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Jeffersonian Democracy: Its Significance for Our Time

BY GLENN E. HOOVER

THE EDITORS of *Die Wandlung*¹ having learned that I called myself a "Jeffersonian democrat", honored me with a request that I indicate briefly the central ideas of those Americans who so describe themselves. At the outset I must warn the reader that I can speak for no one but myself. We who describe ourselves as "Jeffersonians" do so largely in the interest of brevity. We are not organized, we are not a sect, we have no universally accepted dogmas, and no "Jeffersonian" has any authority to speak for another.

Nor shall I make any attempt to summarize Jefferson's thought. Because of his long public career, both in Europe and America, and the great scope of his interests, his writings cover an uncommonly wide range. Here I can comment only on the chief factor on which his philosophy was based, to wit, his intense love of freedom, his faith in it, and his distrust of all concentrations of power. For him, power was the real enemy of liberty, and it was the duty of free men to oppose the undue concentration of it, whether it was to be exercised by governments, bankers, industrialists, or the most terrible of all tyrants, the mob.

Jefferson's precepts are frequently summed up in the maxim "That government is best which governs least." His followers, therefore, stoutly oppose any dictatorship, whether of the Right or the Left, and they would also deny to any government, however wise and "democratic," the power to regulate the economy and the daily lives of the individual citizen. "If we were to depend on Washington (the capital—not the man) to tell us when to plow and when to reap, we should all lack bread" is a statement attributed to Jefferson which expresses his followers' opinion of any form of collectivism, or over-all planned economy.

It is this fear of excessive State power that prompts the followers of Jefferson to encourage the widest possible diffusion of property. They believe that "power follows property" and they do not wish to add to the power of governments by giving them the ownership or control of any property except natural monopolies, or other types of property unsuitable for private ownership. They believe that eternal vigilance is necessary to prevent a governmental bureaucracy from expanding the scope of its

¹ *Die Wandlung* was the Heidelberg periodical in which the German version of this essay first appeared.

functions, thus adding both to its insolence and its incompetence. Bureaucracy, at its best, is a necessary evil, and at its worst it becomes an insufferable one.

Faith in the Common People

THOSE WHO WOULD MAXIMIZE individual freedom must have faith that the common people can conduct, with reasonable success, their personal affairs. Jefferson had such a faith. It was not, however, based on any sentimental or mystical belief that all men are equal in their capacities. Although he was a persistent foe of all privilege based on law or custom, he recognized that there was among men, a natural aristocracy of ability. However, these differences in ability did not justify any unequal treatment before the law, nor the coercion of one man by another.

Jefferson believed also that a free society could function only if all citizens were given equal access to educational opportunities. He proposed that those who demonstrated that they could profit most from these opportunities should be encouraged to continue their schooling at public expense. No statesman of his time laid greater stress on the indispensability of public education. It was the knowledge and wisdom of the people that was to make it unnecessary for the State to stand *in loco parentis* to its citizens. Knowledge was to give men confidence and self-respect. We insist on shifting our burdens to the State, just to the degree that we have lost faith in our ability to conduct our own affairs. The exaltation of the State goes hand in hand with the abasement of the individual.

It is often said that Jefferson's fear of all-powerful States is out-moded because their powers are no longer to be used *against* the people, but *for* the people. It is proposed that we give up many of our personal freedoms in exchange for the economic security and the largesse which such States are to provide. During the Great Depression, this proposal seduced many people, even in such advanced countries as Germany, Britain and the United States. Any kind of economic security, however servile, continues to appeal to the chronically hungry and oppressed people of Eastern Europe. They should, of course, be allowed to choose their fate. Neo-Jeffersonians can only hope that they may some day prize their freedom above any benefits which a police State can provide. They will learn that a government can give its people only what it has first taken from them, decreased by the cost of maintaining a swarm of functionaries.

It must be admitted that there are concentrations of power of a kind unknown in Jefferson's time. The giant trade unions now operating in

the United States and some European countries have the power to halt the mass-production and mass-transportation industries, and thus jeopardize the economy of an entire nation. Jefferson cannot be quoted on the problems they present, but there is every reason to believe that he would oppose such power, even more fiercely than he opposed the tyrannical power exercised by the feudal monarchies of his age.

Liberals, in the United States as elsewhere, have always sympathized with the aspirations of the wage workers, but they are confused and frightened by the unprecedented power which some of our trade unions now employ. Jefferson's logic suggests that such power must be tamed. Governmental coercion can at times be justified, but a free people can never submit to coercion by private organizations. Workers may, and often do, have legitimate demands, but the right to create an "imperium in imperio" is not one of them.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the neo-Jeffersonians in America combat monopoly power only when it is exerted by the great trade unions. They attacked the monopoly power of industrialists, long before trade unions were strong enough to cause any alarm. They insisted that monopoly power was, itself, largely the result of high customs duties, imposed in the name of "protection." Here is the classic example of the way in which State power, unwisely applied, leads to the creation of economic power, which, in turn, is used to exploit the general public. By restricting the freedom of international trade, States make it easier for producers to conspire against the public interest. For us neo-Jeffersonians, State power is never more stupidly applied than when used to restrict the geographical division of labor.

Destroy the Protective Tariff

THE NEO-JEFFERSONIANS would, therefore, destroy the protective tariff system, root and branch. It should not be forgotten that the first national "planning" took the form of state restrictions on international trade. This device, more than any other, has limited geographical specialization, retarded the growth of large scale industries—particularly in Europe—and lowered the per capita productivity of workers throughout the world. It is not the Jeffersonians who are trying to revive the economic self-sufficiency of nations, but those who would use State power to disrupt the natural channels of international trade.

Another charge—equally false—is that we are blind to the changes resulting from increased industrialization and urbanization. We are ac-

cused of seeking to reverse the course of history and return to a pioneer society. It is said that we have no positive program, but only a policy of doing nothing. To the extent that these criticisms are more than cheap jibes, they are based on a complete misunderstanding of the liberal position. It is the liberals, the Jeffersonian liberals, who have insisted that State power be applied to the uttermost to break up monopolies and cartels. It is their collectivist opponents who have maintained that such attempts are futile and only delay the time when the large industries can be taken over by the government.

It is also said—again quite falsely—that Jeffersonian liberals are indifferent to the problem of economic inequality, and the plight of the poor. On the contrary, no liberal—in America at least—with any prestige whatever, opposes governmental relief for the needy. We do, however, prefer that such relief be honest and direct. For example, we favor governmental assistance for those families who cannot earn enough to live according to the accepted standard. We would not, however, seek to solve their problems by establishing price controls, which lower prices for the rich as well as the poor, discourage production, and make black markets inevitable. Price control is an awkward and self-defeating device which shares with inflation the doubtful honor of being the worst form of intervention practiced by modern States.

German readers may wish to know something of the strength in America of what may be called the anti-power tradition of Thomas Jefferson. The answer is not easy. The Democratic party, which still officially reveres Jefferson as one of its founders, seems to have largely abandoned this tradition. After its electoral victory under President Roosevelt in 1932, it supported the extension of the power of the central government, and this often at the expense of the state and local governments. The Republican party, which, for so long as it controlled the federal government, was eager to extend its powers, then became the defender of the states. This reversal of position by the two major parties supports the belief that any political party which controls the central government develops an appetite for power which is insatiable. That "Power grows by what it feeds on" should be readily understood by every German who witnessed the unparalleled concentration of it under *der Führer*.

In university circles, the advocates of free trade—the intellectual heirs of the Jeffersonian tradition—have won a complete victory. The policy of "protection"—at least for our country and for our time—has lost every vestige of intellectual respectability. It is true that the owners

and workers in the high-cost industries still clamor for governmental protection against the products of the "cheap labor" of Europe and Asia. Our farmers, too, want protection from "cheap" New Zealand butter, "cheap" Canadian milk, "cheap" fruits and nuts from the Mediterranean countries, and "cheap" vegetable fats from the islands of the Pacific. Combined, they still have great political power, but their arguments are used by professors of economics as examples of human selfishness and human folly. So far as the universities are concerned, the protectionists have lost their ideological war.

Education and the Growth of Personality

THOMAS JEFFERSON, playing the sage in his Deist heaven, must be comforted to see how generally American intellectuals share his views. For him, universal education was not only the prerequisite of popular government, but the means by which each man could develop his maximum powers, thus freeing himself from dependence on either the state or the compassion of his fellows. It is significant that in the epitaph which he drafted for his tombstone, he made no mention of the fact that he had been governor of his state, or twice President of the United States, but rather that he was the author of The Declaration of Independence, the author of the Bill to Establish Religious Freedom in Virginia, and the founder of the University of Virginia.

Who carries on the Jeffersonian tradition in the United States? First in number are the anonymous, little people who oppose all plans to have the State fix their wages, regulate their hours, and restrict entrance into certain trades and professions; the women who would repeal such "protective" legislation as restricts their opportunity to work at any tasks, or at any times, that are mutually agreeable to them and their employers; the producers and consumers who wish to buy and sell openly in free markets rather than in black ones, or in markets where prices are fixed by the ukase of a commissar; and, finally, all Americans who demand the right to buy abroad, free from the heavy-handed interference of a central government whose commercial policies are always determined by producers, effectively organized into pressure groups. These people constitute a mighty legion. They may at times lack organization, effective leaders and a comprehensive philosophy, but their inclinations are in the direction of freedom—and the future is theirs.

Who are the leaders among the neo-Jeffersonians? They are, chiefly, those intellectuals and more thoughtful business men, who have come to

believe that power is the modern Devil, which must be destroyed, or at least enchained, if men are to be freed from their gravest fears. To try to select any living leaders for recognition would be an invidious task. It seems proper, however, to say that until his untimely death in 1946, Professor Henry C. Simons of the Department of Economics of the University of Chicago was recognized in university circles as a leading champion of freedom. He had a profound distrust of power, whether exercised by States, industrialists or trade unions. After his death, his writings, chiefly monographic in character, were assembled and published by the University of Chicago Press, under the title "Economic Policy For A Free Society". Although he never invoked the name of Jefferson—a practice more prevalent among politicians than among scholars—he was a gifted exponent of Jeffersonian democracy, as that term is used in this essay.

In conclusion it may be pertinent to recall that one of the "four freedoms," popularized by the late President Roosevelt, was "freedom from fear." So far, so good. But what is it modern men most fear? It is no longer such natural calamities as floods, earthquakes and droughts, say the neo-Jeffersonians, but State power. How many young men fear that their governments may, even in time of peace, draft them for military service, later perhaps, to sacrifice them in some war which they neither understand nor approve? How many peaceful families fear that as a result of governmental rivalries—chiefly among the Great Powers—their homes may be laid waste, or the tide of battles shall engulf them, or even that their entire region shall be pulverized by atomic bombs?

The Distribution of Military Power

WE NEO-JEFFERSONIANS are realists, not Utopian. We do not know if, nor when, the world may be freed from the scourge of war, and the burden of preparing for it. We do, however, believe that the threat of war would be considerably diminished if the military might of governments were more evenly distributed among nations. If they would then equip the United Nations with overwhelming power, devoted solely to the task of denying to all nations the use of force, except with United Nations' approval, perhaps the goal of universal peace may be attained.

For the present, however, the world suffers from the worst possible distribution of State power. It is generally believed that there remain but two Great Powers, the United States, with its free enterprise economy, and the Soviet Union with its collectivist economy. Each fears and mis-

trusts the other and there are not now a sufficient number of strong independent nations to mediate between them, or to effectively join in resisting the aggression of either of them. The resulting instability is the real tragedy of the post-War era.

Because of this precarious balance of power, the American people are now following, with much sympathy, the efforts of the people of western Europe to create a Western Union, including, ultimately, all the German people who wish to join the enterprise—and are free to do so. Only in this way, it seems, can the smaller States of Europe attain real security against possible military aggression.

We descendants of those Europeans who left their native lands to spread European civilization throughout the world, want Europe restored. Its beautiful countries deserve a better fate than to serve as battlefields. Moreover, so soon as the peoples of Western Europe are strong enough to protect their own lands, they will constitute a mighty barrier, behind which, both the Soviet Union and the United States might feel safe from aggression. Many of us in the United States would prefer to live in a world in which no nation—not even our own—has such overwhelming power as is now controlled from Moscow and Washington. The revival of Western Europe is a condition precedent to the establishment of this new world order.

Mills College

The New Chinese Agricultural Tax

THE ECONOMIC ILLITERACY of the professed Marxists who have seized power with the aid of Soviet arms in China is a joy to behold for those who wish the regime a short life and an unmerry one. For example, the ninth session of the Council Committee of the Central People's Government in Peiping enacted on Sept. 5, 1950 a temporary agricultural tax law affecting 260,000,000 farmers. The following is the official version of the basic principle of the law:

"In the past, China's feudalistic land system was for the benefit of the landowners. The landowners used every means to shift the tax burden to the farmers. The new agricultural tax operates on a more equitable basis. Those having a larger income pay more taxes, while those having a smaller