



**LIBERTY, (THE PURSUIT OF) HAPPINESS
AND THE ANXIOUS DEMOCRAT**
Conflicting Views of Liberalism in the Early Republic¹

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With the Declaration of Independence—as with other American declarations of rights at the end of the 18th century²—the natural rights to “liberty” and to the “pursuit of happiness” became inextricably linked as inherently part of the history of the new republic. From the very beginning, however, their relationship was a problematic one, as both universalistic concepts shifted from public to private, and led to hesitations as to whether they should be interpreted as collective or individual rights.³

Historians have long debated on the origin of the right to the “pursuit of happiness”⁴ in the revolutionary era, from its Lockean origin as a substitute for the right to property, i.e. an individual right to material well being, as opposed to a more collective sense of happiness in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment. In this line of thought, the right to happiness was understood as a social or collective right which transcended the sum of each and everyone’s individual rights to happiness; happiness might be attained

¹ An initial version of this paper was originally presented in French in two different seminars (“Recherche en histoire intellectuelle et culturelle,” Université de Cergy Pontoise, June 2004 and APSAM, Université Paris XII, October 2004). The present expanded version was given in English at the July 2005 SHEAR Conference in Philadelphia. I wish to thank David Voelker (University of Wisconsin) for putting together the session “Anxious Democrats: The Problem of Republican Governance in the Early Republic,” as well as Seth Cotlar (Willamette University) for providing very useful comments to this paper.

² Willi Adams, *The First American Constitutions. Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

³ Jan Lewis, “Happiness,” Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution, ed. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991): 641-47. See also Elise Marienstras & Naomi Wulf, ed., “Vie privée, bien public : histoire de la sociabilité américaine,” *Cahiers Charles V 22* (September 1997). My article entitled “Le Suffrage universel ou ‘le bonheur du plus grand nombre,’” *Vie Privée, Bien Public*, ed. Elise Marienstras & Naomi Wulf, 141-53, is a source for many of my examples here. The multiple ways of understanding the natural rights quoted in the Declaration are as a matter of fact confirmed in the French translations of the Declaration, see Elise Marienstras & Naomi Wulf, “French Translations and Reception of the Declaration of Independence,” *Journal of American History* 85. 4 (March 1999): 1299-324.

⁴ Lewis, “Happiness,” 641-3; Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

only in society and was understood as the goal of a good government.⁵ This conception was as a matter of fact echoed in the French Declaration of Rights of 1793: Art. 1 - "Le but de la société est le bonheur commun."

One must recall that in the Declaration of Independence, beyond the famous triad, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (rights secured by "governments [...] instituted among men" for that purpose), the right to "happiness" was mentioned two other times: "safety and happiness" belonging to government's realm of action (in this instance, liberty no longer appeared), and finally "the road to happiness," which appears only in the initial draft.⁶

My focus here is on the interaction of the two rights quoted in the Declaration, which appear to be central in understanding the history of the early republic beyond the Revolution, in its development towards democracy. Indeed, what were "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in a country which was turning liberty into a supreme value, both from a political and economic point of view, without always the necessary corollary of social justice (the absence of which slavery is the most blatant example of)?⁷ Just as liberty was originally conceived in more universal and collective terms, J. P. Greene has suggested that the universal conception of happiness in the revolutionary period quickly turned, in the years that followed the Revolution, into a more individualized understanding, less concerned with the well being of the new nation and with the public good of the republic, but more centred on the family and the individuals that made it up.⁸

I would argue that what some historians see as an early evolution in the post-revolutionary years was more of an ambivalent approach towards the meaning of happiness in relationship to liberty, a hesitation typified by Jefferson himself. Indeed these contradictory and overlapping meanings were epitomized by Thomas Jefferson in his practice as a public figure as well as in his life as a private individual. For the author of the Declaration's belief in furthering the public good thanks to an appropriate government, contrasted strikingly with his private experience in Monticello as a slave-owner, where he was denying liberty to "those who labor for [my] happiness,"⁹ thereby pointing to the relative nature of happiness and to the

⁵ "The happiness of the society is the first law of every government" (James Wilson) or "the surest way to promote [...] private happiness is to do publicly useful actions" (Hutcheson), quoted in Lewis, "Happiness", 643-44. See Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Doubleday, 1978).

⁶ Becker, *Declaration of Independence*.

⁷ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (London: Papermac, 1998).

⁸ Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: the Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of Modern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). See the decade long debates on the ideology of republicanism, summed up in Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (April 1982): 334-56; Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* (June 1992): 11-38.

⁹ The actual quote is extracted from a letter of Thomas Jefferson to Angelica Church, Nov 27, 1793: "I have my house to build, my fields to farm, and to watch for the happiness of those who labor for me." In: Saul K Padover, ed. *The Complete Jefferson* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1948] 1963). Lucia C. Stanton, "Those who labor for my happiness: Thomas

central moral dilemma posed by slave-owning. Indeed, the slaves on Jefferson's plantation saw themselves as "happy"¹⁰ ("safe and happy" as in the Declaration?). Yet Jefferson freed none of his slaves during his lifetime and only the Hemings family was emancipated when he died.

The individual and domestic happiness that Jefferson enjoyed thanks to his slaves was therefore divorced from an individual right to liberty, and happiness could thus be considered here as independent from freedom. What about Jefferson as a public figure once he was elected President? What had his conception of happiness become, in relation to liberty, since the Declaration? In his First Inaugural Address, the public happiness of the Declaration was clearly reduced to the sum of the individual happinesses of each. Jefferson was thereby confirming the liberal conception of society, which was coming to dominate the history of the United States.¹¹ Indeed, the action of government was limited to the guarantee of each and everyone's well-being, which put into question the role of government to "secure the rights" to "liberty and happiness."

These questions, which are at the heart of the liberal dilemma, were central to the debates that made up Jacksonian America, opposing, roughly fifty years after the Declaration, two conceptions of government at a time when the United States seemed to have made a clearer choice on the road to political and economic liberalism. The focus of this paper is therefore on the ambivalent heritage of the Jeffersonian model in Jacksonian America and on what was then made of the rights of American citizens to liberty and happiness. For, in Jefferson's wake, the Jacksonian system was characterized by an advance in political liberties through a new political system that took on the name of "democracy" reserved to white men, and by an economic system relying heavily on laissez-faire and a privatized conception of liberty striving towards material well-being. Given their apparent liberties had the American people thus attained the happiness they were entitled to from the beginning? Moreover what role should government play in guaranteeing the "happiness" of its citizens and what conception of liberty was associated to it? I shall consider these questions as they were debated within the political class (National Republicans turned Whigs and Democratic Republicans turned Democrats). Yet for all their disagreements, the two newly competing parties seemed to believe that the promise contained in the Declaration of 1776 had been fulfilled and that the American republic was finally living up to its ideal, albeit in differing terms.

During Jackson's presidency, there were other voices that pointed to a different understanding of the interaction between the two natural rights and their problematic fulfillment in Jacksonian America. Indeed, two

Jefferson and his Slaves," *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993) 147-80.

¹⁰ Stanton, "Those who labor for my happiness," 169. See also James Oakes, "'Whom have I oppressed?': The Pursuit of Happiness and the Happy Slave," *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race and the New Republic*, ed. James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis & Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 220-40.

¹¹ Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. James D. Richardson, vol. 1 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1879-1914) 322.

opposed sets of citizens expressed their concerns, in the face of Jacksonian excessive optimism. First, from a radical viewpoint, although they welcomed political liberty with the right to vote for all white men, the recently formed workingmen's parties were clearly dissatisfied with Jacksonian policies. At the other end of the political spectrum, classical liberals expressed their distrust of Jacksonian laissez-faire and political liberty, pointing to a certain form of anxiety as regards the realizations of democracy in bringing about freedom and happiness.

Jacksonian faith in political liberty and economic freedom

In the first fifty years of the republic, political debate centred on the role of government in society, and this largely helped define the two main political trends which reappeared by the mid 1820s, when the National Republicans emphasized the positive role of government in guaranteeing a national sense of well-being whereas the Democrats insisted on liberty at all costs to achieve happiness.

Indeed, the trend inaugurated during the Jefferson administration was associated with a certain form of political and economic liberalism which came to characterize "Jeffersonian democracy"¹²: free enterprise was encouraged, together with an agrarian concern for the acquisition of land in order to guarantee the independence of the farmer, associated with a belief in states' rights in relationship to the federal government. In Jefferson's own words, a government that should leave the people "free to regulate their own pursuits of industry" brings about happiness: "This is the sum of good government and this is necessary to close the circles of our felicities."¹³

What was the impact of this Jeffersonian view on Jacksonian democracy (understood broadly as the period 1820-1850)? What can the passage from the republic of the Founding Fathers to a so-called democracy, from one political and economic culture to another, tell us about the relationship liberty entertained with happiness?

Indeed, political liberty, which was the main achievement of the Revolution, together with the economic liberty the Revolution was essentially fought for, underwent a change from its *republican* meaning, centred as it was on the opposition to monarchy in order to govern for the public good, to the *democratic* meaning which entailed the right to vote for all white men (from 50-80% of the white male population voting, to the

¹² See Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Stephen Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

¹³ Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801: "Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and its greater happiness hereafter—with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? Still one thing more, fellow-citizens—a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circles of our felicities" (*Messages and Papers*, ed. Richardson, vol. 1, 322).

universalisation of suffrage in the first twenty years of the 19th century). In this context, economic growth, especially in the wake of the War of 1812, as well as territorial expansion, were given a big boost under Jefferson, the aim being to increase the population of independent farmers as well as to encourage free enterprise. In an oft-told development, this growing population of economically independent actors called for corresponding political rights and pushed for the revision of State constitutions from 1802 (Maryland) to the 1820s. By 1824, only Virginia, Louisiana and Rhode Island still imposed heavy restrictions on white male suffrage.¹⁴

Had the Americans thereby achieved the happiness they were originally entitled to pursue? The answer is affirmative, when one listens to the major presidential addresses of the period in which the successive presidents congratulate themselves precisely on this aspect, as if the access to happiness was precisely the measure of the young nation's ability to put into practice its initial ideals. But "the *right to the pursuit of happiness*" no longer appeared as such in the addresses, as on both sides the belief was shared that the American people were indeed "happy." What did this "happiness" consist in? According to the National Republicans and their leader, John Quincy Adams, elected in 1824, the main focus, unsurprisingly was on the positive role of government, which must act not so much in favor of individual progress but of society taken as a whole ("duties assigned [...] to social no less than to individual man"), thanks to political planning and a policy of internal improvements, together with a continental vision for the young republic.¹⁵ Happiness, for Adams, was essentially the happiness of the entire nation: "The great object of the institution of civil government is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social compact." This conception was echoed in Daniel Webster's famous speech on "Liberty and Union" (January 1830), as part of what came to be known as the Webster-Hayne debate: in advocating, in the midst of the Nullification crisis, first and foremost the preservation of the Union ("Liberty first and Union afterwards," "Liberty *and* Union"), he called for the preservation of what "has been to us all a copious fountain of national, social, and personal happiness"—with a hierarchy from "national" to "social" and finally to "personal" happiness which must be noted.

For Jackson, from his First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1829) to his First Annual Message (December 8, 1829), there is no doubt that the American people are "free" and "happy," their liberty depending on economic laissez-faire and political freedom, together with an ambivalent position regarding states' rights, a message which was confirmed in the famous Bank Veto message of May 27, 1830, two years after his election:

How gratifying the effect of presenting to the world the sublime spectacle of a Republic of more than 12,000,000 happy people, in the fifty fourth year of her existence, having passed through two

¹⁴ See Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1984) and Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹⁵ John Quincy Adams, "First Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1825, *Messages and Papers*, ed. Richardson, vol. 2 311 ff.

protracted wars—the one for the acquisition and the other for the maintenance of liberty—free from debt and with all her immense resources unfettered! What a salutary influence would not such an exhibition exercise upon the cause of liberal principles and free government throughout the world!¹⁶

By his second term, the initial ambivalence seemed to have pretty much disappeared, as Jackson insisted more explicitly on the Union as a guarantee of freedom and happiness: “The loss of liberty, of all good government, of peace, plenty and happiness must inevitably follow a dissolution of the Union.”¹⁷ In the end, his Farewell Message (March 4, 1837) reaffirmed his satisfaction in the success of the nation, in a perfect expression of American exceptionalism: “From the earliest ages of history to the present day there never have been 13 millions of people associated in one political body who enjoyed so much freedom and happiness as the people of the United States,” thereby confirming a vision of America as the country where liberty and happiness went hand in hand.¹⁸ In what is just meant here as an overview, we can find many such examples in the political speeches of the day. These expressions could be attributed to mere political rhetoric, except that they were taken at face value by contemporary commentators, who responded with the same mode of discourse. But in coming to different conclusions, they expressed indeed their critical views but also a form of disarray as to the meaning and the role of democracy.

Indeed Jacksonian optimism may have been a mask to dissimulate a great uncertainty that characterized the American republic in its early years, worried as it was in its identity as a young nation.¹⁹ A certain number of social commentators of the period seemed aware of the shortcomings of the Jacksonian system—witness the numerous reform groups derived from the Second Great Awakening or the ephemeral workingmen’s parties, whose aim was precisely to respond to the want brought about by an inefficient political system, apparently free, but incapable of satisfying the happiness of the greatest number.

Critical voices respond to Jacksonian liberal optimism

Andrew Jackson was indeed the first American president to have been elected by universal white male suffrage. Yet can one say that roughly fifty years after Independence, the United States had achieved the happiness that was inscribed in its initial project? Can one say, in more utilitarian terms²⁰

¹⁶ Andrew Jackson, “Bank Veto Message,” *Messages and Papers*, ed. Richardson, 1053.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Jackson’s hesitations on the question of states’ rights, see Richard E. Ellis, *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States’ Rights and the Nullification Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Henry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990).

¹⁸ Andrew Jackson, “Farewell Address,” *Messages and Papers*, ed. Richardson, 1526.

¹⁹ See on the territorial question, Thomas Hietala’s similar interpretation in: *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

²⁰ Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, equated the democratic system with happiness (“The happiness of the greatest number is the measure of right and wrong”). Jeremy

that the passage from a republican system of government to a democratic one had led to “the happiness of the greatest number”?²¹ Indeed, according to the utilitarian axiom, there was an arithmetic correspondence between “democracy” and “happiness” and the Jacksonian system led one to believe that one could easily shift from a political democracy founded on the majority principle to the happiness of an entire people.

At the very period when Tocqueville was writing about the American model of democracy, there were relatively few theoretical analyses of democracy, which was essentially at the stage of its pragmatic beginnings.²² Yet, one can identify among very different groups of commentators an emerging critique of the shortcomings of (Jacksonian) democracy, inspired by comments and reflections developing on the other side of the Atlantic, which ranged from the radical criticism originating with Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and even Karl Marx,²³ all the way to the classical philosophy of liberalism found in the writings of the English John Stuart Mill, and the French Tocqueville or Guizot.

While this critique pointed to a fundamental unease with democracy at its beginnings, one must note from the start that all these critics present themselves as democrats, from Brownson, who believed that “democracy is the best form of government for humanity,”²⁴ to Tocqueville or Mill, for whom there is no doubt that “of all governments, the democratic one is the only one that aims at “the good of the greatest number.” In this they all agreed with Bentham, that the only good government was democracy.²⁵

The Radical critique of the shortcomings of political democracy

As exemplified by the emergence of a workingmen’s movement in the very years when Jackson was first elected, the access to political liberty symbolized by the widening of suffrage was deemed insufficient and could not lead to the conclusion that the American people, an increasingly socially differentiated group, some of which were quickly losing their economic independence, were indeed “happy.” According to the artisans, mechanics, small entrepreneurs and to the more radical reformers who took their defence, democracy had not fulfilled its initial contract, as can be seen in such reviews as *The Free Enquirer*, the *Workingman’s Advocate* or *The Boston Quarterly Review*,²⁶ which repeatedly denounced this failure of Jacksonian democracy or even democracy in general in serving the interests of the

Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, 1776, *A Comment on the Commentaries*, ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1977) 393.

²¹ Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, 393, 508.

²² Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, 1835-40 (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981).

²³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859; François Guizot, *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe*, 1829-30; Robert Owen, *New Views on Society*, 1813-14; Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire*, 1829; Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 1848.

²⁴ Orestes Brownson, “Democracy,” *Boston Quarterly Review* (January 1838): 47.

²⁵ John Stuart Mill, “M. de Tocqueville et la démocratie en Amérique (I), Octobre 1835,” *Essais sur Tocqueville et la société américaine*, ed. Patrick Thierry, (Paris: Vrin, 1994): 11, 51.

²⁶ *Free Enquirer*, New York, 1829-1833. *Workingman’s Advocate*, New York, 1830-33. *Boston Quarterly Review*, Boston, 1838-1842.

greatest number. This radical critique spoke against the way in which Jacksonian discourse used “the people” who had elected them: while promising to defend their interests, Jacksonian populism was only addressing the producers and not “the whole people,” among whom were those who had recently benefited from the political reform that widened the suffrage to non property-holders.²⁷ Indeed as they acquired the right to vote, they were simultaneously being forced to abandon their independence, by selling their land and accepting a salaried work, thus being turned into what they called “wage-slaves,” and thereby being pushed away from the liberty and the happiness that should have derived from suffrage reform.²⁸ In the very period when economic panics were becoming a recurrent feature of the economic landscape (1819, 1837), leading to the loss of employment and to falling wages, these critical writings stressed the incapacity of governments to act in favour of the happiness of the greatest number.²⁹ For Jacksonians, America was no exception compared to Europe: contrary to what most foreigners believed in visiting America in the Jacksonian era (see Michel Chevalier, Alexis de Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau, among others),³⁰ the United States were far from having realized the “equality of conditions” described by Tocqueville.³¹ In the face of the celebration of a happy America, numerous were the voices that denounced the “evils of society,” and sought for collective solutions to reach the happiness that had been initially promised.

Such was the discourse one could find among the social reformers working alongside the early Workingmen’s parties of Philadelphia, Boston and New York, who addressed these artisans and small producers. New York reformers Robert Dale Owen and Frances Wright, for instance, took the defence of the Workingmen in their weekly *the Free Enquirer*, where they were joined by New England reformer Orestes Brownson, who started his career as a publicist in the pages of the *Free Enquirer* and ten years later founded his own *Boston Quarterly*, where he offered a more theoretical approach to the question. Together—albeit differently—they worked towards the education of the working classes, in order for them to be heard on the political scene.

Unsurprisingly, in the pages of the *Free Enquirer*, in the years 1828-1832, the emphasis is not on the “happiness” of the American nation but on the miseries and evils found in its society. The public good celebrated by Jackson was dismissed as just an illusion: “Our nation, poor, even in the midst of riches.” “Happiness! Alas! Where is it on the face of the earth?”

²⁷ For a good discussion on the use of “people” by Jackson, see Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

²⁸ Eric Foner, *Story of American Freedom*, 59 ff; Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) & Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁹ See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962), 287.

³⁰ Michel Chevallier, *Lettres sur l’Amérique du Nord*, 1834; Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, 1837.

³¹ Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 1: 333-34, 260.

exclaim Owen and Wright throughout the pages of their weekly.³² They were determined to seek “The Cause of Existing Evils”³³ in denouncing governmental abuse and religious obscurantism. Faced with blatant inequalities in the American population, they addressed the Workingmen in order to help organize solutions, in the wake of the recent movement in Philadelphia (Carpenters’ strike of 1827), by promoting the ten-hour work day, the abolition of imprisonment for debt as well as a system of public education.

Despite this bleak view of things, they managed to express an inextinguishable faith in the right to the “pursuit of happiness” for all, as they repeatedly returned to the principles of the Declaration of Independence in their appeal to their public. When they encouraged the workers to political action, they did it in reference to the initial project of the Founding Fathers, as can be seen in the Fourth of July Addresses where the toasts are to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness [which] stand particular among the equal inherent and unalienable rights held in virtue of our existence” and to “the equal rights of all, life, liberty and happiness [wherein] lies the sum of human good.”³⁴

Contrary to Jacksonian rhetoric, we are not faced here with an-already-realized happiness, but still with “the *pursuit* of happiness” of the Declaration: “Fifty three years ago, your fathers made a mighty stride towards human liberty and happiness.”³⁵ Thus these reformers were constantly remindful of the road that lay ahead, beyond what the Revolution had achieved: Americans might be enjoying “*our happy form of government*,”³⁶ but political participation was far from being equally shared. Indeed, universal suffrage did not necessarily imply happiness. This radical critique pointed to the failure of a *political* democracy based on suffrage alone, be it “universal,” in founding a *social* democracy, *i.e.* transforming the individuals that made up the “people” into full-fledged political and social actors.

How could one speak of “happiness,” if it did not actually concern everyone? Emphasis was put, in the very same language used by Jackson (or his opponents for that matter) on a common conception of happiness, with a belief in the reciprocal relationship existing between the individuals that made up the nation and its consequent happiness. For the worker was part and parcel of the American nation (“It should not be forgotten that what the bone and muscle are to the human body, the working classes are to the body politic, and therefore entitled to a full share of governmental protection”).³⁷ Thus, in a quasi-organic fashion, just as the happiness of the workers strictly

³² *Free Enquirer*, July 4, 1829 and August 21, 1830.

³³ Frances Wright, “On the Causes of Existing Evils”, *Free Enquirer*, March 1829.

³⁴ *Free Enquirer*, August 21, 1830. On the question of class-consciousness among this early labour movement, see Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984): 1-24 and Nick Salvatore, “Response to Sean Wilentz,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984): 25-30.

³⁵ *Free Enquirer*, July 4, 1829.

³⁶ *Free Enquirer*, August 12, 1829.

³⁷ *Free Enquirer*, August 12, 1829.

depended on the happiness of the entire nation, reciprocally, the existence of social evils came to cancel the hope of happiness, whatever it be:

Where the producing laborer and useful artisan eat well, sleep well, live comfortably, think correctly, speak fearlessly and act uprightly, the nation is happy, free and wise. Has such a nation ever been? No. Can such a nation ever be? Answer, men of industry of the US! If such can be, it is here. If such is to be, it must be your work.³⁸

Hence collective happiness and individualism were deemed incompatible, even for Robert Owen who, who was an admirer of Bentham: "happiness cannot be achieved on an individual basis."³⁹

As suffrage and political democracy, *i.e.* the access to political liberties, are not sufficient to bring about happiness, three main solutions were envisaged by these radical reformers: an Educational plan which was the essential project of the *Free Enquirer*, for

"The liberty and happiness of the people" derive from the principles of a republican education.⁴⁰

NATIONAL, RATIONAL REPUBLICAN EDUCATION; FREE FOR ALL, AT THE EXPENSE OF ALL; CONDUCTED UNDER THE GUARDIANSHIP OF THE STATE, AND FOR THE HONOR, THE HAPPINESS, THE VIRTUE, THE SALVATION OF THE STATE.⁴¹

Indeed among other things, the people must be taught how to vote, as popular sovereignty required education.

Furthermore, Wright and Owen, in the *Free Enquirer*, while they believed in universal suffrage, denounced the way in which Jacksonian democracy did not allow for true representation of the people, which explains why they called for the setting up of a third party in New York (starting July 1828). The bipartisan system dominated by the Whigs and the Democrats only represented two sides of the coin from an economic point of view and did not leave any room for the workingmen: despite the sovereignty of the people, "only the elites rule."⁴²

Finally, property reform was at the origin of an intense debate inside the *Free Enquirer* throughout the year 1830, opposing Owen and Wright to Thomas Skidmore⁴³: the question was repeatedly which of the two issues, property or education, should be given priority in any reform effort. Brownson, after he had broken with this group, would be famous in his

³⁸ *Free Enquirer*, December 5, 1829.

³⁹ Quoted by Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolutions*, 286.

⁴⁰ *Free Enquirer*, July 7, 1830.

⁴¹ *Free Enquirer*, December 5, 1829.

⁴² Brownson, "Constitutional Government," *Boston Quarterly Review* (January 1842): 236.

⁴³ Thomas Skidmore, the leader of the New York party from April to December 1829 created his own party as of the end of 1829, the independent Equal Rights Party as a result of a split inside the workingmen's movement (Owen and Evans on the one hand and a small merchant and artisans dominated faction led by Noah Cook and Henry G. Guyon which finally took over). See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 109.

stand in favour of a radical reform of the right to property in his very polemical article, "The Laboring Classes," published in July 1840, which would earn him severe criticism as well as the posthumous qualifier of "Marxist before Marx"⁴⁴: "What I mean is that universal suffrage and universal education do not give us the power we need to introduce the moral and physical equality demanded."⁴⁵ Beyond the utilitarian principle at the basis of political democracy, Brownson carried the logic of democracy to its utmost point: it must be social if one wanted it to include all.

The classical liberal critique of democracy

What might seem at first sight paradoxical is how this radical critique would meet a more conservative one, that of the classical liberal theory as it was developing during the same years in Britain and France, counter to democracy. Indeed, Orestes Brownson, who, in the United-States, at the time, was quite alone in offering a critical theoretical reflection on democracy, was at the junction of what can be identified as a two-fold opposition to hegemonic democratic liberalism.⁴⁶ Close to the *Free Enquirer* reformers, he went on to denounce the failure of Jacksonian democracy to work towards the happiness of all. In doing so, he was also feeding on the liberal criticism of democracy originating in Europe where suffrage had not yet been widened as in the United States. Indeed from the onset, liberalism, which had originated with the overthrowing of monarchical regimes in Europe and in America, was torn between the belief in majority rule and the more prevalent belief in government by a propertied elite. Gradually, liberalism and democracy appeared to be adversaries rather than allies.⁴⁷

Indeed, all the collective approaches previously cited were based on the belief that the people themselves could have an impact in reforming the system. Yet the 1840 elections, in which the people elected a Whig president, came to prove for some the incapacity of the people to work towards their own happiness. The "sorry sight"⁴⁸ offered by the joyous people who had just elected their own enemies was the very sign that the people could not govern itself or, in other words, that it could not be trusted with the political liberty it had been granted in order to achieve its own happiness. The failure of the people's choice in the 1840 elections would lead Brownson, in particular, beyond his initial position towards a more conservative critique of democracy, emphasizing a problem which he had actually identified early on in his political career: "The people is sovereign; but unhappily the sovereign is miserably educated, and hence all the difficulties."⁴⁹ On this point, he finally reached the conclusions of his transatlantic contemporaries who had not yet attained the stage of universal suffrage. In this more

⁴⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Orestes Brownson: an American Marxist Before Marx," *Seawanee Review* 47 (July-September, 1939): 317-43.

⁴⁵ Brownson, "Brook Farm," *Democratic Review* (November 1842): 486.

⁴⁶ Orestes Brownson is generally criticized because his political family is often difficult to identify (he is called "weathervane Brownson").

⁴⁷ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolutions*, 283-285.

⁴⁸ Brownson, "Democracy and Liberty," *Democratic Review* (April 1843): 259.

⁴⁹ Brownson, "Editorial Address," *Boston Reformer*, July 1, 1836.

conservative (albeit liberal) critique of utilitarianism,⁵⁰ the real capacity of the people to provide for their own happiness was put into doubt, emphasizing the risks contained in what Tocqueville and others called the “tyranny of the majority.”⁵¹

For from the end of the 18th century to the 1830s, one can trace a movement away from the original liberal ideas, and thus a shift from James Mill’s or Jeremy Bentham’s belief in the compatibility of liberalism with democracy to a new framework which actually rejected Bentham’s ideas, as exemplified by moderate liberal critics of democracy such as J. S. Mill in England, Tocqueville or Guizot in France, or, in the United-States, J. F. Cooper for whom only an enlightened elite can guarantee a good government: “There can be no question that the educated and affluent classes of a country, are more capable of coming to wise and intelligent decisions in affairs of state, than the mass of the population.”⁵²

According to J. S. Mill, the dangers associated with representative democracy are of two kinds: there is the “danger of a low grade of intelligence in the representative body and in the popular opinion which controls it,” as well as a “danger of class legislation on the part of the numerical majority, these being all composed of the same class.”⁵³ These are the two evils that the theoretical efforts of the liberal critics of numerical democracy strove against. For James Mill’s confidence in a bourgeois-led democracy had turned into his son’s anxiety to safeguard the rights of minorities against majorities.⁵⁴ The “tyranny of the majority” (or of “King Numbers”) was inherent in Bentham’s “greatest number” and it was seen here as representing a risk for individual liberties as well as for “minorities,” understood differently depending on the critic⁵⁵:

Is it at all times and places good for mankind to be under the absolute authority of the majority of themselves [...] Is it we say, the proper condition of man, in all ages and nations, to be under the despotism of public opinion?

Mill asked Bentham.⁵⁶ Indeed, far from fostering or even respecting liberties, the democratic government was seen as “despotism” and “tyranny.”

If one focuses on Brownson, he was looking not so much at a way of restraining the right to vote to an educated elite, but rather to set up a limit, within the system of governance, against “self-government.” Indeed, in the

⁵⁰ See Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolutions*, 278-286, or Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

⁵¹ Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 1: 343 and 348ff.

⁵² James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*, 1838 (New York: Penguin, 1989) 113.

⁵³ John Stuart Mill, *Representative Government*, 1861, *Three Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) 247.

⁵⁴ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolutions*, 285.

⁵⁵ Depending on the authors, “minority” rights stood for different entities. For Stuart Mill, as for J. F. Cooper, the point was to defend the individual against the “despotism of public opinion;” but for Brownson or Calhoun, one must defend oneself against the economic impositions of the North, Calhoun defending states’ rights to slavery and low tariffs and Brownson protecting the rights of the workers against the same economic policy.

⁵⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge*, 1838 (New York: Harper, 1950) 85.

right to the “pursuit of happiness” he identified an invitation to what he considered was “laissez-faire” which ran counter to his conception of a government devoted to the public good:

May government never interfere with the individual in “pursuit of happiness”? This individual affirms that he must pursue happiness by engaging in piracy, in the slave trade, or by taking to the highway; must government say that the pursuit of happiness is an unalienable right, and leave him to pursue his own way?⁵⁷

In a rather anachronistic (or prophetic) fashion, and as opposed to his American contemporaries whether they be Democrats or *Free Enquirer* reformers, Brownson was pushing for an increase of the power of government, but without coming closer to the Whigs for that matter. Indeed, he was rather unique in his period in his belief in a strong government all the while defending the rights of the working class, with an emphasis on a respect of the Constitution above the people as the only guarantee of a virtuous government. By emphasizing the moral features of what democracy should be about, there was the belief that only a virtuous government could work towards common happiness, which was the only way to make up for the imperfections of universal suffrage. This necessary link between politics and religion (or ethics) was typical of Brownson’s reasoning.⁵⁸ Happiness was not everything, and one can note that he was not alone in associating it to wisdom and virtue: “the nation will be happy, free and wise,” “the growth of individual *virtue* and happiness,” “they would have all men *wise*, good and happy,” “I entreat you by all that is binding in human duty... by all your desires for human happiness,”⁵⁹ in a language reminiscent of the republican virtue of the revolutionary era.

Both in the radical or liberal response to Bentham, one finds an appeal to transcending the sum of individual happinesses towards a collective sense of what it should be about. Brownson by these singular comments interestingly bridges, as he was always on the lookout for the best government, the gap between the two sets of critiques. Beyond his pungency as a commentator, he also exemplified by his very trajectory a fundamental anxiety in the face of this emerging democracy. Indeed Brownson’s very fluctuating life course from place to place, from sect to sect, from one group to the other all the while searching for the one and only dependable form of

⁵⁷ Brownson, “The Origin and Ground of Government,” *Democratic Review* (February 1843): 331.

⁵⁸ Brownson was here again in synch with some of his European contemporaries such as the French utopist Saint Simon. Comte de Saint-Simon, *Nouveau Christianisme : dialogues entre un conservateur et un novateur*, 1825 ; Rosanvallon, *Moment Guizot*, 237.

⁵⁹ *Free Enquirer*, December 5, 1829; Brownson, “Social Evils and their Remedy”, *Boston Quarterly Review* (October 1839): 267; Brownson, *Address on the Fifty-Fifth Anniversary of American Independence Delivered at Ovid, Seneca Co. NY July 4, 1831* (Ithaca: S. S. Chatterton, 1831) 8; Brownson, “The Laboring Classes”, *Boston Quarterly Review* (July 1840): 373; Brownson, *An Address on Intemperance Delivered in Walpole, NH, February 26, 1833* (Keene, NH: J. & J. Prentiss, 1833) 15.

government was the very embodiment of the uncertainties pervading the democratic spirit of the time.⁶⁰

I would like to end with one commentator in particular who spoke to this contemporary anxiety in terms surprisingly close to those used by Tocqueville. Henry W. Bellows, a Unitarian minister in Boston happened to be a *whig* commentator.⁶¹ In an essay that is very reminiscent of Tocqueville's portrayal of the American people, Bellows noticed a lack of feeling of happiness among Americans, who were essentially moved by an "anxious spirit of gain." Tocqueville spoke equally of the unrest or the worry of Jacksonian Americans and devoted an entire chapter in vol. 2 of *De la démocratie en Amérique* to "why the Americans show themselves so worried in the middle of their well-being"⁶²:

J'ai vu en Amérique les hommes les plus libres et les plus éclairés, placés dans la condition la plus heureuse qui soit au monde ; il m'a semblé qu'une sorte de nuage couvrait habituellement leurs traits; ils m'ont paru graves et presque tristes jusque dans leurs plaisirs [...] C'est une chose étrange de voir avec quelle sorte d'ardeur fébrile les Américains poursuivent leur bien-être, et comme ils se montrent tourmentés sans cesse par une crainte vague de n'avoir pas choisi la route la plus courte qui peut y conduire [...] On s'étonne d'abord en contemplant cette agitation singulière que font paraître tant d'hommes heureux, au sein même de leur abondance. Ce spectacle est pourtant aussi vieux que le monde ; ce qui est nouveau, c'est de voir tout un peuple qui le donne.⁶³

⁶⁰ See Schlesinger's thesis which points to this idea [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, *A Pilgrim's Progress: Orestes A. Brownson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966) xi, and Naomi Wulf, "The Idea of Democracy in the United States, 1828-1844, Through the Writings of Orestes Brownson" (Dissertation, Université Paris 7-Denis Diderot, 1995)]. Orestes Brownson was born in 1803 in Vermont and from his early childhood on traveled not only from place to place in New England and New York (with a short stay in Illinois as a young adult), but also from one Protestant denomination to another—he was successively a Congregationalist, a Presbyterian, a Free thinker and a Unitarian—before converting to Catholicism in the middle of his life. Always looking for the best possible society, his religious concerns were closely linked to his political beliefs which led him to move in and out of political organizations such as the short-lived Workingmen's Movement in New York at the end of the 1820s or the Democratic Party in Boston, before he rejected parties altogether as he found his definitive faith.

⁶¹ Henry Bellows, "The Influence of the Trading Spirit Upon the Social and Moral Life of America," *The American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art and Science*, 1 (Jan 1845): 94-98.

⁶² Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 2, chap. 13: "Pourquoi les Américains se montrent si inquiets au milieu de leur bien-être."

⁶³ Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 2, chap. 13: "In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest circumstances that the world affords; it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures. [...] It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare, and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it. At first sight there is something surprising in this strange unrest of so many happy men, restless in the midst of abundance. The spectacle itself, however, is as old as the world; the novelty is to see a whole people furnish an exemplification of it." (Trad. New York: Albert Knopf, 1945).

Just like Tocqueville, Bellows was convinced that, contrary to Europe, America was the country of equal conditions and he believed in the material well being of his fellow Jacksonians:

Widespread comfort, the facilities for livelihood, the spontaneous cheap lands, the high price of labor [...] it is not poverty, nor tyranny, nor over competition which produces this anxiety; that is clear.

And just like Tocqueville, he noted that this pursuit of gain was open to each and everyone. But this is precisely where he offered a psychological comment à la Tocqueville. With this widespread access to well-being, hopes and satisfactions vanished: no more aspirations, access to happiness indeed, but no more “pursuit of happiness.” He thus deduces that trade and free enterprise are not the sole answers to a people’s happiness, nor political liberty: “We are free,” but this liberty turns out to be dangerous and detrimental to us, “destructive of the happiness and dangerous to the virtue”: “We call our country a *happy* country; happy, indeed, in being the home of noble political institutions, the abode of freedom; but very far from being happy in possessing a cheerful, light-hearted, and joyous people”⁶⁴—thereby establishing a contrast, a gap between political and economic freedom and the happiness that can be derived from it. In terms that mirror Tocquevillian views, the Jacksonian is pictured as indeed “free” from both a political and economic point of view, yet characterized by a great sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction. Liberty had not fulfilled its promise in providing its expected corollary, happiness.

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⁶⁴ Bellows, “The Influence of the Trading Spirit.”

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