

A PLACE IN THE SUN FOR PAINE

by Frances Chiu

When the name Theodore Dreiser is mentioned, we are apt to think of his great novels, particularly the scandalous *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925); the latter of which was later to be adapted into the famous film, *A Place in the Sun*. Perhaps we might even recall that Dreiser was narrowly beaten by Sinclair Lewis for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930.

We are less likely to recall Dreiser's progressive, Paineite politics, however--if only because much of his political prose disappeared off the radar over the course of the century: including his most rigorous indictments of corporate abuses in the Gilded Age and the Depression, *Tragic America* (1932) and *America is Worth Saving* (1941). The first was almost immediately banned from bookstores and libraries while the latter attracted little notice. What is particularly intriguing is the possible influence and inspiration of *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*. In the spirit of Paine, both texts execrate the undue political and economic might of the wealthiest and most powerful.

Let's take a brief look at *Tragic America*. Well before the emergence of the Occupy movement in 2011, Dreiser declared: "But this system--which the capitalists would have us believe to be the work of sheer fate--is actually no more and no less than the absolutely planned and executed method by which the banks bring on a state of prosperity for only 1% of the people." Moreover, it was "to that 1% and that 1% alone, comes prosperity, and that all at the beck and will of the banks and corporation executives who are that less than 1% of the total population." Indeed, much of *Tragic America* articulates a number of shared egalitarian themes in *Rights of Man* and the Occupy movement, albeit in the distinctive aftermath of the Crash of 1929: the monopolization of oil and railroad industries; the pernicious influence of religion in education; government subservience to corporations; violence towards strikers; lack of real equality for blacks in the South during the aftermath of the Civil War; and the horrors of European imperialism. In short, according to Dreiser, the ordinary American was being sacrificed to the corporations, the new overlords, by a complicit government.

Many of these themes were reiterated a decade later as Dreiser questioned the necessity of America's role in WW II in *America is Worth Saving*. Here, he denounced the collected 1%

of the European aristocracy and American corporate leaders in Paineite fashion for it was they who stood to gain large profits from the war--whether or not they supported Hitler. And really, what was the difference between Hitler's armies and the British imperialist forces which all but enslaved and decimated scores of Indians, Chinese, and South African blacks? Wasn't it inhumanity writ large? (Dreiser would only change his mind on American military engagement after the German invasion of Russia and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.) These ideas remind us of Paine's own criticisms of the British empire in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* and *Crisis* papers.

Although Dreiser's interpretation runs somewhat counter to Paine's belief that war threatened commerce (not surprising given the rapid industrialization and enlarged manufacturing capacities over the course of a century), a similar pacifism and desire for enlightenment resonates. So it is not fortuitous that Dreiser mentions Paine when observing that the history of man is not a hopeless one comprised entirely of greed and aggression. As if quoting the latter's list of virtuous men in *The Age of Reason*, Dreiser writes: "There have been exceptions, Buddha, Lao Tze, Christ, Confucious, Thomas Paine. Someone actually thought of the Golden rule and the world of things as they are changed, and the dream of things as they might be broadened with that new conception of human relations."

Paine resurfaces near the conclusion as Dreiser underscores the dangers of inequality, quoting from *A Letter to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation* (1792): "When the rich plunder the poor of his rights, it becomes an example to the poor to plunder the rich of his property." Dreiser proceeds to validate these words, noting, "This is not a point of view, but a fact. Only look at the mechanism we call a man. Countless billions of cells have to co-operate to make it work, and if they co-operate and each fulfills its function in relation to the whole the mechanism can last several score of years." Paine would be

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