

THOMAS JEFFERSON ON INDIGENCE IN SPANISH AMERICA: THE POWER OF THE REPUBLICAN IDEAL

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Abstract: As has been amply documented, Thomas Jefferson expressed a sincere interest in the peoples of Spanish America with the waning of colonial rule in the early nineteenth century. I argue in this paper that a substantial portion of his vision was comprised by implying Spanish American societies as ones defined through poverty. His understanding of indigence among peoples of the region was not simply confined to describing their economic condition, but was linked to a moral-political vision with the problem of independence as the major issue related economic poverty. I also contend, at the same time, that Jefferson in fact articulated his hope that Spanish American nations would be able to develop a republican structure of government, made possible by the special economic situation of the Western hemisphere, thus also implying the chance of tackling poverty there.

Keywords: Thomas Jefferson, Republicanism, Poverty, Spanish America.

Shortly after the termination of the second term of his presidency, Thomas Jefferson began to show a growing interest in the New World's colonies of Spain. The main reason was their being situated in the neighborhood of the United States as well as their launching independence movements in the 1810s, shaking the foundations of Spanish rule in the western hemisphere. In this paper I aim to show that one aspect of Jefferson's response to the revolutions taking place in the southern neighbors of the American republic was his understanding them from the perspective of poverty. By implication, he held that lacking in Republican political and cultural foundations they exhibited traces relegating them into the status of poor nations.

Scholarship has already shown how Jefferson, on the whole, thought of countries in Europe that, to him, exhibited traces of poverty, at the same time largely ignoring and even denying his attention to the presence of indigence in his own country (See Steele, 2008: 31 and Steele, 2012: 104-105; for his views on the United States as a country not free from the destitute see Guzzetta, 1985 and Scheer, 1998). Furthermore, no attempt has been made at explaining his views on indigence in the western hemispheric region, outside of the United States. This, at first glance, should come as hardly a surprise. Not even contemporaries touched upon this theme, since before the early nineteenth century the area south of the United States had counted as "*terra incognita*," to use historian Arthur Whitaker's phrase, even to the intellectual elite of the western world (Whitaker, 1962: x). Furthermore, even a cursory glance at Jefferson's public and private utterances promises no quick result of a venture into his notions on the subject of indigence in Spanish America.

On the basis of what he was able to gather for information concerning the region, Jefferson understood societies there as being deeply divided.¹ Well before the independence movements Jefferson was already aware of the stratification of societies in Spanish America. He believed that these societies were controlled by the *peninsulares*, members of the Spanish imperial administration, along with the Catholic clergy, who kept all the other social classes, including creoles, under submission (Jefferson to John Jay, May 4, 1787, in Ford, 1892-1899(IV): 383-384).

Jefferson initially believed that such a deep stratification was a serious consequence of Spanish imperial oppression and, at the same time, a major impediment to the colonies becoming self-governing nation-states. He thus anticipated serious conflicts to arise among the colonies once they acquired independence. In his eyes, freshly independent, such countries would initiate military conflicts and try to establish “military despotisms” over one another with “lower classes” used in the process (Jefferson to Alexander von Humboldt, April 14, 1811, in Washington, 1869(5): 580; see also Jefferson to Alexander von Humboldt, December 6, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 351.; Jefferson to Alexander von Humboldt, December 6, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 351; Jefferson to Humboldt, April 14, 1811, in Washington, 1869(5): 581; see also Jefferson to the Marquis de Lafayette, November 30, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 358-359). In other words, he perceived some kind of a connection between social stratification and the political dynamics characterizing countries of the region. At the same time, he did anticipate the possibility of change for a better direction of political and economic development as will be seen below. Therefore it is erroneous to state that “he never once imagined that they would end in anything other than military despotisms” (Steele, 2012: 96).

Nonetheless, it is important to see that despite his awareness of the social structure and social relations characterizing the colonies of Spain in the New World, Jefferson did not address the issue of indigence in view of social classes. At the same time, he did so from a different angle, and to understand that, one has to turn to his general views on poverty in a republican context.

Much in line with contemporary views, Jefferson connected poverty with the lack of someone’s ability to sustain himself on his own (Morgan, 2004: 96; Smith, 2004: XVIII-XIX). Simple as it may sound, such a view of indigence had far-reaching consequences for him. In the first place, poverty had a definitely gender perspective for him, believing in a naturally preordained gender division of labor, with a sharp contrast between the domestic sphere and the public one, men and women performing tasks supposedly assigned to them in a culturally prescribed manner. In the second place, he argued for the US fulfilling such an ideal in sharp contrast to Europe, where he found females violating such rules of the heteronormative cultural regime, with French women of the

¹ On Jefferson’s sources including German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt see Vajda, 2007: 275. On the methodology that Humboldt applied in producing knowledge about South America and its practical consequences see Pratt, 2003 (1992): chapters 6-8, as well as its consideration by Kovács, 2010: 77-78.

country working in the fields while those of the city even meddling with politics, to his great horror (Vajda, 2008; Steel, 2008: 26; Steel, 2012: 58-72).

In such a system of the gendered division of labor male independence and female dependence represented unequivocal conditions, implying male responsibility for sustaining household economy. Consequently, the inability to provide sustenance for himself or the family became a marker of poverty for Jefferson. No wonder then, that he designated European male peasants as poor, given their need to rely on the supplementary work of their wives in the fields to sustain themselves and their families. Native American women did not fare better in Jefferson's system having to perform similar tasks in the fields for their husbands, making their societies look deeply sunk in indigence according to Jeffersonian logic (Steele, 2008: 20, 30-33).

Beneath such a state of mind lay an even more complex system of political economic thought, namely republicanism that had its basic tenets rooted in classical thought. Jefferson's republican ideal was to serve several purposes and as such would justify various principles that he found vital. One of these was the notion that moral and politically self-sufficient farmers could become virtuous citizens of the republic. The other, being economic in nature, ensured the sustenance of a population surplus – a major concern for him. Republicanism held the importance of landed property for civic existence. Men possessing land, as historian Drew McCoy has summed up, could secure “personal independence” since they did not have to “rely on any other men, or any man, for the basic means of existence.” Such independence ensured a producer's “autonomous control of the resources necessary for his subsistence,” and through that it also made it possible for him “to participate responsibly in the political process” and promote the good of the whole political community (McCoy, 1980: 68).

This republican ideal served as a backdrop to the general understanding of poverty in the United States. The landless or “laboring poor” as they were often referred to, lacked in economic and thus political independence because they had no means of independent sustenance based on landed property. Their dependence was obvious to contemporaries. It was also held in the United States in the late eighteenth century that with population growth, the number of such poor people was on the rise, happening in parallel with the shift from agriculture to manufacturing as the basic form of sustenance in western European societies (McCoy, 1980: 118, 131, 114-119, 45, 51).

These ideas also served as the basis of republican self-government to Jefferson's mind. Jefferson understood that all power was inherent in the people and that republican government was one where people had the power of realizing their own will and “every member composing it has his equal voice in the direction of its concerns” Beyond the level of local government they would govern themselves through their representatives (Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in Peterson, 1984: 1396). The people were supposed to “exercise [power] by themselves, in all cases to which they think themselves competent” (Jefferson to Major John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, in Peterson, 1984: 1491). This, on the other hand, also posited requirements for the people. Self-government, for Jefferson,

involved the idea of the people also being guardians of their own liberty and thus, their job being controlling their governors. Hence the importance of “the opinion of the people” and thus “public opinion” and education in forming that (Jefferson to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, in Peterson, 1984: 880).

Jefferson held that the American people met such an ideal having a natural capacity to govern themselves. This practically meant their ability to maintain a government that would avoid the two extremes of tyranny, that is, rule without liberty on the one hand, and the lack of such a rule with the utmost degree of liberty, on the other (Steele, 2012: 101, 103, 111).

How was then Jefferson’s treatment of Spanish Americans informed by such ideas?

The deep stratification of Spanish American societies as seen by Jefferson also implied a population to him that was far from meeting the ideal of republican independence as outlined above. As he explained to Polish revolutionary Thaddeus Kosciusko in 1811, “[...] the cruel arts of their oppressors have enchanted their minds, have kept them in the ignorance of children, and as incapable of self-government as children” (Jefferson To Kosciusko, April 13, 1811, in Lipscomb and Bergh, 1903-1904(XIII): 43). For him, then, the consequence of colonial status consisted in Spanish Americans lacking the enlightened set of mind necessary for implementing and maintaining governments independent of Spanish rule. The colonial status equaled that of infancy, both suggesting the lack of independence in intellectual, economic, and political terms. But what were the reasons for such conditions?

For Jefferson, one of the greatest dilemmas about the peoples of Spanish America was related to their relationship to liberty: “How much liberty can they bear without intoxication?”, as he asked Humboldt in a letter in 1811 (April 14, 1811, in Washington, 1869(5): 580). Liberty disproportionate to the appropriate level of education was destructive within a structure of political self-government, he believed. And Jefferson’s opinion about the intellectual capacity of the peoples of Spanish America to govern themselves was far from high. He, in fact, believed that at the time of starting independence movements, they, on the whole, did not approximate the necessary level of republican intelligence (To the Marquis de Lafayette, November 30, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 358). (See also Jefferson to Humboldt, June 13, 1817, in Ford, 1904-1905(12): 68; Jefferson to John Adams, May 17, 1818, in Ford, 1904-1905(XII): 95; Jefferson to Dupont de Nemours, April 15, 1811, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 204; Steele, 2012: 97). Jefferson, then, held that colonial rule had left a mark on the minds of the mass of Spanish Americans because of the conscious effort of their leaders to keep them in ignorance as a means of colonial rule, preventing them from developing the ability to govern themselves.

The consequences of such an inability to show republican intelligence on the part of the people of Spanish America were indeed serious, according to Jefferson, in a twofold manner. In the first place, he argued, they were prone to establish “military despotisms” with their leaders continuing to rule over them. “A republic of kings is impossible,” as

he maintained to Lafayette in the abovementioned letter (Jefferson to Lafayette, November 30, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 359; see also Jefferson to Humboldt, April 14, 1811, in Washington, 1869(5): 581). In the second place, such independent countries, led by military despots, also tended to launch wars against one another (Jefferson to Lafayette, November 30, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 359; Jefferson to Adams, January 22, 1821, in Ford, 1904-1905(XII): 199). All this, he intimated to Humboldt, ultimately depended on the intelligence of the governors and the governed alike (Jefferson to Humboldt, April 14, 1811, in Washington, 1869(5): 580).

Despite such a low opinion on the Spanish Americans' political capacities, Jefferson was, to some degree, optimistic about the ability of the peoples of Spanish America to raise themselves to the level of rationality necessary for self-government. He held that the example of the United States was crucial in that regard and education was a major means of achieving that, but was convinced that it could happen only gradually (Jefferson to Lafayette, November 30, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 359).

As has been seen above, he regarded the principle of liberty inversely proportionate with governmental power as a general standard to apply to every people determined to establish republican political order. Nonetheless, he also admitted that it could not happen automatically, only by means of conscious education aimed at instructing the people how to govern themselves. This had a profound relevance to their liberty and independence. As Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr. has argued, Jefferson held that the only way in which liberty would be preserved in the American republic was through republican education. That was important because it was the only way in which minimal government, a vital Jeffersonian ideal, could be ensured. A well-educated citizenry could govern themselves with the utmost degree of liberty and the least possible amount of power and government. In this way, "peace and order," alongside liberty, could be guaranteed and tyrannical rule, that is, abuse by those who rule over the people, avoided. Without an educated citizenry, a republic thus cannot hold very long, according to Jefferson (Wagoner, 1999: 118-119, 120).

Accordingly, only in parallel with the growing level of their intelligence could they gain more liberty (Jefferson To Johns Adams, May 17, 1818, in Ford, 1904-1905(XII): 96). As Jefferson wrote to John Adams in 1821, the education of the people of Spanish America was to involve, among others, the jury system through which they could "begin to learn the exercise of civil duties as well as rights" (Jefferson to John Adams, January 22, 1821, in Ford, 1904-1905(XII): 199). This way of educating people in the practice of self-government was thus to prepare them to run their own affairs in a political sense and practice political independence. The process would mean gradual independence from under imperial rule by Spain to Jefferson, ultimately requiring "a general ripeness to break entirely free from the parent stem" (Jefferson to John Adams, January 22, 1821, in Ford, 1904-1905(XII): 200). In this manner, Jefferson also expressed his belief that Mexico had better conditions to achieve and maintain independence than the "southern provinces" did. He understood that part of that was "that men of science are not wanting" there

(Jefferson to Humboldt, December 6, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 351).

He regarded the time while this would happen that of a whole new generation taking over (Jefferson to Dupont de Nemours, April 15, 1811, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 204). He was convinced that only such a new generation, sufficiently enlightened, could stand independent and sustain itself. As he made that clear in a letter to John Adams in 1823, “The generation which commences a revolution can rarely compleat [sic] it. Habituated from infancy to passive submission of body and mind to their kings and priests, they are not qualified, when called on, to think and provide for themselves[...].” (Jefferson to John Adams, September 4, 1823, in Ford, 1892-1899(X): 269). On this he was following his principle on the differences between generations (See Sloan, 2001; Sloan, 1993 and Smith, 1999).

The inability of Spanish Americans to “provide for themselves” under Spanish rule rendered them like children in a symbolic way, and this state equaled that of the poor by Jeffersonian standards for the lack of the ability to become independent producers.

To what extent did conditions in the region approximate Jefferson’s republican ideal of labor and subsistence?

Jefferson formulated his vision of Spanish American social and economic conditions and his proposed model for reorganizing it according to republican principles against the backdrop of a system of economic and social relations with peculiar features including a shift from self-sufficient segments to commercial agriculture by the end of the colonial period.

In view of economy, the portion of the western hemisphere held by the Spanish exhibited a high degree of diversity in regard to land possession and labor organization, and throughout the colonial period, substantial changes had taken place affecting all forms of property holding and all social and ethnic groups.

Originally, land was in communal possession in native societies, and the Spanish tended to leave the system untouched, being primarily interested in the labor of the indigenous population. Through the system of “*encomienda*” they managed to use such a labor force in most areas to provide sustenance for their own settlements. The latter would pay tribute to their Spanish rulers in the form of goods and work for “protection” and “religious instruction” (Mörner, 1987: 287-288; see also Gibson, 1987: 379).

As time went by, with the decline of Indian population, labor supply became dominated by the system of “*repartimiento*” or “*mita*” in mining areas, meaning the seasonal recruitment of Indian laborers for public work projects, especially or in private employment, less so, in return for some payment. The phenomenon practically included the periodic release of a portion of village population for labor service in *mitas*, on building sites or various other segments of the economy. Moreover, even such producers as “[c]reole and mestizo” farmers had the chance to make use of the *repartimiento* when in need of help (McLeod, 1987: 321, 323 (quotation)).

With population decline among natives, however, even more dramatic changes began to set in. Although largely protected by law during the colonial period, much of the Indian land possession was appropriated and granted to Spanish settlers, the main reason being

the decline in population among natives. Deserted communal land thus became the target of white landholders, and other means such as force was also used to acquire land from natives (Mörner, 1987: 288; Gibson, 1987: 388-389). Land acquisition by Spaniards was also promoted by the growth of commercial agriculture resulting in the appearance of large estates or "*haciendas*" by the eighteenth century (Mörner, 1987: 289, 290).

Haciendas and smaller estates possessed by Spaniards, creoles or mestizos heavily relied on Indian labor, which ranged from the free through the semi-free kind. In the core areas, free labor became widespread by the eighteenth century. The tendency was promoted by the fact that Indians felt compelled to leave their villages refusing to participate in labor connected with tribute, *encomienda* or *repartimiento*, many of them ending up in cities or on haciendas (Gibson, 1987: 385; McLeod, 1987: 326, 328; Gibson, 1987: 374). By the time of independence movements the free laboring population became predominant and in addition to "accultured Indians" it also included "people of mixed race" or "castas", "free blacks, and a few *déclassé* whites" (McLeod, 1987: 328).

A significant proportion of Indian laborers worked on haciendas as peons, semi-free laborers moving there either compelled by debts or/and the pressure of subsistence. They would cultivate part of the land held that they did not own paying for its use either in cash, in kind or in the form of labor (Gibson, 1987: 386; McLeod, 1987: 326, 327). In addition to free labor and peonage, slave labor was also significant in Spanish America. Originally a major form of labor in the New World, based on native labor, slavery was terminated for some time, however, based on black African slave labor, it was revived by the eighteenth century (McLeod, 1987: 317, 330-331) becoming significant "in the tropical lowlands" (Mörner, 1987: 292).

Land and labor, in Spanish America, then, showed a varied picture in view of Jefferson's republican ideal. The system of communal lands originally characterizing Native American landholding practices, functioning to serve sustenance, came to disintegration in most of New Spain. In parallel to that, Spanish and creole settlers became dominant landholders and producers with the rise of commercial agriculture, catering to markets also extending well beyond the boundaries of haciendas. Labor became more and more tied to such complex systems of production or was already like that in the case of mines or city projects. Whether free labor, peonage or slave one, they were far from the republican ideal of self-sufficiency based on landed property, except in cases of farmers cultivating the land without the assistance of *repartimiento*, slave or free labor, not to mention great landed estates that approximated the European model of agricultural production so much denounced and criticized by Jefferson (Jefferson to James Madison, October 28, 1785, in Peterson, 1984: 841).

In one sense, then, Jefferson considered the people of Spanish America capable of preparing themselves for independent existence and thus achieving the status of a republican nation capable of caring for itself, that is, avoiding the state of dependence and poverty. In claiming so, he also held that they would imitate the American model of government. Yet, in an economic and social sense they were far from meeting the

Jeffersonian ideal. At the same time, he also found the example of the United States instructive for them in organizing their economies, thereby also promoting the ideal of republican social order geared toward the avoidance of indigence.

Jefferson developed such a vision of Spanish America within the context of his apprehension of European influence in the western hemisphere. In 1813, ten years before the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine, in a letter to Humboldt, he declared his view that the American continent should stay away from the affairs of European countries constantly at war with one another (Jefferson to Alexander von Humboldt, December 6, 1813, in Ford, 1904-1905(XI): 351-352).

Though also seeing the newly independent countries of Spanish America as potential economic rivals of the United States (Jefferson to James Madison, February 4, 1816, in Ford, 1892-1899(X): 19; Lewis, 1998: 79). Jefferson, in the context of Euro-American power relations, saw them as ones sharing common interests, which, to a significant extent, were related to the special conditions making the whole American hemisphere capable of avoiding the European model of social and political development and thereby poverty.

Historian Brian Steele has claimed that for Jefferson, an important dividing line between the United States and European nations was poverty that the former was fortunate to avoid (Steele, 2008: 31; Steele, 2012: 73). However he, as his vision of the western hemisphere suggests, would also see Spanish America as having the potential to follow the US model of republican economic structure.

As he explored in a remarkable letter to William Short in 1820, America should separate itself from Europe through the possibility of avoiding its wars. While in the Old World, he was convinced, population surplus was handled by means of war through its devastation of the population of the belligerents, in the New World that was not needed and hence peace was possible. The key to that was, of course, the availability of free land capable of sustaining a relatively small population. As Jefferson explained to Short, "Here, room is abundant, population scanty, and peace the necessary means for producing men, to whom the redundant soil is offering the means of life and happiness" (Jefferson to William Short, August 4, 1820, in Lipscomb and Bergh, 1903-1904(XV): 1903, 262, 263 (quotation)).

One can then conclude that, in contrast to Europe, where the major device of dealing with excess population and thus poverty consisted in war, in Jefferson's vision, free countries of the western hemisphere, including Spanish America, had the chance to opt for a peaceful alternative. The abundance of free land held not simply the hope of an agricultural empire of liberty for Jefferson, but also an opportunity for Spanish Americans to enable everyone to sustain themselves, thus avoiding the necessity of war and indigence plaguing belligerent European states. For Jefferson, there was a chance for economic sustenance in the sequels of Spain's American empire to be placed on the republican model of independent producers and hence the problem of indigence managed.

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