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THE REVOLUTION OF 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic

Edited by James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf

University of Virginia Press Charlottesville and London

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CHAPTER 6

Thomas Jefferson and the Psychology of Democracy

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To speak of "the psychology of democracy" may startle readers. It may even strike some as an incongruous phrase, like the politics of the stomach or the economics of pride. I acknowledge the cognitive dissonance the concept creates; we are not used to linking a form of government with human consciousness. Still, talking about the psychology of democracy enables me to get at an elusive feature in the transformation of the United States from a postcolonial society to a

democratic nation. It came to me after years of trying—often under the pressure of criticism—to express what I considered Thomas Jefferson's most distinctive contribution to the political mores of his country.

The thesis that I shall put forward is that his election to the presidency in 1800 enabled Jefferson to embark on a campaign to expunge the colonial residues that cluttered Americans' path—at least the white, male portion of them—to a democracy that was social as well as political. A student of both politics and people, Jefferson had a keen sense of the psychological component in the change from a monarchy to a democracy. He knew that it would take more than well-meaning prescriptions to change the political consciousness of his countrymen. While the colonists had never acquired the aristocratic manners or royal ceremonies of Great Britain, the ideals associated with them had exerted a strong influence on them, particularly among the upper class.

As president, Jefferson steered the country toward a fresh, indeterminate, emotional space where citizens, not subjects, might experiment with new ways of being free. Jefferson's success in promoting democracy and freedom produced a blend of egalitarianism and individualism that has characterized American culture ever since. What was truly remarkable was that Jefferson was astute enough to see that to liberate and democratize Americans would entail changes in attitudes, behavior, affect, and desire, not just opinion. Our own familiarity with democratic mores has obscured the fact that, like any set of cultural preferences, democratic ones had to be carefully learned, and then only after the habits and sensibilities of American adults—once monarchical subjects—had been eradicated.

Democracy, Jefferson realized, was as much about social interactions as political beliefs, demanding behavioral changes as urgently as new convictions. This was not an obvious conclusion, especially at a time when the most enlightened thinkers tended to talk about transforming society in strictly cerebral terms. Nor was the insight typical of reformers who are usually animated by the didactic impulse to tell people what is good for them. Long before behavioral responses became the domain of social psychologists and reality television, Jefferson analyzed the effects of the decorum of everyday life. He perceptively gauged the insufficiency of lecturing his people into progressive practices. Instead he set in motion a variety of convention-shattering initiatives, based on the assumption that the body had to move out of the box before the brain could imagine different ways of behaving.

The past for Jefferson contained frozen privileges and moribund arrangements. People lived, as it were, in a mask cut off from their real selves as they performed the parts imposed by the hierarchical institutions of church and state. He understood that formality was the handmaiden of hierarchy, heightening the consciousness of rank and promoting lower-class deference. The presumption of social superiority, conveyed in dress, carriage, voice, and gesture worked through a sociology of forms that, once internalized, served as a pervasive check to democratic action. Entirely congruent with Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Jefferson's campaign to rouse his fellow countrymen from the habits of monarchy sought to awaken the self to its routinized responses.

Richard Sennett titled his influential study on contemporary society *The Hidden Injuries of Class*; Jefferson might have written a book on the conspicuous slights of rank. His actions demonstrate his awareness that equality of esteem could flourish only after the psychological underpinnings of a hierarchical society had been deconstructed.¹ Jefferson opened his contemporaries to the sensations and feelings of an egalitarian world through action, as demonstrated in the notorious and exemplary Merry affair.

In 1803 Great Britain sent Anthony Merry as its first minister to the United States. He came with his wife. A wealthy and sociable couple, the Merrys entered Washington while it still retained its bucolic features amid the various building sites scattered across the rural landscape, to which they contributed their own construction plans by devising a residence remodeled from two existing houses. Accompanied by a parade of white servants carrying an endless succession of crates, boxes, and trunks, the Merrys made a grand entrance. Their arrival alerted the denizens of the capital city that their social betters had arrived.²

On 28 November, Secretary of State James Madison brought the new ambassador to the White House for his formal presentation to the president. Merry, in full diplomatic regalia, wore a coat trimmed in black velvet and gold braid, a plumed hat, handsomely buckled shoes, and that European mark of high status, a sword. The president, disconcertingly, was nowhere to be found when they arrived. Minutes elapsed while Madison looked for him among the downstairs rooms of the White House. When Jefferson finally emerged from his study through a side door, he horrified Merry, who later reported that the president was not merely in a state of undress, but "*actually standing in slippers down at the heels*," his "pantaloon, coat, and under-clothes indicative of utter slovenliness and indifference to appearances and in a state of negligence actually

studied." We have to give Merry credit for that last observation—"in a state of negligence actually studied"—for he discerned that the president's attire had been well thought out.³ He protested vigorously about this and further breaches of etiquette, but Madison, speaking for the new administration, pointedly told Merry that he could no more demand social distinctions in the United States than an American emissary could ask for equality at the Court of St. James's.⁴

While some at the time attributed Jefferson's dismissive reception of Merry to his well-known Anglophobia, it bore a striking resemblance to the behavior he had cultivated from the outset of his administration. At his inauguration he had failed to wear even the ceremonial sword that John Adams had sported four years earlier.⁵ Disdaining the company of dignitaries, marching band, or honor guard, Jefferson had walked to the Capitol accompanied by friends and supporters. When he concluded his inaugural address and the crowd dispersed, he returned to his lodgings, where he took a place among his fellow boarders at the noon dinner table.

Once ensconced in the White House, Jefferson banished protocol—that system of formalities carefully calibrated to reflect publicly the importance of dignitaries at official gatherings. He even chose a round table for his dinners to avoid arraying his guests in any semblance of a hierarchical order. At Jefferson's parties, he who was standing nearest to the dining room door when the meal was announced went in first. On other occasions, the president was quite capable of answering the front door of the White House if he happened to be walking by, even if dressed in his lounging robe. He also abandoned the levees and receptions of the Washington and Adams eras, leaving only the Fourth of July and New Year's Day for "open houses" when all in the capital were invited to drop in.⁶

Far from indicating thoughtlessness or negligence on the president's part, these measures had been carefully considered. They provided the contrast with the Federalists that Jefferson wished to sharpen; they embodied the republican simplicity that he had extolled in his presidential campaign. More to the point of my thesis, they nurtured a psychology of democracy.

Jefferson's preference for *pêle-mêle* over protocol pulled forms out from under men and women, placing them in situations that might be characterized as coerced spontaneity. These gestures startled, provoked, pleased, and irritated, depending on one's attachment to formality. By removing the venerable props to a society of ranks and degrees, Jefferson weakened the entire edifice, for the essence of formal behavior is its routinization, its unquestioned channeling of

movements into the mannerisms that choreograph status. Making men and women aware of their actions broke through the sense of naturalness that always gives force to habit. They also flushed out the political messages inherent in etiquette. Under the veil of anonymity Jefferson called attention to the implications of his confrontations with the arbiters of polite society. In a piece in the Philadelphia *Aurora* he proclaimed dramatically that since 4 March 1801 there had been a repudiation of a "Court of the United States." "That day," he wrote, "buried levees, birthdays, royal parades, processions with white wands, and the arrogance of precedence in society, by certain self-styled friends of order, but truly styled friends of privileged orders."⁷ Further to advertise these convictions, Jefferson took daily horseback rides about Washington, unaccompanied by a servant. Such indifference to etiquette disgusted Federalists like New Hampshire senator William Plumer, who confided in his diary that the president's appearance was so at variance with the practices of gentlemen that it "ill accords with the dignity of the Chief of a great nation."⁸

Clearly Jefferson had precipitated a clash of sensibilities, but he understood the political overtones better than those he offended did. Recognizing that a social system operates through habit, he exposed the routinized shame, embarrassment, envy, gratification, confidence, and fear that invisibly policed the interactions among men and women, children and adults, and social inferiors and their presumed superiors. In the economy of forms, emotions act as the switching boxes triggering movement in the service of a reigning set of precepts, just as clothes, speech, and body language provide the cues. Strengthened by daily exercise, established ways are usually strong enough to repel intellectual challenges to their legitimacy. Jefferson took advantage of a citizenry critical of elite rule to challenge the old forms and steered his countrymen toward democratic ways.

It was the genius of Jefferson to give substance to the bombast of revolutionary rhetoric by clarifying and politicizing the latent democratic tendencies of ordinary American men. As Jeffrey Pasley and Seth Cotlar have demonstrated, Jefferson's party pioneered the techniques of political mobilization.⁹

What made the Jeffersonian campaign necessary were the differing lessons America's leaders took away from their experience with resistance and revolution. Even though the violent assertions of American rights had shaken adults from their colonial cocoon, the American Revolution could still be interpreted atavistically as a recapturing of a more perfect past, leaving novelties

suspect. Ancestor worship might be turned to the advantage of the revolutionary leaders themselves, as the Federalists began doing with their adulation of Washington. Like their parents, they had long lived under the shadow of seventeenth-century founders, whether the founders were the romanticized cavaliers of the South or New England's intrepid Puritans.

Once the war for independence had been won, the majority of Federalists were ready to settle down and enjoy self-government much on the social terms that existed in their youth. Those drawn to the Constitution's construction of central power hoped that the country might grow more like Great Britain as it acquired stability, wisdom, and refinement. They wanted to seal off the revolutionary era and teach a new generation of young Americans the truths of good government. Alexander Hamilton's reaction to Adam Smith's idea of self-regulating trade without "a common directing power," is illustrative. He called it "one of those wild speculative paradoxes, which have grown into credit among us, contrary to the uniform practice and sense of the most enlightened nations."¹⁰

For the Federalists the story of the American Revolution followed the sons of liberty from their spirited rebellion against a tyrannical mother country to their maturation through trials of fire into founding fathers. Because so much of the account was rendered through the individual biographies of patriots and leaders, it became a collective record of virtuous lads breathing the free air of a simple land—a virginal England—and growing straight enough as men to stand up for their rights. Local heroes fought a corrupt, autocratic, distant parent in King George. Opportunity was wrested from oppression, sacrifice and courage rewarded with independence. The countries in that candid world that Jefferson evoked in his famous declaration had acted as witnesses to these acts of vigorous manhood.

Not surprisingly, this version of the nation's beginnings attracted the Federalists because it was assimilable to older heroic sagas in which leaders and people were divided like actors and chorus. The past contains all the story lines for the future. Deeds of collective violence and law breaking were redeemed by demonstrations of civic responsibility. Institutions were not overthrown so much as improved, only the unworthy British custodians of those institutions being personally repudiated. Chastened by their own experience with tyrants, Americans were expected to show due respect for legitimate authority and eschew dissent, having won the prize of self-government. Above all, those who

enjoyed the vote should appreciate the inherent dangers to a well-ordered state from enthusiastic excesses and unchecked impulses.

In the Federalists' drama of nationhood, Americans had fought a war for independence, a remarkable event but no more so than those contained in the ancient histories that the classically educated American gentry knew by heart. Young men became their own masters as in classical tales. Indeed, those stories provided a treasury of allusions for the leaders who presided over America's destiny in war and peace, rebellion and constitution making, supplying as well the pseudonyms of Publius, Agrippa, Cincinnatus, Cato, and Brutus. America's birth might represent a *novus ordo seclorum*, as the dollar bill proclaims, but the gentry origins of the founders guaranteed that they would be looking to the Old World for both precepts and approval. It is a perspective that Hamilton again inadvertently gave away when he wrote in a letter, "with Virginia on my right and New England on my left." Facing toward Europe could be assumed.¹¹

The specialness of the United States for most Federalists lay not in signaling a new dispensation for the human race but in offering enlightened statesmen an opportunity to apply the lessons of the past. According to these national leaders, when the American colonies separated from Great Britain, they freed themselves from the mother country's corruptions, but not from the pure model itself. Their history taught that order preceded liberty and that gentlemen filtered from the mass of the voters could best preserve that order. These Federalists, true sons of Englishmen, extolled personal freedom, but it tended to be the freedom of independent gentlemen.

The first elections under the newly constituted United States gave responsibility to men who were socially conservative and intellectually unadventurous. Many, including Vice President John Adams, drew their truths from a kind of secular Calvinism, an amalgam of wisdom drawn from the classics and the Bible: men are prone to sin, and society is subject to degenerative diseases. While in Europe as the French and English emissaries from the United States, Adams had confided to Jefferson his fears that elections would open the nation to the dangers of foreign influence. "Elections to offices which are great objects of Ambition," he wrote Jefferson, "I look at with terror."¹²

The Jeffersonian idea of freedom did not accord with the public philosophy of the Federalist leaders, who viewed through classical and Christian glasses the state of nature in the unkind light that Thomas Hobbes made famous. Government offered a haven from the heartless war of all against all. When men

sought to throw off authority, it was Old Nick speaking through them. Where the Federalists connected man's fallen nature to the civic duty to follow righteous leaders, Jefferson indicted just this disempowering belief, isolating it as the obstacle to fulfilling America's revolutionary potential. He blamed elitist political practices, not the fallen state of man, for the misrule history recorded.

James Duane described Jefferson as the best rubber-off of dust that he had ever met.¹³ The metaphor is apt because it was Jefferson's peculiar relation to the settled and stationary—those things that collect dust—that separated him from almost all of his peers in the revolutionary elite. His campaign to reorient American voters involved cultivating an appreciation of novelty, undermining deference, and enhancing the self-confidence of ordinary white men. The natural rights philosophy did not represent for Jefferson, as it did for others, an intellectual discourse going back to the Stoics. Rather it announced a new liberation from the old social order that men, so long alienated from their true natures, might recover. For Jefferson as for Thomas Paine, the implementation of natural rights required radical surgery on the traditional body politic. More urgently, the dead hand of the past had to be lifted from the shoulders of the living. Liberation had to be actual, psychological, to become politically effective. But unlike Paine, Jefferson was no deracinated intellectual. His abhorrence of privilege and prerogative swelled within the bosom of Virginia's haughty, slave-holding elite. Anomalous as his views were, considering his birth, this at least gave him the advantage of knowing his opponents as an inside observer.

The elements in Jefferson's psychology of democracy were intertwined and overlapping, as the Merry incident illustrates. He initiated new forms for White House etiquette that treated ambassadors with the same respect as average visitors. By raising typical Americans to the same plane as foreign dignitaries, these new manners instilled self-respect and obliterated deference in the same stroke.

Like any dabbler in human nature, Jefferson understood others to the extent that he understood himself. Indeed, one gets the strong impression from Jefferson's writings that he sought to release the Thomas Jefferson in every man. Bristling with more curiosity than time to satiate it, Jefferson directed his social engineering to liberation. While virtue and responsibility were the esteemed civic ideals of the Federalists, he responded more rapturously to the freedom to explore, to express, to think, to travel, and to form opinions. Far more comfortable with fellow intellectuals, Jefferson gave no evidence of having learned firsthand what ordinary men wanted. Rather he knew better what they

ought to desire, politically and socially, and was fortunate that they responded to his didactic program.

During his years as American minister in Paris, Jefferson became fascinated with the idea of replacing the tacit consent of the governed with a genuine, explicit endorsement of current laws. "The earth belongs in usufruct to the living," he wrote Madison. Then, taking the proposition quite literally, he set about calculating the optimal space of years between appeals to the electorate if each generation were to hold its own referendum on the body of legislation regulating their lives. His absorption with this idea exposed his penchant for acting on a philosophical proposition. In many ways a truism, this assertion about the proprietorship of the living prompted Jefferson to nudge his correspondents with provocative proposals about regular plebiscites to ensure the living generations active consent to laws.¹⁴ Viewed as capricious even by his close associates, the notion makes sense within the concept of a psychology of democracy. In going to the polls to register approval of past legislation, American citizens would be actively reclaiming authority over all of the institutions that made a claim to their loyalty. As in the philosophical treatises of Hobbes and Locke, all obligations would be voluntarily assumed.

Working compatibly with the proprietorship of the living, the expectation of inexorable improvement undercut the importance of past knowledge, an attitude Jefferson nicely epitomized when he hailed the principle of representative government as a stunning, modern reworking of republican institutions. "The introduction of this new principle of representative democracy," he said, "has rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government." And then, delivering the coup de grace to classical learning, he added that this fact "in a great measure relieves our regret if the political writings of Aristotle, or of any other ancient, have been lost."¹⁵ Obeisance to the past was exactly the kind of disempowering emotion that Jefferson isolated and attacked. In language, too, he saw the past's restrictive force. If existing laws constrained each cohort of the living, how much more profoundly inhibiting was the conceptual vocabulary that each child inherited through language?

Jefferson targeted the purist as the enemy of linguistic freedom. Dilating on two words he had just learned, purism and neologism, he announced, "I am no friend, therefore, to what is called Purism, but a zealous one to the Neology which has introduced these two new words without any authority of any dictionary." "I consider purism," he went on to say, "as destroying the verve and beauty of the language," while neology "improves both and adds to its

copiousness."¹⁶ In the purist Jefferson espied the snob and the expert, two social arbiters that created distance among men—and we must acknowledge that only men rose to the level of political concern for him. Here the Language, that most human of all endowments, carried with it the power to humble those who used it poorly. Inadequate schooling, always productive of humility, stood in the way of that confidence in one's innate abilities that he associated with democracy. Despite his own mastery as a stylist, he reacted viscerally to the conservatism of grammarians, recognizing in "purism" an authority arrogated by those who knew how to speak correctly, even as they actually thought within a tiresomely conventional social idiom.

Even the lexicon of diplomatic negotiations carried subtle messages for Jefferson. Working over a draft treaty sent to him by John Adams in 1785, he replaced the word "necessities" with "comforts." The new American nation would establish commercial treaties on the basis of exchanging comforts, not necessities or luxuries, categories appropriate for the poor and wealthy but not the average American he addressed.¹⁷ Charles Ingersoll, an ardent Jeffersonian, gives us an idea of just how closely the concept of comfort became associated with the United States. Addressing the American Philosophical Society in 1823, Ingersoll announced, "Where American ingenuity has been put to trial it has never failed. In all the useful arts, and in the philosophy of comfort—that word which cannot be translated into any other language, and which . . . was reserved for maturity in America, we have no superiors."¹⁸ Like Jefferson, Ingersoll read the future through the preferences and accomplishments of ordinary men.

Imagining free conversation as the source of innovations in language, Jefferson called society the workshop for words while dictionaries were but the repositories of those terms already legitimated by usage.¹⁹ In his own day the principal neologisms came from variations on the suffix "ism." Proliferating much as "wise" flourished among us two decades ago (as in language-wise or relationship-wise), the new conceptual universe of "isms" suited Jefferson to a T. In a democratic society he saw that shared conviction—the "isms"—could create political affinities as easily as economic interests or inherited allegiances could.

Sensing on another occasion that his Federalist contemporaries were trying to elevate the new U.S. Constitution into a national shrine, Jefferson ridiculed those who looked on constitutions with "sanctimonious reverence and deemed them like the Ark of the Covenant too sacred to be touched." He touted his party as following "the guidance of . . . theory."²⁰ In countries "left free," the forms of social existence would be emergent and fluid. Without set practices, enduring

laws, revered constitutions, and confining vocabularies, experience itself would furnish the mind with the material for making of Jefferson's enduring appeal, for he articulated the values that continue to resonate today, with the less happy corollary that his success has encouraged an uncritical acceptance of their underlying assumptions.

The democratic sentiments that Jefferson expressed hardly compute with the prudish attitudes he inculcated in his daughters or the strict control he maintained over all the animate subjects and inanimate objects that filled Monticello. Did chucking out social protocols offer release from the tensions of his own legendary discipline? Or were relaxed manners and what today we would call self-actualization the logical extensions for him of his liberal commitments? An avid consumer and inveterate plantation improver, Jefferson may have detected in the tempo of the market a dynamic compatible with democratic practices. Neither slaves nor the members of the female sex could quite march to the beat of this drum, a fact he failed to discern as social when he called on nature to do the necessary discriminating. At a distance of two centuries, we can see that a distaste for racial mixing and emancipated women marked the limits of his social imagination.

Jefferson's championing of innovation cast him onto an uncharted road, totally off the map of the Federalists' path to stability. Thrusting himself against the common conviction that the state of human knowledge was optimal, that what was known was the sum total of what could be known, he conjured up a social world as yet unexplored and unexperienced. The French Revolution played an important part in this story. Its opening events in the spring and summer of 1789 sent Jefferson back to the United States thrilled with the swift translation of Enlightenment thought into revolutionary action. His timing could not have been worse, for in the temporary American capital of New York he discovered in George Washington's official family only elitists busy congratulating themselves on having put the lid on the same democratic impulses that had recharged Jefferson's commitment to change. At dinner parties he remembered that he found himself the only advocate of popular government.²¹

What the French Revolution offered Jefferson and those who rallied to his cause was the inspiration for a different understanding of the American Revolution, one that turned it into a rejection of the past, a rebellion of the spirit, a revolt against traditional sensibilities. The execution of Louis XVI energized a new generation of political aspirants already predisposed to attack Washington's pro-British policies. With act two running in France, the American

Revolution could be reinterpreted as the opening of a drama about human liberation. The intoxicating cry of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" drowned out the sober invocation of "a more perfect union." Unbounded approval and dumbstruck horror emerged swiftly once word reached the United States that the French had killed a king and formed a republic. The equally astounding news that the French armies had defeated the Prussians at Valmy thrilled Jefferson supporters, with its proof that soldiers led by lawyers, saddlers, and stonemasons could defeat one headed by noblemen.

Writing to Adams when they resumed their friendship after 1813, Jefferson unequivocally described their respective parties as "the enemies of reform" and its champions, the two sides splitting on the question of "the improbability of the human mind, in science, in ethics, in government." "Those who advocated reformation of institutions, *pari passu*, with the progress of science," he lectured Adams, "maintained that no definite limits could be assigned to that progress."²² Extolling the present while predicting an utterly new future, Jefferson dispensed confidence to those who lacked both a knowledge of history and a vivid connection to the past through a distinguished family line. As strictly as any French *philosophe*, Jefferson marked his own age as a great divide. Writing to James Madison, he banished the legitimacy of force in international relations to "the dark ages which intervened between ancient and modern civilization."²³

Having laid out my claim that Jefferson launched a campaign to detach American mores from their aristocratic British moorings with his psychology of democracy, I would like to speculate about the source of his animus to ceremonial formality. It is rather perplexing since he loved so dearly the embellishments of European culture—its music, architecture, literature, decorative arts, and salon sociability. Yet he evidently walled these tastes off from his political goals. Perhaps ordinary American householders—disciplined, unassuming, responsible—became Jefferson's ideal of democratic citizenship. Certainly common white men and women astounded foreign visitors with their intelligence, their self-assertiveness, and their disinclination to be taken for servants.²⁴ Rather than chafe at the brashness of average Americans, like many of his gentry associates, Jefferson politicized these qualities. It would be hard to find in his voluminous correspondence any dismissive statement about those of middling and lower rank. He saved his barbs for the grandees of Tidewater Virginia, who were capable of showing cold contempt to those beneath them.

Most probably Jefferson's impressions of lower-class behavior came to him circuitously, through the Scottish Common Sense thinkers who had incorporated

the rationality displayed by untutored market participants into their new concept of commercial society. Another source for his iconoclastic views might have been the contrast that his much admired father offered to the haughty ways of his mother's Randolph relatives. From his father's successful exertions on the Virginia frontier, perhaps a young Jefferson crafted a model for all bootstrapping white men. While he discussed the fate of the African Americans in his midst with perceptive detachment, ordinary white men aroused his reformist passions. Without being able to identify with them, Jefferson abstracted their virtues into a vision of a liberal, progressive democracy.

Three aspects of Jefferson's own psychology figure in his engagement with a psychology for a democratic people. They all deal with absences: his inattentiveness to the problem of order; his lack of concern about measuring up to European standards; and his apparent indifference to sneers about the femininity of his political style. Working together, these negative qualities sealed him off from worries and insults that might have inhibited other men. To start with the issue of order, most of America's revolutionary leaders became apprehensive at any sign of instability, as witness their reactions to Shays' Rebellion. When in 1786 an armed band of indebted farmers in western Massachusetts closed the county courts to prevent foreclosure proceedings, they frightened no less a cool head than George Washington. Jefferson, who heard the news in Paris, responded differently. He interpreted the little rebellion as a healthy outburst, penning his famous lines: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."²⁵

Achieving order had no salience for Jefferson, either as a goal or a problem. He believed in the self-regulating capacities of ordinary men, subscribing to the distinction Paine made in the opening of *Common Sense*, where he wrote, "society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices."²⁶ Beneath government and holding it up was a natural social harmony, a conviction totally different from the view that it took government to enable people to cooperate. This indifference to ordering people, so strange in a slaveholder, left Jefferson unsympathetic to the anxieties, not to mention the accomplishments, of the Federalists, or even to the concerns of his great friend and collaborator, James Madison. Much like Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jefferson blamed the artificial inventions of rank and the overweening arrogance of authority for interfering with men's natural goodness. Nature, on

the other hand, had barred women and blacks from the freemasonry of equals that he esteemed. In raising nature to this pitch of social authenticity, Jefferson was closing the doors to critical thinking about race and gender.

Jefferson was unfazed by fears of being provincial. Much of the presidential formality of Washington and Adams can be attributed to their longing to appear correct in the eyes of Europeans. Jefferson flouted the rules of etiquette and abandoned protocol when he assumed office. He threw open the White House to the general public long before Andrew Jackson did. His lack of formality—what some called his negligence about forms and dress—outraged the Federalists. It violated their sense of propriety and affronted their sensibilities. (Those who are "proper" tend to invest the quality with great importance.) One senses the parochial desire to avoid criticism—or worse, ridicule—from their unacknowledged cosmopolitan mentors in Washington's elaborate receptions and John Adams's fretting over the proper way to address officials. Jefferson, by contrast, gloried in his rejection of ostentation, as his Philadelphia *Aurora* article indicated, laying it at the feet of "certain self-styled friends of order, but truly styled friends of privileged orders."²⁷

From the point of view of Jefferson's "self-styled friends of order," widespread white male suffrage was laudatory as long as the common people deferred to the political wisdom of their superiors. It was exactly the removal of crucial areas of national governance from vulgar majorities in the individual states that had recommended the new Constitution. An elite leadership, filtered for talent, probity, and virtue, would reclaim a reputation that had been sullied by the excessive democratic outbursts of the revolutionary period. The decorum, formality, even the secrecy, of Washington's two administrations embodied the political mores of an American gentry eager to stabilize the structure of government with time-honored hierarchies of authority. These leaders deliberately distanced themselves from those who simply voted. To inspire awe was to elicit compliance with measures deemed beyond the ken of plain voters. Without the Federalists' goals and devoid of their provincial social attitudes, Jefferson could chart a fresh course for the nation.

One more feature of Jefferson's character compels our attention: his indifference to proving his manhood. Defenders of the status quo invariably equate change with challenges to gender roles. The concept of democracy drew many egregious characterizations from Federalists, and a lack of virility was one of them. Despite Jefferson's hostility to the civic participation of women, his psychology of democracy had a feminine undercurrent, with its egalitarian spirit

and evocation of man's peaceful, benign qualities. Hamilton referred to Jefferson's "womanish" attachment to the French Revolution. The flamboyant general James Wilkinson said "that the very existence of an army and democracy was incompatible; that republics were ungrateful; jealous of . . . military merit," and stingy. At a time when political duels proliferated, as partisans proved their manhood along with their political probity, Jefferson counseled his grandson to avoid duels and certainly not to fight to defend his grandfather's name, because, as he explained, it lies "in the hands of my fellow citizens at large, and will be consigned to honor or infamy be the verdict of the republican mass of our country, according to what themselves will have seen, not what their enemies and mine shall have said."²⁸

The peculiar fusion of egalitarianism and individualism that has long typified American political values grew directly out of Jefferson's understanding of the psychology of democracy. Unlike classical political philosophy, which linked democracy to the collective will of the people, Jefferson disaggregated the people into a majority of individuals, each seeking to pursue happiness in his own way. Emphasizing liberation over collective power, he idealized democracy as a system for nourishing curiosity, talent, and personal responsibility. While the French revolutionaries across the Atlantic focused on the general will and strove to create the corporate entity of the nation, Americans created a version of republicanism that was highly individualistic. Their ideal was man the doer, the inventor, the adapter, the improver— *homo faber* —the universal man hidden from himself by tyrants, priests, and overlords. The conflict between the good of the whole and the interests of individuals was washed away by the facile assumption that all individuals had the same interests—that of making free choices. With perfect equanimity Jefferson could write, "so invariable do the laws of nature create our duties and interest, that when they seem to be at variance, we might suspect some fallacy in our reasoning."²⁹

The enemies of Jefferson's program were hostile to parity, unwilling to think and feel as equals with their fellow men. The way their snobbery was transformed into political wisdom through the imaginative devices of culture outraged the new president. Helpless to change the elitism of the elite, Jefferson sought instead to limit their scope of power. Once in office, he dismantled as much of the Federalist armature for a vigorous central government as was practical. He cut taxes, reduced the size of the civil service, and let centralizing laws lapse.

Jefferson's efforts to contract the size of government and the revenues that supported it shrank the overall importance of government, redistributing attention away from the polity toward the economy, where everyone—women, adolescents, the propertyless, and the enslaved—had a place. While Jefferson certainly never sought an enlarged public role for either women or African Americans, his campaign to level hierarchies worked in diverse ways to hasten their day of civic recognition. Like the ordinary men whose emancipation from the serried ranks of traditional society preceded theirs, they found in the expanded commerce of the early Republic openings to a larger world. For women in particular the print revolution and religious reform movement brought an unprecedented scope for action, despite a popular rhetoric that idealized their domestic immurement. In a thousand new ways they were able to give the lie to assertions about their incapacity to participate in the public realm.

America offered Jefferson fertile soil for planting the seeds of free expression, political participation, and limited government. Like many a political theorist, he examined his own heart to find a formula for the right kind of government and discovered how much he hated the politics of deference. From this he concluded that his countrymen would not be ready for democratic action before they had dropped all habits of servility. Or more precisely, he saw in the typical American assertiveness the human material crying out for political validation. He never sought the interdependency of fraternity, nor did he fret about order, worry about European ridicule, or fear for his masculine reputation. Had he done these things, he might not have been able to think his way to a democratic psychology. Sometimes superficial, often optimistic without sufficient warrant, Jefferson established a powerful tie between ordinary citizens and American possibilities with an easiness captured in a line he wrote a friend in 1817: "My theory has always been, that if we are to dream, the flatteries of hope are as cheap, and pleasanter than the gloom of despair."³⁰

Tocqueville got American democracy only half right. He correctly registered the power of majority will in the United States that he visited in 1833. With every office in its gift and without competition from nobles or kings, the majority ruled. He also saw how the spirit of equality threatened liberty: the joys of equality were experienced daily, while liberty needed defending infrequently and then at the risk of enraging the dominant majority. He even seemed to enjoy the irony of the tyrant-slaying Americans raising a new tyrant in themselves. What Tocqueville missed was the aspiration, even hubris, built into American individualism. He construed individualism as a form of self-indulgence that led

self-satisfied Americans to withdraw from the public realm, the better to enjoy friends and family around their own hearth. What he failed to perceive was that the democratic psychology Jefferson had promoted liberated Americans from unwarranted authority and unacceptable gestures of superiority. In their fantasies, ordinary Americans imagined themselves as extraordinary. Social leveling had the inverse effect of infusing common men with a pride in their humanity that brooked no interference, not even from the tyrannical majority.

Jefferson's most enduring contribution to American politics came from his awareness of the debilitating effect of a ranked society's deferential manners. The latent possibility for politicizing these ways opened up when the French Revolution turned violent with the execution of the king and the declaration of the French Republic. The two presidential campaigns that followed gave him and his supporters occasions for arguing against hierarchical, authoritarian central government. After victory in 1800 Jefferson consciously set out to involve Americans in social situations primed to promote egalitarian practices. The policies of limiting government, undertaken during his presidency, linked individualism to antistatism.

By the end of Jefferson's presidency, the once tight braid of social, economic, and political authority came untwisted, leaving the separate strands exposed and weakened. Those with social preeminence had to contend for political power; those with political power were not necessarily accorded social prestige. Those with wealth often failed to command social respect. Those newly admitted to citizenship challenged the authority of those who considered themselves born to govern. The vitality of America's democratic individualism tempts us to minimize the effort it took to eradicate Old World notions. Was Jefferson pushing on an open door? Have I been talking about a paper tiger?

In the contemporary intellectual milieu, indignation at the hypocrisy of a slaveholder's championing of natural rights, not to mention his patronizing attitudes toward women, has once again exposed Jefferson to angry criticism. A century ago he suffered similar abuse, but then it was for the democratic enthusiasm that I have been discussing. As Paul Leicester Ford, the New England editor of his collected writings wrote disparagingly, "Unlike the Federalists, Jefferson was willing to discard the tradition of ages—that the people must be protected against themselves by the brains, money and better 'elements' of the country."³¹

Jefferson deserves the scrutiny of every generation of Americans, but we will lose our grasp of historical reality if we underestimate the power of the aristocratic values that flourished in 1800. He imagined a different kind of social world, and the peculiarities of time and place gave him a historic opportunity to act on that vision. Even with new and important questions to address to the past, we should not forget that Thomas Jefferson jump-started democracy in the United States and, by extension, the world.

NOTES

1. Richard Sennett, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1993); the phrase "equality of esteem" comes from J. R. Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality* (Berkeley, Calif., 1978).
2. Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, Va., 2000), 35.
3. *Ibid.*, 36.
4. Malcolm Lester, Anthony Merry *Redivivus: A Reappraisal of the British Minister to the United States, 1803-06* (Charlottesville, Va., 1978), 33.
5. Bernard A. Weisberger, *America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800* (New York, 2000), 1.
6. Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 22, 24. See also Robert R. Davis Jr., "Pell-Mell: Jeffersonian Etiquette and Protocol," *Historian* 43 (1981): 509-29.
7. Lester, Anthony *Merry*, 41.
8. William Plumer, *Memorandum of Proceedings in the United States Senate, 1803-1807*, ed. Everett Somerville Brown (New York, 1923), 550.
9. See chaps. 5 and 14 in this volume.
10. *Continentalist* No . 5 (April 1782), AHP 3:76.
11. Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government*, (Stanford, Calif., 1970).
12. Adams to Jefferson, 10 Nov. 1787, *AJL*, 210-12.
13. Entry for 25 Oct. 1775, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols., ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 2:218.

14. TJ to Madison, 6 Sept. 1789, *TJP* 15:392-97. 15. As quoted in John Dewey, ed., *Living Thoughts of Jefferson* (London, 1941), 59-60.
16. TJ to John Waldo, 16 Aug. 1813, L&B, 13:13; Dewey, *Living Thoughts*, 9.
17. TJ to John Adams, 27 Nov. 1785, *AJL*, 103.
18. Charles Ingersoll, *A Discourse Concerning the Influence of America* (Philadelphia, 1823), 24.
19. Dewey, *Living Thoughts*, 9. The Oxford English Dictionary has credited Jefferson with coining the word "Americanism"; he actually borrowed it from a Scottish clergyman, John Witherspoon.
20. TJ to Samuel Kercheval, 12 July 1816, Ford, 10:42; TJ to William Short, 3 Jan. 1793, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York, 1944), 321-22.
21. TJ, "Anas," Ford, 1: 160.
22. *AJL*, 500-501.
23. TJ to James Madison, 28 Aug. 1789, *TJP* 2:308.
24. Charles William Janson, *The Stranger in America* (London, 1807), 19, 197.
25. TJ to William Stephens Smith, 13 Nov. 1787, *TJP* 12:355-56.
26. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Philadelphia, 1776), 1.
27. Lester, Anthony *Merry*, 41.
28. 24 Nov. 1808, *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York, 1975), 510. For political dueling see Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 41-45.
29. TJ to J. B. Say, 1 Feb. 1804, L&B, 11:2-3.
30. TJ to Monsieur Barre de Marbois, Monticello, 14 June 1817, L&B, 15:130-31.
31. Ford, 1:12-15.