

The Jefferson-Hemings controversy

In defense of history

Helen Halyard, Shannon Jones
31 December 1998

Substantial debate and controversy have accompanied the science journal *Nature's* release of genetic test results supporting the claim that Thomas Jefferson fathered children by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings.

Most of what is being written on the issue is both shallow and politically reactionary. On the grounds that Jefferson had a sexual relationship with his slave, calls are being made for a reappraisal of his historical role, and his alleged relationship with Hemings is being used to question the progressive significance of the American Revolution.

A wide array of historians and commentators, outright right-wingers as well as ostensibly "left" postmodernists, have for some time maintained that Jefferson's contribution to the struggle for equality, epitomized in his writing of the Declaration of Independence, is outweighed if not entirely negated by the fact that he was a slaveowner. His intimacy with Hemings only underscores the fact, these critics say, that Jefferson was a hypocrite, or worse.

In a comment published in the November 9 edition of *US News and World Report*, the historian Joseph Ellis, author of *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, says of the DNA test results, "The net effect is to reinforce the critical picture of Jefferson as an inherently elusive and deeply duplicitous character."

Jefferson was a "slave-owning serial flogger, sex maniac and kinsman to ax murderers," wrote Christopher Hitchens in a piece published in the Internet magazine *Salon*. Hitchens is a columnist for the *Nation* and contributes regularly to other nominally left-wing journals.

Such an approach contributes nothing to an understanding of Jefferson the man or the period in which he lived. The attempt to apply in an uncritical and mechanical manner moral criteria widely accepted today to figures of a previous historical period is an inherently ahistorical method. It leads to appraisals that are more subjective than scientific.

Do the critics of Jefferson maintain that there was no difference between his position and that of the defenders of King George III? Did the struggle of Jefferson and the American revolutionaries against British tyranny point to the future, or the past?

Hitchens's moralistic attack on Jefferson is all the more repugnant in that it supposedly represents a radical and progressive viewpoint. It is nothing of the sort. It is rather the complacent and cynical standpoint of people who cannot comprehend the level of revolutionary idealism, passion and self-sacrifice exhibited by men like Jefferson.

Using the method Hitchens employs, one can debunk all progressive movements of the past, since one can always find flaws and contradictions in the character of their leaders. Will Hitchens's next project be an indictment of Abraham Lincoln, who for a time offered to protect the institution of slavery in the South if the seceding states would reverse course and remain within the union?

In this controversy it is necessary for socialists to come to the defense of Jefferson, above all because the dispute raises basic questions of historical method and perspective. A conscientious and scientific approach to the study of history is a prerequisite for the struggle to revolutionize

contemporary society.

A serious—that is to say, objective and materialist—assessment of Jefferson views his role in the context of broader social processes. As Engels said in his brilliant pamphlet *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: "To ascertain the driving causes which here in the minds of acting masses and their leaders—the so called great men—are reflected as conscious motives, clearly or unclearly, directly or in an ideological, even glorified, form—is the only path which can put us on the track of the laws holding sway both in history as a whole, and at particular periods and in particular lands. Everything that sets men in motion must go through their minds; but what form it will take in the mind will depend very much on circumstances."

The place of the American Revolution in history

The American Revolution and the struggle against British colonialism marked the dawn of a new era. Those, like Jefferson, who played a leading role were deeply influenced by Enlightenment thought and imbued with optimism about mankind's future. They held that it was possible to understand and change man's environment, thus enabling him to achieve, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The revolt of the American colonies posed the first serious challenge to the slave system internationally. Conducted under the banner of liberty, it opened an ideological debate on the injustice of slave labor. For a time the very survival of the slave system was threatened. The revolution resulted in the abolition of slavery in the North and an increase in the number of free blacks in the upper South. Congress banned the African slave trade in 1808.

Peter Kolchin, author of *American Slavery 1619-1877* (Hill & Wang 1993) reviews these points in passages dealing with the American Revolution. He writes, "Indeed, the Founding Fathers took a series of steps designed to bring about slavery's gradual demise. As children of the Enlightenment, they typically abjured hasty or radical measures that would disrupt society, preferring cautious acts that would induce sustained, long-term progress; rather than a frontal assault on the peculiar institution, they favored a strategy of chipping away at it where it was weakest. Still, there seemed reason to believe—although time would ultimately prove otherwise—that these acts had contained American slavery and put it on the road to gradual extinction." (p 77)

For his part, Jefferson opposed slavery and championed basic democratic rights such as the separation of church and state, a humane criminal code and the establishment of a system of public education. When the Paris masses stormed the Bastille in 1789, Jefferson, then US ambassador to France, defended the uprising against the *ancien regime*.

On his return to the United States he continued to champion the cause of the French Revolution in the face of opposition from many of his contemporaries.

It is not widely known that Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence contained a denunciation of the African slave trade. In the interests of maintaining the unity of the colonies against Britain, this section was deleted after Southern delegates strongly objected.

Such compromises on the slavery issue were to have the unintended effect of strengthening and perpetuating the slave system. But this very fact points to powerful objective factors working in favor of slavery in Jefferson's time. Many things would have to change before American society could come to historical terms with slavery in the South, changes which in their totality marked the emergence of social forces powerful enough to overturn the institution. It was only with the rise of the Northern class of industrialists and wage workers, backed by the small farmers of the upper Midwest, that slavery began to be seriously challenged. In the end, it took a bloody civil war to bring about its eradication.

The fact that Jefferson freed only a handful of his slaves during the period when slave labor flourished internationally does not necessarily prove him to be a hypocrite. As his writings indicate, he did not believe an immediate and total abolition of slavery was desirable or possible. Further, he questioned whether whites and former slaves could live together peacefully, given the prejudices of the former and the bitterness of the latter.

Jefferson's views on the question of race are frequently presented in a one-sided fashion, equating his speculations at one point about black inferiority with the rantings of modern white supremacists. Jefferson's views on this question evolved, and he evinced a generally enlightened and compassionate attitude toward the victims of slavery.

Writing to the accomplished black mathematician Benjamin Banneker in 1791, he said, "Nobody wishes more than I do to see ... proofs that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa and America. I can add with truth that nobody wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body and mind to what it ought to be as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit."

The American Revolution and Civil War were progressive and revolutionary events. However, they created a new set of contradictions. While the end of slavery produced significant change for the black population of the South, it led to the consolidation of a new form of exploitation, capitalist wage-slavery. The Northern industrialists and the remnants of the Southern slavocracy found it in their interest, once the United States emerged as a world power, to use racial prejudice as a means of dividing the working class. Segregation and other forms of racial discrimination became institutionalized as a weapon of capital against the movement of white and black workers.

The resurgence of ethnic tensions, racism and bigotry in contemporary America is not the legacy of Jefferson's alleged failings. It is, rather, part of an international phenomenon, rooted in conditions of mounting social inequality under capitalism. The obsession of so many so-called radical intellectuals with race, the notion that race is *the* great question in the United States, helps obscure the more fundamental conflict of social classes, and, in the end, serves to strengthen racial divisions.

The Jefferson DNA study has had at least one positive consequence. It has demonstrated the superficiality of the terms "white" and "black" as they are used in America. It highlights the fact that the concept of race is a social construct. Contrary to the argument that the US is a society divided by race, the Jefferson DNA study indicates that a much larger proportion of the American population than is commonly assumed shares European

and African ancestry.

Intellectual decline

The superficial approach taken to complex historical questions, and the obsession of much of academia and the media with sex and race, point to a central feature of contemporary American society—a general decline in the level of cultural and intellectual life. The controversy over Jefferson coincides with a growing attack on Enlightenment ideas, including the very concept of historical progress. Today one hears little talk about a better future. Instead there has been a revival of various forms of religion and irrationalism. The evils of contemporary society are proclaimed to be a product of human nature, and not subject to eradication.

The predominance of such pessimistic and unscientific views has definite historic roots. Over the past several decades the working class has suffered a series of defeats culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first workers state. These setbacks, for which the betrayals of the Stalinist and Social Democratic leaderships of the working class are primarily responsible, have undermined the confidence of broad masses of people in the viability of a socialist alternative to capitalism.

Despite the impasse reached by contemporary society, the broad mass of workers, not to mention their potential allies among intellectuals, students and other middle-class layers, do not as yet see a way forward. Underlying this disorientation is the persistence of the great lie of the twentieth century—the false identification of socialism with the Stalinist regime in the former Soviet Union. Flowing from this mistaken view—which is doggedly promoted by the ideologists and defenders of capitalism—the very legitimacy of social reform, let alone revolutionary change, has been called into question.

There are many signs that this period of political confusion and triumphant reaction is giving way to a resurgent period of critical thought and anti-capitalist struggle. However, those guided by a superficial and ahistorical method are highly susceptible to pessimistic moods. They become fixated on the apparent strength of reaction, and fail to note the growth of economic and social antagonisms beneath the surface of society that are driving the working class into battle.

The revival of the socialist workers movement requires strenuous opposition to all attempts at historical distortion and falsification. This includes attempts to deny the progressive significance of the American Revolution and leaders like Jefferson. A byword of the socialist movement retains its full force today: unless the working class defends the past conquests of humanity, it can never achieve new ones.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)