

Jefferson-Adams and the Natural Aristocracy.

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The historian Gordon Wood, in his magisterial 1969 classic *The Creation of the American Republic*, observed that the ideal of equality was a formative part of early American culture. For Wood, the early American attraction to goals of equality grew out of the unsettling experience of the Revolution, the severing of ties to the English hierarchy, and the rise of new individuals to political and social power during the bitter struggle for separation from Britain. The turmoil of the Revolutionary years did undoubtedly contribute to an American rhetoric and ideology of equality. However, the ideal of a political body of equal individuals took such a strong hold because it emerged from a long historical experience before the establishment of the new nation and the ideal developed in the ways that it did because the historical experience both promoted dedication to some form of equality and presented that dedication with grave challenges and contradictions. The intellectual currents of the eighteenth century, including the egalitarian theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine, undoubtedly influenced the thinking of leading individuals in the American war of independence and the early republic. But the history and social setting of the period left them open to these kinds of ideas and created the need to reconcile thoughts about equality and inequality among citizens.

By the time of national independence, the central political issue for most Americans was not the redistribution of wealth. It was whether the acknowledged and accepted inequalities of condition would subordinate some to others. Looking back to England, the citizens of the new nation saw that the hierarchy of dependence in Europe rested on inherited status. Thus, the great debate over stratification at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, the argument over the Natural Aristocracy, was in large part fueled by concerns about whether the “well-born” would be able to re-create and a European-style hierarchy of dependence in the United States. From this very early time, Americans readily accepted differences in wealth, as long as those differences resulted from each person pursuing an independent course. Wealth from the accident of birth carried the taint of Old World hierarchy and raised the possibility of replacing what we now call acquired status with ascribed. Definitions of the Natural Aristocracy were often complicated and contradictory, sometimes portraying the elite as a coherent social class to be balanced against other classes in maintaining equality and sometimes as a collection of individuals of talent. These differing definitions affected how people saw the members of the elite and what kinds of responses they advocated to keep inequality of condition from threatening the political equality of independent yeomen or middling town dwellers.

The idea of equality as the independence of landed freemen took on a quasi-mythical form in the thinking of Thomas Jefferson. Recognizing the importance of land speculation in creating inequality, Jefferson observed that “the greatest Estates we have in this Colony were made ... by taking up &

purchasing at very low rates the rich back Lands which were thought nothing of in those days, but are now the most valuable lands we possess” (Quoted in Linklater 2007, p. 27). Jefferson saw little contradiction between great estates and equality because he understood equality as the absence of hierarchical dependence. Jefferson’s model of society was one of independent farmers, each working his own land. He believed that Saxon England prior to the Norman Conquest had been based on alodial law, in which land belonged to the person who worked it, and argued that American society should be a return to this old Saxon system (Jefferson 1950). “In the model he envisioned, the political structure would be built up from the community based on the local ‘hundred’ or county with its own court and administration” (Quoted in Andro Linklater, *The Fabric of America: How Our Borders and Boundaries Shaped the Country and Forged Our National Identity*. New York: Walker & Company, 2007, p. 47).

Jefferson’s social vision makes it clear just how he managed to square social egalitarianism with a belief in the existence of superior individuals. All men (and Jefferson’s ideas did apply chiefly to “men” in the narrower sense of male humans) were indeed not only created equal, but would live in equal circumstances insofar as none were dependent on others for support or patronage because each controlled his own agrarian base. Some might indeed hold larger tracts, as Jefferson did, But this would not give larger land holders power over smaller holders.

American beliefs and concerns over equality as independence coalesced at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the phrase “natural aristocracy.” Today, we remember this phrase either as a point of contention in the struggle between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists over the adoption of the Constitution or a question of political philosophy in the late correspondence of Jefferson and John Adams. The concept of the natural aristocrat was one of the most widely accepted notions in early social and political thinking about the creation of the American nation. Writing back in England, in the *Wealth of Nations* (Everyman’s Library, 1954 [1776], vol. II, p. 118), Adam Smith attributed the American struggle to the desire of the “... the leading men, the natural aristocracy” of the colonies to manage public affairs. In America, this elite management, taken for granted by Smith, came under scrutiny during the efforts to design a governmental structure following independence. Even those who were most sympathetic to an English-style rank-ordering of society, who were often members of an elite based on birth, tended to accept an implicit and generally unexamined assumption of the situation later known as “equality of opportunity,” in which personal virtues and talents, not advantages of birth, would be the primary sources of preeminence.

Because American concerns were chiefly about hierarchy and dependence, arguments about unequal wealth and position in the early republic often concentrated on whether the most advantaged would employ power to subject others and become a true estate. A concentration of power could help to turn wealthier, more socially connected, and cleverer people into a European-style elite. This was the reason the Federalist-Anti-Federalist debate over the Constitution became a debate over stratification. It was a debate that broadened and deepened American thinking about social classes and produced a range of views, but always stayed close to the issue of what a generally accepted socioeconomic inequality meant for relations of independence.

John Adams took a complicated view of the natural aristocracy, seeing its members as sources of both danger and national political advantage. To overcome the dangers of natural aristocrats to political equality, he proposed “to throw the rich and the proud into one group, in a separate assembly, and there tie their hands; if you give them scope with the people at large, or their representatives, they will destroy all equality and liberty, with the consent and acclamation of the people themselves [italics in the original]. They will have much more power mixed with the representatives, than separated from them. In the first case, if they unite, they will give the law, and govern all; if they differ, they will divide the state, and go to a decision by force. But placing them alone by themselves, the society avails itself of all their abilities and virtues; they become a solid check to the representatives themselves, as well as to the executive power, and you disarm them entirely of their power to do mischief” (John Adams, Letter XXXII, Massachusetts Gazette, Sept. 4, 1787, p. 4). Behind Adams’ political theory is a concept of stratification based on a categorization into the natural aristocrats and “the people at large.” Adams’s argument about restraining the natural aristocracy was an ingenious use of a common Anti-Federalist argument for Federalist purposes, since those opposed to a more centralized government often argued precisely that localized and diffused politics were needed to restrain the natural aristocrats.

With the successful adoption of the Constitution, the debate over the role of inequality in American life became less immediately relevant. But looking back at this debate reveals some of the assumptions and ideas about equality and inequality held by early Americans. Americans did not all agree on their opposition to rank-ordered subordination, nor were they always consistent in their views. The elite Anti Federalists, in particular, often appeared to oppose centralization of governmental authority because they were inclined toward a kind of subordination, in which they imagined themselves, as local elites, better able than a distant authority to direct their own communities. This kind of anti-democratic localism would continue to be one stream in American social views, later appearing in the thought of John C. Calhoun and again among the Southern Bourbons after Reconstruction. Alongside this regional elitism, though, the Jeffersonian image of independent white yeomen continued to hold imaginations in the South.

The most common opinion was a general acceptance of human inequality, combined with the goal of keeping that inequality from becoming permanently institutionalized as hereditary aristocracy and restraining it from becoming a system of subordination. The last important discussion of the concept of the natural aristocracy took place as an epilogue to the old debate at the time of the Constitution, in the letters of Jefferson and Adams in the Fall of 1813, the year after the two political rivals finally renewed their friendship. Writing on September 2, and commenting on a passage of Theognis, Adams raised the question of who are the “aristoi” He translated this word, which means “the best” in Greek, as “aristocrats.” “Philosophy may Answer ‘the Wise and Good,’” Adams maintained, “But the World, Mankind, have by their practice always answered, ‘the rich, the beautiful and well born’” (Adams, in Lester J. Cappon *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1988, p. 371). Adams told Jefferson that “the five Pillars of Aristocracy are Beauty, Wealth, Birth, Genius and Virtues. Any one of the three first, can at any time over bear any one or both of the last two” (Adams, in Cappon 1988, p.

371).

Adams, then saw the inequality described by aristocracy as consisting of individual qualities, rather than inhering in social structure. Today, most commentators would probably classify being “well born,” having an advantageous family situation, as a matter of the system of positions into which individuals are born. Adams, though, writing at a time before sociologically thinking permeated views of the world, considered advantages of birth, personal appearance, and financial situation all as individual qualities. Moreover, he argued that the social assets that individuals possess outweigh moral and intellectual capacities. Although Adams threw together different kinds of human inequalities, it is evident that Adams took a highly skeptical and critical view of social inequality, even while regarding it as inevitable. The things that make people “the best” in a society are usually not the most constructive traits. The suspicion of preeminence is consistent with the old Federalist’s earlier concerns with setting up institutions that can control and direct the political influence of the supposedly best people.

Jefferson replied to these thoughts on October 28. He recognized that Adams was lumping together different types of inequality as components of the aristocracy, and then assuming that the least desirable components would receive the greatest emphasis. Jefferson responded by dividing the qualities identified by Adams into two categories: those belonging to the “artificial aristocracy” and those belonging to the “natural aristocracy.” “The grounds of [the natural aristocracy],” according to Jefferson, “are virtue and talents.” Bodily strength, he explained, was a primary ground of this natural preeminence, but modern weapons have rendered this obsolete. “[B]odily strength, like beauty, good humor, politeness, and other accomplishments, has become an auxiliary ground of distinction.” Jefferson did not make it clear why these other accomplishments should have diminished along with strength, although presumably gunpowder did not displace beauty or politeness in the same way that it displaced physical prowess. The artificial aristocracy, on the other hand, is “founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents” (Jefferson, in Cappon, 1988, p. 388).

Jefferson distinguished between the fundamental political rights of white men, which were equal, and their opportunities for leadership, which the author of the Declaration of Independence believed should be distributed according to virtues and talents. Neither Jefferson nor John Adams was a social leveler. Both saw stratification as inevitable, and justifiable to the extent that it was the product of those virtues and talents. It is notable that Jefferson’s optimism about the natural aristocracy was based on his differentiation of inequality based on “virtues and talents” and inequality based on “wealth and birth.” We can see in Jefferson’s interpretation some of the early traces of the “equality of opportunity” view that was gradually to emerge from the “equality of independence” perspective. The willingness to free the natural aristocrats from constraints came out of the belief that their superiority would be the expression of personal qualities. However, Jefferson also believed, as we have seen, that in a society of independent individual yeomen even political leadership by people of superior talents would not subordinate the general citizenry.

Adams, true to his old dedication to restraining the natural aristocrats, was much more skeptical of inequality. While he combined different kinds of inequalities, he also made a point that many social scientists would accept today: that the advantages that modern commentators might describe as “ascribed status” influence and can outweigh the advantages of “achieved status.” This did not lead him to argue for abolishing social inequality, but to continue his long-held support for finding ways to restrain and direct those at the top.

In the years that have followed this interchange between the two founders, Americans have tended to lean toward the Jeffersonian approach when they have seen a wide opening for virtues and talents, especially as opportunity became a greater part of the national understanding of the meaning of equality. When they have become more conscious of threats to the efficacy of individual virtues and talents, as in the Progressive Era, they have tended to favor the Adams approach, although fostering opportunity for achievement became a more common rationale for constructing political means of constraint.

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