

Thomas Jefferson: Notes on the State of Virginia (1785)

As the first secretary of the United States Treasury, Alexander Hamilton wanted not only to manage the country's finances but also to promote a diversified economy that emphasized trade and manufacturing. He believed that the United States should have an economic system that was as exceptional as its political one. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, like most other Americans, agreed with that idea in principle but disagreed on the particulars. Jefferson articulated the prevailing agrarian vision when he described his dream for America in his Notes on the State of Virginia. Besides extolling the virtues of an agriculture-based economy, Jefferson also commented on American flora and fauna, Native American issues, the problem of slavery, the promise of education, and the organization of government. Jefferson began the work as a series of essay answers to a questionnaire sent out by an official, Francois Barbe-Marbois, with the French legation at Philadelphia in 1780, sending him his original answers in December 1781. Jefferson revised and added new material to the work until it was published as a book, first in Paris in 1785 and then in London. He continued to espouse these ideas years later.

From Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, intro. Thomas Perkins Abernathy (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1964), pp. 156-158.

Query XIX

The present state of manufactures, commerce, interior and exterior trade?

We never had an interior trade of any importance. Our exterior commerce has suffered very much from the beginning of the present contest. During this time we have manufactured within our families the most necessary articles of clothing. Those of cotton will bear some comparison with the same kinds of manufacture in Europe; but those of wool, flax and hemp are very coarse, unsightly, and unpleasant; and such is our attachment to agriculture, and such our preference for foreign manufactures, that be it wise or unwise, our people will certainly return as soon as they can, to the raising raw materials, and exchanging them for finer manufactures than they are able to execute themselves.

The political economists of Europe have established it as a principle, that every State should endeavor to manufacture for itself; and this principle, like many others, we transfer to America, without calculating the difference of circumstance which should often produce a difference of result. In Europe the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people. But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman. Is it best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that one half should be called off from that to exercise manufactures and handicraft arts for the other? Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances; but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry; but, for the

general operations of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.

Review Questions

1. Why does Jefferson dismiss European political-economic theory as irrelevant to or improper for the American situation?
2. What does Jefferson say differentiated America from Europe?
3. Why did he believe an agrarian economy begat a better society?
4. Are Jefferson's comments those of an economist or a revolutionary?

