

Kentucky, in the summer of 1801 set the pattern for subsequent revivals, at which salvation was demonstrated by ranting, twitching, fainting and other behavior closely resembling the cataleptic fit. The revivalists were not only saving themselves, they explained, they were redeeming the entire nation. But some people could not be comfortable in a nation so redeemed. The revival encouraged the free play of passions quite as much as militant deism did; like so many other disturbing trends in American life, it came out of a western wilderness which had voted for Jefferson and which the purchase of Louisiana had done much to enlarge. Religious liberty should mean that men were free to choose the institutional form of their faith, Federalists thought, but they feared if it were also construed to encourage the growth of deism on the one hand or of non-institutional evangelicalism on the other, then not only the churches, but the entire national establishment would be threatened.

In the years after the Revolution, the American walked a strange tightrope between optimism and pessimism. The Revolution had been both a radical break with the past and a conservative affirmation of it; that ambivalence persisted through the early years of the national experience. The Federalist characteristically searched the American social order to find the stability that would justify the Revolution; for the same purpose the Democrat searched it to find flexibility. The Jeffersonian, at least in theory, endorsed flexibility, unpredictability, open-endedness; he led the Federalist to wonder how a society so characterized could endure. The Virginia democrat lived in one of the least flexible of American social arrangements; when the Federalist found him endorsing unpredictability he logically concluded that the Virginian was a hypocrite. Men long for what they do not have; the Federalist's glorification of social stability—his castigation of the decline of deferential behavior, his objection to the annexation of the "howling wilderness" of Louisiana, his jealous maintenance of an extensive federal judiciary, his concern for the advancement of intellectuality, virtue, and traditional religious observance—may well have come out of his appreciation of the forces that were operating to increase the anxieties of American life.

The Fears of the Jeffersonian Republicans

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Sometime during the summer or early fall of 1780, as the war for independence approached its most critical juncture and Americans faced an increasingly problematic future, the secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia, François Marbois, initiated a chain of events that would produce an intellectual and literary landmark of the Revolutionary age. As part of the French government's effort to secure useful information about its new and largely unknown ally, Marbois circulated a detailed questionnaire among influential members of the

Continental Congress. When a copy of the questionnaire found its way to Thomas Jefferson, then the besieged governor of Virginia, he seized the opportunity to organize his wide-ranging reflections on the conditions and prospects of his native country. Many revisions and several years later, when the *Notes on the State of Virginia* publicly appeared, they included what was to become Jefferson's best-known commentary on political economy. His celebration of "those who labour in the earth" as "the chosen people of God" has become a centerpiece of the republic's cultural heritage, a quintessential expression of its impassioned concern for the natural, earthbound virtue of a simple and uncorrupted people.

Jefferson's classic statement is so familiar that it might, at first glance, seem to require neither explanation nor analytical elaboration. But lurking beneath his deceptively simple paean to an agricultural way of life was a more sophisticated perception of how societies normally changed through time as well as an acute understanding of the moral and political implications of a social process that he assumed was inevitable. His memorable observations on the comparative merits of agriculture and manufactures were directly informed by a characteristically eighteenth-century conception of social change.

Jefferson was responding in the *Notes* to Marbois's inquiry about the present state of commerce and manufactures in Virginia. Making a distinction customary of the times, Jefferson reported that the Revolution had encouraged the prolific production of very coarse clothing "within our families," but for the "finer" manufactures Virginians desired, he continued, they would undoubtedly continue to rely on importations from abroad. Recognizing that such a pattern would be considered unfortunate by "the political economists of Europe," who had established the principle "that every state should endeavour to manufacture for itself," Jefferson contended that it was instead a wise and necessary response to peculiar American conditions and to the lessons of history. In Europe, where the land was either fully cultivated or "locked up against the cultivator" by the bars of aristocratic tradition, manufacturing was "resorted to of necessity not of choice." New forms of employment had to be created, in other words, for those people who could not find occupations on the land. In America, by contrast, where "an immensity of land" courted the industry of even a rapidly expanding population, an alternative form of political economy that would not force men into manufacturing was both feasible and eminently desirable. Citing the "happiness and permanence of government" in a society of independent and virtuous husbandmen, Jefferson emphasized the moral and political advantages of America's social opportunity that far outweighed narrowly economic considerations. If his countrymen foolishly and prematurely embraced manufacturing, he predicted, a consequent and inevitable corruption of morals would necessarily endanger the fabric of republican government. Once large numbers of Americans abandoned secure employment on the land to labor in workshops, they would become dependent on "the casualties and caprice of customers" for their subsistence, and such dependence had historically bred a "subservience and venality" that suffocated "the germ of virtue" and prepared "fit tools for the designs of ambition." "It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in

vigour," Jefferson cautioned his readers, since "a degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution."

Jefferson's effusive optimism about his country's peculiar social potential could not obscure some nagging fears. He worried, on the one hand, that his contemporaries might blindly follow the maxims of European political economists, ignore his wisdom, and plunge into manufacturing. Education and a commitment to republican principles might defuse this particular danger, but a larger and less tractable problem loomed on the horizon. Jefferson recognized that the loathsome dependence, subservience, venality, and corruption that he so much dreaded—everything, in short, that he associated with European political economy—were in large part the unavoidable outgrowth of what he referred to as "the natural progress and consequence of the arts." He alluded here to a universal process that eighteenth-century social thinkers often described, a process whose repercussions might "sometimes perhaps" be "retarded by accidental circumstances," as Jefferson put it, but which inevitably had to be felt. Like most enlightened thinkers of his age, Jefferson conceived of natural laws of social and cultural development that applied to America as much as to Europe. Vast resources of land might forestall the unfavorable consequences of this "natural progress" of the arts, but he never doubted that eventually America would be swept up in an inexorable logic of social change. Jefferson's plea in the *Notes on Virginia*, a plea that he would make throughout his public life, was that his countrymen not abuse or disregard the natural advantages that could postpone, but never prevent, a familiar and politically dangerous course of social development....

Many years after his first election to the presidency, Thomas Jefferson commented that "the revolution of 1800" was "as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form." Jefferson was undoubtedly using the term "revolution" not in the modern sense of a radical creation of a new order, but in the traditional sense of a return to first principles, of a restoration of original values and ideals that had been overturned or repudiated. For him, the election of 1800 was a revolution because it marked a turning back to the true republican spirit of 1776. Jefferson was excited by the prospect of the first implementation of the principles of America's republican revolution in the national government created by the Constitution of 1787, since in his eyes a minority faction consisting of an American Walpole and his corrupt minions had captured control of that government almost immediately after its establishment. From Jefferson's perspective, indeed, the Federalists had done more than threaten to corrupt American government by mimicking the English "court" model. Just as frightening was their apparent desire to mold the young republic's political economy along English lines, a desire reflected both in their call for the extensive development of government-subsidized manufacturing enterprises and in their attempt to stimulate a highly commercialized economy anchored to such premature and speculative ventures as an overextended carrying trade. Jefferson's fundamental goal in 1801 was to end this threatened "Anglicization" of both American government and society. In so doing he would restore the basis for the development of a truly republican political economy, one that would be

patterned after Benjamin Franklin's vision of a predominantly agricultural empire that would expand across space, rather than develop through time.

Within the Jeffersonian framework of assumptions and beliefs, three essential conditions were necessary to create and sustain such a republican political economy: a national government free from any taint of corruption, an unobstructed access to an ample supply of open land, and a relatively liberal international commercial order that would offer adequate foreign markets for America's flourishing agricultural surplus. The history of the 1790s had demonstrated all too well to the Jeffersonians the predominant danger to a republican political economy of corruption emanating from the federal government. They were especially troubled by the deleterious political, social, and moral repercussions of the Federalists' financial system, which they regarded as the primary vehicle of corruption both in the political system and in the country at large. Although Jefferson concluded rather soon after his election that his administration could not safely dismantle Hamilton's entire system with a few swift strokes, he was committed to doing everything possible to control that system's effects and gradually reduce its pernicious influence. Extinguishing the national debt as rapidly as possible, reducing government expenditures (especially on the military), and repealing the Federalist battery of direct and excise taxes became primary goals of the Jeffersonians in power, who sought by such means to purge the national government of Hamiltonian fiscalism in accordance with their cherished "country" principles.

In itself, the electoral revolution of 1800 promised to remove the primary threat to a republican political economy posed by the machinations of a corrupt administration. But the Jeffersonians also had to secure the other necessary guarantors of republicanism: landed and commercial expansion. Although the pressure of population growth on the supply of land in the United States had never been a problem of the same immediate magnitude as political corruption, the social and economic dislocations of the 1780s had prompted some concern with this matter. Through the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, undoubtedly the greatest achievement of his presidency, Jefferson appeared to eliminate this problem for generations, if not for centuries, to come. But the third and thorniest problem, in the form of long-standing restrictions on American commerce, proved far more frustrating and intractable. Through an embargo and finally a war the Jeffersonians consistently tried but failed to remove this nagging impediment to the fulfillment of their republican vision.

The presidential administrations from 1801 to 1817 appear more consistent when viewed from this perspective—that is, as a sustained Jeffersonian attempt to secure the requisite conditions for a republican political economy. Securing such a political economy, as the Jeffersonians conceived of it, required more than merely capturing control of the government from a corrupt minority faction; it also required the elimination of specific dangers and the maintenance of certain conditions, and these concerns largely shaped the Jeffersonian approach to both domestic and foreign policy. There was never any question that positive, concrete measures would have to be taken to forestall the development of social conditions that were considered antithetical to republicanism. Hamilton and the Federalists had threatened to make American society old and corrupt long before

its time. Now the Jeffersonians set out to reverse the direction of Federalist policy in order to maintain the country at a relatively youthful stage of development. Hoping to avoid the social evils both of barbarous simplicity and of overrefined, decadent maturity, the Jeffersonians proposed to escape the burden of an economically sophisticated society without sacrificing a necessary degree of republican civilization. Their aspiration to evade social corruption and the ravages of time was a fragile and demanding dream, and the quest to fulfill it was not without its ironies.

On the one hand, the Republican party attracted political support from scores of Americans whose outlook can properly be termed entrepreneurial. Opposition to the Federalist system was never limited to agrarian-minded ideologues who unequivocally opposed a dynamic commercial economy. Many Jeffersonians were anxious to participate in the creation of an expansive economy and to reap its many rewards. Frustrated by the failure of Federalist policies to serve their immediate needs, ambitious men-on-the-make, engaged in a variety of economic pursuits, enlisted under the banner of Jeffersonianism in a crusade to secure the advantages and opportunities they desired. Perhaps some of them saw no contradiction between their personal material ambitions and the traditional vision of a simple, bucolic republic articulated by the leader of their party. Assessing the economic psychology of many of these enterprising Jeffersonians, one scholar has suggested the complex paradox "of capitalists of all occupations denying the spirit of their occupations," adding that "it appears that many Republicans wanted what the Federalists were offering, but they wanted it faster, and they did not want to admit that they wanted it at all." Such a characterization cannot be applied, however, to Jefferson and Madison, and in their case we observe a more poignant irony. As their experience as policymakers soon demonstrated, the Jeffersonian endeavor to secure a peaceful, predominantly agricultural republic demanded a tenaciously expansive foreign policy—a foreign policy that ultimately endangered both the peace and the agricultural character of the young republic.

In developing his analysis of Britain's mercantilist political economy during the 1760s and 1770s, Benjamin Franklin had recognized that corruption could result from both natural and artificial causes. A high population density brought about by the biological pressure of population growth on a limited supply of land was one route to social decay. But as Franklin and many other eighteenth-century writers so often noted, decay also resulted from a corrupt political system that deviously induced extreme social inequality, depopulation of the countryside, urban squalor, luxury manufacturing, and the like. Both routes to corruption had devastating consequences; the difference was that while one was natural and seemingly inevitable, the other was not. During the 1780s James Madison had pondered this distinction, most notably in his correspondence with Jefferson, and had reached the rather pessimistic conclusion that even in the absence of a corrupt political system "a certain degree of misery seems inseparable from a high degree of populousness." Ultimately, he suggested, republican America would offer no exception to this rule. Although Jefferson agreed that the United States would remain virtuous only "as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part

of America" and people were not "piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe," he was confident that such a crisis would not arise "for many centuries." If social decay was to afflict the young republic, Jefferson believed that threat stemmed more from artificial than from natural causes, from a corrupt political system rather than from the inevitable pressure of population growth on the American supply of land. Nevertheless, Jefferson was not totally unconcerned with the problem of land, especially in the realm of theory and speculation. His confidence about the American future betrayed his assumption that America's western (and perhaps northern and southern) boundaries would be regularly extended, always bringing in a fresh supply of virgin land. Should that assumption be challenged, especially by a formidable foreign power, however, a theoretical problem might indeed become a more immediate and practical one.

It is interesting, in this regard, to observe Jefferson's reactions to the writings of Thomas R. Malthus, the British parson and political economist who popularized the theory of population pressure on subsistence, especially since Jefferson gave Malthus's writings particularly close attention near the end of his first presidential administration. Malthus had first presented his views on population in an anonymous pamphlet published in 1798, and his basic thesis was straightforward. Reacting against the optimistic forecasts of social improvement that were common in the late eighteenth century..., Malthus argued that given the biological facts of population and subsistence, such visions of perfectibility for the mass of mankind were chimerical. Instead, the widespread vice, misery, and poverty that so appalled these "speculative philosophers" were the inevitable lot of humanity. The problem, simply stated, was that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man." The irrepressible passion between the sexes, when unchecked, resulted in a geometrical rate of population growth, whereas the supply of food and available means of nourishment could increase only arithmetically at best. This "perpetual tendency in the race of man to increase beyond the means of subsistence," Malthus explained, "is one of the general laws of animated nature, which we can have no reason to expect will change."

Malthus suggested, in short, that all societies were destined to proceed rapidly through the familiar stages of social development toward a state of overpopulation, corruption, and old age. Old age might be postponed, especially in a society with an abundance of land, but not forever. In discussing population growth in America, Malthus emphasized the point that there was no final escape from the predicament he described, for not even a vast reservoir of fertile land could repeal the natural laws of population and subsistence. "Perpetual youth" for a nation was impossible; anyone who expected the United States to remain a land with relatively little poverty and misery forever, he commented, "might as reasonably expect to prevent a wife or mistress from growing old by never exposing her to the sun and air." "It is, undoubtedly, a most disheartening reflection," he grimly concluded, "that the great obstacle in the way to any extraordinary improvement in society, is of a nature that we can never hope to overcome."

Malthus's arguments should have been especially discouraging to Americans, since he contended that the necessary social basis for republicanism was precariously ephemeral. Extreme inequality, widespread poverty, extensive landless dependency—indeed, everything Americans considered antithetical to republicanism—were, according to Malthus, biologically inevitable. American readers could take solace only in the English parson's concession that there were "many modes of treatment in the political, as well as animal body, that contribute to accelerate or retard the approaches of age."...

President Thomas Jefferson was one such reader. By early 1804 he was perusing a borrowed copy of "the new work of Malthus on population," and he pronounced it "one of the ablest I have ever seen."...

... Ironically, what Jefferson found least useful and convincing in Malthus was the population theory that the parson was best known for; the president's general praise for the essay appears to have been prompted by its restatement of *laissez-faire*, anti-mercantilist doctrine. Jefferson particularly chastised Malthus for failing to recognize the irrelevance of his population theory to the American experience. "From the singular circumstance of the immense extent of rich and uncultivated lands in this country, furnishing an increase of food in the same ratio with that of population," Jefferson noted, "the greater part of his book is inapplicable to us, but as a matter of speculation." Population pressure on subsistence would never be an immediate problem in America because "the resource of emigration" to virgin territory was always available. Discussing Malthus's theory with the French economist Say, Jefferson expanded this observation into a more general statement. "The differences of circumstance between this and the old countries of Europe," he wrote, "furnish differences of fact whereon to reason, in questions of political economy, and will consequently produce sometimes a difference of result." Echoing Franklin's observations of fifty years earlier, Jefferson continued: "There, for instance, the quantity of food is fixed, or increasing in a slow and only arithmetical ratio, and the proportion is limited by the same ratio. Supernumerary births consequently add only to your mortality. Here the immense extent of uncultivated and fertile lands enables every one who will labor, to marry young, and to raise a family of any size. Our food, then, may increase geometrically with our laborers, and our births, however multiplied, become effective." Jefferson went on to argue, in this regard, that America provided a further exception to the European rule of balanced economies and national self-sufficiency:

Again, there the best distribution of labor is supposed to be that which places the manufacturing hands along side the agricultural; so that the one part shall feed both, and the other part furnish both with clothes and other comforts. Would that be best here? Egoism and first appearances say yes. Or would it be better that all our laborers should be employed in agriculture? In this case a double or treble portion of fertile lands would be brought into culture; a double or treble creation of food be produced, and its surplus go to nourish the now perishing births of Europe, who in return would manufacture and send us in exchange our

clothes and other comforts. Morality listens to this, and so invariably do the laws of nature create our duties and interests, that when they seem to be at variance, we ought to suspect some fallacy in our reasonings. In solving this question, too, we should allow its just weight to the moral and physical preference of the agricultural, over the manufacturing, man.

This statement was a striking reaffirmation of Jefferson's fundamental beliefs on the subject of political economy, a statement that differed very little from his well-known observations in the *Notes on Virginia* of twenty years earlier. Jefferson's encounter with Malthus thus served, in the end, to reconfirm his basic vision of a predominantly agricultural America that would continue to export its bountiful surpluses of food abroad. Such a republic, he believed, would best serve not only its own citizens, by permitting them to pursue a virtuous way of life, but also the European victims of a Malthusian fate, by providing them with the subsistence they desperately needed. It seems clear, above all, that Jefferson's brimming confidence during this period—expressed both in his response to Malthus and in his restatement of agrarian beliefs—must be viewed in the context of the Louisiana Purchase. With the Federalists properly and, Republicans hoped, permanently displaced from power in the national government, there was no need to worry about the dangers to a republican political economy from political corruption. With Louisiana safely added to the Union, there was also no need to worry about the danger of foreign powers choking off the American supply of land. The acquisition of Louisiana probably removed any Malthusian doubts Jefferson might have had about the long-range viability of republicanism in America. Indeed, the Louisiana question touched on so many aspects of the Jeffersonian vision of a republican political economy that it deserves much closer investigation.

The Mississippi crisis of 1801–1803, which culminated in the Louisiana Purchase, affected crucial and long-standing American concerns. Since the 1780s most Americans had regarded free navigation of the Mississippi River and the right of deposit at New Orleans as essential to the national interest. Without the access to market that these conditions permitted, westward expansion would be stalled, because settlers in the trans-Appalachian regions necessarily depended on the Mississippi and its tributaries to sustain them as active and prosperous republican farmers....

... [C]ontrol of the Mississippi permitted westerners to engage in a secure and dynamically expanding foreign commerce and, as always, Americans saw the significance of commerce in very broad social and moral terms. It was repeatedly asserted that an active commerce that provided a secure and dependable access to foreign markets was absolutely necessary to establish and maintain the republican character of western society....

By rectifying the chronic problem of an uncertain, rapidly fluctuating demand for western agricultural surpluses, the Purchase thus served an important social and moral purpose. "No ruinous fluctuations in commerce need now be apprehended," noted another western commentator, for "agriculture may depend upon those steady markets which trade shall open to industry." There could be

no doubt that a "want of markets for the produce of the soil" always had disastrous consequences, for "it saps the foundations of our prosperity; subverts the end of society, and literally tends to keep us in that rude, uncultivated state, which has excited the derision and contempt of other communities." "As long as this is the state of our country," the same observer queried in familiar fashion, "what encouragement is there for the mind to throw off its native ferocity?" By permanently securing control of the Mississippi River and the promise of boundless foreign markets beyond, the Louisiana Purchase did more than pave the way for economic prosperity. By providing the incentive to industry that shaped a republican people, it laid the necessary basis for the westward expansion of republican civilization itself....

Jefferson's notion of a continuously expanding "empire of liberty" in the Western Hemisphere was a bold intellectual stroke, because it flew in the face of the traditional republican association of expansion and empire with luxury, corruption, and especially despotism. The familiar bugbear of the Roman Empire and its decline through imperial expansion was the most common source of this association. According to Jefferson and most American republicans, expansion would preserve, rather than undermine, the republican character of America. In addition to forestalling development through time and diffusing the spirit of faction, expansion was crucial to American security in its broadest sense. Removing the French from Louisiana also removed the need for a dangerous military establishment in the face of a contiguous foreign threat. It greatly reduced, too, the likelihood of American involvement in a ruinous war that would impose on the young republic the vicious Old World system of national debts, armies, navies, taxation, and the like. For a plethora of reasons, in short, peaceful expansion was sustaining the Jeffersonian republic.

But if the Louisiana Purchase removed some serious obstacles to the realization of Jefferson's republican empire, it also exposed some of the tensions and contradictions within that vision. Since the proper functioning of the empire required both westward and commercial expansion, an assertive, even aggressive, foreign policy would often be necessary to secure the republic. The Jeffersonians frequently boasted of the isolation and independence of the United States; curiously, this claim obscured the fact that American republicanism demanded both an open international commercial order and the absence of any competing presence on the North American continent. The United States could isolate itself from foreign affairs and the potential for conflict only if it was willing to resign its tenacious commitment to westward expansion and free trade. To do this, however, would be to abandon the two most important pillars of the Jeffersonian vision of a republican political economy. Indeed, given the commitment to that vision, the national independence and isolated self-sufficiency boasted of by the Jeffersonians were illusory.