

## **Polo: distinction, sports and stigma in the nobility. Spain, 1900-1950.**

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Pedro Nolasco González de Soto was major wine producer and exporter in Southern Spain. At the beginning of 1917 he overheard the King was thinking about granting him a title. In fact, it is very likely that he himself had taken steps through a contact in the Court to get the title. Part of the procedure was to refer a number of merits to justify the concession. But when the proposal reached one of the competent institutions that had to judge about the granting, its opinion was negative. It was the *Diputación* of the Grandees which considered such merits as "poor relief" although "is a person of some activity and prestige"<sup>1</sup>.

The applicant, very disappointed, wrote to the secretary of the King expressing his disillusion. For him it was clear that his sports initiatives were not liked the *Diputación*, especially his enthusiasm for polo. However, this was not so obvious. Polo was a popular sport for the nobility, some of its members practiced it and others attended country clubs in Spain and abroad where it was played with passion. But it seems clear that playing polo was not equivalent to being admitted into the circles of the nobility or to be ennobled through a title.

The role of sports as an element of distinction is the subject of this paper. Since the late nineteenth century the nobility began practicing some sports apart from hunting. Tennis, motor racing or golf were widespread entertainments throughout Europe practiced by leading elites. Polo conferred a special nuance. In Spain the King played it and some of the most important noblemen of the country did the same. During the first half of the twentieth century polo became an element of distinction that the nobility used as a new ingredient in its symbolic capital. Such incorporation represented a major change because it had little to do with history, family or land, traditional pillars of aristocratic distinction. Polo was a clear demonstration of the ability of some noblemen to adapt and, even more, to reformulate their strategies to maintain their prestigious position in a twentieth-century society. Albeit paying a price.

Monique de Saint Martin thinks that the dynamism of reconversion processes is the constant feature of the European nobility that faces extreme challenges, such as the Soviet Revolution. Saint Martin has also stressed that aristocratic elites from nations with decisive though not as drastic social changes after the Great War -Britain, Turkey, Hungary, Germany, France- endured thanks to their ability for reconversion<sup>2</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> The *Diputación* was the representative institution of the Grandees of Spain. It was authorized to give its opinion on the concession of new titles. *Informe de la Diputación de la Grandeza de España*, April 11 1917. Archivo General del Ministerio de Justicia, marquesado de Torre Soto de Briviesca, leg. 91-3, exp. 803. *Carta de Pedro González de Soto a Emilio María de Torres*, April 9 1917. Archivo General de Palacio, marquesado de Torre Soto de Briviesca, c. 12436 d. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Monique de SAINT MARTIN, "Reconversions and downward social mobility among nobilities in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries", Yme KUIPER, Nikolaj BIJLEVELD and Jaap DRONKERS, *Nobilities in Europe in the Twentieth Century: Reconversion Strategies, Memory Culture and Elite Formation*, Leuven, Peeters, 2015. pp. 315-316.

Spanish case was well suited to test this approach. Spain moved from a constitutional monarchy with undemocratic constraints (1902-1931) to a very brief republican project (1931-1936) that ended in a civil war known by its international dimensions (1936-1939). The war was followed by a long dictatorship (1939-1975) with fascist connotations but extremely traditional underpinnings as well.

In this context, the nobility played a prominent role as a social elite. His endurance, despite the productive effort of analysis, has little to do with the 'feudal' interpretation on the persistence offered by Arno Mayer<sup>3</sup>. The study of the role played by the sport of polo also qualifies Schumpeter's view on the symbiosis between an atavistic nobility and the emerging bourgeoisie, a point of view even more influential than the Gramscian interpretation of hegemonies and power blocs<sup>4</sup>. In this paper, we are not trying to trace the various steps towards a foretold decline, as Cannadine masterfully did for Britain or Cardoza for Italy<sup>5</sup>. In the line of Malinowski and Mandler, we want to question the success that led the nobility to find new fields to distinguish itself and prolong their differentiated status<sup>6</sup>. So creating distinctiveness, essentially aristocratic but open to new incorporations, would be a central theme and evidence of a remarkable innovative capacity, as Leonhard and Wieland pointed out<sup>7</sup>.

Two elements of analysis seem also relevant. The option polo as an element of distinction, a practice and means of sociability, became a source of conflict. Both within the group and outside it, this change calls into question the recognition from within and from outside. In fact, in this specific historical context, it turned into a social stigma, which sometimes they attempted to deny while others they pretended to turn around as a distinction enhancer<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, polo used as a strategy of distinction by the nobility suggests the importance of symbolic boundaries to promote inequality. At the same time it stresses the complex overlapping between social and symbolic boundaries that scholars such as Lamont has paid attention to<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Arno J. MAYER, *The persistence of the old regime: Europe to the Great War*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. SCHUMPETER, *Capitalism, socialism, and democracy*, London, Gallen & Unwin ltd, 1943; in Spain, Antonio Gramsci's influence came through the works of Tuñón de Lara. For instance Manuel TUÑÓN DE LARA, *Historia y realidad del poder: (el poder y las élites en el primer tercio de la España del siglo XX)*, Madrid, Cuadernos para el Diálogo, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> David CANNADINE, *The Decline and fall of the British aristocracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990; Anthony L. CARDOZA, *Aristocrats in bourgeois Italy: the Piedmontese nobility, 1861-1930*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Stephan MALINOWSKI, *Vom König zum Führer: deutscher Adel und Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt a.M, Fischer, 2004; Peter MANDLER, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, Yale University Press, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> John LEONHARD and Christian WIELAND, "Noble identities from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century", John LEONHARD and Christian WIELAND (dir.), *What Makes the Nobility Noble?: Comparative Perspectives from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011, pp. 7-34.

<sup>8</sup> Erving GOFFMAN, *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*, New York, Jaronson, 1974; Pierre BOURDIEU, "Rites as acts of institution" in John G. PERISTANY and Julian Alfred PITT-RIVERS, *Honor and grace in anthropology*, Cambridge England; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 79-90.

<sup>9</sup> Michèle LAMONT and Virag MOLNAR, "The study of boundaries in social sciences", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28(2002), pp. 167-195. Michèle LAMONT, Stefan BELJEAN and Matthew CLAIR, "What

More recently, Peter Mandler wondered whether the nobility could be considered a caste or class in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the question seems somehow behind the point, its emphasis on visibility and discretion connects with the proposals by Saint Martin about the need to put aside the essences to study the adaptations and reinventions of the nobility. Polo in Spain can contribute much considerably to this effort<sup>10</sup>.

### **Building distinction.**

It is usual to associate the introduction of polo in Spain with the person of Alfonso XII (1857-1885). Although the connection with Britain appears immediately (he was a cadet at Sandhurst), his early death cut short the evolution of his reign. His son Alfonso XIII (1886-1941) took the baton as a symbol of the emergence of the sport. The chroniclers of the period stressed the King's passion for sports in general and his habit of surrounding himself with an entourage of friends of similar interests<sup>11</sup>. Polo soon became one of his favorite hobbies, practicing it until 1920s. Without denying the influence of the monarch, from the very beginning it was apparent the interest polo awakened among some nobles of great importance. As a sort of bridge between the two kings, some noblemen continued playing polo matches in the 1890s on the outskirts of Madrid. They were the Duke of Arión, the Marquis of Villamejor, the Duke of Santoña, the Marquis of Larios and the Marquis of San Felices de Aragón. All of them were relatively recent titles, but well connected with the core of Madrid society by their economic relevance and closeness to the monarch<sup>12</sup>. The first decade of the twentieth century was critical in the nobility's development of polo as an element of distinction. First of all, it came the seed of a society called Polo-Club where all the presidents were *grandees of Spain*<sup>13</sup>. The Duke of Alba was its first president and, after his death, his son took office and held it without interruption until 1931<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, the King's interest in the sport led him to rely on a number of people to promote the practice. They ended up being very close to him. The first one was the Marquis de Viana, *grandee of Spain*, with an important position in the Court, although not recognized as one of the main titles at first. The second of these promoters was the Marquis de Villavieja. Mexican born, he had settled in Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. His marriage with a Spanish noblewoman introduced him to much more exclusive circles than those which were accessible to Viana by himself. Villavieja was one of the great promoters of polo at the European level: Leopold II

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is missing? Cultural processes and casual pathways to inequality", *Socio-Economic Review*, 12(2014), pp. 573-608.

<sup>10</sup> Peter MANDLER, "Caste or class? The social and political identity of the British aristocracy since 1800" in John LEONHARD and Christian WIELAND (dir.), *What Makes the Nobility Noble?: Comparative Perspectives from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011, pp. 178-187. Monique de SAINT MARTIN, "Reconversions and downward social mobility...", p. 305.

<sup>11</sup> "The King trained sports in leisure hours with the children of the nobility who have been educated in England", Melchor Almagro San Martín, *Biografía del 1900*, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1943, p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> Mariola GÓMEZ LAÍNEZ, *El Real Club de la Puerta de Hierro*, Madrid, Real Club de la Puerta de Hierro, 2010, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the century, there were more than three hundred titles with *Grandeza* (although only two hundred and fifty held them). There were more than two thousand titles without *Grandeza*. Previously, this honor was extremely connected with the origins of the title. By that time, it was more of a higher distinction among titles. Juan MORENO DE GUERRA Y ALONSO, *Guía de la grandeza*, Madrid, s.n., 1925.

<sup>14</sup> Mariola GÓMEZ LAÍNEZ, *El Real Club de la Puerta de Hierro*, pp. 36-37.

entrusted him with the design and development of the Ostend polo field between 1902 and 1904<sup>15</sup>.

The Viana-Villavieja duo gave a great boost to the sport. Through these means both consolidated their position as members of the most exclusive circle of the nobility, created distinction opportunities within and outside Spain and started a hostility that tells a great deal about disputes regarding distinction. The Marquis de Viana began to organize a series of "polo weeks" that became a social act of great exclusivity since 1908. For this purpose Viana designed a polo field on his property in Moratalla (Cordoba) in southern Spain. In an eighteenth century palace, not only was he able to accommodate their guests; step by step, he madet some of the most exclusive members of high society like to attend these sessions.

Matches took place during the months when the season had not yet started in country clubs and he also invited foreign players to serve as sport developers. In the 1909 polo week three levels of attendees can be appreciated. First, the presence of the King and the Queen drew his closest entourage (Duke of Santo Mauro, Marquis of Torrecilla and Duchess of San Carlos). They were joined by a group of nobles interested in sports and others who came to these meetings due to the prestige of the audience gathered. There were the Dukes of Arión, Santoña and San Pedro de Galatino. Finally there was a group of non nobles participants, all involved in polo. Some of them were veterans but others were young players. Among the latter were Leopoldo Sáinz de la Maza and Justo San Miguel. Both became gradually indispensable in any match or polo week and joined the exclusive core. Both got a title few years later and married women of prestigious ennobled families<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Marqués de VILLAVIEJA, *Life has been good: memoirs of the marqués de Villavieja*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1938. The relationship between Leopold II and Villavieja was controversial. Villavieja was a perfect anglophile whereas Leopold of Belgium wanted to build his own field because he thought the British "think they are the only people who know how to play a game".

<sup>16</sup> Leopoldo Sáinz case was especially interesting. In 1910 the King granted him a title with the count de la Maza denomination. 'Maza' was his second surname but also the name to call the polo mallet in Spanish. AGP, Condado de la Maza, c. 12434 d. 24.

Figure 1. Polo week in Moratalla. March 13-21 1909<sup>17</sup>.



Standing: left to right. 4<sup>th</sup>, duke of Santo Mauro; 6<sup>th</sup>, marquis de Viana; 7<sup>th</sup>, Alfonso XIII; 8<sup>th</sup>, marquis of Torrecilla. Seated: 2<sup>nd</sup>, duke of Santoña; 3<sup>rd</sup>, duke of Arión; 4<sup>th</sup>, duchess of Santoña; 5<sup>th</sup>, Queen Victoria Eugenia; 7<sup>th</sup>, duchess of San Carlos; 9<sup>th</sup>, marquis of Villavieja. On the floor: 1<sup>st</sup>, Leopoldo Sáinz de la Maza; 2<sup>nd</sup>, Justo San Miguel; 3<sup>th</sup>, duke San Pedro de Galatino; 4<sup>th</sup>, count of the Real.

Moratalla Weeks were repeated every year but there is no evidence that the King went continually there. In 1911 the Duke of Alba, perhaps the best known noble in Spain, attended it. The organization was really careful, asking the Marquis de Viana how many ponies each player would bring and the number of employees for care<sup>18</sup>.

In 1914 polo underwent a change of great significance. Until then, if you wanted to play polo in Spain, you had to go to the fields promoted by the King in some of its palaces, to Moratalla or to those in Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao and Jerez that had mainly also other uses. In Madrid, particularly significant as the capital, it was decided to establish a country club that tied together other sports like tennis and golf with polo. The main characteristic of the so called Real Club Puerta de Hierro was that it created an exclusive sociability space where polo had a role as essential as the nobility who headed the club. The symbolic dimension of polo was underscored by the news accounts that covered the opening of the club and the first games played in its field. The audience mattered, but no more than the players. As a contemporary magazine said, "Picturesque polo matches are often attended by true blue blood ladies. Aristocratic sport deserves an audience of aristocrats"<sup>19</sup>. The rise of some figures of the sport was well connected with these changes. One of the most famous was the Duke of Peñaranda, younger brother of

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<sup>17</sup> Archivo Histórico Viana. Sección fotografías, F006.

<sup>18</sup> Players used between for and five ponies and two and four stewards. AHV, administración y cuentas, *letters by duke Alba, count of the Cimera, duke of Arión and count of Maza to marquis of Viana*, leg. 117, d. 47-50.

<sup>19</sup> *Gran Mundo*, March 15th 1914 and April 15th 1914.

the Duke of Alba. Big landowner, restless traveler and hunter, polo became his favorite hobby and the press defined him as "our best polo player".

Figure 2. The Duke of Peñaranda dressed as a polo player by Kaulak<sup>20</sup>.



Like him, other players came up and joined the Count de la Maza or Justo San Miguel as the most recognized champions. Among them were the sons of the Count of Romanones. Liberal politician, Minister and President of the Cabinet on several occasions, he was a Grandee of Spain, but from a social point of view he was not accepted as an equal by many others. However, several of his children began to take part in the polo matches in Moratalla and Puerta de Hierro. Four of his sons –the Count of Dehesa de Velayos, the Marquis of Villabrágima, the Marquis of San Damián and the Count of Yebes- practiced assiduously polo, which gave them a closeness with aristocratic circles that they did not have in the same way before. An evidence of this is that all of them married daughters of Grandees of Spain or other noblemen with a very prominent profile<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Biblioteca Nacional de España, fondo Kaulak, LF1, V2, 1360.

<sup>21</sup> Velayos married a daughter of the Count of Torre Arias, San Damián wed a daughter of the Count of Floridablanca and the Count of Yebes got married with a daughter of the Count of the Viñaza. Villabrágima married the Marquis of Donadio's daughter. One of Romanones's brothers, also a polo player, died in 1920 fighting in the war that Spain waged in the North of Africa. His youngest brother, Agustín, never played polo but wrote instead he wrote a memoir that talked about it and the "Gran Equipo" of polo. Agustín de FIGUEROA, *Dentro y fuera de mi vida*, Madrid, Guadarrama, 1955.

As it mentioned at the beginning of the paper, playing polo was not equivalent to be at the same social position as all players. Hierarchies were still present, although the sport served to overcome exclusive borders in some degree. The case of Pedro González de Soto and the denial of his title due to sports reasons is eloquent. In this respect, the important strategies deployed by the Marquis de Viana make more sense: he was always interested in deciding how he could guide the development of polo in Spain, as well as defining the creation of various networks of sociability around sport. This caused tensions but not fractures: borders wanted to be established in any case. Power sharing was the toughest thing to decide on<sup>22</sup>. These strategies show that polo was part of the distinctiveness that the nobility unfolded with an intention of originality in the 1910s. In this regard, it is not only a social boundary dependent on a number of resources, but also a symbolic one. Titles, relationships and polo mattered, but it was the mixture between all these elements of distinction that was unbeatable. This means that the concept of 'noble capital' employed by Bourdieu (which not just visibility) needs to incorporate something so practical, so physical as sport. The noblemen who played polo were intertwining social boundaries (money was needed to practice polo) with cultural (playing or attending polo matches) and symbolic ones (belonging to the nobility) reformulating a distinction that was far from static<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> There were many references to these power struggles in Marquis de VILLAVIEJA, *Life has been good*, pp. 243-248. Some letters between the Duke of Alba and Villavieja were illuminating: “you know that all these upsets have no easy remedy. This is a person who seems to have put a major interest in life in being hated and he is getting it. You should ignore everything else because you know that the King always ends up accepting you are right”, *Duke of Alba to the Marquis de Villavieja letter*, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1923. Archivo Fundación Casa de Alba, fondo Don Jacobo, c. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre BOURDIEU, “Postface”, Didier LANCIEU et Monique de SAINT MARTIN, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties de 1880 à nos jours*, Paris, Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2007, pp. 385-397 ; Eric HOBBSAWM, "Mass producing traditions, Europe 1870-1914", Eric J. HOBBSAWM and T. O. RANGER (ED.), *The Invention of tradition*, Canto, Cambridge ; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 263-307.

Figure 3. Polo week in Moratalla. April 23rd to 29th, 1916<sup>24</sup>.



Behind: left to right. 8th, Joaquín Santos Suárez; 9th, Alfonso XIII. Middle standing: 3rd, the Count de la Címera; 6th, the Duke of Santo Mauro; 8th, Justo San Miguel; 9th, the Marquis de Villavieja; 10th, the Duke of Arión. Front row: 2nd, the Duchess of San Carlos; 3rd, the Marquis de Viana; 4th, Queen Victoria Eugenia; 7th, the Count of the Maza.

One of the elements that defined polo since the beginning was the British connection. The Marquis of Villavieja learned how to play it over there and King Alfonso XII brought it to Spain from the British Isles. The relevance of Queen Victoria Eugenia has been always stressed to explain the Court's interest in sports but it is little more than an anecdote compared with the great interest of her husband, Alfonso XIII. Apart from the implicit Anglomania, polo was a sport designed to be played on an international stage. Spanish players went to Hurlingham, Ostend or Deauville. They even found enough time to play it in Carlsbad. Alba, Santoña and Peñaranda played polo at the coronation of Edward VII in 1910. Indeed, it was the Marquis of Villavieja who organized a polo match for the Prince of Wales debut in 1921 and there were playing again the Duke of Peñaranda and the Marquis of Villabragima. When the Marquis de Villavieja said polo was "something else", he was obviously thinking about his visits to Britain but also in certain a way of life, which perhaps included a lot of cosmopolitanism –a transnational dimension, we would say- embodied in this sport.

The international dimension does not change its exclusive status. On the contrary, it seems to emphasize it. This could be seen in the Spanish participation in the Antwerp and Paris Olympic Games celebrated in 1920 and 1924, respectively. On both occasions the Spanish team was composed of a set of players remarkably aristocratic. In Antwerp (actually they played in Ostend) competed the Duke of Peñaranda, the Count de la Maza,

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<sup>24</sup> AHV. Sección fotografías, F005.

the Duke of Alba and the Marquis de Villabrágima. Peñaranda, Maza and Villabrágima repeated in Paris and were joined by the Marquis de San Miguel and the Count de la Dehesa de Velayos.

Polo was not a mass sport, of course, nor included any element of nationalization in the sense that some elite sports –such as tennis- had already raised. It was exclusive and far from the kind of nationalism that blurred class inequalities. Notwithstanding, the Olympics highlighted the renewed role played by "selfless activities", defined by Monique de Saint Martin, in the redefinition of the concept of nobility on those occasions. Private initiatives, social institutions and international events were a demonstration that an essential piece of 'noble capital' is its constant cultivation through diverse initiatives in their dimensions and impact that never ceases to reproduce distinction<sup>25</sup>.

Figure 4. Polo week in Moratalla. April 23th to 30th 1922<sup>26</sup>.



Standing behind: left to right: 5<sup>th</sup>, the Marquis of San Miguel; 10<sup>th</sup>, the Marquis de Viana.  
Second line: 1st, the Marquis de Villavieja; 2nd, the Marquis de San Damián; 6th, the Duke of Alba.  
Front row: 5th, Queen Victoria Eugenia; 6th, Alfonso XIII (with the Duke of Peñaranda's son in his arms); 7th, the Duchess of Peñaranda (the Marquis de Viana daughter).

### **Polo, stigma and luxury perception.**

In Pierre Bourdieu's words, recognition of distinction is a key element in building an exclusive identity. On the one hand, this recognition would depend on the distinction making sense by itself and, on the other, on an agreement from outside and also within

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<sup>25</sup> ABC, August 3rd 1920. Monique de SAINT MARTIN, *L'espace de la noblesse*, Paris, Editions Métailié, 1993, pp. 132-153.

<sup>26</sup> AHV. Sección fotografías, F0354.

the group or within other similar elites<sup>27</sup>. Sports, and more specifically polo, became a subject of controversy because of its recognition as an element of distinction. In such disputes it can be perceived the difficulty of incorporating a new element to a previously fixed *habitus*. At the same time, the arguments in favor of *habitus* modifications raise the perspective of the 'innovation' and reconversion logic of the nobility in the early twentieth century.

By the height of 1914, the same year Club Puerta de Hierro opened, some voices close to the noblemen were heard criticizing the image they gave of themselves. Polo was in the eyes of everyone as the paradigm of a kind of banality that the nobility had embodied for some time. Francisco Fernández de Bethencourt, renowned genealogist, took his inaugural speech at the Spanish Academy as an opportunity to elaborate this argument. Bethencourt insisted again and again that the Spanish nobility had a History and a future, but that it must change its present. The metaphor was clear: "(their) representatives today run quickly, perhaps with the glow of the light that it is extinguishing, as polo pony riders, to their unfortunate displacement"<sup>28</sup>. The solution was equally clear: "to maintain the traditions that made them before". In a study on the nobility, Fernando Suárez de Tangil, lawyer and future Count, reiterate the criticism argument, connecting sports with the problem of absenteeism<sup>29</sup>.

The nobility itself did not agree: were sports and, particularly polo, a positive innovation or not? Some rather conservative noblemen clearly criticized such practices. In addition, they linked these activities with a scarce projection of noblesse, something which was very present in texts that personified in polo the evils of nobility. The Count of Torres Cabrera wrote, "with one or two exceptions, (the King) has only by his side noblemen who act as tapestry or play polo, who cough it the King coughs and sneeze if the King sneezes"<sup>30</sup>. Sport was a distraction, an abandonment of to the true mission of the nobility.

Regarding the refusal to grant a title to Pedro González de Soto mentioned, the argument was clear: "It is a person of some activity and prestige but it is noteworthy that he certainly lacks the gravity necessary to accept that his proceeding should be granted with perpetual honor"<sup>31</sup>. The rejection was signed by the Duke de la Vega and the Count of Almodóvar. The latter was the Count of Romanones's brother-in-law and therefore, uncle of the members of the 'Gran Equipo' who played with the King. This was not so

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<sup>27</sup> Daloz argues that a real 'struggle' for this recognition takes place. Jean-Pascal DALOZ, *The sociology of elite distinction: from theoretical to comparative perspectives*, Basingstoke, UK; New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 35-37. Craig Calhoun has defined this process of recognition as an 'internalization' of the *habitus*. Craig CALHOUN, "For the social history of the present" in Philip S. GORSKI (ED.), *Bourdieu and historical analysis*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. 36-66.

<sup>28</sup> Francisco FERNÁNDEZ DE BETHENCOURT, *Las letras y los grandes: discurso leído en el acto de su solemne recepción el día 10 de Mayo de 1914*, Madrid, [s.n.], 1914, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> From his point of view, "in the past nobody travelled leagues, as well as today, due to the high aim of playing a golf or a polo match", however they did that to preach their faith or, simply, they stayed in their own landownerships. Fernando SUÁREZ DE TANGIL Y DE ANGULO, *Breve estudio histórico-político y sociológico legal sobre las Grandezas de España y títulos del Reino*, Madrid, [s.n.], 1914, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> The Count Torres Cabrera letter to Antonio Maura, 22 de octubre de 1916, AHV, fondo Torres Cabrera, sección correspondencia, c. 42, leg. 16.1.

<sup>31</sup> *Informe de la Diputación de la Grandeza de España*, April 11th 1917. AGMJ, marquesado de Torre Soto de Briviesca, leg. 91-3, exp. 803.

much a general condemnation as a rather particular refusal to grant access to that exclusive group. González de Soto himself made explicit his surprise to the secretary of the King:

"I spoke fearlessly about my association with matters of sport, religion, and charity on the understanding that the things contributing to soul and body wellbeing were at that point equally meritorious, something is proven by the fact that the King and the Grandees of Spain are all sportsmen"<sup>32</sup>.

At this point, you can see how the boundary is not anything related to the practice of sports in itself, however, sometimes it is perceived as an obstacle to enter the group – when many think otherwise-. The balance between some merits and others was really difficult to maintain but the choice of the nobility at the beginning of the century seemed to be widespread if we understand polo was perfectly compatible with their status. Another question was whether it was something decisive to belong to the nobility. Overall, this debate is connected with the practice of ennoblements, something common to every European monarchy. Sports are an element that speaks of mixed borders, how the social dimension cannot be understood without a symbolic one and, basically, that there are not 'pure' social boundaries, since all of them have an important symbolic component<sup>33</sup>.

In any case, these different perspectives about sport's role in distinction question the existence of a univocal recognition of nobility. This failed inner unity was compounded by a divided external perspective. Some people saw these activities as a symptom of renewal and, above all, of the nobility power. Here the economic relevance in display had a key role. Contrary to those criticizing polo ponies, Ramiro de Maeztu –journalist and intellectual- insisted in a society magazine how convenient was spending for the nobility: "What really excites me is that the Spanish aristocracy would have more money (...). A modern aristocrat can only be the realization of the luxury ideal that inspires the speculator in his business and the worker in his collectivism". And luxury was displayed in cars as well as in ponies<sup>34</sup>. On luxury, several voices insisted on the positive benefits for society and the nobility's moral obligation to support this 'effort'<sup>35</sup>. Although the problem was not just spending, the issue of conspicuous consumption was also something to consider, as a positive or negative choice<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Pedro González de Soto letter to Emilio María de Torres, April 9th 1917. AGP, marquesado de Torre Soto de Briviesca, c. 12436 d. 27.

<sup>33</sup> In this regard, we agree with Brubaker and Cooper when they write about the non-existence of 'hard identities' although the identification process includes multiple and shifting variables. Rogers BRUBAKER and Frederick COOPER, "Beyond 'identity'", *Theory and Society*, 29 (2000), pp. 1-47. About ennoblements, for instance in the Italian case, Anthony L. CARDOZA, "The enduring power of aristocracy: ennoblement in liberal Italy, 1861-1914", *Les Noblesses européennes au XIXe siècle*, Milano, Università di Milano ; Rome, 1988, pp. 595-605. About Spain see José Miguel HERNÁNDEZ BARRAL, "Ser noble en la España de Alfonso XIII", *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, 32(2010), pp. 175-195.

<sup>34</sup> Ramiro de MAEZTU, "Blasones y talegas", *Gran Mundo*, June 15th 1914.

<sup>35</sup> A famous society chronicler connected the luxury 'necessity' with women's role in society and social acts, *El Imparcial*, January 1st 1919. Other voices offered a more accurate description of luxury, Juan BARRIOBERO Y ARMAS, *El lujo: Lo que ha sido, lo que es y lo que no debiera ser, como empleo perjudicial de fuerzas que aumentan la distancia que separa a los humanos*, Madrid, Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1921.

<sup>36</sup> Thorstein VEBLEN, *The theory of the leisure class*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007.

In other audiences, polo was a synonym of waste and, above all, lacking of political or social commitment. In 1919, in the context of a government crisis, *El Sol* –the most renowned liberal newspaper- charged against the role some noblemen in the monarch's inner circle had played. "Neither a *valido* nor a favorite of the kind who dedicate their hours alternately to play polo and palatial policy may no longer represent Spanish opinion, not even the echo of a small national point of view". The article also mentioned the Marquis of Viana, the Marquis of Torrecilla and the Duke of Infantado. The two marquises did not answer, but Infantado published a reply which was followed by a ripost. Infantado began by assuming that his answer will be for the journalist "just like another lost leisure time in sports"<sup>37</sup>. Although the discussion continued on the subject of political influence, the mention of polo seems quite significant as a real stigma on the symbolic level, a boundary that defines the social group.

In the late 1920s, the debate was still resonating. Álvaro Alcalá Galiano was the Marquis of Castel Bravo and the Count of Casa Valencia's son. He wrote for some time in the newspapers, in addition to having published several books. In a book of collected articles, he published a text which offered something like a key on how to understand the nobility sports's craze. Instead of elaborating a theory, Alcalá Galiano preferred to focus on one person to achieve his goal. And there was no better example than the Duke of Alba: "He was not satisfied, like other smart people, with hunting, playing polo, practicing sport and traveling around the globe". Alcalá Galiano thought that in Alba came together "the most noble ancestry with cultural concerns, the love of sports and the spirit of a modern man". There was no one in Paris or London who combine these characteristics better than Alaba and, he added, an Italian nobleman was completely dazzled after visiting his palace in Madrid. In Alcalá Galiano's words, the best way to define the Duke would be an expression by the poet Ruben Darío, "he is very ancient and very modern"<sup>38</sup>.

Lamont, Beljean and Clair have defined stigmatization as a cultural process of identification. As in other such processes, the distribution of resources would not be the only decisive point. From a cultural point of view, distinction, symbolic violence and exclusion play a central role. In the case of the nobility, we can say that the practice of sport, polo in particular, would initiate one of these processes where the weight of the symbolic is decisive. We can appreciate how the definition of boundaries is an external and internal process with competing spaces in both directions. Although there is no good 'stigma' in a real sense, polo was conceived as a sign of distinction despite (or because of) the criticisms<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> *El Sol*, July 19th, 20th y 21st 1919.

<sup>38</sup> Talking about the Duke's archives, he said: "money could buy cars, yachts and polo ponies, but only heritage and tradition can make this miracle". Álvaro ALCALÁ GALIANO, *Entre dos mundos*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1928, pp. 128-129 y 131-132.

<sup>39</sup> Michèle LAMONT, Stefan BELJEAN and Matthew CLAIR, "What is missing? Cultural processes and casual pathways to inequality", *Socio-Economic Review*, 12(2014), pp. 574-578. These authors argue that most cultural processes of distinction are open and endless, which is absolutely connected with the Spanish nobility's case. On stigma, they took the classical (and physical) definition by Goffman: "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" as well as the one by Link and Phelan (psychological): "the convergence of interrelated components of labeling, negative stereotyping, separation and status loss/discrimination in the context of a power structure", p. 589.

## Defending their position in a changing world?

In 1931 the proclamation of the Republic and the consequent end of the monarchy sowed unrest among the nobility. Apart from political positions and strategies, what to do from a social point of view seemed to be an urgent issue. For Mandler, opting for discretion had been one of the keys that led the British nobility to his long and outstanding survival in the early twentieth century<sup>40</sup>. Sports is once again an area where we can measure the exclusivity of the nobility and the sources of their distinction.

Shortly before the Republic's proclamation in 1931, some newspapers published different chronicles about the Real Club Puerta de Hierro, where nothing seemed to have changed regarding the condition of references of the nobility and the role that sports had as an element of distinction. In July 1930, *Blanco y Negro* –a mass-circulation magazine– devoted an article to the Marquis of Portago as “one of our polo players”. There were mentions to the well-known Peñaranda, Maza and Villabragima as potential players of a national team. The Marquis of Portago was very interested in further improving the quality of polo in Spain but not all could follow his verve<sup>41</sup>. Since 1931, Puerta de Hierro became a mirror of the situation of the nobility in the new regime. At the beginning of the Republic, the possibility its closure was arisen due to it being a “focus of conspiracies”. Although it was not finally carried out, the hostility of the regime and its supporters was always present. In fact, the voluntary exile of many noblemen became a major obstacle. From 1,100 members, membership dropped off to scarcely 800. Perhaps the most significant case was the Duke of Alba who resigned from the presidency of the club and moved to England. In his absence, the Marquis of Portago got in charge, drafting new bylaws in 1933 that emphasized the club exclusivity. To be accepted someone had to be proposed by two members. The board would decide about every admission and any negative vote equaled to five positive ones. If any member was expelled “from other recognized club or society”, they would do the same. Also, “committing any act that hurts their reputation and honor” would be sufficient motive to be removed from the club<sup>42</sup>.

Although the Club structure did not change, the discourse sounded different, more defensive. In 1933, the Marquis of Portago writing to the Duke of Alba, commented that polo was “really meager” and that they had thought of the possibility to offer players from other clubs coming to Madrid an invitation to watch and play polo. He also denied the news stories circulating about the possibility to allow an “open ticket office”, he was well aware that this would mean the end of their exclusiveness<sup>43</sup>. The change of mood was proved by the man who carried most directly the management of polo in the Club. He

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<sup>40</sup> Peter MANDLER, “Caste or class?...”, p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> In a letter to the Duke of Alba, he mentioned the opportunity of hiring a player with a high hándicap in order to train the Puerta de Hierro players. The Duke of Alba rejected the possibility because the contract seemed too high to him (12.000 or 13.000 pesetas). *Marquis of Portago letter to the Duke of Alba*, December 30th 1929. AFCA, fondo don Jacobo, c.6.

<sup>42</sup> *Reglamento del Club Puerta de Hierro*, año 1933. AFCA, fondo don Jacobo, c.6. These restrictive criteria are similar to those of the *Nuevo Club*, the most exclusive Madrid social club, although over there a negative vote equaled seven positive ones. The value of the negative vote is one of the most categorical exclusivity criteria.

<sup>43</sup> *Marquis of Portago letter to the Duke of Alba*, (s.f., 1933). AFCA, fondo don Jacobo, c.6.

was Manuel Penche, military officer, who had trained with the Marquis of Villavieja. In another article published around these dates, we could see the chosen strategy. Although the journalist began recalling the aristocratic origins of the sport and regretting the closure of existing fields in royal palaces, he soon ceded the word to Penche: "So far we have considered polo (not just here, but everywhere) as a set of beautiful people, snobs and millionaires". Then he gave a series of guidelines and proposed some initiatives to make polo more affordable. Making prices explicit was a remarkable change. He also commented that some ponies were available to players in order to freshen out without paying an incredible amount of money. His intention was to make the sport more affordable to more riders and to play more profitable games<sup>44</sup>.

Here there was nothing about the admissions process or the audience who used to attend matches. Something very similar happened in another long newspaper article which emphasized the variety of sports that were practiced in the Club. "Today it continues to be the same country club as ever" was a statement trying to connect with the past but not dwelling on the traditional restrictive audience. In fact, only three board members was mentioned, those who had 'technical' positions and ensured the progress of the club in its material improvement. Penche was one of them, but everyone had a title<sup>45</sup>.

In Melchor Almagro San Martín's opinion, a society chronicler, the situation was very worrying for what he called 'society life'. From his point of view, "the Republic has killed any distinction. Today people go around very mixed and ladies are withdrawing"<sup>46</sup>. The attempt to live on without being noticed and without losing their exclusivity seemed to be destined to fail. In a contemporary memoir, Infanta Eulalia de Borbón, one of the King's aunts, wrote that the problem came not only from the outside. The Republic was not the only enemy of the Spanish nobility. Indeed, noblemen themselves were to blame for their marginalization because of their detachment from reality. What was the main problem? She thought it was the "absorbent frenzy" with which they turned to sports, "forgetting any other subject and disdaining any other occupation that broaden their spirit or illustrate their mind"<sup>47</sup>. Eulalia de Borbón spoke about several sports but, without hesitation, polo was in the front line.

Despite the fears, Club Puerta de Hierro survived in the Republic. By 1936, it had even recovered the number of members it had before 1931. It was clear that the republican regime was not synonym with the end of the nobility or the disappearance of its elements of distinction. However, the Republic did question some of the main foundations of social distinction that noblemen had so carefully cultivated. Between 1931 and 1936, noblemen implicitly admitted that displaying their distinction belonged to the past. At the same time, this renunciation was also accompanied by a lack of recognition and even a conflict over its existence. It is difficult to speak about a reconversion process on the same level of the

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<sup>44</sup> Talking about the King's polo fields, the journalist mentioned "with a nostalgic remembrance" the best of all, the Casa de Campo field. He also wrote about the Palacio de la Magdalena field, in Santander. *Blanco y Negro*, January 27th 1933.

<sup>45</sup> *ABC*, May 13th 1933.

<sup>46</sup> Melchor de ALMAGRO SAN MARTÍN, *La pequeña historia: cincuenta años de vida española (1880-1930)*, Madrid, Afrodiseo Aguado, 1954, p. 355. Although the publication date was some years later, the book collected notes from this period of time.

<sup>47</sup> Eulalia de BORBÓN, *Memorias de Doña Eulalia de Borbón ex Infanta de España (de 1864 a 1931)*, Madrid, Juventud, 1935, pp. 197-199.

one experienced by the Russian nobility. There were strategies –continuing with the Club was one of them- but above all it prevailed an expectation toward change mixed with discretion. They did not really want to reconvert in a comprehensive sense.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) clearly connects with this dynamic. It is a powerful metaphor for the role of the noblemen in society at the time that Club Puerta de Hierro was part of the battlefield for a long time during the Francoist assault on Madrid. In fact, the polo field became a car cemetery used by the Army. The nobility as a whole supported the Francoist side and, either due to repression or death in combat, the percentage of victims among them was high<sup>48</sup>. Although written right after the conflict, it was not until 1944 when a study on the noblemen and noblewomen dead during the war was published. It was a kind of elegy for each one of the deceased and also a fierce condemnation of their killers. However, the most interesting part was the long introductory study, in which the author –the Marquis of San Juan de Piedras Albas- tried to understand the reason of these deaths. In his essay there was a justification for the role of the nobility in Spain and the luxury issue reappeared. From his point of view, spending much money was necessary and it was to be expected of the nobility living splendidly<sup>49</sup>. And the best, and only, way to truly understand this was by observing their role in war. Faced with the image we have of the nobility as "frivolous and wasting young gentlemen", they replied with their participation in the conflict and the best evidence of their sacrifice was the number of their dead, according to Piedras Albas.

Nevertheless, the role of the noblemen in General Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) was controversial. In addition to tensions with Falange, the fascist party, Spain was not actually a monarchy anymore<sup>50</sup>. Again, sports reflected the role of the nobility in Spain (and in the world) at that time. Significantly, some people began to take decisions to restart Club Puerta de Hierro's activities soon after the end of the war. Board meetings, decisions about how to back up the activities, fundraising for much-needed investments: all this was already done in October 1939, hardly six months after the end of the conflict.

Despite their good intentions, the real world was not so simple and restarting the sport would not be so easy. Polo was not an exception. Until 1940 the accumulated cars on the polo field did not begin to be withdrawn and only the 1942 season was considered a 'normal' polo season. Among the players gathered, there were again several noblemen, but among the best mentioned there were many others without titles. Joaquín Santos

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<sup>48</sup> Some historians talk about 177 noblemen dead. Among them 80% were victims of rear-front repression and the rest were killed in combat. This figure represented 10% of the nobility. Alfonso BULLÓN DE MENDOZA, "Aristócratas muertos en la Guerra Civil Española", *Aportes*, 44(2000), pp. 77-106. The proportion would be below the 'aristocratic carnage' studied by Cannadine for the Great War. David CANNADINE, *The Decline and fall of the British aristocracy*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> "It needs to be repeated: thanks to the money spent, industrialists, traders, artists and therefore, a large majority of poor families are maintained. Among big spenders only aristocrats could do that, who, as stated above, are quite few because inherited fortunes are not worth as much as those made by finance or hard work. Moreover, it is something typical of the aristocracy, always displayed in a splendid way, without the characteristic selfishness of those who enjoy counting the money they keep in their boxes, regardless of the damage caused by the lack of movement and the notorious damage inflicted on workers", Marquis of SAN JUAN DE PIEDRAS ALBAS, *Héroes y mártires de la aristocracia española*, Madrid, [s.n.], 1945, p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> Carlos COLLADO SEIDEL, "Aristocracy, Fascism, and the Franco Dictatorship (1931-1945)", Karina URBACH (ED.), *European Aristocracies and the Radical Right, 1918-1939*, OUP/German Historical Institute London Studies of the German Historical Institute London, 2007, pp. 111-125.

Suárez was chosen as first president of the club after the conflict. Obviously, he had no title; instead, he was one of the usual attendants of the Moratalla meetings organized by the Marquis of Viana in the past<sup>51</sup>.

Santos Suárez devoted much effort to revive the club. One of the keys of his plan was increasing the number of members. After the war, the figure stood at 900. During that decade this figure was multiplied exponentially. Surprisingly, if we look at the bylaws published in 1952, there were no changes regarding member's admissions and expulsions. The club was simply facing a growing audience. The dissolution of the nobility in such a large number of members was logic and was in tune with a diminished attention to sports practiced by noblemen or noblewomen at the highest level. However, two elements give another perspective on the decline by dissolution.

Since 1950 all presidents held a title and many of them were Grandees of Spain. Thereby, by maintaining a clear continuity, noblemen were assuming that distinction still made sense despite the deep changes experienced by society and by the Club. Secondly, the very continuity of the club is a remarkable fact. By the 1950s, its proximity to Madrid and the completion of an assignment contract made luxury housing companies very interested in the estate. After many meetings and despite no clear reason to explain the change of mind beyond influence and personal connections, it was possible to renew the contract in March 1957. All the while, Hurlingham, the great reference for Villavieja and company, saw how its polo fields disappeared, expropriated by the City of London in the late 1940s<sup>52</sup>. Club Puerta de Hierro, polo and the nobility seemed not to be so damaged in Spain.

Many years ago, FML Thompson used cricket to talk about the end of aristocratic society in England. Amateur noblemen gave way to professionals, no longer returning to win a game since the late nineteenth century in a traditional match they used to play every year. From active participants they became little more than spectators<sup>53</sup>. Thompson had mainly in mind the political and economic dimensions of the aristocratic power. After him and others, a large number of historians questioned the decline of the nobility in terms of eclipse. Nevertheless, the nobility offers more possibilities in the analysis of modern social change. I have not tried to say here that noblemen simply changed cricket for polo. Polo, like other elements of social distinction, is another way to propose an analysis of the nobility that focuses more on a lifestyle, such as the 'Adelswelten' studied by Conze and others<sup>54</sup>. At the same time, it is a fruitful field to continue exploring twentieth century in its many contradictions and legacies.

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<sup>51</sup> Mariola GÓMEZ LAÍNEZ, *El Real Club de la Puerta de Hierro*, pp. 120-122.

<sup>52</sup> Norman BAKER, "Public need versus public interest. The case of the Hurlingham Club, 1945-1948", *The London Journal*, 34(2009), pp. 123-138.

<sup>53</sup> Francis ML THOMPSON, "Britain" in David SPRING, *European landed elites in the nineteenth century*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Eckart CONZE, Wencke METELING, Jörg SCHUSTER und Jochen STROBEL, *Aristokratismus und Moderne : Adel als politisches und kulturelles Konzept, 1890-1945*, Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 2013. About the idea of a noble lifestyle, Mike SAVAGE, "Status, lifestyle and taste" in Frank TRENTMANN, *The Oxford handbook of the history of consumption*, Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 551-567. An extremely interesting case is that of Argentinian high-society. Leandro LOSADA y Roy HORA, "Clases

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altas y medias en la Argentina, 1880-1930. Notas para una agenda de investigación", *Desarrollo Económico*, 200 (2011), pp. 611-630.