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From Social to International Peace:
The Realistic Utopias of Thomas Paine

That Thomas Paine was a pioneer, a prophet, a visionary is something that cannot reasonably be denied. As early as 1778 he defined himself as a 'farmer of thoughts.' But as he was not a man to cultivate ideas for his own private use, he added: 'all the crops I raise I give away.'[62] Thus not only did he coin the phrase 'United States of America,' thereby giving a name to his as yet unchristened adopted country, but he was the first American to mention the idea of a 'declaration of independence,' the first to denounce the sacredness of the King of England, the first to propose a legislative project for the gradual abolition of slavery, the first to advocate national and international copyright, the first (in 1780) to call for the election of 'a Continental Convention for the purpose of forming a Continental constitution,'[63] the first (in 1783) to suggest the establishment of 'a general government over the Union,'[64] and – but I shall go back to this later – the first to plead for international arbitration, the first also (in 1790) to carry the American flag in a foreign procession, the first in revolutionary France to create a republican club, to launch a republican journal and to publish a republican manifesto; and finally, the first to write a scathing criticism of Christianity and the Bible, *not* with a view to promoting atheism but, paradoxically, in order to prevent its expansion.

It seems, however, that Paine has been much less celebrated as a prophet of peace than as a proponent of American Independence or an advocate of human rights or a denouncer of revealed religions. Popular imagery often represents him with a gun in his hands, writing bellicose exhortations by the light of some campfire (which he actually did), and the fact is that he is less frequently depicted as a pacifist than as a warmonger or at least as a Quaker armed to the teeth. In part, this blurred image is, I think, precisely due to his strange relationship with the Society of Friends. All those familiar with the life of Thomas Paine know that his father was a Quaker. Although he never formally belonged to the Society, Paine was deeply influenced by his father's creed and, as a rule, he had more faith in dialogue and persuasion than in violent

confrontation. But, for all that, he was too much of a realist ever to subscribe to the naïve or hypocritical ideas of those who, in the name of non-violence, always tend to collaborate with the powers-that-be, however despotic, or, in times of war, to side with the winning camp or, even worse, with the invader. Much like Gandhi, he would have been strongly averse to *unilateral* disarmament. Although a lover of peace, he was no pacifist in the strict sense of the word, persuaded as he was that liberty could not be defended by good feelings alone. As he saw it, peace was not something that could be proclaimed by the victim, or the victim to be or the possible victim, but on the contrary, something that had to be collectively and rationally organized, structured, discussed, struggled for – even if this meant occasionally and provisionally resorting to defensive force. During the War of Independence, what he blamed the Philadelphia Quakers for was precisely the duplicity with which they brandished their principles in order, in fact, to leave a clear field for the troops of His Britannic Majesty, whom he then dubbed the '*Honorable* plunderer of his country' or the '*Right Honorable* murderer of mankind.'[65]

A few weeks after the Battle of Lexington, he launched his first attack on the Quakers, saying, 'I am thus far a Quaker, that I would gladly agree with all the world to lay aside the use of arms, and settle matters by negotiation; but unless the whole will, the matter ends, and I take up my musket and thank heaven he has put it in my power.'[66] This passage is well-known; less known but perhaps more precise and penetrating is the following one, taken from the same article (July 1775): 'The supposed quietude of a good man allures the ruffian ... The balance of power is the scale of peace. The same balance would be preserved were all the world destitute of arms, for all would be alike; but ... horrid mischief would ensure were one half of the world deprived of the use of them; for while avarice and ambition have a place in the heart of man, the weak will become a prey to the strong.'[67] Although he was later to dream of a military invasion of England, it is clear that, for Paine, only defensive wars were justifiable, and in his eyes such was the case of the American War: 'The period of debate is closed ... the appeal [to arms] was the choice of the king, and the continent has accepted the challenge.'[68] Hence his sarcastic remarks about the treacherous Society of Friends, whom he depicts as 'antiquated virgins ... mistaking [their] wrinkles for dimples'[69] and who, 'with the word "*peace, peace*" continually on their lips,' are so fond of supporting a government 'which is never better pleased than

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when at war!'[70] Paine could bite; but the Friends had a good memory and never forgave him, even on his deathbed.

One of Paine's most important contributions to the organization of peace was his *Maritime Compact* published in 1800. Written 'to compel the English government to acknowledge the rights of neutral commerce, and that free ships make free goods,'[71] this astonishing document, distributed to all foreign ministers then resident in Paris, was more generally designed to render war impossible by threatening belligerent nations with total commercial boycott on the part of neutral countries peacefully leagued into an 'Unarmed Association of Nations.'[72] The idea was that such a boycott would immediately ruin the aggressor's economy by cutting it off from the rest of the world, and thus render warfare counter-productive. The Association would have its own flag 'composed of the same colors as compose the rainbow'[73] and a presidency by rotation, 'the first president to be the executive power of the most northerly nation.'[74] In fact, Paine had in mind Paul I, Emperor of Russia, as the first possible president: 'had it not been for the untimely death of Paul,' he later contended, '*a law of Nations*, founded on the authority of nations ... would have been proclaimed.'[75]

This idea, and ideal, were not new for Paine. Eighteen years before, in his famous *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* (1782), he had already expressed similar views and summarized the whole issue with eloquence: 'The sea is the world's highway; and he who arrogates a prerogative over it transgresses the right [to the freedom of the ocean], and justly brings on himself the chastisement of nations.'[76] It was precisely in the same work – a reply to the Abbé's *Observations on the Revolution in America* – that, as an American historian has put it, he 'actually ceased to think in nationalistic terms and became a practical internationalist.'[77] Practical is perhaps not the right word, in the sense that Paine's utopian proposals were well ahead of his time and clearly overrated the degree of wisdom actually reached by his contemporaries. The novelties formulated in his *Letter* are well-known: the liberation of international trade, the organization of peace on a worldwide basis, a concerted limitation of armaments, and a federation of nations. Paine saw commerce as a convivial competition and as a means of international *rapprochement*. Hence his belief in the pacifying virtues of trade: 'Commerce,' he wrote, 'though in itself a moral nullity, has had a considerable influence in tempering the human mind.'[78] He also believed that, through the

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exemplary union of its thirteen states and its alliance with France, Spain, and the Netherlands, revolutionary America was in fact 'opening a new system of extended civilization'[79] and a new era during which the league of nations would at long last put an end to international violence and anarchy.

Less known, again, or less noticed, is the way in which Paine *first* insisted on the possibility of a peaceful entente between states with different political regimes, and *then* moved on to a conception of international progress that was much less ecumenical. When he wrote his *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, Paine thought that nations could associate with each other in the name of peace and establish between themselves international rules independently of the nature of their several political regimes: 'Forms of government,' he insisted, 'have nothing to do with treaties.'[80] He had therefore no objection to a republic entering into an alliance with a monarchical country: 'So long as each performs its part, we have no more right or business to know how the one or the other conducts its domestic affairs.'[81] Although this may sound like Realpolitik, Paine's attitude was that of an idealist: 'It is best mankind should mix,' he went on to say, 'and it is by a free communication, without regard to domestic matters, that friendship is to be extended and prejudice destroyed all over the world,'[82] – prejudice which he so beautifully defined as 'the spider of the mind.'[83] But the most interesting argument here, and the most original, was Paine's presentation of the concert of nations as *a kind of international republic* where each member, regardless of its size or of the nature of its government, could have a say, and act as an equal partner, in the preparation of peace agreements. That all countries, 'be their forms what they may, are relatively republics with each other,' such was, he explained, 'the first and true principle of alliance.'[84]

Ten years later he had learned much and changed his mind in many ways. In the second part of *Rights of Man* (1792) he takes up again, and expands, the utopian themes outlined one decade before in his reply to Raynal, advocating this time: (1) a sort of *Alliance for Progress* in the form of a European Confederacy including England, France, and Holland; (2) a gradual but 'general dismantling of all the navies in Europe,' and (3) a joint pressure of the United States and Confederated Europe in order to obtain from Spain 'the independence of South America and the opening [of] those countries ... to the general

commerce of the world.'[85] But Paine was now convinced that his dream had no chance of coming true so long as England remained allergic to democratic and republican principles, so long as England remained a court government 'enveloped in intrigue and mystery,'[86] equally unable to cater for the actual needs of its people and to peacefully cooperate with such countries as had cast off the yoke of tyranny. He was confident that the establishment of a democratic system in Britain would powerfully contribute to the spread of republicanism throughout the world and to international peace.

The idea that British monarchy would be a perpetual cause of warfare became such an obsession with Paine that in 1796 he started contriving and planning a naval invasion of England, thus betraying his own previous attachment to the doctrine of defensive war. But, as he himself put it, it was still for the cause of *peace* that he was acting that way: 'The intention of the expedition [with Bonaparte appointed to the command] was to give the people of England an opportunity of forming a government for themselves, and thereby bring about peace.'[87] It happens that in the course of my research on Paine, I stumbled upon something which is to be found in none of the previous Tom Paine biographies: a classified report written *in French* by some secret agent then working in Paris for the English government. Dated 'January 1798,' the document explains that the French Directoire had drawn up a list of five British political personalities who were to form the English 'Directory' once the invasion was accomplished. And Paine was in the number, together with John Horne Tooke, William Sharp, John Thelwell, and the Marquis of Lansdowne![88] This secret scheme – and the prospect of having a share in one more revolution – may account for the fact that Paine lingered so many years in France after his release from prison.

Behind his dream of naval conquest lay the deeply-rooted creed that Britain's external violence was nothing but a projection of its own internal system based on social injustice, and that no lasting peace would be achieved in Europe while England remained the stronghold of hereditary inequality. More generally, Paine considered that the establishment of social peace in each and every civilized country was a prerequisite for a better understanding amongst the nations of the world. Hence his insistence, in *Rights of Man*, on the necessity of developing *social* as well as political rights, so as to diminish economic frustrations, bring men closer to one another, increase the amount of fraternity in the

world, and diminish aggressive drives. For Paine, proposing 'plans for the education of helpless infancy, and the comfortable support of the aged and distressed'[89] was not only a just policy; it was also part of an active strategy of peace based on the idea that non-belligerence between nations does rest, to a not inconsiderable degree, on the establishment of social non-violence between the citizens of each national community.

Like all prophets, Paine was, so to speak, a 'delayed-fuse realist,' someone who had a clear view of the future at a time when so many minds were confused. He was not just the visionary of a more pacific future. He was an actor, a militant, and, if I may put it so, a 'soldier of peace.' He did not see world peace as merely a godsend resulting from chance of Providence, but as the reward of a long, patient, and difficult struggle. In other words, he was the reverse of a fatalist: 'Man,' he once wrote, 'must be the privy councillor of fate, or something is not right.'[90]