

Thomas Jefferson and the American "Provincial" Mind

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WHAT WE THINK of Thomas Jefferson is likely to express precisely what we believe America is all about. For this most versatile and likeable of the Founding Fathers looms large in our history and in the symbol and imagery by which our imaginations have colored the past. For some, Jefferson is the preeminent voice of the libertarian spirit, an apostle of individualism who decried the tyrannous power of the state. Others prefer to bring Jefferson into an egalitarian tradition that has motivated and sponsored the reformist ideals of the country. And some, no doubt, would like to keep the sage of Monticello out of politics altogether. For these, Jefferson is the eighteenth-century man of science and reason, of natural religion, and the spokesman for liberal ideals in education—indeed, a man of cosmopolitan tastes and eclectic interests.

When any emboldened researcher attempts to carve out new meanings from Jefferson and his world, he is likely to invite swift retaliation from those on whose cherished principles he has trampled. New books on Jefferson appear with regularity, and two recent ones have been among the most controversial. When Fawn Brodie introduced *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*¹ in 1974, she invited us to take a fresh look at the sentimental Jefferson, a

man of heart and feeling, whose private passions go further, she believed, in explaining his career than does the cerebral man of traditional portrayal. Recently Garry Wills made new scholarly waves with his *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*.² It is this work that I wish to use as a point of departure for a discussion of Jefferson and an assessment of his meaning for the American experience. But first, why has Wills provoked both praise and hostility with this fresh interpretation of the famous author of the Declaration and what are the large implications of his departure?

Although Wills' *Inventing America* discusses a whole range of issues surrounding the writing of the Declaration, and though it surveys many facets of Jeffersonian opinion, reviews of the work to date confirm that controversy centers mostly on one question: what were the intellectual influences on Jefferson? The object of Wills' attack is the renowned Carl Becker, author of *The Declaration of Independence* (1922). As Wills correctly notes, it is this work that confirmed and has perpetuated Jefferson's reputation as a Lockean. The traditional view asserts that Jefferson read and wholly imbibed John Locke's *Second Treatise* on government and helped stamp its individualistic ideals on the American

political mind. But Wills wants to shift that emphasis completely. Finding no evidence at all that Jefferson even read the *Second Treatise*, Wills locates the sphere of influence on Jefferson in the Scottish Enlightenment. The evidence is largely circumstantial, but, as we shall see, not at all improbable, that Jefferson found a wealth of useful meaning in the moral sense philosophy of Francis Hutcheson and the Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid. Both these thinkers, and the moralist especially, articulated a science of the mind that also embraced a democratic and social philosophy. It is the moral sentiments, they believed, that confirm our nature as social beings and point the way to the fullest realization of our human nature. Jefferson, it is alleged, seized the larger meaning of these truths and applied them to a variety of social questions that agitated eighteenth-century America.³

The major implication of Wills' shifting from England to Scotland is starkly clear. Kenneth S. Lynn, reviewing for *Commentary*, read *Inventing America* and immediately smelled a rat. Lynn thought he knew what Wills was up to. He wanted to discredit Locke, for Locke understood government from the basis of the individual, the free individual who voluntarily consents with other free individuals to form a political state that will defend their sacred individual rights. But such a philosophy, it is readily apparent, threatens the collectivist spirit that Wills cherishes, and so does damage to modern liberalism. Thus, according to Lynn, Wills has refashioned the old Declaration of Independence into a "communitarian manifesto" conveniently imported from Scotland. Lynn decries this insidious effort and dismisses Wills' book as "the tendentious report of a highly political writer whose unannounced but nonetheless obvious aim is to supply the history of the Republic with as pink a dawn as possible." Moreover, considering the many favorable receptions of *Inventing America*, Lynn regrets that the work "is a telling indication of the intellectual temper of the times."⁴

Whether Lynn is judging Wills from a

specific, conservative point of view I know not. Certainly, he seems to speak the mind of those Jeffersonians, A. J. Nock most notably, who find in the Virginian the cherished values of individual liberties articulated against the larger claims of society and their attending collectivist principles. But I intend to argue that it would be most regrettable if conservatives and traditionalists rashly dismissed Wills' thesis and left Jefferson to the liberals. If this is Wills' intention, he is at least not heavy-handed in executing it. Indeed, it could also be said, as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has noted, that Jefferson valued a society drawn and held together by the moral sentiments because such a society obviated the need for the leviathan state, and that the use of the Scottish *philosophes* helped Jefferson articulate his anti-statism.⁵ I wish to approach this matter from a different point of view, to show that Wills' thesis is highly plausible, but is best appreciated within the larger social context of Jefferson's time. Jefferson, I believe, lived and thought within the framework of eighteenth century provincial culture and from this context came the most enduring and useful of the Jeffersonian precepts. The erosion of those values under conditions of contemporary liberalism merits our serious attention.

Our first insights on this issue and on Jefferson's place within the provincial culture derive from some recent, fresh interpretations of American history. The "new political" history, or "cultural politics," as historian Robert Kelley calls it, is an effort to understand the larger patterns of American political life, including political parties, as expressions of cultural-religious styles in America, and the rivalries generated by them. We shall confine our review of this material to colonial America and Jefferson's period, although readers may wish to consult Kelley's *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century for an extended examination to 1877*.⁶

American political life in the colonial period directly extended the cultural patterns of Britain and may be seen in the

most general sense as a warfare between what I shall call provincial and cosmopolitan culture. Britain itself was of course a series of cultural provinces with the ruling English element constituting an elitist and dominating force. Toward its peripheral realms, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, the English maintained an attitude of hauteur. They saw in these provinces a wild, hill people, speaking the King's English with a barbaric brogue. They were excessively religious, in an emotional, moralistic, and superstitious way. They constituted an out party politically that joined with a Whig party within the realm and merged with other religious Dissenters from Anglicanism and its Tory affiliations. Joining this alienated set with increasing force in the middle eighteenth century were the British colonies of North America.⁷

Wherever it is found, provincial culture likely displays certain habits of mind, and we should bear these in mind as we consider Jefferson and the American situation. With great consistency, provincial culture is marked by a religiosity that helps cement its bonds and defines its traditional culture. It values the ties of affection and to this extent cherishes the sentiments of the heart over the dictates of the head. It is often seen for this reason to be anti-intellectual or anti-rational, judging the cerebral life as cold and impersonal, and associating this style with cosmopolitanism. Provincial culture is democratic, often sentimentally so. It exercises a levelling spirit. It celebrates the common people and embraces a folk wisdom which it poses against the formalism and academic style of the cosmopolitan centers. Provincial culture is clannish in its ways; it values the local; it nourishes the ties that bind and the habits of life that describe its unique and special ways. From the cosmopolitan perspective, provincial culture seems crude, vulgar, primitivistic and certainly unsophisticated. For cosmopolitan culture is marked above all by a love for rationalism and scientism; it has a noticeable attraction for the theoretical and abstract, for the universal in contrast to the particular, the unique, and the individual.

Several historians in recent years have come to see the American Revolution as a cultural conflict, one described by the traditional rivalries of provincialism and cosmopolitanism. (These are my own terms, but other historians have described the colonial situation in a manner that conforms essentially with patterns these terms describe.) Their studies emphasize the extent to which the American consciousness was shaped by a Dissenter, mostly Puritan-Calvinist mentality, and recognize the powerful, shaping force of the Great Awakening and the sense of common identity it gave to many persons heretofore separated by colonial boundaries. For the Dissenters, the Anglican Church became an object of fear and opposition, symbolizing not only unlawful ecclesiastical authority but a High Church style that befitted the aristocratic and pompous ways of the cosmopolitan English.⁸ The religious-cultural forces compelled Americans to see themselves as virtuous republicans, maintaining a simple, unsophisticated way of life, united by the grace born of an inward conversion and spread by the emotional zeal of a vigorously preaching ministry. Americans thus developed a provincial culture by which they came increasingly to differentiate themselves from Mother England, but more importantly the provincial culture set Americans against the elements of cosmopolitanism within their own ranks. Hence in Massachusetts, for example, Sam Adams emerged as the leading spokesman for old Puritan communities in the colony that looked with suspicion on aristocratic Boston, prominently symbolized by Governor Thomas Hutchinson. Hutchinson could never understand the wild emotionalism of the common folks' Puritanism and found their piety distasteful. He spoke the cosmopolitan view of many other Americans, several of them now seeking the rock of refuge in the stolid ways of the Anglican church, and generally convinced that the safest path for America was in preserving transatlantic ties with the home country and its culture.⁹ On the night of August 26, 1765, a band of Boston com-

moners burned the governor's mansion to the ground.¹⁰

We must now turn to the central issue of this essay. The provincial roots of the American Revolution are readily visible in New England and in other colonies like New York and Pennsylvania. They are less obvious in Virginia, where Anglicanism was the prevailing religion and where English settlers first came not so much to escape as to fulfill English social and political ideals. But Virginia furnished American rebels in abundance, Jefferson among them. The key, I believe, is that Jefferson came to see the issues of his day in terms of provincialism, with its republican, moral, and sentimental bonds, and the cosmopolitan and imperial ways of England that threatened to destroy them. Indeed, Jefferson's value to us as an American thinker hangs critically on his own articulation of the generic provincial mind.

By virtue of his personality and temperament, Jefferson was clearly attracted to those qualities that describe provinciality. Fawn Brodie's challenging interpretation of Jefferson resorts too frequently to psychology to explain Jefferson's behavior, but it remains nonetheless a most useful portrait of the sentimental Virginian. Her emphasis should not, of course, lead us away from Jefferson the thinker—a man at home in the cosmopolitan culture of the Enlightenment and ranging far and wide among the scientific literature of the day. Jefferson was man thinking, experiencing throughout his life the rewards of intellect and always appreciative of the cultural achievements of cosmopolitanism.¹¹

But Jefferson, as Brodie shows, was also man feeling. Here was a person who handwrote some 18,000 personal letters to sustain his need for human intimacy. This was the Jefferson who commuted back and forth between the arena of politics and the confinements of Monticello, who even while vice-president spent many of his days at home in Charlottesville. Jefferson shunned the gay, intellectual capital of Virginia and built his domicile on the fringes of the colony, looking away from the

settled Tidewater and out toward the hinterland. And we notice above all how out of place this provincial American felt in the old country of Europe; how he looked with fright on the hedonism of British aristocratic life; how he remarked with great misgivings the loss of domestic bonds among the uninhibited Parisians; how, as he commented while in Paris, "I am savage enough to prefer the woods, the wilds, and the independence of Monticello, to all the brilliant pleasures of this gay capital." Jefferson's provincial character seemed to intensify the more he immersed himself in the cosmopolitan society of European social circles. And in the candor of his private letters, Jefferson reveals to us his innermost longings: "I had rather be shut up in a very modest cottage, with my books, my family, and a few old friends, dining on simple bacon, and letting the world role on as it liked, than to occupy the most splendid post which any human power can give."¹²

The factor of personality is an important clue to Jefferson's thought. Bearing in mind his sentimental attachments to home and family, to the bonds of affection wherever found, we can appreciate why Jefferson came so strongly to defend provinciality. Moreover, we can also shed light on the question of Jefferson's sources and why the philosophy of the Scots could be so compelling for him. Jefferson, it will be maintained, could perceive in Hutcheson and Reid an astute defense of just those equalities that created and sustained provincial ties, and the wider use of their ideas further elaborated for Jefferson the rationale by which provincial Americans could articulate their claims for independence of Great Britain. Probably it is true that, in view of the loss of Jefferson's early writings and letters, we may never successfully ascertain those influences that shaped Jefferson's thinking. But Wills' case for the Scottish *philosophes* has much to be said for it. At the very least, striking parallels can be found between Jefferson and the Scottish thinkers. And what is especially important to note, is the fact that the Scottish Enlightenment itself ex-

pressed a provincial culture, a fact that provides, by virtue of the parallel with Jefferson, an important insight on the American.

The Scottish Enlightenment drew on many sources. It spoke the views of a new generation of Moderates in the Church of Scotland, who sought to liberate the Church from its glacial age of Calvinism. In the Scottish universities, a new modern curriculum enabled these institutions to surpass Oxford and Cambridge in academic prestige. And in philosophy, Hutcheson, James Beattie, Reid, and Dugald Stewart resisted the empiricism of Locke and Hume, their fellow Scot, to establish intuitionism. Recently, we have come to understand the social sources of the Scottish Enlightenment, a movement that articulated the special provincial consciousness of Scotland as a kind of subculture distinguished from English ways. For all its apparent cosmopolitanism, its rationalism, and its modernism, and even its occasional aping of English mannerisms, the Scottish Enlightenment pronounced the ideas of an intellectual community of the North that recognized its special place within the larger British society. A brief examination of the intellectual themes of the Scottish Enlightenment suggests precisely how it manifested provincial values and how Jefferson could derive such extended use for himself and for America from it.¹³

Thomas Reid provided the label "Common Sense" for the philosophy he defended. Vexed by the unreasonable and implausible doctrines spun by the thinkers of his day, Reid defended certain truths—that real things exist, that we do know real objects—which, he felt, should be obvious to all. And there was a sense of urgency about his protests, as though more were at stake than some philosophers' war of words. Wills takes great pains to show how Reid defended the democratic intellect against the overly sophisticated but perverse intellectualism of the professionals, and he quotes from Reid's *Inquiry Into the Human Mind* to illustrate Reid's charge that genius "adulterates" common

sense.¹⁴ If anything, Reid's vexations intensified in his later writings. One section from the 1785 *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* I find especially suggestive. Here Reid is protesting against Hume's insistence that we never know real objects, only images in our mind. Thus, says Reid:

We have a remarkable conflict between two contradictory opinions, wherein all mankind are engaged. On the one side, stand all the vulgar, who are unpractised in philosophical researches, and guided by the uncorrupted primary instincts of nature. On the other side, stand all the philosophers ancient and modern; every man without exception who reflects. In this division, to my great humiliation, I find myself classed with the vulgar.¹⁵

Now Thomas Reid was no romantic Wordsworthian and was not reading some uncorrupted intuitive wisdom into the generality of the human race. Reid had arrived to his philosophical chair at Glasgow from his extended service with the Moderate branch of the Scottish Presbyterian clergy. A man of scientific interests and gentlemanly tastes, he has much in common with Jefferson. But it is still possible to see much in Reid here that ties him to the democratic culture and Whig political preferences of Scotland and its self-conscious differentiation from aristocratic England. He stands apart at least from David Hume, with his cosmopolitan ties with France, and his pronounced Tory biases. Reid speaks the conviction that the human mental faculties, exercising their native strengths and pursuing a course of careful cultivation and training, do not deceive. The common intellect can know the world first-hand and reliably. When philosophy itself follows the right course, it only the more confirms the native truths of the common human intellect. This is what Wills labels Reid's "egalitarian epistemology."¹⁶

Even more useful for republican ideals, and for provincial values, especially, was the moral sense philosophy of Francis Hutcheson. It is most thoroughly stated in his

A System of Moral Philosophy, (1755). What is important here is not so much Hutcheson's defense of the moral faculty, or conscience, and the access to universal moral truths that it affords, but Hutcheson's linking of moral truths to the affections. The perception of moral truths, and hence the possibility of the moral human community, was not an affair of the intellect; it was the operation of the sentiments. Hutcheson, as Wills shows, celebrated the moral faculty as the highest in the human galaxy. Moreover, he universalized it, made it the equal and common possession of all. Insofar as human beings are equal in any real sense, then, they are so in their possession of a moral sense. Thus both Hutcheson and Reid democratized philosophy. How might Jefferson profit by their examples?

Wills believes that Jefferson could get extended mileage from Hutcheson because he laid the foundations for a philosophy of social organism. It is the moral sense that makes us social beings and establishes the priority of community over the claim of individual sovereignty. In short, Wills believes that Jefferson could seize an implicit communitarianism in Hutcheson and pose it against the influence of Locke's individualism. One could argue, then, that since it is the moral sense that makes human society and creates the ties of community, it is the social unit that is the source of our rights and liberties. Wills therefore asserts, "No politics built upon the moral sense could make self-interest the foundation of the social contract."¹⁷ And just this conclusion has led critics like Lynn to charge Wills with a socialistic theft of the anti-statist Jefferson. My conviction is, that Jefferson did not use Reid and Hutcheson in this manner and that Wills rushes too fast to judgment in interpreting as he does. But neither is he far off the mark. I shall try to show that what Jefferson perceived in the teaching of the Scots was a usable defense of provincial culture and provincial values *as such*, and that Jefferson's own writings on a variety of matters point to provincialism as their main focus.

The egalitarian strands in provincial culture are clearly indicated by its celebration of the common. It often finds in the simple and uninstructed wisdom of the *volk* an authority that is reliable and safe. The faith in the democratic intellect can, we have noticed, constitute a mistrust of formal, constituted authority or of the formalistic rationalism associated with cosmopolitan culture. Jefferson himself spurned the romantic extremes of this faith and certainly spoke at length for formal education and the training of a leadership class. But Jefferson did go to the democratic extremes in defending the moral sense, as opposed to the intellect. All of mankind meet on this common plain. Jefferson's maxim is well-known: "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well or often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."¹⁸ Here Jefferson not only shows his ties to the democratic philosophy of the provincial Scots, he also specifically embraces provincialism's cult of the natural against the sophisticated, commonality against formalism.

More important, Jefferson also shared the Scottish inclination to place the moral faculty with the sentiments. In his famous letter to the infatuated Maria Cosway, Jefferson sets his "heart" and "head" in lively combat against one another. The heart presents its self-defense to its rival: "To you [nature] allotted the field of science, to me that of morals." Then the heart of Jefferson extends its apologia in a manner that clearly bespeaks provincial values:

In denying to you [the head] the feelings of sympathy, of benevolence, of gratitude, of justice, of love, of friendship, she [nature] has excluded you from their control. To these she has adapted the mechanisms of the heart. Morals were too essential to the happiness of man to be risked on the uncertain combinations of the head.¹⁹

Here the sentiments and bonds of affection, the critical components of provincialism, claim superiority over the scien-

tific rationalisms more often associated with cosmopolitan culture.

Provincial values appear in other aspects of Jefferson's thoughts. Perhaps the most famous and revealing of the many conflicts of his career was his fight against Alexander Hamilton and the industrial and commercial system envisioned by Hamilton. This was a classic contest between the Virginian who, when he spoke of "my country" spoke of Virginia, where his roots were deep and where his life's affections lie, and between the man without roots, the man who had only an adopted country, who sprang from uncertain family origins, belittled state politics, and never understood the provincial ways of Americans. Jefferson's warfare against the specter of Hamiltonianism is usually described by a reference to Jefferson's pronounced agrarian values. But Jefferson embraced agrarianism mostly because that way of life was more expressive of provincialism and more conducive to its maintenance. What loomed in the Hamiltonian vision of America, Jefferson clearly feared, was the breaking of the bonds of personal closeness and their replacement by the impersonal cash-nexus of the modern banking and commercial systems. These would substitute connections made only by accounting books for those agrarian communities where human contacts flourished. Indeed, Jefferson described merchants, along with other types, as threats to provincial ways. "The mere spot they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gains." In short, "the merchants have no country."²⁰ Furthermore, it was when Britain became a commercial power, embraced empire and forsook its own provincial character, that it also became tyrannous. For "money, and not morality, is the principle of commerce and commercial nations."²¹ Jefferson even warned Americans against the temptations of cosmopolitan culture in the form of "English books, English prejudices, [and] English manners" and trusted American resistance to these lures to "our agricultural citizens, in their unsophisticated minds,

their independence and their power."²²

Jefferson's provincial cast of mind appears in other ways, but one matter in particular is illustrative, and enables us to move from Jefferson to some reflections about provincialism and contemporary America. Jefferson's deistic religion is well-known today, as it was notorious in his own time. Indeed, his religious rationalism is another facet of Jefferson that would seem to tie him to cosmopolitan culture. But on this issue too, a certain sentimentality surfaces and brings religion also within the sphere of the provincial character. Thus, as scholars have noticed, virtually the sum of Jefferson's religious leanings are characterized by moral values. What he admired in Christ was the moral purity of his teachings. "Of all the systems of morality, ancient or modern, which have come under my observation, none appear to me so pure as that of Jesus." But as Jefferson almost always found the life of moral health among provincial people, so also does he describe Christ as one of this kind. It was the "innocence of his character" that he admired in Christ and "the genuine and simple religion of Jesus" that he hoped to see recover its influence in the world.²³

But even more, it is possible to describe Jefferson's attitudes toward the churches in terms of a familiar conflict between provincial and cosmopolitan behavior. For the history of religion, as Jefferson perceived it, was the corruption of the purity of Christ's teachings by the dogmatic falsehoods spun from the human intellect, and the further corruption of the original, provincial character of the Church by the bureaucracy and organizational superstructure that replaced it. Religion even became an affair of the political state and its influence for good died as quickly. Religion and the state manifested similar evils. Government "has its hierarchy of emperors, kings, princes, and nobles, as [the Church] has of popes, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests." Jefferson's judgments reinforce his provincial biases and his democratic epistemology on which it is founded. For Christ's moral truths spoke to the general and common intellect, and the

moral sense of all persons. It was the distortions of officialdom that perverted these truths. "The priests have so disfigured the simple religion of Jesus that no one who reads the sophistication they have engrafted on it...would have conceived it could have been fathered on the sublime preacher of the Sermon on the Mount." As Reid before him denounced the corrupting wiles of philosophers, so did Jefferson castigate the intellectual impurities that emerged with the cosmopolitan and Catholic Church. For "the dogmas of religion, as distinguished from moral principles," have become "abstractions unintelligible" to the general lot of humanity.²⁴ Very soon after Jesus, the simple religion "became muffled up in mysteries, and has ever since been kept in concealment from the vulgar eye."²⁵ Christianity was never so pure as when it once thrived as the provincial culture that bound a community in the ties of moral sentiments elaborated by its great leader.

Provincial and cosmopolitan culture, I believe, furnish useful frames of reference for understanding much of American history. To a large degree, the American Revolution was, as Jefferson and others understood it to be, a revolt of republican, puritan America, against the whole structure, style, and apparatus of British imperial culture. Later in the early to middle-nineteenth century, a broad religious culture, constituted of Protestant evangelicalism, assumed an imperial character and governed much of the social, moral, and political ideals of Americans. In turn, persons and groups outside of this cultural mainstream, German Lutherans, Irish Catholics, and others, felt the oppressive strains of this moralistic force and formed pockets of provincial culture in its midst. With the apparent demise of these religious rivalries, and their ethnic-national attributes, the clash of provincialism and cosmopolitanism may seem to have lost force and relevance for contemporary America. But I think this is not the case, and believe that Jeffersonian values may illuminate the issue. Two books that have become influential in the renaissance

of intellectual conservatism in the 1970's describe the problem.

Robert Nisbet, in *Twilight of Authority*, makes a reference to the "new clerisy of power" that has emerged in the recent American past. This element is described by a union of government officialdom and the intellectual class. It has its seat of power in Washington and it dominates American life from that center. Its cosmopolitan characteristics are indicated by its intellectual formalism, its proclivity for academic scientism, and above all, its bureaucratic language. Here, in fact, one is tempted to say that the aparatchiki speak a language that the natives do not know. Obscurantist, pompous, and inflated, this speech illustrates the isolation and remoteness of this imperial element from the local and provincial mannerisms of the rest of the country. The situation describes for Nisbet one of the themes of his book, the withering of authority and its replacement by an awesome power that has passed by default into the hands of this officialdom and the encyclical decrees by which it governs all aspects of American life. For by genuine, and safe authority, Nisbet means that which emerges from the normal interactions of people, their bonds of tradition and affection,—an authority that retains power within the realm of the local and the familiar. Not surprisingly, after Nisbet explored aspects of this problem from several points of view, he concluded with a plea for the recovery of pluralism.²⁶

His case for pluralism is a useful, contemporary comment on this Jeffersonian concern. As Jefferson denounced the alienation of affections engendered by British arrogance, feared the impersonal cash-nexus of modern commercialism, and lamented ecclesiasticism's corruption of the simple morality of Jesus, Nisbet sees similar sources of alienation in an over-legislated, over-adjudicated civilization, one in which all human actions fall within formally rationalized and legalized schema. For, "when every relationship in society becomes a potentially legal relationship, expressed in adversary fashion,

the very juices of the social bond dry up, the social impulse atrophies."²⁷ The recovery of provincial integrity is the safest means of resisting this tendency, and it is also the safest means of establishing a protective barrier between the individual and an imperial government.²⁸

In the view of Michael Novak, the clash between provincial and cosmopolitan culture has become a contemporary war. The dramatis personae are more specific in Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* than in Nisbet's book, and Novak's narrative is more personal and emotional, but equally insightful. For this war pits the white, ethnic population of America against the culture and society fashioned by modern liberalism. The new cosmopolitanism is the "bureaucratic rule of experts," who use the privilege of official power to reshape the country along the lines of rational, secular, scholarly and academic norms. They see society as a machine, not as an organism, and impersonalism is their hallmark. So is their arrogance. "The new educated class—or, at least its Left Wing—would like to run the country *its* way. It thinks it knows what is best, most enlightened, most humane for all of us."²⁹ From this culture, as Novak illustrates in countless ways, whole pockets of American communities are thoroughly and angrily alienated.

But the problem of provincial culture, as Novak also makes clear, is not restricted to white ethnics. The book presents a serious indictment of the culture of modern cosmopolitanism, and Novak describes its chilling effects in a manner not much different from Jefferson. Thus, in commenting on the rebellion of radical youth against "corporate liberalism," Novak remarks:

We may also see in the youth culture a profound starvation for a denser family life, a richer life of the senses, the instincts, the memory. No other group of young people in history was ever brought up under a more intensive dose of value-free discourse, quantification,

analytic rationality, meritocratic competition, universal standards (IQ, College Boards). What was almost wholly neglected in their upbringing was the concrete, the emotive, even tribal side of human nature.... Music, dress, sound, sight, and feeling, ran to the farthest extreme from industrial, suburban rationality. The rise in ethnic consciousness today is also due to disillusionment with the universalist, too thickly rational culture of professional elites.³⁰

For Novak, this consciousness, with its provincial cohesiveness, is the last, still viable expression of a cultural conservatism in America.

Nisbet's and Novak's works are only two from an extendable list that in various ways address the contemporary meaning of provincialism. And so also is Jefferson one, although a remarkably precise and articulate one, among many American thinkers who remind us how much the American democratic heritage is indebted to provincial values. The two authors considered here suggest for us how relevant are the concerns of an eighteenth-century Virginian to the problems of modern America. If we take these concerns seriously, they clearly have important implications for such programs as urban renewal, busing, and the whole network of regulatory fiat that emanate from the remote brain center of the central government. On the other hand, the defense of provincial society need not be a defense of the narrowness, the bigotry, or the smug and self-congratulatory self-inflation that may accompany provincial habits. Nor does this review intend to slight cosmopolitanism when its wisdom and expertise rule with compassion and discrimination. Indeed the cosmopolitan Jefferson himself, enlightened, tolerant, humane, is at the same time the best example of the sensitive provincial. And in getting back to the provincial Jefferson, the essential Jefferson, I believe, we recover one of the valuable links of our national heritage.

¹Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (Toronto, 1974). ²Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.Y., 1978). ³*Ibid.*, pp. 175-215. ⁴See Kenneth S. Lynn, "Falsifying Jefferson," *Commentary*, 66 (October, 1978), 66-71. ⁵In the *Saturday Review*, 5 (August, 1978), 42. ⁶Three other especially important works among this literature are: Paul Kleppner: *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York, 1970); Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago, 1971); and Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, 1971). ⁷Robert Kelley, *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century* (New York, 1979), pp. 34-39. ⁸See for example, Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689-1775* (London, 1962) and Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966). ⁹Kelley, pp. 45, 51-53. ¹⁰Of course, the provincial-cosmopolitan dispute varied in each area according to its own religious and cultural make up. Thus in Pennsylvania it took the form of the frontier Scotch-Irish Presbyterians against the established Quaker proprietors of the eastern and Philadelphia areas of the state. See *ibid.*, pp. 70-76. ¹¹Jefferson: "The most effectual means of being secure against pain is to retire within ourselves, and to suffice for our own happiness.... Hence the inestimable value of intellectual pleasures." Even here Jefferson reflects that part of his personality that tied him to provincial ways. Quoted by Brodie, p. 216. ¹²Brodie, pp. 9, 75, 52, 249-51, 307. ¹³N. T. Phillipson, "Culture and Society

in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment," in *The University and Society*, II, *Europe, Scotland, and the United States from the 16th to the 20th Century*, ed., Lawrence Stone (Princeton, 1974), 407-448. ¹⁴Wills, p. 184. ¹⁵Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785; Cambridge, Mass., 1969), ed., Baruch Brody, p. 221. ¹⁶Wills, p. 84. ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 215. ¹⁸Quoted by Wills, p. 185. ¹⁹This famous letter is reproduced in full in Brodie, pp. 654-67; the quotation is on p. 663. ²⁰Saul K. Padover, ed. *Thomas Jefferson on Democracy* (New York, 1939), p. 84. ²¹*Ibid.*, p. 134. ²²*Ibid.*, p. 85. ²³*Ibid.*, pp. 118-20. ²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 116, 118. ²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 117-18. ²⁶Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (New York, 1975), pp. 4-5, 53-54, 127, 195, 204-5, 240, 253. ²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 240. ²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 205. Nisbet's observations on Eastern governments are worth quoting: "In China, India, and other Eastern societies prior to the present century, governments reigned, as it were, but did not rule. Their claimed powers were at times certainly as centralized and bureaucratized as anything to be found in the West, but these powers almost never touched individual lives directly. Between the power of the government and the life of the individual lay strata of membership and authority—clan, village, caste, temple—which were almost never penetrated by the ruler or his bureaucracy. It was possible, in short, for the Asiatic state to exist for thousands of years in the presence of, as a superstructure of, a nonpolitical society founded on kinship and locality, function, and responsibility." *Ibid.*, p. 204. ²⁹Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York, 1971), pp. 20, 9, xxi. ³⁰Novak, p. 37.