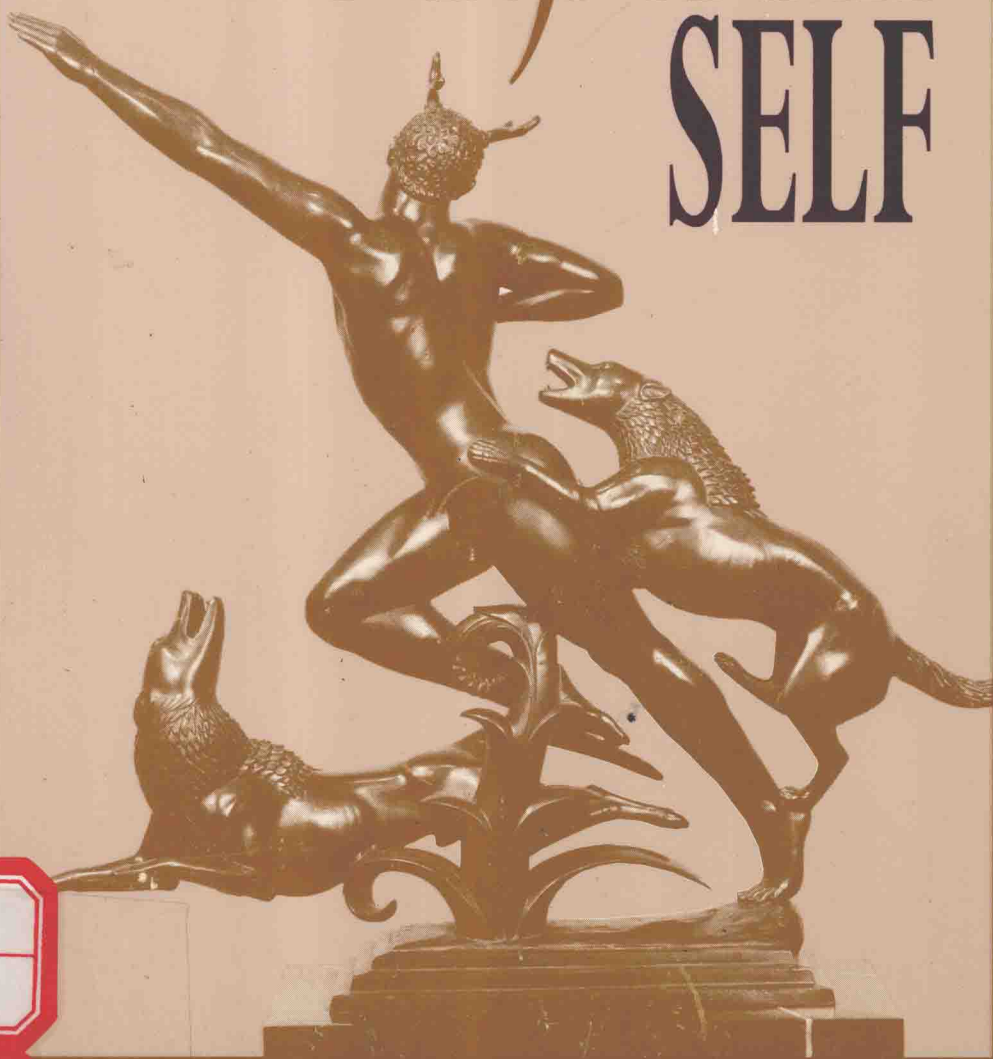


RONALD W. DWORKIN

THE **RISE** OF THE *Imperial* **SELF**



AMERICA'S CULTURE WARS  
FROM AN AUGUSTINIAN PERSPECTIVE

# The Rise of the Imperial Self

*America's Culture Wars  
in Augustinian Perspective*

Ronald William Dworkin

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# The Rise of the Imperial Self



*Front cover:* A picture of a bronze executed by Paul Manship in 1925, of the figure of Actaeon. According to myth, Actaeon was a celebrated huntsman who, after offending the goddess Diana, was turned into a stag and remorselessly pursued by his own dogs. The sculpture of which this photograph was taken is in the collection at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.

***To Sandy***

## Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

In writing *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville believed that America was very different from the world that came before it. The difference between America and the Old World was not really one of wealth or cultivation, but rather of spirit. For centuries, philosophers had warned that a taste for anarchy was synonymous with democratic practice, that the more the great mass of men were raised high, the more society would sink low. The Americans showed the error of this rule as they succeeded in joining a love of freedom and equality to strong religious belief, a respect for the fortunes and rights of others, and a strict code of morality. The Old World built its greatness on the superior position of the few, and the spirit of human motivation attached to this practice radiated extremes of arrogance and envy, domination and servility, and refinement and squalor. The America observed by Tocqueville eased the distance between those extremes, and achieved greatness by lifting up the souls of all who labored and relying on the intelligence, optimism, and piety of its citizens to scale the peaks. In the history of the world, this spirit of human motivation was unprecedented, which is why the birth of America signified a radical break with the past.

Yet in looking at the American present, one gets a sense that America's break with the past was not so radical after all. Certain Old World ideas presumed absent from the psyche of the American have now become apparent, albeit in new forms. The ideology of expressive individualism has come to dominate the worldview of many Americans, and within the American experience, this represents something new. But ironically, it is this change that has ushered in opinions and attitudes held by citizens of an earlier age. While the Old World principle of inequality has not made inroads, the line Tocqueville drew between America and the Old World has nevertheless blurred. With the rise of expressive individualism, America has not shifted further down a continuum, but rather come full circle.

If there is a specific moment in the history of the Old World that the American present brings to mind, it is the period of late antiquity in which Saint Augustine lived. This is because the circumstances of late antiquity and contemporary America are strikingly similar. In both, one world set on the horizon of time as a new one approached its zenith.

Augustine, with his own eyes, witnessed the death of a world—the sack of Rome and the collapse of Roman Africa. Like a supernova that heralds the death of a star, the world of late antiquity radiated an enormous spectrum of energy. During that period, Augustine, the Catholic, was forced to wrestle intellectually with a strong and diverse opposition, including the Manicheans, the Pelagians, the Donatists, the Platonists, and the pagan aristocrats. At times, perhaps, it seemed as if the cultural struggle would yield no clear victor, but with the triumph of the Augustinian position, the world was set forth on a new path. The triumph in Christian beliefs and values is what the philosopher Nietzsche correctly saw as one of the great transformative events in world culture.

Americans in the latter part of the twentieth century are also witnessing the death of a world—that of Tocqueville's America. They are living in the midst of a second cultural supernova, in which different ideologies and value systems are competing energetically for support among the populace. The competition is not a battle of interests but, as in late antiquity, a battle of worldviews. In the fight between the premoderns, the moderns, and the postmoderns, what is at stake is not simply how much wealth is to be redistributed or who is to get the larger share of government contracts, but all of the values and beliefs of a culture. With the answers to such basic questions as "what is just?" "what is good?" and "what is evil?" now a matter of debate, the term "culture wars" has appropriately been used to describe the scene in contemporary American politics. And just as pagan Rome died and gave way to the new culture of Augustinian Christianity, so is Tocqueville's America dying and giving way to the new culture of expressive individualism.

### **Tocqueville's American as an Augustinian Figure**

That there is so much debate over what life was like in the American past suggests that some kind of break with tradition has already occurred. When tremendous energy and scholarship are needed to gain insight into the simplest motives of even the most average minds of a past age then one world has gone by and another come to be. For the purpose of this speculation on the American present, the America of the past to be used for comparison is

based on observations made by Alexis de Tocqueville during his travels through this country in the nineteenth century. Historians may argue whether “Tocqueville’s America” provides an accurate picture of nineteenth-century America, but Tocqueville’s insightful study has endured because it provides a first-hand account of the animating spirit of the nineteenth-century American. His analysis remains as valuable as that of twentieth-century scholars who use more sophisticated research methods but do so with hindsight.

The composite of the nineteenth-century American painted by Tocqueville shares much with that of the contemporary American expressive individualist. In both figures can be found a love of novelty, a feeling of smallness and insignificance that comes from living among the democratic multitude, a love of gossip about the private lives of the rich and powerful, and a tenseness and restlessness despite living in the midst of prosperity.<sup>1</sup> Still, certain behavioral traits in Tocqueville’s American make that person a unique character type, set apart from the contemporary expressive individualist.

Tocqueville’s American was an individualist not because he or she was selfish and acquisitive, but because that person imagined himself to be completely detached from others.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Tocqueville saw that individualism was a new imagined experience of being and not simply an intensification of the age-old tendency towards ambition and desire for personal glory. Contemporary expressive individualists share this imagined experience of detachment and join such natural impulses as self-centeredness and lust for personal gain with the special belief that one travels through life alone, separate from others. Yet Tocqueville’s American, unlike the expressive individualist, combined with the feeling of detachment a willingness to submit to a higher power. He would yield some freedom to conform to a predetermined order. Whether it was bowing before the altar of the Christian God he worshipped, placing his neck under the yoke of public opinion, or adhering meticulously to the rules of democratic procedure, Tocqueville’s American added to the well-known aggressiveness, confidence, and definiteness of the individualist character type a tincture of reverence for something beyond the self.

The experience of Augustine in late antiquity is relevant to the condition of Tocqueville’s America, for Augustinian theology also preached a love of something beyond the self, over and above a love of self. In this way, Tocqueville’s American individualist stands at the mortal limits of Augustinian thought. No character type has come closer to transcending the rivalries of the Old World and distancing himself from the worldly concerns that consume the lives of most people. Tocqueville’s American lived and worked in the City of Man, filled as it is with human glory and achievement, with

passion, joy, and hatred, but his interior sense possessed a certain degree of calmness and imperturbability of the kind that Augustine envisioned in the City of God. Tocqueville's American strived in a world where each man loves himself most of all, yet through the particular way in which religion and democratic principles were interpreted in that figure's mind, he escaped complete absorption. The animating spirit of the City of Man is the love of self, and it was by resisting the pull of that worldly draw that Tocqueville's American came to be an Augustinian figure and thus something markedly different from the contemporary expressive individualist.

### **The Contemporary Expressive Individualist as a Synthesis of Anti-Augustinian Ideas**

What distinguishes the contemporary American expressive individualist as a unique character type, and very different from Tocqueville's American, is precisely his or her intense love of self. The expressive individualist feels detached from others, and therefore is an individualist in the Tocquevillian sense, but combines the experience of detachment with a tremendous pride even during moments of charity and self-sacrifice. The ambition of the contemporary Wall Street businessman who aspires to be a "master of the universe"<sup>3</sup> is different from the ambition of Tocqueville's American capitalist. The former hoards glory for himself. The latter worked and persevered in his duty towards God. But even less cold and calculating expressive individualists such as those who commit to sacrificing themselves by working in a "calling," who find meaning and purpose in building "communities," or who "save the environment" out of "mission," display an intense love of self hardly differing from that of the aggressive businessman. As will be shown, these pursuits are also associated with a religious fervor that tries to catapult man into a higher stratum of being.

The love of self is an old theme in world history, and it is by revisiting this theme that the America of the present brings to mind the experience of the Old World. In particular, the expressive individualist outlook contains within it some of the prejudices and opinions of late antiquity. This time, however, it is not Augustinian theology that has been reanimated in American culture. Rather, it is the coalition of ideologies Augustine fought against—Manicheism, Platonism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and pagan aristocracy—that has resurfaced. Those ideologies were subscribed to by people who had little in common with one another except, as Augustine noted, an extreme love of self.

In his work, Augustine criticizes the tremendous vanity and presumption

of superiority demonstrated by the members of these sects. The Donatists “do not put their trust in God, but in men, such as the great Donatus,” and their break with the Church was “the fruit of pride.”<sup>4</sup> The Manicheans claimed to possess elements of the Divine within them, those parts of the Kingdom of Light that had been siphoned off from God, and Augustine says of them, “They become vain in their thoughts and ‘profess themselves to be wise,’ by attributing to themselves the things that are yours [God’s].”<sup>5</sup> The Platonists were men of wisdom who “revolted from His wholesome humility” in the pride of vain science, whose heads had swelled so that they could no longer see the Truth.<sup>6</sup> The Roman aristocrats gave more honor to Romulus than to the Olympian gods, and did so in the spirit of vanity, not reason.<sup>7</sup>

Expressive individualism shares with these now-defunct ideologies a similar presumption of superiority. Unlike Tocqueville’s American, the expressive individualist will not bow his head before an altar unless doing so feeds his own pride, and he will not conform to any predetermined order unless his autonomy and individuality are preserved. More importantly, the very basis for the great vanity of the anti-Augustinian sects of late antiquity has found its way into the ideas and beliefs of modern expressive individualists. The actual principles of Manicheism, Platonism, Pelagianism, Donatism, and pagan aristocracy can be detected in the worldview of contemporary Americans. In a way, the culture wars in America are a replay of the culture wars of late antiquity. They represent a struggle between Augustinian theology and a field that is united by an opposition to that theology. The same actors are present under new guise.

### A Genealogy of Aristocracy

Of the various anti-Augustinian groups, one survived the period of late antiquity and continued to flourish—aristocracy. The impact of aristocracy on the politics and culture of the Old World remained so powerful that, in some ways, it rendered the triumph of Christian beliefs and values incomplete. Of modern aristocracy, Tocqueville and Nietzsche are keen observers. In both *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Tocqueville, who was himself an aristocrat, provides a glimpse into the mind-set of Old World aristocracy. Nietzsche is almost the philosopher of aristocracy, and his discussions comparing the life-affirming instincts of the aristocrat with the life-denying and vengeful thought patterns of the slave capture in an even more vigorous way the aristocratic mentality. I suggest that there is a link between the modern aristocrat described by Tocqueville and Nietzsche and the pagan aristocrat whom Augustine criticized in the first

five books of *The City of God* and that a genealogy of aristocracy can be traced. While the status, economic position, and behavior of aristocrats have changed tremendously over the centuries, something constant remains in the spark of life that animates them. That constant leads me to place the aristocrats described by Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and Augustine under a single heading—the aristocrat in the City of Man.

Two recent studies of aristocracy, *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule* by Reinhard Bendix and *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* by John Kautsky, find something enduring in the aristocratic experience over many centuries and around different regions of the globe. In Western Europe and Asia, from as far back as the eleventh century to the modern era, aristocrats have exhibited an extreme status-consciousness, a contempt for manual labor and moneymaking, a tremendous respect for blood, rank, and tradition, a system of manners and dress that distinguishes them from others, and a regard for honor, nobility, and superior position. While the aristocrats of the thirteenth century may have prized martial valor in comparison with the court aristocrat of the seventeenth century and may have been more impulsive and physically aggressive, something within the aristocratic experience nevertheless endures.<sup>8</sup> This is what Kautsky notes when he says that “behavioral and ideological patterns can be perceived among aristocracies across different cultures and periods of history,” and that the concept of a general aristocratic culture is a logical one.<sup>9</sup>

The same characteristics observed among aristocrats of the modern era can be found among the Roman aristocrats of late antiquity whom Augustine criticized. In *The City of God*, Augustine describes their “love of esteem,” their love of power and domination, their “desire of human praise,” and their obsession with honor, which Augustine scorned as merely “smoke which had no weight.”<sup>10</sup> The Roman aristocrats, who looked “for glory from one another,”<sup>11</sup> who desired all eyes to be directed on them, and who performed great deeds for their own reputations and not to serve God, share common ground with the feudal aristocrats described by Bendix, for whom “fighting vigor” supplanted all thoughts on the hereafter.<sup>12</sup> Like the modern aristocrats, the Roman aristocrats suppressed their desire for wealth by loving honor and glory even more, and their obsession with high rank and domination recalls the aristocrats of the modern era who “commonly assert their own superiority over all others” and place supreme importance on titles.<sup>13</sup> Even Kautsky notes the similarities between the Roman aristocrats of late antiquity and those of the modern era, and how the Roman aristocrats “looked down in scorn on trade in any form” and believed a posture of religious humility was incompatible with “honor.”<sup>14</sup>

What endures in the aristocratic experience can be summed up as an

extreme love of self. While the love of self can take various forms, it is in general terms what establishes the link between the aristocrat of late antiquity and the generations of aristocrats to follow. From an Augustinian perspective, both the Roman aristocrat of late antiquity and the European aristocrat of the modern era are aristocrats in the City of Man. Their interior senses are enmeshed in the shifting currents of earthly existence—in honor, rank, prestige, and glory. All of the institutions of aristocratic society are arranged to serve this tremendous self-love. By investing certain jobs with more honor than others, by catapulting one group of people into the highest stratum, by following strict codes of conduct that separate them from commoners, or by praising military glory, aristocratic society appeased, rewarded, and honored that self-love. In the language of social science, these arrangements are given the formal and seemingly neutral title of “aristocratic institutions,” but from an Augustinian perspective they are nothing more than tributes to self-love.

In the long timeline of aristocracy, Tocqueville’s American represents the first great interruption. This is because Tocqueville’s American, although a democrat, ushered in a new age of aristocracy—not aristocracy in the City of Man but in the City of God. His interior sense was enmeshed in that which transcended the visible world—in Christian faith, in public opinion, and in the order of republican principle. It was not the love of self so much as it was a love of those ideals, and the order spawned by those ideals, that quickened the early American’s spirit. Investing all jobs with the same degree of honor, adhering to the rules of democracy (even if they were enforced by a “petty” magistrate), deferring to the will of the majority, and persevering in God were activities that demonstrated a love of order paid at the expense of self-love. The institutions and social arrangements of Tocqueville’s America represented a new experience in democracy. But from an Augustinian perspective, they are special because they formed the basis of a new society, one that for the first time in history paid tribute to the love of something distant and immemorial and not just self-love.

In this way, Tocqueville’s American stands at the nexus of the three great philosophical traditions founded by Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and Augustine. He is the synthesis that combines Tocqueville’s praise of the American democrat and contempt for the aristocrat in the City of Man, Nietzsche’s contempt for the modern democrat and praise of the aristocrat in the City of Man, and Augustine’s contempt for the aristocrat in the City of Man and fervent belief in an otherworldly experience in the City of God. As an aristocrat in the City of God, Tocqueville’s American is the one figure who combines democracy, aristocracy, and Augustinian theology and thus can draw support from all three philosophers.

The rise of expressive individualism in America represents the second great

interruption in the long timeline of aristocracy. It signals a return of the interior sense of the American to the City of Man. The movement of expressive individualism is filled with Manichean, Pelagian, Donatist, and Platonist elements, but it is the tendency towards conventional aristocratic behavior within the movement that provides some of the most glaring examples of self-love. In expressive individualist America can be found the opinions and prejudices of the aristocrats observed by Augustine, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche. In this way, by returning to the City of Man and its theme of self-love, America has come full circle.



## About the Author

**Ronald Dworkin** has a Ph.D. in political science from The Johns Hopkins University. He is also a practicing physician. He is currently serving as co-director of the Calvert Institute for Policy Research. He and his wife, Sandy, reside in Maryland.