

Back to the Age of the Borgias? Thomas Jefferson on Civilization and Affection in the United States

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In a letter of 1816, part of a series of correspondence with his once political adversary John Adams, Thomas Jefferson gave expression of the enthusiasm that he shared with the former about the previous century as one with the most spectacular degree of advancement ever in human science and civilization: “I agree with you in all [your] eulogies on the 18th. century. It certainly witnessed the sciences and arts, manners and morals, advanced to a higher degree than the world had ever before seen” (Jefferson to John Adams, January 11, 1816, Peterson 1374). In retrospect, the now retired president of the United States regarded the eighteenth century, the age of the Enlightenment as one exhibiting the unquestionable progress of the human mind and civilization. Nonetheless, he also refused to see it as an unbroken process: with the conflicts in Europe, the “close of the century” brought about a setback in this process and “saw the moral world thrown back again to the age of the Borgias, to the point from which it had departed 300. years before” (1375).

This particular instance was also characteristic of Jefferson’s view of civilization in America, since, as scholarship has shown, despite his optimism from time to time he also detected tendencies pointing in different directions (See Wood 1993; Shalhope). By, in part, drawing upon this scholarship, my objective in this essay is to pursue an investigation that brings together two different issues in Jefferson’s thought: one related to the nature of civilization as well as its role in his envisaging American cultural, economic, and social development and another that concerns Jefferson’s understanding American nationhood as one based on affectionate communality. I will argue that despite the claim

that after his retirement from presidency in 1809 Jefferson developed a sense of disaffection between North and South mainly because of the regression that he detected in connection with the American people with the rise of mass democracy, it was rather the different paces and stages of civilization, causing a split between the two regions that induced his pessimism over the possibility of preserving ties of national affection.

Most students of Jefferson have claimed that his conception of civilization was intricately linked with a belief in the material and intellectual progress of American society. Despite his occasional anxiety about the setbacks in this process, he was overwhelmingly optimistic about the constant improvement of humankind and America based on the growth of science and knowledge (Ekirch 31–33; Appleby 1993; Appleby 1984; Mennell 27–28; Onuf and Onuf 221–22).

At the same time, it has also been pointed out that when contemplating American society Jefferson saw signs indicating a pattern of development that contradicted his general ideas about civilization and progress as improvement. Whether due to the decline of republican virtue in the North (Shalhope 552) or regression into barbarism because of the excesses of an expanding democracy (Wood 1993, 413). Jefferson viewed the course of American political and cultural development with a significant degree of pessimism.

Such an interest in Jefferson's conception of progress and civilization, however, should be complemented with his idea that the nation, the subject of this development, was held together by ties of communal affection, and the idea of cultural homogeneity. At the time of the Revolution and throughout most of his political career, Jefferson regarded the nation as being based on affectionate ties among its members. Furthermore, in his conception of the nation, the precondition for the sustenance of such bonds was cultural homogeneity. Thus, for instance, his efforts to integrate Native Americans into the American nation involved the imperative of cultural assimilation: only by adopting white ways could Natives become part of Jefferson's republic of affection (Willis 284–92; Wood 1993, 406; Onuf 2000, 53, 77–78, 48, 51–52).

As will be seen below, to Jefferson's mind, exactly these ties were threatened by the different paces of civilization in America becoming evident to him in his late period. In order to see that, however, first it is

necessary to discuss Jefferson's conception of civilization and progress. The fullest treatment of Jefferson's views on civilization in relation to America to date is offered by Stephen Mennell, who adapts Norbert Elias's theory of "civilizing process" in his discussion of the American scene. Thus, it can serve as a useful starting point for my analysis.

Civilization, in Elias's model presumes a shift from "external constraints" imposed on the individual self to the development of "self-restraint" in relation to European medieval and early modern codes of behavior. While in the first stage of the process norms limiting social conduct are conveyed by explicit forms such as books of manners, in the next stage they are acquired and internalized by the individual in an unconscious manner. As a result of this civilizing process, then, original rules are no longer made explicit, and the culture goes silent on them because they have become inherent and natural to members of the community. The breaking of them is prohibited by shame and embarrassment to be expected of the individual. Such an automatic way of self-control was extended to all adults by the nineteenth century and was no longer dependent on social distinctions: all members of adult western society were equally exposed to the norms of civilization (Mennell 6, 8-9).

One of Mennell's fundamental claims about the United States in relation to this civilization process is that Americans "came to forget the *process* of civilization through which they had, over the generations, arrived at where they were," considering their culture as superior over that of Europe (26; original emphasis). They assumed that the "founding conditions of American society" already ensured patterns of behavior that should otherwise be the result of a process taking the time of several generations (26). Jefferson shared this view about the peculiar "founding conditions" of America making external restraints unnecessary from the beginning. The conditions involved the social ideal of the "farmer" plus "widespread ... literacy and education." He found all these indispensable to a self-governing people (37). As will be seen below, the argument about those founding conditions will play a crucial role in Jefferson's change of heart with regard to his contemplation of the state of American civilization in his later career.

According to Mennell, such a state of mind, for instance, accounts for a lot of Jefferson's assertions about the American people and is to be seen as a consequence of his insistence on identifying the civilized state already achieved with a presupposed identity taken as given. Hence

Jefferson, according to Mennell, understands the American people as being inherently capable of self-restraint because of their “innate” “sense of justice,” and “rationality,” thereby having the power of governing themselves by nature (29).

Also, in Jefferson’s system, the internalization of restraint on the part of the individual, Mennell argues, reduces the role of state coercion to a minimal degree. Self-governing, “civilized” individuals are capable of guaranteeing social harmony without the active interference of government. Jefferson maintained such a position even in the face of voices demanding a greater degree of control by the state, culminating in the making of the American constitution in the 1780s, because of their distrust of the people’s capacity for self-restraint (31–32, 35).

Mennell’s understanding of the civilization process in Jefferson’s thought, however, is to be complemented with the context of contemporary views of progress. Mennell argues that the type of society that Jefferson posited as the most civilized was one where agriculture and commerce reigned as major forms of economic activity (27). Valid as it may seem at first sight, this contentment requires qualification in the light of the intellectual context that Jefferson’s theory of civilization and development fitted in.

Jefferson’s ideas about economic and social development were directly derived from the conceptual framework of the stadial theory of social development. Rooted in eighteenth-century French and Scottish Enlightenment philosophies, the theory was centered upon the thesis as its lynchpin that human societies are bound to undergo various stages of development, each defined by the particular mode of subsistence characteristic of it. Varying in detail from thinker to thinker, it was generally held that the initial stage was occupied by hunter-gatherers, followed by the pastoral one, which developed into the agricultural mode of subsistence. The whole process culminated in the commercial one as the last stage represented by the highest degree of civilization in terms of knowledge, manners, and refinement (Meek 68–126; McCoy 18–20; Onuf and Onuf 91–93).

This theory of stadial development articulated in temporal terms was adopted by Jefferson and was complemented by a spatial dimension: in America, the march of civilization became identical with the westward movement. Moving westward clearly indicated for him a movement toward the extreme and least developed stage of “barbarism,” represented by native Americans in the Rocky Mountains, a state that once used to

characterize Jefferson's own place of residence. Time, however, will bring about the civilization of one place and the next. For Jefferson, this is also a process that defines the evolution of humankind in general, "the process of man from the infancy of creation to the present day" (Jefferson to William Ludlow, September 6, 1824, Peterson 1497-98).

On the whole, Jefferson regarded this process of civilization as "amelioration," general improvement, ultimately resulting in the disappearance of "barbarism." For him, this change from the state of barbarism to more civilized ones was based on the accumulation of knowledge as well as the improvement in morals. He held that the human mind could serve as a basis of the improvement of the "condition of man" (Jefferson to William Green Mumford, June 18, 1799, Peterson 1064). Thus, he believed, human societies of the past, representing barbarism were less developed in reason or morality. Such "Gothic" ages did not offer a pattern for Americans to follow. Instead, they were to be condemned, despised and avoided (1065; Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799, Peterson 1057; Jefferson to Joseph Priestly, January 27, 1800, Peterson 1073; Jefferson to Joseph Priestly, March 21, 1801, Peterson 1085).

It was this belief in civilization as a basis of progress, for instance, that made Jefferson think of Native Americans as one people in the stage of barbarism but who, at the same time, could be assimilated into white American society. The means he offered was to make them choose the way of progress and move from the world of hunting to that of "agriculture" and "domestic manufactures" (Jefferson to "Gentlemen of the Senate," January 18, 1803, Lipscomb and Bergh III, 490). In their case, then, progress was possible, denoting change from the past through the present toward the future.

Nonetheless, these were cases then Jefferson's assessment of a particular group of humans implied deterioration, and not improvement. For him, as seen above, events in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century indicated such a state, but more generally, the European urban landscape showed conditions that were far from being to serve as examples of civilization. Characterized by "ignorance" and "vice," the poor of European cities embodied an ideal that was far from the one that Jefferson proposes to follow. In fact, they reproduced the barbarian conditions that Jefferson associated with the past of Europe and thus exhibited regression against the backdrop of civilization (Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, Peterson 1309). At the same time, as will

be seen, he also detected problems related to the different pace of development within the Union, also having implications for social cohesion.

As historians have claimed, this social cohesion at the time was largely connected to the vision of American culture as one based on sociability and affection. Largely derived from the culture of sensibility characterizing the second half of the eighteenth century, the belief that society was held together through intimate ties of love associated with the social nature of individuals was shared by most Americans at the time. Such ties of affection were, in ideal cases, to cut across social boundaries, ultimately uniting all Americans also in a nationhood based on sensibility (Wood 1993 (1991), 215–25; Wood 1993, 405–6; Knott; Burstein).

And Jefferson was no exception to those affected by the sentimental tendencies of the age: in his vision of American society or nationhood, affection played a pivotal role. For him, national unity and harmony were based on the affective ties that connected Americans with one another. Furthermore, such ties became crucial in defining the others to this nationhood: black slaves or Native Americans formed different and distinct nations with no ties of affection connecting them to whites. Only by developing affectionate feelings could they become part of Jefferson's nation of love, and he found that possible only in the case of Native Americans. The integration of blacks he found impossible (Onuf 2000, 14, 51, 148).

Not only integration was an issue in Jefferson's vision of the affective republic, but also the possibility of disintegration, that is, falling out of the community of affection. This is a case that historians have noted in connection with the period of Jefferson's retirement from presidency in 1809. Yet, it has not been sufficiently explored how moments of disaffection were connected with Jefferson's ideas about progress and civilization. Gordon S. Wood, for one, argues, that the major cause of Jefferson's growing pessimism about the state and future of the nation was related to the democratic changes that he detected in America. In spite of his faith in progress and civilization, burgeoning mass democracy seemed to exhibit symptoms of regression to him. Ironically, Jefferson was "unprepared for the democratic revolution that he himself inspired." He saw Americans sinking into the state of barbarism, less refined, and "not becoming more enlightened," Wood argues (Wood 1993, first quotation on 413, second on 414).

Yet, I contend, the case was, in fact, different and more complicated than it seems. In the first place, not regression but too much civilization was the major cause of Jefferson's worries about America, and, in the second, it also accounted for his detecting the deterioration of conditions for affection tying the nation together.

It may well be the case that Jefferson conceived of the "founding conditions" of America as unified, thus resulting in a relatively homogeneous civilization process, yet by the 1810s he had clearly perceived divergence between the courses of development of North and South, the former having advanced further on the road from agriculture to commerce as the main source of wealth. For him, the North started to represent all the vices associated with commercialization and urbanization, hence cities such as New York, for instance, becoming the "Cloacina" of the nation. Furthermore, the refinement of the North may have superseded that of the South, but the latter exhibited traits making it seem "rational, moral and affectionate" to Jefferson (Jefferson to William Short, September 8, 1823, Lipscomb and Bergh XV, 469).

Jefferson contrasted an America blessed with agriculture and "restricted commerce" to one with commerce unbound. The latter was to be avoided because of its susceptibility to getting involved in war with foreign powers in defense of its expanding commercial interests. It also implied higher taxes for the people compelled to finance such wars (Jefferson to William H. Crawford, June 20, 1816, Ford X, 34-35). All these tendencies, then, indicated that the North was approximating the degree of development that Jefferson found undesirable. In this way, for Jefferson, a "line of division" was developing between North and South, a fact that also resulted in cleavage between the sections in terms of culture and ideology. This was the reason why Jefferson advocated the isolation of Southern youths from Northern institutions. In this way he hoped to prevent their contamination with "different" ideas (Jefferson to James Breckinridge, February 15, 1821, Peterson 1452).

The differences that Jefferson detected in the development of the two sections were ultimately disruptive of the ties of affection because they implied different variations of the moral sense. For Jefferson, it was the moral sense, present in every human being that enabled them to coexist in society peacefully. Ubiquitous as it was, it posited different rules of behavior in different cultures creating the foundations of social stability. Therefore, it was to fit the given cultural context (Jefferson to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, Peterson 1338). The same moral sense

would not work that same way in a different culture. Hence the different courses of civilization, resulting in different cultural contexts and thus conditions for the moral sense weakened ties between North and South.

At the same time, divergence between North and South in terms of the civilizing process was not the only tendency that Jefferson found worrying. As we have seen, part of the reason for his support of the civilizing process was that it would result in smaller government. By this time, however, he began to feel frustrated at this issue as well: he developed a belief in a tendency toward a larger government, which may be connected with the course of civilization. To him, the larger “machinery of government” and “too many parasites” connected with that indicated the side effects of growth (Jefferson to William Ludlow, September 6, 1824, Peterson 1496–97). The growing power of government posed a threat to the states and resulted in the appearance of “the plundered ploughman and beggared yeomanry” as well as a monarchical form of government (Jefferson to William B. Giles, December 26, 1825, Ford X, 355, 356; quotation on 356).

Although, from time to time, Jefferson found coercion by the federal government a necessity mainly in order to enforce federal legislation within the states (See Steele) the new tendencies clearly contradicted the principle of people governing themselves as well as the idea of small government. All this was not programmed within the founding conditions of American civilization.

It was not no much regression, one can conclude, then, that seems to have characterized Jefferson’s understanding of the civilization process in America. The pessimistic view that he articulated in his later years was, instead, connected with his thesis of the excesses of civilization in the North and its consequences. In the first place, the example of the North showed to him that more civilization and refinement did not necessarily result in greater affection. On the contrary, since it ultimately affected the “founding conditions” of America, best preserved in the South, it could no longer serve attachment within the Union. It was not the age of new barbarism that caused the split between North and South, but more civilization in the North.

In the second place, despite Mennell’s contention, for Jefferson, this process of civilization also affected the whole of America resulting in

larger government, which was to be more involved with commerce and its protection through wars that, in turn, preconditioned more taxes and a stronger, less frugal state. In such a divided country, the different degrees of civilization also created a condition for the relative significance of the moral sense. What was appropriate from a moral viewpoint in the more civilized North was far from that in the less developed and civilized South: the split in the nation was, in part, because of the split in the civilization process. The difference in the degree of civilization, then, also implied the differences of the two regional versions of the moral sense. The difference, however, frustrated the principle of homogeneity, which was indispensable to a harmonious union based on affectionate ties.

In this way, due to changes in the “founding conditions” of America as a result of commercial development, changes within the civilizing process affected different parts of the nation in different ways. This was the ultimate cause of Jefferson’s anxiety over the loss of homogeneity and harmony within the nation, together with civilized affection. Rather than strengthening, civilization, in fact, subverted those vital sentiments of affection.

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