

Jeffersonian Democracy and Education

Sagindyk Urazayev*

October 5, 2019

It is of no secret that Thomas Jefferson was one of the most interesting, conflicting, and ideologically progressive men of his time. His beliefs were considered contradictory. His dreams were thought to be unachievable. His idea of democracy was criticized by many philosophers and politicians, even by his fellow Founding Fathers. In the modern days, Jeffersonian Democracy can be interpreted in many ways, some of which may differ significantly from one another. From one viewpoint, it can be considered “utopian”, others might say it is not even a democracy and that “Jefferson actually was an Agrarian Romantic who dreamed of a republic governed by an elite of character and intellect, and based on the support of a free yeomanry.”¹ What did Thomas Jefferson really envision in his Jeffersonian Democracy and will its enduring principles stand the test of time of more than two centuries and the ever-changing world? We will visit the most important principles of Thomas Jefferson’s democracy and try to learn what was the dream behind the curtains and how that dream was implemented in the American Society

*University of Kansas, ctu@ku.edu

¹Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *LIBERTY OR EQUALITY*, p. 7.

today, or whether it was implemented at all.

The idea of succeeding generations was deep in the Founding Father's mind. From the book "The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson" by Richard K. Matthews, we can learn that Thomas Jefferson can be seen as a 19th century idealist, striving to create best conditions for freedom, human life, and democracy. One of his propositions includes renewal or review of all existing government institutions and the constitution every 19 years. In his letter to Madison, in 1789, he writes: "Every constitution then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force, and not of right."² Jefferson believes that with an approach of constant government structure re-evaluation, the government itself will be able to keep with the modern ever-changing times. This does not mean that the all the laws have to be rewritten and everything should be restructured every 19 years or so, it means that we should take a deeper look into the state of the government about every 20 years and make sure of the applicability of those laws to the modern culture and life. With enforcing the laws to stagnate for longer periods of time would be an action of force and not in sync with the progression of human mind. Jefferson holds only the best intentions for his future fellows and people not to be held back by outdated policies and laws of their ancestors, which in theory should hold no real power over the people of new generations with ways of thinking. Each generation should be able to have a fresh start.

²Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 22-23.

This part of Jeffersonian Democracy about renewing the American Constitution and forgiving debts across generations did not see the light as Thomas Jefferson would have hoped. Last time Congress ratified an amendment, meaning that it was added to US Constitution was in 1994. Twenty-seventh Amendment to the United States Constitution is the newest added amendment, which took about two hundred years to get ratified.³ Modern American society suffers from outdated amendments due to their inapplicability to the current day or vague phrasing with lost original meaning. For example, the Ninth Amendment is dismissed by the Supreme Court as a constitutional irrelevance, due to the ambiguity of its statement:

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

where its meaning can be interpreted in ways of negating the expansion of government powers on account of the enumeration in the Constitution.⁴ Clearly, this not the process of renewing government that Thomas Jefferson had in mind. He believed that as man progresses individually and socially, it is vital for the laws to keep pace and adapt to the new world. During the time of creation of the Declaration of Independence and the first twenty six amendments, it took as little as one hundred days to as much as a year to amend the Constitution, but nowhere near the mark of several centuries. Government institutions will not be able to stay relevant if the laws that

³Britannica, *Twenty-Seventh Amendment*

⁴Randy E.Barnett, *The Ninth Amendment: It Means What It Says*, pp. 2-3.

are getting accepted are already more than a dozen decades old. On the other hand, it is understandable that the structure of the society was simpler and the number of people living was fewer than what we have now. No one from 1790s could not have predicted the expansion of US' population from four million people to more than three hundred million people in just two centuries.⁵ Because of that, the process of amending new laws and reconsideration of the constitution may take an arbitrary amount of time. However, if we apply Thomas Jefferson's point to the current situation, we cannot state this as a failure of the American democracy. Laws are still enforced and the envisioned governmental structure in mind with Congress, House of Representatives, and Senate is in place. With more people involved in the government, the time shows the practical difficulty of keeping up with the times versus the idealistic "always up-to-date" approach in theory.

From above, we know that Jefferson was very optimistic about keeping the government all caught up with the times. Also, one of the main principles of Jeffersonian Democracy was the strife of social responsibility. People should be responsible for their actions and suffer the consequences if necessary. World is changing and it is changing quick. Human mind due to youthfulness of it is developing even more rapidly. Each generation must redefine its goals and values appropriate for their time. Binding laws and policies from past will not always apply to new times and should be reconsidered regularly, so "that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it".

⁵United States Census Bureau, *1790 United States Census*

The absence of natural right for property ensures that a generation owning the land would not “eat up the usufruct of the lands for several generations to come, and then the lands would belong to the dead”⁶

Generally, Jefferson rejects the idea of a land or property being one’s natural rights. Only with labor, where individuals’ “own blood was split” and “their own fortunes expended”, one can earn a property right and all males should be granted if not a land equal to all other lands, then a land that is at least 50 acres.⁷ If we do some calculations, we can know that for approximately 4 million people residing in US, on average, each person can get 472 acres of land.⁸ This amount of land that almost equates to one square mile will be considered very generous, if the government ensured every citizen would get so. Nowadays, the average area of land per capita would equate to only 6 acres of land, which is still, a very large area for a simple modern-day American. What did Thomas Jefferson meant by owning a land of at least 50 acres?

This concept closely relates to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.⁹ This theory describes the stages of human growth and what needs should be satisfied to allow one to progress to higher level of motivation. In the original paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation”, Maslow describes five stages in ascending order of human development:

⁶Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*,p. 20.

⁷Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*,pp. 24-25.

⁸Average area of land per capita = US Area in acres / US Population

⁹Abraham Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*

1. Physiological
2. Safety
3. Love/belonging
4. Esteem
5. Self-actualization

Only with satisfying basic needs, such as food and shelter, one can start to worry about his/her safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. The proposed 50 acres of land would ensure that people's basic needs are satisfied. It would stop farmers and workers from worrying about a ceiling above your head and having something in your mouth tonight. With satisfied basic needs, one can move to safety. It is safe to say that owning a land and taking care of it is already a provision of safety. All left to do is finding a sense of belonging and being a part of something bigger. This is the what Thomas Jefferson wants. He wants every single man to be an active member of the society and community that he is a part of. Without the burden of stressing out about physical needs, we can concentrate our attention on our psychological needs. People can work in their comfort and produce for the better sake of the community. "If we do not the fundamental right to labor the earth returns to the unemployed."¹⁰ This is the stage, where education becomes a bigger part of our lives and desires. Jefferson even argues that the reason American soil belonged to the British King was only because the

¹⁰Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 28-29.

first people to come to the new continent were not educated about the allodial nature of the lands, therefore believing the king and granting him the territory.

*Our ancestors however, who migrated hither, were laborers, not lawyers. The fictitious principle that all lands belong originally to the king, they were early persuaded to believe real, and accordingly took grants of their own lands from the crown.*¹¹

Ensuring well-being of the nation by setting a pretty high-minimum for everyone to own was Jefferson's key on creating a well educated and democratic society. For him, democracy was more than just voting, it was the infrastructure. Voting is simple. Anyone can cast a ballot without knowing how the system works. Building and maintaining an infrastructure with constantly moving pieces and social responsibility between its citizens requires knowledge. Only after knowledge comes experience. With enough experience, one can finally call himself wise. It is an ultimately goal for any society to become wise, to be able to solve incoming problems, granting every man an equal, natural right.

Thomas Jefferson realizes that it would be impossible to make every single person equal. It would be impossible to make everyone have the same exact share of a land. That is why he says "at least 50 acres", when he can propose that "every one should have 50 acres of land". Why he says "all men are created equal" and not "all mean are equal" People are different and someone will have more property and lands than the person next to him.

¹¹Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*,p. 25.

What the society has to ensure is that both of the parties should have the minimum to realize their natural right for equal opportunities. Interestingly enough, all of this starts with schools and educational systems.

“Savage Inequalities” by Jonathan Kozol is a brutal but completely faithful to the truth tells us a story about the realities of America and American Education almost two hundred years after Thomas Jefferson published his United States Declaration of Independence in 1776. The book covers pretty extensively the cases of the worst schools in US. The events in this book take place for the most part between 1988 and 1990.¹² Let us dive into the state of American schools and how do they compare to the education in Jeffersonian Democracy, which states that through education one can become an active and valuable part of a democratic society.

Schools have changed quite a lot during the past couple of decades. Since the 1970s, the class divides the country. Concentration of wealth is being centralized at the very top. The famous (top) one percent owns ninety nine percent of the goods. Consequently, the richest can send their kids to private schools, which are without a doubt the best schools in the country. Private schools offer better professionals, smaller class sizes, special curriculum for college preparation, and rigorous extracurricular activities. With all of the perks together, kids from wealthier family with access to private schools have better chances getting into prestigious colleges and have a great jump-start at their future career. Those private schools can cost up to \$80-90k/year.

¹²Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, p. ix.

With median household income of roughly \$58k/year, more than eighty percent would not be able to have their kid to attend even the most “affordable” private schools. Does that mean that not everyone is having an equal opportunity for an education and a chance for the future? It absolutely does. US is a highly residentially segregated society. Segregation by class and neighborhoods can lead to development of some of the poorest and almost hopeless “black holes” for future generations. US is the wealthiest country in the world and the most extreme in inequality. The bar for extra-rich is unbelievably high and the bar for poor is shockingly low. On the other hand, some other neighborhoods even at close proximity to the poor ones can thrive and be in ever-increasing development with wealthy schools that do not know the meaning of insufficient funds. The current world is built on the idea of a competition. Each family has to succeed for itself. If a family goes into debt or loses colossal amounts of monetary resources, then the next generation or a couple of them will be doomed to suffer the consequences of the actions and mistakes of their ancestors.

For example, let us take a look at the case of East St. Louis. It is probably one of the most dangerous towns in the state and probably in the whole US because the CEO of one of the largest companies in the area has developed an “evacuation plan” for its employees as state troopers are being sent to East St. Louis pretty regularly due to inability of the police force to put down the disturbances.¹³ It is troubling to imagine schools in an environment like this

¹³Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, pp. 20-21.

and one can wish that kids do not have to be raised in similar conditions to the ones above. But one can only wish. East St. Louis, says the chairman of the state board,

*is simply the worst possible place I can imagine to have a child brought up...
The community is in desperate circumstances*¹⁴

East St. Louis High is the biggest school in the city. It only lacks some of almost all of football equipment on the field, which makes visiting teams skip the halftime and get away. Teachers are running out of chalk and papers, paychecks arriving weeks late, nine year old uniforms held by nothing but layers of patches, science lab that are several decades outdated, lethal temperature differences from the outside and the inside, no lab assistants to ensure students' safety during labs that actually work.¹⁵ The average food expenditure on a child is about \$2.40 and only forty five out of one hundred students will get immunizations against simple but lethal polio.¹⁶ Most of the teachers and even the principal were born and raised in the town. They have worked in those conditions for thirty years and even more. This is also called despair. Unfortunately, the case of East St. Louis school and its conditions is not unique in any way. There are many American schools that not only lack decent levels of education, but also basic safety for its students. Public education in New York is a great example of a populated city and its infrastructure.

¹⁴Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, p. 25.

¹⁵Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁶Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, p. 21.

Due to the nature of a densely populated area of New York, a big number of different social classes are residing there, each with its own level of priority to the city. The city never rejects the requests of Wall Street brokers. All of their orders are placed on time, resources allocated accordingly, and delivered in a perfect sense of predictability. However, Morris High high school struggles to get the minimum provisions before fall enrollment. Cash does not flow through the low-income students, therefore those kids having a little value to America, are not able to receive even the most basic needs, such as health care that is being dragged down to the bureaucratic sinkhole of infinite delays and paperwork.¹⁷ At P.S. 94 in District 10, 1300 students in a 700 people capacity used makeshift classrooms transformed from noisy gyms. It would be expected for the government and districts try to mitigate or resolve the issues by appointing social workers and truant officers to investigate an absence of compulsory education. However, for a district of 36,000 children, it would be a miracle for a dozen truant officers to make a real difference in this situation. Similar stories are common in New Jersey, Washington D.C., Cincinnati, Ohio, and many more.¹⁸

Kozol is unique in his way of describing the schools and his style of writing. It is not a plain sequence of events or facts. It is a story told by kids and teachers. It is not as much the author's voice is leading the book, but the voices of the unheard ones. We are able to get a glimpse into the real tragedies

¹⁷Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, p. 114.

¹⁸Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, pp. 133, 175.

of their world that they live in. The book showcases this with a rather disturbing story from a boy, called Smokey, whose sister and his best friend got beat up, raped, and then brutally killed. This conversation continues into us further learning about the nature of East St. Louis. People get killed on the streets, especially elderly and the kids.¹⁹

When a little child dies, my momma say a star go straight to Heaven

One of the most scariest and unsettling realizations about the broken part of public education were the kids. World is dominated by adults. Schools and governments are managed by grown-ups, but the kids are actually the ones experiencing the consequences and in some cases, suffering. Children in the poor and low-income schools are still just children. They can understand their situation and the possibility of them and of their families never getting out of there. In the very first pages of “Savage Inequalities”, we learn a story of girl crying from words of Langston Hughes:

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?*

Jeffersonian Democracy wants us to believe that good education leads to true democracy. So what does an insufficient education or a complete absence of it lead to? We ought to ask ourselves, is this the way Thomas Jefferson envisioned education that will be the society’s moral and knowledge guide to democracy? If we concentrate on the worst possible cases, then the

¹⁹Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, pp. 13-14.

answer is absolutely not. Previously, only examples of the worst schools were brought up and this has the power of impacting our view on modern American education. With this line of thought, we can confidently state that the dreams and hopes of our Founding Fathers were not able to realize themselves. We can criticize and blame the American society on undelivered promises, inequality, and dreams deferred. What will this effort give us in return? Without our sincere effort and will to turn things for the better, we will get nothing more than people being frustrated, issues being ignored, and poor still staying poor.

Books presented in this papers deal with tough and everlasting social issues. Richard K. Matthews gives us an in-depth view into Thomas Jefferson's world not only as the third president of the United States or a politician, but as a human and as an idealist that did not have the power of reversing the current, but to go with the flow of his time. Jefferson was a dreamer, hoping for the best outcome for the future generations by building a sketch of the perfect New World and outlying some of its principles in his Jeffersonian Democracy. He could not have predicted the complications humans would have to struggle along the way. We are still quite of a journey away from our final destination, but we are getting. One can confuse the author of "Savage Inequalities" to be depressed or very pessimistic about the conditions he describes in the book. However, I believe it is a complete opposite. Jonathan Kozol is full of hope and optimism towards the future. He writes about the tough issues so we can finally have a clear picture of what is happening out

there. So we can finally start addressing the topic of poor education directly and straight to the point. He writes about the resilience and astuteness of the children, the kindness of some teachers, and living hope in the neighborhoods. Despite all of its problems and mistakes, American Education is considered worldwide as one of the best education systems in the world. America itself is one of the countries with the highest literacy rates and civic engagement rates. We as a society are still learning the ways and the means of sharing our goods with each other, understanding each other, and supporting each other.

The enduring principles of Jeffersonian Democracy are set in place. They are deep in our society and in the conscience of every single American. We are facing the issues in our public education for the people and infrastructure of our democracy is still being laid-out out. We are moving on the right track full of hope and faith in our future generations and the ones after them. The problems are temporary and are transitional in nature only if we listen collectively to the ones who are in need and we unite in those problems' solutions. By doing so, we would have built a democracy with actively participating people. Participatory democracy in both the political realm and the economic realm is, to Jefferson, a necessary prerequisite to human fulfillment. Jonathan Kozol finished the book in a beautiful way with us looking over the horizon and knowing that everything will be find its rightful place.

All our children ought to be allowed a stake in the enormous richness of

America. Whether they were born to poor white Appalachians or to wealthy Texans, to poor black people in the Bronx or to rich people in Manhasset or Winnetka, they are all quite wonderful and innocent when they are small.
We soil them needlessly.