
During the debate about the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in the fall of 1787, the Federal Farmer, an antifederal pamphlet in wide circulation in the state of New York, suggested that two “very unprincipled parties” were at work in America: The “levellers,” as he called them, on the one hand and the other, “composed of a few, but more dangerous men, with their servile dependents; these avariciously grasp at power and property; you may discover in all the actions of these men, an evident dislike to free and equal governments […] ; these are called aristocrates [sic] […]” (qtd. in Kaminski 239–40). Despite this negative opinion, the author had, in an earlier pamphlet, admitted that “the few men of wealth and abilities” had to be viewed as the “natural aristocracy of the country” (qtd. in Kaminski 220). What, then, was the situation of aristocrats in the New Republic, where supposedly all men were created equal? This is the question the Federal Farmer's contradictory assessment begs and which Jonas Anderson seeks to answer in his dissertation entitled Amerikanische Aristokraten. Investigating the history of the Van Rensselaer family, he argues that the survival of that family (and others similarly situated) as an avowed and accepted aristocracy in New York is evidence that—in spite of all the rhetoric of revolution and modernization—“vormodene Strukturen” (13) clearly survived the American Revolution.

In a first section entitled “Das Land,” the author chronologically tracks the development of the patroonship of Rensselaerswyck from the first Dutch settlements up to its dissolution after the death of Stephen van Rensselaer III in 1839 and ensuing land sales—made necessary after prolonged uprisings against the continued rule of the van Rensselaer family. In this section, Anderson shows that absentee landowners like Kiliaen van Rensselaer and his immediate successors viewed their possessions primarily as a financial investment, while later, after the English takeover of New York, Rensselaerswyck survived due to political considerations. Here, the author details the intentions of the new governor in co-opting the large landowners and their interest in continuity and political stability to the new English colonial government (60–61). Constituent elements of aristocratic rule, the author highlights, were primogeniture and entail—each patroon thus being a custodian rather than an owner, tasked with preserving the family land and fortune for future generations (61). In the case of Rensselaerswyck, this arrangement took some generations to install successfully. The new land grant charter issued by the English governor recognized two heirs, so only after 1695, when the Dutch and North American branches of the van Rensselaer family agreed to divide their various interests, was the patroonship of Rensselaerswyck finally based upon primogeniture. At the same time, Kiliaen III became patroon—the first to have been born in North America rather than the Netherlands (69). Their extensive land holdings, Anderson argues, were the reason why the van Rensselaers and their peers viewed themselves and were viewed by others as the apex of the social pyramid and why they were able to retain that position throughout the upheaval of the Revolution and the Early Republic.

The book’s second section—entitled “Das Leben”—strikes me both as the more interesting and the more problematic one. It examines how the construction of aristocracy functioned for the Van Rensselaers and, by extension, their peers. The opening quotation (167) and the conceptual considerations of the introduction suggest that the requirements of aristocracy were twofold: On the
one hand, the aspiring aristocrat had to present himself suitably, i.e. he had to partake of the “habituellen Gemeinsamkeiten” (22) of the group he wished to belong to. He thus had to have “gemeinsame Gewohnheiten in Denken, Fühlen und Handeln und […] einen nach außen sichtbaren Lebensstil” (22), but on the other hand, the desired status had to be granted from without, by others. An aristocrat needed “symbolische Kapital, welches als Prestige beziehungsweise gesellschaftliche Anerkennungsakte für besessenes Kapitel zu verstehen ist” (22). It is exactly the interaction between those two “sources” of aristocratic status which the author seeks to understand by examining the rituals of status (Chapter 1), the representative functions of the manor house and hospitality (Chapter 2), the family members’ political activities (Chapter 3), the importance of philanthropy (Chapter 4), international travel (Chapter 5) and military service (Chapter 6). In my estimation, however, this analysis cannot fully succeed, because of the limitations of the selected source material: The focus on ego-documents (23) must necessarily create a blind spot where the second half of the definition of aristocratic status is concerned. Thus, the reader is repeatedly left with unanswered questions. For example, the author states that when ballots were introduced in the elections and the large landowners thus found themselves robbed of the influence they had previously had in *viva voce* elections, they nonetheless found ways and means of controlling the elections (209) and that members of the Van Rensselaer family gained fame and reputation during the Revolutionary War (274). But which ways and means of influencing the elections did the landowners find and how does one know that the family members’ military service was perceived as positive and, more importantly, relevant for their status? Even for such assumptions for which the ego-documents might be suitable, references are occasionally scanty. How can the reader know that Stephen Van Rensselaer saw the founding of the Rensselaer School as a “Möglichkeit, sich als selbstbewusster, patriotischer Amerikaner zu präsentieren […]” (245); how can the reader know that “die Kavalierstour über den [europäischen] Kontinent ein wichtiges Element des Standesbewusstseins war” (268)? References making these assertions plausible for a reader are lacking, in these as well as in other places.

An aristocratic way of life, defined by self-representation and sufficient property to support it, survived the American Revolution. While heretofore, this phenomenon would mostly have been associated with the planter aristocracies of the southern slave states, it is accreditable to Jonas Anderson to have widened the focus to include similar structures in the colony and state of New York. While I would have liked some of the results more closely referenced, Anderson’s study is certainly worthwhile reading.

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**Works Cited**