

Thomas Jefferson,  
The Declaration of Independence,  
and Revolutionary Ideology

Bibliographic Essay

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Revolutionary America  
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We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes. . . .

#### The Declaration of Independence

All American Whigs thought alike on these subjects. When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent. . . . Neither aiming at originality of principles or sentiments, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind. . . . All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays or the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.

Thomas Jefferson,  
Letter to Henry Lee on 8 May 1825

Although Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence as a justification for the colonial separation from Britain, the document was also a philosophical tract on human nature, government's role in society, and the meaning of individual liberty. Generations of scholars have debated the intellectual origins of Jefferson's Declaration. The controversy has been based, in large part, on speculation, since research of Jefferson's intellectual development before 1776 is nearly impossible. In 1770, when he was twenty-seven, Jefferson's library and most of his early papers were destroyed in the fire that consumed his mother's plantation home. For this reason the historiography on the Declaration of Independence must be widened beyond Jefferson's development, and should include works that attempt to elucidate the general intellectual climate in which Jefferson wrote. This approach does not make scholarly work on the Declaration less significant, since Jefferson, himself, wrote that the Declaration was "intended to be an expression of the American mind." In this light, the Declaration has been seen as a proclamation of Lockean individualism, of French or Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, of the eighteenth century verve for natural science, and of European or British versions of classical republicanism.

In *The Declaration of Independence*,<sup>1</sup> Herbert Friedenwald argued that Jefferson found his grounding for the document in the "frequently reiterated . . . theories of natural right and social compact, as upon rights possessed under the British constitution."<sup>2</sup> In writing of the self-evident truths and ends of government, Jefferson "was but giving terse expression to the widely diffused convictions of the period. And in doing this he sought out the best model, and repeated the concepts, often the very phraseology and arguments, of his master John Locke."<sup>3</sup> Friedenwald made clear that he was *not* speaking of the

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Friedenwald, *The Declaration of Independence: An Interpretation and an Analysis* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, but meant Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. Friedenwald also argued that Jefferson was "stating a political and not a moral philosophy,"<sup>4</sup> and therefore equality was of a political nature.

In *The Declaration of Independence*,<sup>5</sup> Carl Becker also argued that Locke was the key to understanding Jefferson's Declaration. Jefferson argued from Lockean ideals, which were commonplace in the political dialogue of the revolutionary era:

That there is an 'natural order' of things in the world, cleverly and expertly designed by God for the guidance of mankind; that the 'laws' of this natural order may be discovered by human reason; that these laws so discovered furnish a reliable and immutable standard for testing the ideas, the conduct, and the institutions of men-- these were the accepted premises.<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson needed not only a list of specific grievance against the King of England, but it was essential that he find a "theory of government that provided a place for rebellion, that made it respectable, and even meritorious under certain circumstances."<sup>7</sup> This defense was provided by Locke in the *Second Treatise on Government*, which "the Declaration, in its form, [and] in its phraseology, follows closely."<sup>8</sup>

In *The Liberal Tradition in American History*,<sup>9</sup> Louis Hartz argued that John Locke was not only the influence for the American Revolution, but also for *all* of American liberalism. Liberty, embodied in private property, was the most important emphasis of the revolutionaries and has been most significant political determinant in American society since the founding of the new republic.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

In *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*,<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Koch placed Jefferson with the French ideologues he befriended in Paris. However, Jefferson did not go to Paris until after writing the Declaration of Independence. Koch did spend time on Jefferson's Declaration, which he argued was a statement of Lockean natural rights and the "moral-sense doctrine" of the Scottish Enlightenment. Koch writes that Jefferson "regarded moral sense and natural rights as necessary allies. Moral-sense philosophy for Jefferson, as in the case of Locke and the earlier Scottish tradition, was defended as a basis for political liberty."<sup>12</sup> Koch argued that in the course of Jefferson's life Scottish realism, "was a minor intellectual enthusiasm, rooted . . . in his past, when as a youthful thinker speculating on law and morality, the moral sense theory advocated by Lord Kames caught his attention."<sup>13</sup> French philosophes were the most prominent influence on Jefferson's mature philosophy. The argument Koch made for Jefferson's debt to French thinkers was unimportant for a student of the intellectual origins of the Declaration. What was important was that Koch saw the Declaration as a moral--not a political--paper.

In *Inventing America*,<sup>14</sup> Garry Wills took direct aim at the Lockean interpretation of the Declaration. He argued that Becker's interpretation of Jefferson's intellectual roots was misguided, since there "is no indication Jefferson read the *Second Treatise* carefully or with profit. Indeed, there is no direct proof he ever read it at all."<sup>15</sup> Wills did not set

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<sup>10</sup> Other interpretations emphasizing Lockean principles include: Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1992). Mortimer J. Adler and William Gorman, *The American Testament* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975). Robert H. Webking, *The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

out to prove that Jefferson was *not* influenced by Locke, but he asserted "that we have no reason to keep assuming that a Lockean orthodoxy explains the early formation of Jefferson's political thought."<sup>16</sup>

After an attempt to prove that Jefferson did not put special emphasis on the *Second Treatise*, Wills argued that the Scottish Enlightenment was the most important influence on Jefferson's Declaration. Jefferson ascribed to Francis Hutcheson's argument for a common moral sense based on benevolence and sentimentalism. Jefferson took up this idea of social communalism--not Lockean individualism--in the Declaration:

[P]ublic happiness was a secular and scientific term for men of the Enlightenment, a "heretical" displacement of man's hopes from the hereafter to those immediate gratifications that can stimulate Lockean man to action. Jefferson found the perfect framework for making that scientific tool a political norm when he studied and adopted the moral-sense philosophy. His use of the "pursuit of happiness" as the natural right to rank with life and liberty is not a vague or "idealistic" or ill-defined action, but one consistent with everything else he wrote in the Declaration and outside it. Only when we realize this can we bridge the great disjunction that has haunted all Jeffersonian studies of recent years. It has been granted, rather casually, that Jefferson accepted the moral-sense theory of *private* actions. But then, when men moved to the *public* scale of political action, it was assumed even more aggressively that he was a Lockean individualist, basing the social contract on property rights. If the latter were true, he could not be called a moral-sense philosopher in any serious way. But . . . it is not true. His social thought was as firmly grounded in the moral sense as was Hutcheson's own.<sup>17</sup>

The most well written and insightful critique of Wills's work was done by Ronald Hamowy.<sup>18</sup> Hamowy held fast to the Lockean interpretation as he noted errors of explanation and fact in Wills's argument. Wills's argument that Jefferson's substitution of "pursuit of happiness" for Locke's "property" was proof that Hutcheson--not Locke--was the influence for the Declaration<sup>19</sup> was destroyed by Hamowy. "If Jefferson chose to substitute the broader "pursuit of happiness" for "property" in his list of inalienable

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 254-255.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Hamowy, "Jefferson and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Critique of Garry Wills's *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (October 1979): 503-523.

<sup>19</sup> Wills, 240-255.

rights, it certainly was not because he substituted Hutcheson's notion of property for Locke's. There are simply no significant differences between the two thinkers on the subject."<sup>20</sup> Both philosophers argued that the right to property was inalienable, but they simply did so in different fashions.

Although fascinating, Wills's argument was not convincing. He constantly stretched Jefferson's phrases to apply them to the Scottish Enlightenment. Wills also failed to compare the close links between Locke and Hutcheson. Although Hutcheson and the other Scottish philosophers were no doubt important to Jefferson, the Declaration too closely resembles Lockean political theory for Hutcheson to replace Locke as the major influence for Jefferson.<sup>21</sup>

In *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*,<sup>22</sup> Willard Sterne Randall argued Jefferson's major intellectual source for the Declaration was William Duncan's *The Elements of Logic*. "Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was one of the early attempts at political science. He managed masterfully to construct an elegant political argument according to the rules of science."<sup>23</sup> Duncan's *Logic* provided Jefferson with a scientific precedent. "Jefferson's structure for the Declaration of Independence follows Duncan's dictum, 'If

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<sup>20</sup> Hanowy, 517.

<sup>21</sup> For another work on the Scottish philosophical influence on Jefferson see: Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). White emphasized Thomas Reid's rationalism and the importance of Burlamaqui. See also: "Revolutionary Thought Revisited and Revised," *The Review of Politics* 41, no. 3 (July 1979): 430-434. Beitzinger offered support for Morton White's argument that Burlamaqui was a major influence on Jefferson's political and social philosophy. Burlamaqui brought together Lockean and Scottish moral-sense philosophy. For other works on the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" see: Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). Charles Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984). Sanford focused on Jefferson's reliance on the classics, Christianity, and Enlightenment thought in the phrase. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "The Lost Meaning of 'the Pursuit of Happiness,'" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21, no.3 (July 1964): 325-327.

<sup>22</sup> Willard Sterne Randal, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

therefore evident and allowed truths are disposed in a syllogistic order, so as to offer a regular conclusion, that conclusion is necessarily true and valid."<sup>24</sup>

In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*,<sup>25</sup> Bernard Bailyn argued that the American Revolution was a radical intellectual movement. His investigation was based on the pamphlet literature of the Revolution, which had as its sources the heritage of classical antiquity, Enlightenment rationalism, English common law, New England Puritanism, but most importantly the "radical social and political thought of the English Civil War and of the Commonwealth period."<sup>26</sup> Algernon Sidney, James Harrington, and Henry Neville were the seventeenth-century heroes of liberty that the colonist identified themselves with. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon were the intellectual middlemen for the revolutionaries. From the Commonwealth political thought, the revolutionaries argued that the King's ministers were engaged in a conspiracy to restrict the liberty of the colonies. In their drive for power the ministers upset the balance of the British constitution. Royal officials in the colonies of America aided in this English conspiracy as they attempted to seize as much power as they could.

Bailyn argued that the American Revolution was actually a radical "ideological" revolution that took place in men's minds. Before the Revolution, colonials saw the divergences from the European norms--lack of a titled aristocracy, an established church, and a stratified society--as a vice. After the Revolution, Americans saw these divergences as virtues that enabled them to establish strong republican government. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence espoused the conspiracy theory Bailyn found, and it called for new states built on the Commonwealth ideal of equality.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34.

In *The Machiavellian Moment*,<sup>28</sup> J.G.A. Pocock sought a tradition in which to ground Bailyn's idea. He argued that the republican ideology that dominated the political culture throughout early American history was a carryover from the classical world. Rome, then Florence, and on to the Atlantic World--the republican ideology made a powerful impact and was prevalent in the thinking of those in Jefferson's era.

In *The Enlightenment in America*,<sup>29</sup> Henry F. May argued that the Revolutionary Enlightenment focused on illuminating the fundamental goodness of man. "For the first time in history, they [revolutionaries] believed, it was now possible once and for all to destroy irrational Gothic remnants, to plan and create a new society, and thus to achieve the happiness for which man was destined."<sup>30</sup> Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was a piece of "Whig radicalism," as he argued for a position of natural rights, social contract, and the right of rebellion. The Declaration was also radical for what it left out. Jefferson provided no argument from Biblical scripture as Tom Paine had done throughout "Common Sense." Jefferson argued that it was "Not the restraint of evil or the restoration of virtue," but that "the pursuit of happiness is the end of Government."<sup>31</sup>

Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace argued that the Revolution was an antipatriarchal movement away from Britain.<sup>32</sup> They believed that Jefferson adopted

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<sup>27</sup> Prior to Bailyn's work Caroline Robbins published her work on the English intellectual roots of the Revolution. Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959). See also: Caroline Robbins, "'When It Is that Colonies May Turn Independent': An Analysis of the Environment and Politics of Francis Hutcheson," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (April 1954): 214-251.

<sup>28</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>29</sup> Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 163. Another pertinent analysis by May is: David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 273.

<sup>32</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace, "The American Revolution: The Ideology and Psychology of Nation Liberation," *Perspectives in American History* 6 (1972): 167-302.

familial metaphors to argue that Britain had been a poor mother. He judged the political relationship according to this analogy. This work, along with only psychohistories, did not lead to a greater understanding of Jefferson's Declaration. Burrows and Wallace put too much emphasis on the familial metaphor and do not concentrate on political philosophy.

In Declaring Independence,<sup>33</sup> Jay Fliegelman argued that during the mid eighteenth century there was a revolutionary quest to discover "a natural spoken language that would be a corollary to natural law, a language that would permit universal recognition and understanding."<sup>34</sup> This was the "elocutionary revolution," in which Jefferson was an active participant. Fliegelman treats the Declaration as a rhetorical matter not simply a political or philosophical one. "In this 'lost world,' Jefferson's fascination with Homer, Ossian, Patrick Henry, and the violin is of greater significance than his indebtedness to Locke or Hutcheson."<sup>35</sup> The meaning of the Declaration was tied up in the fact that it was meant to be read aloud. Fliegelman's thesis seems obvious, but the book is valuable for an understanding of the whole of Jefferson's environment.<sup>36</sup>

Although there are many other books on Jefferson and the intellectual milieu of the Revolutionary period, these works represent the major points of interpretation. Friendenwald, Becker, Hartz, and Appleby argued that Jefferson's Declaration was Lockean. Koch felt that the French ideologues were of primary importance to Jefferson's mature thinking, but on the issue of the Declaration he bridged the gap between the

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<sup>33</sup> Jay Fliegelman, Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> For other general works on Jefferson see: Thomas Jefferson, Jefferson Himself: The Personal Narrative of a Many-Sided American, ed. Bernard Mayo (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1942.) Merrill Peterson, Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Daniel Boorstin, The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1948).

supports of Locke and the advocates of the Scottish moral-sense. Koch argued that the Declaration was a moral paper, as did Wills and White, who both believed the Scottish moral-sense tradition was the dominant influence on Jefferson. Robbins, Bailyn, and Pocock argued that Commonwealth ideals produced the republican sentiment felt during the Revolution. Jefferson was a member of the movement and adhered to its principles. Although it sounds trite, they all make important points. However, I believe the Declaration of Independence was a political treatise based on Locke's Second Treatise on Government. Jefferson was obviously influenced by the Scottish school, but the Declaration was not a moral paper.