

and the right to property which should be sacred and inviolate.⁵ Each of these rights, Paine declared, carries with it the duty of respecting the same rights for others.⁶

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson, despite his active life and many talents, thought deeply about the relation of the individual to society. He did not deny that a man has social obligations, but he did maintain that however great the degree in which man was made for society, he was in an even greater degree made for himself.⁷ Society, as Jefferson conceived it, was merely an aggregate of individuals, not a real entity with rights and prerogatives of its own.⁸ Jefferson was an avid believer in individual rights. It has ever troubled some men that under liberty there will be abuses. But Jefferson said, "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty, than those attending too small a degree of it."⁹

Certain rights Jefferson thought were essential: the right of individual conscience, or the right

of every man to care for his own soul;¹⁰ freedom of expression; freedom of commerce (to have dealings with others unhampered); freedom of the person; and the right to ownership and management of property.¹¹ Concerning the latter, Jefferson said: "The true foundation of republican government is the equal right of every citizen, in his person and property, and in their management."¹²

Henry David Thoreau

Nineteenth century essayists added idealism and the subjective bent of Romanticism to the idea of individualism. Henry Thoreau will serve to exemplify this tendency. He will serve well, for his faith in the individual way knew no limits, and was not cluttered by reservations and casuistry. He caught at the central tendency of the tradition and gave it forceful statement. Note this affirmation:

I heartily accept the motto,—“That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.¹³

If it can be said of Thoreau that he had too much faith in men, then it can be said with equal justice that most of us have too much faith in government. This latter was no fault of Thoreau. He said of government, "It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will."¹⁴ Moreover,

"this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India-rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their

¹³ Henry D. Thoreau, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," pub. in *Walden*, Norman H. Pearson, intro. (New York: Rinehart, 1948) p. 281.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.¹⁵

Thoreau has caught here the heart of the American tradition—that it is individuals who actually do and accomplish things, not groups, organizations, collectives, nor governments. These latter are at most aids, at worst obstructions.

William Graham Sumner

In his earlier writings, William Graham Sumner was an articulate advocate of the individual way. Particularly, he advanced the belief in individual responsibility and denied the validity of the emerging idea that the state was responsible for the well-being of individuals. The state, he thought, is not an entity; it is merely all the people joined together for the common purpose of protection. Hence, the state has no obligations which an individual does not have. He conceived American society to have been composed of free and independent men joined by a contract of their making. This contract was made, he said, to give the "utmost room and chance for individual development, and for all the self-reliance and dignity of a free man." No man might claim the help of an-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Democracy*, Saul K. Padover, ed. (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1939), pp. 22-23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.