

Differences of Circumstance, Differences of Fact: Jefferson's Medialist View of History

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***Abstract:** It is often assumed that Jefferson—acquainted with the writings of Scottish thinkers such as Adam Ferguson, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Lord Kames, Adam Smith, and John Millar—was a stadialist of some persuasion, as several of his writings are at least consistent with stadialism. If so, was he a cyclicalist, committed to a society having a life-cycle, or a linearist, committed to the possibility of continued convergence toward some ideal of perfection? An important letter to William Ludlow and several writings where Jefferson writes of human progress as imprescriptible suggest linear stadialism. Numerous other writings, point to urbanization as a stage of social decay, and suggest cyclicalism. The correct answer, I argue, is that Jefferson was neither a linearist nor a cyclicalist, but a medialist. He viewed movement toward increased urbanization as symptomatic of social decline, but always believed any society, by rooting itself in an agrestic manner—a normative mean between the excesses of subsistence living and urbanization—could avert decline and even work toward continued advance.*

***Key Words:** Jefferson, progress, cyclical stadialism, lineal stadialism, medial stadialism*

A “philosophic observer” on a trip from the Rocky-Mountain west to the eastern sea-coast, Jefferson writes in a letter to William Ludlow (6 Sept. 1824), would see a temporal survey of “the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day.” Seeing lawless savages in the West,

he would come to see frontiersmen, farmers, and finally seaport citizens.¹

The letter to Ludlow betrays a purchase of stadialism—the notion that societies pass through fairly well-defined stages. Stadialism was popular in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century and can be found in some measure in the writings of coetaneous Scottish thinkers. Cyclical stadialists, on analogy with living organisms, assume that societies have a life cycle—from birth and growth to decline and death. Linear stadialists, in contrast, merely assume the possibility of continual convergence toward an ideal of perfection.

It is often assumed that Jefferson, acquainted with the writings of each Scottish thinker, was a stadialist of some persuasion, as several of his writings are at least consistent with stadialism. If so, was he a cyclicalist or a linearist? The letter to Ludlow and several writings where Jefferson writes of human progress as imprescriptible suggest linear stadialism. Numerous other writings, point to urbanization as a stage of social decay, and suggest cyclicalism. Yet Jefferson, I argue, was neither a linearist nor a cyclicalist, but a medialist. He viewed movement toward increased urbanization as symptomatic of social decline, but always believed any society, by rooting itself in an agrestic manner—a normative mean between the excesses of subsistence living and urbanization—could avert decline and even work toward continued improvement.

Stadialism and Conjectural History

The view Jefferson expresses in his letter to Ludlow is in keeping with the tenor of eighteenth-century Scottish-Enlightenment thinking, characterized by the push for agricultural improvement, the creation of public spaces for scientific societies and clubs, and in general, the belief in the advance of all sciences, even politics, and religion. The unswerving belief in the advance of scientific institutions gave birth to conjectural history—a “back-projection of documented social trends combined with the comparative ethnography of primitive societies.”² Conjectural history enabled historians to draw inferences about the past beyond the safe limits of “reliable historical

1 I would like to thank the journal's two reviewers, Csaba Lévai and Aki Kalliomäki for aidful comments concerning a prior draft of this paper.

2 Colin Kidd, “Subscription, the Scottish Enlightenment and the Moderate Interpretation of History,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 55, No. 3, 2004, 507–8.

evidence” in an effort to “explain” and serve present-day normative needs, which included foremost moral progress. Thus, history was not merely a descriptive discipline, whose aim was veridical narrative, it was also a normative discipline, whose aim was moral improvement. In the main, the normative aim of stadialists trumped the descriptive aim, and so they believed that theoretical economy that served a moral purpose in the writing of history was preferable to trying to be true to the actual anfractuous course of nature. In that regard, veridicality was an ancillary concern.

Conjectural history is characteristically linked with stadialism—the notion, in Jefferson’s day, that a state and its parts passed through stages, mostly, though not always, well defined. Stadialism, with roots in antiquity (e.g., Plato for whom every *polis* had a life-cycle³), was birthed in Scotland and held by Scottish and French thinkers⁴—e.g., Adam Smith,⁵ David Hume,⁶ Adam Ferguson,⁷ John Millar,⁸ Lord Kames,⁹ William Robertson,¹⁰ Claude-Adrien Helvétius,¹¹ and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot¹²—in the

3 Plato’s argument is based in the imperfection of the material world, in which all things are generated and destroyed. Thus, even the best polis with the best constitution must decay (*R.*, 546a). Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992).

4 “That stadialism arose in Scotland was not coincidental,” writes Neil Hargraves, “[as] 18th century Scotland was in many ways a museum of archaic social forms, from the ‘barbarous’ highlanders to the feudal remnants of the lowlands.” Neil Hargraves, “Enterprise, Adventure and Industry: The formation of ‘Commercial Character’ in William Robertson’s *History of America*,” *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 29, 2003, 35.

5 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R.L. Meek, D.D. Rapheale, and P.G. Stein (Oxford University Press, 1990), *LJ(A)* I.26–35 and 19–30 and *LJ(B)* 149–51.

6 David Hume, “Origin of Government,” *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 40, and “The British Government,” *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, 51.

7 Ferguson, unlike his fellow Scots, was disinclined to view human progress as removal from the state of nature. “If we admit that man is susceptible of improvement, and has in himself a principle of progression, and a desire of perfection, it appears improper to say, that he has quitted the state of his nature, when he has begun to proceed; or that he finds a station for which he was not intended, while, like other animals, he only follows the disposition, and employs the powers that nature has given.” Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, fifth ed. (London, 1782), 13.

8 John Millar, *The Origins of the Distinction of Ranks: Or, An Inquiry into the Circumstances which Give Riser to Influence and Authority, in the Different Members of Society*, Fourth Edition (Edinburgh, 1806), 5–6.

9 Henry Home [Lord Kames], *Sketches of the History of Man*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, [1774] 1813), 159–65 and 176, and *The Gentleman Farmer, being an Attempt to Improve Agriculture by Subjecting It to the Test of Rational Principles*, 4th edition (Edinburgh: 1798), xix–xx.

10 William Robertson, *The History of the Discovery and Settlement of America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 131.

11 Claude Adrien Helvétius, *Treatise on Man: His Intellectual Faculties and his Education*, transl. W. Hooper, M. D., (London: Albion Press, 1810).

12 Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*, in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, ed. R.L. Meek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1750] 1973).

modes sketched below, and by others, in more deviant forms.¹³ Writes Guy Reynolds:

The Stadialist saw the progress of civilizations as a steady upward movement through a series of distinct stages—from early pastoralism through a society of trade toward the modern industrial order. ... Intellectuals and writers built on late eighteenth-century philosophies of history to create detailed models of progress that informed the broader culture. From James Fenimore Cooper's historical fictions to Thomas Cole's series of paintings, *The Course of Empire*, nineteenth-century Americans envisaged distinctive representations of the relations between "civilization" and "savagism," and they embedded their images or narrative within a theory of progress.¹⁴

There is no one-size-fits-all definition of "stadial history" that applies to all stadialists, and that is probably because stadialism was, *faute de mieux*, more of a methodological heuristic used by conjectural historians to link human barbarism to the modern man of the eighteenth century than a method, aiming to replace traditional narrative approaches to history.¹⁵ It might have been more complementary to than frictional with traditional narrative approaches to history.

The number of stages for stadialists was generally a matter of unobjectionable disagreement, although many—e.g., Smith and Ferguson—agreed on four stages (hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce).¹⁶ Etiological expediency, not etiological correctness, was often the chief desideratum.¹⁷ As Dugald Stewart wrote in a preface to Adam Smith's *The Theory of*

13 Karen O'Brien, "Between Enlightenment and Stadial History: William Robertson on the History of Europe", *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1993, 53–54.

14 Guy Reynolds, *Apostles of Modernity: American Writers in the Age of Development* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 16.

15 H.M. Höpfl, "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 20.

16 For more on the four stages in eighteenth-century thinking, see Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Pocock maintains that Scottish philosophy, and the "four-stages schema," was not in keeping with civic humanism of the day, but a reply to it. With the transition from one stage to the next, there was increasing complexity, plenty, division of labor—thereby "bringing about ... an increasingly complex organization of both society and personality." The result was refinement of passions, moral improvement, and economic advance. J.G.A. Pocock, "Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations between the Civic Humanist and Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Social Thought," *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* ed. Istvan Holt and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 242.

17 Without facts to guide historians through the stages, "we are under the necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture," writes Stewart. Dugald Stewart, "An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith," *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York, 1966), xli–xlii.

Moral Sentiments, “In most cases, it is of more importance to ascertain the progress that is most simple, than the progress that is most agreeable to fact, for paradoxical as the proposition may appear, it is certainly true that the *real* progress is not always the *most natural*.”¹⁸ To illustrate, Lord Kames, in *Historical Law Tracts* (1761), gives a three-stage theory of historical unfolding to sketch the progress of law over time. In *Sketches on the History of Man* (1774), Kames posits four stages of historical development, and limns six distinct stages of religious advance, from crude polytheism to Christian monotheism. What all had in common, Drew McCoy correctly notes in his brilliant work *The Elusive Republic*, is succession through “several phases of organization from ‘rude’ simplicity to ‘civilized’ complexity.”¹⁹ Overall, the chief factor guiding maturation through stages was for most growth of population, which was determined by factors such as climate and quality of land and which dictated needs of food and of employment.²⁰

Not all gushed over the perceived benefits of civilized complexity. Rousseau warned: “Savage man breathes only tranquillity [*sic*] and liberty; he wants simply to live and rest easy; and not even the unperturbed tranquillity of the Stoic approaches his profound indifference for any other objects. On the other hand, the citizen is always active and in a sweat, always agitated, and unceasingly tormenting himself in order to seek still more laborious occupations. He works until he dies; he even runs to his death in order to be in a position to live, or renounces life in order to acquire immortality.”²¹ Benjamin Franklin echoed the sentiments. “Manufactures are founded in poverty,” since manufacturers carry on their work only by “the multitude of poor without land in a country.”²²

Hence, stadialists bifurcated. On the one hand, there were cyclicalists (e.g., Hume), who posited that social systems had a life-cycle, from nascency, growth, and maturity to senescence, decline, and eventual death. Decline and death were due to social flaccidity from artificial and superfluous luxuries—the “benefits” of commercial society. On the other hand, there were linearists

18 Dugald Stewart, “An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith,” xlii.

19 Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 19.

20 See e.g., Benjamin Franklin, “Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c” (Boston: 1755).

21 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 80.

22 Benjamin Franklin, “The Interest of Great Britain Considered,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 9, ed. L.W. Labaree (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959–), 73–74.

(e.g., Smith and Kames), who posited that social systems passed through stages—the last of which marked a stage of excellence, toward which social systems at least converged. Yet even linearists had Rousseauian moments, in which they were concerned, in Smith’s words, about stagnation or retrogradation through “drowsy stupidity,”²³ or, in Kames’s words, degeneration “into oysters,” through inaction.²⁴ Thus, with all concerned with societal decay, it is plain that a neat division into camps is perhaps pointless.

The March of Civilization: Jefferson’s Stadialism

Like Smith and Ferguson, Jefferson too refers to four stages in his letter to Ludlow. The letter is a reply to an earlier letter from Ludlow on an ideal society, founded by Welshman Robert Owen, located in New Harmony, Indiana, and called “New-Harmony Community of Equality of Rights and Duties, and Common Property.” Ludlow’s letter included some suggestions on stadial history, since Owen’s society was predicated on the notion that “the people [wishing to enter into the community] were at such a stage of progression as to be then fit to enter into a perfect community.”²⁵ Let us return to Jefferson’s philosophic observer on his trip from the Rocky Mountains to the seaport towns (numbers mine):

These he would observe (1) in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subscribing and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next (2) find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then (3) succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man (4) until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day.

Jefferson adds that he has observed the “march of civilization advancing from the sea coast.” He then lauds Owen for his experiment, but expresses some skepticism that positive results might be short-lived when there is increase in the population of the community. Jefferson ends his letter: “The experiment [of social reform] is interesting. I shall not live to see its issue,

23 Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), 735.

24 Lord Kames, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, vol. 1, 152–53.

25 Paul Brown, *Twelve Month in New Harmony; Presenting a Faithful Account of the Principal Occurrences which Have Taken Place There within that Period; Interspersed with Remarks*, http://libertarian-labyrinth.org/archive/Twelve_Months_in_New_Harmony, accessed 12 Nov. 2013, 13.

but I wish it success equal to your hopes, and to yourself and society prosperity and happiness.”

Jefferson’s final sentences proved foreboding. Owen’s society, in which all things were to be held common to all members, lasted merely two years (1825–1827). The causes of dissolution, according to one member of New Harmony, was that the society was viewed by members from the start as a sort of lottery in which the chief concern was loss instead of gain. Members focused on what they would get in return for the goods they had to give up.²⁶ Owen’s account of its dissolution was that the community quickly became a social *méli-mélo*—i.e., “a heterogeneous collection of radicals, enthusiastic devotees to principle, honest latitudinarians and lazy theorists, with a sprinkling of unprincipled sharpers thrown in.”²⁷

Jefferson, however, was mostly unconcerned with a community with “simple regulations,” because, I suspect, he always believed that experiments with small communities were doomed to fail. Small communities were always susceptible to local passions, and thus instable and short-lived.²⁸ Jefferson’s vision was broader. He was concerned with a united nation, comprising states, comprising counties, comprising wards—each held together only by needed laws that would secure citizens’ rights, promote self-sufficiency, and entice citizens to preserve the union and the common good. Beyond that, he envisioned a global community of nations, behaving amicably with each other, in free exchange of surplus goods, and committed to republican principles of governing.

The letter to Ludlow plainly shows an embrace of stadialism. Like Smith, Jefferson is concerned etiologically with economics—*viz.*, efficient use of land as a barometer of economic improvement. Yet Jefferson’s axial aim, as I have shown abundantly elsewhere,²⁹ is efficiency for the sake of moral

26 Paul Brown, *Twelve Months in New Harmony*, 51–2.

27 Joseph Clayton, *Robert Owen: Pioneer of Social Reforms* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1908), 43.

28 See M. Andrew Holowchak, “Individual Liberty and Political Unity in an Expanding Nation: The Axiological Primacy of Wards in Jefferson’s Republican Schema,” *Thomas Jefferson and Philosophy: Essays on the Philosophical Cast of Jefferson’s Writings* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), and “A Global Community of Republics: Jefferson’s ‘Empire for Liberty,’” *Pathological Moralists, Moral Pathologist: Thomas Jefferson as Political Philosopher & Moral Visionist* (forthcoming).

29 E.g., M. Andrew Holowchak, *Dutiful Correspondent: Philosophical Essays on Thomas Jefferson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), ix–x; “The March of Morality: Making Sense of Jefferson’s Moral Sense,” *Thomas Jefferson and Philosophy: Essays on the Philosophical Cast of Jefferson’s Writings* ed., M. Andrew Holowchak (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); *Thomas Jefferson: Uncovering His Unique Philosophy and Vision* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), chaps. 5–7.

development, whereas for Smith moral improvement is one of the numerous benefits of economic proficiency. Efficient use of land for Jefferson is indicative of efficient living—i.e., human happiness or human thriving.

Like Smith, Jefferson limns four stages. Native Americans are illustrations of stage 1. They live off land, but do not use, sustain, or improve it. Untied to the land, they freely roam over vast parcels of land to find food and other goods to sustain themselves, and thus need no laws beyond the laws of nature. Frontiersmen are illustrations of stage 2. They settle on a parcel of land and use it, because they need to feed themselves and they need both to feed and to work or consume the animals they have domesticated. Using the land, they require less of it than do Native Americans. Agrarianists are illustrations of stage 3. They make most efficient use of the land by clearing out useless plants and growing climate- and soil-friendly plants for human consumption or use. Enriching the soil and using tested strategies like crop-rotation and manuring, they require less land than do frontiersmen. Tied to their land and not the caprices of commerce, they are the most independent and dependable citizens. Urbanites of the seaport towns, presumably of the eastern United States at the time, are illustrations of stage 4—the “most improved state.” Jefferson, however, says nothing about why that is so. The letter suggests purchase of linear stadialism.

What is puzzling in the letter to Ludlow is Jefferson’s almost blithe reference to the fourth stage as an advance from stage 3—the stage of agrarianism. Yet that is inconsistent with numerous other writings of his that treat of urbanism as decay, and thus, suggest cyclical stadialism.

Jefferson’s writings almost always betray anticity sentiments.³⁰ His arguments are numerous. I give readers only a sample of his disrelish of urbanism through four arguments.

First, urbanism puts urbanites at the beck and call of nature. In Query XII of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson writes of the counties and towns of Virginia. After a brief account of the principal towns of Virginia, Jefferson ends with a statement of the vagaries of urban living. “Accidental circumstances, however, may controul the indications of nature, and in no instance do they do it more frequently than in the rise and fall of towns.”³¹ In Query XIX, Jefferson expatiates on the accidental circumstances. The

30 E.g., TJ to Edward Carrington, 16 Jan. 1787, and TJ to James Madison, 30 Jan. 1787.

31 Thomas Jefferson, Query XII, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 109.

manufacture of cities depends on “the casualties and caprice of customers,” who are quicksilver consumers. “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.”³²

Second, the manufacture of cities is sterile in comparison with the abundant yield of the country. To Benjamin Austin (9 Jan. 1816), Jefferson writes that “to the labor of the husbandman a vast addition is made by the spontaneous energies of the earth on which it is employed: for one grain of wheat committed to the earth, she renders twenty, thirty, and even fifty fold, whereas to the labor of the manufacturer nothing is added.”

Third, urbanism is economically unstable. To David Williams (14 Nov. 1803), Jefferson says that cities encourage an unbalanced distribution of citizens in unneeded occupations. He states: “The greatest evils of populous society have ever appeared to me to spring from the vicious distribution of its members among the occupations called for. . . . By a blind concourse, particular occupations are ruinously overcharged, and others left in want of hands.” Jefferson has particularly in mind the “revival of letters” at the expense of the “hardy sons of the plough.” He sums, “The general desire of men to live by their heads rather than their hands, and the strong allurements of great cities to those who have any turn for dissipation, threaten to make them here, as in Europe, the sinks of voluntary misery.” In Query XIX of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson writes, “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.”³³ Why scorn for the revival of letters at expense of the plow? Too few men have reason sufficiently cultivated to live by the head. Furthermore, the science of agriculture, for Jefferson—following More, Harrington, and Mercier, among numerous others—is the most substratal science, and any society that is not founded on agriculture is economically, politically, and morally unbalanced.³⁴

Finally and most poignantly, urbanism produces citizens less moral, healthy, and free. It crowds citizens into too little land without replenishing the land. To Dr. Benjamin Rush (23 Sept. 1800), Jefferson states unsympa-

32 Thomas Jefferson, Query XIX, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 164–65.

33 Thomas Jefferson, Query XIX, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 165.

34 See, e.g., M. Andrew Holowchak, “Jefferson’s Moral Agrarianism: Poetic Fiction or Moral Vision?” *Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. 28, 2011, 497–507; and M. Andrew Holowchak, “Jefferson’s Moral Agrarianism,” *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, ed. Paul B. Thompson and David M. Kaplan, 2012, 1–6.

thetically concerning the scourge of yellow fever in several Northern cities: “I am in the habit of looking out for what good may arise from them as consolations to us, and Providence has in fact so established the order of things, as that most evils are the means of producing some good. The yellow fever will discourage the growth of great cities in our nation, & I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man.”³⁵ Years later, Jefferson writes in a letter to Caspar Wistar (21 June 1807), “I am not a friend to placing growing men in populous cities, because they acquire there habits & partialities which do not contribute to the happiness of their after life.”³⁶ In contrast, farmers are “the chosen people of God.” He adds, “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phænomenon of which no age nor notion has furnished an example.”³⁷

Elsewhere in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson with unusual pessimism speaks of American deterioration after the revolutionary war. The people will become careless; their rulers will become corrupt. With carelessness and corruption, the people’s rights will be forgotten. “They will forget themselves, but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights. The shackles ... which shall not be knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will remain on us long, will be made heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion.”³⁸

In a letter to Samuel Kercheval (12 July 1816), Jefferson writes of public extravagance as the catalyst of social decay. “Private fortunes are destroyed by public as well as by private extravagance. And this is the tendency of all human governments.”

Thus, Jefferson, it seems, bought into the notion of social life-cycles and the inevitability of social decay. Urban living, as exemplified in the growing sea-port towns of America, was evidence of social maturation and the onset of decay. The overpopulated nations of Europe are stellar illustrations of moribund societies. In France, the rich leave lands idle so there is space for hunting, while the majority of citizens, without land, are wastefully employed as servants of the wealthy or unemployed.³⁹ In England, many of the

35 See also TJ to John Page, 16 Aug. 1804.

36 See also TJ to John Jay, 23 Aug. 1785; TJ to James Madison, 20 Dec. 1787; TJ to Jean Nicholas Démeunier, 29 Apr. 1795; and TJ to Jean Baptiste Say, 1 Feb. 1804.

37 Thomas Jefferson, Query XIX, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 164–65.

38 Thomas Jefferson, Query XVII, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 161.

39 TJ to James Madison, 28 Oct. 1785.

citizens are laborers, overworked in squalid, cramped conditions, who turn to vice—like boxing, horse racing, and drinking—for pastime.⁴⁰

Overall, overpopulation, misuse or disuse of land, waste, and vice incline people to war. Jefferson writes to John Adams (1 June 1822) of war between Russia and Turkey, between “the kite and snake.” He writes: “Whichever destroys the other, leaves a destroyer the less for the world. This pugnacious humor of mankind seems to be the law of his nature, one of the obstacles to too great multiplication provided in the mechanism of the Universe.” The tone is one of inevitability.⁴¹

The Feeder versus the Fighter: The Lessons of History

Jefferson, we have seen, believed that urbanism was needlessly complex and, consequently, unstable. Therefore, there seems to be little reason to take seriously his remarks in his letter to Ludlow apropos of the urban stage as a stage of utmost perfection. The various writings to which I have referred above indicate a purchase of urbanization as deterioration. As Hume wrote in his *Essays*, the arts and sciences require fresh soil for continued perfection, but every culture in time exhausts its soil, and that sets the stage for inevitable decline. “When the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, from that moment they naturally, or rather necessarily decline, and seldom or never revive in that nation, where they formerly flourished.”⁴² For Jefferson, it is a matter of the shift from agrestic to urban living due to the overcrowding of land in time. It follows that Jefferson was a cyclical, not a linear, stadialist.

That conclusion is, however, harefooted. In a letter to Jean Baptiste Say (1 Feb. 1804), Jefferson expatiates on the problems suggested by Malthus’s recent work on population. Jefferson expresses caution apropos of Malthus’s conclusions if only because there are “differences of circumstance” between America and the old nations of Europe which generate “differ-

40 TJ to John Banister, 15 Oct. 1785.

41 Lynd, drawing on Jefferson’s appropriation of the Saxon myth, states that Jefferson left behind a pessimistic legacy. “The [Saxon] Golden Age ... was in the past. Revolutionary America approximated those conditions, but only for the moment. The growth of commerce would corrupt manners in America as it had in Rome, and once manners were corrupted, the best of statesmen could not save the republic. In buying Louisiana one bought only time.” Staughton Lynd, “Beard, Jefferson, and the Tree of Liberty,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1968, 19–20.

42 David Hume, “The Rise of Arts and Sciences,” *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, vol. 1, 115–35.

ences of fact” which reason must accommodate, and so there is reasonable expectation of a “difference of result.” Jefferson cites quantity of food and birth rates—both fixed or increasing slowly in “only arithmetical ratio” in Europe, while the immensity of uncultivated land in America allows for an explosion of population and unlimited production of food. He sums: “Here the immense extent of uncultivated and fertile lands enables every one who will labor to marry young, and to raise a family of any size. Our food, then, may increase geometrically with our laborers, and our births, however multiplied, become effective.”

Jefferson ends the letter with some speculation concerning the extent to which America should be an agrarian nation. Should America be wholly agrarian and allow Europe to do its manufacturing while it feeds Europe, or should America partner manufacture with agriculture and ignore Europe. One thing seems clear. Social declination does not seem to be inevitable. Americans have a choice.

With the aegis of morality, Jefferson envisions here, as he does elsewhere,⁴³ an America that is predominantly, if not wholly, agrarian. Consider Jefferson’s kite-and-snake letter to Adams: “I hope we shall prove how much happier for man the Quaker policy is, and that the life of the feeder is better than that of the fighter; and it is some consolation that the desolation by these maniacs of one part of the earth is the means of improving it in other parts. Let the latter be our office, and let us milk the cow, while the Russian holds her by the horns, and the Turk by the tail.”

Nevertheless, though Jefferson always subordinates the possible to the practical, his unfailing optimism⁴⁴ disallows a clean distinction between the two. Because of unswerving belief in human progress—to Richard Price (8 Jan. 1789), Jefferson states that once a people push for their rights, “they can never retrograde, but from the natural progress of things must press forward to the establishment of a constitution which shall assure to them

43 E.g., Thomas Jefferson, Queries XIX and XXII, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 164–5 and 175.

44 For an alternative reading, see Maurizio Valsania, *The Limits of Optimism: Thomas Jefferson’s Dualistic Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011). Valsania draws much from a letter of Jefferson to Jedidiah Morse (6 Mar. 1822) in which Jefferson writes of civilizing Native Americans and warns against the possibility of corruption in doing so. The thesis, expressed succinctly in a prior publication “To make visible inconveniences (chaos, wildness, vices, etc.) in order to enhance and further moral and rational behaviors is the gist of Jefferson’s republican experience,” is overstated. Jeffersonian republicanism is as much, if not more, about the benefits of enlightened governing than about the ills of unenlightened living. Maurizio Valsania, “‘Our Original Barbarism’: Man vs. Nature in Thomas Jefferson’s Moral Experience,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2004, 643.

[the French] a good degree of liberty”—he often treated as equivalent the possible and the practicable. Thus, in spite of his thoughts on social maturity and decay and on the Malthusian problem apropos of his day, Jefferson was amenable to the possibility of both the obsolescence of war and of the non-inevitability of societal decline at some future time.⁴⁵ The vision expressed in his letter to Say, for instance, is just such a society—agrarian in nature, relatively self-sufficient, and founded on concern for the autonomy and rights of all citizens.

Moreover, his 1816 letter to Kercheval in which Jefferson writes of social extravagance as the catalyst of social decline describes a tendency, not an inevitability. When social decline occurs and citizens are reduced to suffering automatons, the *bellum omnium in omnis* begins, but that is not the natural state, but merely the “abusive state of man,” brought on by public debt and taxation.

Jefferson was likely no cyclical stadialist, in spite of suggestion of the inevitability of political decay in several writings. Not modeling social systems on living systems, he believed neither that human socialization had a life cycle nor in the inevitability of decay. History was to be read not because it taught social decline was inevitable. History was to be read chiefly because it was “a moral exercise”—it taught moral lessons.⁴⁶ “History, by apprising [people] of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.”⁴⁷ Walter LaFeber agrees: “No guarantee existed that the American experiment would escape the cyclical fate that had destroyed earlier republics. But Jefferson believed that the present and future circumstances of the United States could, at least for a considerable time (and if the nation’s foreign policies worked correctly), be brought into play to check that past while delaying, if not altogether preempting, the cyclical fate.”⁴⁸ Eran Shalev states that for Jefferson “the drama of the progress

45 Stuart disagrees. He writes, “Jefferson viewed war through the spectacles provided by the thinking of the eighteenth century, which made him at once optimistic about the control of war but distinctly pessimistic about ever seeing its elimination from human affairs.” Reginald C. Stuart, *The Half-way Pacifist*, 65 and 27.

46 TJ to Robert Skipwith, 3 Aug. 1771.

47 Thomas Jefferson, Query XVII, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 148.

48 Walter LaFeber, “Jefferson and an American Foreign Policy,” *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 376.

of civilization was still unfolding,” and no one could say where it would stop. Shalev continues: “His view of betterment was almost millennialist in its optimism.... History consisted not only of incremental, accumulative, change: it consisted of *progressive* change also. Decline was not only avoidable, it was not to be expected.”⁴⁹ The problems for Jefferson were the behavioral extremes of saturnalia and idleness that were the result of cramped, unhealthy living conditions for the poor and of the unequal distribution of goods in cities. Shalev’s Jefferson is a linearist.

Conjecturing about the Future

Nonetheless, Jefferson was not a linearist in the manner suggested by Shalev. I aim to show instead, Jefferson was a medialist in two significant senses: one, nomological; the other, naturalistic. Nomologically, he believed that if large societies were to exist, they needed to be regulated by only such number of laws that were needed to secure republican justice. Thus, they needed to steer clear of the extremes of privation of law and of nimity of law. Naturalistically, he believed a society could flourish only if it was predominantly agrarian. Thus, two extremes were to be eschewed—that of insufficient use of land, characteristic of hunting-and-gathering societies whose habits of subsistence disallowed any substantial amount of population and social structure, and that of overuse of land, characteristic of urban manufacturing societies whose abuse of land and overpopulation and required overly complex social structure.

Jefferson’s nomological medialism is expressed in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and in letters to Carrington and Madison. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson writes of the dearth of laws or of “any shadow of government” among Native Americans. “Their only controuls are their manners, and that moral sense of right and wrong.” He contrasts Indian societies with “no law” to civilized Europeans with “too much law.” Which of the two is the “greatest evil”? Appealing to experience and consonant with the utopian sentiments of Thomas More and James Harrington,⁵⁰ he states baldly that

49 Eran Shalev, “Thomas Jefferson’s Classical Silence, 1774–1776: Historical Consciousness and Roman History in the Revolutionary South,” *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*, eds. Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas P. Cole (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 241.

50 Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Gilbert Burnet (London, 1684), 148, and James Harrington, *The Oceana and Other Works of James Harrington Esq; Collected, Methodiz’d, and Review’d with an Exact Account of his Life*, ed. John Toland (London, 1747), 37.

too much law is the greatest evil. “The sheep are happier of themselves, than under care of the wolves.”⁵¹

Jefferson iterates the sentiment in letters to Carrington and Madison. To Edward Carrington (16 Jan. 1787), he states that the lawless Indians “enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under the European governments.” Europeans “have divided their nations into two classes, wolves and sheep.” Wolves are public officials that have become “inattentive to the public affairs.” To James Madison two weeks later (30 Jan. 1787), Jefferson limns three “sufficiently distinguishable” forms of society. There are (1) societies “without government,” exemplified by the Indians; (2) societies “under governments wherein the will of every one has a just influence,” exemplified best by the United States; and (3) societies “under governments of force,” exemplified by most monarchies and most other republics—governments of “wolves over sheep.” Here he states that a society without laws might be the best, but it is “inconsistent with any great degree of population.” In the second society, “the mass of mankind under that [form of government] enjoys a precious degree of liberty & happiness,” but it tends toward turbulence. Nonetheless, turbulent liberty is much preferable to quiet servitude. Moreover, it prevents complacency and keeps honest elected officials.

Second, there is naturalistic medialism, concerning proper use of land. In spite of the letter to Ludlow, Jefferson’s condemnation of urban living is undeniable. Like Ferguson and Millar, Jefferson acknowledges an impulse to strive in man. For Jefferson, however, it is critical not to overreach. Wishing for more than what is needed for sufficiency is responsible for the unhealthiness, immorality, and confinement of urbanism. For Jefferson, cities are a stark illustration of human enormity due to overreaching. Thus, agrestic living is a mean between underuse of land for subsistence living and its exploitation for commercial gain.

Agriculture had a prominent place in the utopian literature of Jefferson’s library.⁵² In Thomas More’s *Utopia*, the state has 54 cities, and numerous farms, each with at least 40 persons, abound in the country.⁵³ Farming is the

51 Thomas Jefferson, Query XI, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 93.

52 For more on the influence of utopian thinking on Jefferson’s political and moral philosophizing, see M. Andrew Holowchak, “Have One Divide and the Other Choose: Jefferson and Utopian Literature,” *Pathological Moralists, Moral Pathologist: Thomas Jefferson as Political Philosopher & Moral Visionist* (forthcoming).

53 Thomas More, *Utopia*, 71–2.

chief occupation and common to every person, hence each year, 20 persons from each city go to each farm and 20 farmers remove to a city. So seriously do they take proper use of land that if a nation lets a parcel of land sit idly and they disallow others use of the land, then it is a just cause for war, “since every man has by the Law of Nature a right to such a waste Portion of the Earth, as is necessary for his subsistence.”⁵⁴

Louis-Sébastien Mercier offers a futuristic view of Paris, France in his *L’an 2440*. The guide of the visitor to the future speaks of the centrality of agriculture to Paris’s wellbeing. “We cultivate an interior commerce only, of which we find the good effects; founded principally on agriculture, it distributes the most necessary aliments; it satisfies the wants of man, but not his pride.” Foreign traffic, “the real father of that destructive luxury” and the cause of monopolies, is mostly eschewed, except when it proves “highly useful.”⁵⁵ Thus, visits to foreign countries are usually not for the sake of commerce, but mostly for the exchange of “useful discoveries” concerning law, health, science, and custom.⁵⁶

Condorcet, in his *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, limns 10 epochs of human mental progress whose end is ilimitable. The second epoch is the transitional state from hunting and gathering to agriculture and domestication of animals.⁵⁷ The third epoch begins a division of labor, for men owning land hire or force others to work it. Tyrannies formed and tyrannies shaped despots. Nonetheless, Condorcet adds, “the strong virtues of agricultural nations” advanced in the oppressive scenario through a grasp of man’s moral link to nature. The final epoch is living Stoically—i.e., in complete accordance with nature.⁵⁸

Nomological and naturalistic medialism show that movement to the stage of widespread urbanism for Jefferson was not infeasible. The people were able to observe the benefits of mostly agrestic living through use of their moral sense and steer clear of excessive manufacture and undue laws characteristic of large-scale urbanism as well as both deficiencies of unlegislated living, characteristic of Native-American cultures and the underle-

54 Thomas More, *Utopia*, 90.

55 Louis-Sebastien Mercier, *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1795), 311–12.

56 Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, 315.

57 Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind: Being a Posthumous Work of the Late M. de Condorcet* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), 21–39.

58 Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 40–68.

gistated living of frontiersmen. Urbanism was stoppable, or at least capable of being tethered. As Merrill Peterson states: “It was not so much the farmer or farming that Jefferson ... idealized, but a state of life midway between the primitive and the civilized, possessing the virtues of both and the vices of neither. This dreamy state captured his feelings and his hopes for the culture of man in America.”⁵⁹

Following Condorcet and in keeping with Shalev’s depiction of Jefferson, Jefferson did believe that no one could know precisely what the future held in store for humans’ advance. Yet it was not the linear, incrementalist model of progress of Shalev whose end could nowise be imagined. Cultural progress for Jefferson had an underlying morality, and thus, was constrained by morality. As Condorcet writes:

Will not men be continually verging towards that state, in which all will possess the requisite knowledge for conducting themselves in the common affairs of life by their own reason, and of maintaining that reason uncontaminated by prejudices; in which they will understand their rights, and exercise them according to their opinion and their conscience; in which all will be able, by the development of their faculties, to procure the certain means of providing for their wants; lastly, in which folly and wretchedness will be accidents, happening only now and then, and not the habitual lot of a considerable portion of society?⁶⁰

Social progress was unpredictable, but in some sense quite imaginable. It was an arcadia—a self-sufficient society of citizens that were chiefly agrarian, fulfilling basic orectic needs, free in their actions, with opportunities for personal growth, politically active and responsible, sensitive to their and others’ rights, and inclined toward peaceable relations with all humans.

Thus, Jefferson’s model is medialist in an Aristotelian sense and in the manner suggested by the utopian literature he read and assimilated into his political thinking.⁶¹ Societies could both under-reach (e.g., the American Indians) and overreach (the British and the French). Nomologically, Jefferson acknowledges both that societies of any size cannot exist without laws and that societies with too many laws are corruptive. Therefore, societies with no laws and with superabundance of laws are extremes and characteristic of vicious governing—complete indifference to law or complete

59 Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1970), 257.

60 Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 318–9.

61 See M. Andrew Holowchak, *A Utopian Dream: Thomas Jefferson’s Philosophy of Education* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

despotism. The best sorts of societies are governed by a moderate number of laws, characteristic of virtuous governing and in conformance to needs of the citizenry. Naturalistically, Jefferson acknowledges it is best to work the land and improve it through agriculture than to put it to little or no use or to overuse and exploit it. Working and bettering the land, moreover, develops the sort of foursquare citizens that are needed for stable and moral government.

Moreover, following Aristotle, Jefferson recognizes that the best sort of “mean” need not to be a perfect middle, as three is the perfect middle on a line bordered by one and five. Nomologically, he recognizes that the precise number of laws for each society is imprescriptible—determinable in part by catholic concerns, which are roughly invariant from culture to culture (i.e., regard for rights), as well as parochial concerns, which vary from culture to culture due to variations in climate, place, and local interests. Overall, in deciding on the number of laws for any society, it is always for Jefferson best to err on the side of having too few, rather than too many. Naturalistically, what it means to work efficiently the land and improve it will vary from culture to culture, as agricultural considerations are determined by quality of soil and climate, *inter alia*. Yet he was sure that Americans, through an education designed to conform to the needs of a moderate citizenry, would be a perfectly naturalized and Stoicized people—*viz.*, “whose manners, morals and habits are perfectly homogeneous with those of the country.”⁶² Like Aristotle, for whom some *poleis* can survive for an indefinitely long period of time so long as there is always an eye toward eschewing the things that destroy constitutions,⁶³ Jefferson thought a nation need not decay so long as its constitution was in effect a nomological and naturalistic mean.

Upshot

Though he likely thought peace impossible in his day, Jefferson continued to press for social betterment and concord. Skeptical of Owen’s New Harmony in later life, he did years earlier, become a member of Noah Worcester’s pacifist society. He writes to Worcester (29 Jan. 1816): “Although I dare not promise myself that it can be perpetually maintained, yet if, by the inculcations of reason or religion, the perversities of our nature can be so

62 TJ to John Banister, 15 Oct. 1785.

63 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), V.8.

far corrected as sometimes to prevent the necessity, either supposed or real, of an appeal to the blinder scourges of war, murder, and devastation, the benevolent endeavors of the friends of peace will not be entirely without remuneration.” In an effort to promote the sort of naturalized citizenry, he founded the University of Virginia. He writes to Augustus Woodward (3 Apr. 1825): “Withdrawn by age from all other public services and attentions to public things, I am closing the last scenes of life by fashioning and fostering an establishment for the instruction of those who are to come after us. I hope its influence on their virtue, freedom, fame and happiness, will be salutary and permanent.”

Following the steady, slow, but sure advances of science, Jefferson could never accept the view that systems of government, grounded in morality, were not advancing. “The ground of liberty is to be gained by inches,” he writes to Rev. Charles Clay (27 Jan. 1790), “that we must be contented to secure what we can get from time to time, and eternally press forward for what is yet to get. It takes time to persuade men to do even what is for their own good.” Politics too was forward-moving, though tardigrade. Decay through increased urbanization might have been the tendency of his day, but there was nothing inevitable about it. Jefferson at various times saw clearly a future state of the world with nations predominantly agricultural, friendly in commerce, and peace-abiding. That is not to state he believed in a realizable eschaton. As the quote in his letter to Dupont de Nemours at the beginning of this paper shows, Jefferson likely believed in convergence toward an ideal state, not its actualization. Yet such convergence toward an ideal future state was a medial and not a linear ideal—a delicate balance between under-reaching and overreaching—and just what his republican schema was created to accommodate.