
CLASSICS OF DEMOCRACY

Jefferson: A Political Reappraisal

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In the hagiography of American presidents three men stand out: Washington, the father of his country, a figure as ambiguously admired as our own fathers—stern and resolute but conspicuously flawed, a man who never won a battle and never knew he'd lost one; Lincoln, the lay preacher reading the signs of Providence for clues of the nation's destiny and like the seventeenth-century Quakers quaking only in the presence of God; and Jefferson, the Sage of Monticello and the country's durable link to the Enlightenment with its faith in man's innate capacity to take care of himself. If, as it is said, the Enlightenment is dead everywhere but in America, it is Jefferson who gave it permanent shelter. Less a mythic figure than either Washington or Lincoln, Jefferson speaks to us still because his vision of what the United States has accorded with that of successive generations of Americans. But there is more than instruction and mutual agreement here. The memorable passages from him about truth surviving in the marketplace of ideas and the blood of tyrants and patriots being the natural manure of the tree of liberty strengthen our conviction that there are moral ends to justify the meritricious means of democracy. More than the graves at Gettysburg, the words from his felicitous pen move us to dedicate ourselves to the proposition "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Just what about Jefferson produces this effect intrigues us. In 1900 a particularly dedicated editor actually assembled a 954-page encyclopedia of Jeffersonian opinion ranging from the A of his comments on "Abilities, Appreciate" to the Z of "Zeal, Ridicule." John Dewey compiled an anthology of his living thought and Carl Becker took the occasion of Jefferson's birthday in 1943 to pose the question that still nags: "What Is Still Living in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?" With his usual lucidity, Becker delivered a lecture that defined for the nation's left wing the vital core of the Jeffersonian message. Cutting through the center of his thought with surgical precision, Becker discarded as vestigial organs Jefferson's commitment to limited government and laissez-faire economic policies and pumped new life into his affirmation of the dignity of ordinary men and women, his respect for the truth, and his hostility to all forms of coercion. Political institutions, he said, must change with changes in the society at large (Becker had in mind the Progressives' extension of the government's regulatory power over the industrial giants of his day; we may substitute entitlement programs and income redistribution for ours), but "in essentials Jefferson's political philosophy is our political

philosophy; in essentials democracy means for us what it meant for him.”¹ And he went on to prove his point by writing a modern update of the Declaration of Independence.

All would be well with this living philosophy of Jefferson’s if it read the same on Wall Street as the campus lanes of Cornell. But therein lies the rub. The history of politics in the United States, as Martin Diamond once commented, is the story of the American heritage and the fight among the heirs. Jefferson wrote the last will and testament for the founding fathers and his bequests have generated the conflicts. Becker found life in those elements of Jefferson’s thought that were assimilable to twentieth-century liberalism, but in other quarters it was just those parts of Jefferson’s philosophy excised by Becker’s scalpel that appeared most deservedly alive and well. Writing on Jefferson for the *New York Times* op-ed page two years ago, another latter-day Jeffersonian called attention to his plea for a wise and frugal government with functions limited and close to home. The Republicans, he indicated, had forgotten their legitimate claim to be his heirs, forgotten even that they had taken their name from Jefferson’s party and honored him as well in their first platform of 1856. Ronald Reagan, this writer maintained, was probably the most Jeffersonian president since Martin Van Buren, a point he embellished with Reagan’s own exhortation “to pluck a flower from Thomas Jefferson’s life and wear it in our soul forever.”² Coming at Jefferson from the right instead of the left, John McClaughry wrote a prescription that nonetheless had a familiar ring: encourage family-owned farms and independent owner-operated businesses and increase employee-ownership of large corporations. The rationale has been compelling to every generation of Americans. When the times are out of joint with the Jeffersonian faith, the times must be reformed. If a thriving capitalistic society threatens equality of opportunity and esteem, vigorous and ameliorative intervention is called for. Somehow the circle of American liberalism must be squared with a reality composed of world markets and superpowers.

When writing under the rubric, “Classics of Democracy” in 1983 a more pertinent question to ask is “what should be living in the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?” The true Jeffersonian legacy is not faith in democracy but rather a definition of freedom as liberation from all social authority, especially that of government. Jefferson celebrated ordinary men not as wielders of public power, but rather as exercisers of private discretion. He believed in their ability to take care of themselves, to seize opportunities for improvement, to profit from the diffusion of knowledge, to care for their families, and to nurture those ties they formed voluntarily. If some did better at this than others then so be it. “To take from one, because it is thought his own industry and that of his fathers had acquired too much, in order to spare to others who or whose fathers have not exercised equal

1 Carl Becker, “What Is Still Living in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?” *American Historical Reviews* 48 (1943): 706.

2 John McClaughry, “Jefferson’s Vision,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1982.

industry and skill," he maintained "is to violate arbitrarily the first principle of association, the guarantee to everyone a free exercise of his industry and the fruits acquired by it." If political privilege were abolished, then, Jefferson believed, concentrations of wealth need not be feared, especially if leaders were alerted to the danger. Writing to James Madison from Paris he suggested progressive taxes for large landholders with total exemptions for small ones. "Legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property." Looking back on a long life in public service he claimed to have created a system "by which every fibre would be eradicated of antient or future aristocracy." But we are distracted by these attacks on the high and mighty. It could just as unequivocally be said that Jefferson laid the ax to every fiber of democracy. The majority power gathered in the state legislature of Virginia struck him "as precisely the definition of despotism." Quick to become alarmed when he thought that the Virginia lawmakers exceeded the legislative capacity assigned them in the state constitution, he penned his famous lines about 173 despots being as oppressive as one. The only popular sovereignty he ever affirmed was that of the people to produce a frame of government that strictly limited the coercive force of the state. He supported the new United States Constitution because Madison assured him that it would limit the exuberance of the state governments, and opposed the first administration under the constitution because Hamilton's loose interpretation of the "necessary and proper" clause threatened to secure for the federal legislature the very powers that Jefferson believed the people had justly withheld from it.

What he detested in the Federalists was their willingness to erect elaborate governmental structures for channeling social power and directing the lives of ordinary people. That theirs was a formula drawn from western civilization's most illustrious political philosophers only outraged his sensibilities and proved the Federalists' blindness to the brilliant new insights of their age. His opponent for the presidency, John Adams, was just as forthright a spokesman for the traditional view as Jefferson was for the new-found faith. Liberty for Adams meant the right of self-government for a people; its maintenance required the skillful construction of a constitution that would incorporate the known tendencies of men. A true descendent of his Puritan forebears, Adams thought of himself as a realist, even a Cassandra, compelled to give witness to the truths of human experience rather than indulge in the illusory hopes of a new dispensation for mankind. If some men had more power than others it was because human beings loved heroes. Political institutions were not to be the instruments of reform, but the repositories of venerable truths. That Americans were newly crafting their governments appeared adventitious to Adams, not fortuitous, and, in his view, they could do no better than acknowledge their British heritage and make special provisions for the disproportionate influence wielded by those men distinguished for their wealth, their lineage, or their extraordinary talents. It never occurred to Adams that the quantum of power at the disposal of government might or should be limited. His conservatism embraced all aspects of life. Not profoundly religious himself, Adams nonetheless

expected American Protestantism to flow along the channels etched by the Puritan and Anglican establishments. Nor did the scientific achievements of the age of Enlightenment cause him to recalculate the reasoning capacity of the human race. Rather he expected the new knowledge to flow into the interstices of the collected wisdom of the ages. The human predicament remained unchanged: order and justice were the artifacts of wise men and happiness was the lot of wisely led citizens. Popular virtue arose only when the problematic nature of man's will was tamed and tutored.

Eager to raise the American nation on entirely different foundations, Jefferson and his party stepped altogether outside the conceptual order of John Adams. Like Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*, they drew their ideas of government "from a principle in nature which no art can overturn, *vis.* that the more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered." We might be forgiven if when reading nature and simplicity in such close juxtaposition we conjured up Rousseau's noble savage or the Romantic poet's apple-cheeked maid and strapping yeoman farmer. But such were not the inspirations for the Jeffersonians. They drew their idea of nature from the new philosophy that taught about predictable human responses emanating from the consistent drive for self-improvement. Generally construed in economic terms, this new conception of natural man had the distinct advantage of crediting him with the capacity for personal autonomy and rational planning, but the more nature was elevated the more irrelevant social institutions became. The inner-directed man of benign ambition and self-imposed discipline required only a hospitable environment in order to flourish. Like an acorn, if unobstructed, his oaklike potential would be fulfilled. This form of human liberation depended on the propagation of the true principles of human association. Then the force of law could be confined to the minimum necessary for controlling malefactors. Alexander Hamilton called this idea "one of those wild speculative paradoxes which have grown into credit among us." But the "common directing power" he favored figured in Jefferson's mind as the intrusive government that had too long encumbered the free action of ordinary men. Much has been written about Jefferson's intellectual debts to those who went before him and not nearly enough has been said about his enthusiasm for thinkers ten and twenty years his junior: Destutt de Tracy, Cabanis, J. B. Say, even Malthus. These men roamed freely through the new intellectual terrain of natural regularities and immutable principles of human action elaborated ingeniously into laws like those of Say and Malthus. The more these philosophers succeeded in constructing a new model for the analysis of human relations, the more closely Jefferson tied his democratic faith to science.

Two mutually exclusive views of human nature became the focal points in the presidential campaign of 1800. Probably at no time since have American voters been confronted with so clearly delineated alternatives. Federalists advertised Jefferson's Deism as a self-evident disqualification for a position of trust and Republicans responded by demanding a moral as well as a fiscal separation of church and state. Jefferson's tolerance of public harangues about national policy and partisan

outbursts in the Republican press were proof of his instability while Jeffersonians stigmatized the government's sedition prosecutions as part of an effort to snatch aristocracy from the jaws of a democratic revolution. Jefferson's enthusiasm for the French Revolution figured in Federalist tracts like markings in a failing patient's fever chart. Federalists said that the sovereign people must recede into the background between elections or they risked taking the shape of the ignorant herd; Republicans used such remarks as proof of the Federalists' pining after English mores. The Federalists appealed to Christian and classical texts to support their contentions about human frailty and Republicans ridiculed this veneration of ancient wisdom as a totally inappropriate attitude in an enlightened age. Insisting that political science was in its infancy, they looked to the future for the vindication of their position, leaving the Federalists with a reservoir of obsolete rules of conduct. There was no meeting ground because an earlier consensus built upon unstated assumptions had collapsed underneath them. Adams and Jefferson were in fact contending for the power to interpret an American Revolution after its meaning had been thrown into doubt by the revolution in France.

The Jeffersonians won an overwhelming victory with their polemic against their own culture's political traditions. Indeed the Federalists' strength was so thoroughly concentrated thereafter in New England that it scarcely counted again in national elections. After his two terms, Jefferson had the exceptional good fortune to be able to pass on his standard to his two closest political allies. Later, when party divisions emerged again, both Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson clamored for the right to be his heir. More important, from the outset Jefferson imposed his will upon the federal government and his spirit upon the American electorate. Nothing could be further from the truth than to claim, as Henry Adams did, that Jefferson in office outfederalized the Federalists. It errs in both directions: in misconceiving the force of Jefferson's drastic reforms and in assuming that such ideologically tepid acts as purchasing Louisiana or using an embargo to protect American shippers contained the essence of Federalism. Noble Cunningham's recent examination of Jefferson-as-administrator should scotch for all time the canard about his being a visionary lacking the know-how to put into practice his visions.³ Cunningham has given us instead a president pouring over the details of executive business, scrupulously conserving public records, and adroitly leading cabinet members into fruitful discussions. The thoroughness with which Jefferson exorcised the Federalist influence astounds. He removed a whole cohort of young Federalists from civil and military office; he eliminated direct taxes; he substantially reduced the national debt even after paying for the Louisiana Territory; he let the Alien and Sedition Acts lapse; he shrank the size of the bureaucracy despite the growth in population and land; he enhanced public access to the national domain; and he introduced a nonchalant informality into state occasions. Not a symbol, a civil servant or presidential

³ Noble Cunningham, *The Process of Government Under Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

initiative escaped his consideration as a possible tool in his dismantling operation.

Despite this furious activity through eight years, we have accepted Jefferson's changes as the inevitable consequence of the American character. Indeed, nothing seems so hard to detect in the past as those novelties that have subsequently become familiar. The style and substance of the Jeffersonian program represented a dramatic rupture with established forms and expectations. Yet we can scarcely see the innovations. In political wars as in real wars, the victors get to write the history and hence organize our memory. In our schoolbooks, Jeffersonian Republicanism has been renamed democracy and depicted as a force of nature: a democratic tide, a democratic landslide—figures of speech that retain their popularity. Far truer was Jefferson's own remembrance of the contest, the fear that the Federalists might prevail still etched in his mind. John Adams would not even remain in Washington to play his part in Jefferson's inauguration, but the two men did resume a correspondence in retirement. Gingerly, they took up the subject of their old battles. "The improbability of the human mind, in science, in ethics, in government," Jefferson told Adams, had been a major point of difference between the two parties. "Those who advocated reformation of institutions, *pari passu*, with the progress of science, maintained that no definite limits could be assigned to that progress," he explained, while the enemies of reform denied improvement and advocated "adherence to the principles, practices and institutions of our fathers which they represented as the consummation of wisdom and akme of excellence, beyond which the human mind could never advance." More frankly Jefferson wrote to Joseph Priestley shortly after his election that his opponents had favored education, "but it was to be the education of our ancestors. We were to look backwards, not forwards, for improvement." Sensing a supportive audience in the philosopher-scientist, Jefferson asserted that one could no longer say that there was nothing new under the sun, "for this whole chapter in the history of man is new. The great extent of our republic is new. Its sparse habitation is new. The mighty wave of public opinion which has rolled over it is new." Much later Jefferson reminisced in a letter to a friend in which he conceded that experience was with the other party, which believed it a "safer guide than mere theory." By 1823 American experience was on Jefferson's side and he expanded on the contrast between the two parties. One had been moved by "the cherishment of the people," the other by a fear and distrust of them. "We believed, that men, enjoying in ease and security the full fruits of their own industry, enlisted by all their interests on the side of law and order, habituated to think for themselves, and to follow their reason as their guide, would be more easily and safely governed, than with minds nourished in error, and vitiated and debased, as in Europe, by ignorance, indigence and oppression."

When Tocqueville visited America in 1831 he found the social world the Jeffersonians had adumbrated a generation earlier. An environment had replaced an order. The vital connection between the nation's elite and its people had

been snapped. Access to private opportunity had replaced ambition for public office. The influence of equality of condition Tocqueville found pervasive. Americans, he wrote, sought nothing so much as "to evade the bondage of system and habit, of family-maxims, class-opinion, and, in some degree of national prejudices." Americans looked to themselves alone for practical and spiritual guidance and if they had raised popular opinion to an unwonted height, it was at least comprehensible to all. Aristocracy, Tocqueville told his readers, made a chain of all the members of the community while democracy broke that chain and severed every link of it. The consequences were arresting. In the Old World "a man almost always knows his forefathers, and respects them; he thinks he already sees his remote descendents, and he loves them. He willingly imposes duties on himself towards the former and the latter; and he will frequently sacrifice his personal gratifications to those who went before and those who will come after him." In the New World, the individual man stands alone without hereditary friends or contemporary ties to alleviate his vulnerability.

One doesn't need an encyclopedia to call to mind the Jeffersonian convictions that contributed to this outcome: "the rights of the whole can be no more than the sum of the rights of individuals," "the rights of one generation will scarcely be considered hereafter as depending on the paper transactions of another," or, more strikingly, his hyperbolic claim that were the whole race desolated and only Adam and Eve remained and they were free, it would be enough. Jefferson enshrined democracy in America by depoliticizing the nation. Confident that natural harmony was superior to the political contrivances of men, he made science his lodestar. Eager to expand his "empire of liberty" he willingly abandoned the philosophical tradition that had valued government as civilization's supreme accomplishment. The self-interest that poisoned the public arena in his eyes could be turned into a private virtue. Hardly an ambiguous legacy despite the fight among the heirs, Jefferson's philosophy lives on because of the intensity and clarity with which he exposed the underside of the western political tradition. Obscured permanently by defeat at the ballot box have been the older ideals of civic virtue, of a statecraft capable of rising above self-interest, and a political community greater than the sum of its voters.

In Jefferson we have the paradox of a passionately committed president working to divest the presidency of national relevance. The result of his indefatigable labors resides in us as a set of unexamined attitudes. Theories about democracy wash over us because we are impervious to the possibilities of positive government. Nothing abides so enduringly as our skepticism about political virtue. Law-making with us is a search for remedies. We can forgive Jefferson his enthusiasm for facts that had yet to be discovered. Facts in contemplation are ever so much richer than facts stated, labeled, cataloged, interpreted, and reinterpreted. We can understand his high hopes for a progress that had not displayed its shape and direction. We can even abide a positivism that had yet to impoverish reality. But we should tolerate no more than he an outworn creed.