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Claiming Thomas Jefferson:

The Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian Genesis of American Progressivism

Paul Joseph Krause

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“Thomas Jefferson, author of America.” These are the titular words that Christopher Hitchens used to describe America’s third President and author of the Declaration of Independence.¹ Indeed, Thomas Jefferson invokes much emotion, praise, and criticism from devotees, biographers, historians, political theorists, and everyday Americans. As the author of the famous words “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” Thomas Jefferson continues to serve as a model of inspiration for the defense of liberty and the promise to create a more perfect union.

While George Washington is considered to be the “Father of our Country” due to his leadership roles in the American Revolution and presidency, Thomas Jefferson was the “Author of America” and one of the most well-known Founding Fathers. And even though Jefferson’s rural and agrarian republic has since transformed into an industrious, commercial, and urban democracy, Jeffersonian idealism continues to animate American politics. Of the Founding Fathers, Jefferson was one of the few democrats—actual proponents of popular democracy and firm believers that the common people could, and should, rule themselves independent of the directives of intellectuals, bankers, and a monolithic federal government. Jefferson was “a man

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

of truly revolutionary and democratic temperament” compared to his more reserved contemporaries.²

But where does the Jeffersonian legacy stand today? In 1935, Charles Wiltse in *The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy* traced the evolution of Jeffersonian democracy through the progressive politics of the New Deal, arguing that American progressivism had two unique strands, one stemming from Hamilton and the other from Jefferson.³ While Jefferson’s close connection to the politics of American liberalism seems unquestionable, contemporary conservatives and libertarians also extol Thomas Jefferson and claim him as their own.⁴ This revisionism has little merit as Thomas Jefferson was a thorough progressivist and not remotely conservative in any sense.⁵ Jefferson also remains a favorite among American liberals, at least for the foundational principles contained in Jefferson’s philosophy concerning popular democracy and by logical extension, universal rights.⁶ In contrast, conservatives have grown to remake the liberal Jefferson into a conservative defender of limited government and guardian of individual liberty. Everyone in America still seeks to claim Thomas Jefferson as his or her own, in some way, shape, or form.

Thomas Jefferson and the Populist Tradition

² Hitchens, 188.

³ Charles Wiltse, *The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1960 reprint), 261-267, 255. See also, Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

³ See, in particular, Thomas DiBacco, “Thomas Jefferson, Democrats’ Favorite Conservative,” *Washington Times*, April 15, 2013; Clyde Wilson, “Thomas Jefferson, Conservative,” review of *The Sage of Monticello* by Dumas Malone, *The Imaginative Conservative*, April 19, 2012; and David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You’ve Always Believed about Thomas Jefferson* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2012).

⁵ M. Andrew Holowchak, *Thomas Jefferson: Uncovering his Unique Philosophy and Vision* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 59-129.

⁶ Merrill Peterson, “Afterward,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 464.

Jeffersonian liberalism can be described as a form of liberal populism. The promotion of the common worker over the privileged forces of wealth, capital, and establishment is Jefferson's longstanding legacy within American liberalism.⁷ The Democratic Party, which is the loose inheritor of the Jeffersonian democratic tradition, has long since promoted its lineage as "the party of the working-class." Jeffersonian democracy reached new heights with the first formal Democratic president, Andrew Jackson. The populist tradition's democratic impulses were keenly analyzed and realized by Alexis de Tocqueville when he visited the United States. It was in the town, the "democracy of the township," where the vibrancy of democracy could be found; "In the township, as well as everywhere else, the people is the only source of power; but in no stage of government does the body of citizens exercise a more immediate influence."⁸ These decentralized democracies, or "ward republics" according to Jefferson, would be the salvation of the democratic spirit of the United States.⁹ Furthermore, Jefferson's commitment to local democratic government instead of a larger federal government was a means by which to prevent the corrupting rise of big business and big capital and to preserve democratic individualism. Jefferson's close identification with the commoner was the bedrock of his liberalism.

The strong promotion of townships and democratic individualism represented the prevailing spirit of liberalism and proto-progressivism in early American history. Democracy naturally oriented itself towards attitudes of progress and equality, to the extent that the 1908 Republican Party platform charged "that the trend of democracy is towards socialism."¹⁰ In contrast to the apparent evolution of Jeffersonian liberalism towards a sort of Jeffersonian

⁷ For a fuller introduction to Jefferson's tacit anti-capitalism, see Claudio J. Katz, "Thomas Jefferson's Anticapitalism," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 1 (2003): 1-17.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2000 reprint), 68-69.

⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in *Jefferson: Autobiography, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, and Letters*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1399.

¹⁰ Wiltse, 257.

socialism,¹¹ the Republican Party and the defenders of American republicanism counter-claimed that republicanism would safeguard against not only the destruction of wealth but also the abuses of wealth and moreover, provide for an equal right to earn instead of an equal right to take.¹² The democratic spirit naturally tended towards opposition to privilege, wealth, and power, however, and was a direct legacy from Jeffersonian philosophy.

The philosophy of Alexander Hamilton stood in clear opposition to the liberal populism of Thomas Jefferson. Hamilton, as the progenitor of a conservative and nationalist tradition in opposition to Jefferson's liberalism and internationalism, was a staunch Federalist and like many of his fellow members of this "aristocratic party,"¹³ was anti-democratic. Although the wealthy elite and natural aristocrats may have shown enthusiasm for democratic institutions, their support was largely superficial. Their endorsement of democratic institutions and democratic reform was not from a love for the spirit of democracy but rather, a means to protect their status in an emerging egalitarian society. In Tocqueville's words, "[B]eneath this artificial enthusiasm, and these obsequious attentions to the preponderating power, it is easy to perceive that the wealthy members of the community entertain a hearty distaste to the democratic institutions of their country. The populace is at once the object of their scorn and fear."¹⁴ The democratic populace was the object of natural fear and suspicion from the upper classes because of the commoners' material-driven quest for equality that was naturally embedded and fostered within them through the democratic process.

¹¹ See Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

¹² Edward Randolph Hartman, *Socialism Versus Christianity* (New York: Cochrane Publishing, 1909), 257.

¹³ Tocqueville, 206.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

After all, it was Thomas Jefferson, upon witnessing the revolution in France, who declared in a 1789 letter to James Madison that “the earth belongs in usufruct to the living; [and] the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.”¹⁵ Likewise, he shared similar sentiments in his letter to Samuel Kercheval: “This corporeal globe, and everything upon it, belong to its present corporeal inhabits, during their generation. They alone have a right to direct what is the concern of themselves alone.”¹⁶ The democratic spirit of Jefferson was truly radical and risked, in Hamilton’s and his supporters’ eyes, the destruction of the natural talent of the emerging meritocratic class (the “natural aristocracy”) in America. All told, what is considered the conservative tradition in America,¹⁷ Hamiltonianism, was implicitly Hobbesian in its philosophical outlook concerning the nature of humanity and further, was deeply federalist.¹⁸ But in being deeply federalist, the philosophy was also strongly anti-democratic. And the trend of the American nation was away from republicanism and towards democracy, which perpetuated the conflict between Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian philosophy. Indeed, the main storyline of America has long been cast in this struggle between Jeffersonian democracy and Hamiltonian natural aristocracy.¹⁹ It was only after the rise of progressivism and the merger of Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian ideas that the near 150 year narrative of the struggle between Jefferson and Hamilton subsided.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789, in *Jefferson*, 959.

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816.

¹⁷ Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1955) asserts that there is no authentic form of American conservatism akin to the conservatism found in Europe. Rather, America is an inherently liberal country, and conservatism serves to stand as an orphan of sorts in American culture. It was not until the rise of “movement conservatism” in post-war (World War II) America that a modern right-wing conservative political movement was founded. The later thesis is that of George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (Wilmington: ISI, 1996 reprint).

¹⁸ Holowchak, 99.

¹⁹ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 8.

Therefore, the heart of the populist tradition can be seen as the struggle of the under class against the natural aristocracy, or upper classes.²⁰ Part of the philosophy of westward expansion started by Thomas Jefferson as governor of Virginia during the American Revolution, his purchase of the Louisiana Territory as President, and the succeeding waves of westward expansion culminating in the Mexican-American War under President James Polk, was founded in the twin beliefs of the westward progress of civilization and the fear that urban financiers from the corrupt metropolis would destroy the virgin lands of the west.²¹ Westward expansion was another means of advancing the populist and democratic nature of the American republic; the western lands would be fertile territory for the yeoman farmer, whom Jefferson called “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.”²² Thus, westward expansion ensured both the expansion of democratic virtue that was innately tied to the yeoman laborer, as well as the next geographic region for the expansion of democracy.²³ It was the lands gained, primarily in the Louisiana Purchase during Jefferson’s Presidency, that would later be the site for the last great mass democratic movement in American history—the “Agrarian Revolt.”²⁴

Of course, this entire populist tradition stood on several key foundations. First was opposition to the excess of corporate capitalism, of which Jefferson and his liberal co-heirs and successors were always extremely wary and vigilant during their terms as president.²⁵ Second

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Peter Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 33-37.

²² Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX—Manufactures, in *Jefferson*, 290.

²³ Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) articulates one of the more recognizable claims of the western frontier, and the frontier pioneers’ and yeoman farmers’ influence upon the direction and formation of American democracy.

²⁴ For a fuller treatise on the populist uprising, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁵ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “What is Loyalty? A Difficult Question,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1947.

was a commitment to popular, or majoritarian, democracy. Third was a philosophy of communitarian localism that emphasized the democracy of the locality above that of the federal government and that was closely tied to the principles of popular democracy. Fourth was the ever obvious commitment and promotion of individual liberty. The tacit anti-capitalism of Thomas Jefferson is something that most libertarians and political conservatives seem to omit from their extolment of Jefferson, even when Jefferson is rightly identified with liberal populism (although contemporary “libertarian populism” infuses elements of populism with free-market capitalism, thus only being half-Jeffersonian at best).²⁶ It was from among these planks that Jeffersonian populism rested and from which the contemporary Left and Right seek to create platforms that often conflict with their otherwise anti-Jeffersonian political positions. Furthermore, despite Jefferson’s progressive philosophy, his static economic philosophy was a major concern for American liberals by the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, the inability of Jefferson to articulate any sort of philosophy for the rise of an industrial, commercial, and urban America was the problem that prompted the birth of American Progressivism.

Hamilton’s America and the Rise of Progressivism

In contrast to Jefferson’s agrarian and populist democracy stood Alexander Hamilton’s vision of a nationalistic, centralized, and economically industrious United States guided by the rule of the natural aristocracy.²⁷ The nexus of power in Hamilton’s perspective would necessarily have been in urban centers and along the commercially-minded and industrial

²⁶ Jay Cost, “The New Old Thing: Jeffersonian Populism Returns,” *Weekly Standard*, Vol. 18, No. 46, August 19, 2013.

²⁷ Holowchak, 12, 92-93.

Northeast.²⁸ Whereas Jefferson had looked to the yeoman farmer and laborer for inspiration for the new American political project, Hamilton started the conservative tradition's emulation of the British system as the foundational guide for America.²⁹ For Hamilton, it was imperative that the United States become an economic, commercial, and industrial power modeled after the very system that the Americans had rebelled against, in order to achieve their own independence. In addition, Hamilton held a distrustful view of the majority, and his conception of democracy was far from the optimistic and populist vision endorsed by his rival Thomas Jefferson.³⁰ While Jefferson was able to lay some of the foundations for his vision as Washington's Secretary of State,³¹ the Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800 and the subsequent Democratic domination of American politics kept the rise of Hamilton's America at bay until the rise of the modern Republican Party and the resulting American Civil War that nearly ruined the United States between 1861-1865.

Thus, Jefferson's agrarian empire of liberty was eclipsed after the American Civil War and the rapid industrialization of the United States, and this industrialization and urbanization was largely centered in the north rather than the south and west.³² The modern Republican Party, despite the claims of contemporary revisionists as having been "a liberal party" at its foundation, was philosophically conservative, nationalist, protectionist and Hamiltonian in its founding.³³

Identifying the "old" Republican and Democratic Parties based on late twentieth and twenty-first

²⁸ Ibid., 93; Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 19.

²⁹ Jennifer Clark, "Anglophilia," in *Britain and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History*, eds. Will Kaufman and Heidi McPherson, (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, Inc., 2005), 84-87.

³⁰ Holowchak, 95.

³¹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, 42-43.

³² Ellis, 352.

³³ Rich Rubino, "Democratic and Republican Ideologies Undergo Dramatic Role Reversal," *Huffington Post*, June 13, 2013. Rich Rubino's article is one of many contemporary articles that grossly misrepresent the Democratic Party as being conservative and the Republican Party as being liberal upon their foundations, and "swapped" ideological positions, primarily following the Civil Rights Movement.

century social politics does great injustice to the philosophical and metaphysical foundations upon which Hamiltonianism and Jeffersonianism rested.

By the end of the Gilded Age, during the height of rapid industrialization, a new problem faced the United States—the concentration of wealth and power among the corporate and “natural” upper classes. What Jefferson had feared, the rise of an urban, commercial, and capitalist America, finally came to fruition. Jefferson had long believed that the rise of big business and big government would lead to a natural alliance that would subvert the interests of the common American and restructure democracy to favor the elite, rather than the working-class majority. The wealth and power amassed by a few, coupled with the growing material inequality between rich and poor, was what first prompted the Agrarian Revolt and populist uprisings that led to the formation of the Greenback Party, Populist Party, free silver movement, and the nomination of William Jennings Bryan—an heir to the agrarian, Jeffersonian, and popular democratic tradition—as the Democratic Party’s nominee for President three times in four election cycles.³⁴ The populist agrarian uprising has been characterized as “the largest democratic mass movement in American history” and was unmistakably Jeffersonian in its political orientation.³⁵

William Jennings Bryan, aware of the stage upon which he spoke in 1896, explicitly cast his lot with Jefferson than with the forces of big business and capital: “I stand with Jefferson, rather than with them (speaking of the corporate business classes), and tell them, as he did, that the issue of money is a function of government, and that the banks ought to go out of the governing business.”³⁶ However, the failures of the populist revolt, which Wiltse characterized

³⁴ Wiltse, 251-255.

³⁵ Goodwyn, vii.

³⁶ William Jennings Bryan, “Cross of Gold,” (Speech given at Democratic National Convention, Chicago, Illinois, July 9, 1896).

as being “agrarian and proletarian” in the tradition of Jeffersonian liberalism,³⁷ gave way to the rise of progressivism, or modern liberalism. Yet progressivism also subverted the liberal populist tradition. Although progressivism came to inherit some characteristics of the liberal populist tradition, the largely urban middle-class movement exhibited what Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler called the “transvaluation of values.”³⁸ That is, the transition from rural working-class agrarian populism to urban middle-class progressivism would naturally lead to the urban progressive movement exhibiting strong opposition to, and a rejection of, many of the values and principles subscribed to by the rural, agrarian, liberal populists.

The failure of the agrarian revolt was a matter of geography, coupled with an unflinching commitment to Jeffersonian ideology. Contained in the south and west, although having exceedingly high support in these regions, the movement failed to spread nationally. Primarily the concern of farmers, poor laborers, and other underclass and predominately rural and agrarian artisans, their concerns never struck a strong chord with those Americans living in the industrial and urban Midwest, or the commercial and urban Northeast. However, the great legacy of the Agrarian Revolt was in how its participants sought to confront the growing inequality and concentration of wealth and power—through democracy itself.³⁹ Like the underpinning of Jeffersonian democracy, the populist and agrarian liberals, despite suffering from their own self-defeating racism, advocated for greater democratic reform as a means of battling the “walls of privilege” that were falling upon them.⁴⁰

³⁷ Wiltse, 251.

³⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: An Abridged Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 181.

³⁹ Wiltse, 253.

⁴⁰ “Walls of Privilege” is a reference to the phrase used by Woodrow Wilson in his “New Freedom” Platform, which attacked the “Triple Wall of Privilege:” banks, tariffs, and trusts—three of the principle targets for the agrarian liberals in the late nineteenth century. See U.S. History: Pre-Columbian to the New Millennium, “Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom,” UShistory.org, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/43g.asp>.

The democratic impulse of the Agrarian Revolt was again foretold by Alexis de Tocqueville, who commented that democratic nations are naturally bred to see the perfectibility of humanity and strive for absolute equality without the restraints of natural aristocracy, nobility, and state religion (the natural privileged classes).⁴¹ Furthermore, this populist uprising can be seen as the next progression towards equality that Tocqueville saw as being inherent and imbedded in the notions of democracy: “I think that democratic communities have a natural taste for freedom...But for equality, their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible.”⁴² That ardent and insatiable passion for equality prompted the populist revolt to counter the newfound disparity of division, wealth, and power segregation that had emerged after the Gilded Age: “Democratic nations are at times fond of equality, but there are certain epochs at which the passion they entertain for it swells to the height of fury.”⁴³ That fury was exhibited by the mass revolution of farmers and poor laborers at the excesses of government and corporate capital at the end of the nineteenth century. But the failure of the Agrarian Revolt did not go unnoticed, nor was it left without a legacy. After another failed Presidential bid by William Jennings Bryan in 1900, signaling the death knell of the populist movement, the progressives arose and synthesized several major tenets of populism, with modified aspects of Hamiltonian philosophy, to beget progressivism. Progressivism, though a larger venue in which some populist causes were ultimately adopted, was still a largely urban and middle-class movement that prioritized urban problems over those of the rural countryside.

These turn of the century progressives addressed rising inequality through a revision of Hamiltonian governmental and economic philosophy with the combination of Jeffersonian

⁴¹ Tocqueville, 543-545.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 617.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 616.

democratic politics. As Herbert Croly bluntly stated, “We must begin, consequently, with critical accounts of the ideas of both Jefferson and of Hamilton; and we must seek to discover wherein each of these sets of ideas was right, and wherein each was wrong.”⁴⁴ Croly, however, did not hide the fact that he sided with the conservative and nationalist outlook of Hamilton over the misguided “amiable enthusiasm” of Thomas Jefferson: “I shall not disguise the fact that, on the whole, my own preferences are on the side of Hamilton rather than of Jefferson.”⁴⁵ For Croly, the redeeming aspects of Jefferson were found not only in his unwavering faith in the commoner—even if Croly himself saw this as somewhat naïve—but also in the implicit calls for democracy and universal rights contained in Jefferson’s writings. For the progressives, the democratization of America would ultimately bring about its salvation from the concentration of wealth and power. While Croly favored the nationalized economic and governmental policies of Hamilton, he was acutely aware that Hamilton’s greatest fault was his anti-democratic federalism that was “inimical to democracy.”⁴⁶ For Croly and other progressives sympathetic to the realism of Hamilton, overturning this anti-democratic tendency was their primary goal.

As the founder of the *New Republic* magazine, and a leading public intellectual who is extolled by the Center for American Progress,⁴⁷ Croly, in siding with Hamilton over Jefferson, inevitably cast the Hamiltonian shadow over progressivism. Contrary to popular belief, progressivism was not a leftward shift in American politics; it was a centrist shift by urban intellectuals who were sympathetic to Jeffersonian ideas of democracy and equality but who rejected his seemingly infantile views of government, capital, and fantasy ideal of an agrarian

⁴⁴ Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: The MacMillon Company, 1911), 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁴⁷ John Halpin and Conor P. Williams, *The Progressive Intellectual Tradition in America*, (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, April 2010), 1-18.

nation. For these mostly urban intellectuals, the prior Agrarian Revolt failed because it was too liberal, too Jeffersonian, and with the rise of an urban and industrious America—the very America that Jefferson sought to avoid—a pure commitment to Jeffersonian liberalism would never (re)gain acceptance in the new America. Therefore, the redeeming aspects of Jeffersonian liberalism had to be synthesized with the realities of an urban and industrial (Hamiltonian) America. Compared to the Jefferson-Jackson-Bryan fear of corporate interests, Croly and other progressives believed that large corporate interests, if “tamed,” could be utilized for the benefit of the entire nation.⁴⁸

As John Halpin and Conor P. Williams rightly point out, progressivism also amended aspects of Hamiltonianism. Economically, these reforms to Hamiltonian philosophy sought to achieve “[a] counterbalance [to] the excessive power of business and to fight inequality.”⁴⁹ Additionally, in contrast to Jefferson, the progressives also agreed with Hamilton with regards to governmental policy as the primary means to achieve the fight against inequality, which indicates a new common ground found among modern liberals and the progenitors of conservatism in the United States.⁵⁰ But whereas Jefferson was committed to a decentralized democracy, Hamilton supported the notions of a strong and activist federal government that would not only help promote the interests of corporate business in America but also “balance” this promotion of government and business through the establishment of public welfare. In the Hamiltonian program, a strong federal government, acting in unison with strong corporate business interests, could work together not only for their mutual benefit but also for the benefit of the collective whole.⁵¹ However, the growing reliance upon a Hamiltonian order and

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Russell Kirk, “Conservative vs. Liberal—A Debate,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1956.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

centralization of power would seem to erode the democratic individualism and democratic decentralization so important to Jeffersonian liberalism. For Jefferson, this view of collaborative government and business was antithetical to grassroots democracy.

Thus, the acceptance of a revised Hamiltonian philosophy, in economic and governmental policy, when combined with the democratic liberalism of Jeffersonianism, constituted the core of progressive ideology at the turn of the century. However, instead of mass-movements advocating for greater political autonomy and reform, the increasingly powerful federal government was the vehicle for Jeffersonian ends but it had to achieve these through Hamiltonian means. Progressivism, therefore, was an ideology that was Hamiltonian but for Jeffersonian ends; such a philosophy was best articulated by the successors of the progressive movement—Franklin Roosevelt and the New Dealers.⁵² And with the rise of the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt tried to present himself as an heir to Jefferson’s liberal tradition and attach Jefferson to the New Deal.⁵³ The New Dealers, evolved progressives, cast themselves as the defenders of the new “four freedoms” and strongly promoted the political liberalism of Thomas Jefferson—increased democratic reforms on behalf of the majority.

In progressive thought, one can see the union between the political liberalism of Thomas Jefferson and the amended economic and governmental conservatism and nationalism of Alexander Hamilton. But even within the progressive movement, there was a division along the same Jeffersonian-Hamiltonian grounds. The more conservative and nationalist tradition, centered upon Theodore Roosevelt and the Republican Party, was still largely laissez-faire in its approach to economics and largely remains so today. The other wing was a revised liberal progressivism, still tacitly anti-capitalist in the Jeffersonian liberal tradition, which reached its

⁵² Ellis, 8-9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

premature prominence under Woodrow Wilson⁵⁴ who, like Jefferson, also promoted a strong internationalism that would ultimately undo his Presidency and destroy the liberal progressive movement in the 1920 election. The success of the New Dealers lay in their merger of these two progressive schools for the prospective collective betterment of the nation as a whole, or the “social-utilitarian end of the state,” which the New Dealers had strongly identified as having deeper roots in Jeffersonian democracy moreover than in Hamiltonianism.⁵⁵

However, one of the most prominent areas of conflict in progressive thinking was (and is) concerned with trade policy. Liberals had always promoted free trade; free trade was a core ideal in Jefferson’s program, as it naturally benefitted the consumer and hurt large corporate interests. Trade would also prevent the rise of unnecessary industry in the United States. Conservatives always tended to support high tariffs and other barriers to trade, which hurt the underclass consumer but greatly benefitted the capitalist class. From Hamilton to Croly, protectionism carried the day in conservative trade policy because it naturally benefitted large corporate interests, but for liberal progressives like Woodrow Wilson, who saw high tariffs in the same light as Jefferson, as “a means of building up and maintaining [the] vested interests” of the capitalist class,⁵⁶ he promptly reduced the tariff as president (with the passing of the “Underwood-Simmons Tariff”).

Indeed, even today we see a division within the progressivism of the Democratic Party concerning free trade, with the majority of Democrats, who hail from the corporate Hamiltonian regions of the country—the West coast and Northeast—standing in opposition to free trade.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Wiltse, 259.

⁵⁵ Wiltse, 238.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See Jeff Taylor, *Where Did the Party Go? William Jennings Bryan, Hubert Humphrey, and the Jeffersonian Legacy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), who argues that the later Democratic Party (post-William Jennings Bryan) has evolved from the original progressive position, “Hamiltonian for Jeffersonian ends,” into a party that has subconsciously become “Hamiltonian for Hamiltonian ends.” He also asserts that the conservative

The rift among the more Jeffersonian progressive school and the Hamiltonian school still underscores a division within progressive thinking after the dissolution of the New Deal coalition after 1968. Jefferson's promotion of international free trade, , is also a medium under which libertarians continue to extol Thomas Jefferson, although for different reasons than they advocate. Erstwhile "liberals" have reshaped the trade debate to imply "fair trade" and the protection of high tariffs, which have historically helped corporations concentrate wealth and power, as being the new liberal position.

Conclusion

The great question of American Progressivism is whether two seemingly oppositional philosophies, that of Jefferson and that of Hamilton, co-exist? Will one philosophy come to supersede the other? The rise of progressivism saw it necessary to combine, in the words of Herbert Croly, the ideas that were "right" in Jefferson and the ideas that were "right" in Hamilton.⁵⁸ But Croly favored a greater degree of Hamilton than Jefferson. The genesis of American Progressivism is much less "radical" and liberal than many realize. It is a philosophy of the radical center, seeking to counterbalance conservative economic policies that would breed too much material inequality without proper safeguards from an activist government, with liberal political reformism, while also rejecting the anti-democratic and Hobbesian tendencies on which Hamiltonianism was originally founded . Indeed, many who subscribe to the banner of

and libertarian populist traditions that have emerged after World War II have common ground with liberal populists in the more authentic Jeffersonian tradition than with mainstream conservatives, and the same is true for liberal populists having more commonality with conservative populists than with modern progressives.

⁵⁸ Croly, 29.

progressivism have more in common with liberal populism than turn of the century progressivism and by that extension, modern progressivism.

While progressivism took some inspiration from Jefferson, and later progressive leaders like Franklin Roosevelt and the New Dealers claimed Jefferson as their own, progressivism ironically sealed the decline of Jeffersonian liberalism within the Democratic Party. Although the initial nexus of progressive thinking—the union of government and business acting in collusion together for the benefit of the common worker—the philosophy trended Hamiltonian as time progressed, ultimately marking one of the final blows against Jeffersonian liberalism.⁵⁹ While progressivism still speaks the language of Jefferson, the results have been very far from his. As Joseph Ellis says, the Jeffersonian appeal by modern progressives is but an aspect of a growing “illusion” in the American political tradition that has both Left and Right, trying to claim proper inheritance from Jefferson.⁶⁰ Yet the language of Thomas Jefferson still resonates with modern progressivism and is evidence of that the allure of Jefferson, nearly two hundred years after his death, still holds much power in the American public conscience.

About the author

Paul Joseph Krause is a triple major in Economics, History, and Philosophy at Baldwin Wallace University, and expects to graduate in May 2015. He plans to go to graduate school to pursue his master degree in religious studies after graduation.

⁵⁹ Ellis, 352-353.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 349-362