Why Democracy Needs Aristocracy

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Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times. Edited by Richard Avramenko and Ethan Alexander-Davey. *Lexington Books, 2018. 324 pp. $120 hardback*.

The concept of a trifunctional society, a society composed of three orders or three estates, is very old. It was even old when Plato famously organized his ideal polity into the philosopher-kings, guardians, and producers in *The Republic*. This threefold division was present in Athenian law from the earliest days; and, according to one philologist, it can be traced deep into the traditions and cultures of prehistoric man.[1] Medieval society was likewise organized into those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor. This is all to say that for most of human history there were clear distinctions among classes, each with its own purpose in society and each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Their respective strengths were expected to counteract the deficiencies of other classes with the result that there was an interdependent and complementary relationship among various orders in society.

This hierarchy of virtues and roles is obscured in democratic societies which insist upon the dogma of one social class with no inherent distinctions among persons, certainly not of birth and station. Whatever the benefits of this modern conception of order (and there are many), there are also a multitude of drawbacks, not least the shroud cast over the continuing and inescapable benefit of

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[1] Georges Dumezil, *L'ideologie Tripartie Des Indo-Europeens* (Brussels: Latomus, 1958), cited by Ethan Alexander-Davey on pp. xvi.

birth and wealth (consider, by way of contrast, the influence of unelected technocrats such as Bill Gates and Elon Musk or the political success of middling members of the Bush and Clinton families). Other flaws—such as the lack of standards characteristic of consumerism and the appeal to the lowest common denominator in entertainment rampant in democratic societies—have been noted and criticized since Plato. Other sociological critiques of mass democratic society have been common in recent times, many noting that the poison of envy is more and not less evident as equality increases.[2] Rather than forging brotherhood, the democratic polity of purportedly free and equal citizens produces individuals alienated from their fellows. Casual defenses of an aristocracy as a class separate unto itself have generally made these points. But inquiries into the implications of aristocracy for political theory are much less common. Fortunately, *Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times* remedies this deficit in the scholarly literature.

Richard Avramenko (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Ethan Alexander-Davey (Campbell University) have assembled an impressive array of essays on various aristocratic thinkers in the modern era. These include those who, like Burke, lacked aristocratic status but nonetheless defended the role of an aristocracy, and also those who, like Tocqueville, were themselves aristocrats. All of the thinkers the essays address wrote in the context of an emerging democratic society and thought deeply about the role of an aristocracy, or at least of the aristocratic virtues, in such a society. This volume avoids the common trap of many discussions of aristocracy—or, indeed, of traditional institutions in general—that dismiss them as mere precursors to the institutions of the present order. According to this line of thinking, whatever value is to be found in previous political orders is found in such of their institutions as presage in some way what we value in our democratic age. This volume explicitly eschews what C. S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery." Rather, these essays explore the possibility that what those institutions of a bygone era may contribute are precisely what our era lacks *because it is democratic*. Enamored of democratic values and well aware of the benefits of democratic virtues, our democratic minds struggle to discern the benefit of the aristocratic. This is a time when an "open mind" is most needed. The democratic mind must consider that the democratic age has its own foibles.

The book is divided into three sections, each devoted to thinkers in the continental, British, and American traditions respectively. The first is

[2] See p. xxii, note 4. Alexander-Davey cites a number of critiques including C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the largest section containing essays by Andrew Fear, Brian Sandberg, Jay Smith, Jerry Salyer, Ethan Alexander-Davey, Jeffrey Church, and Pedro Blas Gonzalez. While the essays are well written and impressive in both their variety and cogency, certain themes emerge. For example, the role of the reactionary aristocrat in the chaos of a post-aristocratic society arises in several essays. Fear discusses Tacitus' depiction of the aristocracy in the early imperial age. Its role there was not to rule again—it could not do that—but to sacrifice itself in defense of the old republic for the good of Rome. Theirs was an "aristocracy of sacrifice." In a similar manner, Church's essay on Nietzsche challenges the traditional view that Nietzsche's aristocracy is predatory. Rather, Nietzsche's "Über-Mensch" is a sort of self-overcoming man who redeems liberal society rather than rules it. He provides spiritual value in a world that has lost meaning. Nietzsche's aristocrat is one who can live in the modern world and even improve it, while escaping its flaws. But there is a sacrificial element in Nietzsche's aristocrat. He strives for greatness in a world that is suspicious of hierarchical ranking, even while he is showing the way to a more spiritually meaningful existence for everyone. A similar spiritual aristocracy is present in Gonzalez's essay on Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*. The problem of mass man, Gonzalez writes, is that he resents the freedom that comes from the cultivation of a multitude of virtues such as prudence, moderation, responsibility, and the like. Living this way ennobles men, allowing them to rise above the mass. But the masses do not like that, so they revolt.

The continental section is weighted toward an examination of French aristocrats. Sandberg, Smith, and Salyer tackle this particular topic. Sandberg argues that French nobles viewed and used credit in the same way merchants did. This was true during the wars of religion until 1800. And it was true of both Protestants and Catholics. Aristocratic practices of credit in war-making were the precursors of the use of credit today in the economies of our liberal democracies. Smith's essay on the work and influence of Henri de Boulainvilliers depicts a man who wrote perceptively on the rights of aristocrats. In a time when rights were increasingly accorded on the basis of equality and merit, this aristocrat argued for rights based on lineage. The reason that lineage could be a source of rights was that it could be a source of meritocratic value. Smith writes of the views of Alès de Corbet, who was heavily influenced by Boulainvilliers: "True nobility is created only when moral qualities have become such an unconscious habit in some families that the posterity of those families comes to be recognized, respected, and honored by their fellow citizens" (64). Salyer's essay on the French reactionary Louis de Bonald's "theory of a Christian elite" points out that Bonald anticipated the rise of the liberal elites and the criticisms of Christopher Lasch.

Bonald argued that a society that hews to hierarchy and tradition is more humane than a liberal society of "equals," which is ultimately ruled by a self-serving elite.

Ethan Alexander-Davey discusses the thought of Konstantin Leontiev, the "Russian Nietzsche." Like Bonald, Leontiev emphasized the importance of a ruling class that embodied as well as promoted beauty and greatness. Aesthetics and religion were the highest ends of man, and their most strident and capable defenders were the Church and the aristocracy. The role of the aristocrat is to uphold standards for everyone across a variety of spheres. This includes aesthetics and greatness of character, but also national cultural distinctiveness.

The section on English political thought features essays from Geoffrey Vaughn, Ian Crowe, and Jonathan Wales. Vaughn's examination of Thomas Hobbes's view of the "aristocracy of pride" provides an idiosyncratic reading of Hobbes. While Hobbes is known for famously touting the *summum malum* as the primary motivator for keeping the social contract, he admitted that some people are driven by pride. Hobbes does not reject the aristocratic anthropology that holds that some people are better than others and that they should rule. Rather, he argues that so few are motivated by aristocratic pride that it is an unreliable basis for the social contract.

Crowe has long been writing about and promoting Burke's work. In his contribution he considers Burke's relationship with four aristocrats of his day and how that affected his broader political views of permanence and change. Crowe sees in Burke's relationship with these men a tempered view of the caricature of Burke's noble aristocrat. These men had their failings. Some engaged in the very financial speculations that Burke condemned, impoverishing themselves in the process. That wasn't the point. The point was that the best members of the aristocratic class brought to political order virtues buttressed by property and religion, which in turn restrained the radical urges of the democratic age.

In the spirit of Crowe's discussion of specific aristocrats in Burke's social circle, Wales considers the life and writings of Alan Ian Percy, the Eighth Duke of Northumberland, perhaps one of the last of the aristocrats, dying in 1930. He came from a nearly thousand-year line of virtuous nobles; and he defended the classic aristocratic view that a humane society would be best preserved not by a liberal democratic order, but by the rule of an elite ensconced in the monarchy, aristocracy, and established church, and characterized by *noblesse oblige*.

The third section considers three aristocratic thinkers in the American context: John Randolph of Roanoke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Richard Weaver. John Devanny describes John Randolph as the *sine qua non* of the Virginia aristocracy. Rather than echoing Jefferson's ideal of the yeoman farmer, Randolph insisted on the necessity of the rule of a landed elite. Randolph's preferred aristocracy was not legally established, but one preserved through primogeniture and entails that retained land in a particular family through a specific lineage. Like the Eighth Duke of Northumberland, Randolph saw individuals from these families ruling the state through example, suffusing society with virtues that can only be cultivated through long, multi-generational practice.

Avramenko and Noah Stengl's essay on Tocqueville makes an important contribution to an understanding of the latter's sociological method. Though not an American, Tocqueville was certainly one of the most astute nineteenth-century students of American democracy. Tocqueville utilized a sociological hermeneutic to understand how social forms characterized democratic and aristocratic societies. Aristocratic etiquette differs from democratic manners, but each corresponds to a respective concrete social reality. Democratic forms are not thought uncouth as long as everyone sees each other as equals. But if there is a divergence between social forms and social reality, then the result is social discord, even revolution. Differences in manners and expectations of deference between classes in an aristocratic society are not resented by the people at large so long as they accept aristocratic distinctions. Debates over the value of aristocratic etiquette versus democratic manners are largely moot since either can be appropriate to the reality of the concrete social order. Manners that do not accord with the social reality create ill-will and resentment among citizens. But when forms of social etiquette accord with present social reality, whether aristocratic or democratic, they increase good will among citizens and social stability overall.

Finally, Jay Langdale considers Richard Weaver's defense of the southern aristocracy. For Weaver the aristocratic patterns of the southern gentlemen include chivalry, devotion to religion that eschews social activism, and feudal economic arrangements, especially concerning land. Weaver saw in the southern culture a defense of these things and thus a guide to a new aristocracy that might redeem the politics of the modern world. This essay fittingly closes the volume as Weaver was specifically looking to provide a way to think about what a future aristocracy might look like in the turmoil of the mid-twentieth century.

Every work is necessarily selective. Not every aristocratic soul in our democratic times could be included. But a few others are worth considering in the context of this particular discussion. In the continental section, a chapter on Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn would have been eminently fitting. Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's defense of monarchic liberalism describes how the qualities of democracy are lethal to a humane freedom. His inclusion would also have taken the section deeper into the twentieth century. In the American section the works of Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Peter Viereck might have been appropriate. Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* is a classic on the inevitability of leaders in a society, even a democratic one. There is always rule by the few. Our choice is between an aristocracy and an oligarchy: rule by the few for the good of all, or rule by the few for the good of the few. The historic aristocracy was predicated upon a notion of rule by the best, and thus manners and practices encouraged generous and responsible behavior. Democratic societies pay little attention to developing the sort of virtues that would qualify rulers as aristocrats in this sense; they make little provision for the mechanisms that enable the best to rule. Democracies can succeed, but only if they recognize and cultivate a humane leadership class. More's classic defense of property is thoroughly aristocratic and an argument that needs to be recalled in a post-*Kelo* world.[3] Finally, Viereck saw aristocracy as central to the early conservatives' view of the world and one that conservatism cannot abandon without losing a central value. These thinkers all understood how the complementary potential of an aristocratic class could contribute to a humane society. They further understood that the higher things would not be secured by the majority, but by a noble and well-reared minority. But to call attention to the absence of these thinkers from consideration in the book is not so much a criticism as the volume already runs past three hundred pages. Consider it instead a list of suggestions for an *Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times*, volume two.

[3] *Kelo v. New London*, 545 U.S. 469 (2005). The Supreme Court ruled that the Fifth Amendment's "public use" clause permits a government to use eminent domain to transfer property from a private homeowner to a corporation if the result serves a "public purpose," in this case, increased tax revenue.