

7-2 | Jefferson's Agrarian Vision for the New Republic

THOMAS JEFFERSON, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781)

Thomas Jefferson had a distinguished political career even before assuming the presidency in 1801. Son of a prominent Virginia family, Jefferson took his position at the front of colonial politics, serving in the Second Continental Congress, as governor of Virginia, minister to France, secretary of state, and vice president. While serving as secretary of state under Washington, he sparred with Hamilton over the direction of the young republic, especially with regard to the economy and whether it should be centered on agriculture or manufacturing. During the 1780s, Jefferson wrote and published his major work, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he offers his own vision of America's economic future, one clearly at odds with Hamilton's views.

The Present State of Manufactures, Commerce, Interior and Exterior Trade

We never had an interior trade of any importance. Our exterior commerce has suffered very much from the beginning of the present contest. During this time we have manufactured within our families the most necessary articles of clothing. Those of cotton will bear some comparison with the same kinds of manufacture in Europe; but those of wool, flax and hemp are very coarse, unsightly, and unpleasant: and such is our attachment to agriculture, and such our preference for foreign manufactures, that be it wise or unwise, our people will certainly return as soon as they can, to the raising [of] raw materials, and exchanging them for finer manufactures than they are able to execute themselves.

The political economists of Europe have established it as a principle that every state should endeavour to manufacture for itself: and this principle, like many others, we transfer to America, without calculating the difference of circumstance which should often produce a difference of result. In Europe the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people. But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman. Is it best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that one half should be called off from that to exercise manufactures and handicraft arts for the other? Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman,

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787), 273–275, 289–291, 293.

for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances: but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution. . . .

It should be our endeavour to cultivate the peace and friendship of every nation, even of that which has injured us most, when we shall have carried our point against her. Our interest will be to throw open the doors of commerce, and to knock off all its shackles, giving perfect freedom to all persons for the vent of whatever they may chuse to bring into our ports, and asking the same in theirs. Never was so much false arithmetic employed on any subject, as that which has been employed to persuade nations that it is their interest to go to war. Were the money which it has cost to gain, at the close of a long war, a little town, or a little territory, the right to cut wood here, or to catch fish there, expended in improving what they already possess, in making roads, opening rivers, building ports, improving the arts, and finding employment for their idle poor, it would render them much stronger, much wealthier and happier. This I hope will be our wisdom. And, perhaps, to remove as much as possible the occasions of making war, it might be better for us to abandon the ocean altogether, that being the element whereon we shall be principally exposed to jostle with other nations: to leave to others to bring what we shall want, and to carry what we can spare. This would make us invulnerable to Europe, by offering none of our property to their prize, and would turn all our citizens to the cultivation of the earth; and, I repeat it again, cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens. It might be time enough to seek employment for them at sea, when the land no longer offers it. But the actual habits of our countrymen attach them to commerce. They will exercise it for themselves. Wars then must sometimes be our lot; and all the wise can do, will be to avoid that half of them which would be produced by our own follies, and our own acts of injustice; and to make for the other half the best preparations we can. Of what nature should these be? A land army would be useless for offence, and not the best nor safest instrument of defence. For

either of these purposes, the sea is the field on which we should meet an European enemy. On that element it is necessary we should possess some power. To aim at such a navy as the greater nations of Europe possess, would be a foolish and wicked waste of the energies of our countrymen. It would be to pull on our own heads that load of military expence, which makes the European labourer go sup- perless to bed, and moistens his bread with the sweat of his brows. It will be enough if we enable ourselves to prevent insults from those nations of Europe which are weak on the sea, because circumstances exist, which render even the stronger ones weak as to us. Providence has placed their richest and most defenceless possessions at our door; has obliged their most precious commerce to pass as it were in review before us. . . .

The value of our lands and slaves, taken conjunctly, doubles in about twenty years. This arises from the multiplication of our slaves, from the extension of cul- ture, and increased demand for lands. The amount of what may be raised will of course rise in the same proportion.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In one of the most famous lines in *Notes*, Jefferson writes that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” He meant white farmers, not African slaves, but why do you think he accorded them such respect?
2. How does this source help you to understand Jefferson’s opposition to Hamil- ton’s economic policies?

7-3 | A Federalist Warns Against French Influence on American Politics

FISHER AMES, *Foreign Politics* (c. 1801–1805)

While economics was one source of division in the new republic, foreign affairs was another. During the 1790s, as the French Revolution broke out, leading to the execution of the absolut- ist King Louis XVI and the triumph of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” Federalists and Republicans (as Jefferson’s supporters were called) took sides, interpreting the French Revolution in light of their own. Jeffersonian Republicans supported the French revolutionaries, who seemed to embrace the same republican ideals that had fueled the American Revolution. Federalists like Fisher Ames, whose essay on “Foreign Politics” is excerpted here, were horrified, especially after the French Revolution darkened into a “Reign of Terror.” For Federalists, the excesses of the French Revolution bespoke the dangers of too much liberty. Here, Ames despairs of a Jeffersonian infatuation with France.

European events have long had such a monopoly of the attention of Americans, that we scarcely find leisure or disposition to backbite and persecute each other,

Works of Fisher Ames (Boston: T. B. Wait & Co., 1809), 209–212.

as much as the rage of party spirit requires. Our pride is often offended, that our country makes a figure in the world so little conspicuous, that others overlook and we almost forget ourselves, while we suffer our sympathy and reflection to be exclusively engrossed by the events of the foreign War.

Yet the champions of party ought to be consoled, for the diversion of a party of our patriotick energies from the domestick scene of controversy, by their own success in rendering foreign politicks subservient to their design. Far though never all over, does not feel the dread nor the shame of her defeats, the insolent joy of her victories, with more emotion than our Jacobins.¹ They allege, in excuse for the deep concern they take in all the confusion and all the injustice of France, that they are not mere speculators, nor subject to impulse that are blind and without object; but that their *pure love for the people* never ceases to animate them enough to imitate what they admire, and to introduce what they so long have studied, and so well understand.

The men of sense and virtue have excuses too for their anxious solicitude about European affairs: there, they may say, faction culls her poisons; and in the bloody field, at length, we can perceive the antidote is sprouting. Already Aurora tells us, it is nonsense to talk of liberty under Buonaparte. Nevertheless France should be superior in the war, and should dictate the terms of peace, and inbred faction, her faithful ally, would be superiour here. The civilized world enjoy neither safety nor repose, if the most restless and ambitious nation obtains what it has struggled for a more than Roman sway, and a resist- power to render the interests of all other states as subservient to its own, as the of her Cisalpine allies.² The forest that harbours one wild cat, should breed many squirrels. Ambition like that of France, requires, for its daily sustenance, tan- ness like that of Spain or Holland: if all her neighbours were like Britain, who could this royal tigress find prey?

So far, indeed, is the attention paid by Americans to the affairs of Europe from being a subject of reproach, that, on the contrary, no period of history would be deemed more worthy of study by our statesmen, as well as our youth, than that of the last twelve years.

In France, we behold the effects of trying by the test of experience the most plausible metaphysical principles, in appearance the most pure, yet the most surpris- ingly in contrast with the corruption of the national manners. Theories, fit angels, have been adopted for the use of a multitude, who have been four- when left to what is called their self-government, unfit to be called men; as if the misrule of chaos or of pandemonium would yield to a little instruction in sing- psalms and divine songs; as if the passions inherent in man, and a constitution

¹Jacobin: Radical faction supporting the overthrow of the monarchy during the French Revolution.

²Cisalpine allies: Ames refers here to a client state created by Napoleon in 1797 on Italian side of the Alps.