

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE: THOMAS JEFFERSON AND/ON THE EVE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Jefferson's comments on the opening moves in the French Revolution in 1789 – he left France in September – have certainly been noted by historians who have emphasized their essential moderation in contrast with his later strong defense of the more radical phase of the revolutionary process. A closer attention to the roots of this initial attitude reveals another aspect of his general « republican » philosophical and political outlook as well as his striking American nationalism.

Jefferson's years as US representative in France were extremely rich and varied. From 1784 to 1789 he did in fact a great deal more than work as a diplomat – defender before the proud French nobility of the « most recent recruit to the family of nations »¹ – and report on local political developments. Part of the liberal aristocratic intellectual world, he worked on an article about the United States for the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* and prepared for publication his *Notes on Virginia*; he travelled to Germany, England, Southern France and Northern Italy noting the conditions of the people and developing an appreciation of classical art; a widower, he attended to the needs of his two daughters and entered into a deep relationship with the Anglo-Italian Maria Cosway and perhaps an equally deep one – though naturally more covered – with his young slave Sally Hemmings. His voluminous correspondence of the period reveals not only views on life and civilization on both sides of the Atlantic as well as on the politics of the European powers, the new federal Constitution and Shays' Rebellion but also detailed discussions of new methods of printing and producing coins, of the principles on which steam engines and magnetism operated, of the construction of musical instruments, and of American fauna and the cartography of Latin America. Equally present are extensive orders to stock his library and wine cellar in Monticello².

¹ Max Beloff, *Thomas Jefferson and American Democracy*, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 72.

² In addition to the volume by Marie Kimball (*Jefferson. The Scene of Europe 1784 to 1789*, New York, 1950) see with regard to Jefferson's five years in Paris the following general works: Claude Bowers, *The Young Jefferson 1743-1789*, Boston, 1945, pp. 464-523; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and the Rights of Man*, Boston, 1951, pp. 180-237; Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation. A Biography*, New York, 1970, pp. 370-389; Fawn M.

As a diplomat he worked, together with John Adams, ambassador in England, on the vital problem of renegotiating US loans in Holland but, in keeping with the rather marginal role of the United States in world politics, he understandably dedicated more time to consular problems than high diplomacy: the release of Americans captive in the Barbary States (although he did make a general proposal on how to control piracy in the Mediterranean) and help for Americans arrested on charges of smuggling were constant questions. He also dealt with housekeepers who claimed not to have been paid by American clients, John Paul Jones and his intricate relations with the Danish government over British ships captured during the war, the French diplomat Count Moustier's difficulties in the States, French citizens who had inheritance claims in America and not only private American debts to French nationals but also those of his government to ex-soldiers and officers from France who had served in the war.

Especially, however, he sought ways to remove existing French obstacles – monopolies and the system of the Farms – to the development of Franco-America trade: tobacco and whale oil occupied a great deal of Jefferson's time and energy and they figure prominently in his relations with the French government and the various memos that he drew up. Even during the domestic political crisis which began in 1787 a good part of his relations with Lafayette were based on his attempt to resolve the question of the American debt to France through an expansion of trade. And in 1788, despite the gathering storm, he managed to conclude a new consular convention with France which eased the way for American products and revised some of the aspects of the previous one, drawn up by Franklin, to which the United States government objected³.

Jefferson's reflections and analyses on the crisis in France towards the end of the 1780s sharply reveal his historical relativism. This was in fact not the only moment when, for the drafter of the Declaration of Independence, general principles were to be mixed with what he considered to be the specific situation and level of maturation of a people. Extremely clear for Jefferson and something which colored his view of all developments in other countries was that the United States enjoyed a particularly favored situation.

Browdie, *Thomas Jeffersons. An Intimate History*, New York, 1974, pp. 228-245; Noble Cunningham, pp. 118-130; as well as the Soviet biography by G.N. Semostjanow and A.I. Utkin (*Jefferson*, Berlin, 1984, pp. 156-163). See also the study by Otto Vossler (*Jefferson and the American Revolutionary Ideal*, Washington, D.C., 1980, pp. 115-175; 1° edition Munich, 1929) which underlines Jefferson's stay in France as a turning point in his ideological development; this view of the American statesman's conversion to French radical political thinking is in direct contrast with the position originally put forward by Gilbert Chinard on Jefferson's enduring essential «americaness» (*Thomas Jefferson. The Apostle of Americanism*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1957, pp. 159-241, 1° edition Boston, 1929). On Vossler see R.R. Palmer, «A Neglected Work: Otto Vossler on Jefferson and the Revolutionary Era», *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, vol. XII, n. 3, July 1955, pp. 462-471.

³ On Jefferson's commercial diplomacy see especially Chinard, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-193 and William K. Woolery, *The Relation of Thomas Jefferson to American Foreign Policy 1783-1793*, Baltimore, 1927, pp. 5-65.

In a well-known letter to Edward Carrington written while in Paris he stated the European governments were as wolves and the people mere sheep – « I do not exaggerate », he underlined. He wondered whether the Indians did not have the best form of government since it left so much to self-regulation while among the non-Indians it was only the English constitutional monarchy and especially the government in America which had anything positive about them⁴.

Nor was his enthusiasm for America limited to its form of government: the government was part of an entire way of life. Jefferson in France between '84 and '89 – quite different than Franklin – developed a deep nostalgia as he became ever more sharply aware of his origins. If in the early period of his stay in Paris difficulties in settling in and the absence of his younger daughter may have made this more acute it never left him completely. Europe, in short, for Jefferson, despite his being captivated by certain aspects of its civilization, was « socially cruel and politically unjust »⁵.

Again and again throughout his entire period in France he wrote to American correspondents of « how little my countrymen know of their precious blessings », of « how I love my country too much to stay from it long ». Mere loneliness or difficulties in his relationship with Maria Cosway and perhaps Sally Hemmings are not sufficient to account for the tone at times plaintive (« Continue then to give me facts, little facts [which] will place me in imagination in my own country... where I am happiest »), at times pathetic (« Insulated and friendless on this side the globe, with such an ocean between me and every thing to which I am attached... »). If he clearly recognized a certain charm and sophistication in French life he nonetheless continually warned diplomatic subordinates and younger relations about the difficulty of dividing one's life between Europe and America, about the disadvantages of travelling which makes men wiser but less happy, about Americans in Europe who search for education but lose, however, in « knowledge, morals, health and happiness ». His sense of the superiority of America extended even to its birds and one can only be amused by the aggressive nationalism typical of a new nation which led him to affirm that the single piece circumference wheel had been invented by New Jersey farmers⁶.

Jefferson was as proud of the simplicity and democratic quality of life in America as he was of the Revolution which had been a product of it and

⁴ January 16, 1787, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. I, edited by Julian P. Boyd, Princeton, N.J., 1950 (hereafter cited as *Papers*), vol. XI, p. 49.

⁵ Saul Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the Foundations of American Freedom*, New York, 1965, p. 3.

⁶ To James Monroe, June 17, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 233; to James Currie, September 27, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 558; to Abigail Adams, February 2, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XII, p. 553; to William Short, March 24, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 695; to Abigail Adams, June 21, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 241; to St. John de Crèvecoeur, January 15, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XI, p. 43. These already extensive quotations are only a selection of repeatedly expressed sentiments. On the peculiarity of American nationalism in this period, based more on immediate conditions than an extension of past history, see Henry Steele Commager, *Jefferson*,

which continued it on this course. To the Frenchman Hilliard d'Auberteuil he stated that not only would the memory of the American Revolution be immortal but that it would immortalize those who recorded it⁷. In the midst of his difficulties to increase the sale of tobacco and whale oil in France he never wavered from the idea that the United States had « shown the way », that it was the leading nation. Other nations would necessarily come along the same path even if, as we will see, they could come only so far using only so much speed.

Nationalistic pride in America was mixed with and reenforced by his generally low appraisal of European civilization and especially its society and politics. If up until 1787 and the crisis which led to the calling of the *Assemblée des Notables* he says little on French politics he was never lacking in general comments on the evil nature of aristocratic and priest ridden societies where the function of government was, through the use of force, to keep the masses in poverty and ignorance. He had kind words for the French people – especially when comparing them to the English – and, in typical Enlightenment fashion, after noting the favorable climate and soil, could blame their misery only on the form of government. If he often spoke well of the French king, in one letter he estimated that « no race of kings has ever presented above one man of common sense in twenty generations » and in another – at the time of the writing of the new federal Constitution and his fears of monarchical tendencies in the States – he stated that the cure for those Americans who might want a king was to send them to Europe. The problems of the continent were identified by Jefferson as the society's aristocratic and religious structures of privilege. Against a devastating description of the empty life of Parisian upper class women – which may have revealed something of his own insecurities and from which in any case he undoubtedly exempted female aristocrats like Madame de Tessy with whom he had stimulating company – he affirmed his unwavering preference for the tranquil and simple pleasures of America with its social freedom and conjugal love⁸.

If a trip through Southern France did convince him that the rural population was somewhat less impoverished than he had thought, he was not at all sanguine about the possibilities of reform. Despite his friendship and

Nationalism, and the Enlightenment, New York, 1975, pp. 157-196. Elise Marienstras (*Les mythes fondateurs de la nation américaine. Essai sur le discours idéologique aux Etats-Unis à l'époque de l'indépendance (1763-1800)*, Paris, 1977) has instead underlined the indirect influence of Indians and black slaves in forming a national consciousness from which they were excluded and which therefore was « partially artificial ».

⁷ February 20, 1786, *Papers*, vol. IX, p. 290.

⁸ To Abigail Adams, June 21, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 239; to Benjamin Hawkins, August 4, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XI, p. 687; to Anne Willing Bingham, February 7, 1787, *Papers*, vol. VI, pp. 122-123. See also his letter to Charles Bellini, September 30, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 568. See also his hints to Americans travelling in Europe (enclosed in a letter to John Rutledge, Jr., June 19, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, p. 269) where, after noting various positive objects of attention (agriculture, gardens, architecture) concludes that « courts » were « to be seen as you would see the tower of London or Menagerie of Versailles with their Lions, tygers, hyaenas and other beasts of prey, standing in the same relation to their fellows ».

sympathy with aristocratic liberals like Lafayette he did not hesitate to underline, in a letter of 1788 to Edward Rutledge, that the degradation of the people was a product of social oppression: « On this side of the Atlantic the blood of the people is become an inheritance, and those who fatten on it, will not relinquish it easily ». It is interesting that after the passage of the Virginia Act of Religious Toleration he noted the enthusiasm, not of governments but, as he put it, of individuals in them. More than good will the problem was one of structures⁹.

The well-being of America was not, for Jefferson, rooted in the racial attributes of the people in comparison to Europeans or in a particular moral quality which derived from some sort of an original compact with God; more simply it came from the fortunate situation of the availability and diffusion of land and that most of the population – he might have put « male, white population » – was composed of small landholders. From Europe he would repeat the views expressed in *Notes on Virginia* as to the cultivators of the earth being the most valuable part of the nation since they were most wedded to its liberties. He not only wished that « our states practice neither commerce nor navigation » but was convinced that due to its geographic situation America would be able to preserve this situation. In one of his many significant letters to Madison he made the temporal aspect of the problem clear: our government would remain virtuous as long as vacant land remained; when the people should be piled on top of one another as in Europe « they would become corrupt as in Europe »¹⁰.

This then was the essential background to his specific analysis of European politics. Aside from his ample reports and comments on the French crisis of 1787-89 the only other political situation which attracted his attention was that of Holland where in 1787 the patriot liberal forces were overthrown by the Statholder supported by Prussia and England. From this Jefferson noted once again the horror of aristocracy and monarchy since part of the possible cause of war was a pretended insult to the sister of a king. More generally he drew « from the present miseries of Holland » several lessons: that there should never be a hereditary office, that citizens should never ally with foreign kings and that foreigners should never be called in to settle domestic conflicts¹¹.

In 1786 Jefferson noted to Lafayette his imperfect knowledge as to « the affairs of this country » but he did feel that he possessed certain ad-

⁹ « Notes of a Tour into the Southern Parts of France, & c. », *Papers*, vol. XI, pp. 415-464; to Lafayette, April 11, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XI, p. 284; to Edward Rutledge, July 18, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, p. 378; to James Madison, *Papers*, vol. X, p. 603.

¹⁰ To John Jay, August 23, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 426; to G.K. van Hogendorp, October 13, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 633; to James Madison, December 20, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XII, p. 442.

¹¹ To James Rutledge, August 6, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XI, p. 701; to John Adams, September 28, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XII, p. 189.

vantages towards an understanding of the dramatic events of 1787-89. In his autobiography, written over thirty years after the beginning of the French Revolution, he indicated these as his relationship with the « patriot » party and especially Lafayette as well as his contact with the diplomatic world in Paris. To this one could add his interest in and sympathy with how the common people – especially the rural population – lived. Nonetheless previous to the calling of the Assemblée des Notables in early 1787 he had noted little in French politics except episodes of press censorship, scandals, intrigues and the punishment of court personalities although he was also aware of the growing tension between the king and the Parlement of Bordeaux¹².

When the crisis was well under way, in January of 1789, he sketched out in letters to the English radical Richard Price and to John Jay – impartially he felt – the two main factors in the developing revolutionary situation: on the one hand, an increase in political consciousness and, on the other, the difficulty of the government to continue in its normal administration. With regard to the first, the country had been awakened from the sleep of despotism by the American war and especially the young officers who had been to America were « less shackled by habit and prejudice, and more ready to assent to the dictates of common sense and common right ». (In another letter, later that spring, he attributed the sharp development of « reason » to the « gross absurdities » which « stare a Frenchman in the face wherever he looks, whether it be towards the throne or the altar »; an Englishman, on the other hand, « could doze under a kind of half reformation »¹³).

As to the second aspect, the court was well on its way to bankruptcy – Jefferson might have added that this too was a spin off of French involvement in the American Revolution – and desperately needed money; it was impossible to get it from the people not because of human sympathy – « courts love the people always, as wolves do the sheep » – but because « they are already squeezed to the last drop ». The clergy and the nobles and the other hand, « by their privileges and their influence, have hitherto screened their property in a great degree from public contribution ». « That half of the Orange then remains yet to be squeezed, and for this operation there is no agent powerful enough but the people ». The Tiers état was therefore,

¹² August 24, 1786, *Papers*, vol. X, p. 294. For Jefferson's comments on the French Revolution in his Autobiography see *Writings*, edited by Merrill Peterson, New York, 1984 (hereafter cited as *Writings*), pp. 62-65, 78-97. Although Jefferson here affirmed that, having consulted his communications to the Secretary of State Jay as well as his letters, he was assured against errors of memory, his correspondence is naturally the preferential source for his reflections. For his comments on French political doings before 1787 see the following letters: to Abigail Adams, July 7, 1785, *Papers*, vol. VIII, p. 265; to Louis Guillaume Otto, May 7, 1786, *Papers*, vol. IX, p. 470; to William Stephens Smith, June 4, 1786, June 16, 1786, *Papers*, vol. IX, pp. 605, 655.

¹³ January 8, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, pp. 420-421; January 11, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, pp. 431-432; to Thomas Paine, March 17, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 672.

according to Jefferson in his missive to the Secretary of State, being enlisted by the Court in the squeezing of the other two orders¹⁴.

His approach to the growing movement for reform, centered first in the *Assemblée des Notables* and then in the *Etats-généraux* was positive and optimistic. Nor up to the *Reveillon* riot in May 1789 was he unduly impressed by the sporadic violence. Convinced of the good will and morality of the monarch — despite his tendency to drink too much — he saw the country advancing « with a steady pace towards the establishment of a constitution whereby the people will resume the great mass of those powers so fatally lodged in the hands of the king ». If he fretted over the danger of civil war, as late as March 1789 he wrote to Madame de Bréhan that « A great political revolution will take place in your country, and that without bloodshed » since « A king with 200,000 men at his orders, is disarmed by the force of the public opinion and the want of money »¹⁵.

At first he was sympathetic to the *Assemblée des Notables* which began meeting in 1787 and felt they were doing much good in laying the basis for a constitution (abolition of abusive laws and the creation of provincial assemblies) although far less success was being obtained in the equally necessary limiting of expenses. In this period of '87-'88, as Lawrence Kaplan has noted, the repression of Shays' Rebellion and his initial hesitations with regard to the new federal Constitution and its dangers of a sharp increase of executive power undoubtedly put Jefferson in a favorable disposition to the work of the *Assemblée*. He was confident that the *Etats-généraux* — to be called sometime in late '88 or '89 — would go further in this same direction of curing the country's ills¹⁶.

Rather rapidly however he was compelled to reemphasize his negative views on European society noting the ever present egoism of the privileged orders. He of course saw the danger that certain reforms of which he approved — of the criminal code and judicial organization — were being pushed through, against the nobility and the clergy, by the king in « *lits de justice* ». Clearly this implied « that the king is the only person in the nation who has any rights, or any power ». The struggle thus appeared to be between the monarchy and the parlements with the « people » — everyone else — on the outside; or as he put it in a letter to Francis Hopkinson, the king and the

¹⁴ Jefferson here also noted (*Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 429), as a third element, the mass suffering and food crisis brought on by the unseasonably severe climate while in his autobiography (*Writings*, p. 92) he found an additional factor in the capricious personality of the queen, something he had mentioned in letters without however giving it excessive weight.

¹⁵ To John Jay, January 11, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 431; to Thomas Lee Shippen, March 11, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 638; to Moustier, March 13, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 652.

¹⁶ To John Jay, January 9, 1787, August 6, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XI, pp. 31-32, 697-698; to George Washington, August 14, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XII, pp. 36-37; Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Jefferson and France. An Essay on Politics and Political Ideas*, Westport, Conn., 1980, pp. 24-25 (1^o edition, 1967); to Moustier, August 9, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, pp. 491-492; to John Brown Cutting, August 23, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, pp. 538-539.

parlements were quarrelling for the oyster and only the shell would be left for the people. This posed the danger that the latter, « deceived by a false cry of liberty may be led to take side with one party, and thus give the other a pretext for crushing them still more ». Here was the danger of armed conflict¹⁷.

Jefferson held out great hopes that the work of reform would be carried on by the Estates-general: the key was in the Tiers état which represented the mass of the nation and Jefferson naturally favored the general democratic demand that their number be doubled and that voting in the Estates be by number and not order. According to the American minister there was, in 1788, between the king and his Parlements, another party, that composed of the « good men »: « a middle patriotic one proceeding with a steady step to recover from both what they can for the nation, and I think they will obtain a pretty good constitution »¹⁸.

Hostility to the aristocracy sharpened in Jefferson as the year came to a close: « While the existence of parliament itself was endangered by the royal authority, they were calling for the états généraux: now they have obtained a kind of victory, they see danger to themselves from those very états généraux and determine either to have them in a form which will neither merit nor command the confidence of the nation, or to prepare a ground for combating their authority if it should be well-composed and should propose a reformation of the parliaments ». The Parlements thus had « pursued the good of the nation just as far as it coincided with their own ». The king in fact and his ministry

are in favor of liberty, and that having 23 millions and a half of the people on their side they will call the other half million to order, and shew them that instead of being two thirds of the nation they are but the forty eighth.

The Notables, acting « in the true spirit of priests and nobles » would probably produce an alliance between the king and people. This explains the concern that Jefferson expressed to Lafayette about the latter's particular situation as a delegate of the nobility:

The Noblesse... will always prefer men who will do their dirty work for them. [The Marquis would therefore soon be dropped and ran the risk that] the people in that case will perhaps not take you up¹⁹.

Jefferson felt that a delicate balance had to be reached between the desirable and the possible. In the typical pose of moderates he feared that

¹⁷ To John Brown Cutting, July 24, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, p. 405; to Francis Hopkinson, May 8, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, p. 145; to Edward Rutledge, July 18, 1788, *Papers*, vol. III, p. 378.

¹⁸ To John Banister, Jr., August 9, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, p. 483; to James Monroe, August 9, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, p. 489.

¹⁹ To John Brown Cutting, October 2, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIII, pp. 649-650; to William Short, November 21, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 276; to John Adams, December 5, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIV, pp. 333-334; to Lafayette, May 6, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 97-98.

matters would be pressed too fast. To the Secretary of State John Jay he noted in November of 1788 that although progress was being made in the direction of a suppression of letters de cachet, a free press and a civil list which could be obtained together with a periodical meeting of the Estates and their exclusive right of taxation and registration of laws – all of which would lead « to the right of originating laws » – he feared that

an impatience to rectify every thing at once, which prevails in some minds, may terrify the court, and lead them to appeal to force, and to depend on that alone.

(It is difficult to estimate what value to give to another factor that Jefferson felt was endangering the reform movement: « the influence of women in the government » who were able to solicit « defiance to laws and regulations » by their husband, family or friends – a practice which « fortunately for the happiness of the sex itself, does not endeavor to extend itself in our country beyond the domestic line »)²⁰.

In the spring of 1789 Jefferson observed the developing political debate (« The frivolities of conversation have given way entirely to politicks – men, women and children talk nothing else: and all you know talk a great deal ») and feared for the development of civil war due to the resistance of the two privileged houses to the « taxgatherers ». In May he indicated to Paine a possible scenario which in large part came to be: the Tiers would invite the other two orders to join it, a majority of the clergy and a minority of the Nobility would agree to this and the king

will agree to do business with the States general so constituted, professing that the necessities of the moment force this; [subsequently a reconciliation within the two orders would take place. He remained confident that the nation was] in a movement which cannot be stopped. Their representatives, if they cannot get on one way, will try another. The mind of man is full of expedients²¹.

Jefferson's detailed letters in June informed on the intrigues of the court, the queen and the high aristocrats against Necker and the difficulties of the king who, he again sustained, « is honest and wishes the good of his people »; there was moreover increasing ferment among the soldiers who declared they would defend the life of the king « but would not cut the throats of their fellow citizens ». His confidence in the Tiers was complete: « The Commons have in their chamber almost all the talents of the nation; they are firm and bold, yet moderate ». He admitted that among them were

a number of very hot headed members; but those of most influence are cool, temperate, and sagacious. Every step of this house has been marked with caution and wisdom; [quite a contrast with the Nobles who were] so furious they can

²⁰ November 19, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIV, pp. 212-213; to George Washington, December 4, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 330.

²¹ To David Humphreys, March 18, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 676; to Thomas Paine, May 19, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 136; to Moustier, May 20, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 141.

seldom debate at all. They have few men of moderate talents and not one of great in the majority²².

The newly declared National Assembly was reported by Jefferson to Paine, a few days before the fall of the Bastille, to « have prostrated the old government, and [it is] now beginning to build one from the foundation »; he then listed the various principles upon which a committee of the Assembly had agreed: governments exist for the perservation of the rights of man; monarchical government has been chosen by the French nation to maintain these rights; from the union of the powers of the nation and king « should result the enacting and execution of the laws ». These moderate principles Jefferson called « the materials of a superb edifice ». On July 17th, to Paine and to Richard Price, he reported the activities of the previous days, events which, as he was to put it shortly in a letter to Madison, « will be for ever memorable in history »: the conflict with a body of German cavalry, the attack on the prison of St. Lazare and Bastille and the beheading of its Governor and Lt. Governor, the recall of Necker, Lafayette as commander of the 60 to 80,000 armed bourgeois which « places the power of the States general absolutely out of the reach of attack, and they may be considered as having a carte blanche ». Despite this he concluded that: « A more dangerous scene of war I never saw in America, than what Paris has presented for 5 days past »²³.

Popular violence was of course a part of the revolutionary process. It is rather revealing that Jefferson did not react to all its manifestations in this period in the same fashion. The Reveillon riot of May for example was soundly denounced: « the wretches » – to whom Jefferson also refered as « the most abandoned banditti of Paris » – did not know what they wanted, « except to do mischief and plunder ». His view was that this riot « had no particular connection with the great national questions now in agitation ». Jefferson considered it unprovoked – he spoke of the « pretence that a paper manufacturer had proposed in an assembly to reduce their wages » – and therefore was « the most unpitied catastrophe of that kind I ever knew »²⁴. His reaction was thus quite different from that to Shays' Rebellion two years earlier. It is not difficult to see at the base of this difference distinct pre-judgements as to the « nature » of the social groups involved: impoverished Parisian dependent laborers on the one hand, New England farmers, indebted but independent, veterans of the Revolutionary War, on the other.

²² To John Jay, June 17, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 188-191; to James Madison, June 18, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 195-197; to John Jay, June 24, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 205-209; to John Jay, June 29, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 221-223.

²³ To Thomas Paine, July 11, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 266-269; to Thomas Paine, July 17, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 279; to Richard Price, July 17, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 280; to James Madison, July 22, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 299.

²⁴ To William Carmichael, May 8, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 104; to John Jay, May 9, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 110.

In contrast with his comments on the Reveillon riot, an attack with mud and stones by the mob of Versailles on the archbishop of Paris' carriage compelling the latter to join the Tiers did not bring condemnation. And writing in late July of the beheading of Mons. Foulon « one of the late obnoxious ministers » and Bertier de Chauvigny, the Intendant of Paris, he could calmly state that

I still hope that nothing will revive the tumults but the possession of those obnoxious characters, and probably the examples already made will teach them to keep out of the way.

The only possible source of further rioting was seen at the end of July to be in the supply of bread given that « the fugitives from the wrath of their country are all safe in foreign countries ». In addition, the violence produced by the resistance of the king – or rather of his counsellors – had had a positive effect: given the long lasting despotism of the government and the respect and fears of the people before authority, the National Assembly on the defensive

could probably have only obtained considerable improvement of the government, not a total revision of it. But, ill informed of the spirit of their nation, the despots around the throne had recourse to violent measures, the forerunners of force. In this they have been completely overthrown, and the nation has made a total resumption of rights, which they had certainly never before ventured even to think of. The National assembly have now as clear a canvas to work on here as we had in America²⁵.

If he had previously counselled caution in order to avoid conflict, after the Revolution began he did thus admit that mass violence could well speed up the process of constitutional reform. What Jefferson could not accept however was mass violence for what he felt were narrow group interests especially if carried out by a social class in which he had no faith. In any case, as he affirmed in a letter to Diodati on the 3rd of August, never had « so great a fermentation ever produced so little injury in any other place »; moreover he personally had been able to sleep peacefully in his house for the entire period²⁶.

And yet the fear that violence would lead to civil war and interrupt the reforming process remained with him. On the other hand he also felt that it was the reforming process itself which alone could stop the development of violence. If, based on his parliamentary experience, Jefferson worried as to the difficulties of 1200 delegates drawing up a Constitution, especially

²⁵ To John Jay, June 24, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 208; to Thomas Paine, July 23, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 302; to John Jay, July 29, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 314; to Diodati, August 3, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 325-326.

²⁶ To Diodati, August 3, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 325. In reality Jefferson's house had been broken into several times in this period although almost certainly by common burglars. See his request to Montmorin (July 8, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 260) for increased police protection for himself and his neighbors.

after the fall of the Bastille he was convinced that the Assembly would proceed rapidly to a Declaration of rights and that this would stop « the burning of the chateaux, and tranquilize the country ». As he prepared to leave Paris for what was intended only as a six-month leave he had requested the preceding autumn, he noted in a somewhat contradictory fashion both that « the civil and ecclesiastical aristocracy » was once again raising its head and that the patriot party had not remained a compact body due to the absence of strong resistance by the king and aristocracy. He left before the dramatic October days which would force the king and his entourage to leave Versailles for Paris but news of this impending crisis reached the Isle of Wight, where he waited for the ship to take him back. Once again his main concern was for the delicate balance which had been established by the forces of reform. Shortly before he set sail for Norfolk he expressed to Madame de Corny his fear of an « approach to the brink of a civil war. From this heaven preserve your country and countrymen who I love with all my soul... »²⁷.

As the Revolution gathered momentum but especially in the late spring and summer of 1789 Jefferson was acutely aware of his double role in French politics: on the one hand he represented the United States to the existing government which was the young Republic's main ally and hope for diversifying its commerce; on the other, although unofficially, he also represented that country which embodied the ideals of the reform movement under way in France, a movement highly critical of that country's governmental and societal structures. Moreover, his associates among the French — Lafayette but not only him — were those in the forefront of this reform movement. Not surprisingly, as the revolutionary crisis proceeded he was often asked for advice on how to move forward — on how to move forward, that is, against the government to which he was accredited. The Archbishop of Bordeaux, in fact, asking him on July 20, 1789 to help officially in the drawing up of a Constitution, noted that « When the happiness of man is at stake, we no longer recognize the existence of foreigners » and Jefferson, two years previously, after affirming that he could not « meddle in the internal affairs of an allied state » added immediately that « it is with the mass of the nation we are allied, and not merely with their governors »²⁸.

The American statesman nonetheless politely rejected the offer of the Archbishop adducing both excessive work with his dispatches as well as the

²⁷ To John Jay, August 5, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 334; to James Madison, August 28, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 365; to John Jay, September 19, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 458; to Madame de Corny, October 14, 1789.

²⁸ From the Archbishop of Bordeaux, July 20, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 291; to C.W.F. Dumas, November 14, 1787, *Papers*, vol. XII, pp. 359-360. Jefferson's awareness of his official representative role referred as well to US politics: in 1788 he politely declined the request of Brissot de Warville to become of member of the society for the abolition of the slave trade on the grounds that « I am here as a public servant; and those whom I serve having never yet been able to give their voice against this practice, it is decent for me to avoid too public a demonstration of my wishes to see it abolished ». February 11, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XII, pp. 577-578. In this malestrom of political upheaval it is moreover interesting that Jefferson

inopportunity of participation by a « zealous republican » in discussions which had as their object a change in the form of government. Moreover, to Richard Price in January of 1789, he had avowed that « having been on the spot from its first origin » he had watched the present struggle « as an uninterested spectator, with no other bias than a love of mankind ». In reality the tempo of events in 1789 brought Jefferson more and more directly into the internal affairs of France. In the preceding two years he had expressed his opinions in a discrete way but at the beginning of June he joined the many who were offering sketches of a possible declaration of rights. To Lafayette and Rabaut de Saint-Etienne, in fact, he proposed a charter which emphasized the independent organization of the Estates-General and its complete rights over taxation, a general legislative power exercised together with the king, abolition of pecuniary privileges and exemptions, subordination of the military to civil authority, various guarantees of personal freedom and the assumption of the national debt²⁹.

If the document was advanced with regard to the Ancien Régime it was quite moderate if compared to the American situation. Moreover as Malone has noted, it left unsettled what was then the main political question – vote by order or by person – and did not set out a general declaration of rights³⁰. It therefore does show Jefferson more conservative than were the leaders of the National Assembly; his caution probably derived once again from a desire to avoid at all costs a civil war which might come from the resistance of the privileged orders.

In these months Jefferson was politically present in yet other ways. He recommended a list of books on the subject of juries to the Abbé Arnoux (affirming that « The execution of laws is more important than the making them »), was drawn in falsely by Mirabeau in the latter's accusation that the government had rejected an offer by Jefferson to obtain corn and flour from America, and hosted in his home in late August, specifically requested by Lafayette, a strategy meeting of various members of the reform party³¹.

remained ever the diplomat concerned with the economic interests of the young American republic. To the French commercial firm Veuve David & fils he wrote at the end of July 1789 that « There is reason to expect that the transfer of the legislative power to the States general will bring on a reformation of the restrictions on commerce, and whenever that shall be taken in hand, I shall use my best efforts, in conjunction with those concerned in the American trade, to have that put on a footing more advantageous to both nations ». July 27, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 311.

²⁹ To the Archbishop of Bordeaux, July 22, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 298; to Richard Price, January 8, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 420. The text of Jefferson's Charter and the accompanying letters to Lafayette and Rabaut de St. Etienne (June 3, 1789) are in *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 165-168. Vossler (*op. cit.*, p. 126) makes a strong case for Jefferson's vigorous involvement in French politics in the spring and summer of 1789 while Kimball (*op. cit.*, p. 269) goes so far as to affirm that « With the calling of the Assembly of Notables... the revolutionist in Jefferson was reborn »).

³⁰ Malone, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219.

³¹ To the Abbé Arnoux, July 19, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 282-283. The various letters of the « Mirabeau Incident » between Jefferson, Lafayette, Necker, Montmorin and Brac de la Perrière are in *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 243-256; at the conclusion of the incident Mirabeau

More significantly, shortly after Jefferson's own proposal for a Charter and less than two weeks before the seizure of the Bastille, Lafayette asked for the American minister's comments on his own declaration of rights. In June Jefferson had declined counselling Lafayette on the question of the minority of the Nobles joining the Tiers. In this case however he was clear in his advice – heeded neither by Lafayette in his proposal to the Assembly in early July nor in the Declaration adopted in August – to cancel « the care of his honor » and « property » from the list of natural rights; the first was judged a principle of aristocracy while the second, given Jefferson's general political philosophy, could not be considered an end in itself but only a means to human happiness. It was in short a civil right but not a natural right³².

Despite this advice on Lafayette's proposed declaration Jefferson was essentially cautious about events in France in 1789 not expecting – and even fearing – rapid changes which would attempt to bring the country to the level of political liberty and democracy existing in the United States. It is moreover clear that his later vigorous defense of the more radical phases of the French Revolution derived less from a specific sympathy for the positions it had taken than from a feeling that in the early and mid-nineties, in both Europe and the States, forces were lining up for what seemed to be « the final struggle » in which indeed everyone had to take their place.

While all historians have noted Jefferson's moderation during this initial phase of the French Revolution they have seen its roots more in a fear of aristocratic reaction, foreign intervention and social chaos resulting from lower class political involvement than in his appraisal of the specific development of the country and its population³³. While it is true that for the American ambassador one could achieve only what was possible, what was effectively possible was limited by how much the people themselves were ready for change. It is not without significance that in the fall of 1788 he wrote Madison of the misfortune that the French people « are not yet ripe for receiving the blessings to which they are entitled. I doubt, for instance, whether the body of the nation, if they could be consulted, would accept of a Habeas corpus law, if offered them by the king ». And in the spring of the

acknowledged his error to the National Assembly. For Jefferson's later account in his Autobiography of the meeting at his home and his having dutifully informed the French minister Count Montmorin, see *Writings*, pp. 96-9731.22.

³² On this episode see Malone, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-224 and Chinard, *op. cit.*, p. 84; on the general question of Jefferson and property see Richard K. Matthews, *Thomas Jefferson. A Revisionist View*, Lawrence, Kansas, 1984, pp. 19-29.

³³ See for example Peterson (*op. cit.*, pp. 374-375) and Henry E. May, *The Enlightenment in America*, New York, 1976, p. 289. Robert R. Palmer (« The Dubious Democrat: Thomas Jefferson in Bourbon France », in *Thomas Jefferson. A Profile*, edited by Merrill D. Peterson, New York, 1967, pp. 100-102) notes that Jefferson « thought of revolution as something to be arranged by persons already active in political affairs » while the Soviet biographers (Sewostjanow and Utkin, *op. cit.*, p. 158) affirm something quite similar: « while for the French the revolution was a social phenomenon for Jefferson it was political ». For Chinard (*op. cit.*, p. 231) on the other hand it is simply a question that he « had always maintained that what was good for America was not necessarily good for France ».

following year, to the same correspondent, he spoke of the possibility for « a tolerably free constitution, perhaps as free a one as the nation is as yet prepared to bear ». Before his return to the United States he confided that a good constitution would be formed « in which liberty and property will probably be placed on a surer footing than they are in England »; or as he put it to Paine in this same period, they would achieve « about a middle term between that of England and the United States »³⁴.

Such caution with regard to events in France did not derive from his general principles about the nature of democracy and the rights of the people and may even seem in contrast to them. It was in fact only a few weeks before he left Paris – and shortly after the meeting at his home of Lafayette's friends – that Jefferson exposed to James Madison one of his most famous formulations of speculative democratic philosophy: the concept that the earth belongs to the living who possess it only in usufruct and, from this, the necessity of frequent revisions of written constitutions and that no generation has the right to bind a succeeding one even with regard to contracted debts³⁵. And yet his view of where the French people stood – seriously weighed down by a long tradition of clerical and aristocratic domination – combined with his deep distrust of the urban masses as seen in his reactions to the Reveillon riot meant that the political process could not be – without irreparable harm for the reform movement – too sharply speeded up.

Republican virtue was not therefore everywhere immediately possible. Few countries if any had for Jefferson the fortune of the United States where specific conditions – available land and thus a nation of small freeholders, many of whom were literate – allowed for a tradition of the exercise of democratic rights. Far from his horizon were both future capitalist development and slavery as an inextricable contradiction of the American condition and a necessary part of the freedom of non-slaves. Rather the United States had reached a goal towards which all nations tended; the early phase of the French Revolution was for Jefferson part of a general reform movement in the American and European continents. To Madison, for example, he had noted with pride in reference to the *Assemblée Nationale* that the drawing up of the United States Constitution has « been viewed as model... on every occasion »³⁶.

Jefferson's historically rooted and non-abstract analysis of what could be expected from a given country would seem to enlist him as a supporter of

³⁴ November 18, 1788, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 188; March 15, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XIV, p. 661; to Lucy Ludwell Paradise, September 10, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 412; September 13, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 424. The linkage here of liberty and property did not of course mean that Jefferson had placed them conceptually on the same level.

³⁵ September 6, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, pp. 392-397.

³⁶ August 28, 1789, *Papers*, vol. XV, p. 366. By coincidence February 22, 1787 had been the date of both the first meeting of the Assembly of Notables as well as that of the formal organization of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

the concept that the American Revolution had been fought to preserve what existed and not, as for example the French one, to conquer something new³⁷. On the other hand this bending of general principles does not, despite appearances, place his approach near that of the other American observer in Paris at this time, Gouverneur Morris. The latter felt that governments necessarily reflected specific situations but as a genuine social conservative – horrified at Jefferson's connections in Paris with the reform elements – he viewed general principles as only abstractions, dangerous in themselves. For Jefferson, instead, the «inalienable, natural rights» were in constant tension with specific realities³⁸.

The moderating effect of historical conditions on Jefferson's principles is something which was to remain with him not only throughout his active political life but also in his retirement. In 1817 the sage of Monticello wrote his old comrade in arms Lafayette about the destiny «of our southern brethren» now that independence from Spain had been won. He affirmed that «ignorance and bigotry, like other insanities, are incapable of self-government» and thus the newly independent countries were destined to fall under military despotism. He emphasized that «No one, I hope, can doubt my wish to see them and all mankind exercising self-government, and capable of exercising it». And yet as to what was «practicable» he could only counsel, «as their sincere friend and brother», that they «come to an accord with Spain» under the guarantee of the European powers and the United States. Such an accord would allow Spain

a nominal supremacy, with authority only to keep the peace among them, leaving them otherwise all the powers of self-government, until their experience in them, their emancipation from their priests, and advancement in information, shall prepare them for complete independence.

This position is especially striking when compared to his letter of the previous year to Kercheval which reaffirmed his general principle of the need to increase self-government and decentralization³⁹.

The meaning of progress was precisely the constant expansion of the capabilities of the people to exercise inalienable rights and no people was destined to remain without the full development of such rights; specific

³⁷ A classic statement of this thesis is in Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, 1963 where the American Revolution is fought over freedom (which already existed) while the French one is centered on bread (which, distinct from America, was missing). Arendt of course is able to sustain such a position only by gravely underestimating – as did Jefferson – the importance of slavery as an element of the country's experience.

³⁸ Moreover while for Jefferson such rights specifically excluded property Morris, as C.D. Hazen has emphasized (*Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, Baltimore, 1897, pp. 55-57) saw no basic rights aside from those connected with property. For Gouverneur Morris' views of the Revolution see his *A Diary of the French Revolution*, edited by Beatrix Cary Davenport, Westport, Conn., 1972.

³⁹ To Lafayette, May 14, 1817, *Writings*, pp. 1408-1409; to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, *Writings*, pp. 1395-1403.

historic situations however seem determining for Jefferson as to how much could be exercised how quickly. In a certain sense it may have been a formulation similar to Engels' comment towards the end of the 19th century that « Men make history but not at their choosing ». America was another time and another place and one could only be happy that the situation of America – United States America, that is – permitted so much freedom so rapidly.