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On Jeffersonian Tradition

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IX

## On Jeffersonian Tradition

By Francis G. Wilson

### I

IT IS NOW two hundred years since the birth of Thomas Jefferson. His name has become one of the major symbols in the tradition we call American. The personality of the man shows vigorously in his letters, in the results of his policies as a leader and in the restored Monticello which he loved more than any other spot on the face of the earth. We study his personality because of his interest in science, his appreciation of invention, but surely not because of his metaphysics. We admire him because of his belief in progress, but not because he avowed himself a materialist. We remember him because he could see in outline the drama of a growing United States, but not because of his perverse judgments on New England leaders. Those who love America as it is, can see the results of his policy in our imperial domain and in the establishment of political traditions that still seem valid for contemporary life. To those who dream of a society that yet is not, Jefferson stands as a symbol of the new world, the progenitor of benevolent reforms that may yet make men happy. Both the realist and the utopian can find in the complexities of Jefferson's personality much that gives them encouragement and emotional support. We see Jefferson's work in the living America, both that which is and that which many believe ought to be.

Can we not say that from the beginning one of the strong currents in our tradition has been a belief in change, in progress, in the ennobling effects of freedom? Call it civilization or progress as one will, but conservatives as well as philosophical revolutionaries have adhered to this governing idea. Today, as we acknowledge the distress of Western tradition, men of all political creeds fear that the poison of social retrogression will master the erstwhile healthy body. There is concern that the traditional framework in which our political conflicts have been waged will be destroyed. In the twentieth century we face

a fundamental reevaluation of the tradition of the last century and a half, the tradition of democratic progress. The passions of war indicate that all is not well with these traditions. In such a time we can return for insight to a man like Thomas Jefferson.

In this return to Monticello two hundred years after the birth of its master, we would like to affirm the continuity of fundamental principles. We would forget the dead and keep the living; or, we would continue to put the force of life into fundamental ideas that express the continuity of national beliefs. Those thinkers who are far in the past are more easily judged than those only as remote as Jefferson. We are more certain in picking the fundamentals of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine or Aquinas than of Jefferson. For the older minds, the living, the lasting and the fundamental stand out through the centuries; but for Jefferson we must, by analogical argument do the same. We must evade the dramatic incidents of tyranny, technology and war in order to see what must be remembered from the mind of Thomas Jefferson.<sup>1</sup>

The very amplitude, diversity and contradiction of Jefferson's mind enables perceptive thinkers to see the permanence in his thought. Contradictions and changing judgments suggest that we can overlook perversities in thinking, shallow metaphysics and ignoble personal animosities, while we yet retain much that is worth our consideration today. The Jefferson we seek must be beyond the acerbities of political and theoretical conflict; but we might center, if we would, on the old man, harassed by debt, who could reach a reconciliation with John Adams in order to discuss philosophy in long letters written in the twilight of life. Or, we might seek the younger Jefferson who was busy discovering the common law, the history of primitive peoples in Europe, the principles of natural law, and the new ideas feeding the discontent of Frenchmen.

It is the fate of great men to be claimed by lesser minds as their authority. Jefferson changed much during his long life, until the day when he and John Adams died on July 4, 1826, and his time-con-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Emil Lederer, "Technology," in *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, XIV, 553-559.

ditioned contradictions enable living reformers to claim for themselves the generosity of his mind. Yet principles need to be separated from their application. If we would praise Jefferson, the reformer, we must see his reforms in their own setting and praise them if we will. But we must recognize that Jefferson was a hard-headed political leader who knew only too well the paths of compromise as well as of irreconcilable opposition. Today some would say that, conditions being changed, Jefferson would support their ideas; but inevitably such a procedure means the selection of certain of his ideas for immediate consideration, while forgetting other principles and applications that can in no wise be accepted.

In the largest sense, it would seem that Jefferson, in succession to Benjamin Franklin, was the most important representative of the Enlightenment in America. Not only did he help bring the *Aufklärung* to the United States, but he also inspired Frenchmen to be faithful to their ideas, until finally at the end Auguste Comte wrote to Jefferson in 1824 paying homage and sending some of his work.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps in flattery, perhaps not, Comte declared that Jefferson would be the most competent judge of his ideas. True it is that Jefferson's enemies regarded him at times as wholly Gallicized. But one must not forget that Jefferson was never merely one thing or another. He was a Virginian, an American, as well as a perceptive cosmopolitan. His long opposition to British institutions had in part, no doubt, the effect of throwing him into the current of French criticism during his work in Paris, and he saw the French Revolution hopefully even while he condemned Robespierre and later Napoleon.

Let us say, then, that to judge Jefferson intellectually is to judge the Enlightenment, because many basic assumptions he made about the world are generally in accordance with phases of French thought. This statement does not imply that all Frenchmen were accepted equally, for Jefferson came, with other Frenchmen, to dislike Montesquieu; Voltaire was only a source-book for facts to him, and Rousseau seems not to have troubled his mind. When we inquire into what is living and dead in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, we inquire also

<sup>2</sup> See Gilbert Chinard, *Jefferson et les Ideologues* (1925), pp. 285-287.

what is living and what is dead of the French liberal tradition from before the Revolution on into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But this is the intellectual Jefferson, not the Jefferson who was the founder of a political party and who fought his way through partisan conflict to become President of the United States. We can say that the Enlightenment did not predict the kind of society in which we live, and that there is much in the principles of the Enlightenment that we would do well to forget.<sup>3</sup>

French philosophy in the eighteenth century, as G. H. Sabine says, grew in the main from that of John Locke, "but it developed important differences which need especially to be noted." The historical and conservative qualities of the English Revolution were not supported in France, for in that country reason became the primary opponent of custom.<sup>4</sup> As Jefferson was influenced by the Lockean atmosphere, it was logical, therefore, that he should fit in with French ideas. And for Jefferson the principles of reason and science for the most part displaced the historicism characteristic of English thought. But French thought demonstrated a progressive disintegration of natural law ideas to which Jefferson was committed. Thus there was a basic uncertainty in Jefferson's position, for on the one hand he took the English tradition of natural law and rights and on the other hand he moved with those who, starting with Locke, were moving steadily away from the English system of thought. Jefferson, with his French colleagues, saw that there is such a thing as despotism and that its alternative is political freedom. He undertook, with reason, to show the conditions that led to despotism in England, in France and in America. He sought a basis for rational freedom, and he found it in an agrarian and decentralized society. Yet Jefferson's lesson to his fellow-countrymen may be one that we must learn again; like him we may return to the common man in order to escape the centralized and total state in the twentieth century. In America, at least, we can say that the tradition of the Enlightenment resulted in a belief in agrarian democracy, while in France that same

<sup>3</sup> See Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The American Spirit* (1942), for emphasis on Condorcet in the rise of the ideas of progress and civilization characteristic of the Enlightenment. See also Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (1941).

<sup>4</sup> G. H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (1937), pp. 545-547. Cf. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932).

liberal tradition tended to make its adjustment to the centralization of the state. A tradition in both symbol and substance, but while the symbols were in measure the same in France and America, the substance was vastly different.

## II.

If we would investigate the Jefferson of the Enlightenment, we must examine the intellectual company he kept. In evaluating these men, we judge Jefferson himself. It must be noted that today many of the same conflicts of judgment prevail as in the time of Jefferson. His mind was a wide-ranging mixture of ideas, which, had he been a systematic thinker, might have been brought to some order. His positive and extreme, often ill-fated, estimates of thinkers might have been softened, but then the illuminative qualities of his personality would have been, perhaps, too shaded for the appreciation of later generations.

The dogmatic qualities of his intellectual judgment Jefferson illustrates by recording that once at dinner he asserted to Hamilton that the three greatest men were Bacon, Newton and Locke. During the evening Hamilton had discussed with Adams the English Constitution, the former asserting that this constitution was the most perfect model of government while Adams agreed that it was almost perfect. Such ideas Jefferson condemned as monarchist (would we say "fascist" today?).<sup>5</sup> But it was monarchy in general that Jefferson condemned, for he praised Samuel Adams in 1800 for having demonstrated to Americans that it was "monarchy, and not merely British monarchy" that our Revolution had rejected.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Jefferson objected to the study of Plato and Aristotle arose perhaps from his theories of education, since he contended that those who control education have an interest in the reputation and dreams of Plato, and Aristotle's ideas had been outmoded by more recent developments.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, collected and edited by P. L. Ford (10 vols., 1892-1899), IX, 295-296.

<sup>6</sup> Ford ed., VII, 425.

<sup>7</sup> Ford ed., IX, 462-463. The introduction of representative government had rendered Aristotle useless, he thought in 1816. Jefferson was unaware, it seems, of Aristotle's philosophical views. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. by H. A. Washington (9 vols., 1853-1854), VII, 32.

Jefferson's intellectual progress has been subjected to careful study. Apparently about the year 1769 he turned from the law to the study of government, in which John Locke, Montesquieu, Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, and other works occupied the center of his attention. There are, for example, twenty-seven excerpts in *The commonplace Book* from Montesquieu. About 1770 Jefferson had probably outlined in his own mind the series of reforms in Virginia which were to help make him famous. In criminal reform he leaned on Beccaria whose work, *Dei Delitti e delle Pene*, was published in 1764. Though he was nominally a member of the Anglican Church, he fought the recognized legal status of that establishment. This was not inconsistent in his mind with attending Sunday services in Washington and loving to sing old Psalm tunes.<sup>8</sup>

When Jefferson went to Paris, Benjamin Franklin put him in touch with his philosophical associates, and Jefferson accepted enthusiastically the new friendships offered him. He came in contact with Turgot, DuPont de Nemours, Abbé Morellet, Condorcet, and he continued his association with Lafayette. It was at this time, according to Chénard, that Jefferson must have turned against Montesquieu because of his praise of monarchy and especially the monarchy of Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> Voltaire's writings were used by Jefferson to some extent, though mainly as a source of information. These contacts with French ideas in critical economics and politics had a lasting influence on Jefferson, and years later when he had retired from the presidency he sought to spread French liberalism in America, mainly through the ideologists who had continued the critical tradition in France. The election of Jefferson to the presidency was itself hailed by a small group of French devotees as a confirmation of their own ideas. Thus we may say that Jefferson helped to vitalize the opposition in France after the rise of Napoleon. In 1802, for example, he was elected to L'Institut National des Sciences et des Arts. He was thrown in contact in epistolary fashion with Volney, Cabanis, Saint-Jean Crèvecoeur, Garat, DuPont de Nemours, and Destutt de Tracy. In 1803,

<sup>8</sup> See Marie Kimball, "Jefferson's Four Freedoms," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XIX (1943), 204 ff.

<sup>9</sup> See Chénard, *op. cit.*, p. 5, *passim*.



J-B. Say sent Jefferson a copy of his *Traité d'économie politique*, and he received this volume at the time he was reading with approval the work of Malthus, though he believed that conditions in America made Malthus' ideas inapplicable.<sup>10</sup>

It was, however, Destutt de Tracy who maintained personal contact with Jefferson to the end. The Comte de Tracy seemed to impress himself on Jefferson as a great philosopher, and this ill-fated enthusiasm led Jefferson to become a propagandist for Tracy's ideas in America. He labored to get translations published, and in his letters to Adams he urged upon the sage of Quincy the wisdom of studying Dupuis and Tracy. In 1810, he undertook to get Tracy's *Commentaire sur Montesquieu* published, a labor which finally was successful but one which was animated by a passion to deflate the monarchism and Anglophilism of the author of *L'Esprit des lois*. Nor was this the end, for in 1818 he succeeded in bringing about the publication of the *Traité d'économie politique* by the same author.<sup>11</sup> During his last years, Jefferson maintained his relations only with Tracy and Lafayette in France. In the Adams correspondence we find Jefferson urging upon him Tracy's *Commentary* and also the analysis of Dupuis made by Tracy. The latter work suggests that while both Adams and Jefferson were rather vague in their religious conceptions, they shared the prejudices and misunderstandings of the age in relation to the Catholic Faith.<sup>12</sup>

While we have today sympathy for many of the ideas expressed by Jefferson, it is also clear that on repeated occasions the judgments he made about the writers of his time are marred by his political passion. Some of the writers he condemned have survived better than those he considered to be among the great philosophers of the age. Indeed, Jefferson's philosophic judgments savor often of the amateur rather than of the careful student. We would confirm Jefferson today in his dislike of the tyrants of his age, such as Robespierre and Napoleon, as he wrote to Madame de Staël in 1813.<sup>13</sup> But when he declared

<sup>10</sup> Washington ed., IV, 526-527.

<sup>11</sup> Chénard, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 ff., 181.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 250 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Washington ed., VI, 114.

next year that Blackstone and Hume had made Tories of all England, and that they had done more than Napoleon to destroy the liberties of man we are reminded of Jefferson's place in the American political battle.<sup>14</sup> Only the "rotteness of his mind" could explain in 1791 Burke's attitude on the French Revolution.<sup>15</sup> The attempted introduction of Christianity into the common law, he thought in 1824, was nothing less than a conspiracy hatched between Church and State.<sup>16</sup> In 1807, he urged the reading of Locke, Sidney, Priestley, Chipman, *The Federalist*, Beccaria, Adam Smith, and J-B. Say.<sup>17</sup> The Abbé Sieyès, he thought at one time, to be the logical head of the French nation, since his pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état* had electrified that country as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* had stirred the United States.<sup>18</sup> Yet Jefferson, as we have suggested, had his strong prejudices concerning the ancients. He confessed that he loved the reading of ancient history and the classics,<sup>19</sup> but he particularly liked Epicurus. The doctrine of Epicurus, he stated in 1816, "notwithstanding the calumnies of the Stoics and caricatures of Cicero, is the most rational system remaining of the philosophy of the ancients, as frugal of vicious indulgence, and fruitful of virtue as the hyperbolical extravagances of his rival sects."<sup>20</sup>

The discovery of the manuscript of Jefferson's *Commonplace Book* has thrown certain important slants on his early intellectual development.<sup>21</sup> Here we find that Lord Kames' *Historical Law Tracts*, first published in 1758, might have provided, as well as Locke, the natural law background of his thinking. From *The Commonplace Book* we see that Jefferson made a survey of the history of the early peoples of Europe in order to prove that the oldest forms of government of Washington ed., VII, 335. He urged that the study of law begin with Coke rather than Blackstone, the monarchist. Ford ed., IX, 276-277.

<sup>14</sup> Washington ed., VII, 335.

<sup>15</sup> Ford ed., V, 333.

<sup>16</sup> Washington ed., VII, 359. While Jefferson admitted the common law was part of the State laws, he regarded the idea of a general common law in force in the United States as a means toward the further expansion of national power. Ford ed., VII, 451.

<sup>17</sup> Ford ed., IX, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Ford ed., I, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Ford ed., X, 120.

<sup>20</sup> Ford ed., X, 6. In 1819 he said: "I too am an Epicurean." *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> See Gilbert Chénard (ed.) *The Commonplace Book of Thomas Jefferson. A Repertory of His Ideas on Government* (1926).

the Celts, Germans, Gauls and others rested on popular sovereignty. He took Strabo and Tacitus at face value; from the Greeks he deduced the principle of the freedom of colonies, and he observed that the early Greek kings were elected by the consent of the people. In searching for precedents for the construction of an American Congress, he was impressed with the contribution of the northern peoples of Europe to excellence in governmental institutions. He believed, like English republicans in the seventeenth century, that the landed aristocracy in England had been introduced by the Norman conquest, and that feudalism was not of German or "Saxon" origin. While he became hostile to any American who praised the British system, and while he rejected Montesquieu largely in terms of American party conflict, he was willing to accept the Saxon institutions of England. The Tories were Normans and the Whigs were Saxons, he thought. Clearly these ideas arose from the study of the common law and the history of legal institutions as he was able to investigate it. It seems reasonably clear that the substratum of these early ideas continued throughout his life. The last entry in *The commonplace Book*, written in old age, continues the early spirit of the collection, since it is a statement of the heresies of Hume on the issue of popular sovereignty.<sup>22</sup>

### III.

We reach now a position at which a more careful examination of Jefferson's ideas on moral obligation may be undertaken. Early in his career, in 1787, he stated that man has an innate moral sense, and therefore it was "lost time to attend lectures in" moral philosophy.<sup>23</sup> In 1814, he argued that utility is the test of virtue.<sup>24</sup> But this hypothesis was part of his view that society must insist only on those moral precepts upon which all religions agree, for the Creator has placed moral judgment indelibly within us.<sup>25</sup> His admission that

<sup>22</sup> See Vernon L. Parrington, *The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800* (1927), pp. 343 ff. for further comments on the intellectual foundations of Jefferson. Parrington, it would seem, stresses the influence of the frontier too much. It is held now that from the start Jefferson was at least a somewhat aristocratic frontiersman.

<sup>23</sup> Ford, ed., IV, 428.

<sup>24</sup> Washington ed., VI, 351.

<sup>25</sup> Washington ed., V, 471 (1809).

the sublimest system of morality is to be found in the four evangelists would in itself give little satisfaction to the Christian social thinker.<sup>26</sup> Probably the real thought of Jefferson on religion and the religious foundation of morality will continue to be a matter of controversy. But the fact that he declined to discuss his religion would, under the circumstances, indicate such a divergence of view from the standard accepted around him that it was wiser not to speak of it. In 1816, Jefferson declared that he wrote nothing on religion and rarely spoke of it, and then only in reasonable company.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, he made no inquiry into another man's faith and troubled no other person with his own. Summing the matter up in 1817, he declared that his religion was known only to himself and to his God.<sup>28</sup>

The Virginia statute on religious liberty may justly be regarded as one of the great charters in American history. We must urge that the specific mental cast in Jefferson which gave rise to it may be distinguished from the long-run importance of such a law. Did the Virginia statute arise from hostility to religion itself, as we may say of many measures in modern Europe? Chinard, who knows the European background as well as the American, assures us that such was not the case. If Jefferson expressed the view of the Middle Ages common to the Enlightenment, his attack on established religion in Virginia was directed against his own creed. One might even contend that Jefferson believed his bill was a restoration of the ancient Saxon liberties of Englishmen. The Virginia statute was simply a protest, says Chinard, of a legalistic mind convinced that the privileges enjoyed by the Church in the State of Virginia rested on an unsound foundation.<sup>29</sup> But clearly the idea of Christian toleration supported by Jefferson came from outside Christian philosophy; it was based on a casualness concerning religious truth that most Christians, of whatever view, could not accept. May we not say that the Virginia statute has been an aid to, or has been successful, because of tendencies in Christian thinking itself as it has developed in the United States? Certainly, there is a problem here requiring a probing answer.

<sup>26</sup> Washington ed., VI, 309 (1814).

<sup>27</sup> Washington ed., VI, 412.

<sup>28</sup> Ford ed., X, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Commonplace Book*, p. 57.

Can we not say that, like his philosophical idols, Jefferson believed a proper social structure and a proper system of education would enable men to be rational? The function of the teacher is not so much to discipline individuals as to permit natural goodness to emerge. If Christianity has long doubted so easy a solution of human difficulty, modern social science itself is less sure than were the rationalists of the eighteenth century. For some, the failure of moral conceptions held by Jefferson has meant that propaganda as the means of social discipline must take the place of rationalist education. But it is a propaganda that leads directly to the struggle for political power.

As we have seen, Jefferson believed in the necessity of a sound social morality, but we must ask today whether in his philosophy he provided a proper basis for the rights and duties of personality. On the one hand, he asserted the natural rights and duties of man in the Declaration of Independence, a doctrine which runs back through English thinkers, such as John Locke and Richard Hooker, to the earlier synthesis of Thomas Aquinas. That synthesis had brought together on rational principles the values of Christianity and Aristotelian thought. Yet Jefferson hardly discussed the foundation of his doctrine of natural rights, while he asserted the propositions of majority rule, the sovereignty of the living generation and the necessity of constant change in laws and institutions. How were these ideas brought together and reconciled? In general, we cannot say that he did bring them together; the metaphysical principles of the French ideologists implied, if not the rejection of natural rights, at least the disintegration of natural law. Perhaps we should, on the other hand, be grateful for Jefferson's assertions of rights which we today still believe appropriate and necessary for the preservation of individual freedom. Thus, in 1788, he urged that the bill of rights proposed for the new Constitution should contain the freedom of religion and the press, the right to trial by jury, the prohibition of standing armies and of any suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, and the freedom of commerce against monopolies.<sup>30</sup>

Jefferson's moral theory was a disordered skein, with the thread

<sup>30</sup> Washington ed., II, 355.

running through the passions of many political battles. Late in life he declared himself to be a materialist, for, he argued, things immaterial are nothing. He believed he was supported in this view by Locke, Tracy and Dugald Stewart.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV.

We have discovered that in a world of tyranny, in which democratic institutions are on the retreat or are destroyed in certain countries, we must have a foundation for our belief in democracy. We can no longer observe the practices of democracies for our proof; we must have a sense of purpose if we would restore the democratic system to those countries in which it has ceased to exist. In this we are much like Jefferson and his ideological colleagues, since they were arguing for the establishment of a political system in which the consent of the governed was real and in which also the majority was restrained enough to extend to all the fundamental rights of personality. We cannot agree with Jefferson that his political party had a monopoly on the democratic principle and that his Federalist opponents were monarchists and barbarians. That was part of the perversity of his outlook which we, today, with generosity will call unrepresentative of his mind.

Yet we cannot deny the profundity of political issues in the early years of the republic. Speaking of the majority principle in Jefferson's

<sup>31</sup> Washington ed., VII, 175 f (1820). There has been controversy as to whether Jefferson was influenced by the ideas of Cardinal Bellarmine on the popular consent basis of government. The idea of consent has been a pervasive one in Western thought for centuries past, and it is probably not worth while to try to show that such ideas were derived exclusively from one source. *The Commonwealth Book* shows that without Locke, Jefferson could have derived his natural law ideas from Lord Kames or others. What we should do is to recognize that in Christianity there is a philosophical and historical basis for democratic government that not even the gentlemen of the Enlightenment could escape. See Caillard Hunt, "Cardinal Bellarmine and the Virginia Bill of Rights," *Catholic Historical Review*, October, 1917, pp. 276-289; David S. Schaff, "The Bellarmine-Jefferson Legend and the Declaration of Independence," *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, Second Series, VIII (1928), 237-276. Schaff's paper is marred by errors. A comparison of his interpretation of mediaeval ideas with the work of Charles H. McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West* (1932) and R. W. and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West* (6 vols., 1903-1936), will show that Schaff did not understand the mixed form of government, the governmental as distinguished from the social contract, the growth of parliamentary institutions in mediaeval times, and certainly not the nature and role of law in the mediaeval community or mediaeval monarchy. In addition he has been unable to state the mediaeval or modern Catholic theory of the relation of Church and State.

thought, Lord Acton asserted: "Between this revolutionary doctrine and the ideas derived from England, there was an irreconcilable antagonism. It was intolerable to Jefferson that the engagements of one generation should bind another, that any rights should be deemed too sacred to be confiscated by the vote of a majority. He desired law to be in a constant state of fluctuation, and every change to realize more and more the momentary wishes of the people."<sup>32</sup> Here is an issue that a student of Jefferson may not evade. "We of the United States . . . are constitutionally and conscientiously democrats," Jefferson wrote to DuPont de Nemours in 1816.<sup>33</sup> Again, in 1825, he declared that democrats "consider the people as the safest depository of power in the last resort; they cherish them therefore, and wish to leave in them all the powers to the exercise of which they are competent."<sup>34</sup> To Lord Acton, the Jeffersonian principle had cut the United States off from the community of tradition which in his day bound European societies together, for we had rejected the English principle of balanced and co-operating interests in the composition of the State. Still, it may be argued that Acton has overstated Jefferson's ideas; the truth, we think, is that Jefferson never reconciled the principles of fundamental right, in which he believed, with the fluctuations of majority control. This, it may be said, is a central difficulty in many a statement of political ideas. We can look with relative calmness today on the greatness of Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson's mortal enemy, and the failures in Jefferson's own thought.<sup>35</sup>

We must remember that Jefferson was in many ways a student of political compromise, and that in practice he seldom held rigidly to a doctrinaire position. He believed in man and his capacity to form sound opinions, but under conditions and not in the abstract. He believed in a general right of suffrage; but when he made proposals for constitutional provisions, he accepted property qualifications for the right to vote. Only a qualified statement may be made as to what

<sup>32</sup> *Historical Essays and Studies*, ed. by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (1907), p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> Ford ed., X, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ford ed., X, 335.

<sup>35</sup> See Gerald W. Johnson, "The Changelings," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XIX (1943), 236 ff.

Jefferson thought on the suffrage, though we may take as satisfactory his statement, in 1816, that every man who "fights or pays" should have an equal right in the election of the legislature.<sup>36</sup> Jefferson believed in the emancipation of slaves, but he held them during his life and in 1787 he even thought of appealing to them to work harder for his and their security. This principle of relative application must be pursued throughout the study of Jefferson's ideas. He believed in the ultimate rationality of men, provided there were proper conditions for the formation of opinion and its realization in practical politics.

Here, then, is the central issue concerning Jefferson's belief in democracy. In broad outline there is much that we today can accept, while some of the specific issues which aroused him do not seem incisive today. We agree that the genuinely free and uncorrupted mind of the citizen may be trusted, indeed must be trusted, if there is to be any meaning in democracy. We also accept Jefferson's belief that men and principles may be corrupted, and that in the corrupted society men can hardly be trusted with power. Majority rule, he said in 1790, is the natural law of every society, though at another time, in 1807, he spoke of the "unjust majority" in the State of Connecticut.<sup>37</sup> In his first inaugural address he declared that the majority will to be rightful must also be reasonable and that equal rights and equal laws must prevail in order to prevent oppression. On the other hand, he asserted in his *Notes on Virginia* that there was less chance of political corruption if all men had the right to participate in government, but that the British government was an oligarchy and was therefore corrupt.<sup>38</sup>

If we accept the idea that time may produce a corruption of men and principles (as charged of the Federalists in the United States), may we not say that Jefferson recognized there was no necessary or inevitable reconciliation of classes in society? Under disintegrative conditions there would be a struggle for power and a lack of civic virtue. He was concerned with the circumstances under which opinion would be uncorrupted and virtuous. Thus he supported the agrarian against the urban conception of life; he opposed consolidation or centraliza-

<sup>36</sup> Ford ed., X, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Ford ed., V, 206; IX, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Ford ed., III, 254.



tion; he accepted internal improvements in the states while rejecting them in the national government; he opposed standing armies as destroyers of liberty; and he did not believe in the indefinite tenure of executive office. He was, indeed, the founder of both the Democratic party and the two-term presidential tradition. One is inclined to say that for Jefferson such principles were more than current and changing arrangements of government; they ~~approach~~ <sup>approach</sup> almost ~~to~~ the permanent bases of any sound democracy. ✓

In Virginia politics he proposed four main measures for the destruction of aristocracy and the establishment of republican government. Enfranchisement went with it, as the equal partition of property was the best of agrarian laws; religious freedom was established; and an educational system at public expense was initiated.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, a natural aristocracy exists among men which is grounded in virtue and talent. Its opposite, the artificial aristocracy, is built upon wealth and birth. He proposed to let the citizens in free elections separate the natural from the artificial aristocrats.<sup>40</sup> Late in life, with the ideas of John Taylor of Caroline in mind no doubt, he hoped to crush "the aristocracy of our moneyed corporations" which were a challenge to the governmental system.<sup>41</sup> If education was important to Jefferson in shaping opinions, he was interested likewise in practical educational politics. Apparently, one reason for his interest in the founding of the University of Virginia was to keep young southerners away from Harvard where they learned the "lessons of anti-Missourianism";<sup>42</sup> he was careful that the professor of law at the University of Virginia did not follow the Toryism of Blackstone;<sup>43</sup> and the professor of government at that institution was not to be a believer in national consolidation or centralization. Jefferson's eye was also on the textbooks that were to be used in this subject.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ford ed., I, 68 f.

<sup>40</sup> Ford ed., IX, 425-426.

<sup>41</sup> Ford ed., X, 69.

<sup>42</sup> Washington ed., VII, 202 (1821).

<sup>43</sup> Ford ed., X, 376.

<sup>44</sup> Washington ed., VII, 397. Jefferson opposed the teaching of divinity at the University of Virginia, but he proposed that each religious body might establish a lecturer on or near the campus. Ford ed., X, 243.

Though Jefferson spoke of the Federalist campaign in 1800 as an effort to restore barbarism, such narrowness of mind was forgotten in old age when he became reconciled with John Adams and carried on with him a correspondence that in many ways provided the most interesting of Jefferson's letters. This correspondence shows that Jefferson's faith in progress had not wavered with the disappointments of old age. There had, thought Jefferson in 1816, been great progress in the arts and sciences since the Borgias, whose activities he took to be the low point in modern European morality. He held these views in spite of his belief that Bonaparte represented for the time being a kind of extinction in Europe of natural morality.<sup>45</sup> The principle of progress, including moral progress, was clearly the basis of Jefferson's belief in the future of democracy and popular sovereignty. The people, he said, are independent of all but the moral law—and in that we would heartily agree.<sup>46</sup>

## V.

In the unsystematic body of thought associated with Thomas Jefferson, the agrarian tradition he bequeathed to American thought is to some its most appealing contemporary aspect. The agrarian can see no compromise between Jefferson and the modern urban, bureaucratic state which implies a continuous process of national centralization. The agrarian who visits the Jefferson Memorial, dedicated in Washington, D. C., in April, 1943, can see with disappointment that no quotation of the five in that magnificent edifice suggests that he believed in a decentralized and agrarian society as the basis of progress and democracy.

By 1816 Jefferson admitted that manufactures were necessary in the United States, owing to the policies of England and France in relation to American shipping.<sup>47</sup> But the modern agrarian would not deny all manufacturing, any more than he would try to destroy all cities. It is a problem of predominance in society, and the merchant and the shipper must be accepted. There has, naturally, been con-

<sup>45</sup> Washington ed., VI, 524.

<sup>46</sup> Ford ed., X, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Ford ed., X, 8.

trovery over this aspect of Jefferson's thought, and some have asserted that the agrarians, especially the southern agrarians, who claim Jefferson as their forbear, misconstrue the total range of his thought.<sup>48</sup>

But there are enough statements of the agrarian principle, as well as the fact of the life he lived, to give countenance to the agrarian claim of support from Jefferson.

The early *Notes on Virginia* clearly show his belief in the agrarian mode of life as contrasted with the kind of urban life he witnessed in Europe. Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God; let our workshops remain in Europe. The argument must center, however, on later statements. In the first inaugural, he favored the encouragement of agriculture "and of commerce as its handmaid" as essential to our government. An equilibrium of agriculture, manufactures and commerce has certainly become essential to our prosperity, he believed in 1809.<sup>49</sup> At the same time he accused New England of sacrificing agriculture and manufactures to commerce.<sup>50</sup> "My idea," he said, "is that we should encourage home manufactures to the extent of our own consumption of everything of which we raise the raw materials."<sup>51</sup> But it was clear that he favored the development of household manufacturing.<sup>52</sup> Jefferson would even turn to agriculture for resistance to aping the British and to crush the Humist Tories of our American cities.<sup>53</sup>

It must be remembered that the defense of agriculture as a foundation of social life was connected in Jefferson's mind with the defense of decentralization, that is, the resistance to any agency of the national government which sought to undermine the autonomy of the states. Support of the state governments was clearly stated in the first inaugural. Internal improvements, the hallmark of centralization to those opposed to consolidation, were resisted in the national government but supported in the states, especially in Virginia where Jefferson was a

<sup>48</sup> See Patrick F. Quinn, "Agrarianism and the Jeffersonian Philosophy," *The Review of Politics*, II (1940), 87 ff.

<sup>49</sup> Ford ed., IX, 239.

<sup>50</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Ford ed., IX, 226.

<sup>52</sup> Ford ed., V, 28; VI, 509; IX, 333, 371, 373; Washington ed., V, 456.

<sup>53</sup> Washington ed., VI, 335 (1814).

member of the Board of Public Works. Internal improvements were associated with the idea of government in the locality, and Jefferson insisted that before internal improvements might be undertaken by the national government a constitutional amendment was necessary, even as he wanted a constitutional amendment to validate the Louisiana Purchase. He attacked the national bank; he favored the Tenth Amendment which became the foundation of the South's interpretation of the Constitution; he opposed the expansion of the general welfare clause in the Constitution to make up for the non-delegation of power to the national government. Jefferson supported Spencer Roane in his attacks on the growing power of the national courts; and he wrote the Kentucky Resolutions. In 1820, the Missouri question seemed the most portentous that had been before the American people, and with the rise of sectional parties he feared for the continuance of the Union. In this he blamed the Federalists who, as erstwhile monarchists, had now become consolidators. Six months before his death Jefferson saw with the deepest affliction the rapid strides the federal government was making in overthrowing and usurping the rights reserved to the state.<sup>54</sup>

Not unrelated to these principles was Jefferson's advocacy of international peace. He opposed rash imperialist adventures in South America, but he had a vision of solidarity between the states of the Western Hemisphere. Indeed, one might urge that in acquiring territory he was adopting a policy of keeping Europe out of the New World. Jefferson saw clearly the realities of Europe, as his comments on European politics would show, but we cannot today be sure just what his policy would be. Certainly, for the role the United States has adopted today, a consolidated state is necessary. Would Jefferson say that because of world affairs we should surrender the ideal of the agrarian and decentralized state? In 1808, however, he stated that his administration had been conducted on pacific principles; in accordance with the ideas of the Society of Friends; he did not understand the opposition of Quakers to his administration.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ford ed., X, 354-355. See in general on Jefferson's defense of local government, Jesse T. Carpenter, *The South as a Conscious Minority, 1789-1861* (1930). In this connection one must not forget his long-standing opposition to standing armies as a means of destroying local liberty and republican government.

<sup>55</sup> Washington ed., V, 303.

## VI.

In April, 1943, the Jefferson Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D. C. Along with Washington and Lincoln, Jefferson has been recognized as among the great of the American nation. One is always impressed with the power of those who select a man for such honor, but perhaps an even greater impression falls upon us when we realize the power of those who choose the quotations from his writings which, for the millions who visit his memorial, are to represent the mind of Thomas Jefferson. With so complex a personality to deal with, with such a variety of ideas to pick from, no single student of Jefferson would perhaps be satisfied with what was done. Quotations of this sort must be selected in the spirit of the time in which the monument is erected, and for the masses the symbolic Jefferson becomes separated forever from the man of many ideas and sturdy political passions. Jefferson deserves to be among the honored great; he is a symbol of American democracy. But the student of his mind must get behind the symbolism of monuments. What today should we admire in Jefferson and what should we condemn?

The desperation of our times suggests that only the total state can solve the problems we face, however we judge them to have originated. Thus we say the modern centralized and industrial society is inevitable, and that, in part, in administrative or bureaucratic control we must seek the promise of tomorrow. Or so it seems. It may be, on the other hand, that these very conditions will inspire a sense of purpose that will lead us back to the practical principles that Jefferson urged, with modifications, throughout his long public life. We may yet seek vitality in the decentralized and balanced society. Some will say with insistence that the conflicts of today have arisen from the weakness of the metaphysical tradition, the revolutionary tradition of modern civilization, which Jefferson defended. Had the modern world been built on less secular foundations, the spirit of our times might have been different. We cannot today read with any enthusiasm of the philosophical deities Jefferson worshipped; much of the intellectual tradition Jefferson loved had crumbled before our own time.

In spite of this, in the reconstruction of the moral foundations of tomorrow we cannot leave Jefferson out of account. What we must say is that Jefferson never integrated the basic ideas of his philosophy. We may be more inclined today to return to the Declaration of Independence than to the philosophy of the French ideologists, though Jefferson spent more time on the ideas of the latter than on the former. We will choose a democracy that grows out of the Declaration rather than one that grows from the principles of DeStur de Tracy. Perhaps we may even conclude that the ideal of political balance and control held by the Federalists is closer to the Declaration of Independence than the philosophy of John Taylor. Perhaps we can integrate with the Jeffersonian passion for the progress of the common man the northern ideals of an evolutionary humanitarianism. The ideals of the North were more sternly Protestant than Jefferson's thinking and they led directly to centralization and the acceptance of the industrial society. Will the failures of those ideals in the twentieth century be considered any greater than the weaknesses of the Jeffersonian system? Hardly.

We need not forgive Jefferson for sharing the weaknesses of his brothers in the interpretation of history; we need not forgive him for failing to see that the protection of individual rights implies restraining the majority, or even, in part, the government of past generations; we may pass in silence the narrowness of his mind when he spoke of his opponents; we may accept as the wisdom of the world his tendency to compromise in practice his deeper principles. His dream of the American Union is but dimly reflected in the world of today; we are not sure that the positivism of his age is the answer to our quest. We see his rationalism used for the defense of centralization, war, and the struggle with the conditions of life in urban society. His repudiations of religion may even serve the modern tyrants. Those who would build anew a Jeffersonian era may return to him for inspiration, while those who would not, can read him again for the generosity and sympathy he showed.