
CLASSICS

OF DEMOCRACY

Tom Paine: Radical Democrat

ISAAC KRAMNICK

Americans have made much of Tom Paine in the last fifteen years. His face has been on a postage stamp since 1968 (how he would have loved the irony). He was quoted repeatedly in Gerald Ford's 1976 State of the Union address, and, more recently, Ronald Reagan cited inspirational Paine at the Republican Convention and in his "debate" with John Anderson. And why shouldn't Americans, especially those caught up in the fervor of political rhetoric, cite Tom Paine? Few foreigners, let alone Americans, have written more eloquently of America's messianic mission than has Paine. Throughout his career, from his arrival in Philadelphia at the age of thirty-seven through his role in the French Revolution and his efforts to bring about an English revolution, Paine sang the praises of America as the land of the chosen people. Providence, he insisted, had destined America for a special role in history. In a world "over-run with oppression," America was chosen "as the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty." In his *American Crisis*, Paine claimed that "had it not been for America, there had been no such thing as freedom left throughout the whole universe." "Freedom hath been hunted round the globe," he wrote in a stirring passage in *Common Sense*; America would "receive the fugitive." Her birth and existence was a flood that wiped clean the slate of history. America had it in her power "to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand." From America would flow a stream of liberty to cleanse the world of tyranny. Well might Ronald Reagan, the crusader, invoke the rhetoric of Tom Paine.

Care must be taken by a Ford or a Reagan, however, lest he leave the poetic Paine and embrace the Paine fancied recently by other Americans. During the bicentenary, much use was made of Paine by the countercelebrants, the "People's Bicentenary." He alone among the men of 1776 seemed worthy of celebration by the radicals of 1976, for he alone among the founders was considered a true democrat—a populist, an egalitarian, a democrat. To be sure, there was Jefferson, but few would call the slaveholder Jefferson "Tommy," let alone "citizen Tom." Few artisans would hold Jefferson their champion and sing of him under the liberty tree.

Paine's contemporaries agreed. Paine was a radical democrat. While John Adams appreciated Paine's role in achieving independence and shared his sense of America's uniqueness, he was frightened by the simple radicalism of Paine's political vision. It was, Adams wrote, "so democratical, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work."¹ In England, where in the 1790s the *Rights of Man* became as much a standard work as *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the very name Paine struck terror into the hearts of the aristocracy and government. Their response was to hang democrat Tom Paine in effigy and try him for treason.

Two centuries later, neoconservatives like the late Martin Diamond, Irving Kristol, and Samuel Huntington, in their assault on democracy are quite right to include most of the founding fathers in their camp of "sober and cautious" democrats (i.e., nondemocrats) and to see democracy as "problematic" at the founding. To abandon sobriety and caution, to see democracy as less than problematic, is to commit the modern sin of democratic "enthusiasm," according to neoconservatism. But the seeds of this heresy were planted in the very age of the founding. Tom Paine was a democratic "enthusiast" if ever there was one. He was the first important radical in the American political tradition. His outlook was essentially democratic in its values and instincts. His writings give strength, character, and persuasiveness to the American democratic and egalitarian ideal to the extent that even today it resists the assault from the political and intellectual right. But there are limitations to Paine's world view, revealing limitations. His is a democratic enthusiasm bound inextricably to the universe of liberal discourse. It is this that ultimately explains the lack of total dissonance in his contemporary invocation by laissez-faire liberal ideologues like Reagan. Paine's is a radicalism on the left fringe of the American liberal consensus. But it is a bourgeois radicalism, nonetheless, complete with all the strengths and weaknesses of that tradition.

¹ John Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1850-56), vol. 3, p. 330.

No democrat so enthusiastically rejected the aristocratic world as did Tom Paine. Burke wrote of him that he sought "to destroy in six or seven days" the feudal and chivalric past that "all the boasted wisdom of our ancestors has labored to bring to perfection for six or seven centuries."² Paine's every reflex was egalitarian, bent on undermining what he considered the "quixotic age of chivalric nonsense."³ Kings were the first nonsense to go. Doing nothing more than make war and give away positions, they were paid "eight hundred thousand sterling a year and worshipped into the bargain." They were useless and unproductive; "of more worth is one honest man to society . . . than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived."⁴

After kings, the nonsense of aristocracy was next to go. Is there anything more absurd than the hereditary principle, Paine asked in the *Rights of Man*, "as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wiseman, and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet laureate?" What mattered was not a man's pedigree, but his productivity. Society should be led by men of "talents and abilities," yet its offices of privilege and power were filled by a nobility that, according to Paine, really meant "no—ability." Paine, like Wat Tyler, could scan "all the vocabulary of Adam," and find there "not such an animal as a duke or a count." The great of the world could shout leveler at such Jacobin sentiments, and proud citizen Tom Paine would reply, "France has not levelled, it has exalted. It has put down the dwarf, to set up the man." Monarchs and aristocrats were unproductive idlers, parasites, and "drones . . . who neither collect the honey, nor form the hive, but exist only for lazy enjoyment."

Behind the power of these drones lay the deception that government and society were mysterious and arcane realms where secrets possessed only by some enabled the few to lead, to govern, to oppress. For Paine, "the age of fiction and political superstition, and of craft, and mystery is passing away." The "craft of courts" is banished from popular government. "There is no place for mystery, no where for it to begin"⁵ when the people govern themselves. Such a government was simple and uncomplicated. Defenders of balanced or separated powers, like John Adams, were criticized for their glorification of complexity, which, in fact, Paine insisted was merely a return to the fiction, crafts, and mystery of the predemocratic age.

2 Edmund Burke, "Letters on a Regicide Peace," in *Burke's Works*, 8 vols. (London: Bohn, 1855), vol. 5, p. 395.

3 Tom Paine, *The Rights of Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 72.

4 Tom Paine, *Common Sense* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 83.

5 Tom Paine, "Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation," in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, M. D. Conway, ed., 4 vols. (1896; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1967), vol. 3, p. 93; Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 206.

In that age of mystery and "chivalric nonsense," the poor fared worst of all. To their defense, in moving and bitter language, sprang Tom Paine, the former staymaker, in terms no less meaningful two centuries later. "The present state of civilization," he wrote in *Agrarian Justice*, "is as odious as it is unjust. It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it. The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together." There is nothing wrong with riches, he adds, "provided that none be miserable in consequence of it." In Part II of *The Rights of Man*, he laments that nations are "governed like animals, for the pleasure of their riders." "When . . . we see age going to the work-house and youth to the gallows" in a civilized country, he adds, "something must be wrong in the system of government." Why is it, Paine asks, "that scarcely any are executed but the poor?" Youth should be instructed, and the aged supported; instead, he fumes, "the resources of a country are lavished upon kings, upon courts, upon hirelings." What pathetic irony that the poor themselves "are compelled to support the fraud that oppresses them." Paine calculated that

the millions that are superfluously wasted upon governments are more than sufficient to reform those evils . . . were an estimation to be made of the charge of aristocracy to a nation, it will be found nearly equal to that of supporting the poor. The Duke of Richmond alone (and there are cases similar to this) takes away as much for himself as would maintain two thousand poor and aged persons.⁶

Paine's solution was for the authorities to grant the poor four pounds a year for children under fourteen, and to require that the children be schooled. For the elderly there would be, at age fifty, six pounds per year, and ten pounds after age sixty. "It is painful," Paine writes, "to see old age working itself to death, in what are called civilized countries, for daily bread."⁷ Paine calculated how much the poor pay in taxes over a lifetime, and in anticipation of modern social security notes, "the money he shall receive after fifty years, is but little more than the legal interest of the net money he has paid." Is it more civilized, he asks, to render comfortable the old age of 140,000 people, "or that a million a year of public money be expended on any one individual, and him often of the most worthless or insignificant character?"⁸

Public education would be provided for all, if Paine had his way, at the cost

6 Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 250.

7 Ibid., p. 264.

8 Ibid., pp. 265-66.

of ten shillings a year for 400,000 children. Women would receive twenty shillings immediately after the birth of a child, and couples twenty shillings upon marriage. Paine insisted that this was not the Christian philanthropy of traditional paternalist attitudes to the poor. In striking anticipation of a doctrine that even two hundred years later is unacceptable to many, he is certain that "this support, as already remarked, is not of the nature of a charity, but of a right."⁹ No one else in that age of revolution, none of the "sober and cautious" democrats who were America's founders, proclaimed as Paine did: "When it shall be said in any country in the world, my poor are happy, neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive; . . . when these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and its government."¹⁰

Such sentiments endeared Paine to democratic working men. He was applauded by the artisans of Philadelphia and by the members of the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s. His writings would be quoted by the Chartists and the early trade unionists in the nineteenth century. But it is a mistake to read Paine's radicalism as protosocialism, as some have. His merciless indictment of an aristocratic polity and society did serve the interests of the workers and touched their souls, but Paine's radical egalitarianism also served, and was bound up with, the interests of bourgeois liberalism, the principal architect and beneficiary of the destruction of "chivalric nonsense."

It detracts in no way from Paine's radicalism and his egalitarianism to note their liberal sources. Such, indeed, were the terms a progressive and humanitarian assault on the old order had to take in his age. The limitations liberalism placed on his radicalism would become clearer in a later age. In his day there was no incompatibility between his democratic ideals and his defense of individualism, property, and business enterprise. Bourgeois ideals in his mind were intimately linked to an egalitarian vision of society. The stratified society of privilege and rank would be leveled in a bourgeois world of competitive individualism; a world in which political and social place would be determined by talent, merit, and hard work.

His political theory was vintage liberalism. Like Smith and Madison, and like liberal apologists to this day, Paine assumed cooperation and fellowship were strangers to the political arena, a place of conflict and competition con-

9 Ibid., p. 265.

10 Ibid., p. 286.

stituted by atomistic individualism. A nation, he wrote, "is composed of distinct, unconnected individuals, following various trades, employments and pursuits; continually meeting, crossing, uniting, opposing and separating from each other, as accident, interest, and circumstances shall direct."¹¹

Government had no positive agency to promote justice or virtue for these clashing individuals and interests. It was merely to preside as umpire over a world where individualism was the central value. Its sole justification was providing a stable and secure setting for the operation of a commercial society: "Every man wishes to pursue his occupation and to enjoy the fruits of his labor and the produce of his property in peace and safety and with it the least possible expense. When these things are accomplished, all the objects for which government ought to be established are answered."¹²

Paine was read by the artisans and the poor, but his natural friends were also the manufacturers, who were fast destroying traditional society. Paine the entrepreneur, the salesman forever hawking his iron bridge, had great respect for the Wedgewoods, the Arkwrights, the Watts, and their counterparts in America who chartered the Bank of Pennsylvania. These enterprising individuals stood outside government; indeed, their achievements occurred in spite of government: "It is from the enterprise and industry of the individuals and their numerous associations, in which, tritely speaking, government is neither pillow nor bolster, that these improvements have proceeded. No man thought about the government, or who was in, or who was out, when he was planning or executing those things; and all he had to hope with respect to government, was that, it would let him alone."¹³

Paine's entrepreneurial friends were engaged in the same egalitarian crusade that he was. Like him, they sought a redistribution of wealth and power that would be based on equality of opportunity and that would enable individuals of real ability to replace those of "no-ability." Paine's most progressive writings, his *Agrarian Justice* and the justly celebrated Part Two of the *Rights of Man*, while advocating the redistribution of much wealth to the poor, still served the greater interest of individuals of "enterprise and industry," relieving them of that most burdensome of weights, the poor rates. Relief would come to both the middle and lower classes; indeed in greater measure to the former. Equal conditions, equal results, were not his goal nor theirs. The end of "chivalric nonsense" would bring not leveling but equal opportunity in a com-

¹¹ Tom Paine, "Dissertations on Government, the Affairs of the Bank, and Paper Money," in *Writings*, vol. 3, p. 137.

¹² Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 220.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

petitive individualistic society. "That property will ever be unequal is certain," he wrote in 1795. This was neither unjust nor unfair, but simply a result of "industry, superiority of talents, dexterity of management, extreme frugality and fortunate opportunities."¹⁴ His political creed was a simple one, pure liberalism at its most radical and progressive historical moment: "Establish the Rights of Man; enthrone equality . . . let there be no privileges, no distinctions of birth, no monopolies; make safe the liberty of industry and trade, the equal distribution of family inheritances."¹⁵

Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil," wrote Paine in *Common Sense*. With this formula Paine distills the essence of liberal social theory and in turn reveals the flaw that limits his and any radical vision operating within the confines of liberalism. From Locke through Paine and even unto Milton Friedman, the liberal sees civil society as peopled by self-reliant individuals. Such a society is benignly innocent, self-regulating and harmonious. Government is pernicious, the source of threats to individual freedom; it, along with its ally the established Church, is in essence tyrannical. Coercion and abuse are the fruits only of government, never of the social and economic institutions of civil society.

Poverty, for example, according to Paine, is a direct result of governmental interference with "the great laws of society," the "laws of nature and reciprocal interest." "How often is the natural propensity to society disturbed or destroyed by the operations of government," he asks? Instead of "consolidating society, it divided it; it deprived it of its natural cohesion, and engendered discontents and disorders, which otherwise would not have existed." The "excess and inequality of taxation" has but one effect. "A great mass of the community are thrown thereby into poverty and discontent." Governments thus create the poor, the economic institutions of civil society do not. In America there is little or no government, according to Paine. Society performs there quite naturally, with "order and decorum." It follows, then, that, according to Paine, poverty is unknown in America.¹⁶

Paine's preoccupation with government as the source of all coercion, his conviction that civil society is the realm of true freedom, is nowhere better revealed than in his obsession with taxation. The real threat to individual freedom, for Paine, is governmental taxation. Taxation is the symbol of tyranny

¹⁴ Tom Paine, "Dissertation on First Principles of Government," in *Writings*, vol. 3, p. 268.

¹⁵ Tom Paine, "Anti-Monarchical Essay," in *Writings*, vol. 3, p. 107.

¹⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 187-88.

and corruption. His self-appointed mission was to defend "the cause of the poor, of the manufacturers, of the tradesmen, of the farmer, and of all those on whom the real burden of taxes fall."¹⁷ Monarchy, aristocracy, and taxes were all of a piece in Paine's mind. In his "Anti-Monarchical Essay" (1792) he insisted that "in a word, whoever demands a king, demands an aristocracy, and thirty millions of taxes." Royalty, he was sure, "has been invented only to obtain from man excessive taxes." The turmoil of his revolutionary age was produced, according to Paine, by taxpayers who had had enough. He wrote in 1792, "There are two distinct classes of men in the nation [England]. Those who pay taxes and those who receive and live upon the taxes. . . . When taxation is carried to excess, it cannot fail to disunite these two, and something of this is now beginning to appear."¹⁸

America represented "a revolution in the principles and practice of governments" for Paine. By this he meant, of course, its repudiation of monarchy and the hereditary principle and its commitment to representative government. In addition, America represented liberal utopia, the triumph of civil society over government. Like Locke, who had claimed that "in the beginning all the world was America," Paine contended that "the case and circumstances of America present themselves as in the beginning of a world." Paine was struck with how well revolutionary America performed with little central direction. "A little more than what society naturally performed was all the government that was necessary." American government was also cheap. Extending over a country ten times as large as England, Paine calculated its costs as "a fortieth part of the expense which government costs in England." No vast patronage network here; no costly system of jobs. The civil list for the support of one man, the King of England, Paine noted, is "eight times greater than the whole expense of the federal government in America." What little government there was in America was simple, local, and understandable. The Americans put into practice Paine's maxim that the "sum of necessary government is much less than is generally thought." In America, "the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged. Industry is not mortified by the splendid extravagance of a court rioting at its expense. There taxes are few." In England, men were envious of America, and calls for change were coming fast, Paine wrote in 1792, because "the enormous expense of government has provoked men to think."¹⁹

The triumph of civil society over government, of cheap and simple self-

17 Tom Paine, "Prospects on the Rubicon," in *Writings*, vol. 2, p. 204.

18 Paine, "Letter Addressed to the Addressers . . .," p. 55.

19 Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 147, 183-84, 189, 206; "Answer to Four Questions on the Legislation and Executive Powers," in *Writings*, vol. 3, p. 245; "Letter Addressed to the Addressers . . .," p. 81.

regulation over expensive and tyrannical taxation, is seen in a fascinating and repeated preference Paine acknowledges for local over centralized government. England, he suggests, really governs itself, with constables, assizes, magistrates, and juries. This is done at virtually no expense, at no great intrusion of taxation on individual freedom. Central government, on the contrary, or "court government," while useless, is a leviathan, an overblown monster spewing forth jobs and wars. It was the "most productive machine of taxation that was ever invented."²⁰ The latter, centralized monarchical government, was unnecessary and a constant threat to individual liberty. The former, self-regulation by local society, was natural, cheap, and really not government at all. It was thus no threat to individual rights or to the self-realization of talented men.

For the liberal Paine and for his liberal descendants, there is but one villain, government. Merchants, manufacturers, and bankers, even magistrates and justices of the peace, are part of benign and wholesome civil society. Traditional republican doctrine is turned on its head; self-serving individuals further the common good, and public government serves its own selfish and corrupt interest. "The greedy hand of government" is thrust "into every corner and crevice of industry," to grasp "the spoil of the multitude." Governments are evil incarnate. They engage in wars abroad, and practice "oppression and usurpation" at home. They "exhaust the property of the world."²¹ Reversing the conventional identification of courts and the great with civility, and provincial manufacturers and artisans with vulgarity, Paine holds that governments work for the forces of barbarism, society for the forces of civilization. "Governments . . . pervert the abundance which civilized life produces to carry on the uncivilized part."²² Paine pushes aside what most take to be the political issues that divide men and finds not class war but a heroic and quintessentially liberal struggle between individuals and governments: "It is not whether this or that party shall be in or not, or Whig or Tory, or high or low shall prevail; but whether man shall inherit his rights, and universal civilization take place? Whether the fruits of his labours shall be enjoyed by himself, or consumed by the profligacy of government? Whether robbery shall be banished from courts, and wretchedness from countries?"²³

It was inconceivable to Paine and other liberals that civil society and its institutions, economic, familial, or cultural, could be a source of coercion, of "oppression" and "usurpation." That concentrations of power and wealth in non-governmental institutions could be the source of inequality and poverty was in-

20 Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 148, 216, 234.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 233-34.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

compatible with the liberal urge to indict political institutions and to seek progressive change through political reform. Threats to freedom come from the state, from churches and tyrants in the liberal world, not from factory owners, corporate power, or financial manipulators.

Nowhere is this limitation of Paine's vision more apparent than in his strident defense of the Bank of Pennsylvania, a defense that alienated him from many of his Jeffersonian friends in 1786. Paine rejected the fears of the Bank's radical critics, who charged that its directors would wield great economic power even to the point of controlling the state and the government. On the contrary, Paine answered, the Bank illustrates the superiority of civil institutions over state institutions. Men in society have little need for government; they can supply their internal wants and needs by private cooperative activity. Nongovernmental institutions like the Bank by definition could not be oppressive, only taxing governments could. The Bank came into being, he wrote, because government was, in fact, inadequately financing the war. "A public spirit awakened itself with energy out of doors."²⁴ To be sure, the Bank "facilitates the commerce of the country." But much more significantly, "If merchants by this means or farmers by similar means among themselves can mutually aid and support each other, what has the government to do with it? What right has it to expect emolument from associated industry, more than from individual industry? It would be a strange sort of government that should make it illegal for people to assist each other, or pay a tribute for doing so."²⁵ The real threat to individual freedom here was not from any potential or real economic power of the Bank and its directors, according to Paine. The enemy is, indeed, government. Corporate groups must be free of government, Paine writes of the Bank. They must not be dependent on government each year for renewal of their charters. "The citizens who compose those corporations are not free; the government holds an authority and influence over them in a manner different from what it does over other citizens, and by this means destroys that equality of freedom which is the bulwark of the republic."²⁶ If this be Paine's liberalism, can Milton Friedman, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan be far behind?

When he wanted to, Tom Paine could summon citizens to collective action with stirring phrases. In *The Crisis* he had written that "these are the times that try men's souls; the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country." But common action and fraternity, for

²⁴ Paine, "Dissertations on Government . . .," pp. 166-67.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

Paine, are found only in the angry response of a basically individualistic society to public oppression and injustice. When the stimulus of rebellion and war against tyrants and aristocrats is removed, equal individuals will pursue their own livelihoods, and seldom will they be moved to cooperate with one another for common purposes. Among equal citizens, there is little or no sense of community; self-regulating society, yes, but no consciousness of solidarity, nor any real emotional feelings of unity. In society, there is little need for popular power; there are, after all, no collective goals.

Democratic egalitarian citizens for Paine are free, not powerful. Power was something governments had, and with it they taxed, coerced worship, and gave jobs to incompetent second sons of elderly Peers. Its abusive association with government permanently tainted "power" for the individualist Paine and for liberals like him. America was the beacon of light in an otherwise dark world because its equal citizens were free, not because there people had power. Americans did not tax, establish churches, or give away public jobs. That power might serve less abusive ends could not occur to individualistic liberals like Paine, for a free people were not united in pursuing communal ends, nor were they even interested in community itself. Such a linkage of power, community, and freedom could come only with democratic theorists like Rousseau, less wedded to an individualistic vision of society. For such democrats, it was not power itself that corrupted, but the wielders who corrupted power.

How unfair, however, to take leave of Paine at this point, emphasizing his weaknesses not his strengths. Trapped as he was by the limitations of liberal social theory from seeing nongovernmental threats to freedom, equality, and democracy, confined as he was to seeing society only in terms of competitive individualism, it still bears repeating that there have been precious few in the liberal camp who so passionately assaulted privilege as he. There have been few liberals who were so fervently committed to democracy and egalitarianism. He was no Rousseau, to be sure, let alone Marx, but the invocation of his name and his ideas by today's defenders of privilege is an affront to America's radical tradition. Paine is, indeed, the patron saint of American radicalism, bearing in mind, of course, that our radicals, like our conservatives, often carry the stamp of operating within the framework of a fundamentally liberal society.

Lest we forget the democrat Paine, we need remember only how he was hated by the conservatives of his day. Little has changed from Adams's misgivings to the Trilateral Commission's conviction that "some of the problems of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy." The villains for both are enthusiastic and mischievous radicals like Tom Paine,

radicals whose attacks on privilege and whose democratic faith lack, alas, "the sober and cautious American posture toward equality and democracy" so dear to the founders and to the right today. Before they continue to quote Paine, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan would do well to read what John Adams wrote of America's first political radical in 1805, four years before Paine's death in New Rochelle, New York:

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. There can be no severer satyr on the age. For such a mongrel between pig and puppy, begotten by a wild boar on a bitch wolf, never before in any age of the world was suffered by the poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a career of mischief. Call it the Age of Paine.²⁷

²⁷ Quoted in David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 7.