



***Defining the Aristocrat: From Geneva
to Revolutionary France***

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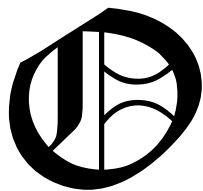
Defining the Aristocrat: From Geneva to Revolutionary France

Nadir Weber

UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Abstract: In the political and social language of the early modern period, aristocracy did not denote a social class, but a form of state or government. At the dawn of the revolutionary age, however, the concept of aristocracy suddenly moved to the centre of disputes over the new political and social order in European states—and with it the previously unknown figure of the aristocrat. This article traces the conceptual history of aristocracy and aristocrats between about 1760 and 1789. It argues that the rise of these revolutionary battle terms was largely rooted in the constitutional struggles of the small Geneva Republic, which were widely observed and commented throughout Europe. Protagonists such as the Geneva opposition leaders and writers François d’Ivernois and Étienne Clavière, and the French philosophers and politicians Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Honoré Gabriel de Riqueti, Comte de Mirabeau, were involved in translating these concepts from the political language of republicanism into the context of the French monarchy, where members of the nobility were now denounced as aristocrats in the run-up to the Estates General. The outbreak of the French Revolution and its perception throughout Europe ultimately shaped the meanings of the concepts of aristocracy and aristocrat in the modern world.¹

Keywords: aristocracy; aristocrats; conceptual history; Geneva, France; eighteenth century



In the 7 Pluviôse of Year II of the French Republic (26 January 1794), the so-called military commission of Bordeaux announced that the former councillor in *parlement* Hugues-Joseph Duval—an “aristocrat outside the law”—would be sentenced to death. According to the revolutionary tribunal, Duval had always hated the revolution and had contacts with other aristocrats; although he had rarely shown up at the meetings of the *parlement*, he had also made no

¹ I would like to thank Cathleen Sarti and the anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments and corrections.

effort against the “royal tyranny.” “Convinced that no act of civicism separates him from the class of enemies of the people; that both a nobleman and a parliamentarian, he is doubly suspicious of aristocracy in a republic,” the commission decided that the death sentence against Duval should be carried out immediately.²

As this and numerous similar examples show, at the height of the French Revolution, being labelled as an aristocrat or a member of the aristocracy could be equivalent to a death sentence. Already in 1788-1789, on the eve of the Estates General, these words suddenly appeared prominently in speeches and printed pamphlets. In the years 1790-1794, they reached an unprecedented frequency in French language usage (fig. 1). In speeches to the National Assembly and in the revolutionary press, aristocrats appeared as synonymous with the enemies of the Revolution; in political prints, aristocratic monsters were fought by defensible patriots; revolutionary songs called for stringing up the aristocrats on lanterns.

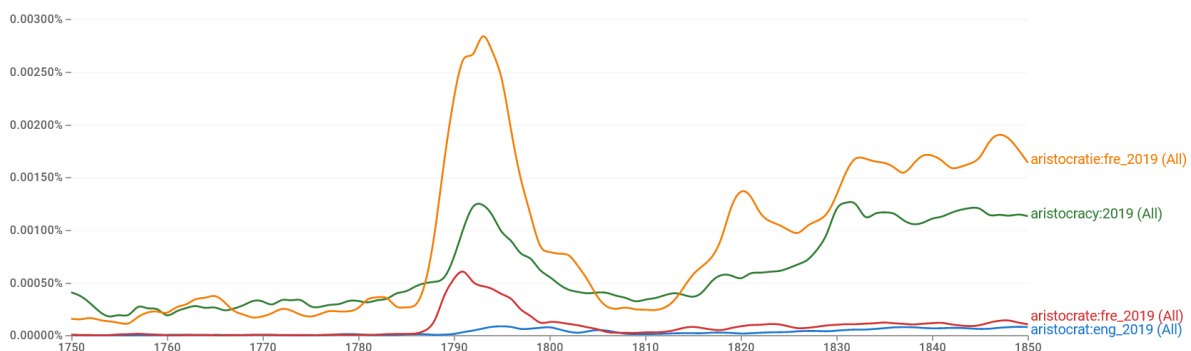


Figure 1. Frequency of the words “aristocracy” and “aristocrat” in English and French, 1750-1850. Graph produced with Ngram Viewer based on the Google Books text corpus (25 May 2023). The graph shows a sharp increase in the use of the terms in French and English around 1789–90. While the word aristocracy is already present in the texts before then, the term aristocrat only receives significant use from this time onwards, which decreases again after the end of the revolutionary period.

² “La Commission Militaire, après avoir entendu les réponses de l’accusé; convaincue qu’aucun acte de civisme ne le sépare de la classe des ennemis du peuple ; que noble à-la-fois et parlementaire il est doublement suspect d’aristocratie dans une république [...] ordonne qu’il subira la peine de mort [...]” *Jugement rendu par la commission militaire, séante à Bordeaux, Qui ordonne que Hugues-Joseph Duval, ci-devant Conseiller au Parlement, subira la peine de mort, étant hors de la loi, comme aristocrate. Du 7 Pluviôse, l’an second de la République Française, une et indivisible* (Bordeaux, August 1793; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, LB41-1201 [48]). Between 23 October 1793 and 31 July 1794, the *commission militaire* in Bordeaux issued over 300 death sentences; on the context, see Aurelien Vivie, *Histoire de la Terreur à Bordeaux*, 2 vols. (Bordeaux: Feret et fils, 1877). On revolutionary jurisdiction during the *Terreur*, see for instance the recent overview by Samuel Marlot, “Les lois révolutionnaires. La systématisation de la Terreur (1793–1794),” *Jus Politicum* 26 (2022): 317–350.

Studies on the cultural and conceptual history of the French Revolution have long recognised that the concept of aristocracy and the associated group designation of aristocrats held a central place in the revolutionary discourse.³ They also pointed out the pronounced polysemy of these political concepts of struggle, which were applied to every new group; aristocrats could be nobles, clerics, or former members of the *parlements*, but also rich merchants, political rivals, or—during the war of the Vendée—even counter-revolutionary peasants. Authors who assumed implicitly the current meaning of the words as synonyms for the nobility or at least the social elites saw it as a paradox in this context that in the early phase of the revolution, conceptual associations such as “aristocracy of the nobility” were also formed and “aristocrat” was used to refer to others than the “actual aristocrats.”⁴

From the perspective of conceptual history and historical semantics, it has been argued that the conceptual equation of aristocracy with the social class of the nobility is primarily a product of the French Revolution, which then shaped the use of the concept in other European languages.⁵ But how exactly did the translation of a concept from classical

³ See, among others, Antoine de Baecque, “Le récit fantastique de la Révolution. Les monstres aristocratiques des pamphlets de 1789,” in *La Révolution du Journal, 1788-1794*, ed. Pierre Retat and Jean Sgard (Paris: CNRS, 1989), 235–246; Maurice Genty, “Aristocrates/aristocratie,” in *Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution Française*, ed. Albert Soboul (Paris: PUF, 1989), 33; Jacques Guilhaumou, *La langue politique et la Révolution française: De l'évènement à la raison linguistique* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1989), esp. 48–53; Timothy Tackett, “La Grande Peur et le complot aristocratique sous la Révolution française,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 355 (2004), 1–19; Thomas E. Kaiser, “Nobles into Aristocrats, or How an Order Became a Conspiracy,” in *The French Nobility and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches*, ed. Jay M. Smith (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 189–224.

⁴ An example of the misunderstandings that an unreflective identification of aristocracy with nobility can bring about in the analysis of revolutionary discourse is Patrice Higonnet’s article on “Aristocrats,” in *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution, 1789-1799, A-K*, ed. Samuel F. Scott and Barry Rothaus (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 22–25, which states that “[m]ost of the people called aristocrates were not noble at all; they were not aristocrats in the normal sense of word” (24) and that “paradoxically the actual aristocrats” were called *aristocratie nobiliaire* (25). In contrast, Robert Crout, in a rarely cited article, has examined the connection with earlier uses of the term, but only for the French context: Robert Rhodes Crout, “Aristocrate and the vocabulary of the Revolution: the beginning,” *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850: Proceedings* 17 (1987): 373–388.

⁵ Nadir Weber, “Die Republik des Adels. Zum Begriff der Aristokratie in der politischen Sprache der Frühen Neuzeit,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 38 (2011): 217–258. On the methodological approach of conceptual history, which also underlies the present article, see for instance Reinhart Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006); Jacques Guilhaumou, *Discours et événement. L’histoire langagière des concepts* (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006); Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández Sebastián, eds., *Conceptual History in the European Space* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

state theory, which in the early modern period had been applied primarily to urban republics, come about in the context of a collapsing system of a courtly monarchy? In this article, I will briefly review the meanings of the concept of aristocracy in the political language of the early modern period and the eighteenth century, and then focus on the increasingly overlapping discourses on republicanism and monarchical reform in the 1780s. I will argue that the sudden birth of the “aristocrat” as the primary enemy of both monarchy and democracy is largely related to the context of the constitutional struggles in the small but intellectually radiant Republic of Geneva.⁶

1. Aristocracy in the political language of early modern Europe

As a review of early modern works on state theory, dictionaries, and everyday political usage shows, the term aristocracy was used almost exclusively to refer to a form of government rather than a social status until the late eighteenth century.⁷ Philosophers and legal scholars thus continued to refer primarily to the classical Aristotelian constitutional typology. This typology defined monarchy, aristocracy, and polity—which included the broader people—as legitimate forms of government and distinguished them from despotism, oligarchy, and democracy or ochlocracy as negative deviations. Aristocracy was considered the rule of the *aristoi*, i.e. a limited group of those particularly suited or virtuous for governmental affairs. In the early modern period, it was certainly likely to identify this group with the order of the nobility, but the distinction between the form of government and those who governed remained important.

In the emerging princely states, the nobility was, on the one hand, increasingly legally defined and set apart from the rest of the population, but on the other hand, its political independence was also restricted.⁸ At least on the ceremonial-legal level of

⁶ The centrality of the Swiss and Geneva contexts in shaping the revolutionary language of the 1780s has also been recognised in recent syntheses. See esp. Richard Whatmore, *Against War and Empire: Geneva, Britain, and France in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), and Jonathan I. Israel, *The Enlightenment that Failed. Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 497–532, e.g. 497: “The 1781–2 Swiss upheavals figured among the first and most important of the trans-Atlantic revolutions as regards shaping the basic theoretical and rhetorical format of ‘democratic’ and ‘aristocratic’ republicanism in an explicit, public manner.”

⁷ See Weber, “Die Republik des Adels,” 223–228; Christian Meier and Werner Conze, “Adel, Aristokratie,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1972), 1–48, esp. 18–20.

⁸ See, for instance, Hamish M. Scott, ed., *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Longman, 1995); Ronald G. Asch, *Nobilities in Transition, 1550-1700: Courtiers and*

constitutional fictions, nobles below the king could no longer be considered sovereign. For political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Bodin, Grotius, Hobbes, or Montesquieu, collective rule by the nobility or another distinguished group was therefore only possible in non-monarchical states; only in republics could they form an aristocracy that was opposed to the democracy where all citizens participated in political decision-making. In the words of Montesquieu: “When the body of the people is possessed of the supreme power, it is called a democracy. When the supreme power is lodged in the hands of a part of the people, it is then an aristocracy.”⁹

Not only in constitutional discourse, but also in common usage, aristocracy was primarily a sub-form of the republic until the late eighteenth century. A search of the term in the database *Early English Books Online*, which covers English texts up to 1700, therefore yields almost exclusively hits in which aristocracy is compared with democracy and monarchy or otherwise defined as a form of government.¹⁰ In French, German, Italian, or English dictionaries and encyclopaedias it was defined as a form of republic ruled by a limited group of noble or patrician rulers until the end of the eighteenth century. For many authors it seemed natural to identify this distinguished group with the social class of the nobility, but the difference between status and form of state was consistently preserved. In 1783, for example, in his *English Etymology*, George William Lemon still defined aristocracy as “a republic governed by the nobility, or leading men.”¹¹

As examples of aristocracy, the reference works therefore did not refer to the French or other European nobilities, but to republics such as the Italian Republics of Venice and Genoa, the Swiss cantons of Bern, Lucerne, Fribourg, and Solothurn, and sometimes also the United Provinces of the Netherlands or its individual states.¹² What these political

Rebels in Britain and Europe (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2003); Michael Sayer, *Nobles and Nobilities of Europe: A History of Structures, Law and Institutions*, 4 vols. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

⁹ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), Book II, chapter 2, transl. Thomas Nugent (London, 1750), online: <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch2s3.html> (last accessed on 2 June 2023). On the concept of republic in early modern French political thinking, which involved both aristocratic and democratic republics, see Éric Gojosso, *Le concept de république en France (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d’Aix-Marseille, 1998).

¹⁰ See *Early English Books Online* (EEBO), <https://www.proquest.com/eebo/index> (16 June 2023). The search yields 1,152 hits, but is biased by the fact that aristocracy is also used as a keyword.

¹¹ George William Lemon, *The English Etymology, Or, a Derivative Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1783), art. “ARISTO-CRACY.”

¹² The governments of the free imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire also often saw themselves as aristocracies, but because of their incomplete sovereignty they were hardly mentioned as examples even in German-language encyclopaedias of the eighteenth century. See, e.g., *Deutsche Encyclopädie oder*

systems have in common is that they did not have a sovereign king at the head (although the doge or the stadtholder had certain prerogatives) and were governed by collectives of councillors who largely co-opted themselves in complex and time-honoured election procedures. Even John Adams, in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), still followed this traditional typology of aristocratic republics.¹³ When prior to the French Revolution aristocracy was mentioned in relation to kingdoms, it was usually in the sense of questioning full royal sovereignty, as especially true in the case of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that was dominated by the assembled nobility (*szlachta*).¹⁴ In a similar way, a number of authors, at certain moments, also described kingdoms such as England (later Great Britain), Denmark, or Sweden as “mixed, or compound formes of Government” that combined monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements.¹⁵

The social elites that dominated the aristocratic republics were sometimes called nobles, *nobili*, *Edle*, or patricians, but not aristocrats. For Montesquieu, nobility in aristocracies was fundamentally different from that in monarchies; if honour was the highest value in the latter, then in aristocratic republics it should be moderation. He referred—albeit critically—to the Venice model, where the *nobili* emphasised their social

Allgemeines Real-Wörterbuch aller Künste und Wissenschaften von einer Gesellschaft Gelehrten, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Varrentrapp & Wenner, 1778), 760, where Venice, Genoa, Amsterdam, Zurich, Bern and Basel are described as “European aristocracies.” On the self-representation of early modern German city-states, see esp. André Krischer, *Reichsstädte in der Fürstengesellschaft: Politischer Zeichengebrauch in der Frühen Neuzeit. Symbolische Kommunikation in der Vormoderne* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006) and Ruth Schilling, *Stadtrepublik und Selbstbehauptung: Venedig, Bremen, Hamburg und Lübeck im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2012).

¹³ John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787; ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 3 vols., vol. 1, 35–69, discussing the examples of Bern, Fribourg, Solothurn, Lucerne, Zurich, Schaffhausen, Mulhouse and Biel, St Gallen, Geneva, Lucca and Genoa, Venice, United Provinces of the Netherlands. On Adam’s political world view, see Richard Alan Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ See Jerzy Lukowski, *Liberty’s Folly: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century, 1697-1795* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Anna Grzeskowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty: The Concept of Freedom in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).

¹⁵ In England, this discussion was particularly intense during the Civil War period. See, e.g., William Ball, *Tractatus de jure regnandi, & regni: or, The sphere of government, according to the law of God, nature, and nations* (London, 1645; EEBO), quote p. 4: “Mixt, or compound formes of Government consist sometimes, and in some places, of Monarchy and Aristocracy, as in Poland; or of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy, as in England: in Poland the Aristocracy hath been most prevalent: in England for the most part the Democracy hath prevailed.” On Sweden, see Charlotta Wolff, “Aristocratic Republicanism and the Hate of Sovereignty in 18th Century Sweden,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 32 (2007): 358–375.

equality at their meetings in the *Maggior Consiglio* through equal dress and prerogatives based solely on their offices.¹⁶ In the Republic of Bern, the largest city-state north of the Alps, described by observers in the eighteenth century as the “most perfect aristocracy” in Europe, the 200-300 members of the Great Council seem to have taken Montesquieu’s script particularly to heart. In 1761, they declared all Bernese citizens nobles, and they repeatedly adjusted electoral procedures to ensure some minimum representation even of the smaller families.¹⁷ In doing so, they distanced themselves from other political systems in several ways: on the one hand, they tried to prevent the concentration of power in one person or in too small a group, but on the other hand, they also strictly opposed democratic claims for participation by the inhabitants who were not represented in the government. Under the *ancien régime*, aristocratic republicanism meant equality in distinction.

Whereas the concept of aristocracy was established in the political language of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although it denoted rather marginal political entities on the European landscape, the same is not the case for the term “aristocrat.” As Robert Palmer correctly stated some fifty years ago, “the Age of Aristocracy, as long as it was unchallenged, heard nothing of ‘aristocrats’.”¹⁸ In France, the word does not appear in a common dictionary before 1787, in Britain, it became a frequently used term only after 1789, inspired by the French revolutionary writings.¹⁹ Prior to the 1780s, most of the view references in printed French texts refer to *Aristocrate* (Aristocrates), a political opponent

¹⁶ See David W. Carrithers, “Not so Virtuous Republics: Montesquieu, Venice, and the Theory of Aristocratic Republicanism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52 (1991): 245–268; Carrithers, “Democratic and Aristocratic Republics: Ancient and Modern,” in *Montesquieu’s Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahl (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 109–158. On the self-image of the Venetian patriciate, see also Dorit Raines, *L’invention du mythe aristocratique: L’image de soi du patriciat vénitien au temps de la Sérénissime*, 2 vols. (Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 2006), and on its European resonance, Eco O. G. Haitisma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980).

¹⁷ See Kapossy, Béla, “Neo-Roman Republicanism and Commercial Society: The Example of Eighteenth-century Berne,” in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, vol. II: *The Values of Republicanism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 227–247; Nadir Weber, “Auf dem Weg zur Adelsrepublik: Die Titulaturenfrage im Bern des 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Heimatkunde* 70 (2008): 3–34, and Weber, “Eine vollkommene Aristokratie? Debatten um die Regierungsform Berns im 18. Jahrhundert,” *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 75 (2013): 3–38.

¹⁸ Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, first ed. 1959), vol. 1, 15.

¹⁹ See *Dictionnaires d’autrefois*, <https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/publicdicos/bibliography> (5 May 2023), and *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/aristocrat#etymonline_v_26519 (5 May 2023), although some earlier entries can be found in the context of the American constitutional debates.

of the Athenian orator Demosthenes, and other figures of Antiquity such as the legendary rulers of Orchomenus.²⁰ Some of the few exceptions to this use in the 1770s concern commentaries on constitutional debates in Poland and Switzerland, and historiographical discussions of the existence of a “feudal aristocracy” in medieval France.²¹ Yet, already in the late 1760s, the “aristocrat” had entered the stage of the political discourse in the political writings by the Genevan *représentants*.

2. Contested aristocracy: the Genevan troubles, 1707-1782

From the late seventeenth century onwards, Geneva was repeatedly the scene of political conflicts over the representation of the citizenry as opposed to the council patriciate, as was not atypical for city republics in the early modern period. Yet as recent historical research has shown, the “city of Calvin” in the eighteenth century was not only a flashpoint of particularly frequent and intense political unrest. As the location of an intellectually radiant academy, as a meeting place for (mostly Protestant) travellers from all over Europe and as a dynamic centre of trade, banking, and printing culture, the political concepts discussed in Geneva radiated far beyond the borders of the Swiss Confederacy, with which it was politically allied. In particular, ideals of an aristocratic and a democratic republicanism clashed here in all their conceptual stridency that would shape the political vocabulary of the “Age of Democratic Revolution” in the Atlantic world.²²

²⁰ See <https://books.google.com/> and <https://gallica.bnf.fr/services/engine/search/advancedSearch/> (16 June 2023). The same is true for *Early English Books Online (EEBO)* that gives only fifteen hints of which most refer to the speech of Demosthenes contra Aristocrat.

²¹ See, e.g., Hans Caspar Hirzel, *Le socrate rustique ou description de la conduit économique & morale d'un paysan philosophe: Traduit de l'allemand de M. Hirzel, premier médecin de la République de Zurich, par on Officier Suisse au service de France*, vol. 2 (Lausanne, 1776), 79 (“Le démocrate apprend de l'aristocrate à connoître tout le prix de l'exactitude à maintenir ses loix dans leur vigueur [...]”), and Doigny Du Ponceau, *Éloge de Michel de l'Hôpital, chancelier de France* (Paris, 1772), 18 (“L'orsqu'aidés par l'expérience, par la marche des siècles, par le réveil des esprits & des ames, les Monarques minant en silence le gouvernement des Fiefs, forcèrent leurs Sujets à leur rendre les droits de Royauté, & humilièrent d'orgueilleux Aristocrates, pour rendre le Peuple plus heureux [...]”). On the historiographical-political debates on the “feudal aristocracy” in France, see Gerd van den Heuvel, “Féodalité, Féodal,” in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*, ed. Rolf Reichardt and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, vol. 10 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988), 7–54, esp. 16–25; Olivier Tholozan, *Henri de Boulainvilliers: L'anti-absolutisme aristocratique légitimé par l'histoire* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 1999), and the literature mentioned below, note 36.

²² See Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*. More recently, Jonathan Israel has come to a similar interpretation stating that there was a split between aristocratic and democratic republicanism in the Age of Revolution; see Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Israel, *The Enlightenment that Failed*, esp. 37–43, 73, 497. However, Israel—like many other scholars—tends to ignore that in the early modern period, the concept of democracy

The much-discussed events will only be briefly sketched here.²³ The dissatisfaction of the broader bourgeoisie with the patrician rule reached a first dramatic climax in 1707, when the political leader Pierre Fatio, who argued for the sovereignty of the General Council (*Conseil Général*), the assembly of all adult male citizens and bourgeois, was executed at the order of the city’s government. The basic conflict over the political participation of the bourgeoisie not represented in the Small Council (*Petit Conseil* or *Conseil des Vingt-Cinq*) and the Great Council (*Grand Conseil* or *Conseil des Deux-Cents*) flared up again in the years 1734-1738 and 1762-1768. The party of the *représentants*, composed mainly of bourgeois and ordinary *citoyens*, demanded additional voting and petitioning rights for the *Conseil général*. In both cases, the conflict could only be settled through diplomatic interventions by Bern, Zurich, and France. In the 1770s, the non-bourgeois *natifs*—intellectually supported by Voltaire and his circle—also increasingly took part in the debate, arguing on the basis of equality under natural law rather than old birth privileges. A political revolution of the *représentants* in early 1781, who immediately granted additional rights to the *natifs*, was reversed again in the summer of the following year by a military intervention of Bern, Sardinia-Piedmont, and France in favour of the council party (*négatifs*), who then reversed the revolutionary edicts and heavily reduced the rights of the General Council. Subsequently, many of the leaders of the *représentants* then fled abroad, where they agitated against the “aristocratic” government in Geneva with writings and contacts with philosophes, bankers, and political decision-makers.

In the perception of contemporaries, this conflict was mainly about whether Geneva was a democratic, mixed, or aristocratic republic—that is, if sovereignty lay in the

was primarily associated with the “direct” democracy in the political systems in some rural cantons of Switzerland, which also had its impact on the debates in Geneva and beyond and on the genealogy of modern democratic institutions. On this aspect, which cannot be elaborated here in more detail, see Randolph C. Head, *Early Modern Democracy in the Grisons: Social Order and Political Language in a Swiss Mountain Canton, 1470-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Andreas Suter, “Vormoderne und moderne Demokratie in der Schweiz,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 31 (2004), 231–254; Fabian Brändle, *Demokratie und Charisma: Fünf Landsgemeindekonflikte im 18. Jahrhundert* (Zürich: Chronos, 2005).

²³ On the course of events and the changing constellations of the Geneva constitutional troubles in the eighteenth century, see esp. *Révolutions genevoises, 1782-1798* (Exhibition catalogue; Geneva: Musée d’art et d’histoire, 1989); Paul Barbey, *État et gouvernement. Les sources et les thèmes du discours politique du patriciat genevois entre 1700 et 1770* (PhD Thesis, University of Geneva, 1990); Angela C. Bennett, *Continuity and Conflict: The Struggle for Political Rights in Eighteenth-Century Geneva* (PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 1995); Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Anja Victorine Hartmann, *Reflexive Politik im sozialen Raum: Politische Eliten in Genf zwischen 1760 und 1841* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 2003); Whatmore, *Against War and Empire*.

assembled bourgeoisie or a limited council. At the latest with the banning of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Contrat Social* immediately after its publication in 1762, which was the immediate cause for the outbreak of the 1760s troubles, this local conflict received broad international attention.²⁴ Not without reason, the local authorities in Geneva had interpreted Rousseau’s harsh criticism of “hereditary aristocracy,” which he saw at work in the patrician republics of Venice and Bern, as a comment on their own practice of government—albeit in the same sentence he praised the “elective aristocracy” as the best of all forms of government.²⁵ From his exile in Neuchâtel, the eminent philosopher then interfered explicitly in the constitutional struggles of his home town with his *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, first printed in Amsterdam in December 1764, in which he reaffirmed his ambivalent attitude to the concept of aristocracy that might be a good way to organise the executive power of a republic, but should never be the source of the state’s laws: “The best of all governments is the aristocratic; the worst sovereignty is the aristocratic.”²⁶ Translated to the Genevan case, this meant that while everyday government was best in the hands of the councils (as long as these were designated by a free election), laws should only be enacted in the assembly of the General Council.²⁷

²⁴ Merja Kylmäkoski, *The Virtue of the Citizen: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Republicanism in the Eighteenth-Century French Context* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), chapter 3. On the reception of Rousseau in the Swiss constitutional debates, see also François Jost, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau Suisse: Étude de sa personnalité et sa pensée*, 2 vols. (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1961); Béla Kapossy, *Iselin contra Rousseau: Sociable Patriotism and the History of Mankind* (Basel: Schwabe, 2006), and Simone Zurbuchen, “Reacting to Rousseau: Difficult Relations between Erudition and Politics in the Swiss Republics,” in *Scholars in Action. The Practice of Knowledge and the Figure of the Savant in the 18th Century*, ed. André Holenstein, Hubert Steinke, and Martin Stuber (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 481–501.

²⁵ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762), Book III, chapter V: “There are then three sorts of aristocracy—natural, elective and hereditary. The first is only for simple peoples; the third is the worst of all governments; the second is the best, and is aristocracy properly so called.” Quote after the English edition *The Social Contract & Discourses of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (London, 1913), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/cole-the-social-contract-and-discourses> (16 June 2023). In Book IV, chapter III (on elections), Rousseau also makes a direct comparison between Venice and Geneva.

²⁶ “Le meilleur des Gouvernemens est l’aristocratique; la pire des Souverainetés est l’aristocratique.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, in *Collection complète des œuvres* (Geneva, 1780-1789), vol. 6, 294, online at <http://www.rousseauonline.ch/Text/lettres-ecrites-de-la-montagne.php> (6 June 2023). On Rousseau’s discussion of aristocracy and its ambiguous reception in revolutionary France, see Roger Barney, “Les aristocrates et Jean-Jacques Rousseau dans la Révolution,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 50 (1978): 534–568.

²⁷ “En Conseil général vous êtes Législateurs, Souverains, indépendans de toute puissance humaine [...]” Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, 301.

The local opposition in Geneva took advantage of the broad European interest caused by Rousseau’s—and later also Voltaire’s, Mirabeau’s, Brissot’s, and other *philosophes*’—involvement to influence public opinion in neighbouring states with the help of printed pamphlets in the hope of balancing their precarious position in the political arena. In this discourse, the concept of aristocracy took on a visibly negative connotation. This use of the concept was in line with the fact that the original concept of aristocracy, from which it was deduced, had visibly acquired a critical-negative connotation in previous years and, for example, in the corresponding article of Diderot’s and d’Alambert’s *Encyclopédie*, had been assimilated to that of oligarchy.²⁸ While proponents of the aristocratic republic in Bern emphasised the equality among rulers and the so-called *Encyclopédie d’Yverdon*, praised the Swiss council governments as perfect elective aristocracies,²⁹ the Geneva *représentants* of the 1760s emphasised the exclusive and inegalitarian character of such a form of government: “in a small town like ours, with almost no territory, the spectacle of an Aristocracy destroying all equality would be unbearable.”³⁰

In this context, the “aristocrat” also first appears in the printed political pamphlets of the Geneva opposition—arguably with reference to an already established oral usage.³¹ The term initially seems to have had the character of a relatively neutral party designation, which could also be used by supporters of the council government.³² Around 1770 it was then used, especially in *natif* writings, as a negative party designation for the ruling, birth-right privileged elites.³³ A decade later, when the conflicts between the different groups

²⁸ Edme-François Mallet and Denis Diderot, “Aristocratie,” in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, Arts et des Métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alambert, vol. 1 (Paris, 1751), 651–652.

²⁹ Fortuné-Barthélemy de Félice, “Aristocratie,” in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connaissances humaines. Mis en ordre par M. De Felice*, vol. 3 (Yverdon, 1771), 525–527.

³⁰ “[...] dans une petite Ville come la nôtre, presque sans territoire, le spectacle d’une Aristocratie qui détruiroit toute égalité seroit insupportable.” *Adresse des citoyens et bourgeois représentans de Genève, au magnifique conseil des vingt-cinq de la dite ville, avec le mémoire qui l’assompañoit. Remis aux seigneurs syndics le 19 May 1767* (Geneva 1767; *e-rara* collection, <https://www.e-rara.ch/>), 20.

³¹ See, e.g., Anonymous, *Receuil de trois pièces dédiées aux amis de la liberté et de la partie* [Geneva, 1768], 50.

³² Already in 1766, the term appears in the correspondence between the Genevan scholar and magistrate Charles Bonnet and his friend in Bern, the polymath Albrecht von Haller. As early as July 1766, for instance, Bonnet expressed his hope that “Frère Aristocrate” (Bern) would support the patrician party, and then repeatedly used the same cipher. Charles Bonnet to Albrecht von Haller, Geneva, 2 July 1766 and 10 October 1767, online on *HallerNet*, <https://hallernet.org/edition/letter/08951> and <https://hallernet.org/edition/letter/09023> (16 June 2023).

³³ See, e.g., [Gaspard Bovier], *Mémoire justificatif, pour les citoyens de Genève, connus sous le nom de Natifs* (s.l., 1770), 95, 139. On the context of this writing, see Jean-Loup Kastler, “Les étrangers et la révolution entre

escalated again, the concept already figured as a prominent “battle term.”³⁴ Pamphlets with titles such as *Nouvelle lettre, sur les misérables aristocrates* (*New letter on the miserable aristocrats*, 1779) or *Les vérités ou nouvelles philippiques aux aristocrates, à leurs écrivains, et parasistes* (*The truths or new philippics to the aristocrats, their writers, and parasites*, 1780) were no doubt aimed at discrediting political opponents labelled as aristocrats.³⁵

The patrician families who dominated the governing Small Council were now accused of creating a closed, hereditary aristocracy that claimed all sovereign rights for itself. For the first time, proto-democratic political visions for the Geneva constitution were clearly mixed with social resentment against the French-oriented, allegedly luxury-loving and decadent social class, the aristocrats. As the balance of power in Geneva shifted—not least because the Genevan opposition speculated on effective support for their compatriot Jacques Necker at the French court—the definitions took on a noticeably triumphalist tone: “I call Aristocrats the remnants of a once powerful party, which sought to establish its power on the debris of our liberty, and which by all sorts of means seeks to deprive us of it.”³⁶ The term aristocrat had now clearly become a social marker and a revolutionary battle term.

3. Travelling concepts: from Geneva to France, 1782-1789

In the late 1780s, the *ancien régime* in France, too, became increasingly connected with the negatively charged terms of aristocracy and the aristocrats. In French constitutional debates, the concept of aristocracy had hitherto appeared mainly in the context of the discussion of noble power in the early Middle Ages, which was mostly considered a deviation from the “natural” constitution and could serve as a foil for criticism of current

Genève et Grenoble: Peut-on faire la révolution sans se sentir étranger?,” in *La Révolution française* 22 (2022), online <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/5967> (23 June 2023).

³⁴ The concept of “battle term” (*Kampfbegriff*) in the sense used here goes back to Reinhart Koselleck, who observed an ideologisation of numerous “basic concepts” (*Grundbegriffe*) of political-social language in the period from about 1750 to 1850. Building on this, Rolf Reinhart identified a “logomachy” in revolutionary France; see Rolf Reichardt, *Das Blut der Freiheit. Französische Revolution und demokratische Kultur*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2002), esp. 216–232.

³⁵ Anonymous, *Nouvelle lettre, sur ces misérables aristocrates, dans le même genre, le même goût, et le même stile que la précédente, adressée au doyen pénétrant* (s.l. [Geneva], dated 2 August 1779; *e-rara*); Anonymous, *Les vérités ou nouvelles philippiques aux aristocrates, à leurs écrivains, et parasites*, (s.l. [Geneva], 1780; *e-rara*).

³⁶ *Les vérités ou Nouvelles philippiques*, 4. (“J’appelle Aristocrates, ce reste d’un parti jadis puissant, qui voulut établir son pouvoir sur les débris de notre liberté, & qui par toutes sortes de moyens cherche à nous en priver.”)

privileges and power of the nobility.³⁷ Moreover, the term seems to have been occasionally used by the royalist party in the context of the disputes between the French crown and the *Parlement* of Paris in 1770-1774 to delegitimise the demands for greater political participation by this legal-political institution that claimed to represent the nation.³⁸ At the same time, the official *Gazette de France* commented with admiration on the coups of the kings of Denmark (1660) and Sweden (1772) against the “aristocratic tyranny” of the nobility.³⁹ However, such occasional associations did not affect the broader use of language; the French nobility was still consistently referred to as *noblesse* and not as aristocracy in dictionaries or titles of printed texts, and French aristocrats did not exist.

This changed at the turn of 1788/89, when a multitude of pamphlets against the “aristocracy” or the “aristocrats” suddenly appeared in France. In order to understand this discursive shift, my thesis is that we should not only look at constitutional debates within France, but also at perceptions of intensifying conflicts within European republics that have been purposefully “translated” into the French context by politically involved actors. New discursive bridges were built across the previous strict distinction between monarchy and republic, especially following the French political-military guarantee of the “aristocratic” constitution in Geneva in 1782 and its passive toleration of Prussian intervention against the revolutionary Dutch “patriots” in favour of the “*aristocraaten*” in 1787.⁴⁰ The emigrated leaders of the Genevan *représentants* were among the key players in these semantic transformations. From exile, they increasingly intervened in the French

³⁷ The writings of René Louis de Voyer, Marquis d’Argenson, and Gabriel Bonnot de Mably were particularly important in this discourse. See Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 125–161, and Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 156–166.

³⁸ Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism: France, 1770-1774* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 25, 133–136; Crout, “Aristocrate and the vocabulary of the Revolution,” 375–376.

³⁹ *Gazette de France*, 21 September 1772, 351 (article from Hamburg, 1 September 1772). The anonymous correspondent commented on the current events in Sweden and linked them to the “revolution” in Denmark in 1660 in which the “Danish aristocracy” had been “abolished.”

⁴⁰ On the Dutch *Patriottenbeweging* and their fight against the “aristocrats” (*aristocraaten*) of the stadtholder’s party, see Stephan R. E. Klein, *Patriots Republicanism: Politieke cultuur in Nederland (1766-1787)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), esp. 227–243, Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 883–896.

and British constitutional debates and, through their economic prosperity and astute argumentation, became a voice that was first heard and then politically influential.⁴¹

At first, the Genevan opposition had hoped for the help of the French court and public in their fight against the “aristocrats.” In the summer of 1781, a leader of the *représentants*, François d’Ivernois (1757-1842), travelled to Paris to see Foreign Minister Vergennes; when he was not allowed to see him, he published an extensive brochure explaining why Geneva’s legitimate constitution was a “wisely tempered democracy” and not an aristocracy.⁴² The following year, when the democratic revolution was being overturned by the foreign powers, d’Ivernois still dedicated his extensive *Tableau historique et politique des révolutions de Genève* to the king of France, expressing his wish that Louis XVI “would not help the aristocrats of Geneva to annihilate the first of our laws.”⁴³ After the re-establishment of the aristocratic regime with the so-called *code noir*, however, d’Ivernois turned to exile in London, where an English translation of his *Tableau* was produced in 1784. It was followed by a second volume in French that covered the period from 1768 to late 1788 and was published precisely at the moment when the aristocratic regime in Geneva was once again overthrown, thus allowing the *représentants* to return to their city.⁴⁴ In d’Ivernois perspective, the history of Geneva in the eighteenth century now appeared as a long struggle between “the aristocracy” or “the aristocrats” and the citizens.

In d’Ivernois’ eyes, this struggle was linked to France not only by the fact that the French crown had protected the “aristocrats” in Geneva. He now also saw an analogous conflict at the heart of the French monarchy. To illustrate this, he quoted King Louis XVI himself, who had told the *Parlement* in Paris on 17 April 1788 that “if the majority of my courts could impose my will, the monarchy would be no more than an aristocracy of magistrates, as opposed to the rights and interests of the nation as to those of

⁴¹ On the *représentants* role in the British and French constitutional debates, see Whatmore, *Against War and Empire*, part three, 137–270, and Whatmore, *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans: The Genevans and the Irish in the Time of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴² [François d’Ivernois], *Offrande à la liberté et à la paix, par un Citoyen de Genève; ou Idées de conciliation, adressées à Mr. J. A. de Luc, en refutation du Mémoire qu’il remit le 21 Aoust 1781, à Monsieur le Comte de Vergennes* (Geneva, 1781), 19 (“une Démocratie sagement tempérée”). On d’Ivernois and his intellectual biography, see Otto Karmin, *Sir Francis d’Ivernois 1757–1842: Sa vie, son oeuvre et son temps* (Geneva: Revue historique de la Révolution française et de l’Empire, 1920), and Whatmore, *Against War and Empire*, 157–176.

⁴³ [François d’Ivernois], *Tableau historique et politique des révolutions de Genève dans le dix-huitième siècle, dédié à Sa Majesté Très-Chrétienne, Louis XVI, Roi de France et de Navarre* (Geneva, 1782), xv. (“[...] ELLE n’aidera point les Aristocrates de Genève à anéantir la première de nos Loix; la seule qui les force à la mériter.”)

⁴⁴ [François d’Ivernois], *Tableau historique et politique des deux dernières révolutions de Genève*, tome II (London, 1789).

sovereignty.”⁴⁵ Both the legitimate democracy in Geneva and the legitimate monarchy of France were thus threatened by the aristocrats. And in both cases, it was imperative to prevent or end the “aristocracy of the magistrates.”

Although d’Ivernois would later turn out to be an opponent of the Jacobin-centralistic Revolution in France that also affected his hometown, his writings contributed to the spread of a political vocabulary that was increasingly applied to French conditions in the run-up to the Estates-General. Another key agents in this process of semantic transition was d’Ivernois’ countryman Étienne Clavière (1735-1793), who had also had to flee into exile in 1782 and later became French citizen and a leading republican figure of the French Revolution, serving as minister of finance in 1792–93.⁴⁶ In addition to writings that they published in their own name, Clavière and his Geneva exile circle exercised their influence in particular via their close collaboration with the French authors Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville and Honoré Gabriel de Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, whom they first met in Neuchâtel in 1782. At least until they themselves became leading political figures in revolutionary France, Mirabeau and Brissot acted as organs of a Genevan republicanism that was characterised by a sharp criticism of everything aristocratic. Together, this intellectual circle formed a “highly powered anti-aristocratic crypto-republican French-Swiss propaganda machine.”⁴⁷

The case of Brissot illustrates the translation of Geneva’s political concepts of combat into the constitutional debates of revolutionary France. At the request of his Geneva friends and financial supporters, Brissot published anonymously an extensive

⁴⁵ D’Ivernois, *Tableau historique et politique*, vol. 2, 242. (“Si la pluralité de mes Cours forçait ma volonté, la Monarchie ne serait plus qu’une aristocratie de Magistrats aussi contraire aux droits & aux intérêts de la nation qu’à ceux de la souveraineté.”) Louis statement was a response to a remonstrance of the *parlement* of Paris; see *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des Chambres françaises. Première série (1787 à 1799)*, vol. 1 (Paris: P. Dupront, 1867), 284; on 4 May 1788, the *parlement* answered “Non, Sire, point d’aristocratie en France, mais point de despotisme. Telle est la constitution: tel est aussi le vœu de votre Parlement, et l’intérêt de Votre Majesté.” *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, vol 1, 286. On the context, see Vivian R. Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation: The Political Schooling of the French, 1787-1788* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 62–65; Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 222–228.

⁴⁶ Richard Whatmore and James Livesey, “Étienne Clavière, Jacques-Pierre Brissot et les fondations intellectuelles de la politique des girondins,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 75 (2000): 1–26.

⁴⁷ Israel, *The Enlightenment That Failed*, 509. The influence of the Genevans on Mirabeau’s thinking and speeches was first analysed in depth by Joseph Bénétruy, *L’atelier de Mirabeau: Quatre proscrits genevois dans la tourmente révolutionnaire (Etienne Clavière, Jacques-Antoine Du Roveray, Etienne Dumont, Etienne-Salomon Reybaz)* (Geneva: A. Jullien, 1962). Richard Whatmore has convincingly shown that this “atelier” also worked the other way round; Whatmore, *Against War and Empire*, 228–241.

pamphlet entitled *Le philadelphien à Genève* in 1783 in which he commented on the failed “revolution” in Geneva and in which the word “aristocrats” occurs more than twenty times.⁴⁸ In the fictional narrator’s position of an American republican who had observed events in Geneva in 1782, he claimed to describe in detail how the Geneva republic “has fallen from its original state to the state of slavery to which its aristocrats have now reduced it.”⁴⁹ “Good patriots” (like his colleagues) had therefore left the country in the meantime to work for a better system from abroad. After spells in London, the Netherlands, and America—where he observed similar struggles between “patriots” or democratic republicans on the one hand and “aristocrats” on the other—the prolific political writer finally returned to France in the run-up to the Estates General.

The same vocabulary he had used to describe the conflicts in Geneva and the Netherlands, Brissot now also applied to France. In an addendum to his *Plan of Conduct for the Deputies of the People to the Estates-General*, published in April 1789, Brissot directly linked the present situation in France with the experiences of the past political troubles in Geneva, adding a “note” of several pages on the troubles in Geneva in which he reminded his readers that “that the popular Constitution of Geneva was overthrown by violence in 1782; this overthrow was the work of the intrigues of the Aristocrats.”⁵⁰ After the French Crown (or, more precisely, the supposed influence of a Geneva minister, Jacques Necker) had destroyed the Genevan Republic, Brissot was ready to continue his fight against the “aristocrats” on French soil. Consequently, from May 1789, Brissot published the left-wing periodical *Le Patriote François*, which systematically discredited the traditional elites of the monarchy—nobles, clerics, members of the *parlements*—“infamous aristocrats.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ [Jean-Pierre Brissot de Warville], *Le Philadelphien de Genève, ou Lettres d’un Américain sur la dernière révolution de Genève, sa Constitution nouvelle, l’émigration en Irlande, &c. pouvant servir de tableau politique de Genève jusqu’en 1784* (Dublin, 1783).

⁴⁹ Brissot, *Le Philadelphien à Genève*, 5 (“J’ai vu par quels degrés celle-ci [la république] est tombée de son état premier à l’état d’esclavage où ses aristocrates le réduisent aujourd’hui.”)

⁵⁰ Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *Plan de conduite pour les Députés du Peuple aux États-Généraux de 1789* (s.l. [Paris], April 1789), Brissot de Warville, *Notes relatives au Plan de conduite pour les Députés du Peuple aux États-Généraux de 1789* (s.l. [Paris], 1789), 29–34 (“Note sur les derniers troubles de Genève”), quote 29: “On doit se rappeler que la Constitution populaire de Genève a été renversée par la violence en 1782; ce renversement a été l’ouvrage des intrigues des Aristocrates.”

⁵¹ See., e.g., *Le Patriote François*, 28 July 1789, p. 1, on the meeting of the Assemblée nationale of 25 July 1789 (“Cet infâme Aristocrate”). On Brissot’s biography and the *Patriote François*, see, among others, Leonore Loft, *Passion, Politics, and Philosophy: Rediscovering J.-P. Brissot* (Westport: Greenwood, 2002).

4. Dismantling the aristocratic conspiracy

But how could the social elites of a monarchy in crisis suddenly be called aristocrats—a term which, in the republican context, implied sovereign rights? In contrast to Geneva, where the question was whether the republic was democratic or aristocratic, the figure of the French aristocrat was initially based on the idea of a secret coup by the elites against both the legitimate authority of the king and the rights of the nation. This criticism had already emerged during the *Assemblée des Notables* 1787-1788, whose claim to represent the French nation was rejected by a growing number of commentators, which may also have inspired Louis XVI (or rather his ministers) for the statement on the *parlement’s* “aristocracy” mentioned above. The anti-noble discourse in France then became more intense in the month before the opening of the *États généraux*, when it became apparent that these would be dominated by noble-born members of the first two estates.⁵² This was probably also influenced by the American constitutional debates, where some democratic authors argued “that indeed every distinguished man is an aristocrat.”⁵³ These elites, who had already illegally dominated the monarchy in previous centuries, were about to misuse the assembly, the critics warned, to establish a Venice-style aristocracy in which there would be neither a sovereign king nor a voice for the nation:

The members of the nobility will become despotic senators; the first king of the world will be transformed into a simple doge without power or authority, and you, poor people of France, will be like the Venetians, legally wrapped in so many chains, that it will become forever impossible for you to leave slavery.⁵⁴

It is against the background of these explicit or implicit models of early modern aristocracies in Venice or Geneva that Abbé Sieyès’ remarks on aristocracy in his hugely

⁵² See Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation*; Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 217–256; William Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵³ *The Debates and Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of New York, Assembled at Poughkeepsie on the 17th June, 1788: A Fac-Simile Reprint of An Original Copy in the Adriance Memorial Library* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar Brothers Institute, 1905), 39.

⁵⁴ Jean-Baptiste Bremond, *Premières Observations au Peuple François, sur la quadruple Aristocratie qui existe depuis deux siècles, sous le nom de haut Clergé, de Possédant fiefs, de Magistrats, & du haut Tiers ; & vues générales sur la constitution et la félicité publique* ([Versailles], 1789; BNF), 57. (“Les membres de la Noblesse deviendront des despotes Sénateurs; le premier Roi du monde sera transformé en un simple Doge, sans pouvoir & sans autorité ; & vous, pauvre Peuple François, vous serez comme le Vénitiens, légalement enveloppés de tant de chaînes, qu’il vous deviendra à jamais impossible de sortir l’esclavage.”)

influential speech on the Third Estate in January 1789 must be understood. In this speech, Sieyès warned of a "triple aristocracy of the church, the sword, and the robe" and asked rhetorically, "if the Estates General are the interpreter of the general will and, as such, have legislative power, is it not certain that this is a true aristocracy, where the Estates General are no more than a clerical-nobility-judicial assembly?"⁵⁵ In fact, according to Sieyès, these groups had already long dominated the kingship, so that France was nothing other than a "courtly aristocracy" (*aristocratie aulique*). Now the rights of the nation embodied by the Third Estate had to be restored, and this required the disempowerment of the nobility, which had illegitimately elevated itself to an aristocracy: "Today the third estate is everything, nobility is a word. But under this word has crept a new and intolerable aristocracy; and the people have every reason not to want aristocrats."⁵⁶

In a similar way, Mirabeau, who despite his noble birth was elected to represent the Third Estate and became a public hero in the first phase of the Revolution, showed himself early on to be a spokesman for this theory of an aristocratic conspiracy, and was later positively quoted by numerous pamphlets against the "aristocrats."⁵⁷ In February 1789, he warned in his speeches and writings for election of the coming "aristocracy of the nobility." Whether they were patricians in a city republic or nobles in a monarchy suddenly no longer made much difference. Instead, Mirabeau was already using the term aristocrat largely synonymously for the class of the socially privileged, stating that "in every country, in every age, the aristocrats have pursued the friends of the people."⁵⁸ It was now necessary

⁵⁵ "Si les états généraux sont l'interprète de la volonté générale et ont, à ce titre, le pouvoir législatif, n'est-il pas certain que là est une véritable aristocratie, où les états généraux ne sont qu'une assemblée cléricalo-nobili-judicielle?" Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* (1789), ed. Société de l'Histoire de la Révolution Française (Paris, 1888), 57–93, 35, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Qu%E2%80%99est-ce_que_le_tiers_%C3%A9tat_%3F.

⁵⁶ "Aujourd'hui le tiers est tout, la noblesse est un mot. Mais sous ce mot s'est glissée une nouvelle et intolérable aristocratie; et le peuple a toute raison de ne point vouloir d'aristocrates." Sieyès, 79.

⁵⁷ In addition to his commitment to the Geneva *représentants*, which materialised among other things in a letter to Vergennes, Mirabeau had also already prominently presented his criticism of the aristocratic form of government and the nobility before the Revolution in his *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus* (1784). On Mirabeau's connections with the Genevan cause and his role in the anti-noble discourse in the 1780s and during the Revolution; see also François Quastana, *La pensée politique de Mirabeau (1771-1789). "Républicanisme Classique" et régénération de la monarchie* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2007), 329–358, and Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies*, chapter 4;

⁵⁸ Honoré Gabriel de Riqueti, Comte de Mirabeau, *Réponse aux protestations faites au nom des Prélats & des Possédans-fiefs de l'Assemblée de Provence, contre le discours du Comte de Mirabeau sur la représentation de la Nation Provençale dans les Etats actuels & sur la nécessité de convoquer une Assemblée générale des trois Ordres. Et contre-protestation par le Comte de Mirabeau* ([Paris], February 1789; BNF), 13. ("Dans tous les pays, dans tous les âges, les Aristocrates ont emplacement poursuivi les amis du Peuple [...].")

to put an end to the “feudal aristocracy,” which had been based on the tax privileges of the nobility, and thus to help the *volonté générale* of the nation to break through.⁵⁹

The anti-aristocratic discourse proved so effective at the beginning of the Revolution because it allowed the advocates of the bourgeois Third Estate to criticise the nobility as the embodiment of a corrupt “feudal” regime without directly attacking the monarchy itself. On the contrary, many of the early revolutionaries promised to restore the legitimate authority of the king, and Louis XVI’s initial decision to accept the Revolution and move his court to Paris seemed to prove them right. Yet after a new National Assembly had replaced the Estates General and the nobility had lost most of its privileges, the theory of aristocratic usurpation gave way to an increasingly aggressive discourse of fear of aristocratic counter-revolution, which justified ever more drastic measures against the former privileged.⁶⁰ And as the Revolution further progressed, aristocrat became a battle term that could denote members of all kinds of groups such nobles, clerics, royalists, merchants, the rich, and even girondists such as Clavière and Brissot. It became, as Laurence Coudart has stated, an “ideological instrument that allowed to discredit and neutralise the opponents.”⁶¹

Conclusion

Within a few years, a system of government that concerned a few peripheral small states in Europe became increasingly synonymous with the *ancien régime* with all its prerogatives and privileges, which the French revolutionaries saw as something to be overcome. Ironically, what was exported as a word from the early modern republics, soon came back in the flesh from the collapsing French monarchy. The French aristocrats who were declared “outside the law” in France travelled to the neighbouring Swiss cantons, the Netherlands or on to Genoa and Venice, among others. In this way, the negative image of these states as strongholds of the aristocracy was potentiated, which later legitimised military conquest and the transformation into sister republics.

The Republic of Geneva, the former model for the revolutionary struggle of patriots against aristocrats, had followed the example of the French Revolution already earlier. In

⁵⁹ Mirabeau, *Réponse aux protestations faites au nom des Prélats & des Possédans-fiefs de l’Assemblée de Provence*, 45–46 (“aristocratie féodale”).

⁶⁰ Antoine de Baecque, “Le récit fantastique de la Révolution”; Timothy Tackett, “La Grande Peur et le complot aristocratique.”

⁶¹ Laurence Coudart, “Aristocrate,” in *Dictionnaire de l’Histoire de France*, ed. Jean-François Sirinelli and Daniel Couty, A-J (Paris: Armand Colin, 1999), 86.

early 1789, the exiles were allowed to return to their hometown by decree of the *Conseil Général*, and a new war of pamphlets between “patriots” and “aristocrats” began.⁶² In December 1792, backed by the French decree of 19 November to support revolutionary movements in neighbouring countries, the rule of the Small Council was finally overthrown, and a French-style *Assemblée Nationale* was set up to draft a new constitution. This was soon followed by a more radical regime led by revolutionary clubs and outbreaks of violence parallel to the *Terreur* in France. In 1798, following the French invasion in Switzerland, Geneva was incorporated into the French Republic, before finally becoming a Swiss canton after the collapse of Napoleon’s *Empire* in 1814.

With the disappearance of the early modern republics that had combined collective government with hereditary privileges, the concept of aristocracy had finally detached itself from republican political language. In post-revolutionary contexts, the concept now was largely used to refer to the nobility or the new bourgeois elites. In this sense, it was also transferred into the scholarly language of the future classics of historical sociology such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx.⁶³ The fact that aristocracy had meant something different in the early modern period and that aristocrats are a rather recent phenomenon in conceptual history does not mean that the concepts cannot be used as concepts to describe social and political elites in the pre-modern period. But I think it is important to be aware of the difference in historical and analytical meaning—and to know their bloody history during the revolutionary period.

⁶² See Golay, Eric, *Quand le peuple devient roi: Mouvement populaire, politique et révolution à Genève de 1789 à 1794* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 2001), here esp. 54–66.

⁶³ See, e.g., Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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