



Orestes Brownson on the Natural Aristocracy

In 1813, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams engaged in a correspondence on the topic of the natural aristocracy in America. These two political enemies reconciled over the question of how the new nation might raise up leaders like themselves. More than a generation later the journalist, publisher, one-time Transcendentalist and notable Catholic convert, Orestes Brownson, would revisit this same topic.

Adams and Jefferson disagreed about how to define a natural aristocracy. Adams insisted that advantages beyond personal qualities should be included, such as wealth and family connections. According to his letter of November 15, "Education, Wealth, Strength, Beauty, Stature, Birth, Marriage, graceful Attitudes and Motions, Gait, Air, Complexion, Physiognomy, are Talents, as well as Genius and Science and learning. Any one of these Talents, that in fact commands or influences true Votes in Society, gives to the Man who possesses it, the Character of an Aristocrat, in my Sense of the Word."

Perhaps, as the father of a future president, such advantages were more at the forefront of his mind than they were for his widower correspondent. Jefferson, by contrast, argued that only the personal traits carried by an individual could qualify one for inclusion in the natural aristocracy. Adams was responding to Jefferson's comment from October 28, in which he stated: "For I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. Formerly bodily powers gave place among the aristoi. But since the invention of gunpowder has armed the weak as well as the strong with missile death, bodily strength,

like beauty, good humor, politeness and other accomplishments, has become but an auxiliary ground of distinction."

Jefferson's definition has become the dominant one in this country. It is an important part of the American story of the penniless youth who goes on to greatness.



Orestes Brownson

Their mutual friend, Ben Franklin was the prototype, both insofar as this was his story and insofar as he went to great pains making sure everyone knew it was his story. Self-promotion is a necessity for the parvenu.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, preceding the correspondence with Adams by more than two decades, Jefferson described the means by which a natural aristocracy could arise in America. The educational sys-

tem would have the lower schools promote to the higher their best students. "By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually." Eventually the very best would be admitted to institutes of higher learning such as the University of Virginia.

The phrase "raked from the rubbish" might even have been used by Brownson, were it not so indelicate, for he followed Jefferson in both his understanding of what a natural aristocracy is and how it could be cultivated. In his "Oration on Liberal Studies" (1853), he announced, "I tell you, young gentlemen, however democratically inclined you may be, that God gives to every nation an aristocracy, titled or untitled, recognized or unrecognized by the civil constitution, hereditary or unhereditary, whose mission it is to guide and lead the people, and to direct, sustain, and defend their interests."

There was a strong aristocratic tendency in Brownson, not altogether unwarranted. In that same address he claimed, "The strength and glory of a nation depend not on the vulgar, the commonalty, the low born, the servile, or the simple, but on its freemen, its gentlemen, its nobility." When that class of citizen becomes corrupt the nation will fail.

As did Jefferson, Brownson thought a natural aristocracy could be formed in the universities and colleges that were being established throughout the country. In his "Necessity of Liberal Education" from the *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1844), he wrote, "The true interest of republics is to found, and liberally endow, colleges and universities, so as to bring the highest education within the reach of individuals from

the humblest classes.”

Brownson’s comment is not far different from another of Jefferson’s from the same letter quoted above, “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?”

The idea that an educated class of citizens could and must lead the country out of its troubles gained speed in the early twentieth century and kept pace with the space age after World War II. Poor boys made good, such as Harvard’s president James Bryant Conant, institutionalized the process of raking the rubbish with standardized tests such as the SAT. Today, competitive entry processes that select for only the best and highest performing students from preschool to gradeschool ensure that the rubbish is well and truly raked.

From Jefferson through Brownson and Conant to the vast college admissions industry, the form by which the natural aristocracy was to be cultivated has always been the same. The most able men—and now women, too—would be selected for greater advantages and responsibilities as they ascended not a greasy pole but an ivory tower. The problem many are starting to discover is that university has become a greasy tower, merely a means to further ambition and accrue wealth and power.

Criticisms of American higher education are becoming commonplace. Harry Lewis, a computer scientist and former dean of Harvard College wrote a book entitled *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* Lewis laments that “Harvard teaches students but does not make them wise.” More directly, he tells us that the education offered at Harvard “suggests that character and morality are not the university’s business at all”.

Higher education may do a good job at raking the rubbish for the most talented and accomplished young people in the country, but, according to Lewis and others, they remain rubbish. William Deresiewicz recounts a student at Yale responding to him in the following way: “So are you saying that we’re all just, like, really excellent

sheep?” Deresiewicz went on to write a whole book on the topic, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*.

What happened? A clue can be found in another passage from Brownson’s “Necessity of Liberal Education.” He wrote, “Dangers, numerous and threatening, hand over us, and we have no hope, but in the educated men, the *scholars* of the country. It is for them to come to the rescue. It is on their fidelity to their mission, and their boldness, energy, and devotion to the truth and social progress, that the salvation of the country, under Providence, depends.”

Brownson’s hope in the guidance of Providence was not accidental and marks his departure from Jefferson and his successors. In an address at Dartmouth College entitled “An Oration on the Scholar’s Mission” (1843), he previewed his notion that the scholar could save the country. He stated, “The remedy must be sought in the increase of the number of genuine scholars, in raising up an army of thoroughly educated men, gifted with a brave, heroic, self-denying spirit, with no will but that of their Divine Master, and knowing only to obey, to the spirit, and to the letter, even the least and the greatest of his commands, let obedience cost what it may.”

Brownson was part of the long American tradition of looking to its colleges and universities to save it, but was outside that tradition insofar as he expected those institutions to be (or remain) explicitly religious. In his address “On Liberal Studies”, he argued that the virtue of the community could be maintained only by “a religious education, not merely instruction in simply human knowledge”. The content of Jefferson’s idea of a university is more similar to what one finds today than what Brownson had in mind.

When Jefferson founded the University of Virginia it intentionally had no Theology department. Catching up with “Mr. Jefferson’s University”, most of those institutions that were founded with religious missions have relegated theology to dark corners where they might not embarrass anyone. Harvard’s elision of its motto from

veritas christo ecclesia to *veritas* (and in some instances, simply a large “V”) is among the more cringing versions of this soft-Jacobinism.

With regard to the Christian origins of so many colleges and universities, Andrew Delbanco has written that “many academics have a curiously uneasy relation with these origins, as if they pose some threat or embarrassment to our secular liberties, even though the battle for academic freedom against clerical authority was won long ago.” Brownson would be dismayed.

The moral qualities Brownson wanted to cultivate in a natural aristocracy seem absent or incidental, certainly accidental in the education of the new meritocracy. That itself is no accident. America’s colleges and universities abandoned character formation in tandem with their religious missions. They found it more difficult to advance an ideal in an increasingly pluralistic and fractured culture.

The sad irony in this story is that the natural aristocracy that Jefferson promoted and his followers, including Brownson, hoped to develop through higher education have become, instead, the pseudo-aristocracy he feared. Adams’s list of “Education, Wealth, Strength, Beauty, Stature, Birth, Marriage, graceful Attitudes and Motions, Gait, Air, Complexion, Physiognomy” could be translated into the language of college admissions as “class rank, future donor, athlete, legacy student, minority”. One can read this in Deresiewicz’s account of his time on the Yale admissions committee.

Brownson argued for a system in which the “education determines the class, not the class the education”. More than 200 years after Jefferson planned to rake the rubbish, it seems the task is not complete. In 2014 Yale announced a new initiative to find qualified poor students. What Yale means by “poor” (or “more”) might be questionable, when at the time 69 percent of its students came from families earning more than \$120,000 and only 14 percent earned less than \$66,000 at a time when the national average was \$52,000.

But even if Yale and other elite institutions can do the job of finding heretofore

unidentified geniuses, it remains unclear what good that will do for their less qualified classmates or the nation as a whole. Brownson argued that the mission of the natural aristocracy was “to guide and lead the people, and to direct, sustain, and defend their interests”. There is little evidence they acknowledge having such a mission.

In the recent book by J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, a Yale graduate describes the vast cultural distance between the educated aristocrats whose world he joined and the moral chaos he left behind in Appalachia. His account suggests we have

not left behind, or we have fallen back into, what Jefferson decried as the belief that there is “a favored few booting and spurred, ready to ride them [the mass of mankind] legitimately”.

Brownson might have been wrong to place his hope in the burgeoning institutions of higher learning, but not in higher learning itself. In his “Oration on Liberal Studies” he admitted to not having received a liberal education. That was true, at least in a formal, institutional setting. Yet he was greatly educated. He became a member of the natural aristocracy.

What we should learn from Brownson’s

mistake is not to put our trust in the institutions of higher learning at the expense of learning. The effort to locate education in institutions rather than in ideas and the books and people who contain them is to misunderstand where talents are found.

Talents are found in individuals, such as Brownson. His self-education should be a model and inspiration for us and subsequent generations.

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New Voices

New Poetry in English



Lydia Martin



A Reassurance to the Scrupulous

Over the altar bends the aged priest,
Stooped by prayer and weight of ancient days.
His veined, trembling hands with tender care
the host he hardly sees before
his rheumy eyes doth raise.

Breaking with finite care the Blessed Bread:
Infinite, boundless Body of the Lord,
In servant’s broken hands the broken God.
And in that moment infinite
A precious piece of whiteness falls upon the floor

Fallen, with glory hidden by disguise!
Fallen before his eyes the Lord of Light!
The helpless King from helpless servant’s hands,
And there, before his blindness is
Fallen, the giver of sight!

And do you think the great High Priest is sad?
Or wounded by that faithful, weakly love?
So, when the children cradle Him in hand,
He kisses fingers with His crumbs:
The love-lost Lord above!