

ABC's *American Royal Baby*: The US elite's fascination with royalty

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9 June 2021

"No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State."— US Constitution, Article I, Section 9, Clause 8

"Unquestionably the person that can get lowest down in cringing before royalty and nobility, and can get most satisfaction out of crawling on his belly before them, is an American. Not all Americans, but when an American does it he makes competition impossible."— Mark Twain in his Notebook

The birth on June 4 in Santa Barbara, California, of Lilibet "Lili" Diana Mountbatten-Windsor to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Prince Harry and the former Meghan Markle, sent the American media into a predictable frenzy.

As part of this, ABC News produced an hour-long special, *The American Royal Baby*, about the birth of "the first senior royal baby born in America."

"The wait is over," the program begins breathlessly. "This baby girl is going to be one of the most famous baby girls in the world," we are informed. She is the most "A-list baby" in a long time, "the first American member of the Royal Family." Is Oprah Winfrey possibly her godmother? Could Lilibet-Diana ever become queen? She will have playdates with the Clooney children. Her parents are "rewriting history." Will she be entirely brought up in the US? Will the rift between Prince Harry and his elder brother, Prince William, ever be mended?

This is very stupid stuff, drivel actually, although it is driven by serious concerns. On the one hand, there is an effort to divert public attention from the horrific and ongoing pandemic, its disastrous social consequences, along with the danger of war and dictatorship. On the other, there is the powerful gravitation of the immensely wealthy in the US and their hangers-on toward aristocracy and royalty, and toward despotism.

The ABC special, unsurprisingly, is pitched at a very low level. In the UK, we learn, there is "really so much joy right now." Coming two months after the death of Prince Harry's grandfather, Prince Philip, the event is "such a blessing." Are there concerns in Britain over the continuing divisions in the royal family? The ABC correspondent in London allows her face to cloud over for an instant, before reiterating that there is "nothing but joy and celebration" in the UK.

The naming of the new baby, Lilibet, the childhood nickname of Queen Elizabeth, and Diana, for her grandmother, the late Princess Diana, is perhaps an "olive branch" to Buckingham Palace.

Prince Harry and Meghan Markle come from "two different worlds." Will they choose California and "Hollywood" or "British high society" within which to raise their two children? In March, Winfrey conducted one of her famously penetrating interviews with Harry and Meghan Markle. The latter complained about her mistreatment and about racism within the royal family. Concerns were expressed by some, she explained, about how dark her first child's skin might be. Oprah was open-mouthed with astonishment, "What?"

ABC and the American media generally have expressed sympathy for Harry and Meghan in their effort to "escape persecution" at the hands of the other royals. Now they are among "American royalty," fellow "celebrities with kids." Again, images of the Clooneys, along with those of Chrissy Teigen and John Legend, Serena Williams, and now even Beyoncé and Jay-Z ... The estranged royal couple's children will play with "some of the wealthiest and most famous children in the world," from "Hollywood" and the "tech world."

The special refers to Meghan Markle's concern for "female empowerment," and a correspondent explains that in Lili "you're going to have a feminist and possibly an American president." The ABC special eventually comes to an end, many minutes after it ran out of anything to say.

A revolution took place in the US, directed against the British monarchy. The American Revolution instituted republican rule.

The US Constitution forbids the granting of any "Title of Nobility." Nonetheless, the accumulation of immense wealth, in combination with definite political circumstances, always brings with it a resurgence of fascination with "Nobility." The WSWS has written numerous times about the re-emergence of the "aristocratic principle" in many spheres of American life and its anti-democratic implications. A handful of people control nearly everything—they see no good reason why they shouldn't control everything, at whatever cost.

As a reminder, between March 18, 2020, and April 12, 2021, the collective wealth of American billionaires climbed by \$1.62 trillion, or 55 percent, from \$2.95 trillion to \$4.56 trillion. On the latter date, America's 719 billionaires held over four times more wealth than that possessed by the 165 million Americans in society's bottom half (\$1.01 trillion). Billionaire wealth has experienced a 19-fold increase since 1990.

America's very, very rich (including its African-American representatives—see *Bridgerton*) envy the various princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, marquesses and marchionesses, earls and countesses, viscounts and viscountesses, barons and baronesses still around, especially the British ones, and secretly, or not so secretly, resent the absence of such titles in America. Why, they reason, should we, the finest and most deserving portion of the

population, the crème de la crème, be deprived of our due and enduring recognition?

Mark Twain, as noted above, once argued that no one could get “lower down” in groveling before aristocracy than an American. There is some truth to this. The absence of titles makes them all the more irresistible and desirable. All the vicious contempt of the plutocracy for the population finds expression in this fascination. While tens of millions live in darkness and squalor, they live in light and elegance. It seems to the rich that the working class has largely produced its own conditions and therefore more or less deserves them. Their billions of dollars prove that certain people have value and importance, if not in God’s eyes anymore, in society’s anyway.

This is not entirely new. In *Empire of Liberty*, Gordon Wood recounts the infatuation with monarchy exhibited by Federalists and others in the late 18th century. The Southern slaveholders unashamedly based themselves on the principle of inequality.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, with the emergence of modern American capitalist industry, immense fortunes were amassed by the robber barons and the like. Twain coined the phrase “the gilded age.” In 1895, Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs remarked that the “aristocracy of wealth is now as well established in the United States as is the aristocracy of blood in any European country, and the laws as they exist confer upon this aristocracy unlimited power.”

Rich American parents began looking toward Europe and its often impoverished dukes and princes as potential partners for their daughters. This was the phenomenon known as the “dollar princesses.”

In 1890, *Titled Americans* appeared, a “book that revealed the wealthiest and most socially ambitious families of late nineteenth-century America, and the titled European bachelors whose hearts their daughters might hope to conquer,” as an introduction to a recent republication of the work explains.

Eric Homberger, emeritus professor of American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, estimates in that introductory essay that “454 American heiresses married European aristocrats in the late nineteenth century, and thus acquired, at considerable expense, hereditary titles of nobility. 136 bagged Earls or Counts, forty-two married princes, seventeen married dukes, nineteen married viscounts, thirty-three married marquises, and there are forty-six wives of baronets and knights, and sixty-four baronesses.”

Some of these were matches made in heaven (or some other place). For example, *Titled Americans* recorded the nuptials between Mary Polk, the granddaughter of Confederate general (and Episcopal bishop) Leonidas Polk, and Baron de Charette, “the famous French general” and a member of the “de Charette family,” who “won great fame as leaders of the Royalists in the [counter-revolutionary] Vendean War of 1797.”

In any case, Homberger writes, “In the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century, there had been an explosion of press interest in the doings of the wealthy, who—led by the regal Astors, Vanderbilts, Morgans and Goulds—became objects of intense press scrutiny. The rich constituted the first true celebrities in American life, soon to be followed by opera divas, Broadway performers, singers, movie stars, professional athletes, gamblers and gangsters.”

The professor observes that the 1890s was a decade “in which social conflict reached unprecedented heights, and hardship was a reality for many Americans.” However, he goes on, “newspapers in what was called the Gilded Age seemed to be more concerned to chronicle the lives of the rich and socially eminent.”

New York Times suggested in 1893, Homberger points out, “that as much as \$50 million might have accompanied the American brides as they sailed across the Atlantic for their new lives in the decayed and impoverished estates of the great aristocratic families. In 1911 [radical journalist] Gustavus Myers estimated the true cost of the transatlantic marriages at something like \$220 million.”

In 1896, Robert N. Reeves, in the *American Magazine of Civics*, a journal on political issues published in New York, wrote scathingly about “Our Aristocracy.” He warned about a “spirit of aristocracy abroad in our land that is sanctioned and kept alive by a vast majority of our very wealthy citizens,” a spirit that was driven by “the rapid accumulation of enormous private fortunes—fortunes which dwarf the magnificent incomes of the wealthiest European kings, princes, or emperors.”

Reeves pointed to the political dangers inherent in this process. By building up a “hothouse aristocracy,” America’s wealthy were “fast breeding another and more fiery element in American society—anarchy,” by which Reeves meant the danger of socialism. He asserted that the elites were “building up an insurmountable barrier between the rich and the poor. Their selfishness and total disregard for the happiness of other human beings less fortunate than themselves are without doubt widening the gulf in the social relations of our people.”

Reeves asked his readers to think of “the grand ball given recently in one of our large cities for the entertainment of a visiting duke; of the coats of arms, the flashing diamonds, the dazzling costumes, the costly fountain playing in the center of the grand ballroom; think of all the pageantry of those who without thought or care of the poor and the wretched spent a fortune that night for the entertainment of one man, and then think of all the unknown dead in our great cities, of the shivering poor who beg to live, of all the suffering and sorrow and misery.”

If the rich continued on this path, Reeves warned, “just as surely as the prodigal expenditures caused by the profuse magnificence of Louis le Grand [Louis XVI] plunged France into a revolution, just as surely will our country have cause to regret in the future the present leaning of our wealthy toward luxury and aristocracy.” Indeed, titanic struggles erupted in the 1890s and the first decades of the 20th century.

In our day, under quite different conditions, the protracted decay and decomposition of American capitalism, social inequality is reaching unbearable dimensions. The warnings of Reeves are more apropos than ever. The celebration of wealth and royalty, in the midst of mass popular suffering, will only contribute to the discrediting of capitalism and help bring on that “more fiery element in American society.”



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