

## The Relevance of Thomas Jefferson for the Twentieth Century: A Reappraisal\*

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the relevance of Thomas Jefferson for the twentieth century with a special emphasis on the libertarian and millennial aspects of what has generally become known as the Jeffersonian vision. Topics discussed include Jefferson's view of the French Revolution, his view of slavery, his opinions regarding government of Louisiana and other related subjects. That he was a complex man full of contradictions—"a baffling series of contradictions," Professor Merrill D. Peterson has described—will also be discussed.<sup>1</sup> The assumption on which the present study is based is that Jefferson's significance has always lied and will continue to lie in his being a symbol—a symbol of national aspirations and, as recent studies have more and more revealed, of national ambiguities and dilemmas.

My thesis is that the Jeffersonian vision is valid and creditable today, providing direction and purpose for the people of the United States. In other words, considered as a national platform of goals and objectives, appeal to it can help Americans solve the diverse and complicated problems that they face. And intellectually—this is a point the more pertinent to the present study—it can be the ground on which to construct a mean-

ingful and unified conception of what the history of the United States has been about, replacing the scattered one which seems to be prevailing today.

It may be fitting to open my discussion with a few quotations from Jefferson's numerous writings, for it will give you some idea of the tone of his language and will also remind you of where he stood on politics, economics or religion: his "imperishable rhetoric" on the one hand and his "imperishable faith" on the other.<sup>2</sup> Jefferson as symbol becomes alive through his writings, public or private.

The first is taken from a letter to Benjamin Rush, dated September 23, 1800:

I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.<sup>3</sup>

These words, inscribed on the wall of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., will continue to speak to the hearts of those who cherish liberty everywhere. It might be added however that Jefferson's original intention had been more to criticize certain Christian sects, namely the "Episcopalians" and "Congregationalists," for their endeavor to "obtain an establishment" than to expound a general principle of liberty.

The second passage, excerpted from his *Notes on Virginia* (1781-82), is very well-

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1 Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), p. 9.

2 Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948), p. 43.

3 There are several editions of collected writings of Jefferson available. His public papers, addresses and letters quoted in this paper may be found in them unless otherwise noted.

known but there has not been agreement among historians either as to what such a passage in Jefferson's otherwise sedate Enlightenment writings exactly meant or as to what impact it had on the subsequent debates on slavery:

Indeed I *tremble* for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever . . . . The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest [between white masters and black slaves]. But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil. We must be contended to hope they will force their way into everyone's mind. [Italics mine] (Query XVIII)

Our last passage is found in a letter to Roger C. Weightman, dated June 24, 1826. Jefferson had been invited to attend the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Declaration of Independence but had to decline the invitation because of poor health. (He was eighty-three years old then.) The letter was his reply stating so but in it he also stated that he would be celebrating the happy occasion with his countrymen in spirit if not in person:

[O]ur fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made . . . . The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.

Cursory reading of these passages will suffice to show that they were written in the mood of optimism, conveying the writer's sense of mission, his faith in progress and human values and his commitment to revolutionary ideals. It seems that he was con-

templating some millennial vision; so assured he seems of the uniqueness of the American experience and the promises of life there.

However, we cannot but notice a tinge of uncertainty or tension lurking in Jefferson's projected vision. Anyone who reads these passages today will not fail to spot his anxiety that unless they take extra heed of the moral obligations demanded of them, Americans can expect only severe punishment and scourge. It is not difficult to see that there is a strange mixture of millennialism and apocalypse here. Neither of these theological concepts is ordinarily applied to Jefferson's generally secular ideology. Moreover, we are not certain exactly where his eschatology stood. But in view of the fact that tradition has long had him in a prophet's role and considering the ambivalence of hopes and fears, aspirations and despairs, it may be right to posit here that the Jefferson's view of the future of his nation was millennial, with proddings for never ceasing to pay attention to "the grace of God," or Americans can expect only the doom of their eventual fall.<sup>4</sup>

We must perhaps go back to Vernon Louis Parrington and his *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30) in order the better to reappraise Jefferson's place in the historical imagination of the American people. For it was Parrington who, coming out of the Progressive background, turned one man's vision into some sort of a national vision—better still, the American Dream—and remade a complex historical personage into an almost mythical symbol. I do not mean to slight the

4 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "America: Experiment or Destiny?", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (June 1977), pp. 505-522, has an interesting discussion on "messianism" in America.

contributions made by professional historians like Charles A. Beard and Carl Becker in putting forth the Progressive theme of liberal forces combatting conservative, reactionary forces throughout American history. Parrington was an amateur as historian but it was he who did more than any of his contemporaries to create the liberal-progressive image of Jefferson. He did that in an impassioned, rhetorical language:

Far more completely than any other American of his generation he [Jefferson] embodied the idealisms of the great revolution—its faith in human nature, its economic individualism, its conviction that here in America, through the instrumentality of political democracy, the lot of the common man should somehow be made better.<sup>5</sup>

Several years later James Truslow Adams wrote almost in an identical style:

There is no doubt that Jeffersonianism was the American doctrine, stemming straight from the Declaration of Independence.... If America has stood for anything unique in the history of the world, it has been for the American dream, the belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one.<sup>6</sup>

That these ringing voices were in fact not so much an affirmation of the continued presence of the Jeffersonian “dream” as an expression of laments—that the America’s great tradition had disappeared or was rapidly disappearing—has been pointed out by not a small number of scholars. Professor Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., is one of them. It was, according to Professor Ekirch, on his own generation who seemed to have diverted from

“the whole philosophy of progressive reform” of earlier decades that Adams rendered such a “severe judgment.” Adams wrote his *Epic of America* (1933) in order to “put into historical perspective the increasingly troubled concern and sense of malaise shared by so many of the intellectuals of the 1920’s.”<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of today however both Parrington and Adams appear to have been too much immersed in a nostalgic recollection of the America’s glorious past. It may be correct to say that they were both naive and that their seemingly unsophisticated adoration of the nation’s past history was not so realistic.

Checking the recent scholarship on the history of the American Revolution and also of the early national period, one will note that the framework in which to see American history—to use a terminology which is coming into vogue nowadays, the paradigm or “mind-set”—has been altered. In other words, the “Progressive” paradigm or the “mind-set” which characterized Parrington’s and Adams’ conception of American history, seems no longer adequate to account for the nation’s past performances.

What makes the whole question of historical paradigms complicated is that the shift in emphasis from the “Progressive” to the New Left, the latest comer, was not one-step. That is, there had been one radical shift in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s: the emergence of what Professor Gene Wise has called the “counter-Progressive” school, or of what has generally come to be called the “consensus” school. It is this latter set of historical assumptions that are now being challenged

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5 Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vol. 1, *The Colonial Mind 1620-1800* (New York, 1927), p. 349.

6 James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Garden City, 1933), p. 104.

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7 Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *Ideologies and Utopias: The Impact of the New Deal on American Thought* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 7, 11-12.

by the New Left.<sup>8</sup>

There is not much room in this paper to analyze in detail the historiography of recent studies on the American Revolution or on Jefferson, except to point out that the shift in historical perspective that has become increasingly evident during the past decade or so has been not unrelated to the changes taking place in American society, in America's position in international politics or, more importantly, in people's view of the universe, i.e., their conception of man's relationships with each other on the one hand and with the external environment (nature) on the other. Needless to say, some of these changes have been sudden while others gradual, some visible while others not so conspicuous; but they are all fundamental in nature.

The assassination of President Kennedy, the War in Vietnam, conflicts over civil rights, university confrontations, the almost guilt-ridden consciousness that certain groups, most notably Indians (Native Americans), blacks (Afro-Americans), Chicanos (Mexican-Americans) and other racial and ethnic minorities have been victims of race prejudice and gross social injustice—these are some of the events and changes in the Americans' awareness that have given rise to a radical shift in the conception of history.

I am aware of the danger of labeling or oversimplification, but comparison of the New Left paradigm with the "Progressive" paradigm on the one hand and with the "consensus" paradigm on the other seems to be in order.

The New Left historians question in the first place the idea of progress which both

the "Progressive" and "consensus" schools of historians have stressed as one sure sign that America was superior to all other nations. They cannot accept such a notion of progress because it fails to take into account the problems of poverty, waste or power. Instead, they regard it as demonstrably false and even malign. Secondly—this point is related to the first one—they criticize the notions of continuity and consensus, saying that the facts of divisions and class and other struggles are too obvious to ignore. The third criticism is that both the "Progressive" and "consensus" paradigms in fact condone the political hegemony of the whites over the non-whites who are supposed to be savage, barbarian and hence inferior. Such notion of white supremacy one historian has called "WASP-centered."<sup>9</sup> Fourthly, the New Left historians do not see human experience in terms of both-this-and-that, for to do so is tantamount to rationalizing the *status quo* or, worse still, to apologizing for social evils that are manifest in American society today. So they have the tendency to esteem the "system-changing" rather than "system-reforming" liberals the more highly: for example, William Lloyd Garrison and Big Bill Haywood over Jefferson or FDR, much troubled and tormented about the welfare of their "dispossessed" fellow countrymen as these latter men might have been. Lastly, the values the New Left historians cherish most strongly are the sense of harmony between nature and man, vitality, honesty and spontaneity of expression, whereas traditional values such as work ethic and exploitative individualism are quite suspect in their eyes. The rhetoric of the self-made man so-called the time-honored symbol of

<sup>8</sup> I have depended heavily for the following discussion on Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanation: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill., 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Carl Degler, quoted in "Rediscovering America," *Time*, July 7, 1980, p. 29.

the American success story is naturally downgraded in the New Left scholarship.

Much credit must be given to the New Left historiography for having aroused a new historical consciousness which stresses the need to see history "from bottom up." This new emphasis was apparently meant to be antithetical to the elite-centered view of the previous schools, both "Progressive" and "consensus." Also it was hoped that the New Left historians would come up with a conception of history more solid and more realistic. However, all indications seem to point to a rather scattered vision of the American past or an iconoclastic attack on conventional heroes and on venerable institutions and customs. In short the New Left historiography awaits revision as all previous historiographies in the past have.

I would like to take a quick look at what happened in American society during the past decade or so politically and socially before moving on to Jefferson.

As mentioned earlier, there was serious concern for social reform in the 1960's and experiments, some serious and good while others not so, were made to raise individual consciousness and re-establish communal relationships in the extremely individualistic, atomized society that America is today. But, like all the historical periods that have come after the passing of reform zeal, the decade of the 1970's may be best described as the era of disillusionment. A drifting and tentative mood seems to prevail. The sense of uncertainty and the feeling of powerlessness are discernible among the people who have long prided themselves for the unique history of their nation and for being heirs to a great revolutionary tradition.

This state has been brought about in more

ways than one as a conservative reaction to the turbulent decade of the 1960's. It was ironical that vociferous assaults on the national mood of self-complacency and shocking revelations of the unexpectedly repressive nature of American society had alienated and antagonized a large segment of the otherwise liberal-minded middle-class Americans. The radical reformers, mostly young men and women, lost their sympathizers, mostly of older generations, as they mounted a vigorous attack on existing institutions or, as they preferred to call, the "Establishment." There were also a number of sorry cases of the "awareness movement," creative and resourceful in itself, degenerating into the low-level self-absorption fad or violence.<sup>10</sup>

This is then a time of doubt. One would hardly be surprised to find a significant number of Americans who are reluctant to accept such a rosy account of their nation's history as: "two centuries of constitutional government, a century of remarkable economic development, half a century of national security in a war-plagued world and a quarter of a century of expanding minority rights."<sup>11</sup> It may be perhaps more accurate to say that, granting the record of commendable past performances to be true, they cannot imagine their future to be as bright as in the past. They seem to be unable to hold on to a millennial vision such as Jefferson's. Since it is obvious that things are not going as well for their nation as when Jefferson made his optimistic predictions, a vision such as Jefferson's appears increasingly untenable.

10 See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: America in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1978), esp. Ch. 1.

11 Bernard Bailyn *et al.*, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People* (Boston, 1977), p. 1265.

Discussion of the American vision, ideal and real, is not complete without a careful examination of Jefferson's vision, for he is a large part of the nation's history and an inefaceable symbol of the American vision.

It is a well-known fact that Jefferson wished to be remembered by his posterity as "Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia," according to the epitaph of his own choosing on his tombstone.

The circumstances in which the Declaration of Independence were written hardly need re-telling. I would only add that till the end of his life Jefferson believed that the Declaration had been "an expression of the American mind."<sup>12</sup>

The Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom which was enacted in 1787 in Jefferson's absence—he was in France at that time as American minister there—was a landmark in the history of the freedom of religion anywhere in the world. The enacted bill stated that:

all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion. . . . The right to worship a religion according to one's conscience. . . is among the natural rights of mankind and any act intended to narrow its operation. . . will be an infringement of natural right.

The statute thus set precedence for the characteristically American relationship between church and state—the principle of separation of church and state—which later was confirmed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.

12 To Richard H. Lee, May 8, 1825, quoted in Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922), pp. 25-26.

About the founding of the University of Virginia—what it meant to Jefferson—I wish to quote from Professor Merrill D. Peterson:

And perhaps nothing contained so well the dominant forces of his life and mind, of democracy and enlightenment and nationality, as his vision of a great university . . . . It was *his* monument. If Emerson's aphorism, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man," has any truth, it belongs to Jefferson and the University of Virginia. It contained himself. Jefferson knew this.<sup>13</sup> [*Italics the author's*].

We all know that Jefferson was very much concerned about laying the basis of public education in Virginia that would place his native state on the same level with "our sister states" with respect to education.<sup>14</sup> He may not have succeeded with his overall plan but he had succeeded at least with the University. This was no small accomplishment and he was right to have wished to be remembered for it.

Next I wish to discuss the concept of the special destiny of America that we find in Jefferson's American vision.

Put in theological terms, it cannot be denied that there was a strain of millennialism, the belief in the coming of a period of righteousness and happiness in the indefinite future, in Jefferson's vision. He thought that America's place in the history of mankind was special because it was unique: unique in the sense that there was a new beginning of history in America, that America was blessed with physical and social endowments nowhere else seen, and that America had a world mission to perform.

There are numerous passages in both

13 Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation, A Biography* (New York, 1970), pp. 963, 988.

14 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 988.

Jefferson's public and private writings that show this. I would like to quote a few. About the novelty of American history, he wrote thus:

We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun. For this whole chapter in the history of man is new. The great extent of our Republic is new. Its sparse habitation is new. The mighty wave of public opinion which has rolled over it is new. (To Joseph Priestley, May 21, 1801)

I might point out in passing that he was in this letter congratulating himself for his party's triumph over the "monarchist" forces—i.e., the Federalist Party—in the recent presidential election.

It is almost ironic that his stay in France prior to the outbreak of the Great Revolution had made Jefferson, a cosmopolitan and admirer of French culture, a devoted American patriot. He judged French society according to the standards of his agrarian America. In a letter to James Monroe he wrote:

I sincerely wish you may find it convenient to come here. The pleasure of the trip will be less than you expect but the utility greater. It will make you adore your own country, its soil, its climate, its equality, liberty, laws, people and manners. My god! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy. I confess I had no idea of it myself. (June 17, 1785)

You may be intrigued by an emotional outburst, "My god!", coming from someone who has been reputed to be so rational.

America was to be the model, the example for the rest of the world to emulate, in Jefferson's scheme of priorities.

I . . . bless the Almighty Being, who, in gathering together the waters under the heavens into one place, divided the dry land

of your hemisphere from the dry lands of ours, and said, at least be there peace. I hope. . . that its [America's] prosperity under the Charter will react on the mind of Europe, and profit her by the example. (To Earl of Buchan, July 10, 1803)<sup>15</sup>

I do not mean to make a Puritan out of Jefferson, but this passage would be enough to put him alongside John Winthrop, the Puritan divine who had called on his fellow settlers to America to build a "city on a hill" in the wilderness of America, except this difference: Jefferson's America, which he described with much pride as "the world's best hope," "a rising nation," and "a chosen country" (The First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801), was as it were a *fait accompli* and Jefferson had no choice but to be intent on keeping it as it was. In other words, Jefferson's American vision was conservative; not in the sense of "reactionary," though.

That there are certain elements of ambiguity in Jefferson's vision cannot be denied. I would like to select a few and analyze them next.

We find in Jefferson's vision the elements both of what Professor William Appleman Williams has called "the sense of isolation" and of an "expansionist ideology."<sup>16</sup> The latter Jefferson best expressed in the all too famous phrase, "empire of liberty"—an unfortunate phrase however for it has had the connotation of overseas expansionism or imperialism. Likewise, for Jefferson to talk about isolation did not mean that he was advocating a policy of so-called isolationism. To talk about his nation's being isolated from

15 Quoted in Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Boston, 1948), p. 291.

16 For this and the following discussion I owe greatly to William Appiamn Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World, 1776-1976* (New York, 1976), esp. Chs. 1 and 2.

the rest of the world was for him more metaphorical than factual. Another letter of his to Monroe proves this point:

America, North and South, has a set of interests distinct from those of Europe, and peculiarly her own. She should therefore have a system of her own, separate and apart from that of Europe. While the last is laboring to become the domicile of despotism, our endeavor should surely be, to make our hemisphere that of freedom. (October 24, 1823)

To “preserve uninfected by contagion” the blessings that America was enjoying was Jefferson’s rationale to support Monroe’s foreign policy.

Paradoxical as it may sound, as far as Jefferson could see, the best way to keep America from forming “entangling alliances” with the countries of the old world was for America to keep expanding—westward. The foundation of the “empire of liberty” was to be laid on “the Western bank” of the Mississippi River. This was new territory and those who would settle there would be “the younger,” i.e., virtuous and enlightened, groups of people. And in them the promise of America would lie.<sup>17</sup>

The corollary of this isolationist-expansionist ideology was the imperative on the one hand for America to be agricultural so that it could remain virtuous and on the other for Americans to set their mind to defusing or removing the “internal differences and conflicts.”

However, Jefferson was practical enough to foresee the rise of commerce and manufacturing in America. His often quoted letter to Benjamin Austin will show this (January 9, 1816). In that he writes, “Experience has taught me that manufactures are now as

necessary to our independence as to our comfort.” This makes a marked contrast to another of his often quoted passages in *Notes on Virginia*: “Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe.” (Query XIX)

It cannot be denied that Jefferson cherished the image of one same people living in a unified country. That Jefferson was not alone in holding such a sentiment may be seen by comparing what he said about the notion of “one people, one nation” with the similar sentiment expressed in *Federalist* No. 2 written by John Jay:

Our rapid multiplication will expand itself . . . and cover the whole Northern, if not the Southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms and by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction *either blot or mixture* on that surface. [*Italics mine*]<sup>18</sup>

With equal pleasure I have as often taken notice that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs and who . . . have nobly established general liberty and independence. (*Federalist* No. 2)

Jefferson was however not such a purist as some of our recent scholars have assumed him to have been. Indeed he was aware of “the diverse sources of American energy” and counted “the advantages as well as the dangers of sectional division, religious variety, ethnic diversity and even class disagreement.”<sup>19</sup>

18 Quoted in Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, *The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States* (New York, 1977), p. 134.

19 *The Great Republic*, p. 935.

17 Peterson, *New Nation*, p. 735.

Jefferson, it seems fair to say, had an almost instinctive trust in them and this was where he differed most from Alexander Hamilton who reviewed with horror the prospect of these diverse forces let loose. Jefferson on the other hand believed that a free interplay of them would bring a happy result; Hamilton pondered the necessity of shackling these forces. Jefferson's "empire of liberty" was thus a dynamic notion capable of functioning in many ways.

It is not difficult to point out a few instances of Jefferson moving away from his professed libertarian principles. For example, at the time of the treason trial of Aaron Burr, his one-time Vice-President, he made conscious efforts to have him convicted although such a conduct on the part of the President might well have jeopardized the constitutional principle of the separation of powers. A little earlier when the question of whether the inhabitants of the newly acquired territory of Louisiana, mostly Spanish and French, should be granted rights equal to those of the residents of the older states was being debated, he let known his view, apparently a biased one, that "our new fellow citizens are as yet incapable of self-government as children," and even condoned the "despotic rule" of Governor James Wilkinson.<sup>20</sup>

One does not have to go far in pointing out the limits of Jefferson's political philosophy, especially in the area of the federal vs. state rights.

One of the issues involved in the Alien and Sedition Laws controversy (1798-99) was whether any state had the power to nullify the acts of the federal government. You will

recall that Jefferson was secret author of the Kentucky Resolutions which, adopting the compact theory of the origins of the federal government, criticized the laws. These laws were "null and void," he stated, because the power to deport undesirable aliens or to suppress criticisms of the government was not among the powers specifically "delegated to the United States." This strict or narrow interpretation of the Constitution however would put him in a serious dilemma when he sought to acquire a new territory, Louisiana, from France. If he were to observe the Tenth Amendment which in effect denied the notion of the implied powers of the federal government, where could he find the ground on which to justify his decision to acquire Louisiana? He would have favored a constitutional amendment delegating such power to the United States Government. But in fact he allowed himself to succumb to the consideration of expedience, i.e., to resort to the implied powers argument. He later confessed that he had "done an act beyond the Constitution." (To John Breckinridge, August 9, 1803)

I do not want to be taken to be apologetic, but probably one plausible explanation of Jefferson's lack of consistency would be to depend on his "human frailties," namely the exigencies of office, the temptation of power and the responsibilities of leadership, which conspired to "anesthetize his sensitivity to libertarian values."<sup>21</sup> Or we may go along with Richard Hofstadter who analyzed Jefferson's political thought in terms of "aristocrat as democrat" and emphasized that he had no "doctrinaire compulsion to be consistent."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (New York, 1891-1896), Vol. 2, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard W. Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> Hofstadter, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Discussion so far, both criticism and defense of the Jeffersonian vision, has been limited to the conventional "Progressive" vs. "consensus" scheme. It may be appropriate now to examine it in a new, different perspective, i.e., the New Left paradigm.

I shall take up and concentrate on two aspects of the Jeffersonian vision: Jefferson's ambivalent attitude toward the questions of race and slavery for one and his Enlightenment idea of progress for the other.

Jefferson wrote "one of the classic denunciations of slavery."<sup>23</sup> But himself owner of more than one hundred slaves at any time, Jefferson also expressed "the most intense, extensive, and extreme formulation of anti-Negro 'thought' offered by any American in the thirty years after the Revolution."<sup>24</sup> Let us compare these two passages both taken from his *Notes on Virginia*, the first one denouncing slavery:

There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.... Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? (Query XVIII)

and the second one noticeably anti-Negro:

But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture....

23 Winthrop D. Jordan, *The Whiteman's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York, 1974), p. 168.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. (Query XIV)

He was no doubt well aware of the dilemma and in contemplation of one plausible way to overcome it, he had once proposed a carefully laid out plan to end slavery: emancipation of those born after a given day and their education and expatriation after a given age. But that project having failed, he became increasingly reticent on the question of slavery until he had literally become a spokesman for one section of the nation and an apologist for this inhuman institution. He explained that he had chosen not to speak on the issue again because he had not been able to think of any "practicable way" of freeing slaves. He weighed "self-preservation" more than "justice." (To John Holmes, April 22, 1820)

The New Left historians have criticized Jefferson for his lack of courage to act immediately for the abolition of slavery and they have also been especially irked by what they have regarded as Jefferson's "racism." Indeed he believed in the racial superiority of the whites over the blacks and he had an irresistible fear, which he shared with his fellow Southerners and probably with many Northerners as well, of the "blot or mixture" of the two races:

Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without *staining* the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of *mixture*. [*Italics mine*] (Query XIV)

To mix with blacks was to cause the loss of the dignity and beauty of the white race.<sup>25</sup>

25 It is interesting to note that Jefferson had a

There is no denying that this is really a racist sentiment.

Jefferson's suggestion of defusion as a possible solution of the slavery problem in the United States is understandable only in this light. His letter to John Holmes is illuminating in this regard:

Their [slaves'] diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation by dividing the burden on a greater number of coadjutors.

For this reason Jefferson favored the admission of Missouri as a slave state. Or better put, he was opposed to the plan of prohibiting slavery from the territory west of the Mississippi River because it would prevent the black population from being widely scattered over a broad area. The fate of the black slaves was thus settled permanently in the Jefferson's scheme of things: the blacks, a large majority of them anyway, would remain slaves regardless of their geographical location. The New Left criticism of Jefferson's alleged "racism" merits consideration to this extent.

The idea of progress was manifest most openly in the eagerness with which Americans have conquered the wilderness. According to the New Left historians, the idea was too "WASP-centered" and the rationale behind it they can hardly approve of.

The logic behind the idea of progress may be best described as "the reduction of time and the organization of space."<sup>26</sup> The metaphysics of it may also be put thus: "imposition of rational order upon the natural wildness

of the earth."<sup>27</sup> It was in this spirit that the wild frontier was pushed on and eventually vanquished.

The modern and—in a meaningful way—the ultimate expression of this idea of progress was space exploration. It was no accident by any means that the space program was promoted with a zest under the "New Frontier" banner and that John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth and a WASP, took occasion to make a remark like:

If we could develop in only eight years the means of landing men on the moon, we could do just about anything we set our minds to. We could solve the problems of poverty in the midst of plenty, correct racial injustice, and ease social tensions.<sup>28</sup>

What is missing here is appreciation of "mystery, the web of life [and] the living interrelationships of all things."<sup>29</sup> The rational mentality of white Americans is in a marked contrast to what Professors Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble call "Native American wisdom." For example, here is Chief Luther Standing Bear speaking:

The whiteman does not understand America. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. But in the Indian, the spirit of the land is still rested, it will be until other men are able to meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefather's bones.<sup>30</sup>

If whites have hitherto have had confidence in their "ability to control rather than be controlled by the forces surrounding" them, they are losing that confidence rapidly. It seems that a reversal of roles is now taking place: victims becoming conquerers and

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totally different view of Indians or Native Americans. He wrote: "I believe the Indian then to be in body and mind equal to the white man." (Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 178.)

26 Carroll and Noble, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

28 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 391.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 381.

30 Quoted in *ibid.*

conquerers being conquered.

Jefferson has long been regarded as high priest, so to speak, of such an idea of progress. Professor Daniel Boorstin has stressed the significance of the "success of the Jeffersonian struggle" for mastery of the physical environment.<sup>31</sup> Even as late as only a few years ago, Professor Henry Steele Commager wrote in a congratulatory note thus:

Of all the American philosophes, it was Jefferson who was most indefatigable in bringing about the transformation from wilderness to civilization, and who contributed most to the process.<sup>32</sup>

Professor Carroll and Noble have used an entirely different language. Jefferson was the most important representative of "linear expressions of Anglo-American culture." For he was "discomforted by irregularity, by uncertainty, by inefficiency. His image of the world extolled the straight line, the rectangular order, the repetition of geometric forms."<sup>33</sup>

I have drawn heavily on the work of Professors Carroll and Noble regarding the topics discussed above, because I have been interested in the apparent shift in perspective adopted by one of the co-authors, namely, Professor Noble. He wrote in one of his earlier works that the Revolution of 1800, which brought Jefferson to the ultimate political eminence, had been "total and final fulfillment of the Enlightenment definition of progress." Jefferson, who had by then become "the first great prophet of the national covenant," led his nation in the great battle, the Armageddon.<sup>34</sup> Mind you, the notion of

America's national progress and Jefferson's association with it.

Professor Noble's more recent, critical analysis of the "Progressive" scholarship is an example of the "counter-Progressive" or "consensus" scholarship. His diagnosis of the persistent theme of the "national covenant" of progress, which he thinks dangerous or laden with catastrophic consequences for both America and the world at large, may be better put as "ecological" if not New Left. The question of the propriety of calling such a conception of history "ecological" or not aside, one thing is certain. It is that Professor Noble is trying to come up with a new synthesis or with a historical interpretation which will replace the traditional millennial vision, the kind most associated with Jefferson. It seems that he is very much convinced that the Jeffersonian vision, as it has traditionally been propagated, is not only unreal but also unsound. Such a vision is inadequate to manage the highly industrialized society that America today is. Moreover, it is narrow, exclusive, chauvinistic and elitist. This is the reason why he thinks it unsound. The roots of the problem, as he sees it, were Jefferson first and his posterity secondly. Professor Noble has been rather embarrassed to find Jefferson's posterity, historians not excepted, have created the Jefferson symbol and clung to it for the past two hundred years.

I do not think Professor Noble is proposing an apocalyptic vision of America's future, though. That would be going to the other extreme. Instead of saying America is the best, that kind of logic would lead one to say America is the worst. The notion of the uniqueness of America is still there, and so

31 Boorstin, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

32 Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City, 1977), p. 114.

33 Carroll and Noble, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

34 *Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis*

*and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830* (Minneapolis, 1965), p. 105.

is the sense of mission—except all in reverse terms. These are the qualities that other peoples of the world have found most obnoxious with Americans.

With all this said, what Americans need most now may be put thus: sober re-assessment of their past record and renewed commitment to their revolutionary ideals. American people have been known to have these qualities. And it is in this area in particular that, I believe, appeal to Jefferson, to his vision, will prove relevant and valid.

Jefferson was a more sophisticated man than we usually think. It is true that he had an undaunted faith in the future glory of his beloved nation. Indeed he liked “the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.” (To John Adams, August 1, 1816) He seldom lost his faith in “the smooth flow of things toward their beneficial end.”<sup>35</sup> Yet he too had moments of fear and despair:

And so we have gone on, and so we shall go on, *puzzled* and prospering beyond example in the history of man. [Italics mine] (To John Adams, January 21, 1812)

The single word, “puzzled,” conveys more eloquently than anything we have of Jefferson’s writings the sense of sobriety in him, and it also tells that he was never a fantastic visionary as popular mythology has made him out to be. By the same token, to say simply that he was a practical man would not be a fair representation of his serene and basically wholesome integrity.

If a prophet is one who is “unremitting in his attention to the divine design,” Jefferson seems to fit this role—perhaps better than any one of his contemporaries with the possible exception of Benjamin Franklin, who was

a forerunner of Jefferson in many ways.<sup>36</sup> But I think the sense of urgency was stronger with Jefferson than with Franklin. The use of his favorite metaphor, “slumber,” will illustrate this. In a letter to Thomas Lomax, dated March 12, 1799, he wrote that “the spirit of 1776 is not dead. It has only been slumbering.”<sup>37</sup> Better still his expounding the right of revolution in words quoted below was a reflection of the sense of urgency on his part. He went far beyond Locke’s natural rights philosophy when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence that:

To secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed... Whenever any form of government becomes destitute of these, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government.

In this connection I wish to bring your attention to the passage in *Notes on Virginia* quoted earlier:

Indeed I *tremble* for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot *sleep* forever. [Italics mine]

You may be interested to know that, right after this passage, Jefferson invokes the “supernatural interference” to rectify the evil of slavery. If all this does not prove that his concern for social justice was genuine and that he was earnest in his reformist zeal, what else does it prove? With all fairness to his sincerity it may be right to conclude that Jefferson was putting himself in the role of a prophet, whose task it was to arouse his

36 Professor Commager also emphasizes the ambiguity in Franklin as follows: “Better than any other American, except Franklin himself, he [Jefferson] combined the sturdy provincialism of the frontiersman with the cosmopolitanism of the philosophe.” (*op. cit.*, p. 96)

37 Quoted in Daniel Sisson, *The American Revolution of 1800* (New York, 1974), p. 56.

35 Hofstadter, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

countrymen from their inaction. It was left for the posterity to live up to his expectations, heeding his words of warning—and of exhortation.

Before closing my discussion, I would like to quote Jefferson for the last time. He was writing to Lafayette:

You must ferret the people out of their hovels as I have done, look into their kettles, eat their bread, loll on their beds under pretense of resting yourself, but in fact to find if they are soft. You will feel a sublime pleasure in the course of this investigation, and a sublimer one hereafter when you shall be able to apply your knowledge to the softening of their beds, or the throwing a morsel of meat into the kettle of vegetables. (April 11, 1787)

If we say this is no more than a benevolent

ruler displaying his usual good will, we would miss a great deal. For troubled as he was by the unequal distributions of wealth—by the inequality of “results” rather than of opportunity—Jefferson’s will to serve the public was no doubt genuine. (To serve the public was the original meaning of “republicanism,” and Jefferson was a republican in every sense.) He had every reason to feel the urgency of the situation and to call for responsible action. Throwing “a morsel of meat into the kettle of vegetables” may sound like a small thing, but it was as urgent and required as much immediate action as emancipating black slaves. This call to action and an abiding faith that men—and women—should be able to manage their affairs, I think, are Jefferson’s legacy to the twentieth century.