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Paine's Legacy

In his lifetime, Thomas Paine heard his praises sung on two continents. Literally *sung*:

There was a man whose name was Paine, a man of Common Sense,
Who came from Philadelphia, his knowledge to dispense,
He prov'd that man had equal rights, as equal sons of nature,
Deriv'd by universal grant, from Heaven's Legislature.

So ran a London song from 1794. No one, so far as I know, has collected all of the Paineite songs from the late eighteenth century, but their number must run into the dozens. The most famous of them, Joseph Mather's 'God Save Great Thomas Paine,' was sung to the tune of both 'God Save the King' and 'My Country 'Tis of Thee' – a fitting tribute (as Christopher Hitchens has observed) to a man who was both the founding father of modern British radicalism and the finest American. Few of these songs are sung today, especially in America (although there is a popular fiddle tune, 'The Rights of Man,' that is still recorded from time to time). More important, relatively few people really know much about the best-selling author of the Age of Revolution. Has Paine's legacy, like his bones, been lost along the way?

Yes and no. There are at least some monuments to Paine's memory. In the towns of Thetford and Lewes, England, and in New Rochelle, New York, stalwart bands of Paine admirers – freethinkers, labor activists, and history buffs and others – have been kindling Paine's legacy for years. Twelve years ago, the City of New York had set aside a patch of land near Foley Square as Thomas Paine Park. But for the most part, existing national governments have shied away from commemorating Paine, aside from the odd plaque or postage stamp, which is hardly adequate. These honors are usually reserved for heads of state, but how, then, are we to explain the popularity of Ben Franklin or Robert Fulton, let alone the endless procession of minor military heroes and party hacks and the neglect of Thomas Paine? The oversight is scandalous, but also understandable. Paine, the international democrat, put little stock in the kinds of unreflective patriotic nationalism usually invested in alabaster

national heroes. And Paine's writings, with their insistence on speaking plain truth to insolent power, still have a way of unsettling the powers that be, two centuries later.

Given the dearth of official glory, we must look a little harder to find Paine's legacy. Abstractly, Paine is certainly remembered in his dedication to reason, and his name is linked to two cardinal principles of modern political life – democracy and internationalism. Getting beneath these abstractions turns up some interesting things about how Paine, the citizen of the world, is remembered – and not remembered – around the world. Paine's exploits touched most directly the experiences of three nations: France, Great Britain, and the United States. He is honored today in all three, but in very different ways.

France seems to have done the least to preserve a Paineite tradition (despite the fine efforts of contemporary scholars like Bernard Vincent). It is not entirely a matter of xenophobia or French national pride. (After all, President Wilson has his avenue in Paris.) It was, instead, the French Revolution – or more specifically the Jacobin ascendancy – that undid Paine in France. Enconced in Paris in 1792, an official American representative to the French Convention, Paine was one of the best friends the French Revolution would ever have, more eloquent in its defense than most of the French revolutionaries themselves. But for various reasons – linguistic, temperamental, intellectual, accidental – Paine drifted into the milieu of the emerging Girondin faction. Once he raised his voice in 1793 against the execution of Louis XVI (on both humanitarian and pragmatic grounds), Paine's political position became, to put it mildly, precarious. He paid for his alleged unreliability to the revolutionary cause with ten months in a Jacobin prison.

It is misleading to see in Paine's French experience (as some writers have) a kind of foreshadowing of twentieth-century political agonies – of liberators turned into jailers and naïve radicals turned into victims, and others into bitter conservatives. Such a picture seems to me designed more to gain some ideological advantage than to reason with the past. Paine was never naïve; more important, even after his release from prison, he never renounced his support for the French Revolution. Indeed, he continued to take pride at the thought that the American struggle for independence and his own writings may have helped inspire the French to overturn the Bastille. But to the extent that Jacobinism has become all too synonymous with the revolutionary cause, then it is easy

to see why Paine's role in the French Revolution has been all but forgotten. Girondist politics are today largely consigned to history's dustbin, as is anyone even fleetingly associated with that point of view.

When recalled, Paine's *Rights of Man* is commonly described as part of a debate over British government (which in part, of course, it was). Paine's actual contribution to French developments – as well as any larger Paineite tradition in France – has gotten lost in the folds of French politics, amidst the competing claims of those neo-Jacobin republicans, socialists, Bonapartists, and conservatives who have dominated French politics and, in effect, re-fought the French Revolution for generation after generation. Even today, as some French intellectuals and politicians try to retrieve a viable Gallic liberalism, their thoughts turn not to Thomas Paine but to a writer like Aléxis de Tocqueville or like [François] Guizot.

Paine's reputation is far sturdier in Britain. Literary background is one reason why: Paine's writing is above all in the great tradition of the freeborn, dissenting English democrat, a tradition with its roots in Bunyan, Milton, and the russet-coated writers of the Commonwealth period. As various historians have shown, that tradition fed directly into the culture and politics of the nineteenth-century British labor movement, with Tom Paine's writings as its foundation texts. Ever since, Paine's memory has burned strongest in the British labor movement, and more recently: the Labour Party. Other legacies – of John Wesley and of Karl Marx – are there as well. Still, there is a fairly direct line leading from Paine to the Chartists who held Paine's writings aloft, and then to the later generations of trade unionists and socialists and activists who sing to this day about the rights of man – including Michael Foot, M.P., Labour Party Leader, and President of the Thomas Paine Society.

The United States is a more puzzling case. Here, the praise of Paine began to abate in the late 1790s, not because of his Girondist sympathies but because of his anti-Christian deism. Americans could easily celebrate Paine for *Rights of Man*; they could not forgive him *The Age of Reason*, not at a time when a fervent evangelical revival was gearing up, a revival that would usher in an American nineteenth century marked by intense piety. In 1809, Paine's former friend Joel Barlow advised the New York City editor James Cheetham that 'the greater part of the readers in the United States will not be persuaded, as long as their present feelings last, to consider Paine in another light than as a drunkard and a deist.'

Cheetham proved Barlow correct a year later when he published his notorious biography, which did so much to codify the Paine demonology. From that day to this, America's national political leaders have usually had precious little to say about Paine and his works – at least in public. Thomas Jefferson (who, it should be recalled, was a slaveholder) has become the mainstream apostle of reason, enlightenment, and equality. The most pungent remark from a nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century American president about Paine was Theodore Roosevelt's absurd dismissal of him as a 'filthy little atheist.' In the twentieth century, since then (and some may view this as ironic), it has taken Ronald Reagan to do the most to cite Paine approvingly – the conservative president who takes courage from Paine's radical call to remake the world.

Yet just beneath the surface a stronger American Paineite political tradition has ebbed and flowed. Despite the notoriety attached to his name in some quarters, Paine's contributions to the language of American politics, and to Americans' sense of what it means to be an American, were too fundamental to let his ideas suffer utter neglect. Andrew Jackson, a firm proponent of the separation of church and state as well as of other democratic principles, once allowed that Paine should be honored 'in the hearts of all lovers of liberty.' Abraham Lincoln, likewise, admired Paine, particularly for his religious skepticism. Outside of the American political mainstream, the Paineite current has run even stronger. On January 29, 1825, a group of some forty radical artisan freethinkers (some of them English immigrants), all of them drawn from roughly the same local strata that so thrilled Paine during the American Revolution, gathered in New York City to honor Paine's birthday. They began a tradition of annual celebrations that expanded and spread through the 1840s, encompassing a significant portion of the Jacksonian labor movement. At roughly the same time, partisans of the radical wing of the Democratic Party honored Paine and spoke continually on the stump about Paineite principles. One of their number, the great sculptor John Frazee, actually designed and executed a handsome monument to the author of *Common Sense*.

Other voices, usually voices of dissent, perpetuated the Paineite tradition after the Civil War. The ex-artisan poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, saw fit to address a Paine birthday celebration in 1877, where he proclaimed that a good portion of what was best about his country –

'its ardent belief in, and substantial practice of, radical human rights' – derived from Thomas Paine. Later Americans, less sure that the 'country was still in touch with its highest ideals, turned to Paine for sustenance. Eugene V. Debs often made a point of insisting that the American socialist tradition owed much to Paine. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded its newspaper early in this century, it could find no better title than *The Crisis*. And on through the 1960s, American reformers and radicals of various stripes paid homage to Paine, occasionally in a calculated search for legitimacy, more often not.

Taken country by country, then, Paine's legacy is uneven. Still, a common thread runs through these different examples – of Paine as the hero of democratic causes not yet won and of causes sometimes forgotten, the prophet who was honored and then dishonored in his own time and whose main legacy is to the powerless. There is much truth in this, but it is not the whole story. Viewing Paine as a visionary utopian tells us much about how the world has departed from what Paine considered to be self-evident natural principles – but it also obscures that side of Paine that was eminently practical. It is to forget the Paine who spent countless hours computing the actual economic costs of monarchical corruption. It is to forget the Paine who worked tirelessly as the clerk of the Pennsylvania assembly, helping to hammer out the state's first emancipation law. It is to forget the Paine who designed iron bridges, smokeless candles, and countless other scientific improvements. It is to forget the projects of Paine's that did come to pass.

As a writer, for example, Paine established a style, mixing plainspoken politics with seditious laughter, which has become a mainstay of public criticism. He was, in effect, one of the first, if not the first, of the modern political intellectuals. Earlier writers, to be sure, had spoken eloquently of the people and to the people, as [John] Bunyan and [Gerrard] Winstanley did. Aspects of Paine's writings are heavily indebted to writers like [Jonathan] Swift, to say nothing of the more malicious and salacious pamphleteers of eighteenth-century Grub Street. But it was Paine who most forcefully directed his talents to the crises of the moment, in a compelling language designed to galvanize not so much the people in and around the Court or the capital but those ordinary people whose reading consisted mainly of the Bible (if that) – an everyday language drawn from the pulpit and the State House but also

from the tavern, the workshop, the kitchen, and the streets. It is impossible to imagine a Mark Twain, a Henry George, or an H. L. Mencken, without Tom Paine in back of them all. Here Paine's practical project became a living reality. The same is true of numerous other of Paine's efforts, from the very independence of the American republic to such later developments as the abolition of slavery and the founding of the United Nations. We fail to notice this side of Paine's legacy, not because it is hidden or because it has not come to pass, but because it is everywhere.

Where, then, between Paine the visionary and Paine the practical man, are we to locate Paine's legacy? It is, I think, in the tension between the two – the unfulfilled visions and the living realities – that his writings still contain their great power. This is not always self-evident, either to historians, politicians, or citizens. To them, too often, Paine's writings may be inspiring on the subjects of democracy and internationalism, but they also seem to be based on an obsolete view of the world. All of Paine's rationalist talk about natural laws, human benevolence, and universal rights does grate somewhat on twentieth-century ears. We have learned too much about the potentialities of human evil and irrationality – from Auschwitz to the Gulag to everyday conflicts of class, race, and nationality – to be as optimistic about humankind as Paine was. Paine's democracy, some say, was a patently 'bourgeois' democracy, a forerunner of the individualist ideals that would eventually be used to mask the wretched exploitation of mine and mill. Paine's democracy, others insist, is unrealistic in today's treacherous world; instead, we need secret governments of unelected spooks, soldiers, and crooks to keep the world safe from tyranny. As for internationalism, it is a nice idea, and worth trying sometime – but national security comes first.

Such people should be careful about condescending to Thomas Paine. We may feel uncomfortable with the scientific optimism of democracy with which Paine viewed humanity. But to equate Paine's vision of democracy – or democracy itself – with human oppression is to make a mockery of *Common Sense*. Likewise the claim that to protect democracy, governments must circumvent the popular will. Were Paine alive today listening to his modern critics, I am sure he would be scribbling away somewhere, cackling to himself, telling us in no uncertain terms that we have not yet begun even to imagine what democracy could be like. The principles, even some of the institutions of

democracy are here; practical Tom Paine helped put them in place two centuries ago. But we have only begun to put them to the full use Paine thought possible.

The same holds true on the international scene. Slowly, painfully, and only at the cost of appalling carnage has the world slowly awakened to the imperative of international accord, and to the essential meaninglessness of the conventional nationalist wisdom. Even the threat of nuclear annihilation has not done the trick, for it has taken forty years and more of Cold War and continual crises for the living generations to begin to discard their shibboleths and begin to think – really think – about cooperation. There are, as I speak, fragile but not imaginary hopes that some fundamental change in human consciousness is underway. We will be sure this is so when governments start heeding the governed instead of the imperatives of national security – when throughout the world people appreciate Thomas Paine and understand as he did that the fate of democracy and the fate of human existence are as one. As Paine wrote in *Rights of Man*:

That there are men in all countries who get their living by war, and by keeping up the quarrels of Nations, is as shocking as it is true; but when those who are concerned in the government of a country, make it their study to sow discord, and cultivate prejudices between Nations, it becomes the more unpardonable.

Only democracy – true democracy – could, as Paine saw it, rid the nations of the world of those who get their living by war, by sowing discord, and cultivating prejudice. Human conflict and evil will never be eliminated from the world. But we have it in our power, as practical utopians, to do far better than ever before. Let that, above all, be Paine's legacy.