

Thomas Paine, Our Contemporary

by Chris Hedges, www.truthdig.com, May 27th, 2014

Cornel West, Richard D. Wolff and I, along with moderator Laura Flanders, next Sunday will inaugurate “The Anatomy of Revolution,” a series of panel discussions focusing on modern revolutionary theorists. This first event will be part of a two-day conference in New York City sponsored by the LEFT FORUM; nine other discussions by West, Wolff and me will follow in other venues later this year.

Sunday’s event will be about THOMAS PAINE, the author of *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*—the most widely read political essays of the 18th century, works that established the standards by which rebellion is morally and legally permissible. We will ask whether the conditions for revolt set by Paine have been met with the rise of the corporate state. Should Paine’s call for the overthrow of British tyranny inspire our own call for revolution? And if it should, to echo Vladimir Lenin, what must be done?

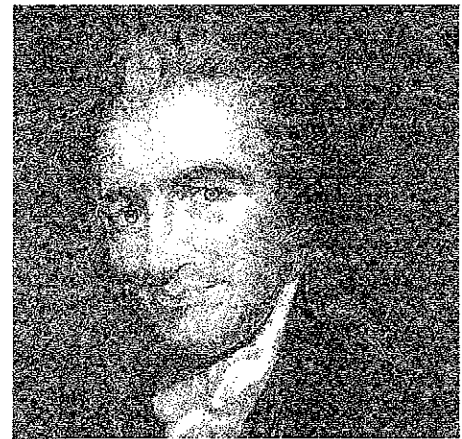
Thomas Paine is America’s one great revolutionary theorist. We have produced a slew of admirable anarchists—Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Dorothy Day and Noam Chomsky—and radical leaders have arisen out of oppressed groups—Sitting Bull, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Cornel West and bell hooks—but we don’t have a tradition of revolutionists. This makes Paine unique.

Paine’s brilliance as a writer—*Common Sense* is one of the finest pieces of rhetorical writing in the English language—is matched by his clear and unsentimental understanding of British imperial power. No revolutionist can challenge power if he or she does not grasp how power works. This makes Sheldon Wolin’s *Democracy Incorporated* and his concept of “inverted totalitarianism” as important to us today as Paine’s writings on the nature of the British monarchy were in 1776.

There were numerous American leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, who hoped to work out an accommodation with the British crown to keep America a British colony, just as many now believe they can work through traditional mechanisms of power, including electoral politics and the judicial system, to reform corporate power. Paine, partly because he did not come to America from England until he was 37, understood that the British crown had no interest in accommodation; today, the corporate state similarly has no interest in granting any concessions. It became Paine’s job to explain to his American audience the reality of British power and what effective resistance would entail. Paine knew that the British monarchy, which wielded the global imperial power that America wields today, was blinded by its hubris and military prowess. It had lost the ability to listen and as a result had lost the ability to make rational choices, as New York inhabitants discovered when British warships and mercenary troops besieged the city.

Paine created a new political language. He wrote in crystalline prose. *Common Sense* was read by hundreds of thousands. It was the first political essay in Enlightenment Europe to call for a separation between *civil society* and *the state*, terms that many writers had considered interchangeable. Civil society, Paine argued, must always act as a counterweight against the state in a democracy. Power, he warned, even in a democracy, carries within it the seeds of tyranny.

Paine, as George Orwell and James Baldwin did later, used his pen as a weapon. It was a weapon deeply feared by the monarchies in Europe, as well as the Jacobins in France, who



imprisoned Paine and planned to execute him for denouncing the Reign of Terror. He spoke an undeniable truth. He called his readers to act upon that truth. “My motive and object in all my political works, beginning with *Common Sense*,” Paine remembered in 1806, “... have been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government, and enable him to be free.”

“Where liberty is, there is my country,” Benjamin Franklin once said to Paine. “Where liberty is *not*, *there* is my country,” Paine replied. For Paine, the role of a citizen extended beyond national borders. The fight of those living under any system of tyranny was his fight. “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; the rational world is my friend, because I am a friend of its happiness: when these things can be said,” Paine wrote, “then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.”

The key to social change, as Eric Foner pointed out in *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, is “a change in the nature of language itself, both in the emergence of new words and in old words taking on new meanings.” The call for revolution that was advanced by Paine, as by writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, came through the new language of secular rationalism, rather than the older language of traditional religion. But Paine, unlike Rousseau and other philosophers, wrote in the everyday language of working people. He drew from their experiences. And he was the first writer to extend political debate beyond the refined salons to the taverns. He hated the erudite, florid prose of philosophers such as Edmund Burke, calling that type of philosophical and academic language “Bastilles of the word.” He saw liberty as being intimately connected with language. And he knew that those who seek to monopolize power always retreat into arcane language that is inaccessible to the masses. Paine’s clarity will have to be replicated. We too will have to invent a new language. We will have to articulate our reality through communitarianism in an age of diminishing resources rather than the language of capitalism. And we will have to do this in a form that is accessible. Foner cites this as one of Paine’s most important achievements.

Paine was one of the creators of this secular language of

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revolution, a language in which timeless discontents, millennial aspirations and popular traditions were expressed in a strikingly new vocabulary. The very slogans and rallying cries we associate with the revolutions of the late eighteenth century come from Paine's writings: "rights of man," "age of reason," "age of revolution" and "the times that try men's souls." Paine helped to transform the meaning of the key words of political discourse. In *Common Sense* he was among the first writers to use "republic" in a positive rather than derogatory sense; in *Rights of Man* he abandoned the old classical definition of "democracy," as a state where each citizen participated directly in government, and created its far broader, far more favorable modern meaning. Even the word "revolution" was transformed in his writing, from a term derived from the motion of planets and implying a cyclical view of history to one signifying vast and irreversible social and political change.

Paine also understood what despotic regimes do to the soul. Despotic regimes—and here the corporate state serves as a contemporary example—make war on reason and rational thought. They circumscribe free speech and free assembly. They marginalize and silence critics. They make all institutions subservient to despotism, or in our case corporate power. They employ relentless propaganda to rob people of the language to describe their daily reality. They render them politically alienated. Those who live under despotic regimes, Paine noted, finally lose the ability to communicate their most basic concerns and grievances. And this suppression, Paine understood, has consequences. "Let men communicate their thoughts with freedom," Paine wrote, "and their indignation fly off like a fire spread on the surface; like gunpowder scattered, they kindle, they communicate; but the explosion is neither loud nor dangerous—keep them under restraint, it is subterranean fire, whose agitation is unseen till it bursts into earthquake or volcano." Finally, Paine understood that war is always the preferred activity of despotic states, for, as he wrote, war is essentially "the art of conquering at home."

Paine, who refused to profit off his writings, suffered for his courage. When he returned to England, where he wrote *Rights of Man*, he was persecuted, as he would be later in France and in America upon his return. John Keane in his *Tom Paine: A Political Life* describes some of what Paine endured as a radical in late 18th century England.

Government spies tailed him constantly on London's streets, sending back a stream of reports to the Home Secretary's office. Those parts of the press that functioned as government mouthpieces pelted him with abuse. "It is earnestly recommended to Mad Tom," snarled the *Times*, "that he should embark for France, and there be naturalized into the regular confusion of a democracy." Broadsheets containing "intercepted correspondence from Satan to Citizen Paine" pictured him as a three-hearted, fire-breathing monster, named "Tom Stich." Open letters, often identically worded but signed with different pen names, were circulated through taverns and alehouses. "Brother Weavers and Artificers," thundered "a gentleman" to the inhabitants of Manchester and Salford, "Do not let us be humbugged by Mr. Paine, who tells us a great many Truths, in his book, in order to shove off his Lies." Dozens of sermons and satires directed at Paine were

published, many of them written anonymously, for commoners, by upper-class foes masquerading as commoners.

The power of Paine, as in the case of Orwell or Baldwin, was that he refused to be anyone's propagandist. He may have embraced the American Revolution, as he embraced the French Revolution, but he was a fierce abolitionist and a foe of the use of terror as a political tool, a stance for which he was eventually imprisoned in revolutionary France. He asked the American revolutionaries "with what consistency, or decency" they "could complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousand in slavery." He stood up in the National Convention in France, where he was one of two foreigners allowed to be elected and to sit as a delegate, to denounce the calls in the chamber to execute the king, Louis XVI. "He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression," Paine said. "For if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself." Unchecked legislatures, he warned, could be as despotic as unchecked monarchs. He hated the pomp and arrogance of power and privilege, retaining his loyalty to the working class in which he was raised. "High sounding names" like "My Lord", he wrote, serve only to "overawe the superstitious vulgar" and make them "admire in the great, the vices they would honestly condemn in themselves." He ridiculed the divine right of kings. The British monarchy, which traced itself back seven centuries to William the Conqueror, had, he wrote, been founded by "a French bastard landing with armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives." And he detested the superstition and power of religious dogma, equating Christian belief with Greek mythology. "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit," he wrote. Paine posited that the "virtuous people" would smash the windows of the Christian God if he lived on earth.

His unrelenting commitment to truth and justice, along with his eternal rebelliousness, saw him later vilified by the leaders of the new American republic, who had no interest in the egalitarian society championed by Paine. Paine attacked former revolutionaries such as George Washington in the United States and Maximilien Robespierre in France who abused power in the name of "the people." He was driven out of England by the government of William Pitt and later, after nearly a year in prison, was ousted from Jacobin France. He was, by that time, an old man, and even his former champions, in well-orchestrated smear campaigns, routinely denounced him for his religious and political radicalism. The popular press in America dismissed him: he was "the drunken infidel." But Paine never veered from the proposition that liberty meant the liberty to speak the truth even if no one wanted to hear it. He died, largely forgotten, in New York City. Six people were at his burial. Two of them were black.

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