today is his skepticism of government involvement in medicine. He believes this will only lead to greater social control:

All these healthcare enterprises, with poorly paid doctors on salaries, where treatments are supervised by bureaucracies, should be regarded with suspicion; overnight they can undergo alarming transformations.

Here again people succumb to government control because of fear. One of the greatest fears for modern man is to be without health insurance. Jünger was an ardent believer in the importance of developing personal health care, as good health was another facet of freedom and a means to thwart government control.

Despite his eccentric and aristocratic views, Ernst Jünger remains one of the most important modern thinkers on the political Right. And if more people read and understand him, it will become clear he is no fascist, and never was. But he was certainly a great visionary and may well be one of the great conservative writers of the twentieth century.

How’re ya gonna keep ’em down on the farm?

Paul H. Lewis


A recent Gallup poll found that 72 percent of Americans now fear the federal government as the greatest threat to our democratic freedoms. In light of the revelations about NSA monitoring of our phone calls and e-mails, and of the IRS’s targeting of groups opposed to President Obama’s reelection, and what we now know—despite much official lying—about the deeply intrusive nature of Obamacare, would you include yourself in that majority? If so, then maybe Jeff Taylor’s *Politics on a Human Scale* is just the sort of book you’ll want to read.

Or maybe not. Professor Taylor perceives American history as a Manichean struggle between two traditions, the Jeffersonian and the Hamiltonian. In his lengthy, minutely researched, and heavily end-noted study, the Jeffersonians are the heroes. He shares their ideal of a highly decentralized agrarian republic in which yeoman farmers settle political questions face to face in small, local communities and reserve the right to nullify decisions made by higher-level authorities. His villains are the Hamiltonian bankers and businessmen of the urban East Coast with their allegedly “sophisticated” irreligious attitudes and their desire for a strong central government to facilitate the growth of a commercial economy that would not only

Paul H. Lewis is a retired professor of political science from Tulane University. He now lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.
dominate America but would also expand overseas, using the excuse of “national interest” to justify war and empire.

Despite losing the fight in 1789 to prevent the Constitution’s ratification, the Jeffersonians controlled the federal government through their Democratic Party for most of the pre–Civil War era. Taylor gives little attention to that period beyond noting that Andrew Jackson continued the tradition. He fails to mention that the War of 1812 and the Mexican War were fought under Democratic presidents, Madison and Polk, and that their aims included territorial expansion. In the earlier war the United States unsuccessfully tried to seize Canada, while in the latter war we took Texas, California, and Arizona from Mexico. Jeffersonians, apparently, were not immune to the lure of empire building. Perhaps the source of contagion was, in the Mexican case, the Southern planter class, which sought to extend the practice of slavery. Taylor charges the Southern Bourbons with corrupting the otherwise admirable doctrine of states’ rights to justify the continuance of slavery. By doing so they eventually caused the Civil War and the Democrats’ temporary downfall.

Taylor skims over the economic and social developments of the Gilded Age in order to concentrate the bulk of his study on the failure of Progressives at the beginning of the twentieth century and the New Deal thirty years later to break up the giant corporations that had emerged after the Civil War. He notes that the ideological heirs of Alexander Hamilton, working mainly through the Republican Party, succeeded in establishing the industrial, banking, and transportation tycoons at the center of American wealth and power. Even when the Democrats managed to win the White House under Grover Cleveland, they pursued the same statist policies of granting special privileges to corporations. Cleveland went so far as to use government troops to break up the 1894 Pullman Strike. Although Taylor identifies a “Jeffersonian revival” from 1896 to 1912, built around the Populist movement and William Jennings Bryan in the Democratic Party, and Robert La Follette in the GOP, it was short-lived. The so-called Progressives, Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, increased the powers of the federal government only to regulate, rather than destroy, Big Business.

Taylor explains their betrayal of Jeffersonianism by emphasizing Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s privileged backgrounds and their many ties to the business world, but a fuller explanation would have explored the huge changes in American society that industrial growth brought about during the Gilded Age. By the end of the nineteenth century, the urban population had doubled, and manufacturing surpassed agriculture as the principal source of wealth and employment. A vast railroad network reached into every part of the country, allowing hundreds of thousands of people to escape from “the idiocy of rural life” (to quote Marx’s immortal zinger). While many of those who fled to the cities lived in squalid slums and groaned under the discipline of factory labor, there was no appreciable back-to-the-farm movement. Nor was it possible to restore laissez-faire. Ferocious competition among ruthless tycoons at the start of the Gilded Age had been disruptive rather than productive until big bankers, led by J.P. Morgan, imposed order by consolidating corporations into trusts and monopolies. And when those latter abused their power, experience showed that the state and local governments were unable to control them. Only a strong central government could check their power, but why break them up into little pieces when their growth had turned the United States into the world’s foremost industrial power?
Starting with World War I, Big Government and Big Business began a close collaboration that continued through the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations, and finally became a permanent paradigm with the New Deal. For Taylor, Franklin D. Roosevelt represented the final triumph of Hamiltonianism within the Democratic Party, which now was committed permanently to “state-supervised monopoly capitalism.” And despite the efforts of small-government conservatives like Robert Taft and Barry Goldwater, FDR’s success convinced a majority of Republicans to buy into the paradigm. Led originally by Thomas Dewey and Nelson Rockefeller, these “me-too” Republicans have controlled the party down to the present.

But what about Ronald Reagan? Surely he was an exception to Hamiltonian hegemony? Not really, according to Taylor. Reagan spoke like a small-government Goldwater conservative on his way to the presidency, and his election was helped by the defection of “Reagan Democrats,” who were really former supporters of George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama. (For Taylor, Wallace was, despite his deplorable racism, a true states’ rights populist in the style of William Jennings Bryan—perhaps the last of that breed in the Democratic Party.) Once in office, however, Reagan fell into the familiar pattern of increasing federal spending and running up deficits. And he bequeathed to the Republican Party big-government advocates like George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush.

Are there any Jeffersonians left on the American political scene, then? For Taylor, very few prominent politicians qualify. Among those whom he mentions favorably are Patrick Buchanan, Ron Paul, Jerry Brown, and Dennis Kucinich. These are “morality-based,” antiwar, social conservatives, as opposed to “economic-based” establishment conservatives. As for writers and commentators, Taylor rules out prominent figures like Rush Limbaugh, Charles Krauthammer, George Will, and indeed the whole Fox News team as pseudo-conservatives, because they are said to mock Ron Paul, Pat Buchanan, and the Christian Right. Bill Buckley comes in for a special rant because he used National Review magazine to attack the John Birch Society. Neoconservatives are dismissed as being predominantly Jewish and favoring an aggressive foreign policy for Israel’s sake (363). If a new upsurge in Jeffersonianism were to occur, it would have to originate outside the major political parties and the mainstream media.

On the Right, an independent Tea Party might become an effective force against Big Government and crony capitalism, but first it would have to overcome its divisions between the small-government Old Right conservatives, the evangelicals of the newer Christian Right, and the rather hedonistic libertarians. On the Left, there is the latest emanation of the counterculture: the Occupy Wall Street anarchists, plus various dropouts from the consumer society. Though still marginal, these groups have certain trends on their side. The Internet and other social media give voice to opinions that lie outside the governing establishment and the mainstream media. Social fragmentation encourages a de facto decentralism through the forming of subcultural enclaves. These are, for Taylor, straws in the wind that hint of future political change.

It is worth reading Politics on a Human Scale because, whether you agree with its thesis or not, it is thought provoking. However, I would recommend reading it in tandem with Jackson Lears’s No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920. Lears reminds us that the rapid industrialization
and urbanization of the late nineteenth century also generated an antimodern reaction among many educated and affluent people, which took the form of a fascination with medieval society. The warrior and the saint were “authentic” people, not cogs in some commercial bureaucracy. For the antimodernist handyman, there was the Arts and Crafts Movement, which tried to revive the spirit of medieval craftsmanship. None of these things stopped the relentless forward march of modernity, but they produced the late-Victorian trend toward the Gothic in literature and architecture. By providing opportunities to meet with likeminded people, they were therapy for the psychologically displaced; and by promoting values like “dedication to service” and “rugged individualism,” they helped guide the anomic back into the mainstream. Is it possible that blogging, Facebook “friending,” and tweeting might provide similar relief for today’s Jeffersonians, nostalgic for their long-lost agrarian Arcadia?