

## SOST101–16Jan24Lecture

### Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*

I won't go back over the background information other than briefly hit on a few things; see that other document, if you like. (Rehearse a pertinent thing or two)

#### Structure of the book

First, the basic structure of the book. *Notes* is divided into 23 “queries,” each in response to a question asked by M. Marbois. The first eleven are mostly on the natural features of VA (keep in mind that VA at this point included the entire Midwest; the breaking away of the Midwest from VA would come over the next decade). Query XII, “Counties and Towns,” serves as a pivot between that opening section and the final eleven queries, which are mostly about the political and moral features of Virginia (and thus, again, by extension, America).

#### What does *Notes* provide us with?

- A window into Jefferson's thought:
  - Federalism and decentralization
  - Science and rationality
  - Economics and Politics
  - Connections between economic systems, political systems, and the **virtue** of individual citizens
  - Understandings of the differences in human beings, as well as their similarities:
    - \* Enslaved and Free
    - \* Whites, Blacks, Natives
    - \* Ancients and Moderns
    - \* Europeans and Americans

Jefferson is thus using *Notes* to explore how human interactions both improve and degrade the liberty of the individuals involved in these interactions. Importantly for our purposes, he is looking at these interactions against the backdrop of Virginia and what it has become in the ~175 years since the establishment of Jamestown. He is thus able to see *what has already developed* organically over this time and comment on the facts of that *in his present* of the 1780s.

#### What is Jefferson doing in *Notes*?

Jefferson's overall purpose is to show all the ways in which America offers a new way of being, a way of being in contradistinction to what are, in his view, decaying European cultures and political systems. America, and particularly what will become the South, emerge in Jefferson's thinking as places that recognize the fundamental need of **freedom** for all men. **Liberty** is thus the highest Jeffersonian good. - Obviously, Jefferson is keenly aware of slavery and

its problems and challenges to these ideas. - Beyond his solution, which we will look at in a bit, Jefferson importantly understand slavery as a challenge to **virtue** - Virtue, in Jefferson's mind, also has at least some connection to the physical and geographic.

These are ideas of freedom, liberty, slavery, virtue, and land are all explored in the three queries we are looking at today.

### **Notes and Southern Literature**

Yet, the most intriguing thing to me about *Notes* is not Jefferson's assessment of what things were in his day (and how they had come to be), but rather the ways in which his thinking here serves as an initiation into the topics that will come to dominate Southern thought, culture, and history—*and thus Southern literature*—for the next two centuries and more: - Race, in many different forms - Agriculture and land - Economic development - Progress and destruction - Industrialization and agrarianism - Liberty and citizenship - The role, size, and scope of the state - Public and private virtue - The South's embeddedness into a world beyond itself—the South as not simply a provincial backwater, but a cosmopolitan place

While Jefferson is notoriously slippery and difficult to pin down ideologically (though I believe there are some core ideas of his we can't escape from). And yet, that not only does not take away from, it rather emphasizes all of the ways in which he is perhaps the **original Southerner**. What we see here in *Notes*, the only book he ever published, is the beginnings of thinking about the South as a place and its situatedness within a greater American whole. Importantly, this is happening while both America *and* the South are in the process of being born! The ideas noted above will be explored over and over again in the South's literature, often using frameworks similar to those Jefferson puts forth here.