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Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia (revised)

The politics of naturalism¹

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Notes on the State of Virginia offers a textbook case on the role of scientific discourse in the construction of a nation's identity. As exemplified in Jefferson's careful dismantling of Comte de Buffon's argument about the inferiority of both people and animals of the American continent, naturalism and scientific language are for the enlightened Americans vital devices geared towards building the promise of a new society against the arrogant – and misinformed- geographic determinism of the French. When comparing the native American man to his European counterpart, Buffon, the most widely known natural historian of the late eighteenth century and strong advocate of geographic determinism, goes "(...)il n'a nulle vivacite, nulle activite dans l'ame; celle du corps est moins un exercice, un mouvement volontaire q'une necessite d'action causee par le besoin; otez lui la faim & la soif, vous detruirez en meme temps le principe actif de tous ses mouvements (...)"² (p.62)

Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* is a heartfelt rebuttal to these ideas, and an instrument for building a vision of America as a political, economic and intellectual promise: "The queries on rivers and seaports contained a commercial message, and the queries that followed would demonstrate that this was a country worth investing in." (p.xxiii)

Buffon's theories belong to a school of thought rooted in Montesquieu's notion that human culture is determined by climate and geography. These consist mainly of portraying America as a continent unsuitable for civilization based on –inexact- accounts

¹ Naturalism in the Linnaean sense

² "(...) he has no vivacity, nor there is activity in his soul. The activity of his body is less an exercise, a willful movement, than a mere action caused by necessity. Take away the hunger and thirst, and you will at the same time destroy the active principle of all his movements (...)"

of its physical conditions, particularly its humidity and harsh weather. Frank Shuffleton's introduction points that even though *Notes* is essentially a response to a series of queries formulated by Francois Marbois, the secretary of the French legation on the United States, Jefferson was directly addressing Buffon's theories as a matter of national pride and as a way to make the new country attractive to European investors. In an early mention of climate change and its implications on agriculture Jefferson points at the fact that both winters and summers have become milder, according to the memories of the eldest (p.87), and delves into the ability of man and culture to alter both the geography and climate of a territory. This ability is put forward as a statement of the new country's resolution and power of will.

It is in this sense that Jefferson's use of scientific language, and particularly of naturalist descriptions of the state, is a tool for the construction of a national discourse, a response to an ongoing dialogue between Jefferson and his French counterparts. The use of scientific language is a political device used by both sides of the discussion. An example of this is the defense of the native American as a noble people: the suitability of America as a place for a new society can be proven if the nobility of its aborigines is demonstrated, and this is consistent with Jefferson's (condescending) praise on the native Americans, and might explain at least part of his pejorative stance on the non-American 'transplanted' black slaves –this will be addressed later-. After a long discussion about the qualities of Indians, Jefferson states

I only mean to suggest a doubt, whether the bulk and faculties of animals depend on the side of the Atlantic on which their food happens to grow, or which furnishes the elements of which they are compounded? (p.68).

Later in the book, he laments the disappearance of tribal languages even more than the disappearance of the tribes themselves:

It is to be lamented then, much to be lamented, that we have suffered so many of the Indian tribes already to extinguish, without our having previously collected and deposited on the records of literature, the general rudiments at least of the languages they spoke. (p.107)

The urge to catalogue, to record and name, is a sign of how the definition of a culture of scientific protocols was a pressing need, a struggle of ideological and political implications with the accepted truths of the time. Jefferson, in his quest to refute Buffon's theories, builds an argument that points at the need for valid mechanisms of legitimating scientific truth, and contests the accepted scientific truth of the time, crafted to a large extent from accounts made by travelers; "(...) But who were these travelers? Have they not been men of a very different description from those who have laid open to us the other three quarters of the world? Was natural history the object of their travels? Did they measure or weight the animals they speak of? Or did they not judge them by sight, or perhaps even by report only?" (p.56)

Scientific language in the world of *Notes* is the battleground of politics. It is the power of evidence, in a moment when the construction of scientific truth was less regulated and standardized than it is today, what will grant validity to the argument either participant. Whether Jefferson attacks the fundamental idea behind geographical determinism, or merely rebuts Buffon in specific aspects of his argument while conforming to its underlying principles, is a problematic question that could shed light on the political role that science played in the early years of the United States³. It seems unfair to challenge some of the naïve aspects of Jefferson's naturalism, as when he classifies plants in "1. medicinal, 2. Esculent, 3. Ornamental, or 4. Useful for fabrication⁴" (p.39), but some aspects of *Notes* are hard for a reader today to overlook, particularly the way Jefferson deals with racial differences. Whereas his description of the enslaved black population is pejorative to the extent of comparing them with animals, Jefferson praises the native American as a people capable of art and oratory (even though they have not the 'privilege' of knowing the written word) "They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration" (p.147).

Jefferson seems ambivalently aware of the fact that slavery can't have a place in a society that claims to be a model of freedom and civilization. He denigrates slavery yet at the same time rules out the possibility of a racially integrated, egalitarian, society: "When freed, he [the black] is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture" (p.151). It is suggested by Shuffleton that in a letter to Madison Jefferson was shy about putting forward the necessity of emancipation (and the settling of an American constitution): "But there are sentiments on some subjects which I apprehend might be displeasing to the country, perhaps to the assembly, or someone who lead it. I do not wish to be exposed to their censure" (p.xvii). This tension -explained to some extent by the circumstances of the time and of Jefferson's own family and social circle- is a conflict that the book fails to resolve.

In the exhaustive description of nature taken by Jefferson and some of his contemporaries (there are parallel examples of enlightenment enterprises in South America, with heroic

³ The book is full of fascinating instances of Jefferson's awareness of his own role in history. Quite prophetically mentions zeal and degeneration as unavoidable outcomes of a society composed by fallible human beings, "The spirit of the times may alter, will alter, our leaders will become corrupt, our people careless" (p.167). In *Notes*, the use of scientific language goes hand in hand with a strong spirit of foundation and invention, where secularism, scientific discourse, slavery and politics interplay. But that needs to be addressed somewhere else.

⁴ It is hard not to be reminded of the famous Borges passage: "These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled 'Celestial Empire of benevolent Knowledge'. In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." Jorge Luis Borges, Translated from the Spanish 'El idioma analítico de John Wilkins' by Lilia Graciela Vázquez; edited by Jan Frederik Solem with assistance from Bjørn Are Davidsen and Rolf Andersen. A translation by Ruth L. C. Simms can be found in Jorge Luis Borges, 'Other inquisitions 1937-1952' (University of Texas Press, 1993)

botanical expeditions and quixotic astronomical endeavors), the urgent will to grasp, to classify, to label and to catalogue, language, and specifically scientific language is used as a way to take ownership of an uncharted world and –specially- of an idea of the future, it is a way to trademark the idea and the place of a new society. *Notes on the State of Virginia* reminds us of scientific discourse as a way to seize a territory, as an unashamed statement of white supremacy and as a shaping force of the world as it still is today.

“(…) Further information will, doubtless, produce further corrections.” (p.57)

d.c.