Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville
Alan S. Kahan

Aristocratic Liberalism was originally published in 1992 by Oxford University Press. The new edition includes an afterward which clarifies certain aspects of the book and also offers a general taxonomy of 19th century liberalisms. The author views his analysis of aristocratic liberalism as part of a larger discussion concerning the different types of liberalism. By focusing on three key aristocratic liberals — Burckhardt, Mill, and Tocqueville — Kahan argues that aristocratic liberalism was a distinct, if somewhat marginal, discourse within 19th century European liberalism.

Kahan’s history of 19th century European thought revolves, almost to a fault, around the French Revolution which, Kahan points out, lasted for over half a century as different groups and ideas attempted to reforge stable political and social systems. In the afterword, Kahan identifies the “common liberal minimum program” as including private property, free trade, equality before the law, freedom of press, and representative government (page 141). Different thinkers supported aspects of this program to different degrees: the aristocratic liberals, for instance, typically downplayed the importance of a free press, at least while the middle and lower classes remained uneducated.

In addition to different policies, the different thinkers appealed to different accounts of human nature, of human society, and of history. For Kahan, the primary targets against which the aristocratic liberals wrote were the interconnected rise of centralization, bureaucracy and capitalism. For many people in the 19th century, material well-being became the highest human goal, while mediocrity, conformity and commercialism were the keys for achieving that goal. As Mill wrote, the art of living had been “engrossed by the art of getting on” (page 45).

One thing that becomes clear through this discussion is the distaste that these three thinkers had for the great majority of humanity. Different liberalisms have different ideas of human nature, and not all of them are limited to or even focused on economic concerns. The aristocratic liberal is perhaps the strangest, harkening back to renaissance humanism to challenge the economic and equalitarian ideals of the 19th century.
The connection between aristocratic liberalism and humanism revolves around the value of liberty, individuality and diversity (page 98). However, according to Kahan, one of the general projects of the aristocratic liberals was the creation of “new virtues” (page 94). These virtues, such as enlightened self-interest, move away from the earlier humanistic virtues, but remain tied to the idea that human beings should be evaluated in terms of their capabilities. To the earlier, humanistic, thinkers, the table of virtues (and vices) were static, and the primary problem was whether these virtues were achieved or not. For aristocratic liberals, virtues were tied to historical change. Rather than corruption, the primary fear was stagnation (page 96).

While reworking the humanistic virtues and the ideal of individuality, the aristocratic liberals also appealed to the image of an aristocracy to imagine a community that can oppose modern, isolating individualism. In the aristocratic ideal, diversity and individuality could exist alongside a strong sense of community. This is not a theme that Kahan pursues to any detail, except insofar as he discusses the importance of education to create an enlightened society. One important gap in Kahan’s discussion here is the almost total lack of a concern for nationalism. On the rare times that the nation is referred to at all, it is typically confused with the state. One example of this connection is when Kahan notes how the three thinkers were nationalists, and by this he means that “they devoted considerable thought to their countries’ place in the European balance of power.” (page 62) But the importance of nationalism in the 19th century has little to do with the balance of power between states. Rather, nationalism became an important way to think through social and economic struggles, both as a way to imagine a mediocre and conforming collective, and as a way to resist it through appeals to often idealized images of national identity.

The trio are used to recite typical criticisms of 19th century middle class mediocrity, with little concern for pushing the analysis of their shared conceptual space. It would have been valuable for Kahan to have also considered how these thinkers were caught in the conceptual frames offered by aristocratic liberalism, where they could on the one hand criticize the narrowing of humanity under capitalism and yet be unable to think through a solution thatextends beyond appeals to education? A reading of Marx’s Jewish Question would have been useful here, insofar as education, like religious conversion, could be understood as creating a spiritual transformation that leaves the material conditions (and the narrowness of life) intact. Kahan’s discussion, in other words, never really creates a sense of interrogation.
One final limitation of the book is that the discussion does not create a sense of the larger intellectual arguments that were occurring in the 19th century. The aristocratic liberals worry about the rise of mass culture and mediocrity, they worry about the centralizing tendencies of bureaucracy, and they worry about the commodification of value, but these large-scale social, political, and economic changes do not have thinkers connected to them in Kahan’s discussion. Likewise, no other reactions to these changes are discussed. Other liberals, the socialists, the missionaries, and so on are almost completely absent. There was no consideration of non-European thinkers, and American thinkers in particular. One could expect, if only as a foil, to at least recognize thinkers such as Thomas Paine. While the absence of other voices helps to emphasize the shared space of these three thinkers, it also creates the sense that the debates, if they existed at all, did not extend far beyond that space.

In his Aristocratic Liberalism, Kahan helps challenge some common preconceptions concerning 19th century liberalism. For instance, while liberalism is typically represented as adopting the values of the bourgeois middle class, certain liberals appealed to aristocratic ideals as a way to challenge many of those middle class values. The key differences revolve around differing accounts of human nature, of the progress or decline of history, and of the possibilities and goals of human community. While Kahan’s work clarifies the conceptual space that was common to three important 19th century liberals, the book fails to create a larger sense of the debate. The result is that the book is really only valuable when read as part of a larger library of books, many of which have not been written yet, that deal with the rest of 19th century thought.