

Thomas Jefferson on manufacturing and commerce

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1853). Originally written in 1781 and first published in 1784.

As you read...

NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA

In 1780, François de Barbé Marbois, a French diplomat in Philadelphia, sent a series of questions to officials of each of the thirteen states. His goal was to learn more about the natural resources, economies, and people of the states so that he could report back to France.

The questions to Virginia were forwarded to Thomas Jefferson, who was then governor of Virginia. Jefferson wrote a detailed response to each of Marbois' questions, and in 1784 his "notes on the state of Virginia" were published as a book.

In this section, Jefferson answers Marbois' question about "the present state of manufactures, commerce, interior and exterior trade." In it, he argues that Virginia should not focus on developing industry but should remain agricultural.

FARMERS AS IDEAL CITIZENS

During and after the Revolution, American leaders worried about whether their new form of government would survive. A republic was based on the decisions of the people, and so (it was believed) the people must be willing to put the common good ahead of their own private self-interest. We still talk about these same issues today — in almost any important political debate, someone will say that people should "rise above partisanship." (*Partisanship* is a tendency to be *partisan*, or strongly supportive of one side or *party* instead of working together for the common good. Of course, in these speeches, it's always the other side that's being partisan, never the speaker!)

Many people — including Thomas Jefferson, as you'll read here — believed that small, self-sufficient farmers made the best citizens of a republic. They saw farmers as harder working, more moral, and more trustworthy than other people. This is a very old idea. The Greek poet Hesiod wrote about small farmers this way more than 2,500 years ago, and you can still hear it sometimes in political debates today.

Americans in the 1790s were split over whether the new nation should remain mostly agricultural or develop industry and commerce. The opposing view, held by Federalists, was that the nation should build industry and commerce so that it would not be dependent on Europe. Both sides wanted to expand independence, but Jefferson and the Republicans thought in terms of personal independence, whereas the Federalists thought in terms of national independence.

In the South, especially, people agreed with Jefferson, and the South remained almost entirely agricultural until after the Civil War.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Why did Virginians begin manufacturing some goods during the Revolution? Why did Jefferson believe they would stop after the war was over?
- Why did Jefferson believe farmers made the best citizens?
- Why would these ideas have been especially attractive in North Carolina at the beginning of the nineteenth century?
- How much sense do you think Jefferson's arguments made for the U.S. at the beginning of the nineteenth century? How much sense do you think they make today?
- Thomas Jefferson was not a small farmer — he owned a great deal of land and many slaves. Does that fact make his argument less valid?

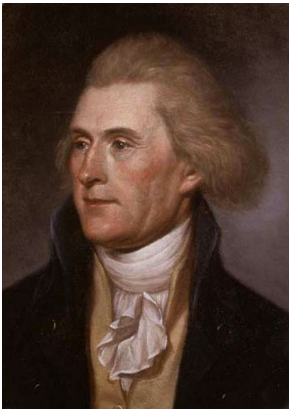


Figure 1. Thomas Jefferson.

We¹ never had an interior trade of any importance. Our exterior commerce has suffered very much from the beginning of the present contest². During this time we have manufactured within our families the most necessary articles of cloathing. 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 endeavour to manufacture for itself³: 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 cultivator⁴. 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 labour in the earth are the chosen people of God⁵, 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 phaenomenon 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 the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependance⁶ 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 labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are

wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops 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 vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.

On the web

Notes on the State of Virginia

<http://www.amphilsoc.org/exhibits/nature/jefferson.htm>

An online exhibit from the American Philosophical Society.

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Notes

1. That is, Virginians.
2. The War of American Independence. Before the 1770s, American colonists had imported nearly all of their manufactured goods from Great Britain. During the war, Britain blockaded American ports to prevent any trade with Europe.
3. Jefferson is talking about *mercantilism*, an economic theory popular in the 1700s. According to mercantilism, a nation's prosperity depends on its supply of money — gold and silver, sometimes called *specie*. To increase its supply of specie, a nation should export more than it imports. Manufactured goods typically cost more than agricultural products, and so a nation that exported manufactured goods would bring in more money than a nation that exported farm products and had to import its manufactured goods.

This theory was behind Britain's trade regulations before the Revolution. Mercantilism recommended that Great Britain should import agricultural products from its colonies and sell manufactured goods back to them. So, for example, the colonies might send inexpensive cotton and wool to Britain and buy back expensive cloth and clothing as well as the tools needed for farming. The result of these policies was that there was very little money available in the American colonies. (This was one of the problems the Regulators were fighting.)

During and after the Revolution, many Americans argued that the new nation should expand its manufacturing so that it could export higher-quality and more expensive goods — or at least not have to import all its manufactured goods from Europe. Jefferson, as he explains here, disagreed.

4. During the medieval period, English peasants had practiced *subsistence farming*, growing mainly the food they needed to feed themselves and the nobles whose land they worked. They often did this on “common” or public land to which they had traditional rights.

After about 1500, a process of *enclosure* began. Common lands were *enclosed* — literally, divided up and fenced in — and used for specific commercial purposes, such as raising sheep for wool, that required fewer workers. Many peasants were thrown off their land and moved to cities (or, eventually, to America). Enclosure happened gradually for a few hundred years, and it peaked about the time Jefferson was writing, in the late 1700s.

5. This is a famous quotation, and it sums up Jefferson’s writing about agriculture. Jefferson is building on an ancient idea that farmers were more moral, more virtuous, or more godly than people living in cities.
6. By *dependence* Jefferson means economic dependence on others. In eighteenth-century British and American politics, people often argued that a man who depended on someone else for his living would be subservient to him politically and therefore could not be trusted with the responsibility of full citizenship. In an era before the secret ballot, when people voted openly and in public, this certainly made some sense — a worker might be fired for voting for a candidate his employer hated. Jefferson takes this a step further by mentioning customers — a businessman who needed to keep customers was also, in a way, dependent on them. A farmer, though, could feed himself and clothe himself and so was not dependent on anyone else for his living.

The *independence* of a small, self-sufficient farmer was a way of thinking about the ideal citizen. Someone who owned his own land, worked for himself, and owed nothing to anyone could therefore be trusted with the public good. He wouldn’t need favors from other people, and so he wouldn’t get caught up in political schemes.

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