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# An American Aristocracy

by Eugene V. Debs

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The President of Harvard University is very much concerned about the establishment of an American aristocracy. In this there is nothing peculiar. We doubt if there is an institution of learning in the country the president of which does not share the anxiety of President Eliot, of Harvard, nor need we exclude the smaller institutions, the colleges, academies, high schools, etc., in all of which the seeds of aristocracy are diligently cultivated.

The Harvard president professes that he does not want an aristocracy of titles and privileges, such as is rotting and festering in Europe, but an aristocracy of education, intellect, refinement, and, necessarily, money, because the learned advocate of an American aristocracy sees no chance for its establishment unless there are founded ancestral homes, to be held from generation to generation, involving the idea of entailment; the ancestral estate, with its castle, to be taken by the oldest male heir, etc., all of which involves fundamental changes in the laws and institutions of the country.

Such an aristocracy, President Eliot believes, would develop an honorable pride in name and home and become an incentive to meritorious conduct, and eventually become the glory of the nation.

All of Mr. Eliot's ideas of an American aristocracy converge on an "ancestral home" — some spot to be made sacred by inheritance, by associations, by family traditions, etc., and the idea to educate American children so that in due time we shall have an American aristocracy — an exclusive set, known and recognized as "the aristocracy!"

It will occur to numerous readers that President Eliot is seeking to dwarf the fundamental ideas of American institutions — the created equality of man, and, it possible, the more explicit declaration of St.

Peter, that “God is no respecter of persons.”<sup>1</sup> The Harvard president, with all his book lore, fails to perceive the trend of human thought. He makes no note of the fact that the term “aristocracy” is everywhere becoming odious; that Democracy is the shibboleth of the people in all lands where there is any desire to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and error. Learned though he be, his learning, if it has not made him “mad,” has reduced him to a crank, filled his mind with vagaries and made him the exponent not only of folly but of an impossibility.

Here, in the United States, it is possible for certain people to imagine themselves aristocrats. The work began long ago, and has been kept up to the present. Boston has its codfish, mackerel and herring aristocracy, dating back to the early days of fishhooks, bait and seines, colored somewhat with rum, beads and slave ships — traffic in human flesh. It has its factory aristocracy, built up to colossal proportions upon woman and child labor, in establishments often more loathsome than prisons; an aristocracy which is giving back to the wilderness thousands of “ancestral homes,” homes where bats and owls hold high carnival, farms abandoned to wild beasts and reptiles, facts which President Eliot might contemplate with profit. In all of the great cities we have the “American aristocracy” for which the Harvard president pants and sighs, meditates and writes. New York has its “400,” with Ward McAllister its historian, made of Wall Street shearers of lambs and those distinguished fakirs who, with magic art, change water into wealth, so that experts are incapable of telling “which from t’other,” and all is set down as equally entitled to dividends. In all of the great cities, in fact in all the cities of the country, there is to be found an American aristocracy, minus the “ancestral home,” and minus pedigree, the ancestral name, the castle, etc.

President Eliot, manifestly, has not given the subject he discusses the study its importance demands, and which it should command. Everywhere the American aristocracy, in some stage of development, can be seen. In Michigan, a skunkery promises such profits that within a generation an aristocratic family will be founded as notable as that of the Astors or the Vanderbilts. Why not? Skinning skunks for their fur is quite as reputable as skinning coons and muskrats, and

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Acts, chapter 10, verses 34-35: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

the indications are that in the near future the skunk rampant or pas-sant will proclaim the proprietor of the Michigan skunkery equal to the most exacting demands of President Eliot for an American aristocracy. Mr. Freeland can have his “ancestral home” near or remote from his skunkery, and in his palatial banqueting hall may entertain the aristocracy in a style equal to anything recorded under the old regime.

If President Eliot were as well-informed as he ought to be, he would know that there is a budding aristocracy to be found in every mercantile establishment, from a corner grocery to the “house” which “controls the market.” He has only to read the papers to learn how rapidly aristocratic families are striding to the front, giving “teas,” “chocolates,” “coffees,” etc., always careful to have full descriptions of costumes, together with “diamond and pearl ornaments” appear in the press. The trust barons, the bonanza kings, the bucket shop lords, and the lamb-shearing sir knights constitute a still higher grade of American aristocracy, while the railroad tsars, sultans, and shahs are on top, and have the largest army of retainers to supply them with the needful to maintain their establishments.

To help on matters, we have an aristocratic religion, aristocratic churches, and aristocratic cemeteries, and we think President Eliot need not vex his learned soul further. Like Rip Van Winkle, should he go to sleep for twenty years, upon waking he would find the American aristocracy shining like a dead mackerel at full moon, and sufficiently offensive to make a brass dog hold its nose.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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