



Dustin Gish, Daniel Klinghard. *Thomas Jefferson and the Science of Republican Government: A Political Biography of Notes on the State of Virginia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 348 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-15736-1.

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Dustin Gish and Daniel Klinghard challenge the scholarly view that Thomas Jefferson's *Notes* "lack[s] any coherent literary structure or unifying political purpose" (p. 4). They make two broad claims. First, Jefferson republished the *Notes* for a broad audience, "to shape the minds of Americans" in the debate over constitutional reform in both Virginia and America (p. 2). Second, if one reads "with care" (p. 8n25), one can discern in the *Notes* an overarching structure.

Jefferson, they argue, aspired to be a lawgiver in the ancient sense—to educate the habits of the people. He had an "ambitious agenda for cultural transformation as a result of a gradual enlightenment of the state's citizens" (p. 61); upon this "republican culture" he could build "a truly republican constitution." But Jefferson is an "anti-Moses" (p. 189); instead of giving commands from on high, he gives his own "Decalogue," with natural right replacing God, to direct the people to choose his positive reforms.

For this task, he weighs various forms of human matter (Native Americans, black slaves, and European immigrants) in "three distinct stages of human association—Native American, Anglo American, and European" (p. 176). The natural, pre-political state of the Indians without laws is better than European tyranny, or "too much law"

(p. 176). Yet it is filled with inconveniences: the barbaric treatment of women, limited growth, undue piety that stifles innovation and science. While he attributes the difference between Indians and whites to the institution of slavery, Jefferson finds that the difference between blacks and whites is "fixed in nature": blacks are "inferior to the whites in ... body and mind" and unable to achieve self-government, preventing their ever becoming fellow citizens. Black slavery corrupts republican spirit by encouraging tyranny among white masters and servility among the white populace—the very habits of white European immigrants. Jefferson's recommendations are then to encourage native population growth instead of immigration, Indian removal, and African colonization.

The central Query XII shows a "tension between nature and politics"—there are locations where "the laws have said there shall be towns, but Nature has said there shall not" (pp. 182-83). These historically "unplanned patterns" (p. 184) have been marked by uneven settlement, religious divisions, a failure to establish commercial centers, and above all, a failure to "defin[e] a broader public purpose for the state" (p. 184). This shows the reader the need for the "turn to politics." Only in political life, directed by "human

choice and judgment,” is there “potential for perfectibility” of human nature. The difficulty with the authors’ interpretation here—and they recognize it—is that the towns have laws and politics of a certain sort. More likely, Jefferson is showing the insufficiency of political life in the city, and the need for the state, as segue to constitutional reforms for the best regime, a republic. This includes an education of the “natural aristocra[cy]” (p. 227), a preference for agriculture, and the organization of commerce.

The authors meticulously and successfully challenge the view that the *Notes* was published haphazardly. Rather it was intended to arrive in time to influence constitutional debates. The “crisis of confidence” (p. 272) in Virginia had led to a proposal for a dictator, and the economic failure under the Articles of Confederation, culminating in Shays’ Rebellion, had led to proposals for more authoritarian government. Jefferson feared reactionism and the return to vassalage more than insurrection. Seeking to reform the Articles, he included policy goals as part of an ambitious agenda of 126 bills for legal reform: “Abolition of primogeniture, the disestablishment of the church and the establishment of freedom of religion, the creation of a modern system of public education, rewriting and humanizing the entire criminal code, and ultimately the abolition of slavery” (p. 59, see pp. 206-37).

In the most rewarding section of the book, the authors place Jefferson’s *Notes* in a dialogue with John Adams’s *Defence* and James Madison’s *Federalist*. Jefferson believed that Adams had insufficiently rejected the “British model of governance” (p. 104)—true revolution would bring a “constitution that could evolve consistently over time as popular demands shifted” (p. 105). Adams looked to historical examples to see the limits of politics, and from the new political science he borrowed the innovations of representation, separation of powers, and legislative checks to frame a balanced constitution. Concerned about the growth

of economic elites, he included a strong executive and the institutionalization of social classes—to “ostracize” this aristocracy to a single branch (p. 286). Jefferson, meanwhile, believing that there were “no definite limits” (p. 294) to progress towards a “purely republican form of government” (p. 289), rejected the balance of social orders as an attempt to graft scientific reforms onto corrupt monarchical roots.

Madison responds to Jefferson, explicitly in *Federalist* Nos. 48 and 49, and broadly in Nos. 37-50. Understanding the social order as animated by competing private interests, he channeled them into different branches secured by partial agency. An energetic executive was key: Madison, wishing to reconcile consent and force, prized “security and order” (p. 325), against Jefferson’s wish to separate consent from force, prizing “republican principles” (pp. 322, 305). Fearing that frequent conventions would unleash “public passions” (p. 316) and destroy unity, Madison taught “veneration” for the laws in a divinely inspired founding moment (see p. 320). His criticism of a “nation of philosophers” (p. 316) is directed at Jefferson’s progressive political science. Rejecting the analogy between natural and political science, Madison stressed the limits of the human mind: prudential compromise, he teaches, is the best that one can expect from politics. That being said, in their focus on these differences, the authors tend to understate the degree to which all of these statesmen not only agreed on the problem of social class but also shared the intention of unifying republican consent with the security of rights—the more they become separated, the more one departs from this comprehensive end.

Regarding the second claim, the authors follow Harvey Mansfield’s division of the book between nature (*Queries* I-XI) and politics (*Queries* XIII-XXIII), with a pivot in the central *Query* XII (pp. 118-19). But pushing farther, they claim that Jefferson uses a “literary structure” (p. 77) and a biblical “rhetorical style” (p. 84) to teach his read-

ers “a Baconian scientific method designed to liberate men’s minds from false authorities of the past” (p. 18). Offering readers a “subtle critique of three distinct forms of authority: religious, scientific, and political” (p. 20), Jefferson subverts the “Biblical account of order” (p. 13) and the “wretched philosophy” of “Old World scientists” (p. 78), who used degeneracy theory to attack the republican principle of equality. Instead, he champions a “cautious philosophy” in the “patient accumulation of facts”—this is an attitude of inquiry, beginning with questions and ending with “wonder,” which invites further inquiry (pp. 151, 140, 142). This “approach to natural science” inspires his “complementary science of politics” (p. 18).

Thus Jefferson uses Enlightenment skepticism for two contradictory projects. The first is to question all authority—a religious and ethical imperative to study the natural world and “use this subsequent knowledge to imitate the Creator Himself” (p. 165), without any “clear movement to absolute certainty” (p. 150). This moral sense, with its own concept of “original sin,” “exist[s] distinct from and in tension with the exercise of reason” (pp. 165, 161). The second is to link “Baconian intellectual liberty with political liberty” (p. 93), establishing “a new conception of authority, specifically ... popular sovereignty” (p. 103). Seeing the “democratizing potential of Enlightenment science” (p. 77), Jefferson subordinated reason to “laws of nature and natural rights” (p. 153). Unaware that, according to his own method, the principles of natural right must also be tentative hypotheses, Jefferson had a religious “faith in the revolutionary process ... ‘endorsed’ by nature” (p. 129), which he believed ought to inform the ever-changing and imperfect world of practical politics. Thus Jefferson’s “central thesis,” as revealed by the “historical process,” is an “emerging preference in the new American republics” for decision-making by “popular consensus rather than by authoritative statements or war” (p. 121).

I find the authors’ second claim suspect and unnecessary—one does not need a recurring analogy to Genesis creation and Exodus liberation to read the *Notes* holistically. Their drumbeat references to Bacon—“something like a Baconian approach,” “in Baconian fashion,” “following the Baconian approach,” “to use a Baconian term,” “in true Baconian fashion”—import a broader intellectual framework, which becomes a distraction, and worse, makes Jefferson an unwitting captain in General Bacon’s philosophic army. These references are often strained: surveying bounds shows the creative act of Enlightenment, republican decision-making, and dispute resolution (65-6); Bacon’s three tables is incorrectly applied to Jefferson’s refutation of the degeneracy hypothesis (145); Jefferson’s separation of climate from mines marks out a Baconian “ironic ‘mine’” of fact-finding (157); Jefferson’s Decalogue has only six, or possibly nine, commandments, only inferring a tenth (193, 197). All experiments become Baconian, and one wonders if this experimentalism does not share more in common with John Dewey than it does Jefferson or Bacon. Moreover, the authors’ tendency both to dance around speculations rather than provide straightforward explication and to labor through numerous secondary sources (often tediously and unhelpfully) make the book longer than necessary and detract from its usefulness as a commentary. One finds an example of reading in circles at the bottom of p. 152, where the same phrases are needlessly repeated at the bottom of p. 152.

I recommend this book for serious students of political theory and the American founding. Its commentary contributes to our assessment of Jefferson as a serious thinker, even as a political founder, and increases our appreciation for both the science of politics and the art of statesmanship.

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