Liberty, State, & Union

The Political Theory of Thomas Jefferson

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Thomas Jefferson
Icon of a Vanished Republic

Freedom in all just pursuits.[1]

It is uncommon for the man of action to be a philosopher. A political thinker is not usually a statesman nor is the political leader an original thinker. Thomas Jefferson is an exception to this rule, one of those rare individuals who could legitimately go down in history as both a thinker and a politician. Also, judging from the wealth of literature dedicated to him over the years, there are surely hardly more than a dozen or so great historical figures about whom more has been written than Jefferson. He was a politician and political thinker as well as a noteworthy scientist, naturalist, botanist, architect, and cultural organizer. In short, Thomas Jefferson seems to challenge the common perception that if talents, virtue, and the blessings of Providence are embodied within one and the same person, such a man can be successful in one field only.

Jefferson is a truly unique case in the history of political thought. Author of just one booklength work, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (written in 1781, published in 1785 in French, and two years later in English),[2] and of hundreds of documents of a straightforward political character—that is to say, submitted for the consideration of some representative assembly—Jefferson poured out the vast body of his political opinions in thousands of letters, often veritable essays, written during more than sixty years of his life (his earliest extant letter was written in 1762 and the last dates from 1826). Jefferson's correspondence was overwhelmingly prompted, as is typical of the American tradition, by contingent problems. If the history of political thought is to be understood as the attempt to uncover both the tangible evidence of ideas and that which remains below the surface—the living testimony of an author or a tradition as well as the voice of bygone times—then Jefferson is a particularly stimulating subject from the methodological point of view. His books, published essays, official

documents, dispatches, legal/political opinions, and private letters all stand as statements of his thought and constitute equally authoritative sources. While for many great thinkers there is a body of work meant for publication that represents the core of their contribution, and a lesser, though at times relevant, private production, in the case of Jefferson, an equal dignity must be conferred by the interpreter to the vast sum of his writings.

The use of Jeffersonian writings in the general reconstruction of his thinking, however, can be fruitful only after a clear examination of the historical and temporal contexts surrounding the statements. Moreover, as Michael P. Zuckert has repeatedly pointed out, it must be borne in mind that the author of the Declaration abhorred unnecessary disagreements and was a kind, sociable person, both as a result of his upbringing and his natural bent. So, vigilant attention must also be paid to the recipient of the letter. To quote just one example, it is true that he stated that the *Federalist* (1788) is "the best commentary on the principles of government which ever was written."[3] However, the person to whom he made this remark was his friend and protégé James Madison, one of the writers of the essays and, therefore, this may not be regarded as his definitive opinion on the work of *Publius*.

In any event, as will be shown in this work, many of these letters had a lasting impact, and the statements contained in them make up the heart of Jeffersonianism. Dozens of these had undoubtedly an effect and a circulation comparable to that of a political pamphlet. His correspondence thus forms an extremely unusual collection of letters, not just a hermeneutic supporting material. A careful reading of his letters clarifies what Jefferson actually thought about large and small matters, and also serves to provide some insight, well in advance of its general recognition, into the formation of a political consensus within a very influential circle in the American politics of the time.

Notwithstanding the wealth of studies dedicated to him, or rather because of it, Jefferson's exact place in the history of political thought is still the subject of fierce controversy today. The famous cry, "Those of you who are for and against Robespierre, please tell us who Robespierre was!" is quite suitable for almost all historical research on great, widely discussed figures. But in the case of the third president, it would have to be reformulated more or less as follows: "Jeffersonians, decide what Thomas

Jefferson really thought." For the passions and controversies that the figure of the great Virginian still stirs up today focus primarily on the intellectual influences and the correct understanding of his thinking rather than on his standing in history. That he was a major figure of towering importance can never be called into doubt.

Author of the Declaration of Independence, minister to France, a prominent figure in the first American administration, undisputed leader of the opposition to the Federalists in the 1790s, president of the United States from 1801 to 1809, the critical conscience of the country until his death on 4 July 1826, Thomas Jefferson is the most widely studied, fascinating, and genuinely representative Founding Father of an entire era. Almost uniquely among America's great statesmen, Jefferson epitomizes this role both with regard to his contemporaries and his descendants.

Jefferson's contemporaries charged him with the drafting of the Declaration, a task he would never have been entrusted with had they not held him, then aged thirty-three, to be an excellent representative of the entire revolutionary generation. The very words of his friend and political rival, John Adams, pronounced on his deathbed on the 4 July 1826—"Thomas Jefferson survives," to be understood as "The spirit of the Revolution is not yet dead"—confirm the complete identification of the Virginian politician with the American Revolution; indeed, of Jefferson with America itself. It is difficult to find a comparable interplay of such strong, intertwined references between an historical figure and a country. Jefferson is the First Virginian and the First American—he himself invented the term "Americanism." Like many American intellectuals after him, he spent years in Paris, had an extremely cosmopolitan outlook, and felt part of that "Republic of letters" that united all learned men in the eighteenth century. Yet whenever he said "my country," he was always referring only to Virginia. He spent the whole of his life thinking about America and its infinite opportunities and remained convinced that what had been created great and free could not degenerate to become a second Europe.

The specific problem surrounding Jefferson is that of a historical figure transformed into an icon, of a man who wrote just one book and of whom hundreds of books have been written. It was James Parton, one of his first biographers of note, who recapped it in a nutshell: "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right."[4]

Perhaps the responsibility of evoking the entire "meaning" of a country, and of the country which has the greatest influence on contemporary mankind, is too much of a burden for Jefferson's legacy. The image of Jefferson studied so brilliantly by Merrill Peterson almost fifty years ago continues to be "a sensitive reflector, through several generations, of America's troubled search for the image of itself."[5]

In addition, Jefferson is better remembered than any other historical figure by Americans, even for what he did not do. According to a survey in the early 1990s, 30 percent of respondents indicated Jefferson as one of the Fathers of the Constitution.[6] While this is undoubtedly forgivable and only goes to show the extent to which the third president is the Founding Father best known to Americans today, it should be noted that one of the greatest European historians of the past century, Fernand Braudel, made this very same error.[7] The mistake is perhaps additional evidence of the complete lack of European regard toward American history, the latter having for far too long been thought of as a mere appendix to European history.

Many scholars regard Jefferson as the quintessence of contradictions and enigmas. The title of a book dedicated to the great Virginian's ideas, *American Sphinx,*[8] aptly sums up Joseph Ellis's anguish. In Merrill Peterson's opinion, Jefferson, like every great protagonist, "was a baffling series of contradictions: philosopher and politician, aristocrat and democrat, cosmopolitan and American. He authored the nation's birthright, but he also wrote the Kentucky Resolutions of 'nullification.'"[9] These supposed contradictions only show, in the case of Ellis, that the latter failed to divest himself of the mindset of a twentieth-century American liberal intellectual. In the case of Peterson, the contradictions stand out by choosing subsequent American history and the Jeffersonian image as the preferred viewpoint. From the vantage point of Monticello, on the other hand, the view is more linear than later historians would have one believe. Perhaps, if anything, it is American history that blatantly contradicts its own beginnings. In his time, Jefferson was no sphinx; it is the unbridgeable gap between the early republic and our age that makes him seem so.

The figure and thought of Thomas Jefferson is called upon to vindicate the most diverse and improbable constitutional arrangements. Students are constantly at work discovering the "striking similarity" between Jefferson and almost any other figure of national import, no matter how distant in time and space. As one of the most sophisticated and unique human

products of the Enlightenment on either side of the Atlantic, Jefferson seems to find soul mates in unlikely eras and places. For instance, we learn that there is a "striking similarity of ideas" between Thomas Jefferson and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Founding Father of Pakistan.[10] If this were not enough, according to Garrett W. Sheldon, the Founding Father of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, is a *Geist* buddy of the author of the Declaration. Though the two leaders might seem quite distant in every respect, a closer look reveals "striking similarities in background, interests, and ideals."[11] Sheldon points to a specific similarity that most students of Jefferson would find quite unconvincing: "Jefferson and Atatürk...saw the integral place of economics to democratic society and the need for a mix of private enterprise and government regulation of business."[12]

The remarkable influence of the great Virginian was felt in an even more exotic setting. Yasushi Akashi, a Japanese United Nations official, reminisces on his early days and how he first became interested in Jefferson. "As a student brought up in postwar Japan, which was under the American occupation after its defeat in WWII, I was keenly interested in exploring Jefferson's ideas, which often seemed to lie behind reform policies carried out by the Occupation authorities."[13] Apparently, Jefferson is not only the numinous presence behind any great American leader from Lincoln to FDR, LBJ, and beyond, he is also the inspiration of none other than Douglas MacArthur, war general and peacetime dictator.

With regard to the use and misuse of the Jeffersonian heritage in a specifically American setting, we may observe that Thomas Jefferson belongs to everyone: historians, scholars, laymen, and politicians. Politicians who seek to put an elegant final flourish on their speeches can avail themselves of an endless number of useful phrases from the Sage of Monticello, as he is continually present in American political discourse. Joyce Appleby's remark is profoundly true: "The words *Washingtonian*, *Jacksonian*, *Wilsonian* direct us to a past political regime. Only *Jeffersonian* circulates in contemporary conversations."[14] In fact, "Jeffersonianism" has always been political legal tender in the United States—until one realizes that it is "as fake as a two-dollar bill,"[15] since everyone, especially politicians and academics, construct a Jefferson in his or her own image and likeness.

While the continuous revisiting of this figure can be interpreted benignly as a tribute to his stature, Jefferson's being considered in tune with the temper of this country more than 260 years after his birth makes the task

of the historian of political ideas difficult beyond measure. Truly, Jefferson's spirit has never really died; it has migrated to the universities, to academic circles, among intellectuals, politicians, and mere political buffs. "What would Jefferson say?" is a question so recurrent in America that a scholar came up with the idea of a short book by the same title that analyzes the opinions Jefferson presumably would have held on contemporary political issues.[16] Needless to say, many scholars who have devoted years of study to the third president would not at all agree about "what Jefferson would have said," neither with the author of this particular essay, nor with one another.

The fact remains that Thomas Jefferson has been quoted in support of a whole host of different opinions and on the most disparate of matters. During Roosevelt's New Deal—the period in which federal government policy underwent the most radical transformation in American history, ditching for good a laissez-faire economic policy in favor of massive interventionism, affecting social groups in all walks of life—two books on Jefferson were published that upheld diametrically opposed arguments. In the first, *The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy* (1935), Charles M. Wiltse maintained that the New Deal was in perfect tune with the social and political ideas of the most eminent Founding Father and that Roosevelt's political approach was basically Jeffersonian. By contrast, in the second work, *The Living Jefferson*, published the same year, James Truslow Adams portrayed Roosevelt's political experience as an abrupt departure from Jefferson's fundamental political policies and as a step toward a federal tyranny similar to that called for by Alexander Hamilton.[17] According to Adams, "The struggle going on almost everywhere today...is the struggle between the conception of a strong, centralized state, controlling the lives of the citizens for the sake of economics and national power, and the conception of personal liberty affording the greatest possible scope for the individual to live his life as he wills."[18]

Despite this, Samuel Pettengill, a somewhat nonconformist Democrat and the author of *Jefferson, the Forgotten Man*,[19] argued that the first New Deal stood for the true Jeffersonian heritage, as opposed to the authoritarian shift of the second. This work starts with the admission: "I was a New Dealer in 1932 when the New Deal was Jeffersonian. But as it has moved away from the principles of Jefferson to the principles of a centralized government, which would concentrate power at Washington far beyond the dreams of Alexander Hamilton, honest doubts have arisen as to the

wisdom of the present trend."[20] In the preface, the congressman was carried away by his passionate analysis: "The most serious of all questions facing America and the masses of mankind everywhere is whether *Jefferson still lives.*"[21]

During the New Deal, Jefferson was thus understood in three distinct ways and was presented as the forerunner of the entire political landscape that was created following Roosevelt's "realignment." Wiltse contends that Jefferson would have been unconditionally in favor of the program of government intervention in the free economy, while according to James Adams, the Virginian would have unreservedly opposed the centralization of power in the hands of the federal government, and, finally, the figure presented by Pettengill is conceived as surely favoring the first steps but not the later developments of the system created by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find any mention of Jefferson to validate the embrace of the "second" New Deal by any former Republican opponent, a reading that, admittedly quite bizarre, would indeed close the political interpretation circle of the 1930s.

Yet in the biased simplifications by the politicians of the time, the New Deal represented the squaring of the circle, a modern way of rendering Jefferson and Hamilton, or liberty and coercion, compatible. Employing Hamiltonian means to obtain Jeffersonian goals "became the formula that was at once capable of dramatizing traditional democratic principles while at the same time strengthening the hand of the national government."[22]

The paradox is that of a clear political thinker who produced a contentious heritage (wrongly held to be ambiguous for the very fact of being contentious). This is, however, a constant of American politics and must not be judged merely as a deviation of the 1930s. As Senator George Hoar stated at the beginning of the last century, "Every party in this country to-day reckons Jefferson as its patron saint.... Every political sect finds its political doctrine in Jefferson, almost as every religious sect finds its doctrine in the Savior of mankind."[23]

The readings of Jefferson in the light of contemporary concerns crop up in all critical periods of recent American history. In the 1960s and 1970s, a fierce argument broke out on the subject of Jefferson and slavery, his vision of civil rights and political freedom. The same character described by some as the noble father of the movement for racial desegregation was, in

the opinion of others, an advocate of slavery imbued with male chauvinism who, loath to forgo marital pleasures, caused his beloved wife to die in childbirth.

Leonard Levy's work of 1963 opens the period of criticism linked to the figure and the myth that cloaked him. According to Levy, there was really very little that was "libertarian" about Jefferson, who, on the contrary, was a fanatic, zealous, unscrupulous doctrinaire ready to accept dictatorship in order to save his idea of America. In particular, Levy argues, Jefferson had only scant respect for "civil liberties," above all, those of his military and political opponents.[24] As far as slavery is concerned, it was the "definitive" work by John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, that provided the basis for a condemnation of the inconsistencies between the flag-bearer of American freedom and the great slave owner.[25] Miller's essay was so enormously successful that it became the main source—as can readily be noted by any person who visits the splendid abode—of all Monticello's tour guides.

In 1974, the ingenious psychobiographical work by Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, provided a breakthrough in studies on Jefferson that can only be fully appreciated today.[26] While presenting no definite proof—in fact, it would be more appropriate to speak of a heap of contrived conclusions based on weak evidence—the author touched a sensitive nerve by shifting the discussion to the Hemings affair, namely, the often-rumored but never conclusively proved affair between Jefferson and his young black slave Sally Hemings.[27] The sound part of Brodie's work, which for the rest conjures up a veritable love story between the president and the slave (possible but not verifiable), is based on a memoir published in 1873 by James Madison Hemings, who maintained he was one of the children of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.

In the 1990s, the issue became emblematic of the still uneasy relations between blacks and whites in America. Annette Gordon-Reed's work, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*,[28] strongly criticizes white, conservative historiography—with a particularly harsh assessment of Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson, two of the greatest Jefferson scholars (white, males, and Southerners from Mississippi and Virginia, respectively)—for having denied the affair to the last and for having summarily dismissed the entire matter with words that were, to say the least, ill considered. Peterson, in particular, had gone so far as to declare

that the "exaggeration" was the result of "the Negroes' pathetic wish for a little pride and their subtle ways of confounding the white folks."[29] A rather careless statement, as well as an inconsiderate one.

The current American obsession with relationships between genders and races helps explain precisely why Jefferson's relationship with Sally, a half-caste slave and half sister to his deceased wife, has come to represent the focus of the new Jeffersonian free-for-all. The spotlight trained on the Virginian's figure today seem to focus on the dispute among historians who believe it is of prime importance, for a better understanding of Jefferson, to endorse the ever-growing rumors about his relationship with the young slave girl (Sally was no more than fifteen when her relationship started with the then Ambassador to Paris) and about the various children he fathered.[30] If the spokesman of American freedom had, in fact, fathered children with a slave woman and kept them in slavery, then the ultimate hypocrisy of the way America was founded, and of a history told only through Dead White Males, as has always been claimed in radical circles, would be exposed once and for all. In 1998, the prestigious periodical *Nature*, on the basis of a DNA test, published a sensational finding: The slave woman's children were of pure presidential descent. The tests conducted on the offspring of Sally's son leave little room for doubt: Jefferson (or someone with a compatible genetic makeup) was the man's father.[31] But the clue to the mystery was already available by 1968 in a book by Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black*.[32] Jefferson was invariably at home nine months before the birth of each of Sally's children. The chance that this was just a coincidence appears to be quite slim. Thus, according to the official version of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, the evidence offered by DNA results and Jefferson's place of residence at the times when Sally's children were conceived speak clearly: "Although paternity cannot be established with absolute certainty, our evaluation of the best evidence available suggests the strong likelihood that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a relationship over time that led to the birth of one, and perhaps all, of the known children of Sally Hemings."[33]

Conceivably, the father could have been Jefferson's brother, whose life is in the main obscure. Of course, whenever Jefferson returned to Monticello, his house was full of visitors, some of whom were his brother's children, who also had the same genetic heritage.[34]

Although the soap opera that has enthralled the entire nation seems to have reached its final installment, many important scholars are not at all convinced about the authenticity of the accusations and have made their misgivings public. In fact, John Works, a Jefferson descendant in radical disagreement with the Foundation's report, has established a "Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society," charging a board of well-known scholars (including Lance Banning, Robert Ferrel, Harvey C. Mansfield, William R. Kenan, Jr., and Paul Rahe—the latter dissenting) with the task of looking anew at the whole matter. In spring 2001, the results were published without much fuss, since the conclusion was that the charges weren't proved and that they were in all likelihood a hoax.

Although not at all interested on the subject per se, I have dwelt on this matter at some length because it seems to plainly illustrate a critical point: Jefferson, who has already been enlisted by the progressive establishment as the unlikely champion of government intervention in the free economy, appears even more unlikely as the paragon of American virtues in the politically correct climate of our times. The few who try to remember the third president's basic personal details and insist on him being placed in history as a man of the Enlightenment, appear swamped by the chorus of those who want him to be a timeless figure, a contemporary of everyone and everybody. There are no issues concerning American public life, from government intervention in the free economy to race relations, civil rights, even sexual relationships, which—for the sole fact that he is at the center of the debate—do not lead to a painstaking reinterpretation of Jefferson.

Much more critical to my discussion of Jefferson is his alleged protosocialist outlook on the rights to property. The current interpretation of the third president as an opponent of property rights can be dated back to Vernon Parrington, who wrote the classic account of American thought for the generation who came of age between the two world wars, and it is as unfounded as it is entrenched.[35] Parrington reiterated the typical historiographical formula of the "Progressive Era," namely, the opposition between human rights (stated in the Declaration) and "property rights" (upheld by the Constitution). Jefferson, so the argument goes, was the champion of the former, while the framers, and above all, Madison, are depicted as being obsessed by the protection of property. In fact, the author of *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927–1930) was merely echoing

ideas already expressed by Abraham Lincoln—blending them with the theories of the Progressive school—when he declared his party to be the true heir of Jeffersonianism and, in the case of a conflict between "the man and the dollar," to put "the man before the dollar."[36] This epic as well as phantasmagoric struggle between man and dollar was subsequently taken up repeatedly by Parrington, who sought to transform Jefferson into one of the great champions of a titanic, and, needless to say, totally far-fetched battle between man and the dollar.

The view of a nonindividualistic, antiproperty Jefferson, with possible communitarian if not even protosocialist undertones, was to prove fairly impervious to change and has also influenced foreign works on Jefferson in various ways.[37] There are even some who have presented the third president as a forerunner of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels,[38] while others have preferred to read his ideas in the light of Gramscian concepts, in the wake of a fashion that was popular some years ago in American universities.[39] A Soviet scholar even bestowed on the author of the Declaration the distinction of being the herald of the American proletariat and a figurehead of the "enlightened bourgeois," accusing his followers of having utterly misinterpreted his message.[40] An actual ideological "marriage of Jefferson and Marx"[41] was allegedly the one celebrated by a group of Oklahoma Socialists in the beginning of the past century. According to Jim Blissett, they "conceptualized their response to capitalism in the United States in a way that rendered Marx's ideas more congruent with the particular experience of American workers.... In the resulting symbiosis, both traditions were legitimized to create an ideological system that was peculiarly American symbolically joining...Karl Marx and Thomas Jefferson."[42]

The works that form part of this "revisionist" interpretation, spanning the whole range from pale pink to bright red, have very few textual footholds to rest on for support, as I hope to show in this work. Still, they have been taken seriously by a large part of the academic world and contribute significantly to shaping the "scholars' Jefferson," who is by now far removed from the popular opinion that still rates him as a champion of limited government, of natural rights, and antagonism of the states toward interference by federal powers.

Parrington's fault, however, lies not only in the (almost) indestructible antiproperty paradigm built up around Jefferson, but also in the fact that, by