



"I Tremble for My Country": Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia Gentry (Southern Dissent)

Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler

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Hatzenbuehler argues that Jefferson, though celebrated as a nationalist, is best understood as a member of the Virginia gentry who viewed the nation through the lens of his native country, the Commonwealth of Virginia. Throughout his life, Jefferson was torn between his participation in a privileged order and his periodic dissent from the order's ways. In taking Virginians to task for their failure to improve Virginia society, he masked his own reluctance to make fundamental changes in his life. The zenith of Jefferson's criticism came in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where he chided his fellow Virginians for failing to take advantage of the opportunities that independence from Great Britain promised—including writing a new state constitution, establishing religious freedom, educating all of the state's youth, farming grains instead of planting tobacco, and abolishing slavery. The height of his withdrawal from the commitment to the change he advocated came after his presidency, when he allowed his gentry culture to ensnare him. The author also investigates specific issues of contention in the Jefferson literature, among them Jefferson's reliance on the writings of early Virginian writers and George Mason in drafting *Summary View of the Rights of British America* and the *Declaration of Independence*, the influence of the great French *Encyclopedie* on his composition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, his authorship of the *Kentucky Resolutions*, his unfulfilled revolution as president, and the timing of the creation of the University of Virginia. Carefully drawing on Jefferson's voluminous correspondence, Hatzenbuehler does not shy away from the Founding Father's failings but finds much to admire.



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