

Interpretation

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Volume 45 Issue 2

- 155 Ian Dagg Natural Religion in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws*
- 179 David N. Levy Aristotle's "Reply" to Machiavelli on Morality
- 199 Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo "Deceived by the Glory of Caesar": Humility and Machiavelli's Founder
- 223 Marco Andreacchio **Reviews Essays:**
Mastery of Nature, edited by Svetozar Y. Minkov and Bernhardt L. Trout
- 249 Alex Priou *The Eccentric Core*, edited by Ronna Burger and Patrick Goodin
- 269 David Lewis Schaefer *The Banality of Heidegger* by Jean-Luc Nancy
- 291 Victor Bruno **Book Reviews:**
The Techne of Giving by Timothy C. Campbell
- 297 Jonathan Culp *Orwell Your Orwell* by David Ramsay Steele
- 303 Fred Erdman *Becoming Socrates* by Alex Priou
- 307 David Fott *Roman Political Thought* by Jed W. Atkins
- 313 Steven H. Frankel *The Idol of Our Age* by Daniel J. Mahoney
- 323 Michael Harding *Leo Strauss on Nietzsche's Thrasymachean-Dionysian Socrates* by Angel Jaramillo Torres
- 335 Marjorie Jeffrey *Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times*, edited by Richard Avramenko and Ethan Alexander-Davey
- 341 Peter Minowitz *The Bleak Political Implications of Socratic Religion* by Shadia B. Drury
- 347 Charles T. Rubin *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child* by Eileen Hunt Botting
- 353 Thomas Schneider *From Oligarchy to Republicanism* by Forrest A. Nabors
- 357 Stephen Sims *The Legitimacy of the Human* by Rémi Brague

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“Rank” versus “equality”; “beauty” versus “standardization”; the state as a “community of communities” versus the state as a “conglomeration”; it is on these unapologetic terms and with these polarities that *Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times* opens (vii). In coeditor Ethan Alexander-Davey’s introduction, “Visions of Aristocracy,” he explains that this edited volume was made to fill a need, one created by the tendency of “modern political theorists... to reinterpret the great political writings of the ancients, medievals, and early moderns so that they appear to presage the ideals of late modernity” (viii). Alexander-Davey explains that this tendency is an understandable one, given that we live in a democratic age, while “aristocratic political thought is predicated on human inequality” (viii). And yet, he writes, while this primary fact of aristocratic political thought is potentially alienating to contemporary political theorists, the case this volume makes is that although aristocracy begins with human inequality, we egalitarians still have something to learn from the normative claims of aristocracy, particularly about the good things we have lost in the transition from aristocracy to democracy. This case, made earlier by Tocqueville and others, is an especially important one to make in our times—if we have ears to hear it.

Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times consists of three sections, dealing with the aristocratic political thought of Continental Europe, of Britain, and of the United States, respectively. The editors of the volume have not limited

the range of aristocratic political thought to any time period, though certainly the great historical outlier is the first essay of the first section, entitled “Selfless Surrender: Tacitus on the Aristocracy of the Roman Principate,” by Andrew Fear. Fear’s essay is an excellent primer on Tacitus’s critique of the fecklessness of the Roman nobility that enabled the rise and continuity of the principate and the death of the Roman Republic. Tacitus’s aristocratic outlook is bleak: the rule of the emperors is deceitful and brutal, the senate remains worthless, and the people (the *plebs sordida*) worse than worthless (4). Fear’s essay is an examination of the riddle of Tacitus’s political thought: can and should tyranny be opposed, and if so, how? It seems at first that, since one cannot go back, and “the present must be endured,” Stoicism might be an attractive option under tyranny from Tacitus’s point of view (4). But as Fear explains, heroic self-sacrifice and care for the common good are more important than “selfish demonstrations against tyranny,” such as the show-suicides of Stoics such as Thræsea and Seneca. Fear argues that Tacitus presents Marcus Lepidus’s moderation in service to the state, friendship with Tiberius, and noblesse oblige as the correct model for aristocratic behavior in a dictatorship. It is unclear to this reader only why Fear chooses to call this aristocratic mode an “ideology of noble service”—is Tacitus’s position truly ideological or, rather, philosophical (6)? Is ideology possible in aristocratic thought, or is freedom from ideology rather a winning feature of the aristocratic mind?

The section on Continental aristocratic thought continues with an enlightening historical essay by Brian Sandberg tracing the concept of *credit* and its role among the French nobility. This is followed by three essays on relatively obscure aristocratic conservatives: “Enlightened Reactionary: Henri de Boulainvilliers and the Eighteenth-Century French Nobility,” “L’amour est le principe de pouvoir: Postmodern Society and Louis de Bonald,” and “Aristocracy and the Κολλυπολις: Konstantin Leontiev and the Politics of ‘Flourishing Complexity.’” All three essays offer compelling insights into these figures and convincing accounts of why their thought should be examined seriously by political theorists. In his essay on Boullainvilliers, Jay M. Smith presents a figure whose political thought on the question of liberty and virtue can be seen as a striking counter to a thinker roughly contemporary of Boullainvilliers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Jerry Salyer gives a rousing defense of the importance of studying Louis de Bonald’s orthodox philosophic conservatism, as an antidote to soft egalitarianism that goes by the name “conservatism” today, particularly for Bonald’s fellow Catholics, who, Salyer writes, “seem more interested in the tenuous connection between Catholicism and celebrated Hindu nationalist Mohatmas Gandhi than they are in Bonald’s campaign against divorce” (73).

Salyer seeks to revive the study of Bonald by placing him among like-minded conservative thinkers such as Joseph de Maistre and Edmund Burke. In particular, Bonald's writings on the role of religion and the family in society are described as an important counterweight to John Locke's deconstruction of orthodoxy and family life (84).

It seems no accident that the editors positioned Ethan Alexander-Davey's essay on Konstantin Leontiev as a bridge between more obscure aristocratic writers and the final two essays of the Continental section of the book, on the more prominent figures Friedrich Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset, for it is Alexander-Davey's essay that makes the most convincing case within the volume for taking seriously the work of an underrated historical figure and political thinker. In his introduction Alexander-Davey refers to Leontiev as "the Russian Nietzsche" (xviii), a promise that does not go entirely unfulfilled. Leontiev rivals Nietzsche in his defense of inequality, hierarchy, and aesthetics, and yet, while Nietzsche is a man of—perhaps the founder of—the atheistic revolutionary right, Leontiev's aristocratic political thought appears to have more in common with Plato and the medieval Christian thinkers, as well as perhaps with twentieth-century radical traditionalists such as Evola and Guenon. Leontiev, unlike Nietzsche, does not reject faith and reason outright, but builds his hierarchies upon these foundations, alongside aesthetics. Leontiev melds religious universalism—Christianity—with an aristocratic nationalism that combines statecraft and soulcraft (100). Even if Leontiev's vision of a flourishing hierarchical society aimed at the salvation of souls has little to offer us moderns, his direct responses to the work of John Stuart Mill, Tocqueville, and other Western liberals can perhaps provide us with a salutary reminder of the limitations of liberalism, even a liberalism peppered with aristocratic elements.

Jeffrey Church's "Nietzsche on Aristocracy and the Meaning of Life," in a response to scholars who dismiss Nietzsche's defense of aristocracy, gives a nuanced account of precisely what kind of aristocracy Nietzsche sought to create, arguing that it is neither a "predatory" form of aristocracy nor a "natural" form, but rather a new kind of aristocracy based on "spiritual *noblesse oblige*" (142), which would place Nietzsche in the company of Andrew Fear's Tacitus. Church claims that Nietzsche's spiritual aristocracy is built on "the natural equality of all human beings," and that, furthermore, "the Spiritual Aristocracy at its fundamental level is animated by the Kantian notion of freedom as autonomy or self-determination, that humanity redeems itself when given its own law" (152–53). However this may be, it seems curious

that Nietzsche would found his spiritual aristocracy upon an ethical system he summarily destroys in *Genealogy of Morals*. Pedro Blas Gonzalez's essay on Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses* rounds out the volume's section on Continental aristocratic thought by providing a clear and thorough explanation of Ortega's polemic against modern man, or "mass man," and defense of aristocratic "noble man."

There seem to be fewer visions of aristocracy in Britain and America, at least in this volume. Each of the last two sections contain three essays. In "British Visions of Aristocracy" we encounter the familiar Thomas Hobbes and Edmund Burke, as well as the unfamiliar Eighth Duke of Northumberland. In "Thomas Hobbes on the Aristocracy of Passion," Geoffrey M. Vaughan acknowledges the strangeness of trying to connect aristocratic thought to anything in Hobbes's philosophy, but it is precisely because of his unorthodox treatment of Hobbes that this essay is so enjoyable. Its placement in the book comes at a good time as well; it provides the necessary jolt out of what have now become slightly repetitive themes in the Continental section. Vaughan argues that Hobbes, seeing the danger of the aristocratic temptation—rule by the best—replaces "the classical aristocracy of virtue with his own aristocracy of passion" (185). The excellence of Vaughan's treatment overrides the possible objection that this essay does not perfectly fit the theme of the volume; indeed, his discussion of the potential dangers of aristocracy comes at a good time in the book. Ian Crowe's essay on "Edmund Burke's Peerage" offers a prudent reminder to Burke scholars that Burke's aristocratic soul figures prominently in his political prognostications, and Jonathan M. Wales's "Traditionalist Seer: The Aristocratic Philosophy of the Eighth Duke of Northumberland (1880–1930)" provides an elegant description of the life and times of Alan Ian Percy and his High Tory political theory. This essay reveals the tremendous scope of the author's knowledge of High Toryism and the world Percy occupied, from his family to his friendships, as well as his wide array of political writings and speeches. Wales's historical capacity reflects that of his subject, and this essay marks another high point in the collection.

The third section, "Aristocracy in America," begins with John F. Devanny's essay, "'I am an Aristocrat; I Love Liberty, I Hate Equality': John Randolph of Roanoke and the Defense of the Aristocracy of Virginia." This essay questions the prevailing view of Randolph as a Jeffersonian and instead presents him as a proponent of natural aristocracy. Faced with the problem that Randolph wrote no books or treatises, viewing purely theoretical written works

with true Socratic skepticism, Devanny turns to Randolph's life and letters as guideposts for examining his political views. Randolph was a champion of law, rooted community, and tradition, as well as "freedom and limited government as bulwarks against innovation" (268). Devanny defends Randolph as more than a mere political eccentric, casting him as "our greatest political Jeremiah," one who saw danger far ahead but was unable to prevent it (269). Randolph endures as a figure of fascination for American conservatives, even though he was "that most 'un-American' of all species, an aristocrat" (269).

Placed between Devanny's Randolph and the final essay of the book is Richard Avramenko and Noah Stengle's piece, "Looking Down Tocqueville's Nose: On the Problem of Aristocratic Etiquette in Democratic Times." This essay is not about any one figure, but rather about the contrast between aristocratic manners and those of a democracy. What Tocqueville calls "the science of etiquette" is preeminent, even all-important, in an aristocracy: the social fabric relies on it (277). Avramenko and Stengle argue that "the art of manners" remains important for a democracy, and that without it the potential for "populism" or even a revolution becomes more likely (277). Using Tocqueville to create a "sociological hermeneutic," the authors demonstrate the potential chain of causality that leads from a breakdown in manners to the point of revolution in a democratic regime (291). This essay is an outlier in a volume of essays on aristocratic souls, but it shows the importance of aspects of aristocratic political thought at its most basic level: the maintenance of social bonds that hold a political community together. It is perhaps fitting, then, that turning from a demonstrable breakdown in manners and mores the volume ends with the essay "Richard M. Weaver on Chivalry and Aristocracy in the American South," by Jay Langdale. The American South is, or was, a place of carefully constructed etiquette and manners, and Langdale describes Weaver's attraction to the vision of the Southern Agrarians and his ultimate rejection of their pseudopopulism in favor of a more carefully considered aristocratic noblesse oblige. Rather than romanticizing the failures of the South, Weaver in particular noted the southern failure to cultivate the mind through liberal education, cumulating in its great failure to produce a great statesman, "on par with Edmund Burke," who might have aided in perfecting the social order of the South (304). But Weaver's greatest contributions are his insights into the nature of liberalism as dependent on scientism and materialism, and a shallow "progressive educational philosophy" which "failed to comprehend that 'only [true] education' could reliably allow men to understand the 'hierarchy of values'" (307). Weaver, an American, makes the case that, ultimately, "democracy cannot exist without aristocracy" (307).

Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times is a welcome and needed contribution to the political theory literature on aristocratic political thought, and on the whole a courageous effort to be true to the intentions of its subjects. It does not shy away from the unfashionable ideas of those whom C. S. Lewis might have called men with chests, or even modes of political thought that might today be considered fundamentally immoral. If there is indeed a crisis of liberalism afoot or at hand, considering the thoughtful critiques of preliberal and even antiliberal men may be a first step to diagnosing and prescribing our way out of the crisis.