

Original Paper

The American and the Clan

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Abstract

*The Henry James novel *The American* (1877) is analyzed on the basis of a conflict between the two forms of liberty, which Isaiah Berlin in the end of the 1950s designated as negative and positive. The concept of negative freedom is in this interpretation of the novel connected to a contrast between the state and the clan. With starting point in Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order* (2011), and Mark S Weiner in *The Rule of the Clan* (2013), modern rule of law is in the analysis of the novel regarded as something radically different from clan society.*

*Based on an understanding of the modern state as a guarantee for individual autonomy and liberty, in Berlin's negative meaning, James depicts in *The American*, the problems of maintaining liberty, in the negative sense, in a community organised around the clan.*

In the novel, the American protagonist Christopher Newman with his lack of prejudices represent for his French fiancée Claire de Cintrée possible way to freedom. What Newman does, is to offer Claire the opportunity to move from the French aristocracy to the economically strong American bourgeoisie—from a kind of feudalism to capitalism. The proposed move coincides with the developmental curve of the novel, which with respect to Claire runs from clan to state.

In striking contrast to Newman's optimized sort of freedom, where neither any internalized norms nor any economic limitations prohibit the protagonist from acting in the way that he desires, Claire is the daughter of a family that represents the old world, with all its limitations and restrictions on negative liberty. In a highly concrete manner she is prohibited from acting as she wants. This is emphasized in the question of who to marry.

The analysis connects Claire's family to the ultramontanists and legitimists circles of 19th century Parisian aristocracy. The terms refer to the ultra-conservative and fiercely anti-liberal movements that, after the French revolution, turned against the modern state power that allegedly forced on the French

Catholics secular values.

Legitimism and ultramontanist are in the novel intimately connected to maintaining an organisation around the clan. In contrast to the clan, rule of law, democracy and individual freedom is seen as consequences of the framework of the modern, liberal state.

Keywords

Henry James, The American, clan, legitimism, ultramontanist, Iasiah Berlin, negative freedom

In *The American* (1877), Henry James puts the spotlight on the French aristocracy during the transition between the Second Empire and the Third Republic. The novel revolves around Christopher Newman, an American who, at the age of only 35 years old, has successfully accumulated enough capital to become economically independent. In 1868, he travels to Europe and Paris, with the purpose of searching for other values than those purely pecuniary. “I longed for a new world”, he says about the time before his departure for Europe, recalling how he felt “a new man inside my old skin” (p. 57). (Note 1)

In other words: the American as a *new man*. In an 1869 letter, written in Florence to his mother, James characterizes the American traveller to Europe as “the modern man with culture quite left out”. (Note 2)

But Newman is not simply an American, but one hailing from the American West, which suggests that his knowledge of culture is all the more absent. In Europe, he is primarily looking for culture and love—in that precise order. In both cases, one may note that his background as a capitalist has left its mark. As a parody of an American cultural tourist, he cannot approach a work of art, without asking *combien?*. In matters of love, too, he has a tendency to use a vocabulary indicating that he views his intended as an object of investment. (Note 3) But if, in the first half of the novel, he interprets cultural history as something for his own enrichment, he will in the second part realize that cultural tradition also hides dark depths, destructive secrets. There is a power, he realizes, in the cultural tradition that turns the past into something more than a collection of picturesque accessories, and there might be a reason to protect that power in a liberty-affirming society. (Note 4)

In accordance with James’s predisposition for constructing his intrigues around symmetrical patterns of anti-theses, it is not surprising that Newman, in his quest for love, encounters a woman, Claire de Cintré (born Bellegarde) who originates from a venerable, very old family, a background diametrically opposed to his own.

A man from the new world, *vis-à-vis* a woman from the old world.

The arrangement of the two most intrigue-filled protagonists indicates a reciprocity, an exchange. Titles for money, in the first place. His fortune is what prevents the woman’s family from immediately laughing Newman out of the room when he asks for her hand.

But this is far from the most important interchange that the marriage is expected to result in. Newman makes Claire a proposal that includes optimized liberty. But this liberty is offered at the price of her

being turned, at least partially, into a commodity. What Newman does, is to offer Claire the opportunity to move from the French aristocracy to the economically strong American bourgeoisie—from feudalism to capitalism. The proposed move coincides with the developmental curve of the novel, which runs from clan to state. (Note 5)

The lack of freedom which characterizes Claire, can be described as a lack of liberty in the negative meaning of the term, in accordance with the opposition between negative and positive liberty in Isaiah Berlin's essay "Concepts of Liberty" (1958). (Note 6) In this case, the lack of negative liberty is manifested in the coercion that the individual is subjected to in a society organized around the clan.

As is often the case with James, the contradiction between the European and the American is represented in a complex manner, where both the European and the American poles are charged with negative as well as positive connotations. The European cultural tradition is, for example, described from one perspective as a mausoleum, void of life. Contrary to this, the American culture stands for reverence of liberty and the individual.

In the latter case, the possibilities for self-actualization seem optimal, man being perceived as not the least pre-destined or determined by his or his family's background—nor depending on the prejudices of himself or others. The flip side of American liberty is the transformation by the capitalist system of the individual into a commodity, or an instrument in the service of other forces—a tool—with no room for manoeuvre.

Newman is typically American in the same way as many others in James's works. He seems, on the whole, untainted by the conventions and authoritative notions of the bourgeoisie. He lacks all these prejudices, passed down throughout history, from which Henrik Ibsen's Nora, in *A Doll's House*, claims that she must escape in order to become a free person. Newman, who had finished school at the age of ten, says: "I am not cultivated, I am not even educated; I know nothing about history, or art, or foreign tongues [. . .]." (p. 68)

On a European tour, with the purpose of visiting more places than Paris, Newman gets to know a young priest with a keen interest for art and culture. The priest, Rev Babcock, worships Goethe and tries to "infuse into Newman a little of his own spiritual starch". But educating the American capitalist works out badly: "Newman's personal texture was too loose to admit of stiffening. His mind could no more hold principles than a sieve can hold water". A blank page, thus. *Tabula rasa*.

This lack of prejudices, this lack of authoritative notions that man is supplied with by cultural history has—for James—its negative and its positive consequences.

The negative consequences for Newman and those of his like is made clear of James's representations of them as shallow and vulgar in their lack of aesthetic sensibility. In the capitalist society's transformation of everything—human subjects as well as aesthetic objects—into commodities, more or less vulgar, life itself tends to appear as prosaic, its spell irreparably broken.

The novel's two American male friends, Tom Tristram and Newman, both lack a deeper understanding of art. But the 36 year old Newman at least carries an ambition to gain knowledge of the history of art

and of aesthetic sensibility. Tristram, on the other hand, lives by the motto: “I don’t care for pictures; I prefer the reality!”.

Newman has travelled to Europe in order to experience what Matthew Arnolds in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) characterized as *the very best*: “I want to see [. . .] the finest pictures and the handsomest churches.” (p. 58) (Note 7)

On the other hand, Newman has “never read a novel” (p. 63). When asked what sort of art he appreciates, he answers: “Something bright and gay” (p. 93). And it won’t take long until he is “tired of [. . .] going to the opera” (p. 186).

With his journey to Europe, Newman purports to strive for a cultural counterpart to the assets that he, with such great success, has accumulated in the United States. There, he is said to have earned a fortune from his business with copper mines and wash tubs (one remembers the vulgar, unmentionable product that created the family wealth of the Newsomes in James’s *The Ambassadors*).

In that context, it is said that to Newman, “the business of money-getting appeared tolerably dry and sterile” (p. 114). As a consequence, he has a need for art, and first and foremost, beauty.

On the other hand, European culture is distinguished by a corresponding culture fatigue. While Newman appears uncritically in awe of everything that he sees in the Louvre, his Parisian friend Valentin de Bellegarde, the brother of Claire, only experiences boredom. And the boredom has, in that case, nothing to do with education. Rather, the culture fatigue depends on negative experiences of the cultural tradition. Valentin describes his feelings to Newman, when they by chance meet at the Louvre: The more beautiful they [the pictures] are the less I like them. Their great staring eyes and fixed positions irritate me. I feel as if I were at some big, dull party, in a room full of people I shouldn’t wish to speak to. What should I care for their beauty? It’s a bore, and, worse still, it’s a reproach. I have a great many *ennuis*; I feel vicious” (pp. 193-194).

The female copyist Noémie, whom Valentin and Newman meet at the Louvre, and with whom the latter will later fall in love, draws two red lines in the form of a cross over the painting she has grown bored of working with. Newman becomes distraught and points out: “You have spoiled your picture [. . .].” But Valentin argues that the painting has now become “more interesting. It tells a story”. Then, he asks if it is for sale. ““Everything I have is for sale”, said Mademoiselle Noémie” (pp. 198-199), obviously ambiguously.

Now, James could have stopped there. He could have been satisfied with depicting the American as aesthetically insensitive, faced with a European cultural tradition that, in turn, has been emptied of vitality, life and power. He could have underlined how European cultural tradition, at its worst, simply reproduces problematic, conventional bourgeois values that lock man into pre-determined positions—in accordance with various ancient, oppressive structures.

To a certain extent, the meeting of Europe and the United States in *The American* is indeed presented in that manner. But as a whole, it tends to be more complicated. The novel transcends the simple, early modernist view of the European bourgeois culture as lifelessly stiff, and in need of that sort of

vitalizing power with which modernism would impregnate the European cultural body, four or five decades after the publication of *The American*.

The flip side of Newman's shallow concept of history and deficient aesthetic sensibility is his romanticized view of the antipathy he recognises among the French aristocracy towards all novelties of social development—from the French Revolution onward. When Valentin attempts to get Newman to understand that, among the relatives of Valentin and his sister, there are extremely problematic values and traditions, and when Valentin for that reason points out that “old trees have crooked branches, old houses have queer cracks, old races have odd secrets. Remember that we are eight hundred years old”, Newman simply responds: “That's the sort of thing I came to Europe for. You come into my programme.” (p. 163)

When Claire, to Newman, appears as “a very expensive article”, this depends on his conception of her having had a “elaborate education, of her having passed through mysterious ceremonies and processes of culture in her youth, of her having been fashioned and made flexible to certain exalted social needs” (p. 165).

In another instance, Newman describes Claire as “a statue which had [. . .] come to life as flesh and blood” (p. 151). A little later, he speaks about her as “the admired object in all its complexity”, and with a “mechanism” that Newman hopes to get the opportunity to “examine” (p. 165).

Newman appears, from this perspective, as the paragon of the modern, materialistic tourist of culture, naïvely fascinated by everything exotic and strange. At the same time, he lacks capacity for viewing reality in any other way than in the shape of commodities for consumption, more or less exclusive. As a capitalist, he is depicted as viewing value as exclusively a consequence of supply and demand.

The closer he gets to the culturally foreign, the more he will, however, be overwhelmed with distaste. The historical perspective that characterises Claire's family appears as something incomprehensible and unfathomable to Newman.

And the reason for this incomprehensibility is the elements of pressure and restrictiveness that are so prominent in the Bellegarde family. This becomes clear if one relates the construction of the novel to Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between two concepts of liberty: the positive and the negative.

The American perspective of the novel dovetails to a large extent with the state of positive freedom that Isabel Archer represents in the opening of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Archer represents, as does Newman, an optimized sort of freedom, where neither any internalized norms nor any economic limitations prohibit the protagonist from acting in the way that he or she desires. Newman does not have any moral scruples. There are no imputed restrictions from parents or other relatives. He has not gone through any education that could have given rise to obsolete values and norms. And finally: there are no economic limitations. The freedom, in the positive sense of the term, that Ibsen's Nora longs for in *A Doll's House*, is in many ways the same freedom that Newman (like Isabelle Archer) enjoys.

In striking contrast to this, Claire is the daughter of a family that represents the old world, with all its limitations and restrictions on negative liberty. Her existence is connected to limitations and coercive

actions, with her being, in a highly concrete manner, prohibited from acting as she wants. This is emphasized in the question of who to marry.

It is Newman's friend, Mrs Tristram, who plants the idea of marriage with Claire in the young protagonist's mind. Claire and Mrs Tristram had become close friends when they, as girls, attended the same abbey school in Paris. "French by her father, English by her mother", Mrs Tristram tells Newman regarding Claire before he has even seen a glimpse of her. "Her family, on each side, is of fabulous antiquity." (p. 74) Claire's grandfather was a Catholic English count, part of the St Dunstan family. It is a family whose pedigree can be followed backwards to the 16th century. But the family of Claire's dead father goes even further back in time,

"back, back, back. The family antiquaries themselves lose breath. At last they stop, panting and fanning themselves, somewhere in the ninth century, under Charlemagne. That is where we begin. (p. 155)

Nowadays, the family fortune is "small" (p. 74). This forces them to overlook their principle of "not a case on record of a misalliance among the women" (p. 155). On Claire's part, however, there is no question of a sacrifice. On the contrary, one understands at the end of the novel that she, already from their first meetings, has been in love with the American.

The incursions on negative liberty that affect Claire are mainly two. The first is presented retrospectively, and revolves around her marriage with Mr de Cintré, a 60 year old nobleman—a marriage that she was forced into as an 18-year old; "an odious old gentleman", according to Valentin.

Newman is distraught when he, from the Tristram couple, hears about this forced marriage: "But that sort of thing is infamous [. . .] it makes me feel savage to hear of it!"

Is it, then, truly possible, he asks himself, "that they do that sort of thing over here? That helpless women are bullied into marrying men they hate?" (pp. 121-122)

The forced marriage is trivialized by the Tristrams. "Helpless women, all over the world, have a hard time of it", Mrs Tristram says. She continues: "there is plenty of bullying everywhere", after which her husband fills in: "a great deal of that kind of thing goes on in New York [. . .]. Girls are bullied or coaxed or bribed, or all three together, into marrying nasty fellows. There is no end of that always going on in the Fifth Avenue, and other bad things besides. The Mysteries of the Fifth Avenue! Some one ought to show them up!" (pp. 121-122).

The relativism of the Tristrams makes Newman upset. He argues that it is an exaggeration to claim that forced marriages are as common on the Fifth Avenue as in other places around the world: "I don't believe that, in America, girls are ever subjected to compulsion. I don't believe there have been a dozen cases of it since the country began." (p. 122)

Newman seems to realize that, on this point, there exists a fundamental difference. In the world inhabited by Claire, the individual is completely subordinate to the collective. But that is not the case, Newman argues, on the Fifth Avenue. Surely, violence, abuse and force may occur there too. Newman, however, seems to realize that the kind of force that Claire is subjected to is a remnant from another epoch, with completely different ways of organizing societies and interpersonal conduct.

After the death of her 60-year old husband, Claire succeeded against the wishes of her family, in negotiating herself into not having to start an (in her eyes humiliating) legal case about her husband's inheritance. This, she achieved at the price of during the ten years that followed having to give up her freedom of action.

The marriage to Mr de Cintr  had, Newman notes in conversation with Valentin, "been made in your horrible French way". It had been "made by the two families, without her having any voice" (p. 153). And Valentin elaborates with explanations: "She saw M de Cintr  for the first time a month before the wedding, after everything, to the minutest detail, had been arranged. She turned white when she looked at him, and white remained till her wedding-day. The evening before the ceremony she swooned away, and she spent the whole night in sobs." (p. 154)

In that situation, Claire's father took her side. He stood up against the forced marriage, and was for that reason murdered by the mother (in collusion with their son Urbain). But before his death, the father was able to convey to the English housemaid, Mrs. Bread, that his wife had tried to kill him. Moreover, he wrote a short message on a piece of paper, where he accounted for his wife's murderous plans. That letter ends up in Newman's possession (with Mrs Bread as intermediary).

In the case of Newman and Claire, the behaviour of the family is thus repeated, albeit with the marital starting field now being the complete opposite. After first—thought only after various family councils—having accepted Newman as Claire's prospective husband (of course exclusively because of his gigantic fortune), the family's opinion is reversed after the engagement ball of the young couple. The reason is somewhat unclear, but appears to have to do with a more fitting, in the eyes of the family, prospective husband having shown up: Lord Deepmere. For Claire, her family's ban on her marrying Newman results in her joining a convent belonging to the very strict order of the Carmelite Sisters. For Claire, there is a painful consequence to this decision. To renounce Newman, she points out, cannot be called "peace—it's death" (p. 314).

Newman, after the family having announced their decision in the marital matters, seeks out Claire at the family castle (in) Fleuri res.

The castle is said to stem "from the time of Henry IV", that is to say from the first French king of the Bourbon dynasty (who reigned 1589-1610). Surrounded, as it is, by "a wide, green river which washed the foundations of the chateau", and with the towers and walls reflecting "in the quiet water" (pp. 345-346), the castle will function as an appropriate frame for Claire's words: "I must do as they force me—I must, I must. They would haunt me otherwise [. . .] they would kill me! [— — —] It's like a religion. There's a curse upon the house; I don't know what—I don't know why—don't ask me. We must all bear it. (pp. 352-353)

She continues by noting that Newman had, at one point, offered her an opportunity "to go away. [. . .] But I can't—it has overtaken and come back to me" (p. 353). To Claire, Newman represents a possibility for freedom. And that freedom is, in the novel, defined as a lack of coercion, as negative liberty.

After Claire and Newman have parted ways definitively, he wanders around among the large and leafy trees at the side of the castle, where “the old English princes fought for their right and held it” (p. 357). The environment can be seen as a typical framing of those questions about clan culture that successively unfold in the mind of Newman:

What had she meant by her feeling being a kind of religion? It was the religion simply of the family laws, the religion of which her implacable little mother was the high priestess. Twist the thing about as her generosity would, the one certain fact was that they had used force against her.” (p. 359)

When Newman the following day at the castle meets mother and son Bellegarde, it is as if the spirits of the past—the very foundation of clan culture—approach him, “as if the door of a sepulchre had suddenly been opened, and the damp darkness were being exhaled.” (p. 364)

The housemaid, Mrs. Bread, thereafter recounts to Newman how the mother and the brother made Claire “feel wicked [——]. She was afraid [— —]. That was the real trouble, sir. She was like a fair peach, I may say, with just one little speck. She had one little sad spot. You pushed her into the sunshine, sir, and it almost disappeared. Then they pulled her back into the shade and in a moment it began to spread. Before we knew it she was gone. She was a delicate creature.” (pp. 372-373)

Neither does Mrs Tristram care particularly for Claire’s family. Far earlier in the plot, she asserts: “They are terrible people—her *monde*; all mounted upon stilts a mile high, and with pedigrees long in proportion.” In the salon of the family, “no one is admitted who can’t show his fifty quarterings” (p. 75). In the Bellegarde salon, Mrs Tristram points out in the same breath, one can find an immaculate selection of the ultramontanists and legitimists of Parisian society. The terms refer to the ultra-conservative and fiercely anti-liberal movements that, during the 19th century turned on the national state and against the modern state power that allegedly forced on the French Catholics all too secular values.

The legitimists refused to accept the French Revolution, and viewed heirs of the house Bourbon’s older branch as the lawful rulers of France, in particular after Charles X having been forced to abdicate in 1830 (he had, after the July Revolution that year, handed over the power to the duke of Orléans, Louis Philippe I, this despite insistence that the merely 10-year old grandson of Charles X, Henri, should be crowned king—Henri who, with the hypothetical number V, would remain the throne candidate of the legitimists, and thus also of the Bellegarde family, during the latter part of the 19th century).

That the castle of the Bellegarde family is claimed to have been built by the first king of the Bourbon dynasty, Henri IV (the grandfather of the Sun King, Louis XIV) is thus no coincidence.

John Carlos Rowe, has, in different contexts, pointed out that the research around the historical background of the role of the Bellegarde family in the novel has been flawed. As an exception, he has highlighted a 1972 article by John V Antush, that he at the same time—not on entirely erroneous grounds—criticizes for getting caught up in historical circumstances, without concrete connections to James’s contemporaries. (Note 8) One can, perhaps, say that Antush walks into the trap set by James, when the author lets Newman claim that Urbain Bellegarde, the brother of Valentin and Claire, belongs

to an historical era without any kind of relevance to the present and the future: “He felt as he should have felt if he had discovered in M de Bellegarde a taste for certain oddities of diet; an appetite, for instance, for fishbones or nutshells. Under these circumstances, of course, he would never have broached dietary questions with him.” (p. 228) (Note 9)

But that is exactly what Newman *should* have done: conducted ideological discussions with the political madman Urbain de Bellegarde. And this for the simple reason that legitimists and ultramontanists, just as is implied by Rowe, would reveal themselves to have a perhaps unexpected, but nonetheless large, relevance in the future.

At the same time, Rowe goes astray in his interpretation of this complex of motives. According to him the novel can be read as a trivialisation of the libertarian ambitions of liberal society. For Rowe, no differentiation is being made in the novel between the incursions on liberty in the Bellegarde family, and those incursions on liberty that exist in Newman’s homeland, the United States.

Rowe claims, for example, that Newman’s “attitudes toward women are at least as reactionary as those of the Old World Bellegardes”. (Note 10) One may note that Rowe, in this case, repeats the relativist standpoint of the simple-minded Tom Tristram on forced marriage.

In his study *The Other Henry James* (1998), Rowe offer a similar reading of the novel: “James stresses the extent to which the democratic promise of America has ended up merely repeating, if not compounding, the sins of *the aristocratic Europe that* his ancestors had hoped to escape.” (Note 11)

But such an interpretation not only ignores the fact that James has placed this very argument in the mouth of the narrow-minded Tom Tristram, it disregards the factual, historical background. Ultramontanism, namely, was a movement running utterly counter to American society. The American constitution was nothing less than a curse to the ultramontanists. Legitimism and ultramontanism are in the novel intimately connected to maintaining an organisation around the clan—the complete opposite of the modern, liberal state.

As Francis Fukuyama pointed out in *The Origins of Political Order* (2011), and Mark S Weiner in *The Rule of the Clan* (2013), modern rule of law entails something radically different from clan society. The state is, from the perspective of Fukuyama and Weiner, not interpreted as something oppressive. Rather, they emphasize how the framework of the state, which is the prerequisite for the nation, enables rule of law, democracy and individual freedom. (Note 12)

While the state protects its subjects, the clan members protect their cousins. (Note 13) If the state views its subjects as autonomous individuals, the clan views them as parts of a collective organism, where responsibility is communally distributed. Under modern rule of law, the one who commits a crime against another person is as an individual responsible for the crime, and often also liable for the compensation of the victim. (Note 14)

The relatives of the criminal are not viewed as having anything do with the affair. But in a clan culture, they do. There, the important thing is that balance is achieved between the clans. Having the criminal from the other clan punished is not always necessary. It might be more important for the family of the

victim to get an appropriate compensation for its loss.

The modern state, on the other hand, rests on the principle of equality before the law, and on the idea of a general welfare system providing safety and increased possibilities for autonomy and for personal fulfilment. (Note 15) It is just such a world that is detested by the conservative French aristocrats in *The American*.

Ultramontanism can be described as a conservative movement with a lineage dating to the Middle Ages. Its goal was to increase the power of the Pope in Europe at the expense of the national state. After the French Revolution the movement gained momentum, through their proponents arguing that the values of the new, secular state were not compatible with Catholic values. Catholics who accepted the values of the secular state were seen as apostates, as conforming to a false faith that would dilute the religion. Freedom of religion, and other rights that were created in the modern state in order to protect the individual, were viewed as scourges—by the French ultramontanists and legitimists.

And the American constitution was no less than the very moulding frame for the modern state, which had as its primary purpose to guarantee the autonomy and freedom of the individual.

The ultramontanists, together with the legitimists, were thus in their very essence on a collision course with liberals as well as with the representatives of the national state. Legitimists as well as ultramontanists wanted to see an international power base centred around the authority of the Pope in Rome. (Note 16)

It was for this latter reason that the Battle of Castelfidardo, 1860, which is mentioned in the novel, came to be an important reference point for the ultramontanists. Napoleon III then gave his approval to the Italians to declare war against the Papal State—which would lead to a great defeat, for the Pope as well as for the Bourbon dynasty and its sympathizers. And later, when the Zouave forces of the Pope (mentioned in the novel, in the context of Valentin's death) finally, in 1870, were defeated in Rome by Italian forces, an event that took place before the novel was written, but after the time of its setting, it was the final nail in the coffin for the political territorial power ambitions of the Catholic Church.

In the middle of the 1870s, when Henry James frequently lived in Paris, he relatively often dedicated his American columns to the legitimists. Not infrequently, he defended the rights of the conservative Catholics to act within the framework of the republic. Or, as in the following case—to have the own university, which the temperamental republican left-wing politician Léon Gambetta (pp. 1838-1882) had opposed: “If I were a Frenchman I am inclined to think that I should feel more at my ease in a republic in which the Catholic party was allowed to carry on, in competition with the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, as successful and satisfactory a university as it could, than in a republic in which it was silenced and muzzled and forced to disseminate its instruction through private channels. It is hard, indeed, to imagine a Catholic university, with the full light of our current audacity of opinion beating down upon it, proving very dangerous.” (Note 17)

James may appear naïve in a text such as this one. At the same time, the ending of *The American* can be understood against the background of his wish, as a liberal, not to fall into the same way of acting and

the same type of political rhetoric as his ideological opponents.

According to James foreword to the heavily revised version of the novel, in the New York edition from 1907, the purpose of *The American* was to show Newman standing on a higher moral ground than the Bellegardes. The false pretence of the latter, to “represent the highest possible civilization and to be of an order in every way superior to his own”, would thus be made clear. This is shown by Newman at the end of the story, when he chooses to abstain from revenge, and in that manner reveals his magnanimity. (Note 18)

This corresponds to what James wrote to William Dean Howells regarding the conception of the novel: “My subject was: an American letting the insolent foreigner go, out of his good nature, after the insolent foreigner had wronged him and he had held him in his power.” (Note 19) About the United States, he wrote in the same spirit, a year after the publishing of the novel, in the essay “Americans Abroad”: “We are the only great people of the civilized world that is a pure democracy, and we are the only great people that is exclusively commercial.” (Note 20)

Regarding the morals, the norm systems, the conventions and the regulations in Claire’s family, Newman poses the question to Mrs Tristram about why Claire lets them “bully her[.] Is she not her own mistress?” In her answer, Mrs Tristram refers to the family as a clan:

“Legally, yes, I suppose; but morally, no. [— —] Her brother is the *chef de la famille*, as they say; he is the head of the clan. With those people the family is everything; you must act, not for your own pleasure, but for the advantage of the family.” (p. 120)

The very foundation of clan cultures can be extracted from statements like this. In the clan, the individual is subordinated to the collective. There, every singular member is obliged to maintain, respect, and, at the utmost, defend the honour of the clan—or in this case the “family”. The clan is not stronger than its weakest link. The status of the clan rests on the shoulders of every singular member. This makes the individual’s room for manoeuvre limited. What the clan offers in return for these limitations of individual liberty is community, context and safety. Mark S Weiner compares the clan to an insurance company that one is born into but cannot leave. (Note 21) Leaving the clan means that one does not have any legal, economical or medical safety net, but also that one is freed from the historical tie that constitutes one’s identity.

Every singular member can count on the clan as a whole standing up for him or her when he or she is in dire straits. But for such a system to work, unquestionable loyalty is demanded. The loyalty is strengthened by historical continuity. No one in the long row of ancestors wants to be the one to break the historical chain that goes back to the forefather of the clan, the founder. When Newman, at the opening of the novel, visits Claire in her home, Claire recounts her—for clan culture so typical—patrilinear descent: “I was born here, and my father was born here before me, and my grandfather, and my great-grandfathers.” (p. 125)

Her brother Valentin, for his part, had a strict upbringing because of the family’s fear that he might “bespatter the family shield” (p. 139). Newman asks Valentin (in respect, one could say, to negative

liberty): “what is to hinder your ranging??” (p. 140). Valentin answers by referring to the family’s demands of acting in accordance with the expectations of the family, as part of a collective: “Everything is to hinder me [– – –] I couldn’t go into business, I couldn’t make money, because I was a Bellegarde. I couldn’t go into politics, because I was a Bellegarde—the Bellegardes don’t recognize the Bonapartes.” (p. 140)

He can not even marry favourably: “It must be name for name, and fortune for fortune”—“The only thing I could do was to go and fight for the Pope.” (p. 140) And so Valentin did. He was wounded at Castelfidardo, in 1860. There, as mentioned above, the Italian nationalists, who struggled for a united Italy, fought against the troops of the Pope.

The latter are said to have assembled so many noblemen from Western France that a general on the opposing side compared the troops of the Pope to the invitation list for one of the balls of Louis XIV. It was naturally on that side—with the Bourbons and their sympathizers—that Valentin fought, against those who wanted to create a national state.

Valentin claims to be jealous of Newman: “What I envy you is your liberty, [. . .] your wide range, your freedom to come and go.” (p. 140) Newman is described as “the first man” that Valentin “ever envied. [– – –] you have got something that I should have liked to have. [– – –] It’s a sort of air you have of being thoroughly at home in the world” (p. 141).

When Valentin tries to specify why he is jealous of Newman, he refers to the latter’s freedom, not at least from prejudices: “you have fewer prejudices even than I, who pretend to have none, but who in reality have three or four. Happy man, you are strong and you are free.” (p. 146)

It is this lack of prejudice that makes Newman, to Claire, represent a possible way to freedom. After her first marriage, she had sworn to never again marry, but Newman on his part offers her “freedom”: “If you are afraid of losing your freedom, I can assure you that this freedom here, this life you now lead, is a dreary bondage to what I will offer you” (pp. 169-170). And Newman further clarifies the link between marriage (to him) and freedom: “you ought to be perfectly free, and marriage will make you so.” (pp. 171-172)

The wife of Claire’s brother, Urbain (the one who, together with the mother, is the most engaged in maintaining clan mentality), insists to Newman that her attitude is one completely different from that of Urbain. She refers to herself as “a ferocious democrat” (p. 215), while claiming to stem from a “much better” (p. 215) family than Bellegarde. None the less, she does not have time or desire “to sit at home and count over my ancestors on my fingers” (p. 296).

This younger marquise Bellegarde likewise points out that she, as opposed to her husband and mother in law, views people in her surroundings from a modern and meritocratic perspective: “I don’t care a pin for my pedigree; I want to belong to my time. I’m a revolutionist, a radical, a child of the age!” (p. 215) She views people as individuals, not parts of collectives: “I like clever people, wherever they come from, and I take my amusement wherever I find it.” (p. 215) She even claims to “prefer clever Bonapartes to stupid Bourbons” (p. 296)!

Her husband the marquis, on the other hand, detests the Empire (p. 215). He claims that Henri de Bourbon, the count of Chambord, (1820-1883), was the only lawful leader of France (pp. 227-228). Henri was king under the name Henri V, of France and Navarra, and ruled—as mentioned earlier—as a 10-year old, technically, for one week between August 2nd and August 9th, 1830. Before him, his uncle Louis Antoine, the son of Charles X, had reigned for 20 minutes.

Louis Antoine, under the name Louis XIX, came to be the pretender of the legitimists, after the short reign of Henri V, until his death in 1844. Louis was then (again) “succeeded” by Henri V, who was pretender until 1883, when he died as the last of the Bourbon dynasty of French royalty (which had commenced with Henri IV, pp. 1553-1610).

When the engagement ball for Claire and Newman takes place, it is noted that there are no uniforms present, since “Madame de Bellegarde’s door was inexorably closed against the myrmidons of the upstart power which then ruled the fortunes of France” (pp. 276-277). Urbain’s wife also recounts that she cannot go to the theatre with her husband, as he refuses to visit “Palais Royal because the ladies of the court go there so much” (p. 297).

Peter Brooks has discussed the use of melodramatic elements in *The American*. (Note 22) He bases his observations, in part, on James’s description of the “romantic” character of the novel in the preface to the 1907 edition. With the perspective of Brooks, however, one risks missing an important point of the novel: its examination of the prerequisites of freedom. From the perspective of a modern, Western individual, many of the prominent elements in clan society appear as exotic and fantastic—as, in other words, *melodramatic*. This has to do with the modern individual (on false grounds) viewing Western rule of law as more or less given by nature. As a consequence, its opposite, the clan, is falsely seen as a product of fantasy—as a melodramatic element.

An undoubtedly melodramatic element in *The American* is the duel of Valentin. However, when viewed in accordance with the conflict between, on one hand, the incursions of clan mentality upon the freedom of Claire and, on the other hand, Newman’s optimizing of liberty, the episode of Valentin’s death in a duel appears as a way for the author to elevate the fate of Claire above the individual level. What the episode shows is how clan mentality affects even a family dissident such as Valentin. Duelling because of violated honour is by Newman viewed as an anachronistic stupidity (pp. 296-297). Valentin, on the other hand, is a child of his time (or maybe rather of his family). About the duelling, he says: “It is our custom, and I think it is a good thing. Quite apart from the goodness of the cause in which a duel may be fought, it has a kind of picturesque charm which in this age of vile prose seems to me greatly to recommend it. It’s a remnant of a higher-tempered time; one ought to cling to it.” (p. 309) At the end of the novel, Newman visits a church. There, his hate disappears. He feels how the thought of revenge, that for a long time has occupied him, vanishes. It appears consequential. It is a logical outcome of the novel that Newman’s revenge has to be withheld. He realises he comes from a world where such things as shame and honour have no meaning:

Newman's last thought was that of course he would let the Bellegardes go. If he had spoken it aloud he would have said that he didn't want to hurt them. He was ashamed of having wanted to hurt them. They had hurt him, but such things were really not his game. At last he got up and came out of the darkening church[.] (p. 446) (Note 23)

Even if the church and the religious power in Europe during centuries had been forced to adapt to underlying structures of the clan, there is a fundamental opposition between, on one hand, the Christian focus on (individual) *sin* and *guilt*, and, on the other hand, the structuring of clan cultures around (collective) *honour* and *shame*.

From my perspective, Henry James's interest in the mentality of the clan appears as a sign of the intensity with which he, in his writing, approaches questions considering the nature and prerequisites of liberty and freedom. By inserting clan culture as an element of the plot, the differences between positive and negative liberty can be illuminated.

The lack of individual liberty that characterizes the clan is representative for the lack of negative liberty. The clan uses force in order to make the individual act in ways that primarily benefit the clan and the collective. The individual freedom of action is minimized as a consequence of the collective ambition to steer the individual, by force, in the direction most favourable for the clan, the collective.

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Notes

Note 1. All parenthetical citations refer to the 1877 edition of the novel, reprinted in Henry James, *The American*, ed & preface by William Spengelmann, London & New York: Penguin Classics, 1981. References (in notes) to The New York Edition refer to Henry James, *The American*, The Novels and Tales of Henry James, vol 2, New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1907.

Note 2. Henry James, *Letters*, vol 2. 1875-1883, ed Leon Edel, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 152.

Note 3. See Carolyn Porter, "Gender and Value in *The American*", *New Essays on The American*, ed Martha Banta, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p 106.

Note 4. See Enrico Botta, "The Wavering ruins of the American", *Henry James's Europe*. Heritage and Transfer, ed Dennis Tred et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 119-121.

Note 5. According to Carolyn Porter 1987, p 115, "a major social transformation from patriarchy to capitalism has taken place beneath the surface of Parisian society".

Note 6. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), *Four Essays on Liberty*, London & Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 118-172.

Note 7. See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. London 1869, p viii: “culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of get-ting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.”

James relation to Arnold is discussed in Greg W Zacharias, “James’s Morality in Roderick Hudson”, *The Henry James Review*, vol. 11, 1990, 2, pp. 116-117. William Veeder, “Image as Argument. Henry James and the Style of Criticism”, *The Henry James Review*, vol 6, 1985, 3, pp. 172-181. John Henry Raleigh, *Matthew Arnold and American Culture*, Berkeley CA & Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1957, pp. 17-46.

Note 8. John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson’s Tomb. The Politics of Classic American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 185-187. The same text is published as “*The Politics of Innocence in Henry James’s The American*”, *New Essays on The American*, ed Martha Banta, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 77.

John V Antush, “The ‘Much Finer Complexity’ of History in *The American*”. *Journal of American Studies*, 6(1).

The historical context is also mentioned in Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris*, Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2007, p. 12, and in Angus James Wrenn, *Henry James and the Second Empire*, *Studies in Comparative Literature*, vol 14, Oxford 2009, p. 16.

It is notable that Jeanne Delbaere Garant refers briefly to medieval clans in France: “The authority of the family is only an epitome of the authority of the Pope, and the caste system of the Bellegardes a continuation of the social tyranny of the Middle Ages. Catholicism and feudalism are closely linked together.” (Henry James: *The Vision of France*, Paris: Société des Belles Lettres, 1970, p. 274).

Note 9. See John Carlos Rowe 1987, p 78/ John Carlos Rowe 1997, p 187.

Note 10. See John Carlos Rowe 1987, p 90/ John Carlos Rowe 1997, p 197.

Note 11. John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1998, p 67. Cf the conclusion of Rowes interpretation: “The American may well be a subtle warning to James’s readers, as well as to James’s own literary ambitions, that the international destiny of the self-reliant American may have more in common with the imperial claimants of France (the Bellegardes), England (Lord Deepmere), and Italy (the ducal line of Bourbon-Parma, the pope) than we in our democratic enthusiasm are willing to admit.” (John Carlos Rowe 1987, p. 93).

Note 12. Mark S Weiner, *The Rule of the Clan: What an Ancient Form of Social Organization Reveals About the Future of Individual Freedom*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013. Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011, pp. 49-94.

Note 13. Mark S Weiner 2013, p 86.

Note 14. Ibid, pp. 3-5.

Note 15. Ibid, pp. 45-46.

Note 16. See John Carlos Rowe 1987, p. 79.

Note 17. Henry James, *Parisian Sketches: Letters to the New York Tribune 1875-1876*, ed Leon Edel & Ilse Duso Lind, New York: New York University Press, 1957, p 76. Cf John Carlos Rowe 1987, p. 83.

Note 18. The New York Edition, p. vi.

Note 19. Henry James, *Letters*, vol 2, p. 70.

Note 20. Henry James, *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed Richard Howard, New York: Library of America, 1993, p. 787.

Note 21. Mark S Weiner 2013, p. 100.

Note 22. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* [1976], New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 153-196.

See also Peter Brooks, "The Turn of The American", *New Essays on The American*, ed Martha Banta, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 44, where The American is described as som "a novel that began in urbanity and the play of worldly wit, with our introduction to Newman seated on a divan in the salon carre of the Louvre, making his first discovery of the aesthetic, seems to have veered into the gothic".

Note 23. See The New York Edition, p. 534, where "He was ashamed of having wanted to hurt them" is followed by: "He quite failed, of a sudden, to recognise the fact of his having cultivated any such link with them. It was a link for themselves perhaps, their having so hurt him, but that side of it was now not his affair."

Differences between the two editions are discussed by Naomi E Silver, in "Between Communion and Renunciation. Revising The American", *The Henry James Review*, vol 22, 2001, 3, pp. 291-292 and Max F Schulz, "The Bellegardes 'Feud with Christopher Newman. A Study of Henry James's Revision of The American", *American Literature*, vol. 27, 1955, 1, pp. 43-45.