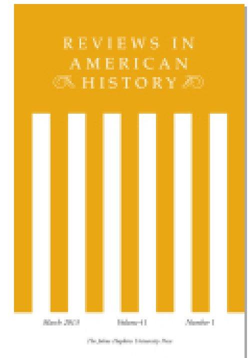
PROJECT MUSE®

Examining Possible Influences of the Classics on Early American Leaders



Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler

Reviews in American History, Volume 41, Number 1, March 2013, pp. 45-49 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2013.0015

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/501927

[Access provided at 6 Apr 2021 02:59 GMT from Carnegie Mellon University]

EXAMINING POSSIBLE INFLUENCES OF THE CLASSICS ON EARLY AMERICAN LEADERS

Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler

Peter S. Onuf and **Nicholas P. Cole, eds**. *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. xii + 316 pp. Illustrations and index. $45.00.

On October 13 and 14, 2008, a renowned group of scholars representing the academic disciplines of art, art history, classics, history, and political science convened at the American Academy in Rome in order to discuss the influence of the classical world—especially Greek and Roman texts and artistic forms—on early American leaders. Taken together, the authors of this resulting collection seem to agree to disagree on the extent to which individuals like Thomas Jefferson drew lessons from the classics, ranging from "prescriptive" to "merely illustrative" (p. ix) or—as with many of them—a complex mixture of both.

Three of the essays focus specifically on Jefferson: Peter Onuf's "Ancients, Moderns, and the Progress of Mankind: Thomas Jefferson's Classical World"; Caroline Winterer's "Classical Taste at Monticello: The Case of Thomas Jefferson's Daughter and Granddaughters"; and Richard Guy Wilson's "Thomas Jefferson's Classical Architecture: An American Agenda." Two prominently feature him in relation to others: Maurie D. McInnis' "George Washington: Cincinnatus or Marcus Aurelius?" and Eran Shalev's "Thomas Jefferson's Classical Silence, 1774–1776: Historical Consciousness and Roman History in the Revolutionary South." Onuf and Shalev share the perspective that Jefferson loved the classics—especially in their original languages—but did not draw practical applications from what he read. In Onuf's words, "Jefferson's deepest satisfaction came from the ancients' languages, not the wisdom of the philosophers" (p. 35). In Shalev's, Jefferson "saw the classics as a comforting luxury, a source of cerebral pleasure, and a symbol of social and intellectual status" (p. 238). When it came to politics, especially, the authors concur that Jefferson saw little to be gained from reading the classics because Americans were grounding their new country's government on people's ability to break from the past and chart new pathways to the future. Key to this transformation would be devising how to create a republican form of government based on federalism and progressivism. According to Shalev, "Classical antiquity was

irrelevant to what Jefferson considered the American—exceptional—situation" (p. 242).

Perhaps because their essays are more specific in their treatments of Jefferson's use of the classics, Winterer and Wilson find evidence that he borrowed directly from them as he fashioned an educational model for his daughters and granddaughters and when he designed buildings. Winterer emphasizes that Jefferson relied on the classics as a way of cultivating the development of "women of taste and learning" (p. 81). From his travels in Europe, Jefferson saw a world "that was palpably physical and enhanced by the delights of polite society" (p. 84), and the objects that he shipped back to Monticello formed the nucleus of the world he envisioned for the females in his family. In Winterer's view, Ellen Randolph Coolidge and her sisters were eventually able to break the bands of tradition and leverage their classical upbringings to achieve parity—in at least this one area—with the schooling that men of the time received.

For his part, Wilson emphasizes that Jefferson employed mathematical proportions and hierarchies that he learned from the classics in his architectural styles: "Jefferson looked very closely at classical precedent and usually followed the rules" (p. 109). Not only did Jefferson rarely deviate from the geometry, composition, and proportion of classical models, but also he wanted his creations to inspire and instruct, as with his design of ten different facades for the professors' pavilions adjacent to the lawn at the University of Virginia. Indeed, he helped produce "a cadre of trained architects and workers who could design and build" in the style of classical architectural forms as resurrected by the treatises of Giacomo Leoni and Charles Errand and Roland Freart de Chambray (p. 121).

Two additional essays address the influence of the classics on Jefferson less directly. Michael P. Zuckert's essay mentions Jefferson in the title, but it is less about Jefferson and the classics than an argument that he followed Lockean natural rights philosophy more than the views of Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson ("Thomas Jefferson and Natural Morality: Classical Moral Theory, Moral Sense, and Rights"). That said, Zuckert argues that, aside from Garry Wills' thesis in *Inventing America*, on balance there are few differences between John Locke's emphasis on natural rights and Hutcheson's moral sensitivities. In fact, Zuckert concludes that, in Hutcheson's writings, "any notion that the moral sense points to a politics drastically different from that associated with Lockean rights theory disappears" and that, by Jefferson's time, Locke's and Hutcheson's views had become compatible due to the writings of David Hume, Henry Home Kames, and others (p. 75).

"George Washington: Cincinnatus or Marcus Aurelius" by Maurie D. McInnis focuses, in the first portion of the essay, on Jefferson's probable influences on Jean-Antoine Houdon's marble sculpture of Washington that stands in the

Virginia state capitol. According to McInnis, Jefferson in all likelihood met with the famous French sculptor in his Paris studio and helped barter the effective combination of "the antique model with Washington's contemporary dress" that makes the sculpture so distinctive (p. 141). Enhancing support for this interpretation is McInnis' sensitive handling of the complex and vitally important diplomatic relations between France and the United States during Washington's first administration and Jefferson's willingness to compromise his antipathy for the Society of the Cincinnati with the need to placate French sensitivities. According to McInnis, Jefferson did this by commissioning a marble bust of the Marquis de Lafayette wearing the symbol of the Society of Cincinnati for the City of Paris (presented in 1786) but requested that emblem be removed from Houdon's presentation of Washington. The effect, according to McInnis, is striking because Washington appears "as Cincinnatus, not Washington as a member of the Society of Cincinnati," since Houdon's statue presents him as a man relinquishing power (p. 151). (In the second part of the essay, McInnis shows how Virginians in the 1850s found the need to recast Washington's image as a military leader and commissioned a sculpture presenting him in the image of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius to accomplish that purpose.)

The other essays in this volume touch indirectly on Jefferson but are more expansive in their coverage, including focusing on Founders such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and George Mason, who embraced classical influences, or Thomas Paine and Benjamin Rush, who did not. Nicholas P. Cole acknowledges that the problem of pinning down the precise influence of the classics on the other Founders proves to be as problematic for them as it is for Jefferson ("America and Ancient and Modern Europe"). Cole finds what he terms "classical motifs" (p. 171) to be prevalent in the writings of Adams, Hamilton, and others, but he expresses doubt that one can automatically assume that their readings of the classics or histories of Greece and Rome carried over directly to their political ideas. According to Cole, the classics primarily provided an important backdrop for the Founders' criticisms of the British Constitution in the period leading to the American Revolution and provided inspiration for their commitment to republicanism.

For his part, Peter Thompson ("Aristotle and King Alfred in America") shifts attention from the Founders' attachment to the classics to their interest in "the ancients" more generally, especially "Anglo-Saxon precedent imagery [that] addressed American population growth and the corruption of government more neatly than Greek or Roman writing on government" (p. 210). Especially for Jefferson, Anglo-Saxon precedents more than those of the classics provided "core values . . . that should be transmitted across generations," including attachment to "the federative principle" (p. 213).

Paul A. Rahe ("Cicero and the Classical Republican Legacy in America") and Jennifer T. Roberts ("Pericles in America: The Founding Era and Beyond")

concur. In Rahe's telling, patriots like Paine and Rush had no place for the classics because these stories idealized war, royalty, and titles. This antipathy for ancient stories was especially strong for Adams, Rahe argues, because Rome meant empire and luxury as well as corruption, vice, and venality—callings that eventually brought the Romans down: "Pride drove the Romans to attempt the conquest of an empire, and strength and courage enabled them to succeed" (p. 255).

Just because the Founders did not read the classics for precedents, however, does not indicate that they did not owe them a debt. Rahe emphasizes that the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and others "kep[t] alive the memory of self-government through a long epoch in which despotism was the norm . . . . What made the American Revolution truly revolutionary was the Americans' commitment to an understanding of man's inalienable rights that not only distinguished them from the slave-holding, empire-building republicans of the past but also set them in opposition to the ancient example" (pp. 256–57).

As for Roberts, Pericles and other Greek authors played less of a role in Revolutionary America than in later generations because they were too democratic for the Founders. Regarding Pericles specifically, Roberts argues that he "served as an emblem of the danger of too much power in the hands of one man" during the Revolutionary period (p. 279); but by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, orators (especially Edward Everett) invoked his name as representative "of the newly popular democratic ethos" (p. 293). Then, in the twentieth century, orators portrayed the Athenian statesman as "the champion of an ominous militarism," which convinces Roberts that, both for the Founders and American leaders in later periods, "modern history impress[es] itself on ancient more often than the other way around" (p. 293).

In the foreword to the book, Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy (Saunders Director, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello) reveals that the authors of these essays circulated their efforts in advance in order to stimulate a discussion of their views. It would have been wonderful to hear these discussions, given the various—and often conflicting—views of the contributors and to have heard whether the give-and-take addressed important topics outside those the authors chose to address. Consider, for example, the fact that only a handful of the authors touched on the topic of slavery (Thompson, Rahe, and McInnis) and that none addressed the fact that, in *Notes on the State of Virginia,* Jefferson compared Virginian slavery directly to Roman slavery. In *Notes*, Jefferson concluded, on the one hand, that Roman slaves (especially in the Augustan age) were much more severely treated than slaves in America; on the other, he conceded that some Roman slaves became artists and scientists and were frequently tutors for Roman children. "But they were of the race of whites," Jefferson concluded. "It is not their condition then, but nature, which has produced the distinction." He then observed

that it was the color of Africans that most differentiated them from Roman slaves. Consequently, "among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture" (*Notes*, Query XIV).

Similarly, Shalev in his essay calculates that, in the run-up to the Revolution, Jefferson was "silent" regarding classical references. Especially notable for Shalev is the fact that in his most important writing during the period 1774 to 1776, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, Jefferson "referred to and elaborated an idealized version of Anglo-Saxon history, and had no reference whatsoever to classical history" (p. 231). Shalev may be technically correct in this assertion, but it is difficult to believe that when Jefferson wrote some passages he was confining his views to the Saxons exclusively, as for example: "Single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day; but a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period . . . too plainly prove a deliberate, systematical plan of reducing us to slavery." In short, one wonders if slavery—whether classical or modern—surfaced as a topic for discussion among the conference attendees.

Finally, a quote from John Adams that Cole used in his essay from "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" (1765), reveals just how difficult it is to try to parse classical references from the texts of the Founders. According to Adams, American settlers were determined to break from European corruptions that linked church and state:

> They knew that government was a plain, simple, intelligible thing, founded in nature and reason, and quite comprehensible by common sense. They detested all base services and servile dependencies on the feudal system. They knew that no such unworthy dependencies took place in the ancient seats of liberty, the republics of Greece and Rome; and they thought all such slavish subordinations were equally inconsistent with the constitution of human nature and that religious liberty with which Jesus had made them free. [p. 188]

Except for the religious reference at the end of the quotation, no one in early America would have agreed with Adams' statement more than Thomas Jefferson, which suggests that—perhaps not unlike the authors of these essays—the classics offered lessons for early American leaders that were complex and even, perhaps, contradictory.

Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler is professor of history in Idaho State University. He is the author of *"I Tremble for My Country": Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia Gentry* (2006).