

Agrarian Justice: Thomas Paine's Last Essay

Address to Cleveland Philosophical Club by Dr. D. A. Rickards

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Today is the 276th anniversary of the birthday of Thomas Paine, one of the most extraordinary people that the world has ever known, and, as of 2013, he hasn't lost his edge.

Whenever something unusual occurred during Paine's lifetime which took his interest or aroused his ire, he would respond by writing a letter, or a pamphlet, or a book about it. Before I go into any detail let me start with a brief biographical sketch.

Two hundred and seventy six years ago today, a child, Thomas Paine was born in Thetford, England. A little town 75 miles north east of London with a population of 2000 of which 21 were eligible to vote. His mother, Frances, was an Anglican, age 40, and his Father, a Quaker, was 29.

Thomas' parents were so poor that they could not afford to send him to school to be a lawyer, a doctor, or a member of the clergy. The Grammar school was free but they had to borrow from a family member to buy his books, in order to teach him until he was 12 years old. At this time, he dropped out and became apprenticed to learn a craft.

Thomas chose his father's trade and agreed to work from that time on as a corset-maker – not the most romantic job - and one which was to haunt him all his life. He was often lampooned in cartoons depicting him as a corset maker from England. {Cartoon}

The Pains lived in poor circumstances in a part of town called Gallows Hill, from which they could constantly see the victims of capital punishment swinging for their crimes. Remember that in those days, stealing a loaf of bread was a capital crime! So was blasphemy! Young Tom also used to accompany his father to Quaker meetings on Cage Lane, so called because it was where the cage, pillory, and stocks for the condemned were kept. During the meetings, they could hear the moans and screams of the criminals being tormented on public display. This how young Tom learned about crime and punishment.

When he was 16 years old Paine ran away to try and enlist with a privateer. You must understand that a privateer is another name for buccaneer, which means a legally-approved pirate with a letter of marque. Such ships were serving king and country. Paine's father went to the docks and rescued his son and lucky he did! Because the vessel he was to sail on was attacked by a French privateer and was sunk and only 17 crewmen survived. More than 150, including the captain, died. Joseph could not persuade Thomas to return to the family home in Thetford, but helped him acquire a job

under another master craftsman in Covent Garden in London famous for its brothels! Thomas soon returned to the docks and signed on with the “King of Prussia”. He sailed in January and returned in August, having captured the treasure of eight enemy vessels. He made at least £30 in commissions, about \$5,000 today. He could now afford to stay in London and buy some decent clothes.

London was exciting to Paine, because it was alive with lectures and intellectuals and the Age of Enlightenment was taking off. During this time he married, but unfortunately his wife died at the end of her first pregnancy

Paine remarried, this time to a tobacconist’s daughter. He worked in and managed the tobacconist’s shop, but it lost money and went out of business. After 18 months, the couple decided to separate. Paine got a new job as an excise man (tax collector) but his heart was not in it. The pay was poor, but you could do quite well if you allowed your customers to bribe you. Paine was dismissed and succeeded in defending himself and getting his job back. His fellow excise men asked him to write an appeal to the government to raise their salaries. This he did, and a copy of his appeal was sent to every member of Parliament. It was elegant but it was turned down and this time he was dismissed for good.

The British Government in 1700’s started what became known as “The Enclosure Act.” All that was needed was for a landowner to ask his Member of Parliament (MP) to approve of building a fence around your property. It sounded harmless enough, but when it was done, there was little or no common ground left for the average man to hunt or graze his sheep or livestock. There had always been acres of Commons on which animals could graze and this Act was one more blow to the people of Thetford and other small towns. I give you all this background material to reacquaint you with our subject, a 37-year-old man who was unsuccessful in everything he tried to do.

One day in 1774, after a lecture at one of the coffeehouses, Paine met an amazing man—probably one of his heroes—Benjamin Franklin. The two of them got along very well. So much so that Franklin suggested that Paine could do well if he went to the American Colonies. Franklin supplied him with contacts with and a letter of recommendation! What a break! The voyage was perilous and several of the passengers died en route. Paine and the Captain were stricken with typhus and became comatose. He was unaware when the boat arrived in Philadelphia. He was carried off on a stretcher and took six weeks to revive. Fortunately Franklin had written to his son and his son-in-law and they had arranged to look after him.

Paine added an “e” to the end of his surname, and took to the new world with ease. He obtained a job and soon was the editor of a new magazine, the Pennsylvania Gazette. This enabled him to meet many people and to write a series of editorials about the upcoming conflict with England. He made friends with Dr. Benjamin Rush, who admired Paine’s views about abolishing Slavery and his writing skills and persuaded him to write the pamphlet which became known as “Common Sense”. The first edition of the pamphlet, published anonymously in January of 1776, was Paine’s reaction to the

British treatment of their American colonies. It was so explosive that it started the revolution. In it Paine said, "...we have every opportunity...to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again..."[P. 90 C.S.] These kind of comments made him extremely popular but they also made him some powerful enemies!. Had the British caught him he would certainly have been hanged but if we had lost the war so would all the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

After the war began, Paine wrote a series of 14 inspirational articles which he called "The American Crisis." It started with the now famous words: "These are the times that try men's souls." The second one then used the term "The United States of America" which he claimed "would one day sound as important as the "Kingdom of Great Britain." Paine was correct! That was the first time the term United States of America had ever been used!

After the war Paine read a book "Reflections on the Revolution in France." It was written by his old English friend and American supporter, Edmund Burke. The book condemned the French Revolution and all those connected with it. Without at first knowing that Burke had been twice richly rewarded for writing this propaganda, Paine was mortified when he saw what his friend had done. He quickly wrote a response and called it "The Rights of Man, Part one"...Later, Part two. In it, Paine opposed hereditary rule. He also made a complete analysis of a progressive income tax plus a plan to house and re-educate the unemployed and the poor. At one point he was moved to say, "Independence is my happiness, and I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good." The workers of many countries went wild about the book and even Thomas Jefferson proclaimed that "he hoped it would do for England what "Common Sense" had done for America!" The British Crown did not take kindly to the Paine's ideas, tried him in absentia, and condemned him to death for treason and seditious libel. He managed to escape before his trial and go to France. Here he was given an honorary citizenship and elected to the National Assembly by four different departments (provinces)! Paine was very popular with the French until he spoke out and opposed killing Louis XVI. He wanted to see the monarchy destroyed but the man and his family spared. He proposed banishing them to America! He recalled how much the King and the French Government had helped the American revolutionaries with arms and men and gold. Paine had previously gone to France at his own expense with his friend 26 year old John Laurens and arranged for arms and a loan of four million livres, which he succeeded in bringing back to America.

Meanwhile, in France, times and attitudes had changed and the Reign of Terror had begun. Paine found himself accused of being an English spy and was locked up in Luxemburg prison, awaiting a trip to the guillotine! He asked for and received writing materials with which he wrote his lengthy critique of the Bible and organized religion. He did it all from memory! Why did he do it? Because, as he wrote to Samuel Adams, "he wanted to stop the spread of Atheism during the French Revolution!" Remember Paine was originally a Quaker and a lifelong Deist!

As you know, Paine missed his appointment with the executioner by sheer luck and his book, *The Age of Reason* in 4 parts was first published in 1791, and was roundly condemned by most of his previous supporters. Of course Jefferson liked it but Paine's closest friend Benjamin Franklin had begged him not to publish it when he heard what it was to be about because he sensed that the public was not ready for it. Franklin was right!

This paper which represents Paine's fifth and final work concerns a part of his life that is not usually well-known and discussed -- his last brilliant essay, written in 1795 and published two years later, called "Agrarian Justice". First of all, let's have a few definitions: The word "agrarian" has two common meanings; the first refers to a social philosophy that values rural society as superior to urban society. The second means political proposals for land redistribution from the rich to the poor. This is common in many countries dating back to Rome in 133 BCE. It is also known as "agrarian reform". In countries where people believed in Confucianism, the farmer was considered the most productive member of the social order but merchants were not held in high esteem.

The next thing is to define why Paine used the word justice to describe his feelings. "It is justice, and not charity, that is the principle of the plan" (A G p. 26) In all great cases, it is necessary to have a principle more universally active than charity and, with respect to justice, it ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not (ibid)

Thomas Paine's philosophy proposed that in the state of Nature, the earth in its' natural unalienable state "was the common property of the human race"

Agrarian Justice was proposed to the French government. It was quite similar to the ideas of the American Henry George (1839 – 1897) and his single tax movement which came 100 years later. George was a kind of socialist and it had been said that Paine's Agrarian Justice was his inspiration. A point of interest was the popular parlor game made up by George's followers, called the Landlord's Game. These days it is known as "Monopoly"!

The Bishop of Llandaff Richard Watson, had written a book called "Apology for Christianity" in reply to Paine's *Age of Reason* and in it he referred to a famous sermon, "the Wisdom and Goodness of God in having made Both rich and poor" Paine denied that God made both rich and poor, declaring " He made only male and female (Genesis 5:2) and gave them the earth for their inheritance".(AJ) Reading the Bishop's words were all that Paine needed to hear.

Paine begins his essay by addressing the legislature of the French Republic, "The plan contained in this work is not adapted for any particular country alone: the principle on which it is based is general. But as the rights of man are a new study in this world, one needing protection from priestly imposture, and the insolence of oppressions too-long established, I have thought it right to place this little work under your safe-guard.

“There are two kinds of property, one, natural property—that which comes to us from the creator of the universe—such as earth, air, water, and second, artificial or acquired property, the invention of men. Equality of natural property is the subject of this little essay. Every individual in the world is born therein with legitimate claims on a certain kind of property or its equivalent.

“Poverty, is a thing created by civilized life. It exists not in the natural state. On the other hand, the natural state is without those advantages which flow from agriculture, arts, science and manufactures.

“The life of an Indian of North America is a continual holiday, compared with the poor of Europe; and, on the other hand it appears to be abject when compared to the rich. Civilization...has operated two ways: to make one part of society more affluent and the other more wretched...the first principle of civilization ought to have been, and ought still to be, that the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period.

“Every proprietor, cultivated lands, owes to the community a *ground-rent* (for I know of no better term to express the idea) for the land which he holds; and it is from this ground-rent that the fund proposed in this plan is to issue...the idea of landed property commenced with cultivation, there was no such thing as landed property before that time. It could not exist in the first state of man, that of hunters. It did not exist in the second state, that of shepherds: neither Abraham, Isaac, Jacob nor Job...were owners of land. Their property consisted in flocks and herds and they traveled with them from place to place.

“Nothing could be more unjust than agrarian law in a country improved by cultivation; for though every man as an inhabitant of the earth, is a joint proprietor...is its natural state, it does not follow that he is a joint proprietor of cultivated earth...I equally defend the right of the possessor to the part which is his.

“Cultivation is at least one of the greatest natural improvements ever made by human invention. It has given to created earth a tenfold value. But...it has produced the greatest evil. It has dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance, without providing for them...indemnification for that loss and...created a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before.

Paine continues, “I shall now proceed to the plan I have proposed...

“To create a national fund, out of which there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of 21 years, the sum of 15 pounds sterling, as compensation, in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property:

“And also, the sum of 10 pounds per annum during life, to every person now living, of the age of 50 years and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.

Paine goes on to explain that people who do not choose to receive it can throw it into the common fund. He takes 21 years as the epoch of maturity. He also assumes that 50 years was the lifespan of a working person.

“There are, in every country, a number of blind and lame persons totally incapable of earning a livelihood...the greater number of blind persons will be...above the age of 50 years, they will be provided for in that class. The remainder...under that age at the same rate of 10 pounds annually for each person.

Paine goes on to give an accounting of England’s population, of 7 ½ million people and the state of its Treasury in 1796 of 1.3 billion pounds.

“It is only by organizing civilization upon such principles”, writes Paine, “as to act like a system of pulleys that the whole weight of misery can be removed.

“It will immediately relieve...three classes of wretchedness—the blind, the lame, and the aged poor; and it will furnish the rising generation with means to prevent their becoming poor...it will do this without deranging or interfering with any national measures.

To understand what Thomas Paine was talking about you must have a clear idea of what he was going through in his life. The year was 1795 and he was living in Paris at that time as a guest of James Monroe. The French Revolution, at least the “Reign of Terror”, was over and the French were trying to come up with a solution of what to do with all of the land that they had recently acquired from the aristocracy. Paine’s solution is explained in his essay but in fact what he was proposing was a model for the first welfare state. “The plan”, said Paine, “should work for any country in the world.” As usual, the message was clearly understood in England and some of its early publishers went to jail!

Some people may claim that Tom Paine’s life was a failure but I agree with Robert Ingersoll that history will call it a success.

Addenda if time: The Maritime Compact, [first draft for the United Nations] The Xmas card to Pres. Jefferson in 1802 with the Louisiana Purchase proposal. The admiration by Napoleon Bonapart, and the Gutson Borglum sculpture in gold, Thomas Edison ‘s views of Paine as the inventor of Bridges and smokeless candles etc.,etc.etc..