

# Eric Foner

## *Thomas Paine and American Radicalism during the American Revolution*

Of the men who made the American Revolution, none had a more remarkable career, or suffered a more peculiar fate, than Thomas Paine. While his friends, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, and his ideological antagonist John Adams, came from middle-and upper-class families long established on American soil, Paine's origins lay among the 'lower orders' of eighteenth-century England, and he did not even arrive in America until the very eve of the revolutionary war. Unlike Alexander Hamilton, another leader of the Revolution born abroad, Paine always remained something of an outsider in America. He never developed true local roots here – as he once told Benjamin Franklin, 'where liberty is not, there is my country.' Paine's profound influence on American events was acknowledged by friends and opponents alike, but after his death, he was excluded from the group of revolutionary leaders canonized in American popular culture. His memory was kept alive primarily by succeeding generations of radicals, who rediscovered him again and again as a symbol of revolutionary internationalism, free-thinking, and defiance of existing institutions.

Paine's biographers have always confronted an unenviable task, and not only because of the complexity of Paine's personality and the fact that most of his correspondence and papers were accidentally burned over a century ago. To depict Paine in his entirety requires a knowledge of the history of America, England, and France, as well as of eighteenth-century science, theology, political philosophy and radical movements. Paine's connections must be traced among the powerful in Europe and America, and also in the tavern-centered world of politically-conscious artisans in London and Philadelphia. In fact, the questions central to an understanding of Paine's career lie well beyond the confines of conventional biography. It is perhaps not surprising that while several fine lives of Paine now exist, a great deal of mystery still surrounds his career. Paine's ideas have never been grasped in their full complexity, nor have they been successfully located in the social context of Paine's age. Some writers have isolated individual strands of Paine's thought –

Newtonian science, deism, political egalitarianism, the promotion of business enterprise and economic growth – as the ‘key’ to Paine’s thought, but no one has shown how, why, and when these various strands became integrated into the coherent ideology of which, for Paine at least, they were component parts. Neither the roots of Paine’s thought, nor the reasons for the tremendous impact of his writings in America and Europe have been fully explained. And Paine’s exact relationship is still not clear, to the expansion of popular participation in politics, the politicization of the ‘lower orders,’ which was among the revolutionary achievements of the Age of Revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Obviously, it would be impossible in a brief paper to resolve the many questions which still revolve around the life of this enigmatic figure. But it should be possible to consider what made Paine unique as a radical pamphleteer of the late eighteenth century, and to analyze the essential assumptions of his republican thought. Most writers would be happy to produce one work of significance and popularity in a lifetime; Paine wrote three pamphlets which were among the greatest best-sellers of his age – *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*. Many of the successes and failures of Paine’s career stemmed from his role as a pamphleteer of revolution. One of the most astute contemporary comments on his strengths and weaknesses was made by Madame Roland during the French Revolution.

The boldness of his thoughts, the originality of his style, the incisive truths, audaciously flung before the very persons they offend, have doubtless produced a great sensation; but I find him more fit, as it were, to scatter these kindling sparks than to lay the foundation or prepare the formation of a government. Paine is better at lighting the way for revolution than drafting a constitution. He grasps, he establishes those great principles whose exposition attracts everyone’s attention, ravishing a club and exciting a tavern gathering; but as for dispassionate committee discussion or the day-to-day work of a legislator, I consider [the English reformer] David Williams infinitely more suited than he.<sup>45</sup>

For a variety of reasons which cannot be gone into here, Paine was a failure as a legislator during the French Revolution. But in 1776 in America, and 1791-92 in England, he was precisely the right man at the

right time, articulating ideas which were in the air but only dimly perceived by most of his contemporaries. How can we explain this success?

Since Paine's political ideas and literary style remained essentially fixed from *Common Sense* to the end of his career, a brief analysis of Paine's first great pamphlet may help reveal the reasons for his unparalleled achievements as a pamphleteer. Although *Common Sense* is best known for its advocacy of American independence, Paine always considered its argument for republicanism the most important part of the pamphlet. 'The mere independence of America,' he later wrote, 'were it to have been followed by a system of government modeled after the corrupt system of English government, would not have interested me with the unabated ardor it did. It was to bring forward and establish the representative system of government, as the work itself will show, that was the leading principle with me in writing.' Paine's savage attack on 'the so much boasted Constitution of England' contains the most striking passages in *Common Sense*. He denounced the whole notion of the historical legitimacy of the monarchy: 'A French bastard landed with an armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original ... The plain truth is that the antiquity of the English monarchy will not bear looking into.' Paine minced no words in his assault on the principle of hereditary rule. The House of Lords was simply the 'remains of an aristocratic tyranny' and as for the monarchy: 'Of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.' Paine was the first writer in America to denounce the English constitution so completely, to deny that balanced government was essential to liberty, and to transform the word 'republic' from a term of abuse in political writing – a synonym for Cromwellian dictatorship – to a living political issue and an ideal of government.<sup>46</sup>

*Common Sense* then turned to a discussion of independence, a subject which had been mentioned sporadically in the press in 1775, but which most colonists still refused to confront – although war with Britain had begun months before and the prospects for reconciliation were dim. Paine's argument again departed from those of previous pamphleteers. Their attacks on British policy had stressed the danger to colonial liberties; Paine gave more emphasis both to economic self-interest and to a vision of an American empire, freed from European domination and

trading freely with the entire world. And, in his most lyrical passages, Paine announced the creation of an independent American republic in the language of an impending millennium. 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again,' he declared, '... the birthday of a new world is at hand.' Paine transformed a struggle over the rights of Englishmen into a contest with meaning for all mankind. In a world in which 'every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression,' America would become 'an asylum for mankind.'<sup>47</sup>

The immediate success and impact of *Common Sense* was nothing less than astonishing, as every scholar of the Revolution has agreed. At a time when the average political pamphlet was printed in one or two editions, *Common Sense* went through twenty-five editions in the single year of 1776. But John Adams always resented the idea that the pamphlet contributed much to the movement for independence. Its discussion of that subject, he insisted, was 'a tolerable summary of the arguments which I had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months.' Nothing in it was new, with the exception of 'the phrases, suitable for an emigrant from New Gate, or one who had chiefly associated with such company, such as "the royal brute of England."' Adams may have been ungrateful, but to some extent he was right. *Common Sense* did express ideas which became fixed parts of American ideology – the separateness of America from Europe, the corruption of the old world and innocence of the new, the virtues of republican government and the absurdity of hereditary privilege – but none of these was original with Paine. What set *Common Sense* apart was its literary tone and style. Its tone, which contemporaries described as 'daring imprudence' and 'uncommon frenzy' was far removed from the legalistic, logical arguments of other American political pamphlets, whose style was 'essentially decorous and reasonable.'<sup>48</sup>

But there was more to Paine's appeal than the enraged assaults on hereditary monarchy which offended Adams, the 'indecent expressions' to which Henry Laurens of South Carolina objected. Paine was the conscious pioneer of a new style of political writing, one designed to extend political discussion beyond the narrow bounds of the eighteenth century's 'political nation.' 'As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand,' he once wrote, 'I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet.' He assumed knowledge of no authority but the Bible, employed no Latin

phrases, or when he did immediately provided translations, and avoided florid language designed to impress more cultivated readers. Paine was capable, to be sure, of creating brilliant metaphors, such as his famous reply to Edmund Burke's sympathy for the fate of Marie Antoinette in *Rights of Man*: 'He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird.' But the hallmarks of his writing were clarity, directness, and forcefulness. Paine's rage was tempered by a conscious attempt to engage the reason as well as the passions of his readers. His savage attacks on kingship and his careful exposition of republicanism were two sides of the same coin: both were meant to undermine the entire system of deferential politics. He flaunted his contempt for precedent and authority. 'In this part of the debate,' he wrote in the spring of 1776 of a newspaper antagonist, 'Cato shelters himself chiefly in quotations from other authors, without reasoning much on the matter himself; in answer to which, I present him with a string of maxims and recollections, drawn from the nature of things, without borrowing from anyone.' Paine's message was that anyone could understand the nature of politics and the principles of government – all it took was common sense.<sup>49</sup>

To his critics, Paine was as guilty of degrading the language as of attacking government. Gouverneur Morris scoffed at him as 'a mere adventurer ... without fortune, without family or connections, ignorant even of grammar.' But Paine was indeed a conscious artist. Most American pamphleteers before Paine aimed their works at the educated classes, believing that to write for a mass audience meant to sacrifice refinement for coarseness and triviality. Paine's literary style, his rejection of deference, and his political republicanism were all interdependent: for Paine, the medium, in effect, was of one piece with the message.<sup>50</sup>

What of Paine's audience? As a professional pamphleteer, Paine naturally addressed his writings to the widest possible readership in America and England. His works were read, as one contemporary noted, in 'all ranks.' It would be wrong to consider Paine the consistent spokesman for any single social class. His personal and political associations, both in America and Europe, spanned the worlds of the upper-class salon and tavern political debates. Yet Paine's particular brand of republican ideology struck its deepest chords among the artisan class in both England and America. In the late eighteenth century, artisans on both sides of the Atlantic awakened to political consciousness

and became carriers of egalitarian political ideas. In America, throughout the revolutionary era, they denounced the pretensions of men of great wealth who had 'the impudence to assert that mechanics are men of no consequence' and 'make no scruples to say that the mechanics ... have no right to be consulted in matters of government.' Thousands of artisans were brought into organized political life via the extra-legal committees created to enforce non-importation in the years preceding independence. In England, the French Revolution and the appearance of Paine's *Rights of Man* helped to stimulate the sudden emergence in the 1790s of the radical corresponding societies, rooted in the artisan communities of London and provincial industrial centers like Sheffield and Leeds, which demanded an expansion of political rights to the mass of English citizens.<sup>51</sup>

This class just emerging into political consciousness found its voice in Paine's writings. Paine literally created for it a new political language, redefining the meaning of old words like republic and democracy, using them repeatedly in a favorable, rather than derogatory, sense. Alone among the major pamphleteers of this period, Paine had sprung from the very mass audience which so eagerly devoured his writings. He had begun life as an artisan, following his father's trade of staymaking before turning to the excise service. His first thirty-seven years, spent in England, had been spent among the lower middle class of artisans, lesser professional men and petty government officials, and in centers of political disaffection like London and Lewes. The anti-British rage expressed in *Common Sense* may well reflect the disappointment of such men of talent in a society characterized by hereditary privilege and patronage politics.<sup>52</sup>

As his recent biographer David Hawke writes, Paine not only retained a manual agility with tools throughout his life, but remained 'a city man at heart.' Though he shared Jefferson's democratic egalitarianism, Paine had little in common with the agrarian bias of Jefferson's thought. Jefferson hoped America could insulate itself against the industrial revolution and regarded commercial banks and a national debt as elements of corruption. Paine was enchanted by the cotton mills, potteries, and steel furnaces of England in the 1780s and hoped such enterprises could be 'carried on in America as well.' He defended the Bank of North America against its opponents in Pennsylvania politics in the mid-1780s, and in *Common Sense* favored the creation of a national debt as a 'national bond.'<sup>53</sup>

Paine's blend of democratic egalitarianism and enthusiasm for business enterprise was shared by his artisan audience. The artisan was part workingman, part property-holding petty entrepreneur. The Philadelphia artisans among whom Paine circulated during his American career were ardent supporters of the ultra-democratic Pennsylvania constitution of 1776 – which Paine also defended in a series of newspaper articles – but as city dwellers they saw the Bank of North America as a bulwark of a stable, noninflationary currency, and as small businessmen they desired a stronger central government which could promote manufacture and trade.<sup>54</sup>

In America and England, artisans responded with enthusiasm to Paine's assault on established political institutions, his attack on the principle of hereditary privilege, his assertion that every man of common sense could understand the nature of government. They found extremely congenial Paine's anti-aristocratic ethos, his glorification of the 'producing classes' as opposed to the idle rich. 'Why ... does Mr. Burke,' Paine asked in *Rights of Man*, 'talk of this House of Peers, as the pillar of the landed interest? Were that pillar to sink into the earth, the same landed property would continue, and the same plowing, sowing, and reaping would go on. The aristocracy are not the farmers who work the land and raise the produce, but ... are the drones ... who neither collect the honey nor form the hive, but exist only for lazy enjoyment.'<sup>55</sup> Such an outlook not only resonated with resentments against political privilege and the lavish lifestyle of the rich, which artisans on both sides of the Atlantic shared, but it also expressed a view of social conflict as a struggle between producers and non-producers (rather than employers and employees, or rich and poor), which would strongly influence the course of radical thought well into the nineteenth century.

Paine's radicalism, after all, did not extend to an attack on the institution of private property. In *Common Sense*, he attributed economic distinctions and inequalities of wealth to differences in talent, industry, and frugality among individuals. 'The distinctions of rich and poor,' he declared, 'may in a great measure be accounted for ... without recourse to the harsh ill-sounding names of oppression and avarice. Oppression is often the *consequence*, but seldom or never the *means* of riches.' Indeed, what impressed Paine about America was its egalitarian distribution of property and high standard of living compared with the old world. 'There are not three millions of people in any part of the universe,' Paine

wrote in 1782, 'who live so well, or have such a fund of ability, as in America.' And in *Rights of Man* he declared, 'I see in America, the generality of the people living in a style of plenty unknown in monarchical countries; and I see that the principle of its government, which is that of the equal rights of man, is making rapid progress in the world.' This association between economic abundance and republican government was a crucial element in Paine's social outlook and helps explain why he did not attribute inequalities of wealth to economic oppression. Indeed, Paine's republican utopianism left little room for class or social conflict of any kind. Both class and party conflict were, in a sense, incompatible with the nature of republicanism which, according to Paine, 'does not admit of an interest distinct from that of the nation.'<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Madison and other republican thinkers who viewed men as motivated basically by selfish interests and believed the only way to preserve liberty was to create a governmental structure balancing competing ambitions and interests, Paine was utterly optimistic about human nature. 'Man,' he wrote, 'were he not corrupted by governments, is naturally the friend of man, and ... human nature is not of itself vicious.' It was men like Madison and John Adams, not Paine, who had a more realistic view of the possibilities of class conflict in a republic. Madison and Adams worked to create a governmental structure which could defuse or neutralize class conflict in the society. Paine was indifferent to the details of frames of government, although he generally preferred a unicameral legislature to represent the unitary interest of a homogenous republican people.<sup>57</sup>

Paine was, to be sure, an eloquent and scathing critic of the social order of Europe. He could comment in moving terms on 'the mass of wretchedness' lying 'hidden from the eye of common observation' and which had 'scarcely any other chance than to expire in poverty or infamy.' Paine shared the artisan's sense of separateness from the eighteenth-century poor, but what he really despised was not the poor, but poverty. In the second part of *Rights of Man*, Paine developed an extensive social welfare program, including an early social security and unemployment relief system, free public education, and the use of progressive taxation to foster economic equality. He helped to provide the link – previously missing in English republican writings (as Professor [Caroline] Robbins has shown) – between demands for political reform and the bitter social grievances of the English lower



classes. But Paine never suggested that his plan was applicable to America, because his essential diagnosis of social problems was political. The 'mass of wretchedness' in English society implied that 'something must be wrong in the system of government.' Paine could speak of a republic as socially harmonious because republican government would cut the aristocracy off from its sources of income – hereditary privilege, court sinecures, governmental favors – and would allow full reign to the natural laws of civil society which, Paine believed, would ensure an economic abundance in which all classes would share.<sup>58</sup>

As Professor [J. R.] Pole has shown in an incisive brief analysis of the London Corresponding Society, Paine's view of the relationship between political and social reform strongly influenced the radical movement of the 1790s in England. The radical societies shared Paine's utopian vision of America – only the most radical figure of the movement, John Thelwell, believed that America was 'somewhat short of the true sansculotte liberty,' since Americans 'have too much veneration for property, too much religion, and too much law.' The societies adopted Paine's utter contempt for the existing English political institutions, and his vision of the social harmony which would result from political reform. The social grievances of the LCS and its kindred societies were far deeper than those of the artisan associations and Democratic-Republican societies of contemporary America – a reflection of the differences between the stage of economic development and class structure of the two nations. Every contemporary account of the origins of the English societies stresses that what led the members into political speculation was economic grievances: 'the miserable and wretched state the people were reduced to,' 'the numerous, burthensome and unnecessary taxes,' the 'oppressive game laws and destructive monopolies,' and other causes of 'the lower classes sinking into poverty, disgrace, and excesses.' But in typical Paineite fashion, these social ills were attributed to defects in the political system and, as the LCS explained in 1792, 'reform and abuse' – the inequitable state of Parliamentary representation and the suffrage – 'and the others will all disappear.'<sup>59</sup>

For reasons which are far too complex to be gone into in detail, the writings of Paine became a 'foundation-text' of working-class radicalism in nineteenth-century England, while in America he was all but forgotten after his death.<sup>60</sup> To over-simplify a complex question, Paine's attack on

Christianity and the Bible in *The Age of Reason* (published in the mid-1790s), alienated him not only from the conservative Calvinist clergy, but from the radical Jeffersonian sects as well. Secularism and anticlericalism became a major strand in English radical thought, but only a minor side issue in America, partially because, after the Revolution, there was no established church to attack, and partly because the institutional church, far from being a bastion of the existing order as in Paine's Europe, was the source of much of the reforming fervor in nineteenth-century America. In the United States, far more critics of society would speak the language of evangelical Protestantism than that of deist rationalism. The irony is that in England, where Paine's political ideals remained unrealized in the nineteenth century, Paine remained a hero to radicals, while Americans who enjoyed republicanism, equality before the laws, and had no titled nobility or hereditary monarch, reviled or ignored Paine. What set him apart was his 'sin' of infidelity, or, perhaps, the poor judgment of having returned to the United States in 1802 in the midst of a religious revival and at the outset of a century characterized above all by its intense religiosity.

Nonetheless, while a continuous 'Paineite' radical tradition has not existed in America, Paine had been rediscovered again and again by American social critics. What makes Paine's radicalism relevant for later generations is not simply, or primarily, the specific tenets of his belief, but his essential cast of mind – his impatience with the past, his bitter contempt for institutions which could not stand the test of reason, his belief that men could shape their own destiny.

Paine's career, in conclusion, might lead us to rethink some of our usual definitions of radicalism in the era of the American Revolution. In a period which in so many ways witnessed the birth of the modern world, Paine was a truly modern figure. His radicalism differed from that of many of his contemporaries in that he had little interest in the past and unbounded optimism about the future. He accepted fully the modern ideas of the perfectibility of man and of unlimited progress. He could not have cared less about the Anglo-Saxon past idealized and used as a model of good government by English radicals, and he did not share the nostalgia of Americans in the Jeffersonian tradition, for an agrarian, pre-capitalist world. He viewed commerce and economic development not as elements of corruption, but as fostering interdependence among men and nations, stimulating all forms of economic enterprise, and lifting the

concerns of mankind from the parochial to the cosmopolitan.

Paine embraced fully the fundamental transformations which American society underwent during the era of the American Revolution – the rapid growth of capitalist institutions and social relations, and the vast expansion of political participation to men previously outside the ‘political nation.’ Many men ‘radical’ in their political outlook were ‘conservative’ or at least nostalgic in opposing capitalist development in America; others, like the great merchant Robert Morris, were perhaps ‘radical’ in being agents of massive social change, but were extremely elitist in their view of politics. But in both the political and economic realms, Paine accepted, in an almost millennial frame of mind, the positive virtues of total change, and he invented a literary style and political language expressing this vision for a new mass audience. Even John Adams had to admit in 1806, ‘I know not whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine.’<sup>61</sup>