
The Aristocratic Origin of American Freedom

Author(s): PETER VIREECK

Source: *Southwest Review*, AUTUMN 1952, Vol. 37, No. 4 (AUTUMN 1952), pp. 331-334

Published by: Southern Methodist University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43460379>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Southwest Review*

JSTOR

The Aristocratic Origin of American Freedom

PETER VIREECK

THE PALACES of Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers—examine them yourself any day at the Williamsburg restoration—hardly look like log cabins. Not even to the disciples of Turner. Let us have no Rousseauistic myths, no noble savages. American freedom, the Conservation of 1776, did not spring from the Wholesome Plebeian Poverty of any westward-facing man-with-the-hoe.

Whether for better or for worse, American freedom was founded in the Europe-style, lackey-tended, varlet-scrubbed châteaux of noblemen like Jefferson. For he, too, was one of Hamilton's "well-born"; today our folksy-progressive prejudices would call them "un-American," "the idle rich," "effete easterners," and, worst of all, "lacking the common touch."

For the crucial first six decades, from the 1770's till the Jacksonian revolution that followed 1828, the American government was not only extremely conservative; it was a closed, hierarchical "government by gentlemen." Power alternated between two rival groups of almost equally conservative gentlemen: Hamilton's elite of northern merchants versus Jefferson's elite of intellectual lawyers and southern planters. Yet neither group neglected our Bill of Rights; they managed to increase, and not only preserve, the liberties bequeathed by our founders.

By 1828 the foundations of American liberty had already been laid, without benefit either of Turner's westward movement or of the PAC. The western log cabins and Jackson's proto-New Deal did indeed contribute to American freedom by diffusing it: from aristocratic republic to—or, rather, toward—mass democracy. An exciting gain. But also a depressing potential danger to liberty; reread Ortega y Gasset on "the mass-man."

The familiar contribution to freedom made by the log cabin and by the human Grass Roots of the West was valuable and necessary. Yet secondary. It merely broadened the primary impulse of freedom bequeathed by the palaces of our aristocratic Conservers of 1776.

Today Americans will be better and not worse democrats if they reject not entirely our original aristocratic heritage and if they reflect occasionally upon the subtle disadvantages as well as the obvious advantages of majoritarianism.

Democracy, yes. In Sandburg's phrase: "The people, yes." But not an egalitarianism in which "bricklayers lord it over architects."*

*Every variation on this theme is examined in one of the most challenging books of our era: Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Liberty or Equality*, Caldwell, Idaho, Caxton Printers, 1952. For freshness and originality of approach to an old theme, it is equaled only by the very different and equally brilliant book by Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*, New York, Harpers, 1951.

Political leaders, not oblivious of votes, rightly praise the benefits of majority rule. They discuss too little the dangers of majority dictatorship. These dangers had been discussed and guarded against by the framers of the American Constitution. Whether the rulers be the aristocracy or demos, it is essential to limit their rule by a constitution and by just laws.

As Plato argued and as history has illustrated, the despotism of demos passes readily into that of the tyrant. Both are alike in being arbitrary. Both rage unchecked by the rights of minorities and individuals. Individual freedom is attacked from the right by compulsory inequality, enforced by caste lines. It is attacked from the left by compulsory equality, enforced by guillotines. Yet freedom—even if valued only by intellectual or aristocratic minorities—should be the first goal of all political action. It should precede comfort, circuses, and gregarious comrade-ism. Freedom is more important to creativity and thereby, in the long run, to the whole human race than a leveling majoritarianism, democracy's bed of Procrustes.

A unity of voluntary co-operation will tolerate individual divergences in art as in politics, in religion as in personality. To prevent majority rule from becoming majority despotism, every stable society has certain traditional institutions acting as brakes on precipitous mass action.

In England, majority decisions can be slowed up by the House of Lords. In America, by the separation of power—President, House, Senate—and by the Supreme Court as guardian of the Constitution.

If a measure is so necessary that its backing by the majority is not the demagogue-incited emotion of the moment but a sustained will, then the brakes can and ought to be overcome. Otherwise a dictatorship of Lords or of the Supreme Court would menace liberty as much as a mob dictatorship. Accordingly, the Con-

stitution can be amended by the slow, sustained action of two-thirds of Congress and three-fourths of the states; presidents can appoint new kinds of judges as the old ones die; kings can ennoble new peers from new classes; the veto of the American President or of the British Lords can be overridden. It is fitting that the amending or overriding be neither too easy, which would play into the hands of radicalism, nor too difficult, which would play into the hands of reaction.

The concept of civil liberties is aristocratic. It bravely defies democratic majority rule. If you insist on civil liberties—and there are few things more worthy of insistence—then you must be prepared to say: "Even if a fairly elected, democratic majority of 99 per cent wants to lynch all Negroes, Jews, Catholics, labor leaders, or bankers, it is our moral and legal duty to resist the majority, though we die in the attempt." Guarding the Bill of Rights even against majorities and even *against the people's will*, the American Constitution performs an aristocratic and conservative function.

The extraordinary conservatism of America's founding fathers is today often ignored. Liberals discuss it with pained embarrassment as a family skeleton. Yet it may account for our being one of the oldest surviving democracies, one of the few never overthrown. A leftist or rightist dictatorship can more easily overthrow an unconservative democracy, where change is too rapid or where an unchecked majoritarianism can sweep a dictator to power during a transient mob hysteria, regretted too late. The English conservative Maine was one of the first to see this Tory quality in what he calls America's "wise" and "calming" Constitution:

When a democracy governs, it is not safe to leave unsettled any important questions concerning the exercise of public powers. . . . It would seem that, by a wise constitution, democracy may be made nearly as calm as water

in a great artificial reservoir; but if there is a weak point anywhere in the structure, the mighty force which it controls will burst through and spread destruction. . . . American experience has, I think, shown that by wise constitutional provisions, thoroughly thought out beforehand, democracy can be made tolerable.

The aristocratic viewpoint toward Old Guard capitalism—aristocratic in being opposed also to socialism and, indeed, in stressing the resemblance between both brands of hog-ethics—was proclaimed by philosophy's greatest prophet of aristocracy. In *Human, All Too Human*, 1878-79, Nietzsche foresaw socialism as the dangerous "epidemic" of the future. But the remedy for curing the worker of his socialist materialism was for the bourgeois to cure himself of his capitalist materialism:

The only remedy against Socialism that still lies in your power is to avoid provoking Socialism—in other words, to live in moderation and contentment . . . and to aid the State as far as possible in its taxing of all superfluities and luxuries. You do not like this remedy? Then, you rich bourgeois who call yourselves "Liberals," confess that it is *your own inclination* that you find so terrible and menacing in Socialists, but allow to prevail in yourselves as unavoidable, as if with you it were something different. As you are constituted, if you had not your fortune and the cares of maintaining it, this bent of yours would make Socialists of you. Possession alone differentiates you from them.

If you wish to conquer the assailants of your prosperity, you must first conquer yourselves.—And if that prosperity only meant well-being, it would not be so external and provocative of envy; it would be more generous, more benevolent, more compensatory, more helpful. But the spurious, histrionic element in your pleasures, which lie more in the feeling of contrast (because others have them not, and feel envious) than in feelings of realized and heightened power . . . these are the things that spread the poison of that national disease, which seizes the masses ever more and more as a Socialistic heart-itch, but has its origin and

breeding-place in you. Who shall now arrest this epidemic?

The aristocrat of today, reapplying this Nietzsche quotation, may make two generalizations. In Europe, socialism is the poor man's capitalism. In America, the cashing of social security checks is the poor man's coupon-clipping.

By minimizing the indispensable catalyst of private initiative ("free enterprise" is far more than a fake slogan), the New Deal philosophy glorifies social security too much. This statism is what Eisenhower calls our excessive "drift to the left." But what caused this? According to the Nietzschean, anti-Marxist analogy, it was preceded by the excessive "drift" to bourgeois Manchester liberalism; the anti-aristocratic commercialism and coupon-clipping of the Old Guard. Inevitable result, in the context of universal suffrage: The rest of the country naturally joined also, via a New Deal, in the game of clipping unearned increments. I don't like the game when either side plays it. Perhaps an Eisenhower Republican regime will cry-halt to it. But halt-criers must also bear in mind three correlatives: the question of who started the game first; the need for a basic humane minimum of living standards; and the fact that you keep the industrial worker conservative, in contrast with the European failure, only by sharing with him a fair stake in the status quo.

The aristocrat may be defined (among other things) as the man who enforces his civilized standards from within, by cultural and ethical self-discipline. The plebeian, the mass-man, is he who only obeys standards physically forced upon him from without. To the plebeian, be he a millionaire or pauper, life is not a challenge to transcend himself and to carry a great heritage forward. It is a vast garbage-pile in which he is ceaselessly poking his snout for more swill. Economics, which Ruskin called "the gospel of Mammon," is the Good Tidings of the plebeian. It is this latter view of "life"

that the aristocratic artist means when he says (as in De Villiers de l'Isle-Adam): "As for *living*, our servants can do that for us."

The plebeian is ruled only by his snout. And therefore only by the knout. And therefore the mass-man is a totalitarian, tending toward a communazi dictatorship of lynch-law, whereas to the aristocrat the civil liberties of his opponents are sacred, even against a mass-majority of 99.9 per cent.

Because the American context is unique in all recorded history, aristocracy must take a unique form in America today. It must abandon the analogies with Old World class-lines. I am prepared undemocratically to defend aristocratic class-lines as performing necessary functions, beneficial to society as a whole, in

certain European historical contexts of the past. But the American context means universal suffrage, fluid class-lines, a "new" country without a Middle Ages, without hereditary nobility, and without any elite trained in *noblesse oblige*, as opposed to a plebeian money-bags elite.

In this very exceptional, very American context, there is only one cure for the quantitative, antiquitative vulgarism that innately endangers democracy, ever since Plato's much-indicted indictment. The cure is not to retreat into un-American class-lines in order to make *some* men aristocrats. The cure is to subordinate economics to cultural values and to subordinate external coercion to internal discipline, in order to make all men aristocrats.

Longwood

BOYD McDONALD

IT cannot be seen from the street. Its entrance sign stands on Woodville Road, just outside Natchez, Mississippi, across from a lot that offers a less pretentious way of life: a trailer camp. You follow its narrow, winding gravel drive, walled in by clay banks covered with dead leaves and arched overhead by branches dripping the dull tinsel of Spanish moss. The trees are tall skeletons in absurd fixed postures, with long overgrowths of straight gray hair. You cross a homemade bridge over a ravine (there was once a pond), and presently, after a curve, through the vines and trees, the faded orange bricks and dirty wood porticoes with carved wooden lace loom inhospitable in the

balmy gray of winter — an appropriate season. Finally, in the unkempt clearing, rises the massive octagon, Longwood, up four stories to its windowed dome and spire. Some of its windows are boarded over, some are black open holes. The ominous trembling of movie music would be appropriate, but Longwood is more stark without. It is overwhelmingly silent and abandoned, but it stands unashamed, sullen and contemptuous, like some smaller, outrageous state capitol building.

The only thing Longwood is the capital of is decay. The only sign of life is a Negro boy walking to his home in what was intended to be the slave quarters near by. The only sounds