

Snobbus Americanus

American democracy is a fine soil for growing the great oaks of freedom and opportunity, but that same rich earth has also been especially accommodating to the rank weed of snobbery. There's no aristocracy of birth to keep Americans in their place. Envy and scorn send them up—and down—in the society.

by Joseph Epstein

William Makepeace Thackeray, in his *Book of Snobs*, reports that “first, the World was made, then, as a matter of course, Snobs.” Yet it is not altogether certain that this is true. One hears little about snobbery before the 18th century, and scarcely anything at all about it then. The Snob, one would think, would be a staple figure in Restoration comedy, but not so. Neither are there any snobs in Shakespeare, Dante, Aristophanes, or the Bible. Not that there isn't plenty of truckling to superiors, parasitism, heavy-handed flattery, back scratching and bottom kissing, all calculated to bring special advantages to its purveyors. Pretension, too, has never been in short supply. We see much pretension that veers on the snobbish in the plays of Molière. The painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, friend to Wordsworth, Keats, Lamb, and Hazlitt, practically swooned when in the company of the highborn. But snobbery as we know it today, snobbery meant to shore up one's own sense of importance and to make others sorely feel their insignificance, was not yet up and running in a serious way. It took the spread of democracy to make that possible.

The reason is that, until the 19th cen-

tury, there was a ready acceptance of rank and social position and, accompanying this, an understanding that most people were everlastingly locked in their place. Where social rank is clearly demarcated, as it is when a nobility and a gentry are present, jockeying for position of the kind that is at the heart of snobbery tends to play a less than strong part in daily life; nor is it quite so central in the interior dramas of men and women whose hearts are set on rising in the world.

Snobbery thrives where society is most open. It does particularly well under democracy, even though, theoretically, it is anathema to the democratic spirit. Snobbery is, wrote the political philosopher Judith N. Shklar in *Ordinary Vices*, “a repudiation of every democratic value.” The social fluidity that democracy makes possible, allowing people to climb from the bottom to the top of the ladder of social class in a generation or two, provides a fine breeding ground for snobbery and gives much room to exercise condescension, haughtiness, affectation, false deference, and other egregious behavior so congenial to the snob.

The unavoidable Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, reminds his



readers that “democratic institutions most successfully develop sentiments of envy in the human heart.” He also remarks that in America he “found [that] the democratic sentiment of envy was expressed in a thousand different ways.” In a democracy, there are so many ways of rising in society: through the acquisition of money, through marriage, even through, *mirabile dictu*, merit. But such is the spirit behind democracy that no one really believes that, apart from innate talent, anyone is intrinsically better than anyone else, and especially that no one is better than oneself; therefore, any difference in social status between one person and another is taken to constitute an injustice of a

kind—and one that can be remedied and rectified by careful plans. From the early Henry James (*Daisy Miller*) to Edith Wharton (*The Custom of the Country*) to Theodore Dreiser (*An American Tragedy*) to F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*), some of the best 19th- and early-20th-century American novels are about attempts to carry such plans to fruition. The attempt to rise in American democracy may be the primary, the central, the essential American story.

One finds touches of snobbery in our nation’s early history. John Adams must have felt he was scoring heavily when he called Alexander Hamilton

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“the bastard brat of a Scotch pedlar,” and the tragic rivalry between Hamilton and Aaron Burr has always seemed to have about it a social-class tinge. But for the most part, the Founding Fathers felt that honor was more important than social position. If one wished to sink a man, the best way to do it was to attack not his birth or manners but his reputation. “Probably nothing separates the traditional world of the Founding Fathers from today,” the historian Gordon S. Wood has written, “more than its concern with honor. Honor was the value genteel society placed on a gentleman and the value a gentleman placed on himself. . . . Honor subsumed self-esteem, pride, and dignity, and was akin to glory and fame.”

Little snobberies existed even in this rarefied atmosphere. Some American families considered themselves aristocratic; some states felt more highly placed than others—the gentry of Virginia and Maryland, for example, early took on aristocratic pretensions. The phenomenon of avowed descent from *Mayflower* passengers—that is, of claiming status through precedence—was part of the mythos of the American founding. As late as the last half of the 19th century, this was continued by such organizations as the Daughters of the American Revolution. But whereas the DAR, as it was then known, once carried some punch in its disapproval, its current-day existence seems largely a joke.

Snobbishness, Marcel Proust noted, implies that there are people to whom one feels oneself inferior. In democratic America, where everyone was thought to be created equal, this became a dubious proposition—at least officially, if not realistically. In a country with so brief a history, no one could say, as Aimery de La Rochefoucauld is supposed to have said when refusing to invite a family to his home, that “they had no position in the year 1000.” Snobbery therefore became identified with pretension—the snobs were those who pretended to be above the

ruck. Yet in the new America, this did not mean that great numbers of people did not wish to rise as high as possible. Thank goodness the law of contradiction has never been enforced in social life, for the jails would overflow.

Elsewhere in the world the social system was fixed because of the stability of a class system, with aristocracy at its top, a substantial peasantry below, a thinnish middle class between. Samuel Johnson felt that “subordination is very necessary for society, and contentions for superiority very dangerous.” A firmly locked-in social system, with little mobility either upward or downward, can be the best stifler of snobbery.

By the time the United States was founded, the first tremors of the forthcoming collapse of aristocracy were being felt. The French Revolution, in 1789, provided more than tremors. Tocqueville, himself of an aristocratic family, knew the game was up well before his visit to our shores in 1831. Behind the writing of *Democracy in America* was the fear that then-rising equality would destroy liberty. He never mentions snobbery in his book, but he is unlikely to have been surprised by the fact that the spirit of equality could only excite the behavior that goes into the making of the snob. Let us add to these the underbelly emotions of uncertainty, uneasiness, and a worrisome self-consciousness about one’s true status that bedevil all snobs.

In public life, a political candidate could be attacked on what were essentially snobbish grounds. Even so cultivated a gent (as he now seems) as Thomas Jefferson took a number of hits about his wardrobe, his grooming, his too easy manners. Andrew Jackson was called by his opponents “the Tennessee barbarian,” and his poor spelling was mocked. Abraham Lincoln, progenitor of the main American myth—that in the United States one can go from a log cabin to the White House—was put down in his day by *The New York*

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Herald as “a fourth-class lecturer who can’t speak good grammar.” Henry Adams, the consummate American snob, devoted an entire novel, *Democracy*, to excoriating the coarseness of American senators, and in that novel, after setting out their low principles, called political corruption “the dance of democracy.” Adams’s friend Henry James wrote a story, “Pandora,” with characters modeled on Adams and his wife, who are planning a party and in which the Adams character remarks, “Hang it, there’s only a month left; let us be vulgar and have some fun—let us invite the President!”

Perhaps there is something fraudulent about democracy, not as a method of conducting politics but as a social arrangement. In America, this was highlighted by the predominantly middle-class makeup of the country. Vague and wide-ranging though the term *middle class* may be, it does render anyone who is part of this stratum capable of, if not intrinsically susceptible to, snobbery in both directions. To be middle class positions one nicely to be both an upward- and a downward-looking snob, full, simultaneously, of aspiration to rise to the position of those above and of disdain for those below.

H. L. Mencken makes this same point, possibly with more glee than is absolutely required, but then his prose glands were always stimulated by the contemplation of what he liked to refer to as Boobus Americanus. In an essay he titled “The Pushful American,” Mencken, along with George Jean Nathan (though the voice of the essay is dominantly Mencken’s), claimed that Americans are distinguished above all by their desire to climb socially. But this appetite for the climb was strongly hedged by a fear of slipping and losing one’s original place.

Mencken’s larger point is that socially the American is on a perpetually icy slope, wanting to climb “a notch or two” but “with no wall of caste . . . to protect him if he slips.” He wrote: “Such a thing as a secure position is practically unknown to us.” Without a true aristocracy, with full

titles and the rest of it, he argued, no American is ever securely lodged. (Tocqueville wrote that “in no country of the world are private fortunes more unstable than in the United States.”) With a title—especially a title handed down to one and handed down in turn to one’s children—one can act the utter rascal or rogue without worry about losing one’s place; one can be drunk, stupid, immoral, with insane politics, but one is still an earl, marquis, count, grandee: a status that cannot be taken away. Lacking a true aristocracy, what we have had, Mencken contends, are cities “full of brummagem aristocrats” who have turned out to be little more than plutocrats aping aristocratic behavior. Instead of a settled society, Americans have a regular rhythm of rise and fall. “The grandfather of the Vanderbilts,” Mencken writes, “was a bounder; the last of the Washingtons is a petty employee in the Library of Congress.”

Americans attempting the social climb Mencken found pitiful, and the group at the top contemptible, with its “shameless self-assertion, its almost obscene display of its importance and of the shadowy privileges and acceptance on which that importance is based.” These arrangements gave way to an almost inevitable snobbery—though Mencken, too, doesn’t use the word—with those who may be said to have arrived anxious to keep down the newcomer, and the newcomer ready to abase himself, to “sacrifice his self-respect today in order to gain the hope of destroying the self-respect of other aspirants tomorrow.”

Mencken’s description of American life, with every city having its own upper-caste groups, with various undergroups plotting to slip past the gates to enter a social Valhalla of sorts, is now so badly dated as to be quite without reality. But where Mencken wasn’t wrong was in noting that democracy “is always inventing class distinctions, despite its theoretical abhorrence of them.” The Ins and Outs, especially in recent years, change with considerable rapidity. Capital-S Society,

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which once stood for *le gratin*, the upper crust, in every modest-sized town and above all in New York City—where such groups existed as Ward McAllister’s Four Hundred, the number of people who could fit into Mrs. Astor’s private ballroom—and which once dominated American social snobbery, is all but finished. This was Society of the society page, where the cotillions, debutante balls, marriages, and other doings of the putative upper class were reported on regularly, generally in a tone of gushing admiration. No one knows who killed Society, or even the date of its death, but one can fix the demise around the time the Society pages were banished from the newspapers, to be replaced by the “style” sections, which began to happen in the 1960s.

The disappearance of a formal, structured Society didn’t mean the end of snobbery, for social envy continued unabated, only becoming more amorphous and turning on things other than birth or wealth alone. “A degree of proximity is required between two classes to make possible envy of the upper by the lower,” the sociologist Robert Nisbet wrote, adding: “This is why envy proliferates during periods or in societies where equality has come to dominate other values.” Nisbet felt that the American competition for “status becomes in its own way as tyrannical as anything before it.” Making roughly the same point, the English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge reported that, at lunch with the editor of *Burke’s Peerage*, he was told of the great interest in titled Englishmen among Americans. “I said that, inevitably, the more egalitarian a society became, the more snobbish.”

While Society was still running strong in America, there was much copying of the English aristocracy, in the naming of suburbs, schools, housing developments, even children. In no other country was the ennobling suffix, usually awarded only to kings and popes, sometimes added to names, resulting in J. Bryan III, or Daniel

Thomas V. Americans, for all their official allegiance to the notion of democracy, seemed to long for an aristocracy. If a full-blown aristocracy could not be brought off, then something resembling a patriciate was thought acceptable.

The ultimate effort in this direction, which is not over yet, is the attempt on the part of many Americans to render the Kennedy family our patriciate. The assassination of John F. Kennedy aided this effort immensely. Panegyrists there have been in plenty to stoke and keep the sacred flame. But too much scandal elsewhere in the family—including the near-fascism and anti-Semitism of the Founding Father, as Joseph Kennedy, Sr., came to be known—and the serious want of talent among Kennedy descendants have made it difficult to sustain. Even now the desire refuses to be quite extinguished, as witness the good-night-sweet-prince press treatment of the sad accidental death of the son of Jack Kennedy. Not even Ted Kennedy, a bloated Falstaffian figure without any of the winning humor, can put it to sleep.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of this is the mythical aura that arose around Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, or Jackie O, in the grocery-press and fashion-magazine styling of her name. Here was a woman of modest attainments, who put up with a frightful amount from her philandering husband and supplied a veneer of culture over his presidency, but whose personal motto, finally, might have been—what the hell, let’s Frenchify it—*Je vais pour l’argent*: I go for the money. One cannot say that she longed for the role, yet she became our older, longer-suffering Princess Diana. Not through any intrinsic merits but chiefly because of her connection to the Kennedys she became, in that thinnest of over- and misused words, an icon. (In the one joke I have ever heard attributed to Mao Zedong, the Chinese leader is supposed to have said, “If Aristotle Onassis was interested in power, I wonder why he didn’t propose to the widow of Nikita Khrushchev.”)

Even as Americans may long for a patri-
archate, a royal family even, we hate what
seem to us distinctions of rank not based on
merit. The only time I ever encountered
such arrangements was in the peacetime
U.S. Army, where the officer class did not
seem to me to earn its privileges. (Only a
handful of sergeants, most of them black,
impressed me as truly able men.) Many of
the officers I had to do with were ROTC
trained and seemed dullish, undeserving of
the deference that was theirs by right of
rank. Not that I rebelled. In my dealings
with them, I merely fell back on what I took
to be my intrinsic superiority, reminding
myself that they may be majors or
colonels in a military setting, but outside
this setting, in the larger world in which I
planned to act, they were corporals at
best. If this was the snob in me reacting to
what I took to be an undeserving hierarchy,
it was, I now think, even more an almost
purely American reaction.

Perhaps Americans in their democra-
cy were especially prone to snob-
bery because they felt themselves so snob-
bishly judged by Europeans. Right out of
the gate, it was Old World versus New,
with the New World having little going
for it besides a certain raw energy. When
Mrs. Frances Trollope, the mother of the
novelist, arrived here in 1827 to report on
the “domestic manners of the Ameri-
cans”—eventually the title of her once-
famous book on America—she had almost
nothing good, and plenty dreary, to say
about her subject. Of Americans general-
ly, and American soldiers in particular,
she wrote: “I do not like them. I do not like
their principles, I do not like their manners,
I do not like their opinions.” Here she is on
Americans at table:

The total want of all the usual cour-
tesies of the table, the voracious
rapidity with which the viands were
seized and devoured, the strange
uncouth phrases and pronunciation;
the loathsome spitting, from the con-
tamination of which it was absolutely
impossible to protect our dresses; the
frightful manner of feeding with their

knives, till the whole blade seemed to
enter into the mouth; and the still
more frightful manner of cleaning
the teeth afterwards with a pocket
knife, soon forced us to feel that we
were not surrounded by the generals,
colonels, and majors of the old world;
and that the dinner hour was to be
anything rather than the hour of
enjoyment.

Lots more of the same issued from
Europeans during the 19th century and
well into the 20th. Charles Dickens, in
Martin Chuzzlewit, devoted the better
part of a thickish novel to attacking
American manners and mores. The main
charge of Europe against America was
coarseness and vulgarity. With the excep-
tion of Tocqueville, whose criticisms
were not so superficial and whose admi-
rations were genuine, scarcely any
Frenchman missed taking a shot at
American life when the opportunity was
presented. The Germans were not more
charitable. But the English were the most
relentless of all in this line, allowing no
one, but no one, to get off. Here is
Virginia Woolf, in her diary for September
12, 1921, complaining about Henry
James’s *The Wings of the Dove*: “Not a
flabby or slack sentence, but much emas-
culated by this timidity or consciousness
or whatever it is. Very highly American, I
conjecture, in the determination to be
highly bred, and the slight obtuseness as
to what high breeding is.”

This of Henry James, the man who T. S.
Eliot said achieved the status of being a
complete European but of no known
country. James himself reminded Ameri-
cans not to be cowed by Europe. But
rather than fight it, many Americans,
especially those with high social and cul-
tural aspirations, chose to join it. They
decided to view themselves outside Euro-
pean social condemnation and to turn
essentially the same criticisms on their
compatriots, thus beginning a chain of
snobbery that, from the top down, would
never quite end, even in our own day,
when its patent absurdity ought to dis-
qualify it straightaway. □