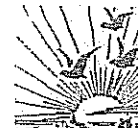


WHY COMMEMORATE THOMAS PAINE?

A supplement to the Thomas Paine Day proposal for Connecticut

composed by Frances Chiu



“WITHOUT THE PEN OF PAINE, the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain.” Thus declared Joel Barlow, poet, diplomat, and native son of Connecticut. But Paine (January 29, 1737–June 8, 1809) was more than a Founding Father who championed and fought for American independence. He was a fierce critic of slavery, imperialism and religious persecution. He drew attention to the lack of rights for women. Above all, he was also a visionary who sought a government responsive to the needs of all of its citizens, as well as one of the earliest proponents of progressive taxation and a scheme that anticipated Social Security.

It was in *Common Sense* (1776) that this English-born former corset-maker and excise officer dared to voice what few were willing to imagine then—independence from Great Britain. Eschewing typically late-18th century verbosity for a clear, succinct, and highly accessible style, Paine convinced many reluctant colonists of the necessity of change, declaring “a new era for politics is struck—and a new method of thinking hath arisen.” Although there were others who expressed impatience with the British Parliament, Paine was one of the first to openly reject the idea of the colonies tethering themselves futilely to a legislature governing from thousands of miles away. Perhaps even more significantly, he delivered some of the most capable arguments against hereditary government, observing that “men who look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey, soon grow insolent.” With the Declaration of Independence following six months after the publication of *Common Sense*, Paine took up arms and joined George Washington in New York. The initially humiliating defeats suffered by the army would subsequently lead Paine to publish the *American Crisis* papers, a series of pamphlets intended to inspire the weary and discouraged colonies throughout the duration of the seemingly interminable war. It was in the final issue of April 18, 1783 that Paine could triumphantly announce that “The times that tried men’s souls are over—and the greatest and completest revolution the world ever knew, gloriously and happily accomplished.”

As France launched a revolution six years later—one partially influenced by its wartime support of the fledgling republic in the war for independence—Paine embraced it too, penning another bestselling publication, *Rights of Man* (Pt. 1, 1791; Pt. 2, 1792). Challenging the reactionary premises of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Paine arrived at a strikingly modern conceptualization of representative government: one that attended to the needs and rights of the masses—peasants, artisans, farmers, tradesmen, manufacturers, and professionals—rather than a select group of wealthy, well-born aristocrats. Here, he underscored the necessity of education for all children, for “A nation under a well-regulated government should permit none to remain uninstructed” because “it is monarchical and aristocratical government only that requires ignorance for its support.” He supported labor rights, asserting that workers should be “as free to make their own bargains, as the law-makers are to let their farms and houses” because “Personal labour is all the property they have”; it was simply unjust for “that little, and the little freedom they enjoy, to be infringed.” Not least, Paine deplored the fact of gross social and economic disparities in a world where the poor, the young, and the elderly suffered disproportionately: “...something must be wrong in the system of government” when “in countries that are called civilised, we see age going to the workhouse and youth to the gallows.” It was thus only reasonable to implement a system that enhanced the quality of living for the many, especially its

most vulnerable members, by shifting the burden of taxation from the shoulders of the poor and middling classes (as in neighboring France) to the wealthy and granting allowances to couples upon marriage and to the elderly.

Not surprisingly, given the pervasive vestiges of feudalism in late 18th-century Britain, Paine was labeled a “leveler” and burned in effigy—only narrowly averting a public hanging. He was to be embroiled in an even greater controversy when he published *The Age of Reason* (1794), a work in which he famously avowed that “I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.” However, as Paine’s deist views were conveniently mistaken for atheism, his reputation suffered even before his return to America in 1802: this is why he remains a controversial Founding Father to this very day.

Yet, in spite of Paine’s virtual proscription from our national history, his ideas continue to resonate loudly here and elsewhere. Time and time again, his vision of change and progress reminds us as it did for our predecessors in 1776 that “The birth-day of a new world is at hand”. Long before the emergence of the Tea Party in 2008, Paine knew that government should not be “an assumption of power, for the aggrandizement of itself” where “the resources of a country are lavished upon kings, upon courts, upon hirelings, impostors and prostitutes.” And long before that of Occupy Wall Street in 2011 with its emphasis on the 99%, Paine knew that government ought to be “a delegation of power for the common benefit of society” and “the public good” in which “the reason for everything must publicly appear”; certainly, the sign that flashed on the Verizon building in NYC on November 17, 2011—“We are winning/It is the beginning of the beginning/We are unstoppable/ Another world is possible”—bears distinct echoes of Paine’s pithy statement, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” Finally, could it not be said that his original vision of democracy has inspired a number of popular movements all around the world through the centuries, right down to the recent student protests over tuition fees in his native England to Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya with the “Arab Spring” still unfolding before our eyes? After all, as Paine observed in *Rights of Man*, “What pace the political summer may keep with the natural, no human foresight can determine. It is however, not difficult to perceive that spring has begun.”

It is time, then, to restore luster to the reputation of Thomas Paine, a man who ranks amongst America’s foremost patriots and progressives, by setting aside an annual day of remembrance—January 29—to observe and honor his accomplishments.

Frances A. Chiu, member of the TPF Board of Directors, is on the faculty at the New School University, New York City, where she teaches an online course on Paine and revolutionary America. Her primary field is 18th and 19th century English literature and history. She resides in Connecticut.