



The Jeffersonian Option

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S understanding that the talented should be tied to the regime, like W.E.B. Du Bois's vision of the talented tenth advancing the best interests of the race, suggests that it may be a good thing to sanction the ambition of the intellectually gifted. The Jeffersonian natural aristocratic understanding of stewardship requires that the talented individual make a serious peace with what the democracy requires. It is not enough to be smart and to wish to serve. One must undertake to feel one's place morally within the democratic community. The Jeffersonian says the intellectual can only be the conscience of the democracy if the intellectual's own conscience is democratic.

This essay presents a selection of significant figures in American intellectual history from the point of view of the accommodation of their self-conscious individualism to the democratic claim of equality. I conflate Jeffersonianism and liberalism, knowing something of the historical awkwardness of that fit. Candidly, I mean the knee-jerk, bend-over-backwards, embarrassing kind of liberalism, the kind that approaches politics and culture with a conscious air of difference in the hopes of bonding across difference. I lay claim to the remnant of liberalism that no one else seems to want, the ridiculous part that has brought together Pat Buchanan, *Doonesbury*, *The New Republic*, *Commentary*, the academic left, ethnic groups and religions, President whatshisname, just about everyone in a chorus of rejection. My motto is that while it is admirable (and necessary) to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, you had better be prepared to fall down, go slow, get blisters, and look like a damn fool.

The liberal has been too little connected with the human pungency that makes civilizations, and unlike its conservative counterpart, liberalism has no orthodoxy to confirm this uneasiness of style. The American conservative has usually acknowledged with ease the WASP tradition as superior, privileging privilege. The liberal holds views that undermine the legitimacy of such acknowledgment without necessarily addressing its flourishing habit. All the liberal has, when it comes down to it, is a version of the democracy with which to align politically, sentimentally, and culturally.

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That coalition is ever changing, and the liberal tradition is at its noblest in choosing some people over some privilege and at its silliest in trying to master the technicalities of the choice; it is most problematic when it attacks other people's privileges and not the liberal's own.

What I am calling the Jeffersonian liberal tradition has always and justly been accused of hypocrisy. How could Jefferson hold slaves *and* write the Declaration? How can this one or that one articulate the principles of freedom and equality that are the essence of the American regime and yet participate in its compromises and countenance crimes against those principles? Hypocrisy is a crude way of saying something perhaps more subtle, but the liberal is as suspect to the groups with which she would make common cause as to those who oppose the goals of those groups. The liberal bears the blame for the distance between those goals and their realization for all groups and individuals and for the turmoil of change from those who did not want any change. The liberals' challenge has been, through participation in democracy in the name of some of its highest principles, to accept it as the key ground of their own expressive experience and experience democracy not as a falsehood but as a truth.

The Puritans gave, it seems fair to say, the characteristic tone of moral urgency and the allegorical frame of mind that has proved so important to high-minded white Americans. Their dual emphasis on the individual conscience and the communally signifying detail persists. But the Puritan conscience and the community are meant to have a direct relation. Indeed the conscience characteristically mediates the Puritan individual and community. Your conscience is the voice of the community. How this changes in America from the voice of the godly community to a more familiar conscience is in itself a fascinating story, one the image of Mickey Mouse confronted with a moral dilemma distills. Faced with a choice, Mickey finds himself a witness to a heated debate between an angel Mickey on one shoulder urging him to do right and a devil Mickey on the other counseling him to do wrong. He is meant to choose a version of himself. The curious phenomenon of the cricket (or other little critter) as conscience suggests how oddly forged an image of the self the American conscience has been. The characteristic New England conscience evolved from the Puritan sense of what kind of person one must be to the Yankee notion of the kind of person one ought to be seen to be; conscientiousness requires a witness, yourself or somebody else. When the Puritan ceased to be sure about God, that conscientious energy was liberated to become one of the standard features of American liberalism, that endless moralizing with no place to go but the here and now.¹

To claim Benjamin Franklin for the liberal tradition is, perhaps, idiosyncratic. But there was a lesson to be learned from Ben, consequential for

liberals should they learn it or not. Surely one of the most remarkable feats of Franklin's long career was his capacity to attain the heights of individual accomplishment and personality without seeming to depart from an ordinary exercise of given potential. Even today, Franklin is a comfortable figure, a democratic familiar, someone whose remarkable commercial, political, scientific, intellectual, benevolent, diplomatic, and sexual accomplishments add up to a friendly wonder, not a superior being.²

Franklin's *Autobiography* echoes through American letters; ask Henry Adams about his models for "self-teaching"; ask James Gatz where he got his Platonic idea of himself as Jay Gatsby.³ Franklin appears to have understood from the outset what was necessary to pursue one's individuality in a way that did not separate one from the common. It was a constant element in his life and work that Franklin avoided giving the offense of his superiority to the community of equals he claimed to prefer. His emphasis on utility reflected, in part, a consciousness that what one thinks or imagines should be able to cross the bridge from self to others. Such crossings share the essence of utility and practicality. Far from demeaning the speculative, they fantasize its good-natured sharing with the hopeful aim of raising the general level. Poor Richard, Franklin's wonderful persona, is not a deception but a kind of philosophic conceit, someone not Franklin who could be Franklin, an offering by a genius to his context. Franklin lent a helping hand to his fellows in the guise of one of them without—and this is important—doing much more than simplifying his knowledge of the world for public consumption.

In Richard's proverbs one can find the secular preacher's role that Emerson was to elaborate as a response of the philosopher to the common good of an essentially democratic community. The knowledge of the world that Franklin here imparts is tough and even cynical but also clear and forgiving. And if, inside Richard's bluff homilies, the guile of a very superior man indeed measures in what part the more ordinary world can take him, well, that is not necessarily a bad thing, especially since his conclusions and his advice are not false. After all, he was not preaching deception. It is easier for a rich man to be good than it is for a poor man. When Billie Holiday said, "You've got to have something to eat and a little love in your life before you can hold still for any damn body's sermon on how to behave," she was agreeing with Poor Richard's proverb "It is hard for an empty sack to stand upright."⁴ Franklin's incisive revision of the pie-in-the-sky text about how hard it is for a rich man to enter heaven is dead on the money as an understanding of American reality. He made the choice to express himself in common terms to ordinary people and chose to think about life in terms that connected his own individuality to common experience.

The name-giving titan of any version of American democracy remains Thomas Jefferson. In itself it is interesting to think about how this almost paradigmatically uncommon man has become one of the civilization's sponsors of equality and the potential of the common. Unlike the even more democratic American saint, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson retains the valuable quality of representing a response to democracy from someone incompletely of it. The common people produced Lincoln as a challenge to history and, in himself, he validated an unambivalent democratic rise. But Jefferson's was not, like Lincoln's or Franklin's, a genius cast in the mold of common clay. Jefferson resonates because he was an individual of superior gifts, place, and attainments, whose seeking out of the democratic is his abiding wonder for us.

John Adams said there would always be an aristocracy of wealth and power, and that it must be restrained by free institutions. For Adams, the equally menacing democracy of the common people must be restrained by a series of private rights. Jefferson seemed to envision the empowerment of both these elements of society and articulated their transformation. He described a natural aristocracy that, educated by the people, would pursue their interests disinterestedly as public servants discharging a special public trust. He also described a people less rude than Adams knew, a pastoralizing vision of the yeoman farmer, self-sufficient, independent, and strong enough to follow the wisdom of the talented few.

The Jeffersonian pastoral of yeoman farmer and natural aristocrat, in which the sweet and useful described a knowledge that exercised just power, struck Adams, as it has many others since, as visionary to the point of unreality. Nevertheless, the Jeffersonian view of society, which the Declaration's claim about natural rights would require, added up to a shrewd map of what must be transformed to make such a society work. The persistence of those qualities, such as he recognized in himself, that make for individual superiority and sway was Jefferson's reason for inventing forms of superiority that a democracy could trust and bind to itself. If Jefferson imagined a relation rather than an identity between such as him and the democracy, it is his ambition for a relation rather than rule that should interest us.

Jefferson was not interested in lowering himself or blunting his individuality, but he did recognize in the equality on which the free political regime was based a serious moral claim on relations within it. Thus he imagined a people from whom he might have sprung and by whom he might have been elevated and to whom he might thereby have been indebted. Jefferson extended Franklin's understanding of self and, in place of humility and caution, established educational, philosophical, pastoral, and political hopes and structures that intended to realize a democratic

community that did not replicate the past but might surpass it. Jefferson's critics say that—like his opposing slavery but not being able to advocate its abolition, let alone deprive himself of the pleasures and comforts of ownership—something wishful and discrepant marred his thinking even to the point of hypocrisy. Jefferson was the first American limousine liberal. That means someone whose principles, especially where other people are concerned, do not interfere significantly with his own life; and someone willing to enforce dangerous utopian fantasies in the name of a cherished good but who is not equally impelled or inclined to face his own privilege.⁵

The interesting fragility of the Jeffersonian attempt to bridge the claims of equality and individuality produced the terms both of his veneration and of his availability to criticism. Jefferson's blithe vision of the connection between the American philosopher and the democratic has beguiled American history; its failure haunts it. The Jeffersonian liberal remains specially liable to this charge because the relation of the extraordinary to the ordinary, which underlies its hopeful vision, can so easily overwhelm and lapse into domination. Who, after all, was Jefferson kidding? He wrote of natural rights and equality, but look at him and at his friends and slaves and milieu. The distance between the effusive philosophic truths of the Declaration and the reality of his own life measures not only the "hypocrisy"⁶ but the philosophic lightness of his point. Jefferson's thinking does seem to know more about other people than about himself and to make himself a rule to others in a somewhat impetuous and presumptuous way. Most people are not and cannot be Jeffersons. Most people come no closer to him by pretending that they are as good as he, even that they understand him. White liberalism starts with a pretense of being like him that turns the complexity and disappointments of Jefferson's thinking into the blithe hypocrisy of which he is then accused.

Thus the Jeffersonian fictions about *the people*, the construction of the image of the yeoman farmer, the constant living within the contradictions between knowing slavery to be wrong and having slaves, the risking of the inevitable discrepancies when taking a stand with "ought to be" rather than "always has been" constitute the hallmarks of a tradition that suggests itself to the individual in democracy. This is the rule of equality as applied to one's sense of individuality, not the rule of one's sense of individuality extended to a sense of everyone else. This remains the most emphatic of the Jeffersonian awarenesses of democracy: the possibility of the useful and the practical as the visible results of the true and the beautiful. They establish a demystified community where even the common people can recognize and come to nurture the uncommon person, who in turn responds by feeling beholden to that community. Small wonder that Jefferson was the quintessential and founding American class traitor, who

in America is the liberal, not the radical. He did not let people see themselves in him as Franklin did, or see himself in them as Whitman came to. But he did find a remarkably daring way of refusing to privatize even the monopoly of truth.

Jefferson and Emerson had more to do with one another than most readings allow. The crucial connection of American democratic history is between those two because they represent the interesting, fertile, and manifestly creative adjustment of the smart to the most. Each had an acknowledged share of his century's intellectual achievement. Each was a noticed and admired participant in a worldwide development, but central to the Enlightenment and Romanticism principally in America and a second-rank figure in the great world. America was still a province of the great worlds, and its European, African, and native inhabitants had not composed the full and flawed relations of their own civilization and empire. Carlyle and Nietzsche read and admired Emerson. But Jefferson and Emerson remained icons of an American civilization. Emerson rivaled Jefferson in effect. Jefferson invented many things, but Emerson first played the role of preacher-turned-philosopher to the America that Jefferson had sketched out. Emerson was bred in the native version of the Jeffersonian vision, the New England preachery. His career explored the creeds and beliefs that might give to his readers and audience, principally middle-class Americans, a sense of themselves and the world that suited their purposes and accorded them individuality. There are as many Emersonian liberals as there are Jeffersonian liberals.

Read Emerson backward from his acceptance by Victorian Americans. Piece his thinking together from the mottoes, the proverbs, and the words carved in stone and wood over arches and mantles in the American institutions of learning. It is an understandable characteristic of the academic studies of Emerson that they have wanted to rescue him from the embrace of Victorian American culture. One reads Emerson to restore his rebelliousness and his challenges, to reanimate his ambivalence, and to emphasize his distance from what was his great and remarkable American audience. The lines of this interpretation made particular sense after the Second World War, when Emerson was so ingrained in midcult that it was hard to tell if it was Emerson or Oscar Hammerstein who wrote "hitch your wagon to a star." Emerson's claim on America's attention, however, cannot be reduced to the various inscriptions of his writings on various American generations and institutions. Read backward from their acceptance by the democracy, Emersonian individualism, idealism, and philosophizing have encouraged a remarkable strain of thinking and work that has populated Jefferson's arena with specifically American natural aristocrats—superior,