the intentions behind “Who is Who”? According to the publishing house itself similar lexicons were already produced in antiquity. The reference book “de illustribus viribus” by Cornelius Nepos apparently dates back to 50 B.C. This tradition was continued in the Renaissance and later still. The first lexicon under the title “Who is Who” was published in England in 1849 as a “mirror” of the “dominant English society”. In 1897 the lexicon was taken over by the Black brothers who found a ready audience for their work. To gather relevant information for the entries the brothers availed themselves of a questionnaire, a slightly amended version of which is still used in England today. Separate editions were published for the USA in 1899, for Australia in 1906 and for most European countries after 1945.

Being accepted to the “Who is Who” is a complicated matter and, as I was able to witness, those who have passed the test are given a special sense of worth for which they will gladly pay. Candidates are selected on the basis of recommendations and careful study of other books of reference plus some additional research on the editors’ part. The chosen ones are invited for a personal interview to establish all relevant data. These are subsequently verified by an “international editing committee” which also has the final say on who is to become accepted to the “Who is Who”. This act is described by the editors in their advertising brochure as a kind of raising to nobility. According to them the “Who is Who” is a register of modern “aristocracy” which many a businessman would be happy to belong to. Thus it says in the brochure, in an effort to make the applicant realize the “noble” significance of the lexicon, “it is because of this strict selection process that many feel almost knighted by their appearance in the “Who is Who”.

Entry in the “Who is Who in Austria” is free of charge and is considered an “expression of the highest recognition”. It should be added, though, that the editors expect the newcomers to the league to buy the lexicon. They are in fact urged to do so in several letters.

Less serious is the business which for copyright reasons calls itself “Who’s Who?” instead of “Who is Who”. The company established in 1954 proceeds as follows: the candidates selected are not interviewed but receive a ready text prepared by the editors based on other books of reference, various newspaper articles, etc.

Recipients are requested to correct or amend the text as needed and return it

accompanied by a previously printed and rather inconspicuous declaration to the effect that they agree to the contents of the prepared text and (are willing to pay) the price of DM 20,00 plus 14% VAT per line. The newly “ennobled” may also acquire a copy of the “Who’s Who” at approximately DM 300,00. I can well imagine that most of the people addressed feel honoured and are ready to pay.

I talked to a woman working for the real “Who is Who” who is very clear about who wants to be in the lexicon and for what reason. Here is what she told me: mostly it is the non-achievers who are interested in an entry. Hangers-on, people who want to attend everybody’s party. People who have nothing to write home about, who have no particular skills. They are the ones who want to be in the lexicon. They get in easily provided they run some business or have the power to act on behalf of a company. Managers, they are nothing special, they want to get in. People in the economy especially are very receptive. Those with really big companies are less interested already in getting an entry in the “Who is Who”. Managers running big companies, for example, they don’t want to be in there, everybody knows who they are anyway. They think, everybody knows me and those who don’t don’t need to. People like the Federal Chancellor are role models, as are artists and athletes. They are a motivation for others to become accepted. I have noticed that gentlemen in the legal profession are particularly keen to have an entry in the “Who is Who.” Senior civil servants, judges, they are crazy about this stuff. They are addicted to this kind of publicity. Many, as I said, are in the economy, they work in big companies. In Upper Austria they kiss my toes when I tell them they have been selected for the “Who is Who”. I can sell them anything in Upper Austria. It used to be people from the Montafon, now it’s the Upper Austrians who can’t get enough of this “Who is Who” business.”

Clearly, the woman has a rather sober attitude towards her customers and shows little respect for them. While some of her ideas may seem rather daring she does have a lot of experience in this matter.

I had a lengthy conversation with another member of the “Who is Who” staff where he ridiculed people’s vanity in the following fashion: “once you have looked through this whole business you can see how dumb it really is.” He commented on his work and the type of people registered, adding to what his colleague before him had told me: “I receive the names of people I am supposed to interview. First of all there are the real celebrities, i.e. people you read about in the papers. All their basic data are

registered in the lexicon. Everyone knows what they do anyway. Some of them you can't even approach they are so busy or protected. Such as the Federal Chancellor. His functions and activities are no secret. All we do is enter his name, date of birth and such like in the "Who is Who". That's all above board and no infringement on protection of data privacy. Then there is a large group of anonymous people who are achieving something in their lives. Among them people at the head of companies, CEOs, executive secretaries, artists, freelancers, etc. The majority wants to be in the book, but not all of them. Though, as I see it, the tendency is towards having an entry in the "Who is Who".

Finally, there is a third group of people who want to be in the book but have no business being there. They come from all walks of life and they want to be 'in' at all costs. They are ready to pay for an entry. But you can't buy your entry with us. There is a committee which decides who will be in the book and who won't. Most people we approach feel rather flattered because they are going to be in the book."

This is no doubt a way of "raising people to nobility" because the chosen individual is put through a seemingly complicated ritual to become the noble person the "Who is Who" ultimately makes them out to be. Just as being raised to nobility during the monarchy was a complex process at the end of which a commission and the emperor himself decided upon the applicant's worthiness of being accepted to noble society. What used to be a letter of nobility is now an entry in the lexicon.

"Ennoblement" through the Grapevine

Creating and distinguishing noble people on a daily basis is what "gossip columns" and other newspaper articles on "high society" are all about. The nobility of the people portrayed more often than not derives from the fact that bustling journalists, hangers-on and party animals make a mention of them in these articles. This is also a kind of "raising to nobility" because repeated mention of people who generally only feature on the periphery of society tends to stress their supposed nobility.

People with a say in the business world, important entrepreneurs, factory owners, chief executive officers, successful executive secretaries, as well as prominent lawyers, senior surgeons and others who for business reasons and even more so because of their vanity want to be mentioned in the "gossip columns" will often arrange big parties which the journalists concerned are invited to attend. Show

business celebrities are invariably roped in for that extra touch but also to make the events more attractive and to afford the guests, among them the journalists, a special sense of dignity. To give an example here is the account of a party published by one “noble” magazine.

The party was given by a well-known Viennese, a builder by profession. Typically the intention was to copy aristocratic ways as the host imagined them to be. The festivities, a celebration of the building company’s anniversary hosted in a city palace, were declared open by a master of ceremonies in baroque livery. Four trumpet-calls were sounded and the guests “nodded in satisfaction” because “the lion builder’s soirees and festivities are long known for this characteristic opener”. “Girls” clad in baroque garments, among them several Austrian beauty queens, added charm and a sense of old nobility. The host had had a famous rock star “flown in” for the role of “show business celebrity”. The guests, who were greeted according to their social rank and importance, included a former minister who also held the opening address, the general manager of a big oil company, the general manager of a paper mill, the chief executive officer of a city owned food enterprise, the general manager of a world famous hotel in Vienna, and finally two members of parliament. The magazine was keen to note that one of the two members of parliament was accompanied by a “dark-skinned model” who was the “centre of attention throughout the evening”.

It is mainly people from business and politics who add glamour to the festivities and want to be fawned upon accordingly. Both during the festivities and in the reports on them (see also, Treiber, 1986). Journalists who have been invited to such events are well aware of the “nobility” of hosts and their guests. One editor of a business magazine is said to have insisted on being photographed in the company of politicians he had invited to a “Heurigen”¹. He strongly urged the journalist who had taken the photograph to also publish it. A mention in one of these articles means free-of-charge publicity and also gives the person concerned a sense of belonging to the important and noble people.

Festivities like these use aristocratic symbols, such as the palace, the liveried servants and the trumpet-calls reminiscent of period movies about life at mediaeval courts, to emphasize the dignity of hosts and guests. The daily and weekly reports on the celebrations, Heurigen evenings and soirees of the rich and noble all follow the

¹ Wine tavern serving “this year’s” local wines.

same pattern. In an opening line the journalist introduces the host and the purpose of the invitation (jubilee, presentation of a fashion collection, etc.). This is also the time to honour host and occasion. Followed by a kind of catwalk presentation of the “noble” people or rather those who have somehow managed to be considered worthy a mention in the column. Genuine members of nobility are, of course, mentioned separately, as is the host’s intention. For those of higher nobility it is generally bad form to accept an invitation to such festivities. They know theirs would be a decorating function only and, besides, presenting themselves vociferously would rather spoil their principle of noble discreetness. It would mean renouncing their noble distance to society. To break the principle would be to incur the criticism of others in their league.

“Gossip columns”, in any event, are taken very seriously. Several lawyers have successfully been awarded the title of “celebrity lawyer” because of them. A fact which flatters them and also attracts new clients.

Cultural sociology defines two major groups of noble people, both of which have a name and a place in our society: one is composed of people in show business, doctors, lawyers, big shots in the economy and politicians seeking the attention of the public. The second group includes scientists and intellectuals who would rather not succumb to such “vanities” because it is hardly conducive to promoting their status in society. The point they, and in fact higher nobility too, are trying to make is that they do not need to be raised to nobility by the light of the media. After all, they are noble already. They have no need for dignity dependent on magazines it seems, for they have their own, awarded to them by academies and various other societies.

Distancing themselves from apparent vanity and greed for a mention in the society columns is in keeping with the traditional style of intellectuals and scientists. They do not need the kind of “ennoblement” mentioned above. They have been ennobled sufficiently by their books, titles and presentations. The high esteem scholars have for themselves is reflected in the old student song “O alte Burschenherrlichkeit” (Oh those glorious old student day) in praise of them who have not wavered from the broad stone. The broad stone being the footpath on the side or in the middle of the street which in the old days kept people from having to step into the dirt. Whenever two people met on the footpath and could not get by, the one of inferior social rank would have to step down into the dirt. Students never made way for the burghers, they would stop on the broad stone and block the other’s path, forcing them into the

dirt. They raised themselves above the respectable townsmen. There are plenty of beer songs and drinking rituals, not to mention their use of the sword, to show that students were “learned” and thus superior. They expressed this perception of themselves not only by their distance towards and disgust for physical labour but also by making sure they were anything but “middle-class” or “petty-bourgeois”. This elitist tradition is still apparent to some extent today in the lives and culture of scientists. So-called intellectuals brace themselves with scepticism for the temptations of the “common”, “nouveau-riche” or “up-and-coming” bourgeois in an effort to make themselves “exclusive” (meaning “noble”).

This also explains why scientists are not keen on being reported on in the “gossip columns”, after all they do not need to resort to such methods of finding acceptance. They have other means at their disposal. It is interesting to note in the context that magazines, in an effort to present their readers with the world of the “noble”, like to delve into the private lives of these “prominent people”. They make reference of their holiday destinations not only to prove their superiority but also to give readers a chance to book similar destinations in close vicinity to the respected “noble person”. This sums up my discourse on “gossip columns” and their obvious intentions. Essentially they are no different from the “Who is Who” and similar instruments of publication. Both provide a kind of “ennoblement”, a distinction from the everyday masses.

The gentleman's club, pp. 370-374

To continue my discourse I shall now talk about the noble clubs illustrious men gathered in to enjoy their privacy. They engaged in sophisticated conversation, had meals together and listened to stimulating lectures to demonstrate their noble distance and distinction from the “commoner”.

For our case there are two clubs in particular which are worth looking into, both instilled as they are with the exclusiveness of old nobility. Their intentions and structures in principle are not unlike those of stylish sports clubs yet their existence and activities are well removed from the eye of the public.

The more exclusive of the two noble associations, the J.-Club, does, however, also have its own fine sports tradition. Following the English example it has close links with equestrian sports for which it continues to fulfil certain functions to this day.

The second one, the S.-Club, has a bigger membership than the J.-Club. It is not easy to become accepted to this illustrious society. Normally, as with golf clubs, the noble man may file an application for membership. Not so with the distinguished S.-Club. The Club preserves its sophistication by “making membership in the Club exclusively subject to a written invitation issued by the president and written acceptance of this invitation by the person invited”, as set out in the statutes. To avoid men of less noble standing becoming members the statutes also provide that “the president may only issue an invitation previously approved by vote in two subsequent committee meetings. The invitation is considered approved with a minimum of three quarters of the votes cast during the committee meetings in favour of acceptance and thus of the invitation itself.” This shows how difficult it is to become a member of such illustrious societies.

For members of the “old nobility”, diplomats and selected nobler members of the bourgeoisie the S.-Club is an opportunity to distance themselves from the “common” people both physically and symbolically. There is an interesting mix of professions represented by the approximately 400 members of the club: 56 are in agriculture and forestry, 44 are in banking, 32 are in the legal profession, 38 are in the diplomatic service and the remainder work in industry, trade, science and journalism (taken from the 1980 members register). The high share of foresters, agriculturists, bankers and diplomats reflects an old tradition of aristocrats being land and forest owners, with access to money and international connections.

The S.-Club which I had to the honour of being invited to and whose members I have come to regard very highly, to me is the epitome of the noble man's distinction. The Club has gone almost unnoticed by the public, enjoying a fine existence away from the media despite the fact that several of its members are quite prominent. This is, of course, in keeping with the noble man's air of seclusion away from the "trash" world of newspapers, everyday gossip and other kinds of publicity.

The S.-Club resides in a magnificent Vienna Ringstraßen palace built in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The rooms, which the nobler J.-club also convenes in, are undeniably modelled on English style and noblesse. Walls painted in dark but warm colours are adorned with pictures of English horse races, famous horses and horsemen. Armchairs and settees have been carefully arranged for members to withdraw to for private conversations.

Attached to the Club is a restaurant whose only duty is to prepare lunch for the noble gentlemen and to offer them food and drink for an agreeable club atmosphere. Liveried waiters move about discreetly and have mastered the art of waiting on noble people. They go well with the Club interior, making the visitor feel he is entering a world of noblesse.

The kind officer of noble birth who I owe the invitation to introduced me to the German military attaché, a senior executive from a brewery company and other noble people. They showed a polite interest in my studies on fringe groups and were quite astonished to see me seek out their noble society for this purpose. I was invited to partake of lunch which was already being served in a bright dining room. I noticed the heavy silver. I was briefly introduced to my dining company. Nobody shook my hand. That is not customary in such surroundings. Merely a cool nod so as not to disturb the air. Members greet each other with a crisp "Servus". More complicated greetings and introduction rituals would only detract from their privacy. Lunchtime conversation was about hunting and other gentlemen's noble pastimes.

The S.-Club has its own ball once a year held under the auspices of the higher nobility and which commoners are denied admittance to.

The symbols used by Club, its discreet rituals and the noblesse expressed by its members are determined by the principle of noble unobtrusiveness. They represent a life of aloofness and distance. Club members not only have the opportunity to dine with other noble men but to make contacts which may be of importance to their careers.

The slightly nobler J.-Club has a very sophisticated and distinguished membership all from the higher nobility. It is kept small on purpose to raise its exclusiveness.

The Club has entered “reciprocity agreements” with four other noble clubs in London, Milan, Paris and Rome. This is to ensure that noble gentlemen will meet and dine with others of a noble mind and similar views of life when they travel abroad.

There are other honourable people, such as Mafiosi and small crooks, with very specific associations of their own which are not unlike the noble clubs in structure.

The Mafia consists of several groups acting independently of each other whose members live in friendship with each other and have vowed mutual loyalty. Mostly they are relatives tied to their group or “family” by marriage or godparenthood wherever possible. Some of these families have veritable admission rituals. Active members of the Mafia carry the proud title of “Mafioso”. They personify certain ideals of maleness which also include the noble duty of the “Omertà” symbolized as follows: “Cu e surdu, orbu e taci campa cent’anni ‘mpaci” (if you are deaf and silent you will live peacefully until you are a hundred). There are many more sayings to manifest the structure of individual groups, such as “a friend with connections is worth more than a hundred ounces in your pocket”, or “if you have friends and money law can kiss your ass.” (see Stölting 1983, pages 4, 9, 13).

Great store is set by the value of friendship which is vital in the fight against the police and other enemies. Members are proud of having their own tradition, albeit a criminal one, and take good care to admit to their families only those with some dignity to speak of. Life in the families is similar to that in the Clubs described above where every infringement of the rules is punished and noble distinction from other people is insisted upon.

The vagabonds (goliards) of the early Middle Ages were also a proud lot. These were learned men, many of them having completed their studies as Masters or theologians, who travelled through Europe in search of the proper posting they had not been granted. In their poems they made fun of fat parsons and bourgeois life. One of these wandering scholars was nicknamed the “Archpoet”. He wrote the so-called “Bundeslied der Vaganten” (federal song of the vagabonds) in which he praises the *ordo vagorum* or guild of wanderers as a noble affair, jokingly likening their lives and upright manner to those of the nobility. (Vagantendichtung, 1984, p. 127). Again there is a clear indication of some noblesse. They sought to copy the lives of noble men, drank wine and beer and made fun of the “commoners”.

Apart from that up until early modern history many wayfaring people had their own fraternities, such as the now famous Rappotsweiler Guild of Pipers which, as of approximately 1400, all minstrels from the Alsace belonged to. The organisation continued to exist until the French Revolution of 1789, the minstrels had their own very strict rules, a patron to protect them and a leader they called the king of the pipers (see Kopecny, 1982, p. 152).

Each of these fraternities which were organized much like traditional guilds addressed people of very specific skills. Members entertained good relations with each other and looked down upon those who did not belong.

My intention with this discourse was to show that all the “clubs” mentioned above – aristocrats, golfers, Mafiosi and “dishonest” people alike – took great care to maintain their exclusiveness. Members were given a sense of their own worthiness which had to be protected from other “carpetbaggers”.

Death Among the Noble, pp. 396-399

Distinguished people not only make sure to live their lives in style but also to turn their passing away into a matter of some distinction too. Ethnology and earliest history give ample proof of the diverse strategies employed by distinguished people to prepare a hereafter worthy of them. They build mausoleums for their future existence, lay tombs or buy graves. They have gravestones designed by artists and save money for a dignified funeral - all while they are still alive. Even in dying they want to demonstrate to others how eminently important they are. Chieftains, priests and noblemen in the old cultures (in Europe this would refer to the Bronze Age and possibly even earlier) strove to distinguish themselves from common folk even in death with graves befitting of their nobility. This aspiration to immortal nobility was most conspicuous among the old Egyptians. The Pharaonic pyramids have always been visible symbols of a person's holiness.

Distinguished people's pompous funerals

To this day the cults of the noble dead follow in the tradition of the pyramids. The Kapuzinergruft (tomb of the Capuchins) in Vienna is no exception. The tomb is home to the magnificent sarcophagi of the former Austrian ruling family. Bronze and stone monuments were erected here in honour of the dead. Charles the Sixth's baroque coffin is adorned by a skull bearing the crown of the Roman emperors. The Archduchess Maria Theresia's tomb is quite magnificent. It exudes the power these noble dead had in their time. Typically, as discreetly evident with the Kapuzinergruft, noble people do not commit their bodies to the soil. Soil is for common folk. A noble person's body is embalmed elaborately in the old Egyptian style to enhance their holiness. It is saved from returning to dust and ashes, a fate reserved for the not so noble ones. The ritual of embalming and separately preserving a person's heart and other entrails as practiced with the old Habsburgs – Empress Zita received similar treatment in 1989 – exalts that noble person from the common mortals and makes them appear immortal. Embalming them and burying them in a tomb keeps them away from the ashes common people must return to upon their death.

Burials of rulers and their relatives are conducted with great care to show the significance of those who have passed away. To that end a number of rituals are employed, such as the extraordinary one that was customary in the Habsburgs' funeral ceremonies in Vienna which Zita was also given. When the coffin arrived at the entrance of the Kapuzinergruft the master of ceremonies knocked at the door with a baton. A Capuchin padre waiting behind the door asked:

"Who is asking for admission?"

"Zita, empress of Austria, crowned queen of Hungary, queen of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia, Illyria, etc.," replied the master of ceremonies.

"Not known to me," said the padre.

Once again the master of ceremonies gave three knocks to the door of the tomb.

Again, the Capuchin asked: "who is asking for admission?"

The master of ceremonies answered: "Zita, her majesty, the empress and queen!"

And the padre repeated: "She is not known to us!"

Once more the master of ceremonies gave three knocks to the door. For the last time the padre asked who wanted to be let in. This time the master of ceremonies replied: "Zita, a mortal sinner." The Capuchin padre at last was satisfied with this and opened the door saying: "let her come in."

There is a deeper meaning to this ceremony, emphasizing as it does the nobility and holiness of a person. Not simply by naming their noble titles but ultimately by making them appear to the world as humble and dignified – both attributes the noble claim for themselves.

Vienna is probably the only city worldwide to call a funeral museum its own. It is a dignified institution of modest splendour located in Goldeggasse in Vienna's 4th district. Visitors can view unusual historical objects connected to the laying out, corteges and funerals of the precious dead.

The most diverse symbols of the noble ones called to be with the Lord are on display here to demonstrate the significance of distinguished people's burial rites. The following forms of laying out were customary before World War I: luxury class, 1st class, 2nd class, 3rd class, 4th class, 5th class and a miserable 6th class. 1st class offered three different types of décor.

For the luxury class "the entire state room dedicated to the laying out including the ceiling was draped in black, the floor was covered with carpets and the coffin was placed on a catafalque beneath a canopy." "Two servants of the house in mourning

dress kept the deathwatch day and night. The main gate of the mourning house was adorned for the occasion with a doorman posted in mourning uniform for two days” (funerals, 1982, p. 48).

The cortege was the noble dead’s impressive trip to the cemetery. It made the dead person’s noble standing clear for everyone to see. In Vienna corteges and mourning uniforms followed the example of Spanish court etiquette. For a luxury class body the undertakers provided a herald on horseback, two horsemen with lanterns, a music band, a luxury hearse with eight black horses, eight equerries dressed in Spanish garb, eight pallbearers, 20 torchbearers and 12 bearers of the coat of arms (funerals, 1982, p. 78).

Burial rituals are an excellent opportunity to show off the noble standing and exclusiveness of the dead and their relatives. A vivid description of this is found in the “*Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt*” (illustrated Viennese paper) of February 15, 1886. The article also stresses the fine distinction between the noble and the poor. The written text is printed beneath two drawings. One depicts a “luxury class” cortege and the other a hearse bearing coffins of people who died in abject poverty. It says on the significance of pompous burial rites: “ what a difference the magnificent tombs of the rich delivered from their palaces to rest in peace. Extravagance and the urge to shine have a lot to do with this (!). The rich have made a veritable sport out of decorating their graves and most people no longer visit cemeteries for reasons of piety but to see as much as they can. As glaring as the differences are between rich and poor in life, so they are in death....”.

Many burial rites have changed but noble people carry on with the distinguished traditions of their forefathers.

**Selections from
Roland Girtler. 1995. *Randkulturen – Theorie der Unanständigkeit.*
(*Marginal Cultures – Theory of Indecency*).
Wien-Köln:Böhlau new edition 2002.**

Vagrants and bums, pp. 46-48

Among the main concerns of the still active vagrant and shrewd bum is to find suitable lodging for the night. Many bums would rather stay in hidden derelict buildings than in one of the regular men's shelters or charity homes. Homes imply a steady monitoring of their behaviour and whereabouts once the police are onto them. Apart from that a bum's main activities consist in locating convents or monasteries doling out the famous monastery soup (see below for details), seeking out the right locations to make satisfactory social contacts and, last but not least, finding cheap sources of alcohol.

Clearly alcohol has always played a role in the culture of vagrants and bums. Looking at a bum's career, alcohol, be it wine or beer, starts out as a symbolic function, a prerequisite for making contact with other bums. Yet each drink brings them closer to alcohol dependency and ultimately plunges them into misery.

To survive and research among bums and petty crooks – it is difficult to draw a line between them – requires a profound knowledge of the language of crooks or thieves' cant (see the appendix for more). To give one example of the importance of their language: I was standing next to a crook by one of the beer tables at Vienna's main train station restaurant.

Seeing another bum being asked by the police to follow them my neighbour suggested to me that the "gentleman" was *ausgefackelt*. When I asked him what he meant he looked at me in amazement and said: you can't be one of us! Later I learnt that to be *ausgefackelt* meant to be registered in the wanted persons file. The incidence inspired me to learn more about thieves' cant.

The life of a bum is also considerably aggravated by the organs of public security, i.e. the police. The latter see in the bum a person who, unable to pose sanctions against them, appears subservient and polite towards them. Their sense of self-worth is boosted remarkably through their contact with bums. One police officer told me he would rather do duty in the 2nd district among bums and prostitutes who tended to

approach him in a fairly civilized manner. In Grinzing, one of Vienna's nobler districts, by contrast, he was forever confronted with drunken senior civil servants who had a way of making life difficult for him.

Bums not yet addicted to alcohol know full well how to approach a police officer without getting into serious trouble. I once witnessed two police officers picking up a bum about to settle for the night in a derelict building. They wanted to check his data via radio seeing that he had no ID on him. As they walked up to the patrol car the bum pulled a filthy tie from his coat which he proceeded to adorn his multi-coloured shirt with. When asked by one of the police officers why he was doing that he replied: "I always take my tie when dealing with officials." Deeply moved by his reverence the two officers finally let him go.

Yet many bums, prompted by their negative experiences with the police, will secretly complain about them. As did the old vagrant I once met: "I can't stand the police. They can go to hell. Just imagine one of them on a building site. He'd be standing there with his shovel for three days not knowing what to do.

Two weeks ago a police officer told me: 'get up, you can't sleep here'. I spent 48 hours under arrest for this. All because I wanted to take a little nap at the station. Another time one of them told me to take off or else he would set his dog on me....I don't think much of them. When I see one I see red. To me they are like the red rag to the bull. When I see green I see red...."

This account shows that while bums by and large are at the police's mercy, they secretly make fun of the latter to blow their own trumpet. So they reproach the police for not having the faintest idea of what it means to work.

Bums refer to the value of work for society as a whole in order to degrade the police although they are far removed from any notion of work themselves. They deny them the right to abase them because they (the police) themselves do not work.

As already mentioned, the "convent soup" was a part of vagrant life. I would like to take a closer look at this. In Vienna and other large cities there are convents and other church-run

institutions like hospitals and old people's homes run by nuns. These institutions regularly offered free food to the homeless, the so-called "convent soup", primarily at noon. Several times I tried to accompany bums to such institutions offering nourishment. Sometimes special rituals were linked to the distribution of the convent

soup. In a nunnery, in which old people were looked after, the bums and I waited between the entrance door and a glass door leading to the inside, which, however, was closed off for reasons of security. Finally a nun appeared with a huge pot. She asked us to pray. Then the food - a mixture of tomato soup, semolina pudding and apple strudel – was served in empty cans made available for this purpose.

Usually the bums had spoons on them. If not, then they could borrow one from a nun. While eating the “convent soup” the bums seemed satisfied with the soup and tried to make a humble impression vis-à-vis the nuns. They seemed to be successful in doing this. If their hunger had not been assuaged by the “convent soup” some buns opted immediately afterwards to seek other convents where they could act in a similarly devout way so as to be able to indulge in further nourishment.

A nun who had created a sort of home for these people wants to train the buns to be devout. Here the bums received cheap accommodation and regular meals. They were expected to keep order, to behave themselves quietly and to take part in devout exercises that the nuns organized. Those bums who expected to lead a quiet life in this way could appear devout, at least to the nun.

p. 59

As descendants of the old travelling scholars, bums and city tramps with their beer bottles and dogs add to the diversity of pedestrian zones and have a strong sense of honour. This was brought home to me very clearly by one begging city tramp I met: propped up beside him was a little board where along with his plea for alms he had proudly put the title “baron of Landstrasse”.

For bums to cope with being stigmatised as work dodgers and inadequate human beings means to reverse that negative stigma and turn it into a positive one. They do so by presenting themselves to the outsider as refusing to work with some dignity on their side. They make fun of work and treat it with irony. Once they have mastered the art of treating work with irony they can be sure of some respect from their colleagues. They have won their honour. A bum I once asked where he worked told me: “with leanto and co.”. When I asked him what this meant he explained: “some lean here and some there.” Being labelled as a work dodger becomes a matter of honour (see Girtler 1980).

Prostitutes, pp. 143-147

With the opening of the borders in 1989 there were changes in the prostitution business in Vienna, in Berlin and in other cities, which I shall try to describe in broad lines below.

Young girls from the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, the Ukraine and other eastern countries thronged to Vienna. They were prepared to go about their business for less money than their Austrian colleagues and thus disrupted the old pricing system.

Some of these women conveniently arranged to travel from Bratislava and other places near the borders just for the night to work as so-called barmaids. Brothel owners in Austria were not adverse to these activities as the ladies who came from Bratislava or Sopron contented themselves with fairly little money as compared to Austrians. By eastern standards, however, the fees they earned in one night were sufficient to comfortably feed a family for two weeks.

The word got about in countries of the east that girls could make easy money in the west. They came from all levels of society. Grammar school students from the Czech Republic, former nunnery students from Poland and university students from the Ukraine – the latter I had a chance to talk with – they all walked the streets and bars in Vienna. Some of the ways they walked were not what they had intended, having believed they would be employed as models or dancers. According to some police reports I received girls had been brought to Vienna under false pretences by mafia-like gangs, which Austrians no doubt played a substantial role in. As one magazine published by the Federal Ministry of the Interior called “public security” wrote:

“Svetlana, a nineteen year old from Lvov in the Ukraine was recruited by a man in December 1992. She was told she could work as a dancer or model for which she would receive approximately US \$ 2,000 a month. She took the train to Sofia. There she met a Bulgarian who produced a forged passport for her. Svetlana told the man she had no money. That was not a problem, he said, somebody would pay for her travel costs. The man accompanied her to Bucharest and then on to Bratislava. She was awaited at the station of the Slovak capital by “Binjo”, a Bulgarian living in Vienna, who took her to Vienna by car. Svetlana was taken to an apartment in the 16th district where she met two other girls from the Ukraine. “Binjo” informed her that she would have to work as a hostess in one of the bars along the Gürtel. Svetlana

refused with indignation but “Binjo” told her he had “bought” her and she would have to walk the streets for him for at least three months to cover her travel expenses. Svetlana and her fellow Ukrainians were taken to a nightclub on Neubaugürtel where they had to sleep with men in the so-called Separees (rooms designated for that purpose). They had to deliver all their earnings to a certain “Cherry” or “Sahib” who would then pass the money on to “Binjo”. “Binjo” and his mate, a Turkish guy nicknamed “the vulture”, were particularly brutal. Almost daily they would beat the Ukrainians for no reason at all. The girls were given just enough money to buy food...” (Öffentliche Sicherheit – public security, October 1993, p. 4).

Police from the aliens office got onto the white slavers. The four men were temporarily taken into custody and the girls had to leave Austria after they had given evidence. During the interrogations the police learned about a Bulgarian gang of criminals whom the four Viennese had collaborated with. They had brought hundreds of girls to Austria in that same manner. The head of the white slavers was a certain “Boreza” (the wrestler). The gang brought girls from the east to Vienna. Another gang was responsible for trafficking young girls from Croatia and Bosnia to Austria. The opening of the borders stirred the prostitution business in Vienna in a very unpleasant way and one which the police very much regret. Old strategies and structures were jeopardized. Before that the police, the pimps and the girls who walked the streets had engaged in good relations which both sides had benefited from.

The police were happy for the pimps to take care of their own matters, to settle any territorial disputes peacefully and to occasionally pass on information on the crime scene. The pimps for their part were happy for the police not to interfere.

Now the situation has changed. The people working in the prostitution business are no longer the same. Mafia-type criminals from South and Eastern Europe are trying to gain a foothold in the business in Austria and Germany and girls from behind the former Iron Curtain seeking their fortune end up in the bars and brothels of the West.

A Whore's Honour

For a whore to preserve her honour she typically keeps her distance from the customer, she does not allow him to consider her a commodity only.

For the "real whore" the customer is not an object of sexuality. He pays her money and the act of sexual intercourse becomes a business. "Private life and business" are kept strictly apart which is just as the pimp would have wished. The "real" whore is superior to her customer. That is her honour.

Results

1. Prostitution as a culture on the edge of society is based on old traditions as evidenced by the language of whores and pimps. Access to this culture mostly comes about through personal contacts with this world. Imprisonment or home careers are incentives for walking the streets to make good money. Those who see prostitution as a major source of income belong to very specific social classes closely linked to the old culture of small crooks.
2. For a whore to be happy with her self-image she has to establish a noble distance to her customer. She does not want to become a mere object of sexuality. This is symbolized, amongst others, by the fact that she does not allow her customer to kiss her on the mouth. It is this kind of intimacy which helps her to take herself seriously. It also explains why in talking to other whores she refers to the customer as "balls". Using degrading expressions for the customer helps her to establish her distance.
3. The fringe culture of prostitution is full of symbols, such as a very characteristic way of dressing, or rituals like keeping one's distance to the customer, which make it possible for those in the discredited of "trade" to live a decent life. A pimp is a whore's figurehead, he stands for her diligence in the trade.

The Gentlemen of Illicit Gambling, pp. 148-156

Illicit gambling as a culture on the edge is well embedded in the old traditions of small crooks which I am sure are linked to the prostitution business as well. Big cities all over the world all undoubtedly have their own old and fascinating gambling traditions. I myself was able to witness some of these in several Viennese public houses and bars. Among the many types of illicit gambling surely the most interesting must be the so called "Stoss" (pack of cards) traditional to Vienna's underworld which involves a number of rituals, underworld feuds and high stakes.

I shall now explain in some detail the "Stoss" game and the way it is organised because ultimately, I believe, the structure of the teams involved and their strategies differ only marginally from those of other groups of crooks engaged in making money through forbidden but attractive business deals. Such as the old alcohol smugglers in the USA in the interwar period or the various gangs of drug dealers. All of them strive hard to undercut their competition by tactics which are veritably martial so that they alone can make money from other people's addiction to gambling etc.

Access to the World of Illicit Gambling

I first contacted the world of illicit gambling through Pepi Taschner, a crook I have mentioned several times already and who has gained some reputation because of a book I wrote about him called "Der Adler und die drei Punkte"² (The Eagle and the Three Points). In writing the book I wanted to give a thrilling introduction to the world of Vienna's crooks and, to some extent at least, to the world of Vienna's prostitutes in the 1960's and 1970's. Many have read the book and according to one relevant magazine it has even become compulsory reading for social workers. I will take this opportunity to once more thank the hero of the book, Pepi Taschner, and to pay tribute to his memory, for unfortunately he died in an accident in July 1990. I wrote an obituary in his honour in one of Vienna's daily papers.

² The book was also published as a paperback under the less inspiring title "Die kriminelle Karriere des Pepi T." (Pepi T.'s Career as a Criminal). I was not happy with the choice of title. Hardly anyone was interested and the book soon went the way of all things and was removed from the world's bookshelves. Perhaps the remaining copies were ceremoniously burnt.

For reasons of piety and gratitude towards this gentleman with whom I also admit having had some difficulties I shall now repeat the obituary:

“...Pepi Taschner is dead... he deserves to be remembered here (briefly). He grew up in a world of crime which, however, he denounced in later years. Pepi Taschner was born in Vienna on December 18, 1942. In the post-war confusion he soon came under the influence of Vienna's crooks. He made friends with Viennese specialists. He also got to know the world of prisons. I met Pepi Taschner in 1981 through one of his friends. He told me about his life whose diversity interested and fascinated me as a sociologist, a cultural scientist and not least as a human being. We decided that I would write a book on him. I did and it gives remarkable insight into a world unknown to good and honest citizens. Because of the information and descriptions supplied by Pepi Taschner the book has become a major work on the culture of crime, gambling and prostitution. Pepi Taschner was instrumental in helping me reconstruct the old Vienna thieves' cant.

Thus I owe much to my partner Pepi Taschner. He knew how to draw the attention of students and others interested in the culture of crime to the problems of those who do not walk the way of the decent citizen. There was much to be learnt from him. More than anything I need to thank him for this. I spent a lot of time with Pepi Taschner, at times he was my good friend as he always was to his companions in the different worlds he moved about in. The very fact that he was friends with members of social groups as diverse as inmates, prostitutes, pimps, district councillors, university professors, people from the theatre, writers, journalists, students and other contemporaries, at times made life difficult for him and for those who knew him. He witnessed much happiness but some misunderstandings too. In his diversity he had a lot to offer to many people. His sense of humour and charm helped him master a number of difficult situations. Reminiscing about his cheerful stories makes me smile. May this smile, my fondness of him and that of the students at Vienna University who he enjoyed talking to, but also our gratitude for all that we learnt from Pepi accompany him forever.”³

The History and Culture of Illicit Gambling

Pepi Taschner gave me an opportunity to participate in various games of chance in the backrooms of inconspicuous bars. Looking at the “Stoss” offers a good insight into old traditions since the terms used in the game are almost certainly of medieval origin. There are criminal police reports of the game being played as early as the interwar years.

The game which is actually a competition to state-operated Casino games of roulette and baccarat has always attracted a regular flow of well-funded gentlemen. These

³ First printed in the Austrian daily paper “Der Standard” on July 5, 1990, page 23.

gentlemen, ladies being barred participation, essentially live on the edge of the underworld as pimps or by dealing in shady business.

The “Stoss” is generally played in the backrooms of various cafes and public houses. Masters of these high-stakes game in Vienna are two or three gentlemen with an underworld past who take the utmost care not to allow any competition so as not to incur business losses. The gentlemen participating in the game have usually grown into the fringe culture of small crooks. As was the case with Pepi Taschner who had an early career as a criminal and reform school inmate. It was there that he became familiar with the strategies of violence he would later need as a member of the “Stoss” gang (see Girtler, 1983, p. 58).

Power Struggles

Just as the state does not want private persons to make money on their own by gambling and therefore sanctions this accordingly, so the gentlemen of the “Stoss” fight those who dare open up competition. In Vienna each of the gentlemen from the underworld has their own district where they alone collect the takings from the game. Feuds for predominance over the “Stoss” have been conducted since time immemorial, that is according to criminal police reports.

Famous crooks’ names such as “Notwehr-Krista” (“defence Krista”) and the “Gschwinde” (“the quick one”) were coined during the sixties in connection with the game. Shootings were a way of settling disputes over who was to have which gambling district. Pepi Taschner told me in some detail about one of them. A certain Heinz K. fought a duel in broad daylight with the above mentioned “Gschwinde” whose real name was Angeler. The latter had received his nickname not because he was quick to draw his gun but, on the contrary, because he was far too slow. The two rivals also managed to shoot the street lighting to pieces in the processo. Heinz K. ended up in prison from which he staged a spectacular escape. He had been brought before a civil court for divorce proceedings – a scheme meticulously planned. His wife had filed for divorce, not in earnest of course, but to enable Heinz K. to escape. While the judge was talking about reconciliation of the two spouses, Heinz K. swiftly disarmed the police officers who had brought him before the court. He then proceeded to tie up the judge and all the others, locked the door of the courtroom

and walked out of the court building. He was never found. Years later he was reported dead after a shoot-out in Düsseldorf.

A certain Norbert Schmutzer was also shot dead during a power struggle in the “Stoss” game while his brother continued to control the game until the seventies, albeit from behind prison walls for some years. I also spoke with him many times and he came to see me at the institute for sociology.

Around 1985 a former assistant of his who had “set up his own shop” in the business was forced by bullets to retire. He was about to enter his restaurant in the 14th municipal district with the “Stoss” on in the backroom when an allegedly unknown person shot at him from the nearby rail tracks. The man was seriously injured and taken to hospital with fourteen bullet holes in his body. He survived by sheer luck. There was another shoot-out in Innsbruck in July 1992 during which the “governor” of a Viennese “Stoss” party was mowed down and killed with a shotgun. A Tyrolean gang had claimed autocracy over illegal gambling. The Viennese “crew” was not going to stand for this and sent a troop of thugs to “clean up” matters in Innsbruck. “Stoss” parties see their business threatened by competition. Several members of a party then set out to settle matters. One of Pepi Taschner’s, my informant’s, tasks was to disturb rival parties together with his mates. This is what he told me:

“Whenever we heard about a rival party we went in two cars to their restaurant/bar and stormed the place. If the new party saw us coming they usually stopped playing and fled. We were well known for our brutality. My party and the other two big ones had agreed that we would not let anyone else join the business. Entering rival parties’ restaurants was not without risk for me. I was always among the first to go into the gambling room and surprise its occupants with the words: gentlemen, the game is up! I would bang my revolver on the table. Mostly the keepers of the bank would drop their cards at the sight of me.” If they did not end the game, their visitors resorted to violence. Though sometimes badly injured those who had been paid the visit never called the police or reported their guests. It is an iron rule not to inform against your opponent. If you do terrible sanctions ensue (see Girtler, p. 246).

This fringe culture at any rate provides its members with good money. As one participant in a gambling party told the police, the only reason he directed the “Stoss” was so that he would be left with more than a piece of cake and a coffee in old age. As long as no more than two or three parties share the winnings in a big city like Vienna there seems to be sufficient money to go round for all the participants.

So the Stoss parties take on mafia-style methods to defend their monopoly as best they can. And they also, most notably, resort to violence.

Dignified Life and Honour in Gambling

Several years ago, when Pepi Taschner was still alive, there were three gentlemen from the underworld who ruled the “Stoss” parties, having divided up the districts of the game among themselves. One of the groups was referred to as the “Gürtel party” because it resided in the bars along the Gürtel (major street in Vienna), an area also important for the prostitution business. This goes to show how close the two lines of business are to each other.

Both exist on the edge or rather beyond the edge of legality which means they need their own commands to maintain order among those who walk the streets and those who play the game.

Another “Stoss” party was referred to as the “Prater party” (large park area and amusement park) presided over by a crook who had come to fame as an “underworld king” and who was called “the red one” for his red hair.

It takes several persons to play a proper “Stoss” game without rivals:

The master of the game is known as the “bank”, he shuffles the cards or rather he “cuts” them, to use criminal argot, because the cards are cut against each other during shuffling. To find out where a game is played on a given day one usually asks: “where will they cut tonight?”. The party is further enriched by gentlemen prepared to lend money to gamblers at high interest rates. They are aptly referred to as “Kredithai” (credit sharks) or “Sauger!” (suckers).

One major role is that of the watchdogs, i.e. the lookout men posted outside the bars or restaurants to warn their colleagues inside, sometimes via radio, of approaching police.

Honourable participants considered it very important to always dress elegantly, presenting themselves as noble crooks in imitation of Mafia members.

For good reason Pepi Taschner had the word “Mafia” tattooed onto his left forearm. I could see with Pepi Taschner how important good clothing and other visible objects like cars and gold watches were to them.

He did a good job as watchdog and cleaning up rivalling “Stoss” parties so Alois Schmutzer, the boss of his party, regularly paid him decent money from the daily winnings. Pepi knew he had to be swift and violent with the enemies of his own party.

He was highly esteemed for his ability to draw a gun quickly. To use his own words: “The gun for me was not just for shooting, but above all for hitting. My two revolvers were part of me, they belonged to me and those who dealt with me knew that. I even slept with them, they were always in easy reach under my pillow.” (Girtler, 1983, p. 285). Pepi took great care of his appearance as an elegant gentleman, he was familiar with the symbols of the noble class and sought the company of its members. It was from such company that he drew his dignity and his honour. One of his favourite pastimes was to go to the Prater noble sauna where he met people from the Austrian broadcasting company and star athletes.

Among the trademarks of “Stoss” party members is their solidarity for each other. It is part of one’s honour not to drop a mate even if he spends many years in prison. Thus it happened to the boss of a Viennese “Stoss” party that, during his term in prison in the seventies, his colleagues paid substantial sums of money from the takings into his account every day. He is said to have bought real estate and houses while in prison. Upon his release he had plenty of money at his disposal.