

Fringe nobles and boundary maintenance: An exploration

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Tim Winzler 
University of Glasgow, UK

Abstract

This article explores a sub-group of elites at the border to non-elites that I shall call fringe nobles. It develops the theoretical interest in this group, understood as a structural ideal-type. It then fleshes out the characteristics of it with the help of historical examples of relational studies of fringe nobles before complementing this with a case-study on study motivation of German fringe noble economics students. The habitus of this group is characterized by a taste for purification and field-specific extreme positions – in the field of contemporary economics, this seems expressed by the likely uptake of an ultraliberal position. The article then goes on to explore the links of this position-taking with a specific feeling of threat before turning to the position-taking of fringe noble economists in the field of politics. The article concludes with a plea for a sociology of fringe nobles by formulating further empirical and theoretical questions.

Keywords

boundary maintenance, Bourdieu, Elias, elites, fringe nobles, social class, ultraliberalism

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à un sous-groupe de l'élite, à la frontière de la non-élite que j'appellerai les nobles marginaux. Il s'attache à développer l'intérêt théorique de ce groupe, envisagé comme un idéal-type structurel. Il dessine ensuite ses caractéristiques à l'aide d'exemples historiques d'études relationnelles avant de les compléter par une étude de cas sur la motivation dans les études d'étudiants allemands nobles marginaux en économie. L'habitus de ce groupe se caractérise par un goût pour la purification et des positions extrêmes spécifiques au champ – dans le champ de l'économie contemporaine, cela semble se manifester par la prise de positions ultra-libérales. L'article explore ensuite les liens entre ces prises de position et un sentiment spécifique d'être menacé, avant de se tourner vers les prises de position d'économistes de la noblesse marginale dans le champ de la politique. L'article se conclut sur un plaidoyer

Corresponding author:

Tim Winzler, University of Glasgow, 40 Bute Gardens, Glasgow G12 8RT, UK

Email: tim.winzler@glasgow.ac.uk

en faveur d'une sociologie de la noblesse marginale en formulant d'autres questions empiriques et théoriques.

Mots-clés

Bourdieu, classes sociales, Elias, élites, maintien des frontières, nobles marginaux, ultralibéralisme

[. . .] that touchy frontier between dominant and intermediate positions (between top and middle management in business, for example), a very sensitive borderline which must be both euphemized and stressed so that the middle orders remain in their place.

– Pierre Bourdieu

Margin call

This article is a contribution to the rejuvenated fields of elite research (Griffiths et al., 2008; Cousin et al., 2018; Davis and Williams, 2017; Savage, 2015) and to the sociology of class (Savage et al., 2013). Its object is a group that is neglected by both literatures, namely elites at the border to non-elites. I will call this group fringe nobles. Fringe nobles do not really figure in class systems. In one schema, they may be part of the 'lower professionals and managers' section (Goldthorpe et al., 1987). In another, they may be 'managers' or 'supervisors' of various kinds (Wright, 1985). In yet another, they may span anything from the 'elite' to 'middle classes' to 'new affluent workers' (Savage et al., 2013). They also do not gather much explicit attention among the new sociology of elites, which is mostly focused on elite networks (Griffiths et al., 2008), financialization (Davis and Williams, 2017), or the 'super-rich' (Birtchnell and Caletrio, 2013; Savage, 2015). As I will attempt to show throughout this article, this neglect may be ultimately detrimental for both sociological sub-fields.

As both the sociologies of class and of elites acknowledge, contemporary elite power and influence are heavily dependent on ever-increasing chains of institutions, fields, organizations and 'intermediators' (Wedel, 2017). They are less rigid and more fluid in some ways without, for all that, thereby jeopardizing the whole structure of inequalities and social groups (Piketty, 2014). Fluidity – of both cultural and geographical location – requires powerful social driving forces, catalysts that retain class structure through a constant work of veering attention away from its essential rigidity. They need a constant supply of cultural-ideological resources that help to paralyze or to channel resistance while supplying it with a feeling of novelty and innovation. I argue that there are specific social groups that are supremely equipped to be at the forefront of this work of ideological supply, which requires constant, and increasingly fast yet partial, toppling of received wisdoms and re-assembling of given cultural tools and objects. Thus, these symbolic innovators play an important role in elite/class reproduction. In this article, I suggest that fringe nobles are such a group of symbolic innovators, and that therefore their positions and actions may warrant more attention from the sociologies of class and of elites. This would amount to a need to study boundary-making more seriously (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

This is an exploratory work that wishes to sketch out the theoretical foundations and basic characteristics of the concept of fringe nobles via using data scavenged from existing literature and from my own PhD project on study selection of German economics students (Winzler, 2019a).

My epistemological starting point for this is the relational epistemology of Pierre Bourdieu. Given the marginality of my object, and the lack of systematic literature devoted to it, I shall loosely apply Bourdieusian notions of field, capital, habitus, dispositions, and class. My goal is to bring to the fore specific invariant similarities in dispositions, attitudes, and behavior that result from the position of fringe nobles. For this, I will first describe the basic theoretical idea that I take from Bourdieu's work on Algeria. I will then foray through the position-takings of fringe nobles in various historical social spaces and fields, comparing them with each other homologically. I am trying thereby to tease out and to link, both empirically and theoretically, specific characteristics of this position of fringe nobles in different social spaces and fields (Flemmen, 2013). I will then go on to extend this to data on specific German fringe noble economics students. I will explore the link of position in social space to position-taking in a specific field, as well as its affective, cognitive, and conative (Wacquant, 2014) dimensions. Finally, I explore how this fringe noble disposition may influence other fields, such as politics. I conclude with fresh questions that evolve from this exploration.

Fringe nobles – Sensibility for the symbolic and a taste for purification

Perhaps it is best to start the theoretical outline of this 'structural ideal-type'¹ with a very practical observation by Bourdieu about the marriage practices of certain Algerian groups:

In practice, this ideal [i.e. parallel-cousin] marriage is often a forced choice which the group seeks to present as a choice of the ideal, thus making a virtue of necessity. As has been seen, it is often found in the poorest lineages or the poorest lines of the dominant groups. It tends in any case to be the choice of groups characterized by a strong desire to assert their distinction, because it always has the objective effect of reinforcing the integration of the minimal unit and, consequently, its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other units. It is predisposed by its ambiguity to play the role of poor man's prestige marriage, and it offers an elegant solution for all those who, like a ruined nobleman unable to manifest his refusal to derogate other than symbolically, seek in the affectation of rigour the means of affirming their distinction. This can be the case with a lineage cut off from its original group and anxious to maintain its originality; a family seeking to assert the distinctive features of its lineage by doing one better in purism [. . .]; a clan seeking to mark its distinction from the opposing clan by strict observance of the traditions [. . .], etc. (Bourdieu, 1992 [1980]: 186f.)

As Bourdieu describes it here, the position of 'fringe elite' can be occupied in two ways: either by being at the fringe or by falling into it. The two ways seem to be sociologically similar for him. Any empirical investigation of fringe elites would, therefore, imply the need to gather information both about present and past positions in social space. Both variants of fringe elites are dominated elites. They are, or were until recently,

part of the field of power (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]), but there their position is one of relative paucity of capital, whether economic, cultural, or social. This may be the case with executives of marginal and relatively irrelevant company branches. It may be the case with devalued specializations of otherwise very reputable professions such as medicine or law. It may also be the case with professorships in subjects considered rare and exotic. It may even reach into more medium-level occupations such as clerks or rather undistinguished service providers. Formerly powerful social groups such as aristocracies or nomenklaturas may fall into it as well. Certainly, within given class schemata (Atkinson, 2017; Goldthorpe et al., 1987; Savage et al., 2013; Wright, 1985), this position of fringe nobles is difficult to objectify, so we need to apply less rigid indicators for the moment.

The everyday lifeworld of fringe nobles is in the world of the dominant (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 262), with its field-specific culture, norms, and taboos. But it is also a world that already comes into extensive contact with other, different class cultures that are likely to be perceived as 'lower' or 'worth less'.² It is a world where social mechanisms of distinction that come with the job and the position – mechanisms as quotidian as 'not usually being present', being an 'exceptional sight' (see Willis, 2016 [1978]: 78f. for a good example from education) – are less prevalent and less stable. Neither are many other forms of subtle, system-engrained distinctions (Birtchnell and Caletrio, 2013: 12f.). Moreover, with the changes to these life worlds that ensue in the struggle between dominant class and middle class – the adaptation of new ways to embody 'excellence', the change of fundamental norms, and so on (the 'liquidity' of modernity) – are naturally threatening those whose position is most dependent on having these cultural and normative traits. Thus, what comes with this position is what might be called an essential 'sensitivity for the symbolic' and its changes. The habitus of fringe nobles is quick to detect changes in symbolic hierarchies. In fact, it may even be oversensitive to these changes, and thus may interpret changes as being more dramatic than they are objectively. In reaction to this, one may see an attempt to defend the existing system by way of purification, or 'affectation of rigor'. Thus, in Bourdieu's example from mid-20th century Algeria above, the fringe nobles in this field choose traditional parallel-cousin marriage as an expression of this purification and their field position.

Naturally, in a dynamic society with a high division of labor and many specific fields, this purification will change in expression with the specific norms and fields in question. It is therefore possible, by way of a kind of an empirical prologue, to identify in passing a few homologues (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 105–107; Atkinson, 2017) of this purification in various historical circumstances, taken from relational research. This may also help to better flesh out the characteristics of this ideal-type.

Norbert Elias (2002 [1969]) writes about fringe nobles in his *Court Society* (pp. 414–447). These are mostly low-level aristocrats that are usually not at the court in Versailles (the physical and social power center of the specific field in question) but have stayed in the French provinces. For Elias, these groups are 'two-front strata' within the specific figuration of 17th- and 18th-century France because they are '[. . .] spun into the interdependency network [in such a way] that they constantly have to deal with tensions and conflict situations on two fronts' (Elias, 2002 [1969]: 443, translation mine). These 'two fronts' are, of course, on the one hand, the rising bourgeoisie and, on the other hand, the haute aristocracy around the king. With the latter, the fringe nobles share a common

history and common norms, such as ancestry, as the principle of stratification (rather than merit). They are nevertheless increasingly relegated from the haute aristocracy and from the noblesse de robe in terms of the power (or capital) that the latter are appropriate due to their presence in Versailles. It is the group of the fringe nobles or ‘two-front strata’ that, in this situation, initiates what Elias calls a ‘civilizing push’. Due to the weakened state of the aristocracy vis-à-vis the king, no physical or ‘real’ rebellion is possible so that what is created, for the first time, is the genre of literary romanticism – discussed in the book on the example of Honore d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée*. This pastoral novel represents a symbolization and sublimation of the relations of force at the time, which implies, for Elias, a rise in the distance of person and reality from the medieval starting point of the interlocking of both (see also more generally Elias, 2000 [1939]).

For the purposes at hand in this article, one may say that these fringe nobles engage in an attempt of symbolic production and symbolic re-drawing of the boundary between the dominant class and the dominated class. Their group-specific interest for doing this, as Elias readily sees, lies in the double distinction they need to effect against both ascending bourgeoisie and dominating aristocracy. Thus, the figures in the novel (druids, knights, princesses, as well as the actual heroes, the shepherds) all assert, more or less openly, the principle of ancestry. Thus also, the hierarchy of the figures in the novel is reversed compared to that of actual society. The shepherds, which represent the rural, lower aristocracy, represent the pastoral life that is ‘free’, ‘simple’, ‘faithful’, ‘noble’, and ‘pure’, thus certainly superior to that of the court aristocracy. In effect, the creation of the pastoral novel for the fringe nobles creates a new kind of symbolic distinction. It erects a new boundary. For the dominant class as a whole, it serves the function of a distinctive sign against non-aristocratic circles. For the progress of mankind overall, it may have served, as Elias says, as a ‘civilizing push’ in that struggles are less focused on physical confrontation. In this account, the fringe nobles are portrayed as ultimately beneficial for the whole of society. Similar to Bourdieu’s example of pre-modern Algeria, the fringe nobles purify existing norms (ancestry), which follows from their position in the particular social space (or figuration). In Algeria, existing marriage norms are purified in the same way as existing stratification norms are purified in absolutist France. Unlike in Bourdieu’s example, the Fringe Nobles in Elias’ court society in addition also innovate, in the sense that they use existing norms and experiences in a dynamic situation to assert their (seemingly) fading position in it via the invention of a new, more sublimated symbolic way of struggle and expression. Yet at the same time, this innovation serves a conservative function with regard to the position of the dominant class as a whole. But this is not necessarily always so.

In another work, Elias (1990 [1989]) writes about the changes to German society in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this eventful history of industrialization and various revolutions, fringe nobles – which, in this figuration, consist of both lower aristocratic circles and integrated bourgeois strata – play a very prominent role (Elias, 1990 [1989]: 251–294). Like their homologues of French absolutism, these groups are couched between a dominant aristocracy and king, as well as an ascending (now industrial) bourgeoisie. In addition, there is organized labor, unified and guided by ascendant Marxism. The process of the original humanism of bourgeois circles that gives way to a virulent nationalism and militarism in time may be applied with particular coherence to the sub-group of the

fringe nobles. Being threatened subjectively and objectively by the ascending strata and their differing cultures, the fringe nobles endeavor to re-fortify the boundaries between them and those groups. After the revolution of 1918 and after losing their position in the military, they engage in irregular militia groups (the Freikorps) and in terrorism against the new leaders of (now Weimar Republic) Germany. This action is underpinned by a radicalizing nationalism interspersed with antisemitism. The new system is experienced as a gross and unacceptable affront to their sense of position, and the terror can thus be interpreted as a desperate (and ultimately unsuccessful) attempt of re-drawing and re-emphasizing symbolic boundaries (Elias, 1990 [1989]: 295). Elias names Ernst von Salomon (1954 [1951]) as a representative of this fringe noble strata. But the concomitant militarization of culture and science, of other specific fields, is just as important (Ringer, 1990 [1969]). Here, too, fringe nobles play an important role in the production and popularization of this change. Aside from Salomon, authors like Walter Bloem or Ernst Jünger re-define war and killing as 'noble' and 'unspoiled' ('ursprünglich'), hence as a form of purification of the original German militarism and nationalism. It is these authors that create the homologue to d'Urfé's pastoral novel, the romanticizing of violence, with analogous roles of the participants:

In Stahlgewittern [novel by Jünger] is really a glorification of the young, middle-class officer³ [. . .]. The higher, mostly aristocratic officers appear only in the distance, as superiors. In the limelight stands the lieutenant and company commander of middle-class origin who has fully assimilated the aristocratic code of the German officers and who feels proud to be a member of the German officer caste with its very pronounced and distinctive rituals of behavior. (Elias, 1996 [1989]: 211)

And the low-ranked soldiers, although closely living with these lieutenants, nevertheless remain 'strictly socially distanced' from them – 'By and large, in Jünger's book the men played a non-speaking role' (Elias, 1996 [1989]: 212). Here we have the analogues of knights, shepherds, and peasants in their new roles.⁴ Once more, there is a purification of norms of the field, springing from the peculiarly liminal character of the position of this group. Elias clearly sees that

Of course, for these young middle-class officers the internalization and nuances of the officer code were somewhat different from those of the nobles in the higher ranks. The former [. . .] were in many ways rooted in the anti-moral, anti-humanist, anti-civilizing tradition of large groups of the Wilhelmine middle-class. That means they saw war not in the way the warrior nobility did, simply as a social fact, as part of the human lot especially for soldiers, but instead regarded it as something imperative and desirable, an ideal of manly behavior, so that its violence and brutality appeared to be something great and meaningful. (Elias, 1996 [1989]: 211)

What can be learned for the ideal-type of the fringe nobles is that symbolic re-drawing and purification may take on radical and objectively revolutionary forms if it is not successful in restoring the boundaries between classes and if there are no institutional backups that prevent them from losing too much of their prestige.⁵ The fringe nobles, with their symbolic work to re-assert their position in society, facilitated the rise of National Socialism, and thus both undermined their wider contribution to the reproduction of the

dominant class and to the ‘process of civilization’. It is important at this point to point toward the essentially unintentional character of this process. It is also important to look at its dispersion across many different fields (literature, science, politics, the military, and others), being coordinated and led together in such a way as to bring about a ‘synchronization effect’ (see Bourdieu, 1988 [1984]: 173–179). Thus, one may assume that fringe nobles take on quite different position-takings in different fields that are nevertheless homologous, that is, similar in sociological meaning. These position-takings can, under specific circumstances, be deflected and can bring about revolutions.

In this section, I have introduced a structurally derived, exploratory ideal-type from abstract social space and the field of power. From the liminal position of the fringe nobles in this space, I have inferred a disposition of habitus that may be described as a tendency toward purification of existing norms and attitudes, and thus as a taste for the production of symbols of distinction or boundary maintenance. Using a few empirical examples from existing relational literature,⁶ I have sought to flesh out some general characteristics of this position in its integration in societies with a high degree of division of labor and field autonomy. Thus, as elsewhere, the way this position is expressed in various contexts depends on the specific cultural tools and histories available (see Swidler, 1986). The position-induced culture produced by this liminal group can serve as a symbolic weapon in the struggle between classes overall or in other fields. It may even contribute to the lengthening of the chains of domination themselves, as could be seen with the French fringe nobles of the Ancien Régime. It thereby acquires a specific social function beyond the specific interests of the group inventing or exercising it. This function depends on specific environmental or field conditions for it to become efficacious. If not, there may well be a deflection of the overall social function toward one that is dysfunctional or, in Elias’ terms, de-civilizing (Elias, 1996 [1989]: 299–402). Given this high degree of dispersion and complexity in modern societies, new questions emerge: how is this fringe noble existence acquired, experienced and justified in contemporary individual fields? How is it different in its field-specific expression to other structural ideal-types such as that of ‘inheritors’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979 [1964]) or ‘parvenus’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 [1970]: 72ff.)? How does it contribute to specific class domination, inequality, or even social interests beyond its field?

To obtain a tentative answer to these questions I will now explore a contemporary example of fringe nobles in a specific field, namely that of German academic economics. Field theory requires to describe properly the social environment in which these fringe nobles exist and subsist.

Methodology

The following analysis is based on my PhD research with selected economics students at German universities (Winzler, 2019a). The overall project was conducted in a loosely Bourdieusian spirit.⁷ It was to enquire into the process and sociological roots of study motivation within a particular context (university economics in Germany). For it, I employed a purposive sampling method that distinguished groups of analysis according to several lines: first, according to level of study (Bachelor, Master, and PhD); and second, according to the (non-)existence of disciplinary ‘recognition’. This characteristic I

defined objectively as holding a research or teaching assistantship by the students, or as having a scientifically competitive scholarship, in short as anything that showed distinction and recognition coming from the representatives of the academic subject of economics. I took this indicator as a sort of measure for discipline-specific capital (here scientific capital, see Bourdieu, 2006; Regelmann, 2004; Schneickert, 2013). I chose a medium-sized economics department as my case-study institute (CSI). Prior to the main study, I conducted a pilot study at a British economics institute (the pilot study institute – PSI) to develop the methodology to be employed at the CSI in Germany.

I recruited the recognized students by contacting the research assistants to the professors at the CSI of what I defined as core economics subjects (economic theory, economic policy, macro- and micro-economics). I then contacted these students by email or phone and invited them for an interview. While doing this, I also attempted to employ snowballing methods to broaden my sample accordingly. Non-recognized students were recruited in a looser manner. I went to several first-year lectures and distributed a questionnaire about study motivation which had an option to participate in an in-depth interview. Through this, I recruited about a handful of participants. The remaining non-recognized students were recruited from speaking to them at various events of economics-specific student organizations at the CSI. Finally, I, on occasion, attended departmental seminar series as well as events of economic associations run by faculty of the CSI. That, of course, means that my sample is far from ‘representative’ of the whole student body. It is heavily skewed toward successful or at least interested students. Since I assume that ‘interested’ students (whether ‘recognized’ or not) have, at least to some extent, developed an interest in the ‘doxa’ of the specific field in question, my sample seems therefore suitable for the explorative purposes of this article. The length of the in-depth interviews ranges from about 30 minutes to 2.5 hours, with the average interview being around 70–90 minutes long. I did 57 interviews with students (who study mostly at the CSI) in addition to some contextualizing interviews with staff members. Prior to that, I interviewed eight students and a few staff members at the PSI. There were three broad topics that were covered in the student interviews in Germany – first, the way of the student into the discipline, the thoughts and estimations employed at the time, including the alternatives and the definition of their subject; second, the impressions of the subject at the time of the interview, including favorite specializations and lecturers or professors at this point; and last, I asked for their plans for the future. The interviews were taped and partially transcribed according to need, anonymizing sensible data, including the names of the participants who are all given synonyms here. I also omitted any confidential personal data that may lead to the identification of my interviewees.

Those that make up the ‘fringe nobles’ within this group are usually coming from professional (doctors, pastors), entrepreneurial, or managerial (directors) bourgeois background. In prevalent classifications, these would have to be situated somewhere between the ‘elite’ and the ‘established middle classes’ (Savage et al., 2013: 15ff.) or between ‘higher’ and ‘lower professionals’ (Goldthorpe et al., 1987). Four students have a grandparent who owned a larger business (the grandfathers of two students owned factories, while the grandfather of another student owned a large entertainment business and that of another one owned a substantial service business). Three of the seven fringe noble students have at least one parent who is a physician, while another three have parents who

are senior executives at the state level. Another common aspect of their family trajectory is the loss of capital (or at least the failure to reconvert) that affected all of them. One factory-owning grandfather was ruined while another one's factories were partially destroyed in the Second World War. Another business-owning grandfather sold his business some time ago. Two of the grandfathers of two fringe noble students were expropriated by the authorities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The families of three other fringe nobles experienced reprisals during socialist times. Another two fringe nobles experienced considerable difficulty in school, being in danger of not receiving their high school diploma and/or graduating with very mediocre marks. None of this was the case for the other students, either recognized or not, that I interviewed. One may say that these are fringe nobles of the economic or central areas of the field of power, rather than of the intellectual-cultural pole (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 283–295). The remaining, recognized students came from backgrounds either rather rich in cultural-educational capital (a capital that may be dubbed 'technical cultural capital' – that is, sons of engineers, secondary school teachers in natural science subjects) or somewhat lower in standing (here still technical professions were prevalent, such as system administrators or informatics specialists). The former group I dubbed 'inheritors', whereas the latter I called 'parvenus', reflecting their original position in social space. By comparison, then, there is a very marked history of loss and peculiar precarity despite relative affluence present with the fringe noble students, which is why the ideal-type may be applied to them. Overall, there are seven students with fringe noble background as defined here that I interviewed for my study (six Germans at the CSI and one non-German at the PSI).

Why are these fringe nobles pulled toward studying economics, and how do they position themselves within their subject?

Fringe nobles and the spirit of ultraliberalism – An elective affinity

Before the position-taking of the fringe noble students can be assessed, we must outline the specific characteristics of German academic economics. What specific attitudes, doxa, and ideals of excellence are operative in this field? What are the main accepted positions within it?

Academic economics, in Germany as elsewhere, is an academic field that thoroughly embraces methodological individualism (Friedman, 1953; Hesse, 2012; Janssen, 2006), not only in the form of its methods, but also in its political recommendations. It is also a field that is very much mathematized, often operating with advanced statistics, complex models, and very large datasets. These traits have given it the label of a 'neoliberal' discipline (Harvey, 2005; Mirowski, 1989). One may say that this individualistic philosophy and ontology is put as the chief way to enquire about societal welfare. Furthermore, the creation and sustaining of markets in all kinds of areas of life (see Foucault, 2010 [2004] for this) is doxa within the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). It is a crucial focal point on which anyone in the discipline – orthodox and heterodox alike – agrees or at least argues about (Arnsperger and Varoufakis, 2006; Lawson, 2005). Thus, it makes sense to look at how the fringe noble students of my sample are relating to this unquestioned base as opposed to students with another origin and habitus.

Those who make up the largest fraction of my group of ‘recognized’ students (see also Winzler, 2019b) often come from teacher or educational backgrounds (esp. teachers of natural sciences or mathematics or related apprenticeships). This group, which I call the ‘inheritors’ because they take on the most prestigious topics and posts and position-takings available within the subject, tends to favor what may be called an ‘orthodox’ economics position – a natural scientific, very much mathematized, yet also theoretical understanding of economics based on the conventional neoliberal – individualistic doxa described above. They submit to the usual division of values and ‘facts’ that comes with the individualistic base, as well as a certain rejection of ‘literary forms of expression’ (Blaug, 2002 [1980]; McCloskey, 1985). They are most often found in the specializations of macro- and micro-economics as well as in economic theory.

By contrast, almost all fringe noble students take on quite a distinct and different intellectual position – namely that of an ultraliberal or libertarian economics as it is advocated by economists like Friedrich Hayek (1960), Ludwig von Mises (2003 [1933]) or, in German-speaking countries, by Wilhelm Röpke (1963 [1937]) or Alexander Rüstow (1961). Somewhat of an exception here is Johanna, who nevertheless also veers toward a distinctively heterodox position with regard to the (in her words) ‘actually very conservative’ neoclassical dominant position.

This kind of economics, on the one hand, does accept the methodological individualism of orthodox economics. On the other hand, it turns its main attention away from the latter’s statistical-mathematical footing (Friedman, 1953; Stigler and Becker, 1977) and advocates a view of economics that re-emphasizes the diversity and indeed irreducibility of homo oeconomicus. In fact, this school advocates the fact of ‘economic behavior’ as a universal human law that can be found in all societies (pre-modern and modern; archaic and complex) and in many different forms. This economic behavior can be described but not understood because it is too complex and too intricate (Hayek, 1960; Mises, 2003 [1933]). The perspective links this basic ontological position with a fundamental epistemological perspective that distinguishes the analysis and assessment of social and economic phenomena by attributing it to ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivist’ aspects. Individualism is a scientific and normative attitude that aims at respecting the many different and, in the last instance, unexplainable forms of economic exchange. It wishes to analyze in how far a given institutional arrangement lets these forms of economizing flourish or in how far it stifles and perverts them (Hayek, 1945). The latter case is called ‘collectivism’, the subsumption not only of individual but also of collective freedoms under an expansive and self-perpetuating system of state or corporate government, often epitomized in Hayek’s (2001 [1944]) *Road to Serfdom*. This position leads to an adoption of heuristic and historical methodologies common in the Humanities, but highly unusual in mainstream economics (Machlup, 1961). On the contrary, its extreme individualistic pro-market stance also differentiates it from other currents of heterodox economic thought such as Keynesianism or Feminism (see, for instance, Heise and Thieme, 2016).

The fringe nobles of my sample are very much open toward humanities subjects and their less mathematized epistemologies. Someone like Robert, for example, ‘also thought about [studying] Roman languages, like, Spanish and Portuguese’, while Sophia first aspired to be a translator of literature before settling with a Bachelor’s

degree that combines languages and economics (although she does regret that psychology was not part of her degree: 'Of course my favorite would have been a combo of all these three'). Jürgen, among other things, takes psychology into consideration, whereas Jakob pondered studying journalism. Eric selected a mix of philosophy and economics for his Bachelor's degree. And Thomas calls his discovery of new languages such as German or Chinese 'exciting'. None of them, unlike quite a few inheritor students, selected a mathematical or natural scientific subject for study, not even as a minor. In terms of thematic specializations within economics, the fringe nobles most often opt for economic policy (the area where 'individualism' and 'collectivism' in action can arguably best be studied), and, in particular, currency policies. Consequently, many of the fringe nobles write their dissertations or PhDs on topics such as currency competition. What this shows is a taste for general education beyond the limits of the field which is quite distinct from the inheritor students who most often chose subjects that squarely fall into the requirements of orthodox academic economics, namely mathematics or physics or mathematized sociology.⁸

There seems to be a rather intense search for all methods that can be framed as having the goal of understanding. This, of course, is quite extraordinary in academic economics in which these methods are very much marginalized (although the basic individualistic ontology of course is much less so). This may imply less of a 'cultural good will' toward the specific field. It can express a disposition that fits only to a certain degree with the prevailing requirements of the discipline. It takes considerable self-confidence and energy to study economics in this broad manner against the received methodologies and their prestige, and to trust that despite this one may find employment and recognition. Here the socially induced disposition to purify and to work toward symbolic distinction are carried over into individual viewpoints. There are indications that this 'against the grain' disposition is part of the biography of the fringe nobles from rather early on. For example, Jakob retells his 'very conflict-laden school trajectory' in which he quarreled with his teachers several times due to disturbances. Sophia was recommended to me by an economics professor at the CSI who was alerted by her vociferous assertion of ultraliberal principles. In the same way, fellow interviewees made me aware of the 'flashy' posture of ultraliberal Thomas, who professed to me during the interview his engagement with an anti-alcohol, anti-drug youth organization of the church during his high school days. And Eric reports the 'politically incorrect', 'fun militarism' that he joined in his youth. These incidents can be interpreted as expressions of the specific habitus and individualism of fringe nobles. To summarize it with Thomas' words: 'It started [with] me taking an extreme position [. . .] and then finding that I actually enjoyed it [. . .]'.

Given the structural ideal-type developed above, it can be seen that the established position of ultraliberal economics in the present German economic field easily fits with the hypothesis of purification. It is the individualist-economic ontology and epistemology that is purified with considerable consequence in this perspective, resulting in the rejection of, or at least skepticism towards, mathematical constructs and models (which are, just like the welfare state or the state as a whole, leveling agents that tend to abolish potentially important differences between irreducible individuals). This specific choice of purification can be grasped and explained, I argue, as one expression of the habitus of a fringe noble, of a position in the field of power that is precarious and hanging by a

thread, prompting its owners to symbolic vigilance and rigor. And indeed, the very intellectual ancestors whose cultural products are chosen by these students had in common with them a very similar position in social space and were themselves fringe nobles:

Hayek was born into the class which was largely responsible for the maintenance of the Austro-Hungarian empire and which did not survive its collapse. Neither of the higher nobility nor the merchant class, it was a class of civil servants and professionals who were not indifferent to their own advancement but nevertheless maintained standards of conduct and inquiry that linked them to their counterparts throughout Europe. (Kresge, 1994: 3)

Mises was born on Sept 29, 1881, in the city of Lemberg (now Lvov) in Galicia, where his father, a Viennese construction engineer working for the Austrian railroads, was then stationed. Both Mises's father and mother came from prominent Viennese families; his mother's uncle, Dr Joachim Landau, served as deputy from the Liberal Party in the Austrian Parliament. [. . .] Effectively barred from any paid university post in Austria and later in the United States, Mises, pursued his course gallantly. (MisesInstitute, n.d.)

In this section, I have framed the choice for ultraliberal economics within the field of economics as a possible expression of a fringe noble habitus. I have argued that this 'semi-orthodox' expression reflects the liminal character of the position of this group in social space (see also Lebaron, 2001: 100–104, for further empirical evidence for the French field of economics). Thus, it would have to be treated as homologous to the historical examples brought forward earlier – the literary romanticism of French 17th-century fringe nobles and the militarism of German early 20th-century fringe nobles. But this is just a partial exposition and needs to be supplemented by an exploration into how this process is experienced, lived through, and constructed.

Fringe nobles and the road to 'freedom' – The feeling of threat and the posture of one-against-all

In a way, a decision of what to study is at the same time a kind of discovery of a different version of the self, especially for those who do so with recognition following in the desired field. Very often, this also entails construction efforts that help to veil the links that the old self retains with the new one (Goffman, 1991 [1961]: 275–280). What feelings and experiences are at the bottom of the genesis of fringe nobles, and how are they transformed into a distinctively economic-abstract position?

We have seen the joy experienced in taking 'against-the-grain' positions, not only in economics but elsewhere, too. What can also be detected in the statements of these students is a general feeling of threat that is expressed in different ways. This is visible starting with private issues. Juergen, for example, when talking about the investment of his savings, thinks that a financial crisis is imminent, which is why he wants to invest his funds in gold ('real gold, no certificate gold') and state bonds ('the only safe haven'). Sophia emphasizes what she sees as the one-sidedness of the media:

- I: Hmh, well, I don't read that much newspaper, actually I read more, blogs and more in the internet, or simply the pure news. So, for example at Reuters.
T: Hmh.

- I: -ahm, like the pure information, the pure facts, that I also quite like with Handelsblatt online [a German business-focused newspaper], that they comment so little. You have the facts, and you can then form an opinion for yourself.
- T: Ok. Not like with ARD and ZDF [public German broadcasters]?
- I: Exactly [laughs]!
- T: [chuckles] Well, I don't like them either. There is always comment without end, right?
- I: Yes, and always in one direction, mostly in the same direction.

In the same vein, Robert's complains of his difficulty to find a job after graduation due to certain discriminations and regulations in relation to his physical impairment. This quickly develops into a more general critique of regulations per se:

As I said there are people that say [after one has applied to a job] 'We gonna get it done', and then you have people that say 'Oh, we have a problem now'. And against these, there I fight against windmills, that makes no sense [. . .] in Germany there are partially weird laws.

Similarly, Jakob engages in a rather fundamental critique of the school system that caused him a lot of trouble in his youth. For him, it is 'directed towards functioning', killing off creativity and innovation. These kinds of 'private' feelings of uneasiness with parts or the whole of society, often rather vague at first, seem to find a natural and rational expression in the concepts and propositions of ultraliberal economics. They can be clothed afresh, and just like fine feathers make fine birds, fitting concepts make convincing economists. This seems generally aided by the aspiration to make this transmogrifying leap into 'public concerns' (itself being a hallmark of a dominant habitus more generally, see Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 260–317). These 'social libidos' then become cornerstones within the epistemology of 'individualism' versus 'collectivism'. They are transformed into general public threats: to welfare, to democracy, to human rights, and to freedom. These 'collectivist' threats may consist in an 'exuberant' welfare state, in the bureaucratic rules imposed by the European Union (EU), in specific financial policies toward inflation and debt, in the felt impositions of the media system, and so on – all things that are now supposedly putting other civilizational achievements 'in jeopardy' (Hirschman, 1991: 110–121). At one meeting of the local Hayek-Society at the CSI that I attended, there was the hypothesis forwarded of an allegedly uniform 'leftist' media that distorts truth and information.

Bits and pieces of individual or family trajectories, such as the repression and expropriation of family members of some of these fringe noble students, can easily be woven into the construction of this identity, as a kind of teleology of becoming and being ultraliberal. Thus, Sophia justifies her initial choice for economics with her religious parents '[. . .] grew[ing] up in the GDR, suffer[ing] a lot under the regime [. . .]. This is how this interest in politics [i.e. political economy] came about'.

Here we come to the core of the identity construction of these fringe nobles within this field. If civilization is threatened through dynamics of 'collectivism', then the self-ascribed task for the economic fringe nobles is to save it through alerting the rest of society of the dangerous developments taking place in its midst, especially against massive

resistance and stubborn refusal to see ‘the facts’. This surely provides a feeling of principled and honorable resistance, a kind of ‘one-against-all’ feeling that may serve as a powerful tonic to motivate these students. Seen from a sociological lens, this procedure may be called a ‘one-up-manship’, being focused on ‘doing one better in purity’, as Bourdieu puts it. This also points us toward the specific boundary-maintaining function of these economic fringe nobles in our society, namely to symbolically police movements and individuals which ‘[. . .] may impede pure market logic [. . .]’ (Bourdieu, 1998).

Once again, the same feeling of threat can be seen in the intellectual ancestors of these students. Ludwig von Mises (2009 [1978]), for example, expresses similar fears when he remembers the ‘red Vienna’ period after World War I (p. 15):

I knew what was at stake. Bolshevism would lead Vienna to starvation and terror within a few days. Plundering hordes would take to the streets and a second blood bath would destroy what was left of Viennese culture.

Similarly, Hayek’s verdict of the New Deal social policies during and after World War II expresses a similar feeling of threat not only to economic well-being but also to culture in general (Hayek, 2001 [1944]: 13):

How sharp a break not only with the recent past but with the whole evolution of Western civilization the modern trend towards socialism means, becomes clear if we consider it not merely against the background of the nineteenth century, but in a longer historical perspective. We are rapidly abandoning not the views merely of Cobden and Bright, of Adam Smith and Hume, or even of Locke and Milton, but one of the salient characteristics of Western civilization as it has grown from the foundations laid by Christianity and the Greeks and Romans.

Further examples that relate to the fields discussed earlier can be found in Elias (1996 [1989]: 194).

In this section, I have asked how the social position of fringe nobles and the concomitant dispositions are ‘translated’ by the students into a genuine economic-academic stand. At the foundation of the choice for ultraliberal economics may be a profound yet fuzzy feeling of uneasiness with contemporary society. This feeling is transformed and publicized into one of threat and jeopardy for the whole of society. That transformation provides the fringe nobles in economics with a suitable identity, recognized and acceptable for themselves and others. This reflects back to how these students see their own history. These psychological and social processes produce an attitude of ‘one-against-all’ or ‘one-up-manship’. I will now turn to an exploration of how this attitude, and its concomitant cultural products, fares in other fields.

Beyond economics – The revolutionary potential of fringe nobles

I now turn to the exploration of attitudes toward the public and to the politics of these fringe nobles. There is, once again, the feeling of threat that pervades the statements of these students: Just like in the economic field, the fringe noble ultraliberals see ‘collectivist’ tendencies in the political field, tendencies which may lead to the damage or

destruction of democracy. This is the case with an argument that may be called ‘protection of minorities’. Sophia explains,

A very general critique, not necessarily seen from an economic point of view. [. . .] that [politicians such as Angela Merkel] are often too hungry for power. That she jumps on bandwagons, thus not really adjusting her opinion from what she thinks would be the best [. . .] that she pushes forward the opinion that she does publicly because she says ‘Ok, this is what my voters want, that is what brings the most votes’. That she simply doesn’t follow a clear line. [. . .] I do think this majority of people, or the majority of voters, are often, for example, also influenced by lobbyism, and, ah, by laws that have existed for a long time. Those [laws] that are tightly established, so I think this public opinion then often is not really the opinion of the majority. Or rather if I always follow the majority through laws, I of course also suppress minorities through that.

Similarly, with Jakob, we too find a critique of actually existing democracy and a plea for a kind of ‘subsidiary principle’:

- I: [. . .] that is the way it is, you don’t feel represented. I mean you then always have to ask in how far you can be represented in a representative democracy at all, because in a party I can make politics only for one [group] alone, and therefore it somehow will get difficult, to find a party with which one overlaps very strongly.
- T: Hmh, well, is there a better model than representative democracy?
- I: Well, I could imagine that if you shift many decisions to the local level, maybe a direct democracy [makes] after all more sense. [. . .] And I mean, there of course this [i.e. his] liberal mindset comes through, to say ‘Let us simply decide this on the lowest possible level’, meaning preferably directly with the individual, meaning no democracy at all, but freedom, or with things that are decided communally at least [to make the decisions] on the least functional level, meaning on the community level. [. . .] there is of course always the danger, even in a democracy, that a not insignificant minority is not taken into account [. . .].

From the viewpoint of fringe nobles, it makes sense to emphasize the threats to democracy springing from the ‘tyranny of majority’. Their positioning within the political field is just as typical as their activity within it. Unlike many other recognized students of my sample, the fringe noble economists are much more often engaged in forms of journalism (i.e. activities outside of the field of academic economics) before, during or after their studies. Sophia operated a blog during her studies and now works as a journalist for an economic newspaper. Jakob worked for a newspaper during his studies. Eric publishes articles on blogs, as does Johanna. Many, too, were or are engaged in politically charged activities. Jakob was committed to the Free Democrats, Sophia to a small, rather unknown splinter party. Let us now look at the nature and style of this engagement.

What can be detected is a peculiar political homelessness. Sophia, for example, ‘is not voting at all [. . .] because I find it wrong to vote. Or rather I of course charge no one with [not voting], but I say for myself personally, I couldn’t advocate this [chuckles]’. Jakob

professes that ‘my party doesn’t exist’ because he is ‘totally liberal’ [gesamoliberal]. Eric says of himself that he is ‘politically without a home’. Overall, there is much more than with the inheritors who, albeit with hesitations and qualifications, often choose one of the major German parties (such as conservatives, social democrats or free liberals), a distinct rejection to even commit nominally to an existing party, despite their evident political interest and engagement.

Instead, there is an interesting openness for potentially new, radical forces on the political scene. Jakob mentions ‘joke parties’ such as the German satire party ‘The Party’ (Die Partei) as ‘the modern form of not voting’. Often there is a critique on the free liberal or conservative parties, which have left their original line through which, in Eric’s sense, ‘a hole for all middle-class people’ was created, meaning a lack of political representation. Johanna finds the choice of a political party ‘difficult’ before choosing, as a ‘joke’, the Marxist-Leninist party of Germany. Sophia also explains,

[After deciding against major parties and for non-voting] all that is left is splinter parties such as the Party of Reason [PdV], but those, there of course also cluster strange personalities and figures. [. . .] There are also people in there who believe in conspiracy theories and things like that.

Predictably, the fringe noble economists are selecting, if they indeed make a serious consideration of support, those upcoming or splinter parties that are liberal or libertarian in character. They prefer those parties that are not spoiled by taking part in ‘collectivist’ undertakings, which may disrupt the usual, and dangerously jeopardizing, way of politics that, in their view, defines the current state of things. It is, therefore, barely surprising that these considerations also included, at the time of the interviews, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Now, anyone that deals with German politics knows that parties such as the PdV or the AfD are not only libertarian, but also harbor a decidedly conservative strain that veers toward nationalism, xenophobia, and traditional gender roles. And so do the fringe nobles of my sample. They realize that ‘the AfD for me, in certain areas, is too illiberal’, as Jakob puts it. Eric is ‘to and fro’ with regard to it. On the one hand, he appreciates that ‘topics and positions’ are addressed by them – topics that touch on the allegedly oppressive nature of EU-regulation, over-regulation in general, but also the challenge of ‘political correctness’. He seems ready to accept the ‘nationalist kerfuffle’ of the party for what he sees as the re-introduction of ‘classically liberal positions’. Even Johanna ‘share[s] in many points the critique on the EU’. Indeed, a look at the intellectual support for the AfD shows that this uneasy alliance is more than an accident or a fad. For example, the ultra-liberal professor at the CSI did at first support the AfD. So did other, leading German ultraliberals such as Joachim Starbatty. In fact, in its early days the AfD was also known as the ‘economist’s Party’ due to its high number of economics professors in it, many of whom do have ultraliberal leanings. This support was eventually withdrawn (at least for the most part) when the AfD drifted more and more to the political right and its nationalist and traditionalist agenda became more dominant. But the issue remains and is evidently broader than the AfD. The same ambiguity between liberalism and conservatism can be seen on an institutional level: for example, with the German Hayek-Society in

which these accommodating tendencies toward right-wing populist thought are clearly visible (see Plickert, 2015) or with US-American libertarian thought (Ganz, 2017). Why is this so?

Once more, one may refer to the eagerness to draw boundaries, boundaries that are necessarily relying on their own symbolic vigor rather than on institutional processes behind them. This makes ultraliberal fringe nobles prone to a kind of nihilism and ‘moral color blindness’. Eric explains this in his justification of methodological individualism:

- I: [. . .] I mean we all have preferences, those are different, logically. And in how far is ah. . . I mean we all have a preference to earn good money. [. . .] I first don't believe anybody who says ‘I am totally indifferent what future economic prospects [. . .]’. That is always fraught with side conditions, like, that I am already doing reasonably well [. . .]. And ah, to what degree preferences are distributed . . . and how much of that is due to monetary things, maybe with status and prestige and who knows what could play into that as well, into a monetary perspective. Compared to ‘I want to do something what . . . what I like, or a deeper understanding of society, or whatever’. [. . .] Where is the difference there? I mean, purely normatively, I don't get it. [. . .] if we speak of greedy people, for example, then we always speak of people greedy for money, but you could also be greedy for smoking dope.

It is almost as if their position in social space and the necessity to achieve distinction via bold position-takings is undermining their rootedness in universally shared norms. The latter may be weakened even more if their position in social space is deteriorating. This would explain the radicalism of some fringe nobles like Ernst von Salomon or of fringe noble economists like Ludwig von Mises vis-à-vis the relatively moderate (and more successful) Friedrich Hayek, often considered to be the ‘social democrat’ of ultraliberal economists. Then the focus on the purification of an existing norm may, with growing disillusionment and frustration, flip into a negation of the whole symbolic space. In other words, under certain circumstances, the social function of boundary maintenance that fringe noble economics contribute to for the whole of the dominant class may turn into a dissolution of boundaries, above all moral boundaries, and may contribute to symbolic revolutions.

This is expressed very vividly by Ernst von Salomon who recalls his talk with a fellow fringe noble during World War II about the disposition to ‘cross the line’ (‘über den Graben springen’) with regard to do what may be unthinkable for other groups, whether it is the killing of Weimar Republic politicians or even the assassination of Hitler (Salomon, 1951: 152f.). It is because they don't ‘want to live in the lie’ that they ‘know’ that it is their ‘turn’ to ‘cross lines’ and end the ‘absolute corruption’ of what they perceive to be an unacceptable state of things.

This somewhat resonates with Thomas' remark, after I asked him why he supports right-wing populist speakers and parties (such as UKIP), that he ‘just need[s] this for [his] own sanity, get things off [him] and to release the pressure’. For better or for worse for the whole of society, there seems an invariant tendency to shun dominant norms and rules, and to practically and symbolically combine aspects usually held apart in the dominant part of a field.

But it also seems clear that there are other ways in which the purification dispositions of fringe nobles can contribute to partial or conservative revolutions. If there are, for example, enough groups in social space that are in need of signs of distinction due to their own liminal or fallen position, then this may, by way of analogy of position, create new and unforeseen ways of adoption and adaptation to fringe noble economist's ideas. In the case of these fallen nobles, this seems clear in terms of the non-economic leadership of the AfD which can be said to be close to fringe noble social origin itself (Bednarski and Kumkar, 2013) and which exhibits a very similar fear of decline (Bednarski and Kumkar, 2013: 230). But it also seems clear vertically speaking, looking at the typical AfD-base that may be called male 'petite bourgeois' itself, particularly that with less cultural capital (Vorländer et al., 2015).

Fringe noble economist's critiques – like that of the 'collectivist' and 'oppressive' European Union with its 'distorting' subsidies and 'oppressive' regulations – give an objective air and lend legitimacy to the claims of these symbolically threatened groups, perhaps especially when the options from which they can choose political meanings have shrunk (Hann, 2011). But they may just as well be stretched and extended, and thus lodged out of their original positioning as strictly libertarian positions by the force of different uses and insertion into different social contexts (Willis, 2010).

We have seen a similarly unintentional 'door-opening assistance' fringe nobles rendered to the national socialists in Weimar Republic in Elias' account above. The fringe noble economists themselves, however, seem to be in no good position to become aware of this. They tend to block reflexive endeavor of this kind by their insistence on the irreducibility of the individual to explanatory factors which, they hold, is a 'pretense of knowledge' (Hayek, 1945).

Conclusion – Between conservation and change

In this article, I have made the case for the sociology of elites to look at the borders of its subject matter – at a group I termed 'fringe nobles'. Although often neglected in both the elite and class literature, this group is sociologically interesting precisely because of this specific position in social space and the space of the dominant class. Hailing from a relational, and especially Bourdieusian, perspective, I have explored the specific dispositions of habitus that follow from this peculiar position through discussion a few historical examples. I have then, finally, explored a few fringe nobles that I encountered in my own work on study selection and motivation. In all these cases, a disposition toward symbolic purification of respective field norms and rules can be found. This is also a disposition for boundary maintenance. I have attempted to show how a fringe position in dominant social space, specific dispositions, and feelings of this group may interact to bring about distinct position-takings in line with (though not reducible to) this fringe position. I have furthermore shown what I think to be a sociologically pertinent similarity in the position-takings of different fringe nobles in different fields or states of fields, which alluded at the unintentional, societal functions or dysfunctions that fringe nobles perform in their respective social fields. All this has been done in an exploratory vein and would need to be corroborated and fleshed out through a more systematic, validating assembling of data, both in terms of quantity (i.e. the number of cases or cases in fields

looked at, including eventual statistical validations if possible) and quality (i.e. the depth of knowledge of particular fringe nobles and their 'styles of life').

Apart from this, and given the very promising indications drawn from this enquiry, what may be the implications of the fringe noble concept for the sociology of class and elites? Which questions are to be tackled next?

Perhaps the first conclusion that this article suggests is to look more carefully and systematically at the role of the 'intermediator', which is often employed to explain 21st-century class and elite reproduction (Davis and Williams, 2017; Savage and Williams, 2008; Wedel, 2017: 17f.). Even though this role is (often) fitting to fringe nobles, it blurs the specific ways in which they contribute to social reproduction. It also leaves unexplained the issue of them at times 'tipping' toward more radically combatting the order of the social and elite fields. It would seem as if the first issue needs to be resolved by carefully looking, and comparing, the different kinds of intermediaries there can be for the elites, and how, in different historical circumstances, they may converge or diverge in their functions. Again, this seems only doable by relating social position to disposition, and by specifying this for a particular field. One in-depth study by Angus Burgin (2012) on the various members of the Mont Pelerin Society, for example, shows very well the differences in intermediary services to (business) elites rendered by fringe nobles like Mises or Hayek vis-à-vis parvenus such as Milton Friedman. This would also entail a clearer, and more systematic, localization of fringe nobles. In other words, who exactly are the fringe nobles of today, and where can we find them? An obvious suspect in earlier social fields were declining aristocrats, but nowadays one may just as well count ruined business magnates or whole declining professions or groups among them. Other professional fields like think tanks or journalism come to mind (Medvetz, 2014). There would, then, obviously also be a distinction among capital composition which needs to be reckoned with and which likely makes for very different expressions of the position of fringe nobles in different areas of the social and elite fields, expressions that would need to be discerned as expressions of fringe noble habitus as such. The second issue concerns the 'tipping point' when individual position-takings to retain boundaries take on such a form so as to veer toward symbolic revolutions, whether conservative or not. Here I would suggest for further studies to have a closer look at two things – first, more traditionally, the degree of integration of fringe nobles into the specific field of the dominant class. In other words, are there enough 'safety nets' (Wacquant, 1993: 29) so as to prevent fringe nobles from falling too far and thus to develop too radical a position-taking versus the whole elite class? Sociological gut feeling would tend to answer this question in the affirmative, having in mind the burgeoning field of think tanks, cultural intermediary positions, and the like where one would expect a particularly high share of fringe nobles. They would thus remain reasonably integrated into the system they therefore have an interest in defending, despite the otherwise seemingly radical positions. On the contrary, an absence of these opportunities may indeed radicalize them (Gusfield, 1962: 24). Future studies may link this re-secured, changed position (which may also prevent re-ascendency into the elite proper) with a closer in-depth study of how this may cut off rationalizations and thoughts that lead toward abandoning major elite norms and cultural traits (as in the rupture by Hayek or UK conservative philosophers).

But then, second, the very fact of the lengthening of chains of domination and interaction may indeed offset this integration. It may do so by the electronically fostered autonomization of perception of cultural-symbolic products through online communication, which tends to prevent disappointing personal contact of various groups with homological, yet nevertheless very different positions in different fields. The same mechanism may ensure a more continuous misinterpretation of cultural products that may indeed offset the integration of fringe nobles and thus give their cultural products a fictitious, yet real revolutionary and mobilizing impulse (Bourdieu, 1988 [1984]: 173–179) – this is one way in which one may see the peculiar arrangements of ultraliberal economists with right-wing populists. This dynamic of production and reception of cultural ideas would deserve further detailed study, thus linking the sociology of class and inequality with digital sociology and the sociology of knowledge and cognition as well as political mobilization. A more synthetic sociology of elites needs to keep in sight the mutual perception and influence not only of these groups, but also of other groups, to model better the ‘orchestration of the unconscious’ (Bourdieu) that takes places through these actions. We will then be able to model and see much clearer the specific contribution to ‘lengthening chains of dominations’ that fringe nobles help to (re)make or break.

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ORCID iD

Tim Winzler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1914-3100>

Notes

1. I shall call a structural ideal-type one that condenses a great many seemingly disparate observations from different fields and times under one ‘family’ of meanings derived from the structural position in social space. Unlike the Weberian Ideal-type (Weber, 1969), this procedure goes beyond face-value groupings of observable empirical phenomena, based on the primacy (but not exclusivity) of theoretical construction (see Bourdieu et al., 1991 [1968]: 35–38 and also Bourdieu, 1987 [1971]).
2. This has already been observed by Lawrence Stone in his seminal account of the crisis of English aristocracy in the 16th and 17th century: ‘[. . .] the challenge to their authority came not from capitalists or bourgeoisie, but from solid landowners *only one notch further down the social and economic ladder*, the squires and greater gentry’ (Stone, 1965: 11, emphasis mine).

3. The term ‘middle-class’ seems ill-fitting here since this group, at least in its self-view, precisely does not want to be middle-class but to distinguish itself from it.
4. This peaceful relationship between men and lieutenants by Jünger is strongly euphemized. See, for a more sober view Viktor Klemperer’s (1989) reminiscences (pp. 365–383) and the accounts assembled in Wette (1992: 131f.; 136–145).
5. Indeed, it is thus no accident that the staunchest opposition to the French revolution came from the camp of the minor aristocracy, as epitomized by Charlotte Corday, who assassinated Marat.
6. Other examples can easily be found, for example, the Brazilian tribe of the Caduveo examined by Levi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* bear strikingly similar features to the instances elaborated on here. There, too, we have a former elite position that is now lost, the lamentation of former glory being symbolically expressed in the elaboration of a particular cultural practice, namely face paintings:

In this charming civilization, the female beauties trace the outlines of the collective dream with their make-up, their patterns are hieroglyphs describing an inaccessible golden age, which they extol in their ornamentation, since they have no code to in which to express it, and whose mysteries they disclose as they reveal their nudity. (Levi-Strauss, 1978 [1955]: 196f.)

7. Understood as applying Bourdieusian thought as a ‘systematically unified metatheory’ (see the study by Brubaker, 1985: 769f.) from which a specific theory needs to be developed.
8. Monique de Saint-Martin and Ohnacker (2003: 201f.) is able to detect a similar anti-specialist attitude in her study of the remnants of French aristocracy.

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Author biography

Tim Winzler is post-doctoral tutor at the University of Glasgow. He conducts research in the sociologies of knowledge, social class, higher education, and science. In his PhD, he developed a (Bourdiesian) social class approach to study choices in Higher Education. More recently, he has focused on the study of the cultural and political expressions of lower middle class groups in contemporary Germany.