Chapter 7
Aristocrats of Freedom

Political theorists often write about “the political,” as though it were elevated, more than mere politics. The eminent political theorist Sheldon Wolin, defines “the political” as

an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collective . . . In contrast [to politics], the political is episodic, rare. (Wolin, 1996, 31)

Along with the people I talked with, have I abandoned the political forever? Does transgression with others imitate “the political” on a smaller scale, or merely mock it?

In his recent book, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, Wolin (2001, 264–265) elaborates, characterizing “the political” in terms of what might be called republican socialism (my term), in which popular participation in politics is extended to the realm of economics, but always with politics in the lead. The result is socialism with the emphasis on the term social, understood as public discussion, debate, and sociability. In other words, the political does not stop at the borders of what is called economics as it does under liberalism. Nor does economics drive the political as it does under socialism. Instead, everything that people do is drawn under the umbrella of public discourse and determination. Think of Wolin as a Hannah Arendt of the Left, and you will not be far wrong.

Informants and I have abandoned this ideal. Informants do so for the most part unknowingly, and hence without regret. The political was never there for them to miss or lose, not even as an ideal. For all the sometimes subtle differences between younger and older people, they are agreed that American freedom means the freedom to get an education and make money.

I abandon Wolin’s ideal knowingly, and with some regret. My regret is lessened when I listen to people like Bob, 45 years old, who first defines
freedom as making peace with a difficult coworker and then talks about quitting his job, putting his furniture into storage, and going to Kansas for three months in order to research its territorial history, with which he became fascinated. There he spent his days in the library and his evenings playing tennis and drinking beer. He was, he says, inspired by the first history course he took when he returned to college at 40. Bob’s goal is to become a historian. He made good money running his own business but it wasn’t satisfying.

The question that motivates Tocqueville and Wolin is whether freedom is possible in the modern world. Looking at people like Bob, one has to answer yes. Bob is a free man. Bob does not, it seems, practice the transgression of disciplinary boundaries. Instead, he transgresses the boundaries of convention—of what is expected at various stages of life. While Bob transgresses these boundaries alone, at this point in his life he does not need others to show him the way. Bob is the man who has already defined freedom as getting along with others. Bob is the aristocrat whom Tocqueville so admired, the one who escapes the leveling equality of condition and brings something new and different to the world, even if it is just the example of his life. Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, Bob doesn’t look or act like an aristocrat, but he is. So are Lumara and Danielle.

“Aristocratic” freedom is seeing clearly while living as creatively as possible, liberated from the constraints of narcissism, convention, and obsessive attachment. It is ironic that while aristocratic freedom is a strictly individual achievement, it generally depends on the company of others. Transgression with others is not the only form this company takes, but it is one especially suited to young people and the world they live in. Aristocratic freedom takes money but not much, and in the Western democracies we live in wealthy societies with a large social surplus. Above all, aristocratic freedom requires the capacity to bring imagination and reality into mutual contact. In other words, aristocratic freedom requires the power of illusion, the mark of “freedom with.”

Wolin dismisses Tocqueville’s vision of aristocratic freedom, arguing that for its sake he sacrifices the political. The early Tocqueville, says Wolin, is the theorist of a mundane, interest-based politics that at its best enlarges the perspectives of its participants. This is the Tocqueville of volume one of Democracy in America, the Tocqueville who so admired the New England town meeting. But it is not the mature Tocqueville, the one who became involved in French politics and became disillusioned.

The mature Tocqueville desperately longs for “the political” but cannot bear the threat it poses to order and property, becoming in the end the liberal aristocrat he always was. For this Tocqueville, participation serves