

Thomas Jefferson, Time, and History

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Author:

Hannah Spahn

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Daniel Clinkman

Thomas Jefferson was a man who reflected Enlightenment attitudes. This simple statement has formed the premise of much Jefferson scholarship in recent decades, and in particular historians have made an effort to connect Jefferson with the Enlightenment in Britain, especially in its Scottish manifestation. In *Thomas Jefferson, Time, and History*, Hannah Spahn continues this project but sets her sights further south, focusing on two English progenitors of the Enlightenment, Isaac Newton and John Locke. The Jefferson of Spahn's book is a man conscious of the flow of time and of his own place in it, framed in a Newtonian worldview.

In choosing this theme, Spahn places herself at the confluence of two streams in recent Jefferson historiography. The first seeks to situate Jefferson within the 18th-century Enlightenment. This effort can be traced back to Gilbert Chinard in the 1930s and 1940s, when he, in several works, attempted to demonstrate Jefferson's place within the spectrum of French Enlightened thought, a project also taken up by Adrienne Koch.⁽¹⁾ The Enlightenment historiography took a turn in the 1970s, when Garry Wills attempted to demonstrate the importance of Scottish moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson's influence, as opposed to the incumbent view of Jefferson as a Lockean supported by, amongst others, Louis Hartz.⁽²⁾ Although a Hutchesonian influence did not win over the historical community, the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment as a genre did spark interest. Studies by Kevin Hayes, Ari Helo, Peter Onuf and Douglas Wilson have all examined Jefferson's relationship with the works of Scottish Enlightenment writers such as Adam Ferguson, Henry Home, and David Hume, often to great profit for the field.⁽³⁾

The second stream is that of Jefferson's attempt to use time and history as a political tool, in particular to set his own legacy as a way of influencing future politics. This stream is an implied part of many general studies of Jefferson, and has been pursued with particular interest by Merrill Peterson in the 1960s and more

recently by Francis Cogliano.⁽⁴⁾ Spahn builds on Peterson's and Cogliano's findings by accepting their conclusions – that Jefferson was an active and politicized historian in his own right – and focusing on the way in which Jefferson conceived of the future, which he was attempting to manipulate in the present by using interpretations of the past.

Spahn identifies Newtonianism as the organizing principle behind Jefferson's outlook on time and history. Newton, she explains, discarded a medieval understanding of time as confined to the chronology of the Aristotelian interpretation of Scripture. Instead, Newton substituted a dialectical conception of 'objective' and 'subjective' time. Objective time was the deep time of the burgeoning modern sciences, time that stretched out across the lengthy development of the physical universe and could only be understood in an abstract, philosophical sense. Subjective time, on the other hand, was the kind of time that could be understood by a subjective human observer. Rather than eons, epochs, or eternity, subjective time was experienced in increments of seconds, days, and years. As a rule of thumb, according to this division, subjective time is the time that can be comprehended within the span of a single human lifetime, while objective time exists beyond that.

This division of time can be hard to keep straight, and one of the shortcomings of the book is Spahn's shifting treatment of nomenclature. Objective time is also referred to as 'absolute' or 'rational' time at places in the book, and subjective time referred to as 'sentimental', 'relative', or 'common' time. While the labels are used in order to maintain a spirit of authenticity with the original writers that she quotes, it can often lead to confusion in understanding the argument being made. The book might have been improved if the author had relied on a single a word for each category after making the initial introductions.

As Spahn describes it, Jefferson began his political life with an understanding of a homogeneous 'flow' of time, which he then began to seek to order and bend towards his political views. Jefferson understood time as flowing 'according to universal natural laws, while simultaneously understanding human time perception as relative, heterogeneous, and at best leading to an approximate estimate of absolute time' (pp. 22–3). The problem confronting Jefferson, and other Enlightened contemporaries such as Immanuel Kant, was how to reconcile these two forms of time into a single, usable frame of temporal reference. In this respect, Spahn attempts to demonstrate that Jefferson was not only inspired by Enlightenment figures but was actually participating with them in the intellectual problems of the day.

Spahn sets out to demonstrate Jefferson's approach to this problem across six chapters divided into two sections. The first section, 'Time' begins with a brief prologue explaining Newtonian temporal methodology. In chapters one and two, Spahn makes quite an interesting, two-track argument on Jefferson's use of objective time. First, she argues that Jefferson used the tools of objective time, such as calendars and clocks, to regulate the daily routines at Monticello that would normally have been ruled by subjective perceptions of time, such as the rising and setting of the sun. Use of objective methods afforded Jefferson a degree of control over the residents of the plantation, and especially of the slaves.

Second, Jefferson used objective time to justify distinctions in ranks between races and civilizations. Spahn includes a fascinating account of how Jefferson described the French aristocracy as a group of time-wasters and linked their lack of control over their time to the decadence that eventually destroyed them. On the obverse, Jefferson also used time to criticize his slaves, arguing that Afro-Americans lacked the control over their personal time that was exercised by Anglo-Americans. Jefferson claimed that blacks were unable to control their desires and unable to project rewards and punishments into the future, living perpetually presentist existences. For Jefferson, this meant that blacks were incapable of planning and hence of self-improvement, and demonstrated their innate inferiority. As Spahn puts it, Jefferson thought that the 'routines of both [aristocrats and slaves] were characterized by the impossibility of self-determined progress' (p. 55).

In chapter three, Spahn transitions from objective to subjective time and shows how it, too, played an important role in how Jefferson perceived the world. Spahn identifies the death of Jefferson's wife, Martha, and his subsequent emotional breakdown, as a turning point when he temporarily abandoned objectivity as

his main way of organizing time. She quotes convincingly from Jefferson's correspondence with friends and family to show how, in the brief period between his wife's death and his ambassadorship in France, Jefferson gave himself over to subjective or 'sentimental' time.

The second section, 'History' is also organized into three chapters and concerned with how Jefferson's attitudes towards time influenced his view of historical progression and the place of the American Revolution, and by extension himself, within history. Spahn shows how, over the 50 years between the revolution and his death, Jefferson went through three phases in his historical understanding: a pre-revolutionary Bolingbrokean view of history as being moral 'philosophy by example', an intermediate phase in which Jefferson was uncertain in his historical worldview, and a post-revolutionary embrace of a new history based on unpredictability.

As Spahn shows, this was an important change in Jefferson's worldview. Bolingbrokean philosophical history relied on a static assumption that human nature remained constant and that the world never truly changed. Thus, Jefferson could invoke examples from antiquity and the remote past of Saxon England as guides for the American republic with complete sincerity, placing all events in a 'historical continuum'. (p. 117) In the 1780s, at the same time as his crisis of time resulting from the death of his wife, Jefferson's views on history also began to change. Even as he began to think more in terms of subjective time, with its emphasis on day to day reality, he began to turn away from universalist philosophical history and began to take a greater interest in what he had, until then, dismissed as antiquarian history, moving away from what Spahn terms the 'tautology of a universal human nature' (p. 151).

After 1800, Jefferson moved away from prior categories of philosophical or antiquarian history and began constructing a new one. Now that the American Revolution was over, and what he perceived as a threatened Federalist counter-revolution was thwarted, Jefferson 'subdued his skepticism about historiography as a genre and sought to construct ... his own philosophical history of American progress' (p. 189). Spahn characterizes the 'Revolution of 1800', with Jefferson's triumph over the Federalists, as his re-winding up of the clock of American history (pp. 189–190). The language in which Jefferson expressed these historical ideas was Lockean, and Spahn provides colorful examples from Jefferson's correspondence to illustrate the point, particularly Jefferson's use of his own death as a literary device for creating an aura of objective timelessness. (p. 201) He had also come to see history less as a form of Bolingbrokean literature and more as a science. Spahn concludes that Jefferson's temporal thought went through two major changes over the course of his life: 'Firstly, he developed a more active and critical concept of historical reading' that became able to account for contingency in human history. Second, 'he now distinguished more clearly between different realms for history and poetry' (p. 209).

Spahn's account is fascinating, and her command of Jefferson's life of letters is comprehensive. She has very ably overcome a major difficulty when constructing an intellectual history of Jefferson. In contrast to a writer with more voluminous systematical works, in which preserved papers act as explanatory appendices, with Jefferson the papers are all that we have. With the exception of a few early state papers, the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and his autobiography, Jefferson left no autonomous works of great length or refinement. Compared to one of the canonical thinkers of the Enlightenment such as Newton or Locke, or even to a contemporary such as John Adams, Jefferson wrote almost nothing of great length or that indicated systematical thinking. Thus rather than being ancillary material, Jefferson's papers form the major primary source evidence. Whereas Adams could fairly be described as a man who expressed himself systematically in lengthy treatises, Jefferson was a man who expressed himself through attitudes in his correspondence. Spahn's task has been to reconstruct those attitudes, and she has done so convincingly and interestingly.

A curious aspect of Spahn's narrative is her insistence on Jefferson's Newtonianism even while aligning him much more closely with John Locke and Laurence Sterne, the neo-Lockean author of *Tristram Shandy*. By her own admission, Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* 'had a more direct influence on Jefferson's writings' than Newton did (p. 23). Furthermore, the book is replete with references to Jefferson's literary commonplace book, in which he quoted Sterne's passages on time perception at length. These passages in *Tristram Shandy* were themselves based on Locke's *Essay*, in particular Locke's contention that time

perception was a product of internal mental reflection (p. 24). While Locke and Newton were complementary thinkers, Locke's *Essay* was developed concurrently with Newton's *Principia Mathematica* and it is somewhat of a misnomer to label Locke a Newtonian, as if his ideas were based upon those of his colleague. It is possible that Spahn avoided the Lockean label in an effort to buck what has become the commonly accepted default interpretation of Jefferson. If so, it was unfortunate, for this appears to be a case in which Jefferson was in fact the Lockean he is so often supposed to be.

This is particularly relevant because Newtonian and Lockean time, as defined by Spahn, do not emphasize the same things. While Newtonian time accounts for the original division between objective and subjective time that forms Spahn's thesis, Lockean time is a product of the mind and fits into the subjective category. While Spahn provides many examples of Jefferson using something akin to objective time, she does not provide it with the same basis in Jefferson's writings as she does with his use of subjective time. Thus she risks a circular argument: that Jefferson made use of objective time because he was a Newtonian, and can be proved to be a Newtonian via his use of objective time. It is likely that Jefferson was indeed a Newtonian, but the case is not made as well as that for Locke and Sterne.

Spahn also raises an interesting question for future historians. She portrays herself as largely uninterested in the questions of Whig history raised by Trevor Colbourn and others.⁽⁵⁾ The absence of the Saxons and questions of ancient constitutionalism from a meaningful role in her narrative is striking, and while it can be justified given her desire to concentrate on more over-arching issues, there is an important texture here in Jefferson's relationship with the past that is almost entirely missing. An analysis of Jefferson's view of American history as existing on a continuum with English history, without an examination of what that meant in terms of politics and policy, seems incomplete. Likewise, she raises the issue of a classical republican 'Machiavellian moment' conception of time in her introduction.⁽⁶⁾ While she states that 'a 'classical republican' interpretation of time alone cannot explain his temporal sensibility', she does not discount it as an element of his thought, but neither does she attempt to integrate it (p. 17). Future historians working on this line of enquiry may seek to remedy both omissions.

That there will be such historians seems almost a certainty. 'Time' has the potential to be the next big thing in interpreting Jefferson, following on other topics such as race, gender, and moral philosophy. Spahn's ambitious work, while sometimes falling short in its use of labels or in matching detail to its comprehensive scope, is an important beginning on that route of enquiry and provides a strong framework for other scholars to follow her.

Notes

1. See Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson: The Apostle of Americanism* (Boston, 1933), and 'Jefferson among the philosophers', *Ethics*, 53, 4 (1943). See also Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, (New York, NY, 1943).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Gary Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York, NY, 1978), and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, NY, 1955).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Kevin J. Hayes, *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford, 2008); Ari Helo and Peter Onuf, 'Jefferson, morality, and the problem of slavery', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 60, 3 (2003); Peter S. Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA, 2007); and Douglas L. Wilson, 'Jefferson Vs. Hume', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 46, 1 (1989).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. D. Merrill Peterson, *The Jeffersonian Image in the American Mind* (Oxford, 1960); and Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Charlottesville, VA, 2006).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. H. T. Colbourn, 'Thomas Jefferson's use of the past', *The William and Mary Quarterly: Magazine of Early American History* (1958), 56–70.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975, 2003 reprint).[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author will respond to this review in due course.

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