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Thomas Paine: World Citizen in the Age of Nationalism

'My attachment is to all the world, and not to any particular part'
Paine, *Crisis VII*

Thomas Paine was an English citizen by birth; he also became a citizen of the United States and an honorary citizen of France. Although multi-national citizenships were not frequently awarded by Western governments during the late eighteenth century, when a nascent nationalism restricted the exchange between nations of persons and ideas, Paine moved freely between England, France, and America, championing the rights of world humanity, and seldom concerning himself with national boundaries or with political traditions.

Most of Paine's supporters in each of his three countries did not share his disregard for national identity. They might have had world ideological sympathies but they felt a peculiar loyalty to their native country. For Paine, however, national citizenships were but so many licenses of physical mobility. He never regarded himself as a citizen of this or that country; he perceived himself as a global patriot, a citizen of the world. If national boundaries there must be, he suggested, let there also be a forum of united nations to advance world peace and the liberty of peoples. A century and a half later such a forum would be erected, but its early prophet would largely be forgotten – a victim of the political reaction and narrow nationalism of the previous two centuries.

Thomas Paine was not the first person to claim world citizenship. Socrates, according to Plutarch, identified himself, not as a Greek or an Athenian, but as a *mundanus* – a world citizen.[4] Although Paine read neither Latin nor Greek, he almost certainly was familiar with the works of Joseph Addison and Viscount Bolingbroke, who in the early eighteenth century laid claim to world citizenship.[5] Stoic philosophy, with its ideological commitment to cosmic or world citizenship,[6] also reached Paine through his friend Oliver Goldsmith, whose *The Traveller* and *Citizen of the World* were in part philosophical critiques of the local attachments of the English. The eighteenth-century English were accepting of international scrutiny of their manners and morals; above all they enjoyed modeling their political institutions before world opinion.

Paine, however, did not wish to model England; it was his native country but not a special haven of liberty and popular rights. He held the same opinion of his countrymen: they were neither freer nor more innately liberal than the nationals of other countries.

The extraordinary absence of instinctive patriotism removed Paine intellectually and emotionally from the great mass of Englishmen. It put him in correspondence with cosmopolitan thinkers such as Goldsmith, and with the great American Benjamin Franklin,[7] whose predilection for world citizenship caught the attention of the young Paine. Although Paine's world citizenship was unique in its purity, Franklin consciously cultivated the personage of the noble savage of the American frontier. Thomas Jefferson, Paine's most loyal ideological ally, revered France and its Revolution, but towards Britain he harbored love-hate sentiment, wishing at times for 'an ocean of fire between that island and us.'[8] Even Samuel Johnson, often cited as the greatest representative of eighteenth-century sensibility, once announced that he was 'willing to love all mankind, except an American.'[9] If even Johnson, for whom patriotism represented 'the last refuge of a scoundrel,' freely indulged in national aspersion, Paine must be regarded as one of the most enlightened cosmopolitans of his day.

The extent of Paine's internationalism was foreshadowed in his earliest writings, although it was partially obscured by his revolutionary rhetoric. In America, his expressed hostility towards the deeds of the British government and monarchy were readily interpreted by the aroused Americans as symptoms of hostility towards all things British, while his personal exhortations to Americans to proclaim their independence, and to be 'patriots' all, were interpreted in terms of territorial and political sovereignty. But in *Common Sense* Paine sharply ridiculed the predilection of individuals to define themselves according to parish, county, or country. People should unite around reason, he declared: 'The prejudice of Englishmen in favor of their own government by king, lords, and commons, arises as much or more from *national pride* than reason.'[10]

Regardless of its ideological guise, national pride was anathema to Paine. He understood a 'patriot' as someone loyal to universal principles of equality and liberty. Hence the American Revolution was not simply about secession from Great Britain, as he announced in *Common Sense*, 'The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.'

Or as he put it elsewhere in the same text, 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.'[11] Paine's meaning in these stirring phrases was lost on even the most world-minded of the American Revolution. Jefferson himself rummaged deep in the history of England for Saxon democratic precedent, while for republican models he pondered the political experiments of the Ancients. Paine alone was entirely comfortable in framing institutions according to universal and 'common sense' principles, without consulting with history or national tradition.

Paine returned to England in 1787, preceded by his reputation as a revolutionary republican. Some English reformers were of the opinion that Paine had betrayed England by his support of the American cause in the Revolutionary War, but others were citizens of the world, fully accepting of the American revolt and the Declaration of Independence. The latter now looked to Paine for ideological leadership in their own campaign for parliamentary reform.[12]

Upon the outbreak of the revolution in France, the radical reform societies in Britain sent messages of congratulation to the National Assembly and later to the Convention, celebrating the demise of tyranny and the prospects of world peace through a world fraternity of citizens devoted to liberty and equality.[13] In its address to the French nation the London Corresponding Society anticipated an alliance 'not of crowns, but of the people of America, France, and Britain.' Even the executive of the London Revolution Society – the most 'respectable' and aristocratic of the English reform associations – offered the French revolutionaries a message of congratulation. Identifying its members as 'Men, Britons, and Citizens of the World'[14] the Society's executive announced its disdain for 'national partialities,' and celebrated the example of France as an encouragement to 'other nations to assert the unalienable rights of mankind, and thereby to introduce a general reformation in the governments of Europe, and to make the world free and happy.'[15]

Similar sentiments abounded in British radical circles. Joseph Priestley, leader of the Constitutional Society in Birmingham, saw in the French Revolution 'the extinction of all national prejudice and enmity, and the establishment of universal peace and good will among all nations.'[16] Another British radical, the Reverend Richard Price, enthusiastically welcomed the Revolution in a sermon and pamphlet in which he said that 'love of our country' should not cause Britons to forget their 'wider obligations as "citizens of the world."'[17] A spirit of

world citizenship was not the monopoly of Paine, and on the eve of the publication of his *Rights of Man* the British reformers seemed prepared to embrace international alliances for the cause of world liberty.

The radicals' aspiration for world unity was delivered a sharp and scathing critique by Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France.* Although never a *radical* reformer, Burke had sympathized with the American struggle for direct representation at Westminster. Formerly, he had believed Europe to be a morally and intellectually unified civilization bound together by a common inheritance of classical traditions in culture and learning. But in the *Reflections* Burke emphasized the uniqueness of English political institutions and intellectual evolution, resisting the British Jacobins' 'manifest design of connecting the affairs of France with those of England.'[18] Burke was possessed of a mood of xenophobic retreat. He was at pains to disassociate the political experiment of the French from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in Britain; he understood the latter as a peculiarly British reform upheld by the British philosopher Locke, and peaceably carried out in response to the unconstitutional behavior of James II. The French Revolution, on the other hand, was seen by Burke as universal in ambition, and as peculiarly French in its impetuosity.

Paine's reply to Burke in *Rights of Man* emphasized the universal character of natural rights, rejecting national interpretations of justice, equality, and the objects of government. The British Jacobins were at first elated to have this alternative declaration of the rights of man and of the first principles of government, but much of their attention was directed to the secondary and illustrative issues raised by Paine, namely his attacks on borough-mongering, the national debt, and the running of political interference by the higher clergy. The British radicals interpreted *Rights of Man* in a peculiarly British context – as a guide for the reform of abuses in their own government and economy. It is partly for this reason that Part II of *Rights of Man* outsold Part I.[19] The former text concentrates upon specific economic and social problems of the 1790s, such as enclosure, unemployment, and poverty, proposing solutions in the form of family allowances, old-age pensions, and tax reductions for the poor. Many of the principles and much of the revolutionary program of Part I, on the other hand, were ignored or even repudiated by the British radicals. They did not follow Paine's advice to leave off veneration for Saxon models of liberty and democracy. They

ignored Paine's declaration that the dead have no claim on the institutions of the living. They even opposed Paine's republicanism as an un-British innovation. Providing that Parliament was free of sinecurists and placemen, they preferred a balanced constitution of King, Lords, and Commons. Finally, much of *Rights of Man* generated no debate whatever in British radical circles, including Paine's appeal for an ideological alliance between Britain, France, and the United States, his call for a European Congress to arbitrate international disputes, and his proposal for a worldwide assembly of nations.[20]

As the French Revolutionaries ascended into war with the rest of Europe, the British Jacobins retreated from internationalism and world citizenship. They followed the path carved by the British working class, which at once celebrated Paine's economic proposals and denounced the French as frog-eaters, wearers of wooden shoes, and as effeminate in character. For the British worker the utility of radicalism lay in its capacity to assure them access to roast beef, plum pudding, and beer. The government stoked these patriotic embers at the same time as it portrayed Paine as a traitor and enemy of things British. Even before Paine's trial in 1792, he was being burned and slaughtered in effigy by working people.[21] The Jacobin leaders said little in Paine's defense even when he was tried and convicted *in absentia* for seditious libel.

Late in 1792, Paine re-located to revolutionary France. There he was widely acclaimed by the common people. He would even be awarded honorary citizenship in the new Republic. On the strength of his defense of the Revolution and of world republicanism he was elected to the National Convention. All appeared well. Although a foreigner with a limited knowledge of the French language, Paine provided the French with a degree of international endorsement of their new political regime.

In America and England Paine had managed to avoid factional association, but in France he moved in Girondin circles, especially with Brissot and Cordorcet.[22] This was a natural gravitation for Paine. The Girondins perceived themselves as citizens of the world; they were cosmopolitan in culture, and ardent admirers of the American revolutionaries; and like Paine they wished to export the Revolution immediately. The Jacobins, on the other hand, were not world citizens. As France went to war with Europe, they manifested a growing distrust of foreigners. For the Jacobins the Revolution was an affair of the French nation. From their point of view it was essential to consolidate the

Revolution at home and to ensure the welfare of the French working class before steering the Revolution abroad.

As the Jacobins moved into the ascendancy in the Convention, it grew clear to Paine that the French Revolution would not, at least in the foreseeable future, evolve into a world revolution. His world vision had again become a liability, and in 1793 he was charged with treason and imprisoned as a foreigner.

The Jacobins were not unjustified in their fear of foreigners, especially in the wake of the King's solicitation of foreign assistance against the Revolution. But Paine they misunderstood. The Jacobins observed his vote against the execution of Louis XVI, forgetting that he was among the first to suggest that France discard its monarchy. Similarly, they observed his English tongue, forgetting that he had long since abjured his loyalty to the British Crown. There was even a degree of mistrust of Paine as an American, especially as the United States maintained a course of neutrality during the French Revolutionary War.

This was the beginning of the end for Paine. He was suffered to remain in prison without significant protest from the American minister in France, Gouverneur Morris. Morris's successor, James Monroe, would eventually secure Paine's release by claiming him as an American citizen, but not before Paine composed forty pages of legalistic argument in demonstration of his American citizenship.[23] It is indeed ironic that Paine, in order to obtain his release from jail, and to remove the threat of the guillotine, was reduced to seeking asylum in a national citizenship.

When Paine returned to America in 1802, he found his citizenship to be of nominal worth only. He was accused by some of having abandoned America,[24] while others took exception to his critique of the Scriptures in *The Age of Reason*. And as American support for the French Revolution waned, Paine was dismissed as a dangerous and un-Christian demagogue. According to the anti-Jacobin pamphleteer William Cobbett, 'men will learn to express all that is base, malignant, treacherous, unnatural and blasphemous, by the single mono-syllable, Paine.'[25]

Paine was alternatively reviled and ignored as he lived out his last years. A great exception was President Jefferson, who still shared much of Paine's world vision. But even Jefferson thought it wise to distance himself from Paine's internationalism and deism.

In England, Paine's name was similarly reviled. He had been declared

outside the law in 1792, and in 1798 his name became almost unspeakable for proposing to the Directory a plan for a French invasion of the British Isles. In 1804, he published a pamphlet wishing Napoleon success in this venture.[26] Of course, Paine was of the thinking that Napoleon would install in Britain a democratic republic, and that Britain could then join America and France in disseminating republicanism and world peace. The British, however, were not ready for republicanism. As the patriotic song 'The Sons of Albion' put it:

> Neither rebels, French, sans culottes,
> Nor dupes of tyranny boast,
> Shall conquer the English, the Irish, the Scotch
> Nor shall land upon our coast.[27]

Paine's last desperate plea for world citizenship was made through his scheme for a world religion of benevolent humanity. He outlined a new universal religion of reason in an attempt to unite all humanity.[28] This attack on conventional Christianity made Paine anathema to most of his remaining friends in the United States, including world citizens such as Joseph Priestley.

Paine was the victim of a conservative religious reaction in America, which witnessed a growing ecclesiastical intolerance and fundamentalism. At the same time, the enlightened universalism of the days of the Revolution were degenerating into a new territorial and economic nationalism. It was manifested in militancy (in the case of the War of 1812), and later in imperialism, dressed in the guise of 'manifest destiny.'

This was not Paine's vision. He was possessed of a single-state messianism. At times he seemed willing to have America or France serve as ideological sponsor for the new world union, but the liberty, equality, and peacefulness of all peoples within such a world state had to be respected and ensured. Almost certainly Paine would have viewed the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as sorry failures in attaining this object. His aspirations for the world, however, can still inspire us all.