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Thomas Jefferson and the Agrarian Myth:
A Reappraisal of Sources

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation evaluates Thomas Jefferson's agrarianism using Richard Hofstadter's notion of the 'Agrarian Myth' (*The Age of Reform*, 1955). A literature review of studies on Jefferson's claims for the rural life reveals two contesting views: one favorable to his agrarianism as a moral vision, another condemnatory against the statesman's eventual pro-capitalist turn for commerce and manufacture. The simplistic reduction both positions make of Jefferson's motivations to 'morality' in opposition to 'politics' and 'economy' asks for a reappraisal of sources. Here follows a new analysis of Jefferson's addresses, writings and correspondence dealing with agrarian life and manufacture. The results indicate with Hollowchak (2011) that the crux of the debate should not be 'ethics' but 'morality', but, contrary to him, that Jefferson's ability to hide the pragmatic use of manufacture under the defense of non-commercial values, may be deemed 'moral' (acting depending on circumstance), precisely because it is 'political' and 'economic'.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Jefferson – Agrarian Myth – Jefferson's Writings – Morality – Politics – Economy.

Este trabajo analiza la presencia en los escritos de Thomas Jefferson de los elementos básicos que componen la noción 'Mito Agrario' ideada por Hofstadter (*The Age of Reform*, 1955). El repaso de las publicaciones existentes en torno el pensamiento de lo agrario en Jefferson muestra que unas aprueban sus actuaciones y otras condenan el giro pro-capitalista que dio en favor del comercio y la manufactura. La reducción que ambas posturas hacen del problema a su dimensión ética requiere un nuevo estudio documental. El texto que sigue repasa los discursos, escritos y correspondencia de Jefferson en los que se tratan las formas de vida agraria y manufacturera. Concluye con Hollowchak (2011) que el debate no debe circular en torno a la ética sino en torno a la moral, pero, a diferencia de él, que la postura de Jefferson es 'moral' (obediente a la circunstancia), precisamente porque es 'política' y 'económica'.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Thomas Jefferson – El 'Mito Agrario' – Escritos de Jefferson – Moral – Política – Economía.

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1. Introduction

a) Purpose

This dissertation deals with the debate on Jefferson's agrarianism, which became part of his politics in the government of Virginia (1779-81) and the United States (1801-09). As Jefferson became a grand political figure, his sense of agrarianism and idealization of the United States was disputed by politicians in his own days and scholars to this very day. In 1955, Richard Hofstadter wrote *The Age of Reform*, which created a new concept, that of the 'Agrarian Myth', to question the reality behind the sentimental attachment to rural American values that it signifies and the role such men as Jefferson played in shaping the ideal of an honest, equal, self-sufficient rural society as founding of American society. Then, since the 1950s the debate on Jefferson's agrarian values have never ceased.

This dissertation aims to present a documented view of Jefferson's agrarianism through a reappraisal of some private and public texts written by the statesman's, taking into account the different interpretations given by scholars since Hofstadter's book brought forth the term and concept of the 'Agrarian Myth'.

b) Structure and Method

The study that follows has been divided into four distinct parts.

- 1) In the first part, 'The Agrarian Myth according to Hofstadter', there is a discussion of the term the 'Agrarian Myth' as it is used in *The Age of Reform*, after a brief review of the whole work and before a presentation of the origins of the myth.

In this respect, it is necessary to go through the social and political movements of late-19th-century and early-20th-century American history (Populism, Progressivism and the New Deal), whose examination led Hofstadter to coin that term and concept. This contextualization works as an introduction to the definition of the major ideals involved in it and the identification of Thomas Jefferson as the source and origin of the American imaginary attachment to rural living.

Those principal elements are contact with nature, appreciation of the small community, spiritual and physical health, and freedom and independence. The question is how Jefferson's thought relates with them.

- 2) In the second part, 'Thomas Jefferson's Agrarianism', there is a survey of Jefferson's biographical links to agriculture and a review of the principal literature written on his agrarianism.

It seems necessary to introduce the figure of Jefferson, giving the essential information about his personal life and political career in relation to agriculture. It serves to introduce the different studies that have examined his relation to pragmatic agrarianism and the defense of rural values. Then it follows the state of the question, identifying the different approaches that scholars have supported. Basically, there are three groups: those who support Jefferson's ethical vision, those who see Jefferson's agrarianism as political propaganda, and those who identify in Jefferson's thought a natural evolution.

I would like to criticize the first too and join the last group with my own hypothesis.

- 3) Next comes the central part of this dissertation: 'An Analysis of Sources'. It is an analysis and reassessment of the most relevant documents where Jefferson talks about agrarianism, commerce and manufacture.

The selected sources include eight letters, private and public correspondence, one Query from his book *Notes of the State of Virginia*, and his Second

Inaugural Address (1805). Despite the analysis is limited to ten texts, I have studied closely five other documents that helped me carry out the analysis of the other ten.

The method followed in the study has three steps: the contextualization of each text, the description of its main contents and the commentary of those extracts that deal with the ideal of agrarianism, trying to find in them the four principal elements present in the concept of 'Agrarian Myth'.

- 4) Finally, in 'A New Interpretation', an attempt is made to reassess those sources and my new personal interpretation is given of them. In this fourth part, I put together the main results of the analysis to build my argument and try to explain why scholars do not agree on Jefferson's ethical stand and what the real purpose of his politics seems to be.

a) Thesis

Studying Jefferson's political actions, his sense of ethics as a defender of freedom and justice cannot be questioned. However, looking closely at his period as politician in contrast with the thoughts expressed in his writings and addresses, the divergent nature of his words and politics with regard to the use and exploitation of land may be rather close to an immoral attitude. It seems as if he would make use of agrarian values exclusively for pragmatic ends. The problem is that all previous analyses are either too justifying or too condemnatory.

This dissertation proposes, in contrast, that Jefferson's political decisions were 'moral' in the strict sense of the term, that is to say, taken to fit the circumstances.

2. The Agrarian Myth according to Hofstadter

The term 'Agrarian Myth' became known after Richard Hofstadter (1916-1970), a well-known American historian, presented this concept in his book *The Age of Reform*, published for the first time in 1955.

a) An Overview of *The Age of Reform* (1955)

The book tries to review the transitional period in the American society extending from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, when certain social movements took place during a rapid and turbulent transition from the conditions of an agrarian society to those of modern urban life. In *The Age of Reform* Hofstadter carries out a survey of three periods in the history of the United States stretching between the 1890s and the 1930s:

1st. The Age of Populism (1890s) deals with the social movement based on traditional agrarian values organized by farmers and working people in response to the social discontent produced by the economic changes in the late-nineteenth century.

2nd. The Age of Progressivism (1900-1914) is a continuation of the Populist movement, which made use of the agrarian values but did not answer to the demanded new forms of an industrialized world.

3rd. The New Deal (1933-1938) was a domestic economic and social program of reforms that was set up as a response to the Great Depression of 1929 and very different to the other two, with a clear tendency for pragmatism and resolution of problems.

What Hofstadter found looking at the progress of the three movements was that the early American tradition, based on rural life, farms, small villages, etc. (what is known as “grass-root democracy”) had actually disappeared as the conquests of industrialism progressed. This began with the American Revolution, moving on through the Jacksonian era until after 1840, with the hatching of capitalism and immigration in America (banks, railroads’ companies, elites, etc) in the last quarter of the century. Yet, in the creeds and standard vocabulary of Populism and Progressivism at the turn of the century, Hofstadter discovers the myth did not come to an end and claims: “[t]he more commercial this society became, the more reason it found to cling in imagination to the non-commercial agrarian values” (24). The imaginary notions of the ‘Agrarian Myth’ continued to be used until the 1920s as a method of manipulation to reach an ideal, but unreal, representation of life in the growingly urban, industrialized America.

b) The Agrarian Myth and Its Realities

A close reading of the initial chapters of *The Age of Reform* gives us the key components that a society based on the ‘Agrarian Myth’ was said to exhibit, but also the realities that go with them, which are very different from them.

Those key components were basically four:

- *A lifestyle in direct contact with nature and soil.* In early America, the natural right to labour the soil was defended, because agriculture was thought the honest and primary, innocent and religious source of life: farmers working the earth meant a healthy, prosperous, ethical nation, free from corruption.

- *Appreciation of life in small villages,* as against life in big cities. The ideal for the early American people was farms as self-sufficient units, the farm as job and home; depraved populations inhabited the large cities.

- *Promotion of a homogeneous nation* composed by *virtuous and incorrupt* yeomen. In the birth of America, the yeoman farmer was considered the ideal man and citizen, committed to moral values of industry, independence, equality, and austerity, surely an individual blessed by God. Equally, for the American Revolution the farmer was the symbol of a new nation, patriotism, morality, and civics.

- *Belief in freedom and independence.* The early years in America were characterised for the satisfaction of self-sufficient life. Yeomen wanted to be independent from the market place and other farms. Americans congratulated themselves because they did not have a feudal past, industry, royal, aristocratic, ecclesiastical, or monarchical power, or manufacturing class; they considered rural society the most perfect and independent society existing then in the world.

Hofstadter points out that the reality America lived throughout the 19th century was different from the ideal:

- Contact with nature and the soil gradually lost its appeal. The agricultural trends moved to *manufactures* and speculation with lands and properties. Either farmers were pushed into commercial production for the cities or the new generations rejected simple rural values and exchanged the direct contact with nature for work in the cities.

- *The farmers' offspring moved into cities*, seeking a life with more opportunities. If the United States, led by Thomas Jefferson, supported the settlement of small farms this was in the form of an empire, an internal empire of small farms opened with the purchase of the Louisiana territory and the opening of the trans-Allegheny region.

- They were the first step in industry. The industrialization meant the end of an equal and homogeneous society, and then *social differences* appeared: the industry moved a massive forty-year migration of European people, implying a *society divided* by different political ideas.
- Between 1815 and 1860, the yeomen had lost their social status and respect. The spread of machinery and the availability of land transformed the farmer into a speculator: like bankers and magnates, he could earn a surplus and capitalize his efforts if buy more land and work it with modern machinery. In the late 19th century, the individual self-sufficient farmers no longer existed. Lack of transportation, the new markets in cities and the specialization on agriculture made *all members of society more dependent on each other*; and the ideal of the self-sufficient man was substituted by the ‘self-made man’.

It appears to be clear that there are two faces to the history of America, from the birth of the Republic to the turn of the twentieth century: one is the belief that shaped the democratic nation as a land of healthy, honest, independent, non-commercial men, tied to their work on the land, and another is a society where agricultural living was in decline. But how then did the ‘Agrarian Myth’ get shaped in the beginning?

c) The Origin of the Myth and Jefferson

The genesis of the notion is in literature. Agriculture was a main concern for the European leading upper class, especially in eighteenth-century England and France. They enjoyed a classical education and were influenced by classics such as Virgil, Cicero, Aristotle, and Hesiod, and their praise of pastoral life and husbandry. The works of Dryden, Samuel Johnson also show that. From there, agrarian values moved to America, influencing the predominantly literate landowners and the generation of intellectuals who, for instance, were to become the first presidents of the United States.

With the American Revolution the countryman was considered the symbol of the new nation. Agrarian values guided the American life. Then, when the first governments got power in the United States, the 'Agrarian Myth' was used as rhetorical device for politicians until 1840. Since that decade migration from one to another American territory, along with the European immigration, produced a great evolution in the cities. With the conquest of the West, the farmers purchased more properties and then they could grow faster, which made those people economically more powerful and speculative. Next, with the rise of industrial development in the United States from 1880 onwards, agrarian values lost their place in the new proto-capitalist American society.

What concerns us here is that Richard Hofstadter places Thomas Jefferson, a reader of tracts on agricultural improvement, but also of pastoral poetry and political philosophy, among the group of the 'Fathers' of the Agrarian Myth: St. John de Crèvecoeur, Thomas Paine, Philip Freneau, Benjamin Franklin. Let's now review how Jefferson's agrarianism has been studied by scholars recently.

3. Thomas Jefferson's Agrarianism

Jefferson's devotion to agrarianism, his life-long passion for farming and duty to others are a well-known facts. Scholars have examined the motivations behind his defense of rural living and the realities of his politics which contrast with it.

a) Agriculture in Jefferson's Life and Politics

Thomas Jefferson was born in a family of planters and surveyors. Thus, his relation to agriculture was present from the very beginning of his life until the end. He inherited the passion for nature from his father, Peter Jefferson. From a very early age, he was very interested in learning about plants, seeds, soil, farming, etc., and took advantage of this education when he grew up and became an adult. He inherited from his father 5000 acres of land in Bedford County, Virginia, and he built his residence there, Monticello. As he had a passion for agriculture, he made of Monticello an iconic place for gardening: he imported foreign seeds of cereals and trees from Asia and Europe such as rice and olives, planted there a great variety of shrubs, flowers, ornamental trees, grasses, nut trees, fruit trees, vineyards and vegetables and kept a diary that he called *Garden Book*. This close relation of Jefferson with nature and cultivation influenced his most important personal project of his last years, the University of Virginia. There, Jefferson's educational program included the learning of horticulture and agriculture. Still furthermore, the architectural plan of the 'Academic village' he drew designed green spaces and gardens as fields for cultivation among the professors' Pavilions and student residences.

His political career grew with time, starting as a representative of Albemarle County in the Virginia Houses of Burgesses in 1769, and following in 1775, when he was appointed delegate of the Continental Congress to write the Declaration of Independence in 1776 (supporting human rights and men's equality). His political participation was increased and he served as the Second Governor of Virginia for two

years (1779-81). Then, he participated in the Congress of Confederation, until he was appointed the United States Minister to France in 1785 until 1789. When he came back from France he received the important mission of becoming the first United States Secretary of State from 1790 to 1793 and at the end of the same decade he reached a higher political position as Vice-President of the United States, during John Adams's Presidency. He finally climbed to the Presidency in 1801, to stay in government for two terms until 1809.

All throughout his career, Jefferson's politics was influenced by his passion for agriculture. For Jefferson, the agrarian nation he had conceived in books and travels was essential to avoid the arbitrary political attitude that was present in European societies and also foreign influences (commerce, industry, corruption, etc.), and obtain the desired independence from England. That influenced all his international politics. In the United States, Jefferson's hunger for land changed the political map. The need then was to buy more lands for the yeomen to labor. While he was the third President of the United States, his administration purchased the Louisiana territory, which paradoxically increased the national debt so much that as a consequence, the welfare of the nation could not depend on farming exclusively. He realized that American society was becoming manufacturing and commercial and so revised his previous political and economic thought.

These facts have been observed for decades by scholars and the question of Jefferson's agrarianism has produced many critical pages ever since *The Age of Reform* came out.

b) A Literature Review

The principal publications on Jefferson's agrarianism fall into two main types: those who consider it a moral vision and those who consider it part of Jefferson's political and economic propaganda. The ones that maintain Jefferson's moral attitude are a majority:

- Marvin Fisher's 'An Answer to Jefferson on Manufacture', in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (1962), tells about Jefferson's attitude concerning industrialization. Fisher defends the sincerity of Jefferson's words and claims industrialization is a cause of social perversion, but argues that the President mistook the United States for Virginia and thus his moral agrarianism is more a morality play.
- J.W. Cooke (1973) argues that austerity is a necessity if men want to remain free and honest and that, according to that, for Jefferson agrarianism was the guarantee of a virtuous society.
- Barbara McEwan's *Thomas Jefferson: Farmer* (1991) recounts Jefferson's life as farmer and justifies Jefferson's support of manufacture and commercial exchange because of securing the independence of America.
- Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (2000) tells about the industrialization of America during the 19th and 20th centuries. Marx praises Jefferson believed in the small-scale agriculture, without taking into account the economic advantages offered by technology, already extant.
- M. Andrew Holowchak's article "Jefferson's Moral Agrarianism: Poetic Fiction or Normative Vision" (2011), defends Jefferson's moral agrarianism, as an ideal that may also apply universally.

All these scholars are convinced that Jefferson's agrarianism did not have an economic aim and was not politically motivated.

On the other hand, there are scholars that claim that Jefferson used traditional agrarian values to promote a pro-capitalist system based on investment of private property and agriculture, supporting national bank, promoting manufacturing and, in fact, causing a large debt. Following on Richard Hofstadter's idea that the link of agrarianism with virtue is a poetic fiction that hides an economic agenda, the most important of these include:

- Joyce Appleby (1984), in *Capitalism and the New Social Order*. He explains the triumph of the first America's popular political movement. He points out how Jefferson's politics was a sort of proto-capitalism, which was also present in early America.
- Charles A. Miller's *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (1993) makes a study of Jefferson's use of the word 'nature'. Miller supports the idea that Jefferson's agrarianism caused a large national debt, which led to the support of a national bank and the promotion of manufacture.
- Gene Wunderlich, in "Hues of American Agrarianism" (2000), argues that Jefferson put in action his agrarianism, not only because it was in vogue in Europe, but because he projected a politics of independence from Britain and expansionism in the States.

Nevertheless, among these scholars, we can find a group which understands Jefferson's mind underwent a process of change:

- Although Griswold in *Farming and Democracy* (1948) qualifies Jefferson's vision as moral, he detects a change of Jefferson's mind and claims Jefferson eventually recognized the necessity of manufacture to feed economic progress.
- Adrienne Koch's *The American Enlightenment* (1980) is a book about the Constitutional period. Koch tells about Jefferson's ethical agrarianism clashed with liberalism.
- Charles A. Miller (1993), in *Jefferson and Nature*, makes a study of Jefferson's use of the word 'nature'. Although the author finds Jefferson's political attitude opportunist, he also defends Jefferson and his moral agrarianism.

Thanks to them, the fact is proved that Jefferson supports rural life and working the land as the best option for the future of the country and the maintenance of moral values in society, as well as that Jefferson changed his mind and noted that the progress of industry was advantageous for the economic progress of the United States.

In sum, the debate that Hofstadter opened with his ‘Agrarian Myth’ brought about two main divergent standpoints in relation to the nature of Jefferson’s politics and the real object of his plan for America.

Of all the works I consulted, that by Holowchak (2011) helped me understand that ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are two different things and that I needed to analyze more profoundly Jefferson’s ideas directly from his written legate and skipping other scholars’ interpretations. What was Jefferson real stand about agrarianism? What Holowchak defends is, first, that there is a distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’, second, that ‘morality’ and ‘economy’ and ‘politics’ are different things, and third, that in Jefferson’s agrarianism, the one was principal and the other secondary: “Jefferson’s agrarianism is expressly and fundamentally a moral commitment and only secondarily economically or politically motivated” (502), and thus Jefferson’s moral agrarianism can be universal.

In contrast with him, what I defend is that Jefferson’s ability to hide the pragmatic use of manufacture under the defense of non-commercial values, if unethical, can be considered ‘moral’, that is to say, etymologically, ‘acting depending on circumstance’, precisely because it is ‘political’ and ‘economic’. To prove that, I have analyzed a number of writings by Jefferson in which agriculture and manufacture are commented.

4. An Analysis of Sources

My analysis will consist in reviewing ten selected writings. In all, they include one public address, one report from his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and eight letters from his correspondence:

- 1) To John Jay. Paris, Aug. 23, 1785.
- 2) ‘Manufactures’. *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787).
- 3) To James Madison. Paris, Dec. 20, 1787.
- 4) To Jean Nicolas D meunier. Monticello, Apr. 29, 1795.
- 5) To Brother Handsome Lake. Washington, Nov. 3, 1802.
- 6) To Governor William H. Harrison. Washington, Feb. 27, 1803.
- 7) To the Brothers of the Choctaw Nation. Dec. 17, 1803.
- 8) To Jean Baptiste Sav. Washington, Feb. 1, 1804.
- 9) *Second Inaugural Address*. March 4, 1805.
- 10) To Benjamin Austin. Monticello. Jan. 9, 1816.¹

Besides, I have analyzed for my research on Thomas Jefferson other five documents from the same that finally I have not included in this paper because of its limited extension. They are five letters that Jefferson wrote to: Brother John Baptist de Coigne

¹ These texts have been taken from the Library of America edition of Jefferson’s *Writings* (1984). All later quotes from texts are from this edition and reference to their page numbers are in brackets.

(1781), the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation (1806), John Melish (1813), Charles Willson Peale (1816) and Lafayette (1817).

The method employed has three parts. First, the texts are contextualized; second, there is a review of their main content, and finally comes a study of the references to agrarianism contained in them with respect to the key components that Hofstadter placed within the notion of the 'Agrarian Myth': (a) the exaltation of life in nature; (b) of life in community; (c) of the yeoman as the ideal citizen of a homogeneous peaceful society; and (d) the defense of freedom and the independence as social values for a perfect democracy.

The aim is to focus on Jefferson's personal and political comments to try to guess how much they link him with the concept of the 'Agrarian Myth' and what use he made of it.

1) To John Jay. Paris, Aug. 23, 1785

Context: This is a letter written by Thomas Jefferson, while he was Ambassador to France in Paris (1775-89) and responsible for the commercial relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of Prussia. It is addressed to John Jay, who was then the Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the United States (1784-90). He describes it not as an official diplomatic letter, but as a private one, written to answer the question Jay had proposed him earlier on "whether it would be useful to us to carry all our own productions, or none" (818). His reasoning includes a strong defense of agrarian life.

Main Content: Jefferson is concerned about national economic stability and discusses whether the industry of agriculture or that of manufactures would contribute most to the national wealth. The cultivation of great extensions of land is what he thinks will keep the United States as a self-sufficient nation economically speaking, and thus a politically independent country, not the opening international maritime commercial that

many want, because this will bring frequent war. He then places agriculture with preference to manufacture. The necessity to create a naval force to protect international affairs is finally mentioned. This may come when national debt is paid through the sale of lands.

Commentary: The letter opens with a very well-known quotation: “Cultivators of the Earth are the most valuable citizens” (818). It has been considered an expression of Jefferson’s belief that the economic, political and social stability of the nation depended on that American citizens tied to their land.

In that sense, the social value of the yeomen comes from their ethical primacy. This places them over that of the seamen and their commercial activities, as well as that of the manufacturers and their business enterprises:

They are the most vigorous, the most independant, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to it’s liberty & interests by the most lasting bonds. As long therefore as they can find employment in this line, I would not convert them into mariners, artisans or anything else.
(818)

This quotation shows that the ethical primacy of the farmers Hofstadter talks about can be seen through three different aspects: in the first place, through their physical strength and health; in the second place, through their sense of liberty; and in the third place, through their honesty. The three, welfare, liberty and virtue, are social values that unite a society which is democratic and can stay together, and more important, that lets the political and economic life of America be independent from the domination of European nations. With regard to commerce and manufacture, he preferred to keep them away from the centre of American society; they only benefit commerce brings is: “Frequent wars without a doubt” (819).

To answer his correspondent’s question, then, he concluded that land must be the main source of income for America, not manufacture. This is for two main reasons: because

the country is large enough to employ all citizens and because land can be sold in the Western part of the continent to pay for the high national debt: “I hope our land office will rid us of our debts” (820).

At this stage of Jefferson’s early Republicanism, the work of land and living a yeoman’s life are a safe source of democracy, but also of income.

2) ‘Manufactures’. *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)

Context: This text was also written while Jefferson was Ambassador to France, after his previous experience as Governor of Virginia (1779-81). *Notes on the State of Virginia* is a report presented to the Secretary of the French delegation in Philadelphia, who sent a questionnaire to the governors of the colonies on each state's geography, natural resources and government. Query XIX in the questionnaire was ‘The present state of manufactures, commerce, interior and exterior trade?’ In his answer, Jefferson contrasts rural Virginia and urban Europe and the sustainability of their economies.

Main Content: Jefferson reports on manufacture in Virginia. The state never had much trade and the products the people manufactured were of poor quality. There was no reason, then, to apply to America the European economic theories that say that every state must manufacture its own products. Producing raw materials and buying manufactured goods is the preferred economic model for the State. He suggests this will make the people independent and the government of the Republic safe.

Commentary: In early America, commercial activity was not frequent. They only manufactured clothes but their quality could not be compared to European articles. America and Europe cannot be compared either: there manufacture is a necessity due to the lack of lands, whereas in America, they have “an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman” (290). Thus, the best option for the state is to continue

working the land and manufacturing basic products and only bringing from overseas those of finer quality: “Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe” (291).

The advantage is the social virtue of the farmer. His spiritual innocence is clear: “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example” (290); also his religious purity: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God” (290). Just like Jefferson thought husbandmen were physically healthy, they were spiritually ‘healthy’ too, content to look up to heaven, the only dependence that does not suffocate virtue.

In this, his own society contrasts that of commercial, manufacturing Europe. There, where there is not enough land for a population that grows increasingly, the lives of the peoples depend on “the casualties and caprice of customers” (290). The effect is dependence and vice: “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambitions” (291), the dark side of the ‘Agrarian Myth’. Manufacture makes nations where mobs of people crowd under corrupt manners and principles: “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” (291), whereas, to Jefferson, the “happiness and permanence of government” can be preserved if people do not manufacture all goods themselves (291).

One thing is interesting: although Jefferson reports here that there is almost commerce among Americans at this stage, he has understood the type of dependence that capitalism imposes on an individual, when he says the lives of Europeans depend “on the casualties and the caprice of customers” (290). It is not the bare necessities of the farmer, but surplus and excess that matter. We will see how Jefferson uses this clear understanding of how market societies work to expand the territory of the United States.

3) To James Madison. Paris, Dec. 20, 1787

Context: This personal letter is addressed to James Madison, who had served as delegate to the Congress of the Confederation from Virginia (succeeded by Jefferson in 1783) and would become the fourth President of the United States of America after him (1817-25). Three months earlier, the Constitution that he had been drafting for four months, with Thomas Jefferson and the rest of delegates of the Convention, had been signed.

Main Content: Jefferson takes the opportunity to comment on aspects he likes and dislikes about the articles of the Constitution. He is very happy with the first part on the separation of powers, but not with important omissions, principally that of a bill of rights, and so, hopes for future amendments. Support for an agrarian society comes at the end talking about stable government, just like also in the beginning there is a mention to the high national debt and the sale of Western lands that has to pay for it.

Commentary: The closing remark of these amendments to the constitutional charter of the nation is very frequently quoted to illustrate Jefferson's political agrarianism:

I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe. (918)

Here, as in the previous letter, the idea is that an attachment to agrarian values inculcates virtue in the soul of citizens of the state and consequently, in the state itself, whereas manufacture corrupts them and causes rebellion against the state, the way it happens in urban Europe. Jefferson uses very frequently this contrast between the two regions, American vs. European, but given that this time it comes after his criticism of the articles of the Constitution, that may mean that the agrarian society is the social

form that he thought was truly described by the American Declaration of Independence: rural America is the land of the free and of the equal.

In America, a virtuous society like that he thinks would resist without opposition for an unlimited future or “as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America” (918). But again, Jefferson, while he speaks again about land as a source of moral virtue for the man that occupies it, as a statesman, hopes land will become a pecuniary source for the well-being of the state:

I am much pleased that the sale of Western lands is so successful. I hope they will absorb all the Certificates of our Domestic debt speedily, in the first place, and that then offered for cash they will do the same by our foreign one. (915)

So it seems there is still no evolution in his republican idealism from 1785: the two things that are present in his agrarian thought are that land is a source of egalitarian democracy and also of capital.

4) To Jean Nicolas Démeunier. Monticello, Va., Apr. 29, 1795

Context: Ten years later, while Jefferson was Secretary of State of the United States, and the presidential candidate of the Democratic Republicans, he wrote this letter to Jean Nicolas Démeunier (1751-1814), a French politician and author of essays on political and moral history, who had fled to the United States during the French Reign of Terror. The letter answers Démeunier’s request for advice on the best way to employ himself while he is in New York.

Main Content: In this letter, Jefferson starts by criticizing the cruelty of the French Revolution. He explains to Démeunier how small manufacture can be a safe occupation

and recommends he should occupy a small farm, even if the profit it makes is also small: “[Labor] is at the same time the most tranquil, healthy, & independent” (1029).

Commentary: After returning from France, Jefferson himself takes up nail manufacturing, due to the bad state in which he finds his plantation which will take several years to regenerate:

I thought for a while of taking up the manufacture of pot-ash, which requires but small advances of money. I concluded at length however to begin a manufacture of nails, which needs little or no capital, & I now employ a dozen little boys from 10. to 16. years of age (1028)

This type of household manufacture also belongs to the ‘Agrarian Myth’. There is virtue in it because it does not involve using large amounts of money. Just like the farmer, who earns “a reasonable profit & comfortable subservience results” (1029), the household manufacturer requires “little or no capital” to begin his activity (1028). This gives the small manufacturing trade some social status, as “additional title of nobility or the consigns of a new Europe”, says Jefferson (1029), that which the urban, commercial manufacturer would never have, but he does not enjoy “the simple abundance of austerity” that is part of the ‘Agrarian Myth’.

In any case, Jefferson insists in supporting the work of the yeoman as the most reasonable and independent and happiest occupation that D meunier could take up (1029), adding husbandry is highly recommended to him for his “philosophic turn” (1029). This proves that Jefferson considered the preoccupation for husbandry to be the intellectual preoccupation of the upper intellectual classes. The yeoman works the land and the political philosopher projects his ideal model to society.

5) To Brother Handsome Lake. Washington, Nov. 3, 1802

Context: Jefferson wrote this letter to the Native-American Handsome Lake, a leader of the Iroquois people, in the State of New York, while he was in his first term as President of the United States of America (1801-05). He knew that a peaceful relation with the Native American nations who lived beyond the frontier of the United States was necessary in order not to start an Indian War which European powers would want to be part of. Their adoption of agriculture and a sedentary lifestyle could assimilate their culture to the Americans' and prevent war.

Main Content: It starts by congratulating the leader and his people on the reform of the manners and habits they have gone through and agrees to prohibit the sale of alcohol among the Iroquois people, since they consider it fatal for their morals. Throughout the text, Jefferson intends to influence him so that his people will sell their lands. Handsome Lake is suspicious of the white man's intentions.

Commentary: This letter shows how Jefferson acts in politics. In the first place, Jefferson is very cautious. He does not want to annoy Handsome Lake and tries to assure him that nobody wants to take their lands off them without their approval, but leaving clear "We, indeed, are always ready to buy land", and going on,

[B]ut we will never ask but when you wish to sell; and our laws, in order to protect you against imposition, have forbidden individuals to purchase lands from you; and have rendered it necessary, when you desire to sell, even to a State, that an agent from the United States should attend the sale, see that your consent is freely given a satisfactory price paid, and report to us what has been done, for our approbation. (556)

Jefferson is trying to give the Indian leader legal guarantees that their natural right to property will be respected until they want to sell: the state has been created to protect also the property of the Native Americans if they want to keep it.

In the second place comes persuasion: he preaches agrarianism again, to convince Handsome Lake that he has to sell. To have more land is good for the society, good for the individual, and gain progress:

But going into a state of agriculture, it may be as advantageous to a society, as it is to an individual, who has more land than he can improve, to sell a part, and lay out the money in stocks and implements of agriculture, for the better implements of agriculture (556);

so, his people should invest all their efforts in abandoning hunting and gathering in the forest and leading a sedentary life of cultivation in small family farms, and providing for their own clothes and implements, like the white man :

Persuade our red brethren then to be sober, and to cultivate their lands; and their women to spin and weave for their families. You will soon see your women and children well fed and clothed, your men living happily in peace and plenty, and your number increasing from year to year (556).

This small family farm represents “so happy a change”, that Jefferson assures Handsome Lake that it will be remembered generation after generation, and so assures the stability, continuity and survival of a society (556-57).

Third comes an invitation to be morally responsible citizens: the life they now lead of drinking and ruin is not the fault of the white man that sells them the alcohol, it is up to their moral ability not to fall into vice. The nations that have given them liquors and corrupted their habits “have sold what individuals wish to buy, leaving to everyone to be the guardian of his own health and happiness” (555). Thus, they are responsible for their own excesses.

Thomas Jefferson’s calling here to an individual’s liberty to reject corruption, while it is very consonant with the ideal of the husbandman, seems rather cynical if we consider the following letter, “unofficial and private”, sent to the Governor of Indiana.

6) To Governor William H. Harrison. Washington, Feb. 27, 1803

Context: This letter was written by Jefferson during his first term as President of the United States to William H. Harrison, who served as Governor of the Territory of Indiana between 1801 and 1812. It tells about the President's plans for territorial expansion over the lands occupied by the Natives. This is a period of territorial expansion. Only one week later, the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France, the biggest territorial sale in America's history. He warns Harrison that the letter must remain "unofficial and private", especially from the Indians (1117).

Main Content: It includes information and instructions on Indian affairs in agreement with the Federal Government. Jefferson explains his plan and idea to grab the Indians' lands by making them run in debt. In that way white settlements will gradually the Indians and they will either become citizens of the United States or move beyond the Mississippi.

Commentary: This is probably the most important letter in our selection. It shows the obscure side of moral agrarianism, its political and economic reverse side. Jefferson reveals Governor Harrison the Federal government's plans to get the natives to give up their own cultures, religions, and lifestyles, and above all, their lands:

To promote this disposition to exchange lands, which they have to spare and we want, for necessaries, which we have to spare and they want, we shall push our trading uses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands. (1118)

From this letter we learn with surprise that what Thomas Jefferson had learnt in Europe about the power of corruption and dependence that manufactured products and trade have on people, he applied to coerce the native Indians with the aim of obtaining their lands for the United States.

This contrasts very much with all his previous appeals to the non-commercial, non-pecuniary and self-sufficient life. Those ‘necessaries’, “which we have to spare and they want” (1118), are manufactures, create dependence, and finally bring the dispossession of land. This action is clearly against the principles of an austere, self-sufficient, free life of the ‘Agrarian Myth’ that they present to them.

Also, he is conscious of the growing power of the United States as opposed to that of the weakened ‘aboriginals’:

As to their fear, we presume that our strength and their weakness is now so visible that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them, and that all our liberalities to them proceed from motives of pure humanity only. (1118)

That is to say, we do not crush them because we are humanitarian, but they know we could. However, Jefferson seems to be aware of the dishonesty of making use of commerce and manufacture to corrupt the Indians and obtain their lands, when he ends by saying: “I must repeat that this letter is to be considered as private” (1120).

7) To the Brothers of the Choctaw Nation. Dec. 17, 1803

Context: Written while Jefferson was President of the United States, this letter is to the Choctaw Indians, on the east of the Mississippi. They had been friends of the colonies in the Revolution but since they seemed to resist cultural assimilation and thus become United States citizens, Jefferson believed that they should be taken away from their land and sent west of the Mississippi River. This is the start of the age of Westward expansion begun with the Louisiana Purchase in February 1803 and followed by the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806).

Main Content: The letter shows that the Choctaw are willing to sell their lands on the Tonbigbee and the Mississippi to be able to pay for the debts they have with merchants. Jefferson wants to negotiate with them the price and shows special interest for those lands on the Mississippi. He next encourages them to adopt agriculture and industry and individual property and reminds them that the presents they got from the State are free.

Commentary: This letter is a confirmation of the success of the coercive plan Jefferson had communicated to Harrison. He addresses the leader of the Choctaw:

You say you owe a great debt to your merchants, that you have nothing to pay it with but lands, and you pray us to take lands, and pay your debt. The sum you have occasion for, brothers, is a very great one. We have never yet paid as much to any of our red brethren for the purchase of lands. (558)

First, Jefferson, the statesman, is glad to hear that and even tries to get the best selling price. Next, Jefferson, the agrarian, insists that the life of the small cultivator is a source of benefit and prosperity for them, in imitation of the white man:

I rejoice, brothers, to hear you propose to become cultivators to the earth for the maintenance of your families. [...] A little land cultivated, and a little labor, will procure more provisions than the most successful hunt [...] Compared with you, we are but as of yesterday in this land. Yet see how much more we have multiplied by industry. (559)

In these words, Jefferson promises the main elements of the ‘Agrarian Myth’ (the rightful possession of land, life in small communities, full of virtue and freedom), but we have seen how his acts in fact condemn the Indians to live the opposite values: dispossession of lands, corruption, dependence, commerce and manufacture.

8) To Jean Baptiste Say. Washington, Feb. 1, 1804

Context: In 1804, while Jefferson was in his first term as President he wrote a letter to Jean Baptiste Say (1767-1832), an important French economist and businessman. In this personal letter, Jefferson says he has read Malthus, Adam Smith and other writings on Political Economy, the main subject in the text.

Main Content: The main difference between the economy of the United States and Europe is the surplus of land and demography in the North American continent. His concern is again what the best economic system for America may be. An agrarian society continues to be his best option.

Commentary: Jefferson notes that European and American economies were very different. After reading Adam Smith and Malthus, he understands that in Europe population growth is not parallel to the production of food and consequently the death rate is very high; by contrast, in America, the immense fertile extension of lands “enables everyone who will labor to marry young, and to raise a family of any size” (1144). The starting point is that if circumstances are different, political economy must be different.

Given that, the question for Jefferson is what the best distribution of labor is to sustain American society. Agriculture and manufacture were the two most common occupations in his nation. Jefferson considers some options: putting manufacture on a same level with agriculture, making everyone work the land and letting manufacture stay in Europe or giving “moral and physical preference of the agricultural over the manufacturing man” (1144). This last is what he thinks is the best option, so it seems that Jefferson’s agrarianism will be dominant during his presidency.

9) *Second Inaugural Address. Mar. 4, 1805*

Context: This address was delivered when Jefferson began his second term as President of the United States (1805-09). Throughout those four years, there were two important preoccupations for him: that the Napoleonic wars could damage American commerce and that the process of Indian tribal removal to the Louisiana Territory would open land for American settlers.

Main Content: Jefferson's Second Inaugural Address makes a summary of the government's achievements during his first Presidential term, mainly peace with foreign nations, taxation on foreign manufacture and westward expansion, and tells about the principles that his new term would be based on: liberty, equality and human rights. He complains against the press, because it was critical with his administration and explains he wants to govern a term based on morality, respect and not neglect the problems of any American citizen.

Commentary: When he examines everything done in the first presidency (peace with foreign nations, lowering of taxes, territorial expansion, religious liberty, Indian affairs), Jefferson finds that taxation on commerce is the basis for the economic progress of his nation:

These contributions enable us to support the current expenses of the government, to fulfil contracts with foreign nations, to extinguish the native right of soil within our limits, to extend those limits, and to apply such a surplus to our public debts. (519)

It eventually allows the reduction of public debt through the extension of the limits of the nation. So it is not surprising that now in front of the Congress he will talk about the aboriginal inhabitants of the United States for two long paragraphs. He describes them innocent but disturbed by the coming of settlers:

Endowed with the faculties and the rights of men, breathing an ardent love of liberty and independence, and occupying a country which left them no desire but to be undisturbed. [...] They have been overwhelmed by the current. (520)

The state has introduced them to agrarian life, with instructors and tools, now that settlers have reduced their land limits for hunting, and Jefferson says teaching them to quit hunting and adopt farming is a humanitarian action, an act of ‘commiseration’ for their history on the country:

[H]umanity enjoins us to teach them agriculture and the domestic arts; to encourage them to that industry which alone can enable them to maintain their place in existence, and to prepare them in time for that state of society, which to bodily comforts adds the improvement of the mind and morals. We have therefore liberally furnished them with the implements of husbandry and household use. (520)

However, he denounces that is very difficult, because these ‘aboriginal inhabitants’ lack a sense of reason, they follow “the habits of their bodies, prejudice of their minds, ignorance, pride” or keep a “sanctimonious reverence for the customs of their ancestors” (520).

Therefore, as in the ‘Agrarian Myth’, Jefferson proclaims that agriculture leads to “that state of society, which to bodily comforts adds the improvement of the mind and morals” (520); also, as in the ‘Agrarian Myth’, economic self-sufficiency and family-size are shown as the ideal and more appropriate way of life to defend the state of property, “state of property, equal or unequal, which results to every man from his own industry, or that of his fathers” (522). However, we know that this is only a cover to a political decision to acquire new territory expand the limits, wealth and power of the United States. The question is how to criticize Jefferson and his attitude.

10) To Benjamin Austin. Monticello, Jan. 9, 1816

Context: This letter was addressed to Benjamin Austin (1752-1820), a Boston merchant and political writer. Jefferson had already retired from public service and he was centered on his major personal project of the construction of the University of Virginia. International politics at this time were framed by the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the opening of international trade routes. The emerging development of industry during the period reveals a change in Jefferson's frame of mind with respect to manufacture.

Main Content: It begins with Jefferson's commentary on events in France under Bonaparte. A central part of it is a response to Benjamin Austin's comments on how Jefferson's words in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Query XIX) are quoted to defend dependence on England for manufacture. Jefferson replies that times have changed and that now commerce and industry are both necessary for social comfort and for America's independence.

Commentary: We can see in this letter that Jefferson feels very proud of his historical legate: of the germ for free representative governments in Europe, whose parent tree should be cherished at home, which he defines an opportunity for "the amelioration of human condition" (1370). Immediately after he looks back and adds:

You tell me I am quoted by those who wish to continue our dependence on England for manufactures. There was a time when I might have been so quoted with more candor, but within the thirty years which have since elapsed, how are circumstances changed! (1370)

Now he seems to be ready to correct his 'opinion' of 1785 that the society that was needed was a predominantly agrarian one. Circumstances have now changed dramatically: when he wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* there was no war: manufacturing nations would cultivate friendship with customers; now the Napoleonic

Wars had injured American economy by excluding her ship from overseas commerce (1370-71). The situation and consequence are these:

We have experienced what we did not then believe, that there exists both profligacy and power enough to exclude us from the field of interchange with other nations: that to be independent for the comforts of life we must fabricate them ourselves. (1371)

And adds this totally new conclusion: “We must now place the manufacturer by the side of the agriculturalist” (1371), a conclusion of Jefferson’s thought on political economy, which goes on with a call for consumption of domestic manufactured products:

[E]xperience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort; and if those who quote me as a of a different opinion, will keep pace with me in purchasing nothing foreign where an equivalent of domestic fabric can be obtained, without regard to difference of price, it will not be our fault if we do not soon have a supply at home equal to our demand. (1371-72)

Jefferson is an outstanding political figure: he built his own political economy as he was building the nation.

5. A New Interpretation

As we know from our literature review, Hofstadter's concept of the 'Agrarian Myth' opened a controversial debate on Jefferson's agrarianism and his ethics. Some scholars defended Jefferson's integrity; others understood Jefferson as a person who was principally interested in political and economic power. As I pointed out, there is a third group of scholars that focused on Jefferson's evolution from agrarianism to the support of domestic manufacture. The first two were either too justifying or too condemnatory. This is why a new interpretation is needed, based on the main elements in the notion of 'Agrarian Myth', looking for a reading of Jefferson's moral, political and economic agrarianism that is not only justifying or condemnatory.

The analysis that I have made of ten different sources is directly essential to the question. I looked for the different components of the 'Agrarian Myth' in them: nature, community, virtue, freedom. As the documents were arranged in chronological order, it is relatively easy to reach a clear view of three phases in Jefferson's use of agrarianism:

1) First, a period around *Notes on the State of Virginia*, from the letter to John Jay in 1785 to that to James Madison in 1787. It is marked by his stay in France and a contrast between the two social models.

The three texts represent strongly Jefferson's idea in support of husbandry as the best means to bring progress to America, economically and socially, and also reaching social cohesion and the whole independence of the United States from the political and economic influence of European powers. The main argument that Jefferson gives is that the North-American continent has extensions of land enough to employ all citizens and even pay for national debt. America only needs to manufacture basic goods and bring from Europe the fine goods; commerce and manufacture only bring dependence and corruption. This way, American society will remain virtuous and healthy.

At this first stage, it seems very clear that Jefferson's attachment to the ideals rural life are reflected in the type of society he projects for the independent States, completely consonant with that of the yeoman in the 'Agrarian Myth'. It is shown in his letters to John Jay (1785), and James Madison (1787) and in his *Notes* too (1785, 1787) However, it is important to note also that these three texts show, first, that in France Jefferson has become aware of the role manufactures products play in society as generators of dependence and corruption and, second, that land in America may be a source, not only of virtue for society, but of capital for the well-being of the state. These two conclusions will have an influence on his actions as President.

2) A second period around and during Jefferson's First Term (1801-05), from the letter sent to Jean Nicolas D meunier in 1795 to that written to the Brothers of the Choctaw nation in 1803. This is the start of the Westward expansion begun with the Louisiana Purchase and the Indian removal beyond the Mississippi.

For the first time we see Jefferson taking up a small manufacturing activity, when he returned from France and his farm was in a very bad state. However, he continued defending the ideal of the 'Agrarian Myth', of living in small communities, supporting the self-sufficient small farms and believing the virtue of yeomen. These are exactly the arguments that he uses to convince the Indians to adopt agriculture and, more importantly, sell their lands to the United States, in his letters to both Handsome Lake (1795) and the leader of the Choctaw (1803).

However, at this stage, the other side of the Myth is shown. When Jefferson explains in a confidential letter to the Governor of Indiana (1803) the calculated plan of the Federal Government to make Native Americans run into debt by selling them manufactured products and thus grab their lands, we see that this is against the principles that he defends in the letters he writes to them, very consonant with the social model defended in the 'Agrarian Myth'. Economic dependence, removal, vice are basically opposite to Jefferson's idea of independence, right of land property, and virtue. The use of the

corruptive powers of commerce and manufacture against the Indians for political and economic ends is also a sign of the reverse side of the 'Agrarian Myth'.

3) A third period around Jefferson's Second Term (1806-09), from the letter to Jean Baptiste Say in 1804 to that written to Benjamin Austin in 1816. Jefferson's preoccupations here are the interference of the Napoleonic wars in domestic economy and the territorial expansion of the United States toward the west.

The texts here go from the reaffirmation of the preference of the agricultural over the manufacturing man (for economic and demographic reasons, in his letter to Say (1804), and mainly political reasons in his *Second Inaugural Address*), to the discovery of the importance of commerce for the survival of the nation in the letter written to Benjamin Austin in 1816: the United States must now manufacture for themselves or they will not survive without a chance to participate in the transoceanic trade routes.

No doubt, Jefferson's career is the revelation of a political man. The group of scholars that stressed the importance of the evolution of Jefferson's political thought were right when they identified that change. But they left the question of how to interpret it, as an ethical or merely political and economic act.

Making use of Holowchack's differentiation between 'ethics', which concerns life based on right actions (according to Aristotle), and the more recent concept, 'morality', which concerns people actions in given circumstances (2011), we can reread Jefferson's political evolution. Jefferson's agrarianism, if unethical, is 'moral' in the strict etymological sense of the term, because it is aware of all surrounding circumstances. It is 'moral', then, precisely because it is 'political' and 'economic', terms that for scholars on Jefferson's agrarianism could not be reconciled, but that Thomas Jefferson has shown are one the reverse of the other two: politics is giving an answer to pressing realities, ethical or unethical, humanitarian or repressive, but surely moral, because like the morals of each time, it will necessarily be circumstantial.

This new interpretation could enhance including a comment by Jefferson from his *Second Inaugural Address* (1805) as an example of how morality could come against ethics because of the particular political and economic circumstances. Thereby, although politicians would defend an ideal of moral commitment with the nation generally, sometimes political reality forces them to have not a disposition to ethical actions. In this, Jefferson said:

We are firmly convinced, and we act on that conviction, that with nations, as with individuals, our interests soundly calculated, will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties; (518)

6. Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson's intentions behind the actions he took for the development of his country have been a matter of controversy since Richard Hofstadter published his book *The Age of Reform* in 1955 and pointed out that Jefferson was one of the Americans that was part of the origin of what he designated the 'Agrarian Myth'.

Hofstadter's 'Agrarian Myth' is the rhetorical use of attachment to rural living (life in direct contact with nature, the small family farms, spiritual virtue and physical strength, freedom and independence from commercial values), made by the different political movements that were created between the 1890s and the 1920s to channel social discontent among farmers and immigrants in the emergence of capitalist America.

From the late 19th century until the 1930s, three political movements appeared in the United States: Populism, Progressivism and the New Deal. They were much related with the issue of recovering (Populism and Progressivism) or rejecting (the New Deal) the rural values of early America. Hofstadter realized that from the late 1890s capitalism and industry had come into contact with agriculture in America and that, in fact, at that time, traditional agrarian values had no place in the real economic and social situation: this had been progressively influenced by the European immigrants and industry and become more capitalist and heterogeneous.

In Hofstadter's view, their nostalgic attachment to an agrarian past was used to propagate the innocent origins of the United States at a time of growing urbanization, commerce and industry, as well as to excuse the fact that the economic speculation of lands and properties had been the foundation on which the country was built.

Thomas Jefferson's presidency coincided with that and was among those Americans that participated in the creation of the myth on the emergence of a commercial agriculture.

Despite the venerated position that Jefferson has in the history of the United States, scholars have been faced with the issue of clarifying the ethical nature of his political actions, ever since Hofstadter's book had come to light. On one hand, there are scholars such as Barbara McEwan or Leo Marx, who defend Jefferson's agrarianism as a moral vision, led by his passion for agriculture and love of the simple life of the small, self-sufficient landowner, and not by any commercial or political interests; on the other hand, there are those, such as Joyce Appleby or Charles A. Miller, who think Jefferson's agrarianism worked as political propaganda, shown by his eventual support to foreign manufactures, private investment, and pro-capitalist system, only focused on the economic progress of citizens; still, there is another intermediate approach, taken by scholars such as Adrienne Koch or A.W. Griswold, who think Jefferson's mind underwent an evolution, from the total defense of the rural lifestyle up to the acceptance of commerce and industry.

The simplistic reduction most of them make of Jefferson's motivations to 'morality' in opposition to 'politics' and 'economy' asks for a reappraisal of sources. To that end, I have analyzed ten of Jefferson's writings in which the defense on agrarian values is made use of or contradicted. In each text, I have looked the different key points that determine the concept of the 'Agrarian Myth' and evaluated how these relate to realities of the new market economy. The results indicate that while Jefferson propagates in public and private speeches and correspondence his belief that the only way to assure a moral nation is to develop an agricultural nation of free small landowners who enjoy their right of property and are distant from the evils and corruptions brought by commerce and industry, some of his most prominent political actions (especially the Indian Removal in Westward expansion) clearly contradict those humanitarian ideals. They also indicate that Jefferson changed his mind throughout the years, to adapt to the new realities, finally in favor of supporting industry and foreign manufactures for the economic progress of the United States.

Jefferson's agrarianism is a complex issue, and, in my view, there is not correct trying to give a clear explanation that could justify or condemn Jefferson's integrity.

Hollowchak (2011) made me realize that ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ must be taken as two different things. Jefferson’s writings taught me that whereas a political action may not be ‘ethical’ in the Aristotelian tradition, it is always ‘moral’, in the etymological sense of the term, that it is necessarily taken to suit the accompanying circumstances, either political or economic.

Re-reading Jefferson’s writings is a lesson on politics that the statesman himself learned throughout his life and delivered: his agrarian myth had to give way to a pragmatic politics of urban markets and commercial production.

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