

Noble-less

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William Doyle

ARISTOCRACY AND ITS ENEMIES IN THE AGE OF
 REVOLUTION

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For Alexis de Tocqueville, *tout comprendre* was hardly *tout pardonner* when it came to the fate of the pre-Revolutionary French nobility. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, he portrayed it as a caste "in a state of complete isolation at the heart of the nation - the leader of an army in appearance, an officer corps without soldiers in reality". Over the course of more than a century, nobles had alienated themselves from the middle classes and the common people. This made it easy to "realize how, after standing tall for a thousand years, [the nobility] could have been overthrown in the space of one night".

Tocqueville's curt account captured a myth he could not quite escape and a brutal reality he could not ignore. Those thousand years were the stuff of self-serving aristocratic stories of their immemorial origins. That single night was August 4, 1789, when the National Assembly razed the structure of noble privileges, from the keeping of rabbits to the buying of government offices. The Revolutionary overthrow of feudalism was indeed astonishingly quick. But could it really be explained by the "democratic envy" Tocqueville believed the nobility had culpably inflamed in the French people?

William Doyle would not think so. His *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* keeps its distance from Tocqueville. He deals in calculations not sentiments, and with political contingencies more than inevitable ruptures. Here are no rising expectations lifting revolutionary hopes but instead a deeply divided nobility wrong-footed by fast-moving events beyond its control. And he stresses external factors, notably those stemming from the American Revolution, as much as domestic causes for the abolition of aristocracy. It is little surprise, then, that Tocqueville the "sentimental Legitimist" makes a cameo appearance in Doyle's book so brief a reader could blink and miss him.

The presiding genius of *Aristocracy and its Enemies* is instead R. R. Palmer, whose monumental "political history of Europe and America, 1760-1800", *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, first appeared fifty years ago. Palmer depicted a "Revolution of the Western World" in which insurgent "democrats" confronted entrenched "aristocrats" from the Appalachians almost to the Urals. Doyle follows Palmer in attributing "worldhistorical significance" to this challenge, though his definition of the world is narrower even than Palmer's and means mostly the United States and France. His subject is what one renegade French nobleman, the Marquis de Mirabeau, called the "war on the privileged and on privileges" in the American and French Revolutions. Like Palmer, Doyle does not extend his remit to the Haitian or Iberian-American Revolutions. As a result, he misses the greater significance of the late eighteenth-century assault on aristocracy as one flank of a more fundamental and wideranging attack on heredity as a basis for dominance and subordination.

Doyle occasionally touches on this larger matter. "The issue" at stake in the French Revolutionary debate on

abolishing the nobility, he notes, "was one of identity, if not race". Many French nobles, supported by their ideological allies among historians, had long argued that they were literally a race apart from other Frenchmen, descendants of the conquering Franks, not of defeated Gauls. To strip them of fiscal privileges was one thing; to extinguish heredity in the name of equality was, "in noble eyes ... nothing less than an attempt to change biology". In February 1790, Louis XVI reminded the National Assembly of the "antiquity and continuity of services of an honoured race [une race honorée]". The deputies - among them many nobles - applauded him wildly, save for an aristocratic rump who thought the King had betrayed them in his rush to ride the Revolutionary tiger. When nobles could no longer identify with their monarch and with each other, any fiction of "racial" distinctiveness was dead.

Doyle masterfully charts the road to this impasse in the opening chapters of his book. He describes an order that was both vibrant and declining before 1789: vibrant because venal offices had added an average of two nobles a day to its ranks since 1700; and declining, because no longer self-reproducing even as the French population itself was growing. This elite was unusually open by European standards, but became ever more divided between its ancient oaks and upstart mushrooms. Their only bond was their privileges; these had been expanding before the Revolution and might have been crowned by the ultimate right to form a Second Estate when the King convened the EstatesGeneral. Nobles were returned as members of all three estates and many led the effort to reconstitute themselves as a fully National Assembly, voting by head not by order. Once that Assembly abolished feudal distinctions and closed the door to ennoblement through venality, there could be no pretence of aristocratic unity. Nobility itself was extinguished in June 1790. What Edmund Burke had called shortly before "the Corinthian capital of a polished society" collapsed from weaknesses within as much as from pressures from without.

The end of centuries of aristocratic dominance in France became thinkable, Doyle argues, in part because the infant United States "showed the European world beyond America that a society without nobles was possible, and could work". Leading the egalitarian charge in the Assembly were many aristocratic French veterans of the American War, like the Vicomte de Noailles and the Marquis de Lafayette, who had seen that world without nobles and approved it. Though in the seventeenth century Nova Scotia had had its hereditary baronets and the Proprietors of Carolina had tried to nurture a perpetual cadre of caciques and landgraves, no aristocracy had ever successfully taken root in North American soil. The American Revolution later swept away the vestiges of what Thomas Jefferson termed "pseudoAristocracy", notably primogeniture and entails. "Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops", observed the French migrant and scion of Norman nobility, Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, in 1782.

Opposition to aristocracy was "the corner stone of republican government", wrote Alexander Hamilton in the Federalist Papers. Article 1, sections 9 and 10 of the US Constitution ("No title of nobility shall be granted by the United States"; "No state ... shall grant any title of nobility") enshrined this axiom in fundamental law. In the longest chapter of his book, Doyle notes that twentyone of the fifty-five drafters of that Constitution were themselves members of a hereditary association suspected of fomenting aristocracy, the Society of the Cincinnati, created in May 1783 as a league for veterans of the American War. Membership was to descend perpetually in the male line and would be distinguished by a blue ribbon and a bald-eagle medal. To some excitable observers, the Society of "Saint Senatus" sounded suspiciously like a traditional order of European chivalry. Could it be the stalking-horse "to form an Order of hereditary knights, in direct Opposition to the solemnly declared sense of their Country", as Benjamin Franklin charged? The resulting transatlantic debate almost forced George Washington to resign from the Society and led it formally to renounce heredity, even as many state branches still clung to it. Hereditary Cincinnati walk among us today, albeit without the aristocratic entitlements their early opponents had feared.

The Cincinnati controversy may have been a tempest in a teacup, but Doyle shows persuasively that it helped to sharpen the contrast between French hierarchy and American equality, and was "an essential step in discrediting noble aims and ideals" in France. In this regard, the efforts of Lafayette - a member of the French Cincinnati - to promote the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen were of a piece with his

pro-Americanism and his steadfast opposition to slavery. He would be among the nobles who led the charge against privilege in favour of the principle that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights". His efforts to persuade a friend like Jefferson to renounce slaveholding were less successful, and pointed up the incompleteness of the American egalitarian project.

An account like Doyle's that climaxes with the events of August 4, 1789 in France could proceed in two directions. The more obvious, and more traditional, is the route Doyle chooses: to follow the fate of the French nobility after that bonfire of the vanities. This he does with admirable balance, noting that little more than 12 per cent of the nobility left France as émigrés, and the guillotine claimed fewer than 1 per cent of them during the Terror. In November 1797, the Directory stripped all remaining nobles of French citizenship, but they began to return to respectability only two years later when the ci-devant Corsican noble, Napoleon Bonaparte, declared the Revolution over in late 1799. As Emperor, Napoleon drafted some 700 other ci-devants into an expanded but unprivileged imperial aristocracy which survived his fall and the post-Napoleonic restoration of the Bourbons. Apart from a brief hiatus under the Second Republic, a much reduced French nobility has lasted to this day. As Doyle reminds us, two of the Fifth Republic's presidents, de Gaulle and Giscard d'Estaing, have been noblemen, though perhaps that should be three, if we include that sprig of lesser Hungarian nobility, Nicolas Sarkozy.

The truly world-historical story Doyle could have told instead concerns the fate of hereditary status itself. On the eve of the French Revolution, most of the Western world recognized three major biologically transmissible relations of power: aristocracy, monarchy and slavery. In the French case, they fell and rose together. Aristocracy was abolished in 1790, the monarchy in 1792 and slavery in France's colonial possessions in 1794. All three returned between 1802 and 1814, though only aristocracy lasted into the twentieth century. The most thoroughgoing egalitarians of the Age of Revolution, like Lafayette and Thomas Paine, saw nobles, kings and slaves as equal affronts to human dignity because their existence derived from the same irrational exclusionary principle: heredity.

It was therefore more than a metaphor for the Jacobin abbé de Cournand, only weeks after the abolition of feudalism, to write ironically of the "noble aristocracy of the epidermis [l'aristocratie de l'épiderme]" upheld by the slave-holders of Saint-Domingue, or for the regicide deputy Simon Camboulas to protest in the Convention of 1794 that "the noble aristocracy and the priestly aristocracy have been destroyed, but the cutaneous aristocracy [l'aristocratie cutanée] still rules". What later American abolitionists would call the "pigmentocracy" was vulnerable to the same levelling logic as the rule of kings and nobles. Yet narratives of the abolition of slavery on the one hand, and of aristocracy and monarchy on the other, are almost never told in tandem. Slavery no longer has legal standing, but more than a seventh of the world's countries retain some form of hereditary aristocracy or monarchy. In these respects, the Age of Revolution remains unfinished, for reasons both understandable and unforgivable.