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**Ellis Wasson, Aristocracy and the modern world.  
Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan,  
2006, 296 pp.**

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## Book reviews

**Ellis Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 296 pp.**

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Since the French Revolution the history of aristocracy has been presented as a history of decline and disintegration. This book by Wasson, a historian of American origin and educated in the United Kingdom who specialises in European ruling classes, goes against this tradition. The author claims that the nobilities of Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries adjusted efficaciously, with resilience and adaptability, to the challenges of modernity. His book has been written accordingly to the most innovative and recent research about elites and the roles they played in the modernization process. He presents plenty of references that confirm his familiarity with this research field as it has been developed in most European countries. Although he acknowledges that elites in different countries were not homogeneous, he tries to outline the features that allowed aristocracy to uphold its political and social roles in modern societies. To achieve this aim, Wasson devotes the first chapter to providing a definition of the object and clearing the field of ambiguities and confusing uses of the word "aristocracy." The latter, in his view, is a specific concept that differs from "upper class," "oligarchy" and other similar terms. Its meaning can be elucidated with reference to a few general criteria: aristocrats were nobles, established in their elevated ranks (that were passed on to the following generations) by monarchs; in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, coats of arms, as well as a large residence in the city and/or in the countryside, were an essential prerequisite; most of them were landowners; power (positions in the legislature or in bureaucracy, as well as an easy and direct access to the monarch) was also associated with aristocracy; finally, a collective set of values was shared by aristocrats. This brief list of criteria shows that the concept of aristocracy was based upon an act of institutionalization on behalf of the political authority (monarchs). Moreover, a number of subsequent social and cultural aspects of their life-conduct publicly legitimized their dominant position in society. Aristocratic status therefore appeared to be strongly dependent on the monarchy's favour.

As result, aristocrats have been often described as conservative, contrary to innovation and strictly bound to the confines of their national country, in which their status was accepted. Wasson, instead, proposes a different interpretation. In his view, aristocrats were cosmopolitan rather than nationalist, open to novelties and sensitive to many innovations, in the economic field as well as in the cultural and social ones. At the same time, however, the author claims that the main threats to aristocratic leadership were posed by expanding conceptions of equality, nationalism and democracy. His argument sounds like this: during the whole of the Nineteenth century new middle classes increased their importance. While industrialization developed and new bourgeois industrial elites became dominant, aristocrats lost their influence as a class. Some aristocratic individuals, however, continued to exercise their leadership all over Europe, in the political field, as well as in the industrial and financial ones. In a Bourdieusian jargon, we could say that in some cases aristocrats converted their cultural, social and even economic capital into more profitable resources that were better suited to the

modern era. In this sense, their multilingual culture often became a useful skill that allowed to conduct a cosmopolitan life in the major European cities (such as London, Moscow or St Petersburg, Berlin, Paris, Naples, etc.). Moreover, the acceptance of newcomers in elite circles, which had previously been a tool to protect aristocracy against rapid extinction, became attention to innovative lifestyles and good disposition towards change, although still within a framework of privilege where their dominant positions were preserved.

In the following chapters the author describes different aspects of aristocratic life over the centuries: patronage of arts, entrepreneurship in agriculture and manufacturing, “time devoted to socialize” [p. 100], a high sense of honour that was initially based on family and lineage and that after the French Revolution and Napoleonic age became rooted in service to the community, political careers. The development of industrial society marked frequent alliances between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, marked by marriages that allowed them to share economic capital and social prestige. The aristocracy thus preserved its dominant position, whereas bourgeoisie acquired the social appreciation and recognition deriving from a legitimate and honourable life-conduct.

From a sociology of culture point of view, the interest of the book lies in the main thesis of the author, who pushes forward the idea that the aristocratic cultural model was a legitimate model in modern societies. According to Wasson, while modern society was undergoing deep changes that transformed it from a rural to an industrial organization, from a monarchic to a republican system, etc., many aristocrats played a role by maintaining ties with the past traditions and cultural forms of their countries though the adaptation of their lifestyles, political engagements and economic activities to the new conditions of society. Numerous examples cited in the volume confirm, as noted also by Norbert Elias, that the standards for moral and cultural judgments in the new modern societies were shaped according to the values of aristocratic people: honour, social life, education, politeness, prestige, etc. carried on to be leading sources of social appreciation. As Veblen has also outlined, this book shows how during the centuries the things and situations that these issues were associated to changed, however their meanings remained unchanged.

The book provides an interpretation of modern societies as being very conservative and consensual: societies in which the different elites, wherever they came from, reciprocally adjusted their interests and organized their central role in economic, politic and even cultural life.

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