

JEFFERSON'S IDEAS ON CLASS RELATIONS

"His faith was a class faith and his appeal was a class appeal." Charles A. Beard

Jeffersonian democracy means all things to all men and has been claimed by all men for their own. In the course of its absorption in American traditions there has been a tendency to obscure the outlines of Jeffersonian democracy and to overlook the features which made it peculiarly Jeffersonian. A naive visitor from abroad, stopping to sample American political oratory and hearing the vacuous amiabilities that are conventionally involved with Jefferson's name between the months of August and November, would be justified in concluding that Jefferson was the fountainhead of American demagoguery and an unspeakable scoundrel. In fact, Jeffersonian democracy represented in its day, however imperfectly, the first systematic attempt to take the control of public affairs in America out of the hands of special privilege and vest it in the people. It was thus necessarily based upon a class appeal, the kind of appeal that would be abhorrent to many who invoke its name today.

The extent to which the class struggles of his day were reflected in the thought of Thomas Jefferson therefore has more than an academic interest. But if we are to understand Jefferson's ideas about class relationships, we must first remember that he was not a systematic thinker. Only his theory of government and natural rights has any sharp outline which can be perceived in the mass of his writings. He gave no systematic exposition of his views. He had no philosophy of history in the sense that James Madison and Karl Marx had philosophies of history. One scans his writings in vain for any such sharp, penetrating, and yet comprehensive statement about class relations as may be found in the Federalist Number 10 or in the Communist Manifesto.

It is, however, possible to piece together the scattered observations of Jefferson upon class relationships and to form a fairly consistent view of them. Again it should be pointed out that consistency was not the strongest of Jefferson's

virtues. Beard has pointed out how Jefferson was capable of praising and endorsing both John Adams' Defense of the American Constitutions, which contained a strong argument for class rule, and John Taylor's passionate counterblast, An Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States, which attacked capitalist groups as exploiters of the landed class.(1)

The Formation and Solidarity of Classes

Jefferson's ideas about the formation of classes are somewhat contradictory. The elementary fact that economic activity is the prime factor in the formation of classes and the principle that economic status is a most significant way of classifying mankind are both so frequently found in his writings that citations are superfluous. At the same time, he was fond of referring to men in broad categories which are more psychological than economic, fond of juxtaposing 'aristocrats' to 'the people'. And we find explicit statements to the effect that psychological causes operate in a sort of social vacuum to form, or at least to strengthen, class differentiation. Thus "the division into whig and tory is founded in the nature of men", (2) and "There is a natural aristocracy among men", of which the grounds are "virtue and talents" as well as an "artificial aristocracy founded upon wealth and birth without either virtue or talents".(3) Notice that the economic aristocracy is the one held to be "artificial".

Upon other occasions Jefferson recognizes that economic factors influence attitudes of mind, and reverses the order of the causes:

"The pursuits of agriculture [are] the best preservative of morals." (4)

"Our greediness for wealth, and fantastical expense, have degraded, and will degrade, the minds of our maritime citizens. These are the peculiar vices of commerce." (5)

I shall give a fuller account of this dualism in Jefferson's thought in a subsequent section on classes and political parties.

1. Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy, p/ 415.
2. Writings, P.L. Ford ed., VIII, p. 150. (This edition will subsequently be cited as VIII Ford 150.) See also X Ford 281 and 317.
3. IX Ford 425 (1813).
4. Writings, H. A. Washington ed., II, p. 248.

Searching the writings of Jefferson, we find that he makes reference to practically all the classes that existed in his time--small farmers, great landowners, sea traders, merchants, speculators, mechanics, artisans, clergy, and slaves. Naturally, the classes of which he makes most frequent mention are those likely to be found in a predominantly agricultural country, affected with a considerable amount of commercial and mercantile activity. There is practically no reference to industrial capitalists but their existence is implied by the use of the word 'artisan', which in those days meant an employed worker, as distinguished from the 'mechanic', or independent worker. A noteworthy feature is the separate classification of speculators and clergy. In those days capitalists, in their capacity of speculators in public securities, were more important, at least to the agrarians, than capitalists in any other role. Hence the importance of a distinction which we seldom make today. The frequent distinction of the clergy seems to be a survival of the French practice of legal classification, peculiar to the ancien regime. Jefferson's references to the clergy--almost always 'priests'--are generally in a European context.

An interesting feature of Jefferson's thought is the ubiquitous, unquestioned assumption that economic classes have a high degree of solidarity, i.e., that their members have common interests and that they join in the pursuit of these interests. I have not found any trace in Jefferson's writings of the idea that intra-class division could be a very decisive factor in history. While there is no explicit statement about class solidarity, its absence denoted complete acceptance of the fact rather than disbelief. For Jefferson class solidarity was one of the primary assumptions of political science.

Jefferson and the Small Farmers

Granting the existence of social-economic classes, what class did Jefferson value most? On this question at least there is no ambiguity. In his life and in his writings Thomas Jefferson allied himself with, represented, valued, and praised above all others, the small farming class, despite the fact that he was an aristocratic landowner. He despised artisans, disliked, feared and fought capitalists of all kinds, and even did his best to prevent the continuance of an hereditary agrarian aristocracy in Virginia by abolishing primogeniture and entail. For the small farmers, and to a lesser extent the rural mechanics who served them--he alone had praise, and it was high praise.

In his early Notes on Virginia (1782) Jefferson wrote:

"While we have land to labor, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff." (6)

A Physiocratic conception of the primary value of agriculture persisted in his thought. In 1807 he wrote to a friend:

"Agriculture is the most useful of the occupations of man." (7)

His interest in agriculture was merged with his American patriotism:

"Farmers, whose interests are entirely agricultural....are the true representatives of the great American interest, and are alone to be relied on for expressing the proper American sentiments." (8)

Because of the eulogistic manner in which he always speaks of 'the people' and his general distaste for all other classes, it is safe to assume that Jefferson consciously or unconsciously identified 'the people' with small farmers. Artisans in towns were not the people--they were 'mobs'. Jefferson's dislike of both upper and lower classes in the cities took the form of disparagement of city life:

"I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man." (9)

The Economic Relations of Classes

In the discussion of economic relations it is possible to put major emphasis upon either the

6. III Ford 269.
7. V Wash. 83.
8. VII Ford 170 (1797). If it should be necessary for some farmers to turn to another trade, Jefferson preferred the sea to manufactures. IV Ford 88 (1785). On the virtues of agriculture see also III Ford 269, 279 (1782).
9. Jefferson felt that the French Revolution failed because of city mobs. IX Ford 429 (1813) He attributed the vices of city mobs to the fact that they were exploited and hungry. III Ford 269.

functional interdependence of economic classes or upon their mutual antagonism over the manner in which the social produce is distributed. The choice a man makes between these alternatives is a clue to much of his social philosophy. Jefferson's writings indicate that he was more concerned with the struggle of classes, and that he felt this struggle to be one of the major data of history. The conception of class exploitation is always present in his writings.

"Experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind; for I can apply no milder term to the governments of Europe and to the general prey of the rich on the poor." (10)

The conception that an hereditary aristocracy is parasitic upon the public is expounded in a letter to de Meunier in 1786, when Jefferson feared that the Cincinnati would grow into such an aristocracy:

"An industrious farmer occupies a more dignified place in the scale of beings, whether moral or political, than a lazy loungeur, valuing himself on his family, too proud to work, and drawing out a miserable existence by eating on that surplus of other men's labor, which is the sacred fruit of the helpless poor." (11)

Again:

"Kings, nobles and priests....are an abandoned confederacy against the happiness of the mass of the people." (12)

Government itself can be a device of exploitation through tariffs and taxes:

"I think we have more machinery of government than is necessary, too many parasites living on the labor of the industrious." (13)

10. IV Ford 360 (1787).

11. IV Ford 176.

12. IV Ford 269 (1786).

13. VII Wash. 378 (1824)

See also X Ford 45. Jefferson was proud that under his American governmental exploitation of the virtuous had been reduced to a minimum.

Jefferson also perceived that the clergy and nobility of France were exploiting the people by throwing the burden of taxation upon them.(14)

Commercial wars like those of England Jefferson felt to be one of the greatest ways of exploiting the people "to feed the avidity of a few millionaire merchants and to keep one thousand ships of war for the protection of their commercial speculations." This was advanced as a good reason to keep America largely agricultural.(15)

Jefferson never failed to see the class aspects of domestic legislation. A proposal of 1793 to afford exclusive privileges to American ships he termed an attempt to sacrifice "the whole mass of our farmers" to "the class of shipwrights".(16) In 1809, when the exigencies of international politics had caused him to encourage domestic manufactures "to the extent of our own consumption", and when the shippers complained that their carrying trade would be cut, he accused them of a desire to injure agriculture and manufactures to their interest. (17) Later, when the country was agitated by the tariff issue, he declared it "an extraordinary proposition that the Agricultural, mercantile, and navigating classes should be taxed to maintain that of manufactures." (18)

Thus there is an interplay of class interests, with each class--except the agricultural--being accused of a desire to exploit. But here, as elsewhere, the direct economic relations are not considered to be exploitative. It is the use of political means to carry out economic exploitation that most occupies Jefferson's attention.

To the end of his life Jefferson never ceased to believe that the great machinery of capitalism was plundering the American farmers under the wily and malicious guidance of the federalists. In 1825 he

14. I Ford 125 (1821).

15. X Ford 35 (1816). See also VII Ford 334 (1799).

16. VII Wash. 625 (1793).

17. IX Ford 239.

18. X Ford 285 (1823).

wrote to William B. Giles:

"Their younger recruits [i. e. the federalists] who, having nothing in them of the feelings...of '76, now look to a single and splendid government of an aristocracy, founded on banking institutions, and moneyed incorporations under the guise and cloak of their favored branches of manufactures, commerce and navigation, riding and ruling over the plundered plowman and beggared yeomanry." (19)

Such grievances, Jefferson had always held, could be properly redressed by political action. In 1791 he concluded that the evil features of the American government could be corrected by "the augmentation of the members in the lower House so as to get more agricultural representation, which may put that interest above that of the stock-jobbers." (20) After forming the Republican party and fighting into power, he declared it his aim to make it impossible for "the few to riot on the labors of the many." (21)

In Europe, as in America, the masses were exploited. In France, the nobles were so wealthy that they did not deem it necessary to have their surplus land labored, so that the countryside was filled with wretched beggars. (22)

As for England, the whole of society there was a seething mass of exploitation and misery. There Jefferson discerned three classes: 1) aristocrats, composed of the nobility, wealthy commoners, the high ranks of priesthood, and the officers of the government; 2) the laboring class; and 3) the paupers, who made up one fifth of the population:

"The aristocracy, which has the laws and government in their hands, have so managed them as to reduce the third description [paupers] below the means of supporting life; and to force the second, whether employed in agriculture or the arts, to the maximum of labor which the construction of the human

19. X Ford 356.

21. IV Wash. 548 (1804).

22. VII Ford 35 (1785).

20. V Ford 275.

body can endure, and to the minimum of food, and of the meanest kind, which will preserve it in life, and in sufficient strength to perform its functions. ...The pauperism of the lowest class, the abject suppression of the laboring, and the luxury, the riot, the domination and the vicious happiness of the aristocracy. In their hands the paupers are used as tools to maintain their own wretchedness and to keep down the laboring portion by shooting them whenever the desperation produced by the cravings of their stomachs drives them into riots."(23)

True, Americans owned slaves, Jefferson went on to say, but English wage slavery was worse. He realized that slavery too was exploitation (24) and observed that slaveowners were rarely seen to work themselves. Still he felt that Negroes needed some special kind of inducement or compulsion to labor.(25) It has become a commonplace among students of American history that Jefferson favored the abolition of slavery. It is worth observing, however, that he did not believe that Negro slaves should be accorded the same right to fight for their freedom that he was so happy to see freemen exercise. Jefferson was not above playing the role of an informer when he thought a slave uprising possible in the United States. In 1793, when word came to him that two Frenchmen of Negro extraction were headed for Charleston from Santo Domingo with the purpose of inciting a slave rebellion, he wrote to the governor of South Carolina to warn him. (26) Here, dramatically displayed, are the boundaries of the Jeffersonian version of natural rights!

The Political Relations of Classes

Professor Charles A. Beard, in his Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy, (27) shows very clearly how inconsistent was Jefferson's conception of the relationship of economic classes to political parties. A number of quotations could be extracted from Jefferson's writings to show that he believed

23. VI Wash. 375-383. The bitterness of this letter is no doubt partly due to the fact that we were then at war with England.
24. III Ford 267 (1782) and VI Wash. 378.
25. VII Wash. 310 (1823).
26. IV Wash. 97-98.
27. P. 327 ff.

the American parties of his day to be chiefly psychological in origin:

"The division into whig and tory is founded in the nature of men." (28)

"For in truth, the parties of Whig and Tory are those of nature. They exist in all countries, whether called by these names or those of Aristocrats and Democrats, Cote Droite and Cote Gauche, Ultras and Radicals, Serviles and Liberals. The sickly, weakly, timid man fears the people and is a tory by nature. The healthy strong, and bold cherishes them, and is formed a whig by nature.(29)

Such flat declarations would seem to be conclusive. Let it be noticed, however, that these are categorical generalizations about man, the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson the philosopher. When he was writing as an historian of his times, Jefferson's account of party differences took on a different color.

During the period when our first American parties were emerging he gave the following analysis of the split. The anti-republicans were composed of refugees and tories, British merchants, American merchants, speculators and holders in banks and public funds, most officers of the federal government, office hunters, and nervous persons afraid of change. The republicans were composed, he observed of the entire body of landholders and "the body of laborers, not being landholders, whether in husbandry or the arts." The republicans, he thought, outnumbered the others - by 500 to 1, but the ant-republicans had the advantage of living in the cities where they had ready access to each other. Moreover "they give chief employment to the newspapers and therefore have most of them under their command." (30) The essentially economic character of this analysis needs no comment.

The essential features of this analysis were repeated the following year in Jefferson's famous letter to Mazzei. The point is sufficiently important to warrant the risk of some repetition,

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28. VIII Ford 150 (1802) See also X Ford 281 and 317 (1823-4).

29. X Ford 281 (1823)

30. VII Ford 47 (1795); Jefferson was highly conscious of capitalist control over the press; see his letter to Elbridge Gerry IV Wash. 172-3 (1797)

"The main body of our citizens, however, remain true to their republican principles; the whole landed interest is Republican, and so is a great mass of talents. Against us are the Executive, the Judiciary, two out of three branches of the Legislature, all the officers of the government, all who want to be officers, all timid men who prefer the calm of despotism to the boisterous sea of liberty, British merchants and Americans trading on British capital, speculators and holders in the banks and public funds." (31)

Now both of these analyses have this characteristic: that while they discern what we today regard as the fundamental parties in the struggle--the landed and capitalist interests--they also mention other groups--the Judiciary, timid men, office-seekers, etc.--which are not economic classes. It does not seem to have occurred to Jefferson that the executive, judiciary, and parts of the legislature were anti-republican simply because they were composed of or dominated by capitalist interests; or that the office-seeking group had to base its appeal largely upon one class or the other. In brief, he did not see, as Marx would have seen and as John Taylor of Caroline did see, that the non-economic groups were simply servitors or sub-classifications of the fundamental economic classes.

Thus while Jefferson may not have given due consideration to the primacy of economic classes in the political struggle, he realized full well that they were ranged upon opposite sides of the political fence.

Jefferson's historical analysis was preponderantly economic, but his philosophical generalizations about man's political life emphasized psychological traits, which he apparently regarded as innate. One can only wonder whether he seriously believed that the well-fed speculators and merchants of the cities were sickly and timid by nature. How did he square the notion of innate mental traits--timidity, fear of the people, 'natural' adherence to tory and whig factions--with the Lockean idea of the tabula rasa? How did he reconcile it with his own frequent recognition that economic life conditions mental outlook? It is unfortunate that Jefferson

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31.IV Wash. 139 (April 24, 1796). Jefferson was also keenly aware of the class nature of the fight over the foreign policy of the United States. See his letter to Madison, May 13, 1793, III Wash. 557.

was not as rigorous a thinker as some of his contemporaries.

An explanation of his inconsistencies may be sought in Jefferson's own peculiar personal status. A leader of the small farmers, he came from the ranks of a landed aristocracy. He chose to advocate the cause of the little man out of a mixture of humanitarianism, distrust for the ways of city men, and certain highly intellectualized convictions about the nature of desirable government. Since these non-economic, individual motives operated in Jefferson's own case, it is possible that he attributed them to other men in an unwarranted degree. And if the representatives of the people could be moved largely by intellectual convictions and native sympathies, why could the same not be true of their opponents? Thus the political universe is made to mirror Jefferson's own mind. Despite the obvious class character of the party battles of his era, which intruded upon his philosophical beliefs and left a strong mark in his writings, there was always a residuum of his initial feeling that sympathies--the cherishing of the people or the fear of the people--and abstract notions of government were as decisive with others as they were with him.

Conclusion

Indeed, Jefferson's anomalous class position may be used to account for many features of his career. In theory he was inconsistent, and his practice could not follow his theory. Theoretically, Jefferson was a democratic fire-eater who wanted a rebellion every twenty years and insisted that the tree of liberty be nourished with the blood of tyrant. In practice he was a mild agrarian reformer, devoted to strict economy and democratic taxation policies, but failing to attempt even so elementary a reform as universal male suffrage. In his theory social struggles were usually portrayed as the interplay of 18 century abstractions, and his statements which come nearest to constituting a theory of history flatly assert the primacy of psychological causes. Yet as a practical politician he well knew how to pour his policies and appeals into the mold of class interest; and writing as a commentator on his times, he has given us a penetrating picture of the economic and class aspect of political struggles.

Perhaps Jefferson failed to make class struggle an integral part of his social theory because he expected and hoped for the abatement of such struggles in the enduring victory of the agrarian democracy. There were lands to be settled

in the West, and the immediate future promised a rapid expansion of the agricultural class. The vicious proclivities of the city mobs would not assert themselves in America because, if they became hard pressed, there were "vacant lands for them to resort to." (32) This pleasant prospect seemed to extend as far into the future as one could see:

"I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries: as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become as corrupt as in Europe." (33)

Had Jefferson himself been drawn from their ranks, his championship of the small farmers might have been less philosophical and more militant. Perhaps then his theory would have been more rigorous and consistent, his endorsement of agrarian rebellion more pregnant with practical significance. However that may be, the farmers paid a heavy price for having as their leader this magnanimous aristocrat, who could erect in his hall at Monticello a marble bust of his greatest foe.

Based upon small farmers, contemptuous of city 'mobs', and led in the paths of compromise by an enlightened slave-owning aristocrat--such was Jeffersonian democracy. History, with characteristic brutality, chose to strangle the Jeffersonian ideal in the slow course of a century. Although Jefferson's thoroughly democratic theories of government will be part of any system of political organization which is not based upon cynicism and oppression, the vital substance of Jeffersonian democracy, its peculiarly Jeffersonian aspect, has little relation to current political and economic realities. The small farmers have been outnumbered and crushed; the landed Southerners have become servitors rather than opponents of the great capitalists, into whose hands control has fallen; and the city 'mobs'--those "panders of vice and the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned" (34)-- have become 'the people', upon whom the preservation of democracy depends.

32. III Ford 269 (1805).
33. IV Ford 479 (1787).
34. IV Ford 88 (1785).