

Philosophers Unwelcome

WHEN THOMAS PAINE, a populist hero during revolutionary times, intended to return to the United States from France after twenty-five years away, an anonymous writer in *Port Folio* fulminated, “What! Invite to the United States that lying, drunken, brutal infidel.”¹ There, in a nutshell, was a view of contemporary continental philosophers typical of those who saw Jefferson and his allies as embracing every foreign, radical, and godless threat.

For Jefferson’s Federalist opponents, the more abstract elements of natural philosophy were not only a waste of time, they were dangerous. The origins of their suspicion lay partly in religion and partly in political philosophy. In their view, the most immediate threat, greater even than a call to the literal barricades, was the insidious, sometimes open tension between the new philosophies, with their scientific explanations of causes in the material world, and religion. Modern philosophies, especially those coming out of France, were seen as leading to a denial of basic tenets of Christianity—as indeed, in Jefferson’s case, they did—and as threatening the stability of the young nation.

One author lambasted Jefferson and others like him on precisely these grounds: “Wretched, indeed, is our country, if she is to be enlightened by . . . philosophers whose industry is equalled by nothing but their vanity; whose pursuits are impeded by no danger nor difficulty . . . who think nothing too great for them to grasp, and nothing too minute to be observed: they dig into the bowels of the earth, and climb the loftiest mountains; they traverse the ocean, and explore the region of air; they search the written records of antiquity, and the traditions of savages; they