LORD BOLINGBROKE: A TORY THINKER THAT JEFFERSON TRULY ADMIRED

by Haimo Li
Jefferson scholars all knew that Thomas Jefferson often disparaged the label “Tory” in his political writings. For Jefferson, being called a Whig would signify approval, while being called a Tory was quite derogatory and damaging. There were, however, one or two Tory thinkers that Jefferson truly admired, and Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke seems to be the most salient one of this very rare category.

Jefferson intensively read Bolingbroke, first in his youth and continuing throughout his life. As Andrew Burstein nicely documented: “in his Literary Commonplace Book, begun in the early 1760s, Jefferson excerpted more from Bolingbroke . . . than from any other thinker or writer, classical or modern.”[1] In his late years he still highly recognized Bolingbroke’s contributions. In Jefferson’s January 1821 letter to Francis Eppes, he wrote this famous paragraph on Bolingbroke:

You ask my opinion of Ld Bolingbroke and Thomas Paine. they were alike in making bitter enemies of the priests & Pharisees of their day, both were honest men; both advocates for human liberty. Paine wrote for a country which permitted him to push his reasoning to whatever length it would go: Ld Bolingbroke in one restrained by a constitution, and by public opinion. he was called indeed a tory: but his writings
prove him a stronger advocate for liberty than any of his countrymen, the whigs of the present day. Irritated by his exile, he committed one act unworthy of him, in connecting himself momentarily with a prince rejected by his country. But he redeemed that single act by his establishment of the principles which proved it to be wrong. These two persons differed remarkably in the style of their writing, each leaving a model of what is most perfect in both extremes of the simple and the sublime. No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style; in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language . . . Ld Bolingbroke's, on the other hand, is a style of the highest order: the lofty, rhythmical, full-flowing eloquence of Cicero. Periods of just measure, their members proportioned, their close full and round. His conceptions too are bold and strong, his diction copious, polished and commanding as his subject. His writings are certainly the finest samples in the English language of the eloquence proper for the senate. His political tracts are safe reading for the most timid religinist, his philosophical, for those who are not afraid to trust their reason with discussions of right and wrong.[2]

This clearly is high praise. For Jefferson, Bolingbroke was a Tory with all the open-mindedness to the classic Whiggish teachings of “liberty” and constitutional order. This open-mindedness made Bolingbroke a good (and in Jefferson's mind rare) Tory. Generally speaking, Jefferson clearly despised Tories, but he was wise enough not to discount the views of every Tory. Besides, Bolingbroke played “a prominent role in developing a Country ideology, designed to link Tories with opposition Whigs in order to produce a political movement that was at once loyal and pledged to better government”.[3] This “Country” (as versus “Court”) ideology appealed to Jefferson[4].

Jefferson's evaluation and comments on Bolingbroke have been repeatedly verified and reconfirmed by modern scholarship. According to Lee Ward, “In Bolingbroke we see a particularly vivid demonstration of the Tory transfer of allegiance from the Filmerian
[meaning Robert Filmer] absolute monarch to the eighteenth-century moderate Whig doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty.[5] A. Owen Aldridge's research tells us that men like Bolingbroke "who had been tories, took up the Old Whig doctrine and wielded it to bludgeon the New Whigs."[6] Caroline Robbins's research further confirms this point: "Bolingbroke was a freethinker and a Tory, albeit one who could put Scripture to his own uses and cite the canonical Whig writers in defense of his own devious ways."[7] James Mulvihill described Bolingbroke's rhetoric as "a classic instance of a Tory appropriation of Whig constitutionalism, profoundly traditional in style and substance, but ... Whiggishly subversive in method and aims."[8] R. C. Richardson sharply summarized, "what the Tory Bolingbroke was doing was to use the Whig appeal to a free past as a weapon."[9]

Of course, there are other areas where Jefferson happily found himself in agreement with Bolingbroke. For example, Bolingbroke famously attacked oligarchy, similar to Jefferson's fierce criticism of "pseudo-aristoi" and "Pseudo-aristocracy."[10] Jefferson also quite obviously admired Bolingbroke's religious views. Bolingbroke upheld deism,[11] he "believed in God, but rejected revelation,"[12] and modern Jefferson scholarships oftentimes views that "it was Bolingbroke who set Jefferson on the road to religious skepticism."[13] David Mayer even concluded that "the deistic natural religion of Bolingbroke ... most visibly shaped the moral philosophy on which Jefferson's understanding of natural society and, more broadly, his concept of self-government rested."[14] This is perfectly documented by Dumas Malone, who writes that young Jefferson "copied the dictum of Bolingbroke that the teachings of Christ comprise an incomplete body of ethics; and that a system collected from the writings of the ancient heathen moralists would be more full, more entire, more coherent, and more clearly deduced from unquestionable principles of knowledge."[15]

Additionally, in 1774 Jefferson tried his best to remind King George III that he was "the chief officer of the people, appointed by the laws, and circumscribed with definite powers, to assist in the working the great machine of government, erected for their use, and consequently subject to their superintendence." As pointed out by Merrill D. Peterson, to a certain extent this Jefferson line sounded just like Bolingbroke's famous ideas of the "patriot king" model.[16] More broadly, Jefferson's view of the British Monarch had been influenced by Bolingbroke's theory, as sharply captured by Harold Hellenbrand: "in effect, Jefferson adapted Bolingbroke's advice about how a patriot king should behave within Britain itself to the structure of empire. Seeing his British counselors for what they were—parties, factions—the king should strive to maintain the balance of a great, if a well poised empire."[17]

On economics, Bolingbroke once said: "the landed men are the true owners of our political vessel, the moneyed men are no more than passengers in it." This approach nicely fit into
Jefferson’s Virginia background and his political base in the South, as opposed to Alexander Hamilton’s Northern moneyed-man background.

Last but not least, overall Bolingbroke’s attitude towards France looks quite similar to what Jefferson had in mind. As pointed out by John Shovlin, “Bolingbroke welcomed the idea of closer relations with France and believed that freer trade would facilitate this.”[18]

Perhaps Jefferson’s admiration of Bolingbroke would help to bring us a better understanding of his 1801 First Inaugural Address, in which Jefferson famously said, “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.” A Federalist who is open-minded to the Republican principles would be a good Federalist, just like Bolingbroke, a Tory who is open-minded to the Whig principles would be a good Tory.


