John C. Calhoun and William G. Sumner: A Jeffersonian Study

從傑佛遜的觀點透視比較卡爾洪與桑姆納

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【Abstract】

John C. Calhoun and William G. Sumner were famous for their well-organized works and thoughts on contemporary political issues concerned. These issues included the law of nature, natural rights, the origin of individual-state relationship, and relevant others, all of which had much to do with how Americans would proceed and develop with their political life, established an American-mind base, and dissolved in the stereotype of the spirit of the country. Calhoun’s and Sumner’s doctrines, despite their differences, could be considered those reflected such thinking. For example, Calhoun and Sumner, based on the notion of limited government, insisted that the majority rule be curbed. The former advocated a concurrent democratic system, whereas the latter maintained a Social-Darwinist kind of individualism. Thomas Jefferson was the third President of the United States of America, whose political belief was believed to have set up and refreshed American political traditions, and whose works to be sure could be regarded as a legacy of American Literature. Hence this research paper is intended to utilize Jefferson’s principal thinking as a theoretical spectrum for analyzing the comparison between Calhoun’s and Sumner’s notions. Seeing that the thoughts closely related to American values are worth exploring, the research aims to deepen and enrich the studies on American Literature, and generally interpret what the American Creed and values are all about.

【摘　要】

卡爾洪和桑姆納均為美國立國初期的知名作家，其作品用字洗鍊，立論嚴謹，著重於探討朝野當時所關心的政治問題，包括自然法、自然權利、人與國家之間的權力互動根源等，這些問題不僅關係到美國人民未來政治生活的演進方向，也奠定了美國心靈的基礎，成為該國立國精神的主流原型。吾人於研究美國語文學之餘，為求研究面向的多元與深化，亦當探求美國的思想根源。卡爾洪和桑姆納的觀點，雖然彼此的主張有所差異，正典型地反映了這種思想根源。例如卡、桑二人從有限政府的觀點著眼，認為不宜過度強調多數統治，前著提倡協同式的民主制度，後者則主張社會達爾文式的個人主義。傑佛遜為美國第三任總統，其主要政治主張誠信充實、奠定了美國的政治思想傳統，其作品自是美國文學的一項資產。因此本文試以傑佛遜的基本主張作為比較分析卡、桑二人理念異同的光譜，希望藉此彰顯美國價值與信念之所繫。

Key Words: the law of nature, natural rights, ochlocracy, concurrent majority, states rights, Social-Darwinist individualism, limited government
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“I am glad to cite the opinion of Jefferson upon this subject rather than any other, because I consider him the most powerful advocate democracy has ever had.”

--- Alexis de Tocqueville

I. Introduction

John C. Calhoun as a Southern republican was a states rights advocate, while William G. Sumner, a Social Darwinist, laid his emphasis on the societal level, not the state level. Both had an organic view of the society, and both writers objected to excessive power of the state. The former disapproved of the democracy based on numerical majority and as a result favored the notion of concurrent majority and minority veto; the latter opposed any paternal forms of government and thus

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2 Calhoun disliked the term democracy and regarded the government of the States and the Union as a republic instead of a democratic. He called himself a Republican because the name Democrat was North-like and thought to be “those who are in favor of the government of the absolute numerical majority.” He was strongly opposed to such a government and believed it would destroy the political system and solidarity of the country. See Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 338-39.
denounced welfarism proposed and executed by government. For Calhoun, the majority had no right to make a decision which might affect the non-majority. In Sumner’s opinion, every individual should be given the opportunity to pursue happiness without sacrificing other people’s interest. As a way of discovering the differences and highlighting the similarities between both writers’ viewpoints on the relationship between the State and the Individual, Jefferson’s political ideas on natural rights, the law of nature, and republicanism may provide a valuable spectrum for research.

II. Jeffersonian Democracy

Jefferson’s notion of democracy, in a word, was meant to be a political system in which individuals were expected to wield their power by reason while the government was expected to wield its minimum power for the self-preservation of the people. The elements of democracy favored by Jefferson, including universal suffrage, two-house Congress, stable institutions, separation of powers, and checks and balances, were based on freedoms and rights as listed in the Constitution of the United States; above all, Jeffersonian democracy valued federalism in light of the state’s right to defend themselves from something unconstitutional against the federal government, so it thought itself to be guaranteed by the decentralization of power.4

As to natural rights, Jefferson believed that all men were born equal and endowed with inseparable rights, and that the government, consented by the people, was established to secure these rights or else the people had the right to overthrow it.5 As he wrote,

No man has a natural right to commit aggression on the equal rights of another; and this is all from which the laws ought to restrain him; every man is under the natural duty of contributing to the necessities of the society . . . ; and, no man having a natural right to be the judge between himself and another, it is his natural duty to submit to the umpirage of an impartial third.6

The individuals had the right to pursue what they needed without offending the same rights of others.7 When Jefferson talked about natural rights, he did not mention much about the social contract.8 However, he did believe that man was inherently a rational being with rights given by nature and with “an innate sense of justice,” and that a self-government “as a limited contract” was thus created to protect these rights.9 To sum up, for Jefferson, right and duty were indispensable together

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4 It was notable that Jefferson rebuked the 1789’s constitution for its shortage of a bill of rights. See Roger Scruton, A Dictionary of Political Thought (London: Pen Books, 1982) 238.
6 Ibid., 18.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 141.
to sustain the society and government. Such thoughts, like Hobbes's, seemed to highlight the principle of self-preservation and the fear of all against all. In other words, Jefferson's belief in people's pursuit of happiness was not so much hedonism as Aristotle's "eudaemonism". It was apparent that Jefferson distrusted ochlocracy (mobocracy), which easily resulted from hedonistic indulgence in pursuing happiness.

As to the law of nature, Jefferson trusted in human reason since he was confident in human nature and man's ability to govern himself without enforcement from outside. In a sense, the law of nature was seen as intertwined with reason, which would give birth to man-made laws and legitimize natural rights. That was why Jefferson was called a utilitarian deist. He defied any sort of morality that was merely grounded on self-interest. Unlike Libertarians', obviously his idea of reason was not tantamount to that of selfishness. He was more normative as a result of his agreeing to objectivist moral sense confined by reason or law of nature, the Jeffersonian self-evident truth supporting natural rights of mankind. As a Jefferson expert pointed out, "The Law of Nature and Nations for Jefferson becomes another illustration of his theory of rights. The key to this is given in the view that each nation 'forms a moral person' and every member of a nation is 'personally responsible for his society.'" In brief, the law of nature and natural rights existed in a cause-effect relationship.

Jefferson's republicanism started with a radical individualism based on human equal needs and rights and concluded that the authority of a state came from the will of the majority. His emphasis on the will of the majority differed from the Federalists', who distrusted majority rule. Furthermore, Jefferson believed that the nation, like an individual, had the right to govern itself with freedom and independence—the individual wielded his right in his "will," whereas a group of men exercised its right by their majority; he even created the notion of fair majority or of the rightful will of the majority, which brought about that "majorities are on the whole, more reliable than minorities." So to speak, not being worried about ochlocracy, Jeffersonian democracy was optimistic towards the human ability to exercise rights and powers by reason. That was a more radical view of individualism.

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10 Ibid., 148.
11 Ibid., 42.
13 Koch, op. cit., 28-29.
14 Ibid., 30.
16 Koch, op. cit., 28-29.
17 Ibid., 149.
18 Ibid., 150-51. In Jefferson's opinion, as Koch pointed out, the majority law was the law of nature of the human society; hence it became a basic law in the society recognizing "equal rights" and the "vital principle of republics." Of course, in terms of republicanism, Jefferson was also well-known in supporting civil liberty such as free speech, judiciary justice, etc., included in the bills of rights of the Constitution. See ibid., 155.
III. The Jeffersonian Level of Calhoun’s Thoughts

In terms of the precedent discussion of Jefferson’s basic political thoughts, Calhoun was similar to Jefferson in his positive attitude towards the State power but different in his organic view of individuals in society.

A. The Role of Individuals in Society

Calhoun’s corollary of his principle of the concurrent majority as the fundamental rule of the constitutional government was based on the arguments below. First, man was a social being because society could help sustain his life and protect his faculties. His private interests were apt to exceed his sympathetic or social interests. As a result, personal interests clashed among people and led to discord of the society. Since government as an indispensable controlling power was able to keep the society stable, it secured individuals’ happiness against any violence and disorder from outside or within. However, government was very likely to abuse its power to oppress the non-majority voice, so a constitutional government was created to prevent the abuse of such power. But that was not enough, because the right of suffrage, the spirit of majority rule, could not reflect diverse interests in the society. People need to wield a concurrent power to ensure or veto the execution of law. In Calhoun’s opinion, a constitutional limited government might be secured by way of concurrent majority and “nullification.” The result was the principle of compromise. Calhoun advocated not simply a proportionate but “an equal voice with the majority”; as John L. Safford pointed out,

This is a far superior protection against the tyranny of the majority than either the current one-person-one-vote principle or proportionate representation. Instead of leaving behind minorities of embittered losers, the threat of minority veto should promote association, dialogue, and fair compromise.

For Calhoun, such compromise had to be based on truth and justice and would become a virtuous cycle. But the problem was how compromise would be made without sacrificing interests of any individuals or groups concerned. About this, he did not give a reply.

Although Calhoun was in favor of the notion of limited government as Jefferson was, the latter

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20 Calhoun, ibid., 6-7. Also see Safford, ibid. For Calhoun, “Social organization is necessary for human survival.”
21 Calhoun, ibid., 9.
22 Ibid., 10.
23 Safford, op. cit., 211, 213. Calhoun identified a constitutional government with a limited government.
24 Ibid., 212.
25 Calhoun, op. cit., 50.
put more emphasis on the majority rule; the former, on the contrary, disliked the democracy based on the numerical majority, which meant the majority won by vote and thus oppressed the voice of the non-majority. For Calhoun, minority veto could be regarded as a constitutional right of the south; the execution and extension of the Constitution to the territories over the United States of America would be a shield to the South. 26 Obviously he suspected that the rational side of human nature would dominate the behavior of the political attendants. He was the thinker, different from Jefferson, whose thoughts were the same as those of the Federalists on "the central democratic problem of majority faction or the tyranny of the majority." 27

B. The State's Power

Calhoun strongly advocated the State's right to defend their own interests; however, he was reluctant to see the disunion of his country happen. He believed in federalism and considered America a democratic and federal country, power of which was conferred by the people and constitution of which was assented to, adopted, and ratified by delegates form each State. 28 The amendments of the constitution could only be accomplished by the "separate consent" of the States. 29

For Calhoun, it was righteous for the respective States to possess reserve powers. 30 First, consolidation and disunion would destroy the government because they deviated from federalism, and reserved powers were only wielded by the States separately, when delegated powers worked together by a common political organization by mutual consent among States. 31 Second, in terms of the States which joined in a federal system, the central government was not created to deprive them of all powers they ever had or to undermine their sovereignty and independence. 32 Calhoun differed from Jefferson because of his pro-confederacy color despite his insistence on federalism. 33 For Calhoun, the subject was the States, whereas the object was the federal government. The latter was composed and consented by the former. He indicated that a federal country was "a community composed of States united by a political compact . . . . not a nation composed of individuals united by . . . . a social compact." 34 As Merrill D. Peterson pointed out,

27 Safford, op. cit., 212.
28 Calhoun, op. cit., 81-82, 92.
29 Ibid., 100.
30 The notion of reserve powers for the States has been concretely worded via the 10th Amendment of the Constitution.
31 Ibid., 101-02.
32 Ibid., 104-05.
33 The preamble of the Articles of Confederation of America literally showed that the Union's power originated form the States; on the contrary, that of the Constitution of the United States, whose drafter was Jefferson, explicitly mentioned that the federal government's power came from the people.
34 Calhoun, op. cit., 116.
As the exponent of state rights, Calhoun appeared to some men the rightful heir of Thomas Jefferson. But in Jefferson’s creed state rights were in the service of the fundamental human rights of freedom and self-government. Calhoun converted the doctrine into a defensive weapon against democracy and consolidation. In this he was the heir of reactionary Jeffersonians.\textsuperscript{35}

Besides, self-preservation and security became the most conceivable reason and highest principle of organizing a country. Calhoun’s notion of natural rights was more Hobbesian than Lockeian or Jeffersonian,\textsuperscript{36} because in Hobbes’s viewpoint natural rights were for human beings to do whatever they want to pursue happiness and shun death.

In all, Calhoun maintained that the system of the numerical majority had to be assisted by that of the concurrent majority.\textsuperscript{37} The minority’s right to nullify the unconstitutional acts would facilitate conciliation and promotion of different interests and prevent strife. Calhoun was not as optimistic as Jefferson towards man’s ability to wield his rights and power by reason despite their same advocacy of state-rights, thus a political organization like states or nations was indispensable in order to avoid mobocratic anarchy.

**IV. The Jeffersonian Level of Sumner’s Thoughts**

**A. Individualism**

In favor of traditional values (mores), Sumner disliked individualism and rationalism, which would undermine such social relations as family, education, and religion. The “traditionalism” that stopped human progress was also what he rebuked. He was attempting to keep progress and tradition in equilibrium.\textsuperscript{38} However, Sumner’s disgust for individualism was not meant to discard it. The people certainly had the right to struggle for survival and defend their own interest, but they were expected to behave with social responsibility.\textsuperscript{39} It was apparent that Sumner’s negative view of individualism was different from Jefferson’s tendency to stress independent individuals’ rights by

\textsuperscript{35} Peterson, \textit{op. cit.}, 409-10

\textsuperscript{36} For Calhoun, man was a creature concerned for self-interest and “driven by passions of arrogance, jealousy, and revenge, which are destructive of the social state.” In his eyes, liberty could be considered a reward for the intelligent, patriotic, virtuous, and deserving, and there were no natural rights because all rights develop and remain in man-made laws. In a word, someone’s liberty would be unavoidably dependent on others’ slavery. Therefore Calhoun’s liberty was merely a doctrine focusing on “institutional balances, adjustments, and discriminations.” See \textit{ibid.}, 410.

\textsuperscript{37} Beitzinger, \textit{op. cit.}, 382.

\textsuperscript{38} Sumner, \textit{op. cit.}, 18. Also see \textit{ibid.}, 8-10. The excessive use of individual rights to pursue happiness would damage the society and result in ochlocracy.

\textsuperscript{39} When social order was destroyed, property would become insecure. See William Graham Sumner and Albert Galloway Keller, \textit{The Science of Society}, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927) 337.
nature. As he remarked,

There are two kinds of liberty: the anarchistic... and civil liberty. The latter is liberty under law and institutions, and is a status created by law, with security, peace, order, and a guarantee against arbitrary action contrary to the conceptions of justice.... It is evident that the first type of liberty is a mere figment, like natural rights and equality.41

For Sumner, there was nothing called natural rights or individual liberty because “nature offered only the experience of constant struggle”; individual rights were not inborn but “consistent with the survival of the fittest.”42 His research on social science was free of value, so he opposed the notion of equalitarianism and natural rights; however, Sumner was strongly individualistic as other Social Darwinists in terms of “the liberty that property provided and the liberty to pursue acquisition.”43 For him, on one hand, the struggle for property was similar to that for liberty; on the other hand, human beings lived in order to survive, and property was the support of self-preservation.44 In short as Sumner pointed out, “... civil liberty... is a status produced by laws and civil institutions, in which the personal liberty of individuals is secured; it is a status in which all rights and duties are in equilibrium.”45 Jeffersonian individual rights and liberty were not accepted by Sumner as the principle. He was proceeding in an organic, Social-Darwinist way to see the problems of individualism.46

B. Limited Government and Laissez-Faire

For Sumner, mankind was inherently evil, so the people had the potentiality to abuse the political power they possessed.47 He distrusted the State and the majority who chose it. There were two reasons. First, the majority never rationally made a decision. Second, the State was short of "wisdom, right reason, and pure moral sense."48 As Sumner put it,

History is only a tiresome repetition of one story. Persons and classes have sought to win possession of the power of the State in order to live luxuriously out of the earnings of others. Autocracies, aristocracies, theocracies, and all other organizations for holding

40 Ibid., 32. The individual would hardly developed “folkways”; his immediate motive was interest.
41 Ibid., 622, 624. For Sumner, social progress and dynamic derived from a blend of liberty and discipline.
43 Skidmore, op. cit., 159-61.
44 Sumner and Keller, op. cit., 348-49. Also see ibid., 606. Nevertheless, the blacks were not qualified to enjoy equality or rights to liberty, and such an idea also existed in Jefferson’s mind somehow.
45 Sumner, op. cit., 247-48. Personal liberty was only the chance to struggle for existence “to the best of one’s will and ability, within the bounds of one’s personal circumstances.”
46 Sumner was not like Burke but Spencer, who turned “the organic argument against English conservatism of the Burkean kind, and against all conservatism which lays its stress on the central authority of the state.” See J. S. McClelland, A History of Western Political Thought (London: Routledge, 1996) 492.
47 Sumner, op. cit., 204-05.
political power, have exhibited only the same line of action.\(^{49}\) Rights were secure only when they were defended by all arbitrary force, class, and interest.\(^{50}\) In like manner, Sumner defied any form of “big government” as Jefferson did. A big government was apt to keep everything under control. One of the most typical measures the big government would get involved in was that concerned with welfare. In that sense, Sumner rejected state welfarism, which would benefit “the paupers” at the expense of the rich, especially of the not-so-rich middle class citizens. In his view, welfarism would result in the polarization of the society; viz. the Forgotten Men, the middle class earning a living on its own, became the potential clients of welfarism.\(^{51}\) That was why Sumner advocated laissez-faire as the governmental policy. As he mentioned, the legislature’s effort to improve people’s life was inclined to prevent things from being done; due to man’s limited intelligence and ability, no artificial rule could be made to better the life conditions of the people.\(^{52}\) No wonder the form of limited government was Sumner’s preference and what he believed would help maintain essential freedom and justice.

V. Conclusion

The starting point of Jefferson’s arguments was based on reason, concerned with the law of nature, and positive human nature, related to natural rights. Then he asserted that the individuals and States should be protected from absolute power. Thus the conclusion he drew was the notion of limited government. Jefferson’s theory has its own flaws. First, now that he was so optimistic about the ability of mankind to exercise rights and powers by reason, why couldn’t he trust the so-called big government, constituted by and composed of the individuals (especially the majority) the same way? Second, since he held a belief that the nation just like a person had the right to govern itself with freedom and independence, why shouldn’t it slip the leash but get “limited” instead? It was obviously questionable that the individuals, not governing people, were self-evidently trustworthy in power exercising. However, Calhoun’s and Sumner’s theories weren’t that perfect either.

Calhoun and Sumner looked alike in several aspects. Like Jefferson, they opposed the strengthening of a specific interest.\(^{53}\) Calhoun thus suggested the measure of concurrent consent as a panacea for justice between the majority and minority. Sumner, adopting a different approach,

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\(^{49}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{51}\) McClelland, op. cit., 493-95. The Forgotten Man was the “law-abiding citizen who quietly gets on with his life, pays his way, and who is always the taxman’s target when government has schemes of social improvement in mind.” The spending of state welfare was endless. Once welfarism started, the rich were good at avoiding taxes paid for it, while the Forgotten Men would pay for it and become the next pauper.

\(^{52}\) Sumner, On Liberty, Society, and Politics, 231-32. Plutocracy was also a side effect of the “big government,” that created jobbery, led to corruptions, and undermined social justice. Also see Sumner, The Freeman, 122.

\(^{53}\) As Safford concluded, “What Calhoun sought to do was to make it nearly impossible for any organized voting group or party to aggrandize themselves at the expense of others.” See “John C. Calhoun, Lani Guinier, and Minority Rights,” PS: Political Science & Politics (June 1995): 213.
suggested a hands-off policy as the best way to deal with social justice. Unlike Jefferson, the two writers cast their doubts on the rule of majority. When focusing on the State level, Calhoun spoke much more like Jefferson because both were states-rights advocates. With regard to human nature, Sumner's standpoint that men were born evil was different from Jefferson's but more similar to Calhoun's. While resembling Calhoun about the ideas of organism or communitarianism, Sumner stressed that excessive individualism must have been destructive to the society. To sum up, the starting point of the two writers—negative human nature—was quite matched with the conclusion they drew—the notion of limited government. However, Calhoun's concurrent system was hardly made possible because in history political participants who tried to please everybody were destined to please nobody. On the other hand, Sumner's Social-Darwinist ideas ignored that the wealthy could be evil and more powerful in protecting their own interest.

Although Jefferson, Calhoun, and Sumner made great effort but failed to perfect their theories, they had successfully established a political tradition that reflected values of the American Creed as listed in the Constitution and as believed among the American people. Actually democracy in America grew and developed by ideals and tests with the passage of time. Even Jefferson himself was proved to have revised his majority notion: he changed by regarding the legislature, chosen and decided by the majority, as the most threatening danger that might foster a tyranny. Nevertheless, today in the United States, the notion of limited government, in spite of the fact that it is impossible to put it into practice without considering any socialist ideas, is still widely accepted and never discarded. As Tocqueville concluded:

...I do not think that a democratic power is naturally without force or resources; say, rather, that it is almost always by the abuse of its force and the misemployment of its resources that it becomes a failure. Anarchy is almost always produced by its tyranny or its mistakes, but not by its want of strength.

Bibliography


54 Ibid. Calhoun did not regard the numerical majority as "the people"; likewise, Sumner indicated that the State only stood for "Some-of-us", not "All-of-us." Also see Sumner, The Freeman, 11.

55 Tocqueville, op. cit., 158.

56 Ibid., 157.


