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The American Enlightenment: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas
Jefferson

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1. Introduction

The Enlightenment as an intellectual project represents a very complex, multi-layered subject, not only in the intellectual sphere¹, but in the political, cultural, social and economic spheres as well, and the complexity and magnitude of the subject produced a variety of approaches in dealing with it. Some of the approaches tend to emulate the narrative which the intellectuals of the Enlightenment created themselves, presenting the Enlightenment as being a consequence of new scientific discoveries in the 17th and 18th centuries, or as being the “natural” progress of human history. Others, as for example Jonathan Israel in his *A revolution of the mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, talk of the dichotomy between the “radical” and “moderate” Enlightenments in terms of the scope of civil liberties which they proposed respectively; some say the Enlightenment project is to be blamed for all the disasters humanity suffered during the 20th century due to its instrumental rationality and emphasis on scientific progress (Horkheimer and Adorno in their famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*); some postmodern historical accounts, on the other hand, tend to criticize universalism as a prominent characteristic of the Enlightenment, blaming those values “for the destructive effects we should be ascribing to capitalism” (Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* 190). These various approaches focus on different aspects of the Enlightenment, depending on the political or ideological orientations of particular authors.

The aim of this paper, however, and its approach in dealing with the Enlightenment in general, i.e. its American version in particular, is to describe and analyze the positions of three important figures of the American Enlightenment and the American Revolution – Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, taking into account the complex economic, social, political and epistemological changes which happened during the 18th century. What needs to be emphasized concerning these deep structural changes is that they cannot be removed from the development of a new system of socioeconomic relations of production, and that is capitalism. This is not to say that, for example, the philosophy and intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, or prominent figures of the Enlightenment, should be reduced to and be equated with capitalism, and therefore reduced to a deterministic and crude class analysis. But rather that the context of a rising capitalism system exerted its influence upon a

¹ The reason for the usage of the term „sphere“ in this paper is not to connote a complete separateness of the economic/ material and the political which, of course, are interconnected and mutually dependent. Rather, it is used as heuristic concept which facilitates the analysis and the description of the central problems of this paper.

wide array of concepts which were either being created in the 18th century, or were being reshaped during the same period, and which are still dominant today.

What was at stake in the 18th century was the reshaping of the concepts of the rights of the citizen, the concept of citizenship itself, and the rights which particular classes had in the spheres of the economic and the political. As Ellen Meiksins Wood points out in her text *Modernity, Postmodernity or Capitalism?* that the dominant classes in the 18th century regularly used doctrines and proclamations of equality in order to justify inequality (544). This was made possible by a process in which the economic sphere gradually came to be viewed as the “objective” sphere which exists in and of itself, it came to be viewed as something natural which functioned by its own natural laws, natural laws which should not be interfered with, but should only be scientifically studied and adhered to. This “extraction” of the economic sphere, brought about by the rise of a new and distinct socioeconomic system, in turn reshaped the sphere of the political. In other words, the rights of the individual and the concept of the equality of all men were relocated to the political sphere. What happened was that:

The development of capitalism was making it possible for the first time in history to conceive of political rights as having little bearing on the distribution of social and political power; and it was becoming possible to imagine a distinct political sphere in which all citizens were formally equal, a political sphere abstracted from the inequalities of wealth and economic power outside the political domain (Wood, *Liberty and Property* 316).

Because the revolutions of the 18th century and the intellectual processes of the Enlightenment are very often linked with the “self-evident” rise of a new democratic civil society and concept of equality, and because these new concepts emerged during the Enlightenment, it is necessary to scrutinize them critically regarding the above mentioned processes, and material and social structures.

In the same manner the role of prominent historical figures and political theorists should be viewed, having in mind the above mentioned context and processes. Again it needs to be emphasized that this does not mean that the opinions or political theories of a particular thinker should crudely be reduced to his or her class position. But rather that different historical figures or political theorists were “passionately engaged in the issues of their time and place” even when they sought to translate “their reflections into universal and timeless

principles (Wood, *Social and Political Thought* 141).” When one examines the role and political attitudes of particular historical figures, therefore, one should treat them as:

Living and engaged human-beings, immersed not only in the rich intellectual heritage of received ideas, bequeathed by their philosophical predecessors, nor simply against the background of the available vocabularies specific to their time and place, but also in the context of the social and political processes that shaped their immediate world (ibid. 142).

Those material and social processes, therefore, affected those people, affected their political thinking, making some problems or concepts more prominent than others within their theory and their practice, according to “the nature of the principal contenders, the competing social forces at work, the conflicting interests at stake (ibid. 144).

The first chapter of this paper will therefore present a brief survey of the Enlightenment in general, with an emphasis on the French and English Enlightenments, and of the American Enlightenment in particular, taking into consideration certain aspects of their economic and material contexts. Moreover, the relationship between the Enlightenment and liberalism will be explored, given the fact that the two concepts are often equated or conflated, in order to show that the Enlightenment produced not only such political doctrines as liberalism, but also other, more radical emancipatory ideas. In the third, fourth and fifth chapters the political theories and practices of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson will be described and analyzed, but in comparison to the economic ideologies they adhered to. Because of the separation of the political and the economic which is characteristic of the capitalist system and its ideological mechanisms, which tends to emphasize formal equality on the political level, but obscure real inequality on the economic level, an approach dealing exclusively with the political would not be enough to illuminate the ideological positions of the three men. The economic will therefore serve as the second part of their theory and practice, as the background and underpinning of their political attitudes, showing their visions of society in greater detail. Only by analyzing and describing those two spheres together can the true content of their attitudes be presented.

After the comparison of their political and economic attitudes, their class positions and biographies will be presented in order to see to what extent their different life paths influenced their political careers and political and economic opinions. Although all of them participated in the American Revolution and were influenced by the Enlightenment, and although they

subscribed to political ideas which were commonplace in the 18th century, they still exhibited substantial differences due to their different social statuses, their different biographies, different contexts which they stemmed from and the different extents to which they participated in formal institutions of government. This combined description of the political and economic attitudes of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson and their structural social positions will hopefully shed more light on their similarities and difference and answer some questions raised from the above presented problematic. What is the democratic potential and scope of the attitudes of Franklin, Paine and Jefferson, regarding the way they envisioned the economic sphere? Taking this into account, what are the political ideologies they can be connected with? Which one of them is connected to the Enlightenment the most and why? How do their different social statuses account for the differences in their outlooks? The final chapter will offer some answers to these questions.

Finally, the author of this paper hopes to tackle the problem of “self-evident” truths and concepts related to 18th century history and the Enlightenment, and their particular American context. Although it is very hard to pinpoint what constitutes a “mainstream” historical outlook, due to a huge amount of scholarly work which offers different types of interpretations, we can assume that history as a discipline still largely operates within the frameworks of traditional methodology, focusing on the history of political events and history of grand figures. This type of approach lacks in depth, ignoring wider historical processes and indeed very often taking certain concepts, events and positions of prominent historical figures as something “self-evident”. This is perhaps particularly true of American history, in which the Founding Fathers, the Revolution and its most prominent documents hold a sacred place and have a major role within the romanticized and idealized national mythology. By introducing an emphasis on the material as the driving force behind historical processes, the hope is to show that even the most idealized persons or concepts have their own particular contexts, roles and purposes within the socioeconomic framework of their time period.

2. The Enlightenment and its context

2.1. Liberalism and the Enlightenment

It is safe to say that concerning such concepts as liberalism and the Enlightenment there are a lot of opinions, discussions and debates, and, moreover, a lot of confusion regarding the content of those concepts. Because the Enlightenment and liberalism as an ideology share certain characteristics, of which more will be said later, sometimes the two concepts are described as almost being the same. For example, in an article entitled *Liberalism and its History* Eric Voegelin and Mary and Keith Algozin give a general characterization of liberalism which can in almost all of its aspects be attributed to the Enlightenment: that in the realm of politics liberalism fought against the privileged position of the clergy and nobility within society, for the separation of branches of government with the independence of the judicial and legislative branch from the executive, in the realm of religion for the rejection of revelation and dogma as sources of truth, and in the sphere of the economy against restrictions which set limits to free trade and free economic activity (514-515). There are numerous other examples where liberalism and Enlightenment are either conflated or described too loosely. If we add to that the shift of meaning which happened during the 19th and 20th centuries regarding the content of liberalism as an ideology, as well as the debates about the Enlightenment, the situation becomes even more complicated and confusing. Needless to say, different interpretations of the Enlightenment and liberalism depend upon different political or ideological positions of a particular writer, in which different writers put emphasis on different aspects of the Enlightenment or liberalism as being the most important. Taking all this into account, therefore, when talking about liberalism and the Enlightenment, one has to carefully delineate the contents of those concepts, take into account contextual determinants, but at the same time also the wider intellectual, political and economic currents of an era. Only by considering both the particular and the general can we arrive at a satisfying and illuminating definition of the concepts in question.

Generally speaking, the Enlightenment as an intellectual project appeared against a background of a deep paradigmatic shift in all spheres of philosophical or scientific inquiry; this shift changed the epistemological and metaphysical basis through which society and all of its aspects were viewed, analyzed and described. This change of paradigm and 18th century episteme is very often presented, in a very simplified interpretation, as a result of scientific discoveries made by prominent scientists of the 17th and 18th centuries. It must be stressed, however, that this shift was a complex result of the interconnected processes of deep

structural changes within all spheres of 18th century society, and it is a matter of dispute whether those scientific discoveries were independent agents and motors of “scientific progress” or if they were in fact conditioned by those deep structural changes. Nevertheless, the change of episteme and paradigmatic shift had a very heavy metaphysical and epistemological impact on philosophy, teachings on morality, politics, economy, and the entire existing traditional socio-political order.

The Enlightenment as an intellectual project, therefore, with all of its contextual differences and particularities, had some general and mutual basic ideas. Beginning in the middle of the 17th century and continuing during the whole of the 18th century, the leading figures of the Enlightenment advanced ideas of opposition to the authority of the Bible and the Church, which was brought into question by the discoveries of universal laws which govern nature and which could be comprehended by man, and, in relation to that, espoused the usage of reason as a tool for the advancement of the human race. Although leading figures of the Enlightenment were mostly anti-clerical and opposed to the Church as an institution, opposed to fanaticism, obscurantism and mysticism, they did not reject religion altogether, deism being the most widespread belief amongst Enlightenment intellectuals (Bristow). Subscribing to ideas of natural law, the establishment of government through the consent of the governed, the ideas of the social contract, the tri-partite division of branches of government, the intellectuals of the Enlightenment believed in the amelioration of the state of society through usage of reason and widespread education, through resistance to the existing traditional socio-political order and through the change of political institutions. It can be stated that these ideas were characteristic of the Enlightenment as an intellectual project in general; what can be ascribed to particular contexts, however, are different shapes which those ideas assumed in different countries, different reactions which they provoked, and different aspect of those ideas which were more prominent than others, according to the material and class structure of particular countries.

Liberalism, on the other hand, represents a political ideology and doctrine which developed during the 17th and 18th centuries. In this sense, liberalism is a narrower concept than the Enlightenment, and it can be said that liberalism is a political doctrine which is a product of the Enlightenment, its particular intellectual processes and the above mentioned paradigmatic shift. Liberalism is also an ideology which is obviously linked with structural changes in the early modern period and the rise of capitalism. But, one has to be careful while assessing liberalism in this sense, taking into account contextual differences between various

countries, and especially the economic and political context of the 18th century. Obviously, 18th century liberalism is not the same thing as 19th or 20th century liberalism, and, considering it represents a very loose concept, it can be ascribed to different persons, groups and can, in fact, be very heterogeneous.

Liberalism in the 18th century built its most important tenets around the individual and the individual's liberty, in the political and the economic spheres respectively. Regarding the political sphere, liberals espoused the right of individuals to assemble, the right to the freedom of speech, thought and press and the right to profess religious beliefs freely. In this context, the formation of a government which could at the same time protect the rights of the individual and not intervene too much in the life of the individual was the main problem, which was solved by espousing the tripartite division of government, the system of checks and balances and by organizing frequent elections. It needs to be emphasized, however, that some groups of liberals were not especially keen to granting rights of universal suffrage, fearing mob rule, the tyranny of the majority and especially danger to the security of property; property restrictions on suffrage were therefore commonplace in the liberal ideology during the 18th and 19th centuries (Ball et al.).

In the economic sphere, one of the most sacred rights of the individual was his right to acquire and hold property; in this respect, one of the main functions of government was to secure that property. Moreover, the liberal economic doctrine of *laissez-faire* underpins not only all of the above mentioned political rights, but defines the individual's behavior as such. Thus, according to liberal ideology, society is comprised of atomized individuals, whose self-interest and alleged rational behavior in the market brings overall harmony of particular self-interests within society. The government should not hinder the market in any way, leaving it completely free in order to produce wealth and to encourage free enterprise. Thus, liberal ideology can be summed up as being built around the atomized individual and his liberties, as espousing the rule of law, as being against any excessive intervention from the government and as encouraging free market as the basis of its existence.

2.2. The French and English Enlightenments

Not all political figures, however, subscribed unequivocally to all of the tenets of liberalism in the 18th century and liberalism and the Enlightenment varied according to different contexts. For example, in an interesting analysis of the differences between the French and English Enlightenments, Ellen Meiksins Wood takes precisely the economic

conditions of each country as the most important factor in creating those differences. France in the 18th century was an absolute monarchy with a predominantly agricultural, peasant society; capitalist market imperatives were not present at that time in France, and therefore the mechanisms of the absolutist state provided extra-economic means of appropriation for the upper classes and a door to lucrative office-holding positions. The most prominent ideological mechanism which the French Enlightenment stressed was, therefore, the universal equality of all men positioned against the particularity of the aristocracy, which owed its position to wealth and birth. Equality, the possibility of building status according to merit and not birth and the universality of those claims were central to the French Enlightenment, as, not surprisingly, its leading figures were intellectuals, office holders and bureaucrats who lived off the French state (Wood, *Liberty and Property* 305-306; Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* 183-184).

In England, on the other hand, agrarian capitalism and mechanisms of market principles were in full force, which, in turn, shaped the context of its major Enlightenment writings. Wood states that in England there was an abundance of the so-called “improvement literature” which dealt with the improvement of land according to capitalist principles. In a process which began early in the 16th and 17th centuries, in England the lower classes were being dispossessed of their land, common land was largely privatized and the work force was plunged into proletarian status (Wood, *Liberty and Property* 305-317). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the influential writings of John Locke described and ideologically articulated the rise of capitalism in England, and it is no coincidence either that John Locke is one of the major influences on liberal theory. In her analysis, in fact, Wood distinguishes between English capitalism and its ideology and the French Enlightenment, equating the former with specific ideological and cultural formations embodied in the liberal writings of Locke and the prominent figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. Although the principles of the Enlightenment and the ideology of capitalism which originated in England share some characteristics, namely an interest in science and technology (ibid. 295), Wood sharply distinguishes between the two in terms of their democratic emancipatory potential and universal values. Because of that, Wood states that the whole of the Enlightenment project should not be equated with the rise of capitalism and should not be reduced to a crude class analysis in which it is proclaimed to be an undertaking of the bourgeois capitalist class. The Enlightenment, on the one hand, made possible certain universalistic ideologies which gave way to radical emancipatory projects later in the 18th and 19th centuries, while capitalism, on

the other hand, produced its ideology with its own particular tenets and central ideas. In this context the ideology of liberalism should also be analyzed; as a product of the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, and the structural, epistemological and paradigmatic changes of the 18th century, which at the time also had emancipatory potential, especially in the realm of political rights, but which was also firmly connected and caused by the rise of the new capitalist economic system.

2.3. The American Enlightenment

In comparison to the French, German or English Enlightenments, the American Enlightenment receives maybe the least attention, and is not so often mentioned as a distinct and compact intellectual project. The reason for that can be detected in its colonial status, and its intellectual, political and cultural connection to England and Europe at large. In that context, America can be seen as a European periphery and a mere extension of the English and French Enlightenments and intellectual currents which were dominant there. But despite the undoubtedly very strong influence and interconnectedness between America, England in particular, and Europe in general, America produced its own distinct Enlightenment, where various traditions of thought merged and formed a political ideology which was formative for the American Revolution. Also, the specific material and social conditions which were particular to America, and different from those in Europe, presented a very important factor in the formation of a distinctly American Enlightenment. What is also important to note is the fact that the Enlightenment in America is almost always linked and merged with its Revolution, its most sacred documents and the Revolutionary War, therefore presenting an important aspect of national ideology.

There are a few traditions of thought which were important for the American Enlightenment, pre-revolutionary thought and revolutionary practice. Although some of them have their origins earlier, in the 17th century, all of those traditions had formative influences on 18th century intellectual trends and processes in America. The most important influences were, therefore, those of the authors of classical antiquity, Enlightenment rationalism, the English common law tradition, of the social and political thought of New England Puritanism and that of radical Whig theory. Classical writers were widely read and cited in the 17th and 18th centuries in America, and especially prominent was the theme of the political history of Rome; from the history of the Republic to the Empire (Bailyn 23-24). Along with that, Enlightenment rationalism played an even more important role, and thinkers such as Voltaire,

Montesquieu, Beccaria and others were also frequently read and cited. What is most important to emphasize, however, is the towering influence which particularly John Locke and his political theories exerted upon the revolutionaries and the whole context of 18th century America (ibid. 25-27). Moreover, the influence of English common law “stood side by side with Enlightenment rationalism in the minds of the Revolutionary generation (ibid. 31)”, and the social and political theories of New England Puritanism:

...carried on into the eighteenth century and into the minds of the Revolutionaries the idea, originally worked out in the sermons and tracts of the settlement period, that the colonization of British America had been an event designed by the hand of God to satisfy his ultimate aims (ibid. 32).

Last and maybe the most influential was the tradition of radical English Whig thought, embodied in the example of the so-called Commonwealth party and such works as *Cato's letters* and the newspaper *The Independent Whig*, which espoused liberal ideas *par excellence* (ibid. 45-51). The political ideas of the English Whigs, the influence of classical authors and especially the history of ancient Rome, combined with the specific context of the American frontier, the abundance of land and a large number independent farmers who were dominant at the time, shaped the ideology of republicanism which was crucial during and after the American Revolution.

As it was shown before, structural and material conditions in particular countries largely shaped its intellectual currents, or rather the salience of particular ideas as opposed to other ideas. While in France the context of the Enlightenment and the Revolution was the fight against an absolutist state which was a source of lucrative office-holding reserved primarily for members of the aristocracy, and against the Catholic Church as a powerful religious institution, and while this fight was led by a distinct class of intellectuals, in America different material conditions engendered a different class structure, making a distinct class of “professional” intellectuals absent. As some authors emphasize, the principal agents of the American Enlightenment were not “professional” intellectuals, but “such busy people as planters, doctor, lawyers, politicians, and not least preachers (May 205)” and the American intellectual “functioned only as a part-time *litteratus*. He was the planter, businessman, clergyman, or craftsman, who, like Jefferson, Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, or David Rittenhouse, had to make time for his intellectual life (Meyer 175).”

As it was stated, American revolutionaries did not have to fight an absolutist state; moreover, the 18th century American context was specific in that it was not “weighed down” by the baggage of feudal legal remnants. The American revolutionaries fought against a mercantilist economic policy enacted by the British Crown, particularly in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War which left the Crown in huge amounts of debt; the consequences of which were acts which enlarged taxation and various types of levies. This affected the two main factions of the arising American bourgeoisie: the Northern merchants and the Southern planters, of which the latter were in a more precarious position, because their ports and shipments were mostly dominated by British merchants (Frankel). Notwithstanding the different positions between the Northern and Southern bourgeoisie in terms of the control they exerted upon their own economic affairs, the policies of the Crown united them in their efforts for independence. The context of the American Enlightenment can therefore be characterized as being firmly linked, in the ideological and practical sense, to the American Revolution. In the context in which the absolutist state was absent, in which there was no feudal baggage to hinder the material development of the colonies, but which still was hindered with the mercantilist policies of the British Crown, the Revolution and Enlightenment intellectual processes were carried by member of the Northern and Southern bourgeoisie. The religious aspect was also more prominent within the American Enlightenment, due to the absence of large, powerful church hierarchies, and the activities of the dissenting protestant religious groups. But, what needs to be noted is the importance which is given almost exclusively to the upper class agents of these events in mainstream accounts of 18th century American history. Because, although their names are widely known and commonplace, the American Revolution, as is in fact the case with the French Revolution as well, could not be carried through without the wider popular support of the radically oriented small shopkeepers, independent artisans, mechanics and laborers (ibid.). On this wave of support from the radically democratic oriented “mobs” of the larger American cities, the upper classes established a new form of government, proclaimed to be truly democratic in their essence and structure. But the radically democratic impulse which characterized the Revolution was in fact tamed with these new institutions, in the spirit of the liberal fear of “mob rule”, “tyranny of the majority” and because of the fear for the safety of the property of the upper classes. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the course of the Enlightenment in America went through several stages, that Enlightenment ideas in America through time were “blurred and mellowed” (Meyer 185), and that the American Enlightenment in the first period “drew chiefly from England, in the second from France, in the third from Scotland” (May 213). It

can be concluded and assumed, therefore, that the American Enlightenment and liberal political ideas from this period, exhibited strong progressive and emancipatory potential, mostly backed up by radical popular support in pre-revolutionary times and during the Revolution itself. But, that potential was later tamed and curtailed by institutions and ideological mechanisms used by the upper classes, which is widely neglected in mainstream historical accounts of both the American Enlightenment and the American Revolution.

3. The Political and Economic Theories of Benjamin Franklin

In comparison to Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, the mainstream portrayals of Benjamin Franklin and public attitudes toward him are perhaps the most positive and most idealized. Not only did he participate heavily in the political life of the state of Pennsylvania but he also was involved and had an important role in the American Revolution and all its major events. But the main bulk of the very positive public perception of Franklin, whether within popular opinion or academic circles, is perhaps built around his position and reputation as a renowned scientist in the international context of the 18th century, and his reputation as a “self-made man” in the American context of the same era. Although his role within the American Revolution is always emphasized, in texts and overviews of American history Franklin is, unlike Paine and Jefferson, almost always linked and situated within the wide intellectual currents of the Age of Enlightenment, precisely because of his scientific experiments and versatility and the fame which he acquired from them. For example, Franklin is said to have been “the American Voltaire” and the completest colonial representative of the Age of Enlightenment (Luther and Jorgenson xiii). The *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography* states that Franklin’s life and writings are “important as typifying the other great movement of the American Enlightenment – its secular spirit, the rise of the self-made man” (97). In his text *The Political Theory of Benjamin Franklin* Clinton Rossiter asks a rhetorical question: “Can any new thing be written of Benjamin Franklin? Is there a corner of his magnificent mind or an aspect of his towering influence that is not the most familiar public property?” (259) and he concludes his text with the following words:

He was, after all, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, the most amazing man America has produced, as untypical in the whole as he was typical in his parts. And in fixing our attention we must recall the one conviction that brought harmony to this human multitude: the love of liberty – in every land, in every time, and for every man (293).

This aspect of Franklin as a scientist and a representative of the Age of Enlightenment cannot be separated from the overall political role he held in 18th century America, and from his political and economic theory and practice. For example, the tradition of utilitarian and pragmatist philosophy which most authors mention as an important influence on Franklin’s thought had important practical consequences on his political attitudes, his opinions on religion and many other problems and questions. As a pragmatist, Franklin did not care much for “metaphysical discussions” because, as some authors state, he opposed “the interminable

speculative discussion of matters invisible and unknowable, especially as this discussion was able to draw us away from our service obligations and into discord” (Campbell 111). The consequence of this was that Franklin dedicated himself mostly to tackling particular and concrete problems and obstacles, whether in practice or in his writings, in the pragmatist spirit of being useful and helpful to the community at large. But the pragmatist attitude of Franklin also had an important ideological background: to be useful to the community one had to be useful, pragmatic and industrious in one’s personal life. Therefore, behind Franklin’s utilitarian philosophy there stood an ideology of the emerging capitalist system, what Max Weber called “the spirit of capitalism,” which Franklin disseminated in his widely read almanacs. All these aspects of Franklin’s life have to be taken into account in the analysis of his political and economic opinions, along with his structural position within American society in the 18th century.

As is the case with Thomas Jefferson, and unlike Thomas Paine, Franklin did not leave behind a comprehensive and detailed account of his political theory. Most of his writings deal with concrete problems, and his political philosophy is scattered through numerous pamphlets, letters and articles, and, most importantly, can mainly be read from his political practice. As was mentioned before, this in part had to do with Franklin’s pragmatic attitude and his aversion toward metaphysical discussions, but also with the particular political position that Franklin held during the pre-revolutionary era in America and which he built during his life. Franklin’s position at that time was indeed interesting; practically until the very beginning of the Revolution, he did not openly endorse the independence of the colonies, i.e. he was trying to find a “middle path” between the two sides in dispute. For a long time he was an advocate for the preservation of the British Commonwealth and an advocate for the American colonies to stay a part of it. Not until the 1770s did Franklin explicitly side with the aspirations of the revolutionaries. In other words, through his life Franklin built for himself a mediating and diplomatic position and his “reputation for dispassionate wisdom made him a coveted spokesman on a variety of topics” (Chaplin 72). Here is where Franklin the diplomat, Franklin the successful entrepreneur and Franklin the renowned thinker of the Enlightenment crossed and made him a useful, influential and mediating persona in the events of the American Revolution. That is why Franklin always had a secure and very high place in the cannon of the Founding Fathers. But because of a lack of explicit writing on political theory and because of this specific mediating public position which was characteristic of him, Franklin’s political stances are hard to pin down and classify, and are somewhat ambiguous.

Some writers agree that Franklin did subscribe to the commonplace ideas of the 18th century which were widespread among the rising bourgeoisie, but because he did not write about politics this fact can only be confirmed indirectly. For example, Clinton Rossiter wrote that Franklin's writings leave a "general impression" that he "endorsed as useful doctrines the state of nature (in which all men are free and equal), the social contract, natural law, natural rights (including "life, liberty, and property", as well as freedom of inquiry, expression, petition, religion and migration), and the happiness and safety of the people as the purpose of government" (262-263). But, on the other hand, he stated that: "As the most conspicuous revolutionary of 1776 Franklin could hardly have doubted the rights of resistance and revolution, but we may search in vain for any clear statement of this doctrine" (ibid.). In his *Silence Dogood No. 8* (1722) Franklin, for example, wrote about freedom of speech and said:

That Man ought to speak well of their Governors is true while their Governors deserve to be well spoken of; but to do publick Mischief, without hearing of it, is only the Prerogative and Felicity of Tyranny: a free People will be shewing that they are so, by their Freedom of Speech (Franklin, *Writings* 24).

In the same paper he also wrote about the purpose of government:

The Administration of Government, is nothing else but the attendance of the *Trustees of the People* upon the Interest and Affairs of the People: And as it is the Part and Business of the People, for whose Sake alone all publick Matters are, or ought to be transacted, to see whether they be well or ill transacted; so it is the Interest, and ought to be the Ambition, of all honest Magistrates, to have their Deeds openly examined, and publickly scann'd ... (25).

On the other hand, there is evidence that Franklin did not support popular action in the 1760s and 1770s, which at the time almost always presupposed radical action, especially in comparison to the political activities of members of the elite, and that "In 1759 he took to the *London Chronicle* to assure readers that New Englanders, rather than being infused with "a levelling spirit," were protective of property" (Carp 153).

Taking all this into consideration we can assume that Franklin was in tune with the intellectual, theoretical and political currents of his time, but that, overall, his political attitudes were moderate in comparison to those of Thomas Jefferson, and especially Thomas Paine. He changed his attitudes according to the changing political context in the second part

of the 18th century, according to his pragmatic and utilitarian principles, and according to the public roles and offices he held during that time. Unlike other historical figures who were active in the Revolution, and indeed other Founding Fathers, Franklin was not that much of an ideologue, but a man who was important “for his pragmatic and perceptive views on the structure and dynamics of the British Empire” (Ibid. 159). On the one hand he opposed property restrictions on suffrage, he was against slavery which he denounced on economic and moral grounds, he was active on the local level in forming public libraries, firefighter stations, and making inventions to alleviate everyday life. On the other hand, he was a believer in the system of monarchy and did not side immediately with the causes of the Revolution, and he was a propagator of industriousness, frugality and thrift, which became the main components of the pro-capitalist ideology of the American dream. Franklin was, therefore, a moderate liberal who had strong ties with British society and the British political tradition, and whose mediating position enabled him to participate in both sides of the dispute and to build his influential status. The following quote maybe best explains Franklin’s role in the American Revolution: “Franklin, the unlikely founding father, played a key role in the mobilization of the American colonists toward rebellion and independence. What is less clear is whether Franklin intended the outcome or not” (Ibid. 162).

But, unlike his political position and his political writings, the case is completely different with Franklin’s economic writings. There are numerous articles, pamphlets and letters in which he tackled questions of the economic sphere, and we can say that of the three historical figures who are the theme of this paper, his economic position is the most clear, and most elaborately presented. Franklin’s economic position can therefore be analyzed through his writings on the questions of population growth, a major theme in 18th century economic thought and one of his favorite themes, the economic implications of slavery, free trade, manufacture and agriculture. One aspect of his economic thought is especially interesting, and that is the more “ideological” aspect of his widely read almanacs, in which he disseminated ideas of industriousness, thrift and frugality, and which positioned him as an ideologue of the American dream and the concept of the pursuit of happiness. Because of all these layers and complexity of his economic thought and writings, Franklin presents an extremely interesting historical figure of the 18th century to be analyzed in terms of the newly arising capitalist mode of production.

In 1729 Franklin wrote one of his famous pamphlets entitled *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of Paper Currency*, a paper in which he espoused the issuing of

paper money and analyzed the workings of the economic sphere in that particular era. In it Franklin analyzed the process of commodity exchange and presented a short history of money as a medium of exchange. But the conclusions which Franklin drew from his analysis are fascinating; that through money labor is exchanged for labor, or commodity for commodity. In other words, Franklin proposed that something else should be made a measure of value instead of gold or silver and continued: "This I take to be Labour" (Franklin, *Writings* 126). In this paper Franklin ingeniously criticized the concepts of mercantilist economic theory, which were dominant at the time he wrote the article and for a long time afterwards. For mercantilists, the measure of the level of richness of a particular nation amounted to the amount of gold or silver which a particular nation possessed and, therefore, abstract notions like the labor theory of value were out of the question for mercantilists. In reaction to that, Franklin wrote: "Thus the Riches of a Country are to be valued by the Quantity of Labour its inhabitants are able to purchase, and not by the Quantity of Silver or Gold they possess" (ibid. 127). Franklin wrote his paper almost fifty years before Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), and some authors state that Franklin even lent some information to Smith for his work (Luther and Jorgenson lxiv). Although the theory of *laissez-faire* economy and the evolving opposition to mercantilist theory were common in the 18th century, it is still fascinating how Franklin wrote about the labor theory of value that early and at such a young age (he was twenty-three years old). Maybe the most illustrative evaluation of Franklin's work is that of Karl Marx who wrote in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

It is a man of the New World -- where bourgeois relations of production imported together with their representatives sprouted rapidly in a soil in which the superabundance of humus made up for the lack of historical tradition -- who for the first time deliberately and clearly (so clearly as to be almost trite) reduces exchange-value to labour-time. This man was Benjamin Franklin, who formulated the basic law of modern political economy in an early work, which was written in 1729 and published in 1731 (23).

But although Franklin showed fascinating foresight in the analysis of the labor theory of value, nevertheless he was conditioned by the particular American context in which the abundance of land and agricultural activity shaped the republican political and economic ideology of the revolutionaries. Just as Jefferson much relied on the abundance of American land, in that it will be enough of it for numerous generations to slowly and steadily spread across the continent, constituting a virtuous agrarian republic and democracy of small

landholders and free yeomen, so too Franklin in his later works praised agriculture and virtue which agriculture generated. In his *Positions to be Examined* published in 1769, Franklin wrote about the three ways in which a nation can acquire wealth, the third being “by Agriculture, the only honest Way; wherein man receives a real Increase of the Seed thrown into the Ground, in a kind of continual Miracle wrought by the Hand of God in his Favour, as a Reward for his Innocent Life, and Virtuous Industry” (Franklin, *Writings* 645). The influence of the French Physiocrats can be seen in this appraisal of agriculture as the only honest source of wealth which Franklin expresses. During the 1760s Franklin “adopted almost without reservation” the central physiocratic principles “that agriculture was the only true source of wealth and that political interference with the natural order of economic life was pernicious” (McCoy 8). Therefore, Franklin, like Jefferson, thought of the abundance of land in America as a positive feat; as he stated in his text *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America* in 1784, the abundance of land will keep the colonies in the state of “general happy Mediocrity” in which there are few people who are miserably poor, or who are extremely rich (Franklin, *Writings* 975). The importance of the abundance of land in America is something which appears often in Franklin’s writings. Thus, in his pamphlet *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751) he stated that:

so vast is the Territory of North-America, that it will require many Ages to settle it fully; and till it is fully settled, Labour will never be cheap here, where no Man continues long a Labourer for others, but gets a Plantation of his own, no Man continues long a Journeyman to a Trade, but goes among those new Settlers, and sets up for himself, &c (Franklin, *Writings* 369).”

The ideology of this kind of republicanism espoused the system of a large number of independent farmers in a prolonged stage of improved agricultural society, and saw negatively the stage of development of a commercially mature society which consist primarily of manufactures and therefore of numerous poor laborers. Franklin also subscribed to those views², but was nevertheless aware of the fact that even an independent agricultural society

² The following quotation explains in detail this attitude of Franklin’s: “Franklin's focal concern with population density reflected his belief that population growth propelled a society through its customary phases of development, and he went on to explore the corollary that a people's employments depended upon a country's population density. As long as land was abundant and available for settlement, a society would not advance beyond the youthful stage of agriculture, at which the overwhelming majority of the people were independent and comfortable farmers. When population began to press on the supply of land as a society aged, however, many men were forced to seek other modes of subsistence, especially in manufacturing. These men were not independent or self-employed; they were typically dependent wage-laborers who worked for "a master." As Franklin wrote in 1760, "manufactures are founded in poverty," for "it is the multitude of poor without land in a

cannot be exempt from the currents of international free trade or production of manufactures, which he saw as necessary.

The last important aspect of Franklin's economic thought is the ideological aspect of his emphasis on industriousness and frugality which he thought were a component of virtuous living. In his almanacs Franklin widely disseminated his advice to the common people on how to lead such a virtuous life, and how that virtue would in the end pay off in the form of pleasurable living. His advice in this respect was so influential, that even today it represents statements of "common knowledge," some even becoming widely known proverbs. In his *Poor Richard Improved* from 1758 Franklin thus wrote: "While Laziness travels so slowly, that Poverty soon overtakes him, as we read in Poor Richard, who adds, Drive thy Business, let not that drive thee; and Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy and wise" (Franklin, *Writings* 1296). There are numerous examples of advice from *Poor Richard* which Franklin gives to the people, and which made him the object of analysis in Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* from 1905. Weber stated of Franklin that all "his moral attitudes are coloured with utilitarianism. Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues" (52), and that this kind of thinking "is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalist culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it" (54). Although Franklin lived in the period when capitalism as an economic system was only beginning to fully develop, nevertheless he expressed attitudes which were a crucial part of it, and which only later in the 19th century began to show its full force. This can be seen in the fact that Franklin's *Way to Wealth* was published and republished numerous times during the 19th century (Huang and Mulford 150), as it began to embody the ideology of the American dream.

Unlike Jefferson and similarly to Paine, Franklin was born in a large artisan family, his father being an artisan who produced soap and candles. Therefore, Franklin did not have a strong formal education but was largely self-taught, and was apprenticed as a boy first to his father, and then to his brother who was a printer. Franklin's "self-made" life, however, began when he first moved to Philadelphia and then to London. During those years he acquired useful acquaintances and enough capital to purchase in 1729 Samuel Kramer's paper, in

country, and who must work for others at low wages or starve, that enables undertakers to carry on a manufacture." He added that "no man who can have a piece of land of his own, sufficient by his labour to subsist his family in plenty, is poor enough to be a manufacturer and work for a master." Franklin thus expressed the common eighteenth-century notion that social progress paradoxically entailed an increase in poverty, inequality, dependence, and misery" (McCoy 7).

which later he started to publish the famous *Pennsylvania Gazette*. After this, Franklin slowly began to be included in many formal institutions of government, which culminated in important posts he held prior and during the Revolution, all the while building his scientific career. Franklin managed, therefore, to establish himself as a successful entrepreneur, a famous scientist, and an indispensable influential and mediating figure in the context of the political turmoil in the second part of the 18th century. But what is important to note in the context of Franklin's rags to riches story is the ideological role that story plays in American culture and American history in general. Just as his almanacs which were widely circulated and printed during the 19th century in America, so is his *Autobiography*, many authors agree, the most famous and most widely read autobiography in America. In it Franklin details his success, contrasting the poor and rugged boy who came to Philadelphia to the successful scientist, politician and businessman which he became later in life. Franklin thus described his coming to Philadelphia in 1723:

I was in my working dress, my best clothes being to come round by sea. I was dirty from my journey; my pockets were stuffed out with shirts and stockings; I knew no soul, nor where to look for lodging. Fatigued with walking, rowing, and want of sleep, I was very hungry, and my whole stock of cash consisted of a Dutch dollar and about a shilling in copper coin, which I gave to the boatmen for my passage (Franklin, *Autobiography* 21-22).

Franklin described himself in those conditions so that the reader could "compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there" (ibid. 22). But what is important to note is the context in which Franklin managed to become so successful. As some authors note, middle-class men from the 18th century managed to become successful due to help from wealthy patrons, and economic mobility at the time was decreasing, rather than increasing (Carp 149). So, when analyzing Franklin's or indeed anyone's, structural and class position one should take into account the political connections of a person, and the economic and class structure of the time that person lived in. In other words, not everyone can have the same amount of help to become a "self-made" man.

4. The Political and Economic Theories of Thomas Paine

Although he is almost always mentioned in texts and surveys regarding the American Revolution and the American Enlightenment, Thomas Paine is not included in the canon of the Founding fathers of the United States or the most important figures of the American Revolution, at least not in the same capacity as Franklin or Jefferson. One could argue that, because of his egalitarian and even radically democratic attitudes which will later be shown in detail, and because of several other factors, he represents a kind of a borderline figure of American history and the history of the American Revolution. For example, the *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography* states that Jefferson, Franklin and Washington represent revolutionary heroes in the American tradition while Paine holds a relatively minor position, because of his radicalism and irreligiousness (Senecal and Goldman 295). If we take a look at some biographical texts or entries in other biographical dictionaries, there are several elements which are emphasized about Thomas Paine: his brilliant pamphlets which excited the politically active population of America at the time and which strongly advocated American independence, his humanitarian attitudes and worldview, his outspokenness, etc. But what is interesting is that often his thought is characterized as unoriginal, i.e. that his ideas were “taken” from more original thinkers and then transmitted to the general public. For example, the *Concise Dictionary of American Biography* published in 1964 states that Thomas Paine was “essentially a propagandist through whom the ideas of more original men were transmitted to the crowds”, while it also proclaims Paine to be “a revolutionary by temperament and something of a professional radical”(761). Therefore, in mainstream liberal historical depictions in which histories of grand political figures are dominant and in which radicalism is often used in order to delegitimize, Paine is often discredited as a radical and an unoriginal thinker, and because of that academic and public attitudes towards his role in American history are not uniform. In this chapter, Paine’s political and economic ideas will be presented, followed by a description of his class position, i.e. his habitus. What needs to be pointed out is that the nature of Paine’s writings enables us to have a very clear view of his beliefs, because he wrote extensively and very clearly in the field of political theory, which is not the case with Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, whose attitudes are scattered through numerous formal documents, letters, articles and various types of writings.

The first and most important element that needs to be emphasized regarding Paine’s theory is the following: according to Paine all men were born equal before God and because of that they enjoy equal natural rights. Natural rights represent those rights which “appertain

to man in right of his existence” (Paine, *Rights of Man, Part I* 84), and they include “all the intellectual rights, or rights of the mind, and also all those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness which are not injurious to the natural rights of others” (ibid.). But because the individual power is not competent to enforce all those natural rights which every individual has in right of his existence some natural rights are put together into the “common stock” through which an individual becomes a member of society. From this “throwing” of a part of an individual’s natural rights into the “common stock” follows that natural rights represent the basis of particular civil rights; civil rights, therefore, represent all those rights “which appertain to man in right of his being a member of society” (ibid.). From this society which individuals form in order to secure their natural rights they enter into a contract with each other to form a government. What is important to emphasize in Paine’s political thought is that he advocates a theory of government which rises from society itself; government has its origin in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. The function of government in his theory, therefore, is only to secure those rights which an individual cannot secure himself and is best epitomized in his statement that:

...society is produced by our wants, government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher (Paine, *Common Sense* 4).

It can be seen that Paine did not propose a social contract theory in which the people on one side and the government on the other form an agreement, but that his sovereignty means popular sovereignty, and that government *arises from* that sovereignty. Paine’s ideas on the natural rights of man and the idea that men first come together to form a society and then to form a government are very similar if not exactly the same as the ideas of John Locke, which were very influential and popular in the 18th century.

But natural and civil rights which appertain primarily to the political sphere is not the only thing which, to Paine, stems from the equality of all men before God. It is interesting to see that Paine’s theory of property rights stems from the same source. Although a fervent proponent of the free market in his earlier years, later he developed a theory of property rights in which he acknowledged that there exists a certain kind of poverty characteristic exclusively to modernity and which did not exist in the natural state of man (Lamb 488). Paine obviously became more and more aware of the dispossession of the large majority of the lower classes

of land and property, and some authors therefore state that he put forward a democratic critique of an emerging capitalist order (Cotlar 196). His theory of property is essentially derived from the same source as his theory of the natural rights of man: because all men were born equal before God in the natural state every person was a proprietor and the Earth, in its uncultivated state, represented the common property of the entire human race:

It is a position not to be controverted that the earth, in its natural uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, *the common property of the entire human race*. In that state every man would have been born to property. He would have been a joint life proprietor with the rest in the property of the soil, and in all its natural productions, vegetable and animal (Paine, *Agrarian Justice* 611).

In the natural state, therefore, private property did not exist; it came into existence later on, through *cultivation* and *improvement* of land. Although Paine was not an opponent of private property, stating that the people who cultivated land and therefore created value were legitimate owners of that land, he criticized large land monopolies and always acknowledged the fact that in the natural state all men were once equal proprietors of the Earth. Because of that, Paine proposed a radical reconceptualization and reconstruction of property rights through progressive taxation and through a system which would provide every person after they turned the age of 21 a sum of money of fifteen pounds sterling, “as a compensation, in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of a system of landed property” (Ibid. 613). So, although Paine acknowledged both the legitimacy of private property and the fact that people in general were dispossessed of their natural inheritance, the property which once belonged to the entire human race, he was very well aware of the fact that the accumulation of private property would not be possible outside of society and that because of that, private proprietors *owed* the rest of society a debt: “Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated land, owes the community a *groundrent* (for I know of no better term to express this idea) for the land which he holds; and it is from this groundrent that the fund proposed in this plan is to issue” (Ibid. 611).

It can be seen that Paine’s radical conception of equality of all men before God is intertwined both in the political and in the economic spheres: men had equal natural and civil rights, but also rights to be compensated on the grounds that they equally owed the Earth in their natural state. Although again we can see the influence of John Locke in the idea that all men were proprietors of the Earth in their natural state, Paine differs from Locke precisely

because he criticized large land monopolies, whereas Locke criticized the efficacy of the exploitation of land, i.e. those proprietors who did not improve and cultivate their land enough. Moreover, Paine's theory on property rights, according to some interpretations, has one interesting aspect, namely that "ownership cannot extend beyond what an individual added to the natural world" (Lamb 504). This fits into Paine's general theory which, it seems, presupposes a picture of a society composed not of large land monopolies, but a large number of small landholdings.

Paine's conception of government stems out of his egalitarian views on natural and civil rights and the historical context in which he was born. He was a fervent proponent of representative democracy, which he thought was a system of government that arose from the natural order of things, and was opposed to monarchical and hereditary government on the grounds that it had no real authority as its basis: "Mankind being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance" (Paine, *Common Sense* 10), which he associated with usurpation and plunder. Furthermore, simple or direct democracy, i.e. democracy which was practiced in Athens and the ancient Greek world is not adequate for populous and extensive territories, so the perfect system of government should be based on democracy, but democracy combined with representation. Because of that, Paine advocated a practice in which the people would create a constitution which would represent an act of formation of a government, and he also advocated frequent elections which would correspond to the will of the people and to changing circumstances. What is important to emphasize is that Paine thought that the government as such cannot be the property of any particular man or family, but the whole community, "at whose expense it is supported" (Paine, *Rights of Man Part One* 108).

If we were again to link Paine's system of government to the sphere of the economy, the most important thing to emphasize is his harsh critique of property restrictions on the right to vote, in accordance with his egalitarian principles and the principles of the common interest of all mankind. Although Paine did talk about "industriousness" as an important element of acquiring private property, making a distinction between people on the grounds of their activity and ability to acquire property, he never believed that property should be a criterion for excluding someone from their civil rights. As he stated in his *Dissertation on the First Principles of Government*:

But the offensive part of the case is that this exclusion from the right of voting implies a stigma on the moral character of the persons excluded, and this is what no part of the community has a right to pronounce upon another part. No external circumstance can justify it; wealth is no proof of moral character, nor poverty the want of it” (164).

Here we can really see the purpose of government in Paine’s theory – its purpose is not to serve the wealthy few, but to include the majority in the process of its formation and even to support those who are in dire need of help. Along with the idea of a fund which would financially help everyone when they turn the age of 21, and which represented compensation because of the loss of their natural inheritance, Paine also proposed a system of pensions which would help old people from the age of fifty five to the end of their life. It is interesting to see how Paine intuitively really did provide a democratic critique of capitalism, particularly through his descriptions of the exploitation of laborers, although he surely was not aware that he was describing capitalism as a system: “...the accumulation of personal property is, in many instances, the effect of paying too little for the labor that produced it; the consequence of which is, that the working hand perishes in old age, and the employer abounds in affluence” (Paine, *Agrarian Justice* 620).

Finally, Paine’s habitus and general structural and social position should be analyzed in order to shed some light on his activities and role in 18th century political thought. Unlike such figures as Washington and Jefferson, Paine was not a political figure in the “institutional” and “formal” sense of the word. Although he did participate in some formal positions within institutions of government (he held the office, for example, of clerk to the General Assembly of Pennsylvania) he never held any higher offices during the revolutionary period and later. This meant that he was not bound by institutional and formal roles and positions, or that he was bound with the particularities, caution and maneuvering of practical politics. Instead, Paine’s position could be described as that of a free intellectual, which, in turn, enabled him to express his opinions more freely, directly and, of course, more radically. Paine’s overall position, however, cannot be separated from his structural class position. Although we should be careful when it comes to a class position of an individual within a society, in order not to mechanically reduce his or her behavior or activities primarily to his or her class position, the class aspect should not be ignored. Paine was born in England, and came from a poor Quaker family; he worked as a corset maker, teacher and an officer of the excise. He changed jobs often and he did not have formal education as strong as for example Thomas Jefferson. He was not a man of property, nor a member of the elite in that sense. He

did have political connections and was acquainted with people such as Jefferson and Franklin, the latter even recommending him for a teaching position in America. But apart from receiving a property confiscated from royalists in America, his political connection did not bring him much. All of this should be taken into account when thinking about Thomas Paine's habitus, especially while comparing him to individuals as Thomas Jefferson, always bearing in mind the interdependence between his structural and class position, his affinities and experiences, his activities in the revolutionary era of the 18th century and the general ideological, economic and political context of that era; the fact that he came from a lower class environment and that he worked various lower-paying jobs surely shaped his beliefs to a certain extent.

5. The Political and Economic Theories of Thomas Jefferson

As is the case with almost every historical figure, the interpretations of the role of Thomas Jefferson within American history varied and changed through time, depending on particular circumstances and crises in American society. But the mainstream picture of Thomas Jefferson always remained that of a crucial member of the Founding Fathers and the father of American democracy. Today, there are interpretations which criticize some of Jefferson's practices. For example, Cassandra Pybus in her article entitled *Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* writes: "In the face of this painful specter it is not possible to remain objective and dispassionate about Jefferson on the subject of slavery" (281) and: "The historical reality is that there were contemporaries of Jefferson who managed to act in a more morally responsible and humane way toward their fellow humans, no matter what the cost in money and reputation" (281).

Despite these trends, the mentioned mainstream portrayal and image of Jefferson remains undisputed. Unlike Paine whose role in the American Revolution is subject to debate and who is deemed a radical in a negative light, Jefferson is viewed in a more positive manner. For example, *The Concise Dictionary of American Biography* characterizes Jefferson as a "statesman, diplomat, author, scientist, architect, apostle of freedom and enlightenment" (492) and a "most enigmatic and probably most versatile of great Americans" (495). Furthermore he is celebrated for his "acute intelligence, unceasing industry and dauntless, contagious faith" (495) and is said to be "a passionate advocate of human liberty," with emphasis that "no other American more deserves to be termed a major prophet, a supreme pioneer" (496). Along with descriptions of his love of liberty, what is also emphasized is his moderate political position and political pragmatism. For example, he was "intimate and sympathetic with the moderate reformers, he deplored the violence of the Revolution's later phases but remained convinced that it had done more good than ill" (493).

We can clearly see the general portrayal of Thomas Jefferson is quite unequivocally positive. And this of course is not strange considering the overall role which Jefferson had in the American Revolution from the point of view of mainstream liberal narratives. Having all this in mind, it will be interesting to analyze the scope of political and economic rights he grants "the people" in his political practice, the way he wrote about those rights and the way he acted according to them, particularly considering his deep involvement in the political institutions and formal positions in the new republic. It should be emphasized, however, that

unlike Paine whose political views can easily be read from his numerous pamphlets, and who wrote extensively in the field of political theory, that is not the case with Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson never wrote a systematic overview of his political and economic theory (Merriam 24). Nevertheless, many aspects of his theory can still be extracted from the large number of personal letters he wrote to numerous correspondents, and from his other work.

Jefferson came from a wealthy, land and slaveholding family, his father being a surveyor and mother coming from a prominent Virginian family. He was educated at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and held several high political functions: as governor of Virginia, US minister to France, secretary of state under Washington, vice president under Adams and finally as the president of the United States for two terms. His background is therefore that of a member of the wealthy, educated elite who had the opportunity to hold high offices. So, unlike Thomas Paine whose humbler background made it difficult for him to participate in higher office and in turn enabled him to write more freely as a free thinker and intellectual, Jefferson became a prominent political figure which largely shaped his behavior and the way he wrote about certain problems. The problem of slavery is an excellent example: as a politician who wrote the *Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson stated that, obviously, slavery went contrary to the principles of the Revolutionary War and the *Declaration* itself. But, as a person who grew up surrounded by slaves, who held a plantation with slaves and who lived in a slave-holding state, he expressed his opinions on the biological inferiority of black slaves. On one hand he did try to end the slave trade for example in Virginia, on the other he was not so loud an advocate of abolishing the slave system altogether, as for example Thomas Paine. So, the influence of Jefferson's structural and class position is visible, both in his political practice, but also in his personal opinions on certain matters.

Jefferson's political theory is very typical of the era and context he lived in; he expressed ideas which were very commonplace and widespread in the 18th century. Because he did not write extensively in the field of political theory, he did not offer any unique or new ideas; what is important is the way he implemented those ideas into practice. Needless to say, Jefferson believed in natural and civil rights, the republican form of government and everything which that entailed. He is most famous for his authorship of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and it can serve as an indicator of his general political attitudes, regardless of its nature as a public and formal document. In it Jefferson wrote about the inalienable and inherent rights of man which should be secured through governments

“deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” (Jefferson, *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 25) and that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive “it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, & to institute new government, laying it’s foundation on such principles, & organizing it’s powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness” (ibid. 25). So we can see in Jefferson’s theory a very widespread belief, and the influence of Lockean philosophy, that people have inherent and natural rights which need to be secured through the medium of government.

As he viewed governments to be the tools to secure the good of the governed, he regarded neither governments nor constitutions with “sanctimonious reverence,” and he did not deem them “too sacred to be touched” (Merriam 27). Because of that, Jefferson was a proponent of periodical renewals of agreement of the governed and even revolutions if governments proved to be bad or oppressive. Here we come to a point where Jefferson’s attitudes prove to be very similar if not the same in some points to the attitudes of Thomas Paine. As Jefferson believed in periodical renewals of agreement of the governed and left open the possibility of frequently changing governments and constitutions, he believed in the primacy of the living generations and their right to choose their own forms of government. For example, in a letter to James Madison from September 6, 1789, Jefferson wrote: “By the law of nature, one generation is to another as one independent nation to another. The earth always belongs to the living” (Jefferson, *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 98). Following this, Jefferson even calculated the average duration a law or a constitution should have, stating that “Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force, and not of right” (ibid. 99).

As with his belief in the natural and civil rights of men and the influence of Locke one can detect here, the same goes with Jefferson’s opinions on property. He held the widespread Lockean belief, which he expressed in a another letter to Madison from October 28 1785, that: “The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on” (Jefferson, *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 68), but with awareness of the fact that there are large accumulated landed properties which excluded a part of society from appropriation and which “occasions the numberless instances of wretchedness I had observed in this country and is to be observed all over Europe” (ibid. 67). Thus he stated that “If for the encouragement of industry we allow it (the earth) be appropriated, we must take care that other employment be provided to those excluded from appropriation” (ibid. 68). In his political practice Jefferson

acted accordingly, and although he was “conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable” (Krall 138), he did implement laws in order to stop the development of landed aristocracy; for example he drafted bills in Virginia to abolish primogeniture and entail which helped small farmers and frontiersmen (Griswold 660-661). We can see that Jefferson generally accepted Locke’s ideas on property rights and implemented them through his legislature. Although in some aspects he was aware of the negative consequences of too much accumulation or appropriation, on the other hand he used Lockean theory of property to justify, for example, the seizure of land from Native Americans, who did not cultivate and improve their land and therefore theoretically they did not own it (Krall 138). Jefferson thus exhibits both criticism of large land ownership and praise of land improvement and acquisition, which is not unusual considering that his ideal economic vision of society was that of small independent landowners and farmers (Griswold 661), of which he said to be “the most precious part of a state...” (ibid. 69).

When it comes to suffrage, Jefferson expresses some restrictions and in a sense an elitist view of republican forms of government. In a letter to Edmund Pendleton from August 26, 1776, regarding the way in which members of the Senate should be chosen, Jefferson wrote:

I had two things in view: to get the wisest men chosen, & to make them perfectly independent when chosen. I have ever observed that a choice by the people themselves is not generally distinguished for it’s wisdom. This first secretion from them is usually crude & heterogeneous. But give to those so chosen by the people a second choice themselves, & they generally will chuse wise men (Jefferson, *Writings* 755).

We can see that although Jefferson wrote about democracy and “the people” as the most important political subject within that democracy and system of republicanism, the content of that concept had its limitations. Not only did he believe in a kind of “natural aristocracy among people,” but in a document called *A Bill Declaring Who Shall Be Deemed Citizens of this Commonwealth* (1779) he defined the scope of the concept of citizenship which was restricted to “all white persons born within the territory of this commonwealth and all who have resided therein two years next before passing of this act...” (Jefferson, *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 46). Although this document has to be seen in the political context in which numerous other individuals and opinions were present, the fact that Jefferson wrote it can tell us something about his own opinions on the matter.

On the subject of natural aristocracy Jefferson wrote in a letter to John Adams from October 28, 1813 where he stated that there exist a natural aristocracy among people, based on virtue and talents (Jefferson, *The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 173), unlike “an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents” (ibid. 174). The natural aristocracy is a gift of nature for “the instruction, the trusts, and government of society,” and the best form of government is that “which provides most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government” (ibid. 174). Although it was very common in the 18th century with the newly rising bourgeois class to use meritocratic arguments in order to diminish the role of the aristocracy whose members were privileged in monarchical systems because of their birth, it is important to analyze the content of those arguments. Jefferson opposed the aristocracy and monarchical systems, and acknowledged the right of “the people” to choose their representatives, but emphasized that those representatives should be distinguished by their virtue and talent. This meritocratic concept of government and representatives of the people largely excluded those individuals whose material conditions could not allow them to nurture their potential talents, and thus to maybe allow them to become members of institutions of government. So we can say that, although Jefferson did fight against aristocratic, monarchical and very exclusive concepts of government during his political career (the clash with the Federalists), the democratic scope of his republicanism and institutions of government had their restrictions, and were not as open as that of, for example, Thomas Paine. Jefferson had a view of a republic in which talent and virtue dominated, but the fact that the *a priori* material conditions of an individual are crucial in that respect were taken for granted.

But the general question of politics in Jefferson’s system, and all that it entails, cannot be fully understood without a more detailed analysis of his agrarianism. As was mentioned above, Jefferson viewed agrarian production and the small landowner, the independent farmer, as the pillar of the entire state and its political system. Agrarian production for Jefferson was the most important branch of the economy, and in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), he wrote about the farmers: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (Jefferson, *Writings* 290). Moreover, Jefferson viewed manufacture as a necessary evil, as something which should not in any case be a basis of economic production in a particular state. He associated manufacturing with dependence on “the casualties and caprice of customers” (ibid. 290) and with mobs and the poor of great

European cities. For Jefferson that which preserves a republic “in vigour” are “the manner and spirit of a people,” in this case of the spirit of independent farmers. In his agrarian view of society and dislike of manufacture and commerce, Jefferson exhibited a clear lack of vision regarding the development of new capitalist social relations. Although in his practical politics he did not hinder commerce, as later he stated that “we must now place the manufacturer by the side of the agriculturalist” (qtd. in Krall 143), he clearly did not understand the inherent logic and developments of the new socioeconomic system. His world of independent farmers was an ideal, self-sufficient society of a large number of even, small landholdings, and of petty commodity production, and he saw labor productivity and commodity production through the lens of use values instead of exchange value (Krall 144). In conclusion, Jefferson had an idealized, agrarian and traditional view of the economy of the United States which he based on the virtue of independent yeomen. In his opinion only men who cultivated land, and therefore had virtue, and who owed their portion of private property could be genuinely interested in and have a stake in the republic and its workings.

6. Conclusion

After the description of the political and economic attitudes of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, it can obviously be stated that they shared certain similarities and differences. Although all of them subscribed to the commonplace 18th century political concepts and theories, they nevertheless expressed different opinions on particular questions and they expressed them in different manners in their writings and their political practice. Moreover, it can be concluded that the modality of their political practice had a very heavy impact on the way they expressed their ideas and that this, in turn, was interconnected with their habitus and the particular social contexts which they stemmed from. All of these factors constitute the complexity of the roles each of them played in 18th century American history.

When it comes to social status and class background, the three men were representative of three different social classes. Paine became a freethinker and intellectual mostly involved in writing pamphlets on political theory, without ever acquiring any substantial wealth or material position. Franklin established himself as an upper class Northern entrepreneur heavily involved in scientific research, publishing and writing. Jefferson, on the other hand, was a member of a wealthy and renowned Virginian planter and slaveholding family which provided him with a strong formal education; these circumstances in turn directed him from the very beginning towards participation in public office and politics. The purpose of the comparison of the class positions of the three men is not to mechanically reduce their political theory and practice exclusively to their social class. The purpose is rather to present the different structural contexts and experiences of their lives which in turn influenced them toward different practices and adherence to different political ideologies. This does not exclude from the equation the element of their personal preferences, for example, which surely also present an important factor when talking about them, or any other historical figure. The point is simply that particular material and political contexts made, for each them, some ideas and practices more prominent and more important than others. With Franklin, the most prominent component was that of a pragmatist and utilitarian philosophy and attitude, which characterized both his writings, in which he avoided “metaphysical” discussions but dedicated himself to concrete problems, and his political practice and life in general; in this light his scientific career and mediating position between the Crown and the revolutionaries can be seen. With Paine, it was a more radical and universalistic political ideology, influenced by the intellectual currents of England and France,

and the political and material conditions he had a chance to experience and witness there. With Jefferson, on the other hand, it was the heavy involvement in formal institutions of government which presupposed political maneuvering and the reconciliation of his own more elitist views on representative government with the radical political impulses which were created during the Revolution and later during the clash with the Federalists.

Thus, Paine's writings on political theory were the most comprehensive and most openly stated. In them, he showed a clear adherence to concepts of natural and civil rights, he espoused the concept of government as being formed from the consent of the governed, belonging to all the governed and not to a particular class or family, while also supporting universal suffrage without property restrictions. Moreover, he was a vocal and fervent opponent of the monarchical system. Jefferson and Franklin, on the other hand, although expressing the same ideas on government and general liberties which should be secured in society, still showed particular differences; Jefferson's attitudes being more elitist and more in the spirit of meritocracy, while Franklin's being linked to the monarchical system, of which he was a supporter up to the beginning of the Revolution. In terms of their economic attitudes differences can also be seen. While all three of them surely agreed with the Lockean concept of property, Paine expressed an interesting theory of property in which he opposed large land accumulations and proposed compensations for the part of society which did not own property, and thus provided an early democratic critique of the socioeconomic relations characteristic of capitalism. Jefferson and Franklin, on the other hand, were influenced by the republican ideology which was very dominant in America at the time, envisioning a society of free independent farmers which would steadily expand across the vast continent and its abundance of land. These farmers, owning their own piece of land, would have a stake in the affairs of the society they lived in.

Taking the descriptions above into consideration, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson expressed their own specific views on the economic and the political and the relation between the two, and can therefore be placed into the frameworks of different political ideologies. In the case of Paine, he could be characterized as a democrat, radical for the American context, but maybe more on the moderate side for the European; it is an interesting fact from Paine's biography that, during the French Revolution he sided with the Girondins and opposed the Jacobins, which earned him a year of imprisonment. Nevertheless, due to his democratic outlook on economic relations and political rights as such, Paine represents the most democratically oriented of the three. Franklin, on the other hand, could be

characterized as a moderate liberal, i.e. as being influenced by the tradition of the English Whigs, due to his strong connections to British society. But, interestingly, Franklin is also the one who is linked with the intellectual streams of the Enlightenment the most, due to his scientific research and discoveries. Finally, Thomas Jefferson, although also influenced by the English Whig tradition, could be characterized as a liberal, but of a more progressive orientation. Although he expressed typical elitist liberal views on certain aspects of politics, he was nevertheless opposed to such openly undemocratic tendencies which were embodied by the Federalists after the American Revolution.

Finally, the American Enlightenment represents a product of the wide intellectual currents and political turmoil of the 18th century, but at the same time of its own particular economic and political circumstances. It was a product of the influences of various schools of thought, it was carried out not by a distinct class of intellectuals, but by members of the upper and middle classes of 18th century American society, it was inextricably linked with the American Revolution and the formation of the American state, and, obviously, it addressed its own particular economic and political problems. In this context, Franklin, Paine and Jefferson hold their specific roles: Jefferson, and especially Franklin, as the epitomes of a distinct American Enlightenment, and Paine as a thinker who, although heavily involved in American affairs, brought with him a tradition of radical thought which was more specific to Europe than to America. All in all, their roles and attitudes, and the differences between them, show the various ideological and political projects which were a product of the complexity of the Enlightenment and 18th century history in general.

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to give a critical overview of the historical context of the intellectual project of the Enlightenment in general, and of the American Enlightenment in particular, through the analysis of the political and economic ideas of three prominent figures of American history: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. The paper starts with the conceptualization of the history of the Enlightenment and the 18th century as a period characterized by profound structural and epistemological changes and by the rise of a new socioeconomic system, capitalism. These changes, in turn, influenced the (re)shaping of the political and economic spheres in which the economic was started to be perceived as something objective, natural, with its own internal laws which should be studied and not interfered with, while the discourse of equality, rights and freedom of men was gradually transferred to the political sphere, and became its main component. As this reshaping and differentiating between the economic and the political tends to obscure material inequalities on the economic level and emphasize formal equality on the political level, in this paper the political positions of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson will be described and analyzed against the background of their economic theories and attitudes, in order to present a deeper insight into the content and democratic scope of the ideological positions which they espoused. Along with that, the different structural positions of Franklin, Paine and Jefferson will be presented, in order to see to which extent their different social positions and the different contexts which they stemmed from influenced their attitudes and accounted for the similarities and differences which they exhibited. Thus, through the combination of the wider intellectual, social and material contextualization of the Enlightenment and its American version and the particular analyses of the economic and the political in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, some light will be shed on the particular positions which they held in 18th century American history.

Key words: The Enlightenment, Economic and political theory, 18th century American history, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson