

THE AMERICAN HERESY

The Jeffersonian State

“WE HOLD THESE truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The two marks of the Jeffersonian state were freedom and equality. Let us examine the meaning of these marks.

Freedom, in Jefferson’s mouth, was a very negative thing, even as the functions of government were, to his mind, very negative. Freedom meant simply “absence of interference.” Man should be interfered with as little as possible by the laws. The laws had the right to interfere with liberty only in order to increase liberty—to interfere with such conduct as would, if permitted, violate the liberty of others.

By equality, on the other hand, he meant something much larger than that each man should have a vote. Equality was, in Jefferson’s eyes, rather social than political. He demanded that no prestige of rank should prevent any one citizen from freely speaking his mind to any other citizen. And this virtue of outspokenness is perhaps, even today, the largest special virtue of the Americans. It has survived the ruin of the Jeffersonian state.

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If a state was to remain free and equal, Jefferson thought that it must be agricultural and property-owning. It must be agricultural because the complexity of factory organization made it necessary that men should be divided into masters and servants. Only in an agricultural society could property be so distributed that all men might possess a little and therefore only in such a society could equality be preserved. An agricultural society also was the only free society. For such a society, being economically self-sufficient, could live its own life, regardless of the rest of the world. An industrial society, dependent for its existence upon its capacity to exchange its surplus products against those of other countries, would, as we in England know, continually have to allow its policy to be dictated by commerce.

The Jeffersonian state had, from the beginning, two main obstacles to its realization—a large population of black slaves in the South and, in the North, a growing, though not yet dominant, spirit of commercialism, whose demand was that the object of policy should be not to give the citizen this or that sort of life, but simply to give him as high a material standard as possible.

The Jeffersonian state soon had to meet two attacks.

On the one hand, it had to face the subtle perversion, by those who claimed to be his followers, of Jefferson's teaching upon slavery. He had accepted slavery as a necessary evil. The generation which followed, having discovered that, owing to the invention of Eli Whitney, a slave was a vastly more valuable commodity than it had previously imagined, claimed that slavery was good in itself. Slavery had existed in Jefferson's Virginia, but it did not exist in his Utopia. It existed both in Calhoun's South Carolina and in his Utopia.

On the other hand, Jefferson's state had to face the growing hostility of the commercial classes of the North, who were not content that commerce should play that restricted rôle of supplier of the needs of agriculture, which was the most that Jeffersonian

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philosophy would allow to it. The first attack from this quarter was that of Hamilton, who attempted to impose on the Jeffersonian state a plutocratic government. It was defeated. But the Federalist party re-emerged as the high-tariff party, as the Republican party, captured the government, fought the Civil War and eventually smashed the Jeffersonian state.

The Jeffersonian state was, as has been said, a state primarily agricultural. The independence of the agricultural interest was safeguarded, in the Constitution, by the doctrine of state rights—by the guarantee of a real independence to the agricultural state, which would prevent Washington or New York from becoming the master of her life. That state-life the Civil War killed. It is the thesis of this book that the United States, which were previously a reality, have since been only a name. They have been Hamiltonian rather than Jeffersonian, if one must search out for them an ancestor among the American Fathers.