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The farmers' happiness: a (neo) politics of amity

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While he is in Paris, as Minister Plenipotentiary of the 13 Confederate States of America, between 1784 and 1789, Jefferson is yearning after a special kind of happiness, that he thinks can be found only in America. "The only way to get an everlasting happiness is to return to America, does he write to William Short. [...] You will feel evidently that the happiness of your country is more tranquil, more pure and more permanent."¹

We can think he is homesick, for example when he writes to his friend Charles Bellini as soon as September 1785: "Behold me at length on the vaunted scene of Europe! [...] You are perhaps curious to know how this new scene has struck a savage of the mountains of America. Not advantageously, I assure you."²

Perhaps he makes here some use of his "savage" figure : "I'm savage enough to prefer the woods, the wilds, and the independence of Monticello, to all the brilliant pleasures of this gay capital", he writes to Geismar at the same period³. But for Jefferson happiness is really linked to America for deep reasons, that are all together personal, historical and political reasons. In many of his letters, we can catch a glimpse on the constant features of his representation of happiness, which is deeply rooted in the way he dreams his life in "the mountains of America", specially in Monticello: only America allows to find, or to build, a rural, conjugal happiness, that makes possible a very special kind of society, which Jefferson calls a "society of real friends", or a "rational society". And, more than for personal reasons, this type of "society" is necessary for the citizens to build up their political relationship and to constitute the republic itself in a righteous way.

I suggest then to consider the conception of happiness Jefferson elaborated, mainly during his Parisian years, in each of these three ways,

- 1) his personal representation of happiness,
- 2) the historical meaning of this American happiness, and
- 3) the political meaning Jefferson gives to the pursuit of happiness.

In each of the three dimensions of this American, rural and conjugal happiness, amity, not ordinary friendship, but a very special kind of "amity" holds a quite essential part.

1) Jefferson's personal representation of happiness: a « society of real friends »
Jefferson left us some reveries about what would be, for him, happiness.

For example in a travel letter to Mme de Tott, written as a pastiche of Sterne, Jefferson begins with some light hearted and trite remarks such as :

¹ Jefferson, to William Short, Paris March 24 1789, Boyd XIV 696.

² Jefferson, to Charles Bellini, Paris 30, 1785, Peterson 833.

³ Jefferson, to Geismar, Paris Sept. 6. 1785, Boyd VIII 499.

“ ‘A traveller, says I, retired at night to his chamber in an Inn, all his effects contained in a single trunk, all his cares circumscribed by the walls of his apartment, unknown to all, unheeded, and undisturbed, writes, reads, thinks, sleeps, just in the moments when nature and the movements of his body and mind require. Charmed with the tranquillity of his little cell, he finds how few are our real wants, how cheap a thing is happiness, how expansive a one pride. He views with pity the wretched rich, whom the laws of the world have submitted to the cumbrous trappings of rank: he sees him labouring through the journey of life like an ass oppressed under ingots of gold, [...]. He wonders that a thinking mind can be so subdued by opinion, and that he does not run away from his crowded house, and take refuge in the chamber of an Inn’,

At this point he comes to the evocation of Chaville, this village house “retired from Paris and its distractions”, where Mme de Tott had received Jefferson and Maria Cosway, the charming Italian lady he had met – and lost - a few months before:

I wonder so too, unless he has a Chaville to retire to, and a family composed like that of Chaville, where quiet and friendship can both be indulged.”

And suddenly appears, however, a strange tension:

“But between the society of real friends and the tranquillity of solitude the mind finds no middle ground.”⁴

Richard Hofstadter had made the diagnosis of a “profound ambivalence in Jefferson’s temper”, such as it compelled him to elaborate a “complex response to the antagonistic demands of Self and Society.”⁵

But are these “antagonistic demands” susceptible of conciliating on a middle ground, or rather aren’t they both satisfied in the second term of the opposition, to which Jefferson always finally refers: the “society of real friends”? Indeed such a society does not represent for Jefferson a strict situation of insulation, but, far from the obnoxious crowds of the Old World, rather this idea of a beneficent solitude he often expresses by the word of “independence”, that never means for him insulation, neither autarchy, but a fair and wholesome society, precisely a relation between “real friends”.

- 2) So let us see now what are the “real friends” really doing of their beneficent solitude and society. Their wholesome occupations will allow us to approach the historical, and hence, the political signification Jefferson gives to happiness and amity.

Jefferson’s 5 years stay in Paris gives him the occasion to build comparisons between France, a country highly representative of Europe as the *Old World*, and America, which is really for him, in numerous regards, the *New World*. Only the New World can offer to its citizens the opportunity to exert their just right to “the pursuit of happiness”, and happiness can truly exist only in America.

What is such happiness made of ?

- a – Ease and independence

A letter to Geismar, written during that period, shows that this link between happiness and America leans on historical and political reasons. As he was saying to Geismar that he preferred the “independence of Monticello” to the “brilliant pleasures of this gay capital”, Jefferson concludes: “I shall rejoin myself to my native country with new attachments, with exaggerated esteem for it’s advantages, for tho’ there is less wealth there, there is more

⁴ Jefferson, to Madame de Tott, Marseilles April 5, 1787, Boyd XI 271.

⁵ Richard HOFSTADTER, *The American Political Tradition: The men Who Made It*, New-York: The Random House, 1973, 24-25.

freedom, more ease and less misery.”⁶ We had met under Jefferson’s pen a strong criticism of the “wretched rich”, but we now see that he does not reject all material considerations: at the contrary, the state of “ease” plays a capital part in happiness. And, with the requirement of ease, happiness is not only personal, it does not only concern the individual dimension of life, but it depends of the type of society: avoiding too large statuses of “wealth” will also allow to fight “misery” and allow *all* citizens to reach a state of “ease”. We’ll also see that it is economical and material “ease” that allow the citizens to live in “freedom”, and specially, in “independence”.

- b But, more than ease and independence, happiness in America is also a rural and conjugal happiness, and words such as “the tranquil happiness of domestic life”⁷ can often be found in Jefferson’s letters.

Let us see for example how Jefferson follows, for Bellini, his comparison between the false happiness that diverts men in the Old World, and the true happiness that can be built only in America :

While the great mass of the people are here suffering under physical and moral oppression, I have endeavoured to examine more nearly the condition of the great, [...] to compare it with that degree of happiness which is enjoyed in America, by every class of people.

But here the “degree of happiness” does not depend upon material economic conditions. It is here rather a question of affective economics:

Intrigues of love occupy the younger, and those of ambition the elder part of the great. Conjugal love having no existence among them, domestic happiness, of which that is the basis, is utterly unknown. In lieu of this, are substituted pursuits which nourish and invigorate all our bad passions, and which offer only moments of ecstasy, amidst days and months of restlessness and torment. Much, very much inferior, this, to the tranquil, permanent felicity with which domestic society in America, blesses most of its inhabitants; leaving them to follow steadily those pursuits which health and reason approve, and rendering truly delicious the intervals of those pursuits.⁸

Jefferson has clearly understood the aristocratic standards of behaviour of European urban life, and relies them to the idleness and wealth of the “few” aristocrats of this society, and these are for him ancient, and even feudal standards and world. America, at the contrary, is free from large and crowded cities, and it will stay a rural country, a country of “cultivators of the earth”, as says the famous Query XIX of the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which is an article of political economy : “Let our workshops remain in Europe.”⁹ At the opposite, the conjugal regime of desire, exchange and satisfaction of the New World has not only an affective dimension, it plays two essential roles intimately linked with true happiness:

1) This conjugal regime corresponds to what is dictated by our moral sense, universally and mainly located in all men’s hearts – and secondarily understood by their reason : personal interest is not morally condemned by Jefferson – and by his Scottish Enlightenment masters – at the contrary, it delivers the real meaning of morality, but under one condition, which is that, for a “true and solid happiness”, as said Locke, we must consider our “true interest”¹⁰, not the false one, falsely drawn by a selfish “self love”. As a mutually benevolent relation of “true

⁶ Jefferson, to Geismar, *op. cit.* 500.

⁷ Jefferson, to James Monroe, Paris Dec. 18, 1786, Boyd X 613.

⁸ Jefferson, to Charles Bellini, *op. cit.*

⁹ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX, Peterson 291.

¹⁰ Jefferson, to James Monroe, Dec 18 1786, *op. cit.*, to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, Peterson 1335-1339.

interest”, conjugal love is presented by the moral sense and allows to reach a “true and solid happiness” with the help of our heart and our head.

2) Conjugal love also delivers a real model, a structural scheme, for every social, and even political, relationship:

With its relative solitude, with the space left between the families’ habitations, the rural country first ensures in a physical way the famous “independence” that places such an important part for the virtue of the Republic’s citizens.

But this independence, if it needs some space and solitude, does not mean insulation and autarky, but a truly beneficent and righteous society, or “commerce”, that is founded on the “tranquil happiness of domestic life”, and whose model can be found in conjugal love.

Jefferson often dreamt of such a society, and even offered to his closer friends to realize it.

But whence the necessity of this collection ? did he write as soon as 1771 to his friend Robert Skipwith, who was asking him a list of books. Come to the new Rowanty, from which you may reach your hand to a library formed on a more extensive plan (*this is to say: Jefferson’s own library*). Separated from each other but a few paces, the possessions of each would be open to the other. A spring, centrally situated, might be the scene of every evening’s joy. There we should talk of the lessons of the day, or lose them in Musick, Chess, or the merriments of our family companions. The heart thus lightened, our pillows would be soft, and health and long life would attend the happy scene. Come then, and bring our dear Tibby with you.¹¹

And all along the year 1784, he cultivates the same hopes, towards his friend James Madison, writing to him from Annapolis, on his way to Paris:

I hope you have found access to my library. I beg you to make free use of it. Key, the steward, is living there now and of course will be always in the way. Monroe is buying land almost adjoining me. Short will do the same. What would I not give you could fall into the circle. With such a society I could once more venture home and lay myself up for the residue of life, quitting all it’s contentions which grow daily more and more insupportable. Think of it. To render it practicable only requires you to think it so. Life is of no value but as it brings us gratifications. Among the most valuable of these is *rational society*. It informs the mind, sweetens the temper, cheers our spirits, and promotes health. There is a little farm of 140 as. adjoining me [...].¹²

I will underline these words of “rational society”, that seems the very heart of what Jefferson is waiting from the “society of real friends”. This society mostly consists in exchanging : books, music, lessons of the day, ideas. If such an exchange gives access to happiness, it is because it brings mutual advantages, and for that reason it seems to be the very model of the “righteous commerce” that is for Jefferson the fundamental relation which independent and virtuous citizens of the republic can and must cultivate.

3) We can then relate this “rational society” with the particular and fundamental political amity these citizens develop between themselves.

From the Old World to the New one, from his – extra-conjugal – passion for Maria Cosway, from whom Jefferson tears away to his return back to Monticello as his scene and sort of matricial place, his reading of human history is oriented by the realisation of the republic. And happiness, this rural and conjugal happiness I suggest to call the “farmers’ happiness”, is essential for the republic.

¹¹ Jefferson, to Robert Skipwith, Monticello, Aug. 3, 1771, Boyd I 78.

¹² Jefferson, to James Madison, Annapolis, Feb. 20, 1784, Boyd VI 550.

It is known that for Jefferson “farmers” are the virtuous citizens of the republic, because they are “independent”, in a strict economical and social meaning. They are husbandmen, heads of families, and, “depending only on their soil and their industry for their subsistence”¹³, they will build between themselves relations of a righteous commerce, following different degrees: from the exchange of the “lessons of the day” to that of the products of their industry, and to the “rational discussion” to combine their individual but righteous interests into a common interest and into the laws of political instances. If we add to this conception of the republic the two essential conditions Jefferson gives to the preservation of a true republic, that is to say a free press and public instruction of all citizens, to “enable them to read, to judge and to vote understandingly on what is passing”¹⁴, then we are here very close to the aristotelician “philia”, this specific amity of the deliberating citizens¹⁵.

This can be one of the reasons why, as soon as 1776, Jefferson raised the pursuit of happiness not only as one of the main natural rights every government should protect, but also as one of the “ends” that a just government should help the citizens to reach. Being a central element of happiness, amity is altogether an element in the construction of the political relation and a goal of this political relation we call a “republic”, which is, fundamentally, a great “rational society”.

Sources

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PETERSON, Merrill D. (ed.) (1984), *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, New-York, The Library of America

¹³ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX, Peterson 290.

¹⁴ Jefferson, to Littleton Waller Tazewell, Washington Jan. 5, 1805, Peterson 1150.

¹⁵ and reaching “concord, this political amity”, “when in a State we can see one same thought about general interests, citizens taking decisions and executing what they judged to be good in a general agreement”, as says Aristotle in his *Ethics to Nicomaque*, IX VI.