Rural Independence, Urban Luxury: Political and Moral Virtue in Antebellum America

Abstract

The dominant interpretation of the urban-rural dichotomy in Ante-Bellum America was a mix of moral and political ideas centered around concepts of independence, citizenship, virtue, and the yeoman farmer as the ideal member of society. This interpretation is informed by a line of thought that includes Aristotle and the 17th century English political theorist James Harrington. This interpretation is particular to America due to material conditions (e.g. a large expanse of western land) and the intellectual inheritance (i.e. 18th century British opposition thought) of the early nation. The paper examines Aristotle's Politics, Harrington's Oceana, Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, and others in demonstrating the existence of an interpretation common to all of these writings and thinkers. Beginning with Aristotle an emphasis is laid on the suitability of farmers for democratic governance; Harrington continues this theme with an emphasis on the balance of power determined by a country's distribution of land. In Harrington's schema the most stable state possible is one in which land is distributed as widely as possible while maintaining the economic and political independence of the landholder. In America this idea finds a ready audience and particularly influences Thomas Jefferson's concept of the nation's economic and political future. Like Aristotle and Harrington Jefferson views independent farmers, i.e. yeoman, as the best class of people for a democratic nature. He, along with many other Ante-Bellum Americans, viewed these yeoman as a possessing a special virtue from their profession and way of life.