

Government By “Natural Aristocrats”; Or By Fraudulent & Despotic Aristocrats.

Article: by M. Andrew Holowchak; 19/April/2021:

“The Unseen Significance of Jefferson’s Natural-Aristoi Letter to Adams.”

The Wisest & Most Moral Men Ought to Preside In Government.

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On October 28, 1813, Thomas Jefferson crafts a letter to John Adams in a delayed reply to several other letters, written by Adams on his views of aristocracy, which cry out for a reply. Adams had written extensively on the subject in Discourses on Davila and “Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America,” and continually complained thereafter that he had been much misunderstood, and has asked for Jefferson’s views. After several letters by Adams, Jefferson, months later, finally replies.

Jefferson’s reply (28 Oct. 1813) to Adams is too well-known to need introduction, almost every Jeffersonian biographer has something to say concerning it, yet too few recognize the philosophical significance of it. Jefferson’s letter is an eloquent and luculent summary of a political philosophy, as rich in substance as it is profound in its simplicity. As he believed that the truths of morality were few and straightforward, so too he believed that the principles of good governing were few and straightforward.

After some preliminary thoughts concerning interpretation of a passage on selective breeding by the Greek poet Theognis, Jefferson begins what amounts to a polite refutation of Adams’ views on aristocracy. His refutation underscores key differences between the two men’s views of thriving republican government. Both believed that republican government would thrive when the best men (Gr., aristoi) governed. Adams, however, insisted that the best men were those of wealth, good birth, and even beauty. “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 of or both of the two last,” writes Adams in a prior letter. In support of that claim, Adams appeals to history. People have always preferred wealth and birth, and even looks, to intelligence and morality.

“I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men,” Jefferson coltishly, and perhaps insidiously, concedes. He then proceeds to a distinction between “natural aristoi” and “artificial aristoi,” which amounts to disambiguation of the former through an attempt at a precise account of it. Pace Adams, for whom beauty, wealth, and birth individually or conjointly can trump talent and virtue, this natural aristoi for Jefferson comprises only the virtuous and talented. Jefferson adds, “There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class.” Jefferson’s phrasing here is cautious. Virtue and talent are sufficient to place one among the natural aristocracy. Lack of virtue and talent (more precisely, lack of either) is sufficient to exclude one.

Jefferson's distinction aims to refute Adams, and that refutation underscores the essential difference between Jeffersonian and Adamsian republicanism.

There is to note Jefferson's use of "natural," which is neither discretionary nor incautious, and is often overlooked by biographers. Nature (i.e., God) has foreordained, as it were, that the wisest and most moral ought to preside among men, if only as stewards, that is, primus inter pares, (latin for "First Among Equals". Consequently, the centuries-old practice of the aristoi as the wealthy and wellborn is a contravention, and corruption, of the dictates of nature.

Jefferson says more. He offers this rhetorical question. "May we not even say, that that form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?" Nature has foreordained that genius and morality are the defining features of aristoi, so the best government is that which selects the aristoi. There is no place for the wealthy and wellborn in politics, unless they are also endowed with genius and moral sensitivity.

The rhetorical question leads naturally to other, relevant issues. All concern establishment of a sort of government, genuinely republican, in which a system is in place that selects for the true, natural aristoi. Who are to be the selectors? "The best remedy is exactly that provided by all our constitutions, to leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the aristoi from the pseudo-aristoi, of the wheat from the chaff." The vox populi is not infallible, Jefferson acknowledges, but the people "in general ... will elect the real good and wise." Thus, the aristoi will for the most part assume political offices, though they will be watched and will serve for short terms.

How can we be sure that the people will "in general" select wisely?

On the one hand, the people have the same, if not better, moral sensitivity than those who are fully educated. Why? Moral "judgment" for Jefferson is immediate and sensory, and corrupted by the input of reason (e.g., TJ to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814). Those schooled in morality in the main corrupt their sensory moral faculty by infusion or intervention of thought. A class on morality for Jefferson is as sensible as a class on hearing. One need not be schooled in hearing. One merely hears. That is why Jefferson was insistent that his nephew Peter Carr should eschew formal education in morality. It would likely be of more harm than of good. He writes to Carr (10 Aug. 1787): "I think it lost time to attend lectures in this branch. He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science."

On the other hand, Jefferson maintains here, and elsewhere, that hale republican governing, entailing selection and overseeing of governors by the people as well as governmental decisions consistent with vox populi, requires wholesale and systemic educational reform: public or ward schools for general education of all citizens, male and female; higher education for future politicians, educators, and scientists; and education of an intermediate sort (grammar schools) to take men from the ward schools to, say, the University of Virginia. For republicanism to thrive, all people need a general education, comprising reading, writing, and basic math, and perhaps also some history. Jefferson proposed such structural reform in his 1779 bill, Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, which failed to pass the Virginian legislature due to resistance by Virginian wealthy and wellborn citizens, who refused to be taxed to educate the

masses. Virginia's wealthy and wellborn already had access to quality education through private tutoring or private schooling, and that access, in Jefferson's eyes, allowed for the perpetuation of their monopoly on governing.

And so, even though Jefferson championed thin government, he also and always championed such "infrastructure," such internal improvements in affairs of wards, of counties, of states, and of the nation, that would most facilitate freedom of all citizens in their pursuit of happiness. Thus, he championed systemic educational reform. Thus, he championed laws eradicating entails and primogeniture. Thus, he championed religious freedom to eradicate "the [unnatural] aristocracy of the clergy."

Jefferson too and most significantly championed science, understood then much more broadly than it is today understood. It was a patronage for which he would be criticized throughout his life. "Science had liberated the ideas of those who read and reflect and the American example had kindled feelings of right in the people." He continues in a buoyant, rhetorical tone: "An insurrection has consequently begun, of science, talents and courage against rank and birth, which have fallen into contempt. ... Science is progressive, and talents and enterprise on the alert."

Jefferson adds before ending his exposition, "I have thus stated my opinion on a point on which we differ, not with a view to controversy, for we are both too old to change opinions which are the result of a long life of inquiry and reflection; but on the suggestion of a former letter of yours, that we ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other." That addendum shows other key features of Jefferson's political philosophy, reducible to Jefferson's views on morality: Conciliation and friendliness are always preferable to confrontation.

It is often presumed today that Jefferson's political philosophy, with a focus on thin government, agrarianism, self-sufficiency, full participation by all citizens insofar as talents and time allows, elected officials for short terms as stewards and not tyrants, free trade and amicable relations with all nations, and so on, is bewhiskered: that is, that its tenets cannot be instantiated because they are passé. Proof of that is the fact, most cavalierly assert, that we have gone politically much more in a Hamiltonian than in a Jeffersonian direction. Yet that argument is a fallacy of fatalism. That we have gone in a certain direction means neither that we could not have gone in another direction nor that we cannot still go in another direction. Jefferson's political philosophy is not bewhiskered. It ought to be studied, reconsidered, and revitalized as an alternative (to) the thick, intrusive government practiced today.

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