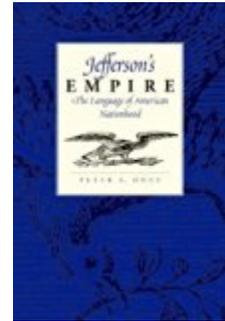


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter S. Onuf. *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. xi + 250 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1930-0.

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## “We Shall all be Americans”?

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“Slaves with us [in Virginia] have no powers as citizens. Yet, in representation in the [Federal] Government, they count in the proportion of three to five. . . . In truth, the condition of different descriptions of inhabitants in any country is a matter of municipal arrangement, of which no foreign country has a right to take notice” (p. 121). So Jefferson wrote in 1816 to Samuel Kercheval in the Valley who questioned the Constitution’s granting representation on behalf of slaves, even though they were not permitted to vote themselves. Property and other qualifications restricted the suffrage in Connecticut, continued Jefferson. Why was the situation of Virginia’s slaves any different from that of the majority of the population in Connecticut? Peter Onuf’s new book asks “Was it? Why did Jefferson refer to Virginia and Connecticut as “foreign countr[ies]”?

Onuf’s effort to weave together the complicated strands of Jefferson’s thinking about equality, consent, nation and empire into a coherent whole marks a refreshing break from the now too familiar query of how he contradicted himself. Essentially, Onuf tries to follow Jefferson’s “tortuous” logic (p. 141), asking how Jefferson could justify slavery and Indian removal and hold, as he did, his ideas about equality. How could a republican who believed in equality be a champion of empire? Did not Jefferson feel terrible strain? With the exception of Jefferson’s one remarkable quote from his Notes on the State of Virginia that “justice cannot sleep forever,” that God would side with the slaves if they should rise up (p.

147), Onuf argues he did not. Even Jefferson’s position on the Missouri crisis was largely “consistent with his Revolutionary principles” (p. 11).

Essentially, Onuf contends that Jefferson had ideas about nation (and race) that made both Indians and slaves into “captive nations” ineligible for citizenship. Jefferson deemed them too inferior in their way of living (Indians) or attributes (black slaves) to measure up to his vision of who should be included among the free and equal within the Virginia or United States nations. Especially, both “captive nations” either would sanction unjust force (coerced consent) or would use it if allowed. Native Americans, in Jefferson’s view, used force to make their women do men’s work and refused to make civilized use of the land. Slaves would use force to retaliate against their former masters, if once allowed, en masse, to become full citizens.

Jefferson seems to have suggested that neither group was properly attached to republican ideas and in some sense thus forfeited their rights. Native Americans, particularly, were “wilderness aristocrats” dependent on corrupt British patronage. Onuf’s analysis is in some ways more damning than Paul Finkelman’s or Joseph Ellis’s. The implication is that Jefferson had no room for diversity, whether cultural or racial, no tolerance, even for differences of opinion. Even Federalist “monocrats” (e.g. secret supporters of monarchy and aristocracy) were “false citizens” who logically, based on their disaffection to the principles of the republic, should be excluded from participation (pp. 89-90). Onuf goes so far as

to suggest that Jefferson represented the majority view, and that he would have sanctioned Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal policy.

The two hinges on which Onuf's analysis swings are his interpretation of Jefferson's ideas about nation and about empire. In Jefferson's vision, empire was not a negative, but a positive "empire of liberty" based on the "consent of the governed," not force or coercion. It need not involve domination, but simply the spread of a principle of government. More chillingly, Onuf suggests that nation, for Jefferson, could be defined in part in "hereditary" terms (e.g. p. 77). It thus could encompass ideas about race (e.g. p. 169).

Of the five main chapters of this book, all but chapter two were previously published elsewhere (although ch. 3 was published only in German). Chapter 5 was given as Onuf's presidential address to SHEAR in 1997 and was published in the *Journal of the Early Republic* in 1998. All were given previously as papers. Due to this originally separate state (no pun intended), some of the chapters overlap a bit in content. Still, the book represents a focused collection of Onuf's thoughts on *Jefferson's Empire*.

In researching this book, Onuf steeped himself in Jefferson's writings. This is his strength, but also his weakness. We enter into Jefferson's conflicted feelings in a way that makes clear that they have become, to some degree, Onuf's as well. "My conflicted feelings . . . are about Jefferson's larger project itself [the empire of liberty], the project that inspired in him such hope and such despair. Perhaps, anti-biographer that I am, I have begun to identify with my subject" (p. 10). This makes Onuf's analysis powerful and insightful. We do, in fact, follow Jefferson's tortuous logic. We are able, especially, to glimpse Jefferson's conflicting values, values in conflict to a great degree within Republican ideology.

But I found myself wishing that Onuf would acknowledge a bit more the ways that force was used in the system of slavery (i.e. not to make Jefferson a hypocrite, but to underline his tortuous logic more than Jefferson himself was willing to do). I found myself resenting slightly Onuf's use of Jefferson's term "restrictionists" for those who sought to limit the expansion of slavery into the Northwest. Surely their stance could be discussed on their own terms, however briefly? I was also not convinced that Jefferson simply "was unable to transcend the prejudices of his day (in his case, masquerading as science)" (p. 148) on the question of race. Onuf gave no evidence about those scientific ideas about race. Indeed, race became a "science" only in the very late eighteenth

century.[1] Only when one attaches oneself to equality – does "race" become an important excuse for maintaining rank. Jefferson speculated, in short, that blacks were not fully human in order to reify older status distinctions that did not fit with his ideas about equality. In a similar vein, I see Jefferson as having great compunction about justifying anything on the basis of inherited right (especially status) – so that I am not fully convinced by Onuf's contention that Jefferson encompassed only white Virginians – via inheritance – into nationhood. How does this mesh with Jefferson's principle of a compact that must be renewed with each generation? Or Jefferson's ideas about citizenship, that rested so much on choice? [2]

Following Onuf's own analysis, I also wondered whether Jefferson would really have supported Andrew Jackson's project of removal (and whether it was inevitable, p. 33). Many groups of Indians, after all (the Iroquois are the best example) retained some of their native lands and were not "removed." Especially for the Cherokee, who "civilized" following Jefferson's instructions – might he not then have admitted them as members – citizens – of his empire of liberty, given his other statements about their equality?

I especially wished for a clearer sense of the change in Jefferson's views over time. Jefferson's 1784 version of the Northwest Ordinance proposed to exclude slavery, for example, yet his position during the Missouri crisis was the opposite. These suggest to me the ways in which Jefferson was struggling with the logic, the dilemmas, the contradictions within Republican ideology – and that he saw them especially clearly in the years just following the Revolution and his grand statement of principles in the Declaration of Independence. Over time, he seems to have developed the "tortuous logic" to justify a different stance. I agree with Onuf that his was not necessarily a "betrayal" of his own Revolutionary principles – but it should perhaps be described as a retreat, or as a rebalancing of his different principles and priorities.

These quibbles aside, Onuf's analysis makes an important contribution to our understanding of Jefferson's ideas. His discussion of the Missouri crisis, that highlights the equal rights of nations (or states) and the question of non-intervention in the affairs of other nations, is especially powerful. "The Missouri crisis juxtaposed the claims of state equality, self-constitution, and noninterference, the foundational premises of Jeffersonian federalism – and liberal internationalism – against restrictionist assertions that regimes founded on slavery could not be republican because they were not based on the

free consent of their peoples” (p. 146). This book made me think again about these terribly important problems and gave me greater insight into how Jefferson struggled to reconcile his conflicting values and desires. Onuf is right that we have not even now resolved the tensions within American ideology—within the interwoven republican and natural rights theories about nations, empire, equality, and consent. These haunt our foreign policy as well as our domestic. *Jefferson’s Empire* is necessary reading for anyone puzzling over Jefferson and the legacy of the American Revolution.

Notes:

[1]. Londa Schiebinger’s *Nature’s Body: Gender and the Making of Modern Science* (Boston, 1993) suggests that “The contours of racial and sexual science in the eighteenth century followed the broader political struggles” (p. 183). In his classic *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, Winthrop Jordan identified some racial prejudice that distinguished “breeds of men” before the Revolution in the writings of (anti-Republican) Englishmen such as Hume and Oliver Goldsmith (ch. 6). But these (relatively unusual) arguments

were used to support older ideas about a great chain of being, that justified all forms of hierarchy in society, including monarchy. Even scientists such as Linnaeus (who originated the ideas about genus and species) in the 1730s, the Comte du Buffon (1749-1788), and the Virginian, Dr. John Mitchell (1745), included blacks among all men and did not use their skin color to argue for innate differences in capability. While some prejudice did clearly antedate Jefferson in Virginia and Europe, a coherent scientific racism did not. Jefferson, in short, had choices and was actively engaged in scientific debates. His position – more than any of the “scientists” who preceded him – was much more on the side of innate differences in the reasoning ability (and even the humanness) of blacks, even if offered as “a suspicion only.”

[2]. See, for example, Jefferson’s “Notes on British and American Alienage,” in Julian P. Boyd, et. al., eds. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, NJ, 1950-) 2:477.

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