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Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America

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Classical works formed the kernel of Thomas Jefferson's libraries. The third president read both Latin and Greek. He wrote repeatedly of his fondness of classical literature and died, on 4 July 1826, with Seneca's work open on his bedside table. Nonetheless, Jefferson in many ways doubted the classical world was the original mold upon which the American experiment had to be built. He was sure the ancients knew all but nothing about revolution and, more generally, that looking backward for precedents was not suitable to the American republican character. Among the founding generation, Jefferson was certainly not alone in this ?dualistic? belief in the significance and insignificance of the classical world. The fact is that Jefferson both loved and distrusted the classics at the same time, and this ?inconsistency? necessarily triggers a series of general questions.

Was the classical world, in the mind of the founding generation, a source of inspiration, a real influence, a pre-condition of their political experience, or did they refer to Roman and Greek antiquity just to find a *post-hoc* confirmation of their biases, thus providing some sort of ancestry to their pre-existing ideas? In other words, were the classics normative or illustrative? Were the founders, Jefferson in particular, keen on learning lessons from the classics, or did they simply intend to sport classical costumes?

The volume edited by Peter Onuf and Nicholas Cole collects essays presented at a conference on the role of the classics held at the American Academy in Rome on 13-14 October 2008. Interdisciplinary in approach, these essays do not aim to dissolve the dualism aforementioned. By looking directly at Thomas Jefferson (?Part I: Jefferson's classical world?), while moving well beyond this figure (?Part II: classical influences?), the essays convincingly show that such a dichotomy entered deeply into the mechanisms through which American republicanism has been invented.

Resisting any simplified solution, *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America* exhibits the dualism of normative vs. illustrative (or, if you prefer, foundational vs. window-dressing) as a basic fact of America's communal identity. In so doing, the volume steps out of two well-established historiographical traditions. Important historians, over the years, have sympathized with either sides of the dilemma. Bernard Bailyn (1) was sure the revolutionary generation inherited almost nothing from the classical world (their sources being contemporary). Others (2) took on a more ?foundational? approach: the classics were, all in all, normative. This volume gives readers more action and drama than previous scholarship has done, leaving the scenario entirely open and undecided. Onuf's and Cole's volume serves an ?and/and? instead of an ?either/or? dish, a very enticing experience for the senses.

The answer this volume provides is not entirely an answer. Founders, we discover, both learned lessons from and in many ways played with classical authors. This means, stated otherwise, that the classics provided, at best, one of the several vocabularies that the founders recurred to, others being, for instance, 18th-century science or the discourse on natural rights. They were at once serious and playful, historically aware and acutely biased. They were sure they had found important lessons for contemporary politicians and, at the same time, they kept looking askance at the previous stages in the process of civilization.

In the ?Prologue? Gordon Wood upholds a foundational approach. In this way, as we are about to see, he sets the template against which the ten following essays have to be gauged. Why did the rebellious provinces of British North America want to emulate the few existing examples of republics: the Dutch Provinces; some Italian cities; a few Swiss cantons? The answer, according to Wood, is that they had before their eyes the majestic precedent of republican Rome. Fascinated by Latin literature, the 18th-century Enlightenment wanted to emulate those virtues (rejection of luxury, a sense of friendship, self-effacement, self-sacrifice, participation in government, and a compelling idea of a communal duty) that made ?old virtuous Rome? possible. Rome-inspired republican ideals were ?never a besieged underground ideology, confined to cellar meetings and marginal intellectuals? (p. 15). Kings themselves were frequently taken by republicanism. Those who voiced their love of freedom or simply criticized the spreading of corruption pronounced words taken from Cicero, Virgil, Sallust, Livy, Tacitus, the Greek Plutarch, or, more often, from their translators. As Wood argues, this practice was ?more than scholarly embellishment and window-dressing for educated Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic? (p. 19). Classics offered the ?principal source of their public morality and values? (p. 19). American revolutionaries ?exploited all of these classical ideas in their creation of the United States? (p. 24). The Revolution changed the scenario dramatically, but the role of the classics did not dwindle. However, when more ?democratic? forces were unleashed ?ancient Rome lost much of its meaning for Americans? (p. 27). By the 1820s, the Roman spell disappeared, and ancient Greece, tumultuous, wild, and free, became a better model.

Peter Onuf's essay concentrates on Thomas Jefferson and takes a middle position between the foundational and the illustrative canon. ?Jefferson deepest satisfaction?, Onuf writes, ?came from the ancients' languages, not the wisdom of their philosophers? (p. 35). By looking back, Jefferson aimed at language and form, not wisdom and content. Those erstwhile doctrines and ideas ? what the ancients thought and what they believed

ought not be taken as exemplary and normative. Jefferson was sure that ancient culture could not provide a model to be re-enacted. He insisted that Romans and Greeks knew nothing about natural rights or consensual foundation of government. Similarly, their social theory was totally inadequate. It was rather the form, the language, that mattered to Jefferson, and this is the sole element that Americans should consider as normative and foundational. In Jefferson's view, Americans needed to revert to the classics for the sake of improving their expression and style. The importance of classical learning rested for Jefferson in the sole fact that they are a great boon for finding "models of pure taste in writing" and "a solid basis for most, and an ornament to all the sciences?". The art of *expressing* the thought of the living generation might profit from classical culture, but nothing more than that. This is certainly more than mimicking or window-dressing, but when we come to figuring out solutions and ideas functional to the modern world, however, the classics can be of no avail.

Michael Zuckert does not advocate a backward-looking Jefferson, not even in the very mild form admitted by Onuf (the power of ancient language). Zuckert sets out to challenge the assumption that moral sense would be for Jefferson essential to conduct a moral life. Furthermore, Jefferson's political theory seems to be clearly "selfish," à la Locke, in no sense molded upon some classical model. Zuckert's Jefferson was thoroughly uncompromising as to his modernity. He always sought to protect the self-regarding rights of individuals. Overlooking both the classics and the moral sense theory, this Jefferson searched for the exclusive examples of good *living* men "Dr. Small, Mr. Wythe, or Peyton Randolph" and for their approbation. As Zuckert insists, Jefferson believed that human beings loved others, and cared for their good, at least as much as they cared to be loved by them. Egotistic and altruistic motives, according to Zuckert, are thus inextricably intertwined in Jefferson's philosophy. The momentous consequence is that no precise role is left to classical examples and ancient models. Albeit suspicious of the moral sense and thus, in a way, critic of *some* modern visions, Jefferson was swept along by a vigorous modernity whose outcome was "a progressive attenuation of the classical element" (p. 75).

Caroline Winterer begins by reminding readers that "Monticello was practically a museum of classical artifacts" (p. 78). Living in an age of "expanding educational possibilities for women" (p. 81), Jefferson's daughters and granddaughters were reared into a discerning classical taste that, in addition, helped to preserve some of the Greco-Roman artifacts of Monticello well into the 19th century. Classicism became a feat of female education. Pressing his young daughter Patsy to read Livy, for example, Jefferson wanted to make sure she had the right chance to properly shape her character. Reading the classics may be an important boon for female education, but was Jefferson ready to admit a universal utility, beyond gender and age? Did Jefferson consider ancient authors as suitable to American citizens? To the American leader? Winterer, understandably, does not offer a definitive answer about the classics' foundational import. They may be of some avail for *some* persons, during a *particular* stage of their lives. As a matter of fact, grandsons and granddaughters kept receiving advice to further their education into Greek and Roman authors.

All the buildings Jefferson designed during his life, or contributed to, Guy Wilson argues, "display his knowledge and his inventiveness with the forms and details of classical architecture" (p. 102). Buildings for early republicans were functional structures but, additionally, they conveyed identity. While Greek architecture had little impact on Jefferson, most of his knowledge was based upon Rome as reinterpreted in the "modern" period. Symmetry and balance were other important features of classical architecture that Jefferson normally followed. The Vitruvian man and the concept of equality "or balance" and a center line "or axis" dominated Jefferson's designs. Another element of classicism was hierarchy, "with a focus always in the center of a compositional whole" (p. 112). Jefferson sought to improve American architecture, "and the employment of classicism furthered that goal" (p. 118). Wilson wants to make sure the reader gets the sense that the employment of classicism was not a passive reenactment of classical models, but rather a dialogue between ancients and moderns. The voice of the moderns, their inventiveness, seems to be preeminent. To some extent modern inventiveness overwhelmed historical accuracy.

Did Washington take as his model Cincinnatus, the citizen-general-farmer, or Marcus Aurelius, the great military leader? This is the question Maurie McInnis asks in her essay. The character of Marcus Aurelius,

McInnis contends, seems more appropriate to the taste and style of Virginia leaders of the middle of the 19th century. However, an association between Washington and Cincinnatus, the Roman general relinquishing power and pursuing pastoral virtue, began to circulate right after the General bid his farewell to the army. By the 1850s a new urge to represent Washington on a monumental scale held sway, and Cincinnatus yielded to Marcus Aurelius. The image of a militaristic Washington was invented. Ancients and moderns are, once again, in a dialogue led and perhaps dominated by those who came second.

“The suspicion”, Nicholas Cole writes, “that Jefferson’s well-attested classical reading reflected his aesthetic sense far more than it contributed to the formation of his ideas is difficult to avoid” (p. 172). Cole sides with Bailyn or Rahe in arguing that Jefferson’s generation, in the battle for republicanism, owed more to Machiavelli and modern authors than to the ancient world. 18th-century Americans chose to draw on antiquity in their political discourse, but the question of “utility” was “central to eighteenth-century discussions of the value of classical learning, and that utility was given a distinct political significance in these discussions” (p. 175). Early republicans harnessed antiquity almost fearlessly. A sincere interest in a bygone world did not deter Jefferson and his peers from projecting their agendas on classical sources. Early republicans read back to find precedents for the natural dictates of “uncorrupted reason”, for ideas of natural law, and for the principle that all men were created equal. After the rupture with British monarchy, however, classical republicanism took on a more exemplary role. That “precedent” became almost inspirational and foundational. As Cole says, “a widespread acceptance of the notion that American republics were in important respects qualitatively similar to the republics of the ancient world” (p. 187) worked as a spur to understand the real historical motives why ancient republics had failed. After the Revolution, Americans perceived they had to better understand the ancient world, to let it speak its own language. A higher degree of historical awareness was needed to avoid previous mistakes.

That Jefferson challenged the prevalent cyclical view of history (that societies unavoidably follow a biological life-cycle) is the premise of Peter Thompson’s chapter. Jefferson understood the material context of human development, namely, demography. “The claim that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living generation has often been studied without reference to Jefferson’s interests in the classical and Anglo-Saxon past ... At the same time, Jefferson’s interest in the classical and Anglo-Saxon past has generally been studied in isolation from the concerns of his political demography” (p. 195). Actually, Jefferson was fatally anxious about (white) demographic growth. Consequently, heeding Anglo-Saxon precedents, according to Jefferson, was much more important to the living people than growing familiar with Greek or Roman cultures. The tenet of being in some sort of continuity with an Anglo-Saxon past gave ex-colonists the impression they were elements of a linearly-expanding people pursuing liberty. Anglo-Saxonism, for Jefferson, was more than a dead patrimony to be bequeathed intact from fathers to sons. His Virginia, with chattel slavery and several other problematic habits, could not be the final stage to be preserved and transmitted. Jefferson needed to differentiate the future from the past. He needed to represent the course of time as the Anglo-Saxon’s seed extending temporally, evolving qualitatively, and growing demographically, ideally without interruption and death. Anglo-Saxonism served Jefferson’s desire to break biological unavoidable cycles.

During the years leading to independence, as Eran Shalev writes, “Jefferson practically ignored Greece and Rome” (p. 220). For him, classics did not speak to the present, nor did they speak of the present. Jefferson was a good historian, in a way. He knew that particular “spaces of experience” were not transferrable or applicable to other spaces of human experience. “The classics surely did *not* serve Jefferson as the paradigmatic reference point that they were for numerous of his contemporaries ... For Jefferson, the classics remained a venue of cultural escapism” (p. 237). The underlying reason for Jefferson’s silence, as Shalev convincingly argues, was that classical authors’ channeled the belief in historical time as necessarily cyclical, centered on the idea of destiny, of rise and ensuing fall. Especially southern leaders were sensitive to the aspect of the movement toward decline and degeneration in the cyclical pattern. “Jefferson did not keep silent because he knew not what or how to ‘speak classically’” (p. 237). Like other figures of the Enlightenment, Jefferson thought of history in terms of a linear and ascending process that admitted of decline as avoidable. Keenly aware that the danger of decline looms large when “corruption” is not cleverly

shunned, Jefferson desired to conceive of history as an alternative to a stage for repetition and destiny. Consequently, classical antiquity *must* be irrelevant. It *must not* be a mold to be repeated.

Paul Rahe presents an essay on the 'influence' of Marcus Tullius Cicero on the American founding. Cicero was the most prominent defender of Roman republicanism. Did the founders refer to Cicero for window-dressing or to deepen their understanding of the actual political situation unfolding before their eyes? Rahe's answer is that neither of these options apply. Cicero was widely cited and referred to by early republicans. Nonetheless, Cicero, together with Aristotle, Livy, Tacitus, Suetonius, Plutarch, and the like, were not strictly speaking foundational. They did 'play a critical role as writers in keeping alive the memory of self-government through a long epoch in which despotism was the norm' (p. 256), but 'as writers' means that their example could not be followed as a template. Their precedent could not be transferred and applied to a different situation. Ancients did not hand over any tool that helped republicans to tackle their problems. Their example, and only their example, should be remembered.

Jennifer Roberts' chapter works as a helpful conclusion to the volume. Dealing with the images of Pericles in America from the 18th to the 21st century, Roberts pinpoints that 'the classics ... played a significant role in the thought of the founding era, but they did not put the founders in a straightjacket that cut off all freedom of movement' (p. 265). Founders' imagination prompted selective reading and preferences. Was Pericles a corrupt and imperialist despot and demagogue? Did he bring on the Peloponnesian War to distract the Athenians? An 'anti-Periclean tradition,' Roberts argues, 'made its way into the thinking of Americans of the founding generation' (p. 278). Not long after the new nation was founded, however, perceptions of Pericles and the uses made of his image changed. After the Constitution was adopted, Pericles was singled out 'by Hamilton, for example' to buttress the argument that the United States, like Periclean Athens, needed to become an imperial power. Plutarch's dim portrait of Pericles's character was slowly but steadily dismissed. The conclusion sounds almost unavoidable: 'The fluidity of Pericles' image strongly discourages placing too much emphasis on classical influence in American political rhetoric' (p. 293).

Concluding by referring to 'fluidity' and the pivotal role played by imagination was probably unavoidable. I feel I should end this review the same way: the meaning of the classics at the beginning of American independence is still to be determined, and always will be. Even though the authors of the essays, singularly considered, may accept some version of the foundational approach (or some version of the illustrative approach), reading the volume right through to the end conveys a different impression. This volume instructs the reader about the impossibility of arriving at any clear-cut and simplistic answer. The volume's multiple voices and different methodological approaches may be criticized by some. Nonetheless, *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America* has the big merit of channelling an undecided drama, still open, and still unfolding before our eyes.

As we approach Jefferson and his world more closely, we find confirmation that the founders believed that classical authors had both failed and succeeded, in many senses. Since human beings always return to their imaginations, classics *had* to be both emulated (which includes mimicking them for amusement) and cast off.

Notes

1. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MS, 1967). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (Harvard, MS, 1963); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1969); Carl Richard, *The Founders and the Classics* (Harvard, MS, 1994). [Back to \(2\)](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/24524>