

Paine and the Right of Revolution

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**Prepared for presentation at the Thomas Paine: Common Sense for the
Modern Era Symposium, San Diego, October 21-22, 2005.**

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“When France shall be surrounded with revolutions, she will be in peace and safety, and her taxes, as well as those of Germany, will consequently become less.”

-Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*

Few names are as strongly associated with radicalism and revolution as Thomas Paine's. John Adams, his contemporary and political adversary, identified Paine as the most influential man of the late eighteenth century,¹ and in more than two centuries his reputation has not changed. Today as always, Paine is hailed by the left—and just as strongly castigated by the right—as apologist for revolution, symbol of Enlightenment, champion of eternal progress, and committed opponent of backward-looking, Burkean conservatives. His extreme reaction against Edmund Burke's traditionalism, his eagerness to break with the past, and his insistence that generations may not be bound by their ancestors have enshrined Paine in the canon of political radicalism.

But to what extent was Paine's radicalism actually grounded in a general theory of continual progress—and to what extent was it merely a reaction to particular historical circumstances of oppression? Was Paine's assertion of the rights of societies and generations to govern themselves genuine—or was he merely opening the theoretical door for the establishment of a new political program, a new form of government, which when established would be, with his blessing, even more binding on “posterity” than the one which preceded it?

¹ Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, xii. David Freeman Hawke points out that Adams meant the statement as an insult. Hawke, *Paine*, 7.

Most Paine scholars take his assertion of the right to generational self-determination at face value.² But a closer examination of Paine’s political theory reveals a thoroughly different story. His assertion that “Every age and generation is, and must be...free to act for itself in all cases”³ was not, in fact, a central tenet of Paine’s thought, but rather a byproduct of the need to answer the conservatives’ (and particularly Burke’s) contention that republicanism was proscribed by national tradition. Indeed, consistently throughout his career, from *Common Sense* to *Rights of Man* and beyond, Paine was perfectly willing to allow generations to bind their posterity—indeed he demanded it—as long as they prescribed the proper form of government, namely republican representative democracy. Paine did not advocate, as Karl Marx would later term it, a “ruthless critique of everything existing,” but rather a particular political program; his call was not for revolution, but for *a* revolution of enlightenment and rationality beyond which there should—indeed *could*—be no further progress. And while Paine’s program retains its progressive character even to this day, the radical and revolutionary vision for which he is justly famous transforms, after enlightenment, into a surprisingly *conservative* vision nearly as strong, and as eloquent, as Burke’s. This transformation, as it manifests itself in Paine’s thought, sheds light on a fundamental underlying tension in present-day progressive political philosophy. Understanding how and why that tension arises, and how Paine is able to overcome it, may enable us to understand—and to move beyond—

² See, especially, Howard Penniman’s 1943 article, “Thomas Paine—Democrat,” and Alfred Owen Aldridge’s seminal biography *Man of Reason: The Life of Thomas Paine*. Also see A.J. Ayer’s more recent biography, *Thomas Paine*, and Gregory Claey’s *Thomas Paine: Social and political thought*. (Ayer, however, does recognize the contradiction between Paine’s utilitarian defense of the republic and his rights-based defense, as we will see below. Ayer, 102.)

³ Paine, *Rights of Man* (1984 Penguin edition, hereafter ROM), 41. Also see Paine, *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*, in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner, 2: 576. (All quotations from Paine, except from *Rights of Man*, *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*, are from Volume 2 of *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, unless otherwise noted.)

the left's current difficulty to sustain itself as a united political front. Indeed, I contend that it is *because* of Paine's 'conservatism,' not in spite of it, that he has managed to remain a hero for progressives and radical movements, from his own time to ours.

“Revolution and Republicanism”

Paine's disagreement with Burke over the right of generational self-determination is pivotal, at least ostensibly, to the Burke-Paine exchange; at least one scholar considers it “Paine's most important initial disagreement with Burke.”⁴ A.J. Ayer, in his assessment of the debate, goes even further in defense of Paine's position:

I do not see this as a serious dispute. Burke's was an argument *ad hominem*. He was concerned to show that Dr Price and his friends were misrepresenting the political intentions of those who brought about the English revolution of 1688, if they treated them as a precedent for the overthrow of the French monarchy more than a hundred years later. Even Burke would not...have denied that something describable as consent, on the part of those who comply with it, is necessary for a law to remain effectively in operation.⁵

Even Burke, Ayer concludes, would agree that generations cannot be wholly bound by their ancestors; his assertion to the contrary is merely a byproduct of his own ulterior motives. Ayer may of course be right; it is not my intent here to examine this claim with regard to Burke. What is noteworthy, however, is that while Ayer easily identifies the underlying motivations behind Burke's political theory, he is unable to recognize the existence of similarly underlying motives within Paine. Like the majority of Paine scholars, Ayer is taken in by the forcefulness and clarity of Paine's argument; he quickly

⁴ Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 72.

⁵ A.J. Ayer, *Thomas Paine*, 74.

concedes the existence of the right to generational self-determination, without detecting Paine's willingness to cast aside that right once the republic is firmly in place.

Paine dedicated his career first and foremost, not to promoting the right of self-governance, but rather to the advancement of a specific political program—republicanism and representative democracy, the inevitable byproduct of a constitution grounded in “reason.”⁶ “It was to bring forward and establish the representative system of Government,” he wrote near the end of his life, “that was the leading principle with me in writing that work (*Common Sense*), and all my other works during the progress of the revolution. And I followed the same principle in writing the *Rights of Man*, in England.”⁷ The near-total lack of a republican tradition in European government, coupled with the longstanding tradition of anti-republican monarchical government in England and France, led Paine inexorably to attack tradition as a necessary or sufficient justification for law or source of government's legitimacy. “That which a whole nation chooses to do,” he asserts, “it has a right to do,” whether or not there is any sort of historical precedent.⁸ But the attack on tradition is secondary to, and largely a consequence of, Paine's advocacy of republican government.

To be sure, Paine's assertion of the right to self-governance is forceful and nearly consistent (though it remains largely in the background of his writings prior to Burke). In *Common Sense* he equates the binding of one's forebears to hereditary monarchy with Adam's binding his forebears to sinfulness.⁹ Generations “have no power to give away

⁶ ROM, 69. A government “of reason” will necessarily be one based on “The common interest of society, and the common rights of man.”

⁷ *To the Honorable Senate of the United States*, 1491. Also see Gary Kates, “From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*,” 570.

⁸ ROM, 42.

⁹ *Common Sense* (1997 Dover edition), 14.

the right of posterity,” Paine argues, “and though they might say ‘We choose you for *our* head,’ they could not, without manifest injustice to their children, say ‘that your children and your children’s children shall reign over *ours* for ever.’”¹⁰ In the opening paragraphs to *The Crisis* he makes his point even more strongly: “Britain...has declared that she has a right...‘to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,’ and if being *bound in that manner*, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth.”¹¹

The affirmation of the right to self-determination comes to the forefront in *Rights of Man*, as Paine directly confronts the doctrine, laid out by Burke, that the social contract connects “those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born,”¹² and thus binds all present and future generations to monarchic institutions. In order to justify the “general revolution” he envisions,¹³ Paine must deflate this argument; and in *Rights of Man* he devotes himself to the task with remarkable literary flair. Paine presents a spirited and memorable defense of the equal right of all generations to choose their own governments: “Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it....Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow.”¹⁴ Paine continues the argument, in characteristically glowing language, in his *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*: “Time with respect to principles is an eternal NOW...if we find the wrong in existence as soon as we begin to live, that is the point of time at which it begins to us; and our right to resist it is the same as if it never existed before.”¹⁵ Characterizing

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ *The Crisis*, Number I. In *Life and Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Daniel Edwin Wheeler, 3:1. (All citations from *The Crisis* are from this anthology.)

¹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1987 Hackett edition, ed. J.G.A. Pocock), 85.

¹³ ROM, 266.

¹⁴ Ibid., 41-2.

¹⁵ *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*, 574.

Burke's position as a sort of slavery to the past, Paine concludes: "The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies....to assume such a right is treason against the right of posterity."¹⁶

Having cleared the way for revolution in thought, Paine proceeds to his central argument: his call for a new government based on principles of reason, rationality and enlightenment. The existing monarchical governments "erect themselves on the (base of) Ignorance" and are by nature counter to reason; "the old Governments," Paine argues, "are on a construction that excludes knowledge as well as happiness."¹⁷ Based on hereditary succession rather than merit, monarchies and aristocracies ascribe equal authority to ignorant and bad kings as to wise and good ones; thus "The hereditary system...is as repugnant to human wisdom, as to human right; and is as absurd, as it is unjust" (ROM, 176).

The revolution that eliminates these archaic governments once and for all, Paine contends, will establish in their place governments—republics—based on the Enlightenment principles of reason and rationality. "There are two ways of governing mankind," Paine wrote. "First, By keeping them ignorant. Secondly, By making them wise. The former was and is the custom of the old world. The latter of the new."¹⁸ Revolution sought enlightenment—its ultimate purpose was "to instruct"—in order "to make men as wise as possible, so that their knowledge being complete, they may be *rationaly* governed."¹⁹ Once the revolution is complete, prejudice, the "spider of the mind" and the one remaining obstacle to the triumph of Enlightenment rationality, will

¹⁶ Ibid., 575-7.

¹⁷ ROM, 140, 144.

¹⁸ Paine, *A Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania on the Present Situation of Their Affairs*, 290. Also see Jack P. Greene, "Paine, America, and the 'Modernization' of Political Consciousness," 81.

inevitably fall. Paine observes this process in the minds of Americans in the wake of their victory over England: “Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used....every corner of the mind is swept of its cobwebs, poison and dust, and made fit for the reception of generous happiness.”²⁰ Enlightenment and republicanism go hand in hand, for Paine, and lead inevitably to the representative government which he advocated above all else. The revolutionary triumph of Reason over Ignorance would open the door to the establishment of republican representative government, and by extension to the ultimate liberation of the people from their tyrannical kings and lords. What was at stake was no less than the freedom of humankind.²¹ The one thing that separated freedom and slavery, Paine argued, was “that all *hereditary government over a people is...a species of slavery, and representative government is freedom.*”²²

The creation of a representative republic based on Enlightenment principles of reason, rationality, liberty and equality, however, would require a revolution of unprecedented magnitude against centuries of monarchical tradition. (Burke was absolutely correct that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was no model; indeed that revolution was “already on the wane, eclipsed by the enlarging orb of reason, and the

¹⁹ *Dissertation on First Principles*, 587; *A Serious Address*, 290.

²⁰ *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, 242-3.

²¹ Indeed the very act of writing, for Paine, was an effort to enlighten ordinary citizens. As many Paine scholars, notably David Freeman Hawke and Eric Foner, have pointed out, “the medium was of one piece with the message.” Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 86. Paine wrote “to educate humankind—to bring all people to a higher level of understanding and rationality”; he wrote in common language for the common man, so that everyone, rich, poor, educated and uneducated alike, might be “enlightened.” Gordon Schochet, “Thomas Paine and the (Modern) Concept of Rights,” 9. Paine saw his works as red pills of liberation; each new mind freed was another irreversible step toward the general revolution of reason and republicanism that would bring “freedom and happiness to all nations.” ROM, 273.

luminous revolutions of America and France.”²³) It is for this reason that Paine declared the absolute and equal right of every generation to govern itself freely, wholly unbound by the decisions of its predecessors—the right, that is, to free itself from the yoke of its past and to conduct itself as it wishes, whether or not this requires “revolutionary” change. “There never did,” Paine declares in *Rights of Man*, “there never will, and there never can exist a parliament, or any description of men, or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controlling posterity to the ‘end of time,’ or of commanding for ever how the world shall be governed, or who shall govern it.”²⁴

Such a right, Paine believed, was a mere extension of the general principles of Enlightenment: freedom over slavery, reason over ignorance, the present and future over the past. What Paine apparently failed to recognize, however, was that the triumph of Enlightenment and the creation of the republic would inevitably bring his republican ideal into conflict with his assertion of the right to generational self-determination. And when that moment came, Paine steadfastly continued to defend “reason” and the republic, unaware of the resulting collapse (by his own reasoning) of the right, or even the possibility, of any kind of revolution.

The Conservative Moment

Eric Foner characterizes the Burke-Paine debate as “the classic confrontation between...order and revolution,” describing Paine as the defender of “revolution and

²² ROM, 201.

²³ *Ibid.*, 91.

republicanism.”²⁵ And in his time, of course, he was, fighting with his pen for a general revolution that would enlighten the world and usher in a new and glorious age of republicanism in Europe. But the creation of the republic brings these two principles into inevitable conflict: once the *republic* becomes the establishment, it becomes impossible to defend revolution without rejecting republicanism—and equally impossible to defend the republic without opposing the right of the people to rebel against it. Faced, if only subconsciously, with this choice, Paine sides with the republic, quickly dropping the “natural right” of self-determination and the natural equality of generations. When describing post-Enlightenment, republican societies, Paine shifts subtly from angry revolutionary to traditionalist conservative, praising the glory—and the permanence—of the new republics in language almost identical to Burke’s.

“Every age and generation,” Paine declared in *Rights of Man*, “must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it.”²⁶ But Enlightenment, once established, cannot be rescinded; attempting to counter it would be, in Paine’s words, like “darkness attempting to illuminate light.”²⁷ Enlightenment is irreversible; the revolution of reason effectively precludes any possibility of returning to pre-Enlightenment forms of society. Its inevitable effects, Paine asserts, are already apparent in America, less than two decades removed from its own enlightenment: “If I ask a man in America, if he wants a King? he retorts, and asks me if I take him for an idiot?”²⁸ Paine makes the point even more directly in the *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*: “Repeated experience has shown, not only the impracticability of conquering America,

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 214.

²⁶ ROM, 41.

²⁷ Ibid., 45.

but the still higher impossibility of conquering her mind, or recalling her back to her former condition of thinking.”²⁹

The permanent effects of enlightenment on societies are not limited to Americans alone. “(T)he iron is becoming hot all over Europe,” Paine declared excitedly. “The insulted German and the enslaved Spaniard, the Russ and the Pole, are beginning to think. The present age will hereafter merit to be called the Age of Reason, and the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world.”³⁰ Paine, of course, would celebrate the triumph of Enlightenment and republicanism (which for him went hand in hand) over ignorance and monarchy, and insist that society never relapse to its old ways. But for Paine the effects of enlightenment were even more inescapably permanent. Once enlightened, once liberated from the slavery of ignorance and monarchy, society, Paine argued, *can never* relapse; it is *humanly impossible*.

Ignorance is of a peculiar nature: and once dispelled, and it is impossible to re-establish it. It is not originally a thing of itself; but is only the absence of knowledge; and though man may be *kept* ignorant, he cannot be *made* ignorant.... Those who talk of a counter-revolution in France, show how little they understand of man. There does not exist in the compass of language, an arrangement of words to express so much as the means of effecting a counter-revolution. The means must be an obliteration of knowledge; and it has never yet been discovered, how to make man *unknow* his knowledge, or *unthink* his thoughts.³¹

Thus for Paine, a second revolution against Enlightenment and the republic would not only be objectionable, but also literally *impossible*. Enlightenment, Paine argued (and he of course is not the only one), is valuable in large part because it opens minds, liberates thought from the restraints of tradition and revealed religion. But

²⁸ Ibid., 125.

²⁹ *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, 254.

³⁰ ROM, 268.

³¹ Ibid., 118-9.

Enlightenment also *closes off* avenues of thought, as surely as any other worldview—and perhaps even more so if, as Paine himself implies, it places an impenetrable psychological block on any sort of premodern mindset. This is, in a sense, an even more conservative position than that of Burke, who at least recognized the possibility of a revolution against traditional monarchical forms of government. And while the exclusion of traditionalism, provincialism, fundamentalism, and other premodern notions is certainly not undesirable, it nevertheless contradicts Paine’s oft-repeated assertion that no generation may bind its posterity, in any way or for any time. For Paine, the revolution of reason would be the last revolution, spreading the irresistible light of republicanism across Europe, opening the door to a new society that would remain triumphant “a thousand years hence.”³² The implication is clear, though Paine may not have recognized it: if Enlightenment is irreversible, then the generation that undertakes the revolution of reason and establishes the republic in fact *binds its posterity to it*. The right of generations to “act for themselves” collapses; even if future generations remain theoretically “free” to revolt against the republic, they will have been mentally incapacitated, by the acts of their ancestors, from doing so.

And this raises a further point, even more important from a twenty-first century perspective: if the republic is to remain in place “a thousand years hence,” then Paine’s revolution—again, by his own reasoning—closes off, not only the possibility of reactionary, premodern counter-revolutions, but also progressive, postmodern revolutions *beyond* Enlightenment. Representative, republican political institutions hold their ground not only against attempts to bring back the *ancien regime*, but also against attempts to progress beyond them. The triumph, in the human psyche, of Enlightenment, the

³² Ibid., 118.

scientific method, and (objective) knowledge not only closes off the possibility of returning to the age of “darkness,” but also closes off the possibility of *critique*, of challenging the scientific method and objective reason Paine takes for granted. Even if we allow for the possibility, such critique would be illegitimate and highly objectionable. For Paine, revolution and criticism are necessary only insofar as they are necessary to bring about the republic; there is much less need for criticism once republican institutions are established. The republican revolution, Paine concludes, binds future generations, not only from reverting to premodern institutions and worldviews, but also from progressing to more radical and postmodern worldviews. The purpose of the revolution, after all, was not to criticize but “to instruct”—not to challenge existing institutions, but to reveal an objective *truth* and found new institutions (objective, and therefore *permanent*) upon it.

If Paine does recognize this implication, he is remarkably unconcerned by it. Indeed, for all his declarations that generations have no right to bind their posterity, Paine is surprisingly tolerant, even praiseful, of generations who bind their posterity to the republic. “Can we but leave posterity with a settled form of government,” he laments in *Common Sense*, “an independant (sic) constitution of its own, the purchase at any price will be cheap.”³³ In the *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* he characterizes the creation of the republic in America as “not a temporary good for the present race only, but a continued good to all posterity.”³⁴ But it is in *Rights of Man* that Paine drops all pretense, if only briefly, and speaks of the future of the republic in almost Burkean overtones: “A thousand years hence, those who shall live in America or in France, will look back with

³³ *Common Sense*, 34.

³⁴ *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, 238.

contemplative pride on the origin of their governments, and say, *This was the work of our glorious ancestors!*”³⁵

Even if it were possible for future generations to carry out a revolution against the enlightened republic, Paine would find little for which to praise it. “He that rebels against reason,” Paine declares in *The Crisis, Number II*, “is a real rebel.” In contrast, “he that in defense of reason, rebels against tyranny, has a better title to ‘*Defender of the Faith*,’ than George III.”³⁶ Revolution is only praiseworthy, for Paine, if it attempts to advance the cause of “reason” and the republic; attempts (*any* attempts—Paine will not distinguish progressive from reactionary) to revolt against republican institutions and principles are to be condemned. In his *Dissertations on Government* Paine is even more overt: “there cannot, because there ought not to, be any deviation” from the principles (“right and justice”) on which the republic is properly based; “and whenever any deviation appears, there is a kind of stepping out of the republican principle, and an approach toward the despotic one.”³⁷ In short, any deviation—*any* deviation—from republican principles constitutes a move towards tyranny. The republic, grounded in reason and directed toward the public good, is the only acceptable principle on which government may be legitimately based; and “Every government that does not act on the principle of a *Republic*...is not a good government.”³⁸ And by extension, representative government, the particular form that arises out of reason³⁹ (which in turn is the

³⁵ *Rights of Man*, 118. Compare Burke: “Our people will find employment enough for a truly patriotic, free, and independent spirit in guarding what they possess from violation. I would not exclude alteration neither, but even when I changed, it should be to preserve. I should be led to my remedy by a great grievance. In what I did, I should follow the example of our ancestors.” *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 217.

³⁶ *The Crisis, Number II*, 17.

³⁷ *Dissertations on Government; the Affairs of the Bank; and Paper Money*, 372.

³⁸ ROM, 178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 140. “Forms grow out of principles,” Paine contends (ROM, 92), and representative government is “the only system of government consistent with (the republican) principle, where simple democracy is

foundation of the republic⁴⁰), is the only acceptable form of government as well. For Paine, Jack Fruchtman, Jr., observes, “the highest form of innovation was a democratic republican constitution.”⁴¹ Beyond the republic there could be no further progress: every step away from the republic, in any direction, is *by nature* a step towards tyranny; and the right of society to “act for itself” ends where the republic begins—either because humanity is wrong to resist it, or psychologically incapable of resisting.

For this reason, “Paine called for no fundamental changes in the forms of government once a republic had been established.”⁴² To be sure, Paine allowed for the possibility of reform, even substantial reform. In *Dissertation on First Principles* he maintained that “Representative government is not confined to any one particular form,”⁴³ and to that end he proposed a constitutional convention be held every seven years to revise, even to scrap and rewrite, the current constitution.⁴⁴ Even more radically, he proposed that “all laws and acts should cease of themselves in thirty years,” so as to ensure that no generation would be bound, to any degree, by the acts of their predecessors.⁴⁵ But even these safeguards are ultimately superficial, for while future generations may have the ability to pass their own laws and write their own constitutions, they are still inescapably bound, by the fundamental revolutionary act of their ancestors, to Enlightenment principles of universal reason, right and justice, to the republican

impracticable.” *Dissertation on First Principles*, 584. Later in *Rights of Man*, Paine methodically eliminates all other forms of government as ultimately incompatible with republican principles (or, in the case of democracy, incompatible with the modern large state), leaving representative government as the only acceptable form. ROM, 179-80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴¹ Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 143.

⁴² Hawke, *Paine*, 107.

⁴³ *Dissertation on First Principles*, 585.

⁴⁴ ROM, 187. Also see, e.g., Penniman, “Thomas Paine—Democrat,” 258.

principle, and to representative institutions of government. Beyond these strict limits future generations could not legitimately go—even if it were possible, *and even if they so desired*. Paine’s posterity would be severely limited: technically free to write new constitutions but bound in practice to representative democracy, they would be able to pursue reform, but not to reshape fundamental institutions or refound government on alternative, anti- or non-republican, principles. After the revolution and the creation of the republic, then, Paine’s attitude toward change becomes virtually indistinguishable from Burke’s: “I would not exclude alteration...but even when I changed, it should be to preserve” the fundamental principles of the existing government.⁴⁶

Certainly it is true that Paine continued to maintain the abstract “right” of future generations to rebel, even if he personally opposed such a rebellion.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in practical terms, for Paine, this “right” existed only on paper. Paine rarely, if ever, wavered from his insistence on the irresistibility and inescapability of Enlightenment; even if future generations did retain the right to resist the republic, their very nature as humans would preclude the very possibility. Moreover, Paine insisted, any step away from enlightenment and republicanism, *in any direction*, would be an illegitimate step toward an illegitimate and tyrannical form of government. “FREEDOM,” Paine boldly stated in the first paragraphs of *The Crisis*, was the end of government and the end of the revolution.⁴⁸ But true liberation, for Paine, was to be found only in the republic. To

⁴⁵ *Dissertations on Government; the Affairs of the Bank; and Paper Money*, 395. In *Rights of Man* Paine is slightly less radical, adopting the Lockean idea of tacit consent. *Rights of Man*, 44. Also see C.E. Merriam, Jr., “Thomas Paine’s Political Theories,” 394.

⁴⁶ Burke, cited above.

⁴⁷ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 152-5.

⁴⁸ *The Crisis*, 1.

resist the republic was to invite slavery⁴⁹; and thus the “freedom” of future generations to rebel against republican principles was fundamentally incompatible with true “freedom.”⁵⁰

In any event, Paine’s devoted advocacy of the right of revolution, as well as the right to self-determination, ended abruptly at the creation of the republic; thereafter, while continuing to maintain the abstract right of the people to rebel, his politics shift into a conservatism almost as strong as—and in some respects stronger than—Burke’s. This dedication to the republic above all else manifests itself on numerous occasions throughout Paine’s later (post-revolutionary) life—most notably in his unwillingness to support the Jacobins’ attempt to carry the French Revolution beyond its initial republican stages, an unwillingness that resulted in his imprisonment and near-execution—as well as throughout his work. In 1804 a dying Paine issued a stern remonstrance *To the French Inhabitants of Louisiana*, who had recently petitioned the U.S. government for the “right” to govern themselves by distinctly anti-republican principles (specifically, the petitioners wanted to continue importing slaves). Leaving aside, for the moment (though he would return to it later), the obvious injustice and hypocrisy of slavery, Paine denied, on purely theoretical grounds, the petitioners’ claim to have a “right” to reject the republic. “(Y)ou do not understand the principles and interest of a republic,” he asserted. “We have had

⁴⁹ Note the similarity to a more recent political thinker, who argued that any step away from classical liberal principles placed society on “the road to serfdom.” Unlike Paine, of course, Friedrich Hayek is almost universally recognized as a (modern-day) conservative. Paine’s extensive social program, detailed at the end of *Rights of Man*, places him in stark opposition to Hayek politically, but the two thinkers share an almost identical line of reasoning.

⁵⁰ Many scholars (see, especially, Fruchtmann, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 251-2) have noted Paine’s debt, particularly in Part 2 of *Rights of Man*, to Rousseau’s idea of the general will, but this more positive conception of liberty, complete with its implicit notion of future generations being “forced to be free,” certainly bears Rousseau’s mark as well. See Isaiah Berlin’s famous piece, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” reprinted in *Four Essays On Liberty*.

experience, and you have not.”⁵¹ The manner of governing the territory “is a matter that belongs to the *purchaser*...of Louisiana,” with which the inhabitants “have no right to interfere.”⁵² The petitioners’ concern with external government might be justified if the U.S. were a despotic power, Paine conceded, but not so that the U.S. is a republic. The principles of the republic, Paine concludes, outweigh any competing claim to self-determination (even notwithstanding the slavery question); and “as you become initiated into the principles and practise of the representative system of government, of which you have yet had no experience, you will participate more and more and finally be partakers of the whole.”⁵³ Again, Paine writes off the petitioners’ anti-republican values as a byproduct of never having experienced the revolution of reason or lived under a republic. Once properly enlightened and instilled with the republican spirit, Paine assumes, they will be assimilated “more and more” into the republican way of life. The republic is so inescapable, for Paine, that once enlightened, a society will find counter-enlightenment principles and forms of government literally inconceivable; indeed, an enlightened society will be wholly unwilling, even mentally unable, to adopt any idea or principle that falls outside the theoretical limits of the republic.⁵⁴ And as for those not yet (or no longer) imbued with Enlightenment principles, Paine, here as elsewhere, is perfectly willing, even eager, to allow the republic to perpetuate itself against their ‘right’ to self-determination.

⁵¹ *To The French Inhabitants of Louisiana*, 968.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 967.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 964. See also Merriam, “Thomas Paine’s Political Theories,” 401.

⁵⁴ This may account for Americans’ historical resistance to any political thinker or system of government that challenges (or seems to challenge) the liberal republic. See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

Thomas Paine's deism prevented him from adopting the millenarian faith,⁵⁵ but as Jack Fruchtman, Jr., observes, he approached a political millenarianism in his defense of the republic and the revolution of reason. The revolution of Enlightenment and the creation of representative institutions of government would ultimately allow humankind to realize "the secular Eden of the democratic republic in which freedom and harmony would prevail."⁵⁶ The term "millenarian" is perfectly apt; Paine himself envisioned, in *Rights of Man*, a lasting and still vigorous republic "a thousand years hence." But his commitment to the Enlightenment, his devotion to republican principles, belies his advocacy of the right of "Every age and generation" to be "as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it."⁵⁷ Paine harshly criticized Burke for denying the right of revolution and self-determination, but joined Burke, in attitude and tone, in denying that same right once the republic was established. Why, then, did Paine devote himself to republican principles and the revolution of Enlightenment?

Prudence

Throughout his career, Thomas Paine attempted to ground his revolution of reason in fundamental principles, and particularly the natural "rights of man." The French Revolution, he wrote in *Rights of Man*, was undertaken not because of the immediate failings of the present government or the sitting king, but because the system itself was fundamentally corrupt. "The king," he insisted, "was known to be the friend of

⁵⁵ Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 104.

⁵⁶ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 157.

⁵⁷ ROM, cited above.

the nation...But the principles of the government itself still remained the same.”⁵⁸ But his unflagging commitment to the republic (in the abstract sense) after revolution, his denial of the people’s right to revolution against republican governments, and his apparent willingness to accept a social structure that, in his view, would forever preclude the possibility of future revolutions fundamentally contradicts his spirited defense of the right to self-governance or generational self-determination. In truth, Paine believed in and defended those rights only insofar as they were directed towards the creation and maintenance of the republic; once the republic was established, those “rights” were not only no longer necessary, but also in fact counterproductive to the “general happiness” of society.⁵⁹ And in the end, it was the “general happiness” of society that he was after. Paine’s advocacy of the republic was a means to an end, grounded largely on *pragmatic* considerations; he defended the republican revolution primarily because the republic was simply a better principle on which to base a system of government. His belief in the “natural rights” of revolution and self-determination was ultimately subordinate to his conviction that historical prudence proved the supremacy of the republic, in practical politics, over all other forms and principles of government.

Paine in *Common Sense* did not appeal as strongly to such concepts as “the public good” or “general happiness” as he would in his later, more mature works;⁶⁰ but this

⁵⁸ ROM, 47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁰ Indeed here, as in *The Crisis*, Paine appears to adopt the idea that *freedom*, or, more accurately, “freedom and security,” rather than happiness, is the “design and end of government.” *Common Sense*, 5; also see *The Crisis*, 1. Later, however, he returns to his true affinities by equating freedom, not only with security, but with “happiness” as well: quoting Dragonetti, Paine contends that “fixing the true point of happiness and freedom” is the true “science” of politics (31). In later writings, of course, he would equate freedom with happiness again through his assertion, noted above, that true liberation lies in the republic.

defense of republicanism⁶¹ and rejection of “hereditary monarchy” was no less tied to pragmatic concerns. Government being a necessary evil, he argues in the opening paragraphs, “prudence,” above all else, advises us, when choosing between competing forms of government, “out of two evils to choose the least.”⁶² “The least,” in this case, is of course representative government grounded in republican principles; and “prudence,” again, will direct the structure of that system—particularly “the propriety of having elections often,” so that the people are properly represented at all times.⁶³ To be sure, Paine does assert the right of generational self-determination and the illegitimacy of societies binding their posterity to hereditary government: “as no man at first could possess any other public honors than were bestowed upon him,” he declares, “so the givers of those honors could have no power to give away the right of posterity, and though they might say, ‘We choose you for *our* head,’ they could not, without manifest injustice to their children, say ‘that your children...shall reign over *ours* for ever.’”⁶⁴ But *why*? Paine’s answer is telling: “Because such an unwise, unjust, unnatural compact might (perhaps) in the next succession put them under a government of a rogue or a fool.”⁶⁵ That is, rather than arguing that generations may not bind their posterity, Paine says instead that generations may not bind their posterity to *hereditary monarchy*⁶⁶—

⁶¹ Cf. Kates, “From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*,” which contends that Paine was not converted to republicanism until after writing Part One of *Rights of Man* (and before writing Part Two). Kates argues persuasively that Part One of *Rights of Man* may have been compatible with a system of constitutional monarchy; but Paine’s previous writings, notably *Dissertations on Government*, indicate that Paine had already been converted to republicanism (and convinced that “the public good” was fundamentally incompatible with monarchy of any kind) long before writing *Rights of Man*.

⁶² *Common Sense*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁶⁶ Paine is silent on the “injustice” or “unnaturalness” of generations binding their posterity to republics. A.J. Ayer points out that “what (Paine) had in view in *Common Sense* was always absolute monarchy...and what is also important, monarchy in which the rule of succession was hereditary.” Elective monarchies, such as those “that existed in Denmark and Poland,” were ignored. Ayer, *Thomas Paine*, 40.

primarily because it would be *imprudent* to do so. Or as Paine himself put it, “It is not so much the absurdity as the evil of hereditary succession which concerns mankind.”⁶⁷

Paine seems to have little problem with a society that binds its posterity to representative, republican government, however, as such a government is prudent and effective. “Can we but leave posterity with a settled form of government,” he argues, “an independant (sic) constitution of its own, the purchase at any price would be cheap.”⁶⁸

In short, Paine’s defense of the revolution, even as early as *Common Sense*, was grounded not so much in his belief in the right of the people to revolt as his belief that this *particular* revolution would result in a better, happier society. Six years later, Paine defended the American Revolution in similar language to the Abbé Raynal: “the local advantages of (the Revolution) to the immediate actors, and the numerous benefits it promised mankind, appeared to be every day increasing; and we saw not a temporary good for the present race only, but a continued good to all posterity.”⁶⁹ By the time he wrote *Rights of Man*, Paine had become convinced that the coming general revolution of Enlightenment and republicanism would not only “be the ultimate cure for all of Europe’s social and political ills,”⁷⁰ but would also usher in a permanent “age of earthly perfection,” for the present and all future generations.⁷¹ Apparently unaware, as A.J. Ayer points out, of the conflict between his utilitarianism and the “natural right” of revolution,⁷² he continued to employ both in his defense of the French Revolution—

⁶⁷ *Common Sense*, 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34 (also cited above).

⁶⁹ *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, 238.

⁷⁰ Schochet, “Thomas Paine and the (Modern) Concept of Rights,” 15.

⁷¹ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 157.

⁷² Ayer, *Thomas Paine*, 102.

though ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, he allows the right of revolution and self-determination to collapse in the face of his republican ideal.⁷³

As noted above, Paine insists in *Rights of Man* that the French Revolution was not merely a response to the flaws of the present government, but a reaction against hereditary monarchy in general. But the attack on hereditary monarchy is based almost entirely on appeals to prudence rather than abstract principle. Monarchy must be resisted, Paine argues, not because it violates the natural rights of posterity,⁷⁴ but primarily because it leads inevitably to bad government. Hereditary government, either in the form of monarchy and aristocracy, necessarily becomes a government of “Ignorance.”⁷⁵ “(T)he idea of hereditary legislation,” Paine contends repeatedly in *Rights of Man*, “is as inconsistent as that of hereditary judges, or hereditary juries; and as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man; and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet-laureate.”⁷⁶ The inevitable result is poor government; history, Paine argues, ancient and recent, proves that hereditary monarchy is solely responsible for the suffering of the European people. Hereditary, anti-republican government endangers “the liberties of the people,”⁷⁷ leads inevitably to “a continual system of war and extortion,”⁷⁸

⁷³ “Natural rights” as Paine described them in *Rights of Man* included “all those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness.” ROM, 68. Thus Paine saw no conflict between the expression of one’s “natural rights” and the permanence of the republic, which for Paine was most conducive to public happiness. Nonetheless, what Paine described as the “natural rights” to revolution and self-determination would collapse in the face of the permanent republic. See Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 139.

⁷⁴ Though here, in contrast to *Common Sense*, Paine does make this appeal as well.

⁷⁵ ROM, 140.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 83. This famous line falls in the midst of a larger and even more telling passage, in which Paine offers six reasons—five based on pragmatic concerns and the lessons of prudence, only one (the fifth in order) based on the principle of self-determination—why “hereditary legislation,” in this case in the form of an aristocratic “House of Peers,” is undesirable.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

makes unnatural enemies of men,⁷⁹ and condemns “a great portion of mankind... (to) a state of poverty and wretchedness.”⁸⁰ It is for *this* reason that monarchies must be eliminated; they are intolerable, not because they impede upon the natural right to self-determination, but simply because they are naturally harmful to society. “When we survey the wretched condition of man under the monarchical and hereditary systems of Government,” Paine concludes, “dragged from his home by one power, or driven by another, and impoverished by taxes more than by enemies, it becomes evident that those systems are bad, and that a general revolution in the principle and construction of Governments is necessary.”⁸¹

Republican governments are praiseworthy, in contrast, because such governments are naturally conducive to the “general will” and “general happiness” of society. (Paine used both phrases, the Rousseauian “general will” and the utilitarian “general happiness,” equating both with the republican “public good.”) This, Paine had by now concluded,⁸² was the sole principle on which legitimate government was based: “Whatever the form or constitution of government may be, it ought to have no other form than the *general* happiness.”⁸³ And while monarchies and aristocracies are inherently directed toward the interests of those in power⁸⁴ and are thus contrary to “knowledge as well as happiness,”⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Ibid., 140, 208.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 211.

⁸¹ Ibid., 143. Interestingly, even the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*, the pivotal document of the French Revolution, appeals exclusively to prudence rather than principle. The protection of human rights is necessary, it argues in the Preamble, primarily because “ignorance, neglect, or contempt of human rights, are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of Government.” Quoted in ROM, 110.

⁸² In contrast with *Common Sense*, where (as noted above) he wavered between—and ultimately equated—“freedom,” “security,” and “happiness.” Paine had settled on the general happiness, or “the public good” (which for him was identical), as the proper end of government at least as early as 1780, when he wrote in *Public Good* that “When we take into view the mutual happiness and united interests of the States of America... there cannot, and ought not, to remain a doubt but that the governing rule of right and of mutual good must in all cases finally preside.” *Public Good*, 304.

⁸³ ROM, 210.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 171.

the republic, being a government of the people, exists naturally “for the common benefit of society.”⁸⁶ “Republican government,” Paine argues, “is no other than government established and conducted for the interest of the public, as well individually as collectively,”⁸⁷ and is thus, by its very nature, the form of government best adapted to promoting the “public good” and increasing the “general happiness.” And history, Paine concludes, conclusively proves that the republic is superior in practice as well: “I see in America, the generality of people living in a style of plenty unknown in monarchical countries; and I see that the principle of its government, which is that of the *equal Rights of Man*, is making a rapid progress in the world.”⁸⁸

Here again, as elsewhere, Paine justifies “the equal Rights of Man” on purely practical, pragmatic grounds. Indeed this is the case throughout, not only *Rights of Man*, but all of Paine’s writings; he embraces the revolution and the republic primarily, not because revolution itself is desirable or because either is an expression of the “rights of man,” but simply because republican government is most conducive, on a practical level, to the “public good” and the “general happiness” of society. Indeed this is the fundamental principle on which Paine grounds all of his political thought. In economics he declares himself “an advocate for commerce, because I am a friend to its effects,”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid., 144.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 212. An interesting debate has raged within Paine scholarship over whether Paine was primarily a liberal or, in Jack Fruchtman’s words, a “protosocialist.” Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 123. Joseph Dorfman’s seminal article, “The Economic Philosophy of Thomas Paine,” contends that Paine was an advocate for liberalism, advocating social programs only insofar as it did not interfere with the extension of commerce. Eric Foner agrees, arguing that Paine’s attachment to the artisan class brought him closer to “the ‘modern’ idea of laissez-faire than the traditional notion of regulation of economic activity in the interests of the general public.” Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 146. By contrast, Howard Penniman asserts that Paine was somewhat more of a socialist (though he never uses the term) who, far from being an advocate of private property in and of itself, “wished property to serve all of society.” Penniman, “Thomas Paine—Democrat,” 252. And Gregory Claeys concludes that

but also proposes a number of expansive social programs, for the increased happiness of society at large. In religious matters (prior, at least, to *The Age of Reason*), he insists that “every religion is good, that teaches man to be good.”⁹⁰ And the republican revolution, finally, is necessary so that humanity may realize “universal peace, civilization, and commerce” on earth.⁹¹ Paine desired the triumph of Enlightenment, reason and republicanism, first and foremost, because he believed that it would bring about a better world⁹²—a fact evidenced most revealingly in the epigraph to this essay, the final line of Paine’s dedication of Part Two of *Rights of Man* to Lafayette: “When France shall be surrounded with revolutions, she will be in peace and safety, and her taxes, as well as those of Germany, will consequently become less. Your sincere, Affectionate Friend, Thomas Paine.”⁹³

Nature

To the extent that Paine did believe in the “natural rights of man,” it was only insofar as man had the natural right to establish and maintain the republic. For Paine, republican government was not only the most conducive to the general happiness, but also the most compatible with—indeed the practical manifestation of—the natural order. The natural right of revolution, therefore, existed only to the extent that it was necessary to overthrow anti-republican governments; but as the republic was, in Paine’s view, part

Paine “was no dogmatic proponent of *laissez-faire*, but instead urged considerable redistribution of wealth” in keeping with his republican principles. Claey's, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 46.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 270.

⁹¹ Ibid., 161.

⁹² Kates, “From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*,” 569.

⁹³ ROM, 152.

and parcel of the natural order, “natural rights,” particularly the rights of revolution and generational self-determination, could not be legitimately invoked to challenge it.

Jack Fruchtman, Jr., observes that Paine’s famous “deism” was infused with a sort of pantheism or “religion of nature.” “Nature,” Fruchtman asserts, “contained the essence of life” for Paine. “Through it, God’s intention was made immanent: from the physical world to human nature to the natural rights of man.”⁹⁴ This faith in God’s presence in nature led Paine to a fundamental belief in nature and “the natural order” as a model for society and government. Could we but discover the fundamental principles on which nature was grounded, Paine believed, we would have the key to establishing, in Fruchtman’s words, a new “secular Eden...in which freedom and harmony would prevail.”⁹⁵ Thus Paine was consistently a firm believer in the power of nature to direct humanity in the right and proper way. “He who takes nature for his guide,” he writes in *Common Sense*, “is not easily beaten out of his argument,”⁹⁶ and in *Rights of Man* he declares that the natural “principles of civilization” would end war and poverty if allowed to operate universally and unchecked.⁹⁷ For this reason, he tells the Abbé Raynal, “He is a weak politician who does not understand human nature.”⁹⁸

Throughout his career, and particularly in *Rights of Man*, Paine expresses the firm conviction that the republic, far above all other principles of government, is most conducive to the natural order. The natural equality of mankind “in the order of creation,” he writes in *Common Sense*,⁹⁹ proves the unnaturalness of monarchy,

⁹⁴ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 10.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157 (also cited above).

⁹⁶ *Common Sense*, 48.

⁹⁷ ROM, 211.

⁹⁸ *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, 257. Also see Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 91.

⁹⁹ *Common Sense*, 8.

aristocracy, and other forms of hereditary government that place one person over others by the mere accident of birth.¹⁰⁰ Monarchy “is not the condition that Heaven intended for man,” he asserts in *Rights of Man* (echoing his Scriptural condemnation of monarchy and hereditary government in *Common Sense*).¹⁰¹ “Nature is orderly in all her works,” he concludes; “but this is a mode of government that counteracts nature.”¹⁰² By contrast, while there exists no naturally perfect *form* of government,¹⁰³ the republic was certainly the *principle* of government which the natural order prescribed. The French Revolution, Paine argues in *Rights of Man*, destroyed “a false system of government”¹⁰⁴ and replaced it with one, a constitutional republic, grounded on “a rational order of things” in which “The principles harmonize with the forms, and both with their origin.”¹⁰⁵ The general revolution of reason and republicanism, Paine believed, would enable mankind to recreate government as it was naturally and originally intended to exist; it is for this reason that Paine characterizes it as a “*counter-revolution*.”¹⁰⁶ The creation (or re-creation) of the republic was for Paine the triumph of nature, and by extension the triumph of God’s plan for the world.

In this sense, the *republic* was mankind’s natural right, inalienable even by mankind itself. The rights of revolution and self-determination, which Paine repeatedly characterized as “natural,” were in fact secondary, “natural” only insofar as they were necessary means to the realization of the republic and the triumph of Enlightenment.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 12. In *Rights of Man* Paine attacks the aristocratic system of primogeniture, which limits inheritance rights to the eldest son, for the same reason. ROM, 82. (Later, interestingly, he attacks primogeniture again, this time for pragmatic reasons in addition to being “unnatural.” ROM, 256.)

¹⁰¹ ROM, 161.

¹⁰² Ibid., 182. Also see Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 44.

¹⁰³ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 144.

¹⁰⁴ ROM, 146.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 161. Also see Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 171.

Calls for revolution or self-determination against republican government (whether progressive or reactionary), as Paine implied in his address *To the French Inhabitants of Louisiana*, were in no way (and could not possibly be) grounded on any kind of “natural right.” Indeed, to fight the republic, to work against it, or to challenge it once it was established was for Paine entirely *unnatural*—as unnatural, indeed, as “darkness attempting to illuminate light.”¹⁰⁷

Conclusion: The Progressive Paine

At the end of *Rights of Man*, Paine characterizes the changes sweeping Europe in terms of the changing of the seasons. The revolution in France, he asserted, was like “*a single bud*” swelling on a single tree in spring—an indication, he concluded, that “the same appearance was beginning, or about to begin, everywhere,” and that while no one could say which buds would successfully blossom and when, it was clear that “the spring is begun.”¹⁰⁸ It was with a great deal of excitement that Thomas Paine heralded the arrival of this spring, and with a great deal of eagerness that he looked forward to the coming summer, in which the revolution of reason would, presumably, blossom across all Europe. But for Paine, this would not be merely a continuation of a permanent cycle of changing seasons, but the end itself. The revolution of reason and the triumph of the republic would bring about a glorious and permanent age in Europe, beyond which it would no longer be possible for humankind to advance. The coming season, for Paine,

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰⁸ ROM, 273.

would be an endless summer, beyond which there would be no more autumns, no more winters—and no more springs.

“That Paine was a radical is indubitable,” writes Eric Foner; and indeed Thomas Paine found himself at the forefront of the revolutionary movement in the last decades of the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁹ Many of his contemporaries agreed with John Adams’ famous (derogatory) assertion that Paine was in fact the most influential revolutionary of his time; and that reputation has stuck with Paine, for better or worse, ever since. “But,” Foner rightly continues, “Paine was an eighteenth-century radical, not a contemporary one.”¹¹⁰ His willingness to sacrifice the right of revolution to the liberal principles that inspired the American and French Revolutions, even his defense of those principles themselves (describing himself as an “advocate for commerce,” for example), places him far to the right of many of today’s progressive movements, even those that openly draw inspiration from his work. In spite of his rabblerous reputation, Thomas Paine was no revolutionary—only a diehard republican who used revolution as a means to a just end.

In spite of this, though (or perhaps *because* of this), Paine’s thought, and particularly his theoretical turn in the wake of the French Revolution, offers a good deal of insight into the problems and pitfalls facing progressives today. What happens to Thomas Paine at this point in history should be of great interest, not only to historians of the Enlightenment, but also to theorists of the modern-day Left. The French Revolution is the climax of the ‘century of lights’ as well as one of the greatest and most transformative democratic upheavals in human history, and Paine was both its and the Enlightenment’s most popular and public spokesperson. That a symbol of progressivism

¹⁰⁹ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, xviii.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xix.

and social justice like Paine should choose, at this particular moment, to effectively abandon his revolutionary impulse (in practice if not on paper) should give pause to those elements of today's fractured Left which choose instead to privilege critique and resistance while largely abandoning the Enlightenment principles of objective reason and universal human rights.

The triumph of the American and French Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century places Enlightenment, as a historical and political movement, at a crossroads. In his classic two-volume study, Peter Gay characterizes Enlightenment thought in two words: *criticism* and *power*.¹¹¹ The philosophes privileged criticism and doubt, the foundations of the Cartesian and scientific methods, as necessary to attain real knowledge of ourselves and our world (to the extent that such knowledge was attainable). This placed them in direct conflict with a political and religious *ancien regime* whose control relied on unquestioning belief in, and adherence to, social traditions, superstitions, and revelations. For this reason, the right to criticize, to challenge, and to resist became a central feature of Enlightenment thought; this is the impetus for Paine's ardent defense of the rights of revolution and self-determination. But the Enlightenment did not seek (as Burke would assert) to tear down the foundations of society for its own sake; rather, the philosophes pursued "the organized habit of criticism"¹¹² in order to build new foundations, grounded in objective and scientific principles of right and truth. "Criticism" and "power" were two sides of the same coin, "inescapably linked parts of the same activity."¹¹³ The philosophes championed resistance and critique—indeed both Lessing and Kant famously celebrated the *quest* for truth over its actual *possession*—but

¹¹¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, Volume 1: The Rise of Modern Paganism*, xi.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 130.

also viewed critique as a process that would culminate in real knowledge (and, in politics, superior, even ideal social institutions). Gay's characterization of Enlightenment in terms of *criticism* and *power* thus parallels Kant, whose slogan *Sapere aude!* encourages people both to *dare* and to *know*, or the passionate defender of the revolution of reason, who simultaneously defends both *revolution* and *reason*. The two sides go hand in hand.

The triumph of revolution forces Enlightenment to reexamine itself, then, because it pits criticism and power (whose alliance was always counterintuitive at best) *against* each other. Enlightenment's critical nature makes it an inherently *insurgent* movement, a movement of the excluded and disenfranchised (hence Lessing's emphasis on the *quest* for truth, or Kant's insistence that the eighteenth century was an age of enlightenment rather than an enlightened age). To the extent that the movement triumphs, becomes the predominant mode of thinking, and takes control of the social order, though, the content of its thought must shift: either it must abandon criticism in practice, or it must turn on *itself* and its own principles. Once the republic of reason is established, reason (as well as the representative institutions it spawns) has little use for revolution; those, like Paine, who maintain their adherence to reason and republican principles will become reformist at best, conservative at worst, and in any case decidedly opposed to future revolutions. And those future revolutions, progressive or otherwise, will have to be waged, at least in part, against the hegemony of objective and instrumental reason, as well as the political and legal institutions they uphold.¹¹⁴ The choice facing the philosophes after the French Revolution is thus the same choice that later faces the followers of Hegel or Marx: does

¹¹³ Ibid., 131. See also Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 234.

one privilege the critical *method* of Enlightenment, or the practical *system* of principles and institutions?

By choosing the system over the method, wedding himself to republican principles over the rights of revolution and self-determination, Paine places himself squarely on the right side of the political divide (which may help explain his imprisonment by the Jacobins). Opposing him on the critical side are a variety of intellectual traditions, many of which have significant influence over current progressive movements: postmodernism, critical theory, anarchism, radical democracy, existentialism, and ethnic nationalism, the force behind much of the recent worldwide explosion of groups seeking national self-determination, often (though certainly not always) toward decidedly anti-republican principles.¹¹⁵ These are the forces that drive much of the left today—and while they may hold Thomas Paine up as a revolutionary forebear, they have little to no use for the objective truth, instrumental reason, universal rights, and cosmopolitan outlook that characterizes the more ‘conservative’ liberal and republican heirs of Enlightenment—including, but certainly not limited to, Paine.

But while these approaches all share a fundamental impotence in offering concrete institutional responses to actual political problems,¹¹⁶ Thomas Paine’s legacy continues to inspire real progressive movements—not *in spite* of his ‘conservative’

¹¹⁵ Karl Marx, incidentally, is able to bridge the gap between revolution/criticism/daring and reason/power/knowledge, by asserting that the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century did not fully realize the republican principles they championed—that another revolution is necessary. But as the split among Marx’s followers indicates, even this only temporarily resolves the fundamental conflict: if there is to be room for criticism in the Enlightenment heritage, then eventually Enlightenment’s heirs must turn on themselves. This is the “dialectic of enlightenment” to which Horkheimer and Adorno refer in their classic work of the same name; on this interpretation, of course, they themselves are the ones responsible for turning Enlightenment on itself—a role they mistakenly ascribe to Hitler.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Stephen Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*. The exception to this, of course, is ethnic nationalism, which does inspire real political action—but, unfortunately, too often in the service of

approach, but in many ways *because* of it. Faced with the implicit choice between the self-determination on which he so firmly insisted and the republic in which he so firmly believed, Thomas Paine chose the latter. But Paine certainly leaves room for progress even after the revolution, in order to advance his republican principles;¹¹⁷ and while such progress is inherently incremental and reformist in nature, rather than fundamental and revolutionary (i.e. working *within* existing institutions rather than challenging them from outside; *appealing* to the predominant principles of society rather than criticizing them), it is also inherently *concrete*, a quality the critical movements, which eschew teleological principles, often lack. This is most evident in Part 2 of *Rights of Man*, in which Paine spells out a specific and detailed social program, one which remains remarkably progressive even to this day. Even more than this, though, activists continue to draw inspiration from the very principles—universal truth, justice, cosmopolitanism, the rights of man—that his ‘conservative’ move allowed him to embrace. When *The Humanist* praised Thomas Paine in 1987, they praised him not as a revolutionary, but as a republican, championing “his rationality, his reason, and his commitment to rights and justice,” and devoting more time to his defense of Louis XVI against the Jacobins than his calls for revolution.¹¹⁸ That modern-day activists still draw inspiration from this long-dead pamphleteer is an indication not of his revolutionary status, but rather of the continuing power of the principles—cosmopolitanism, human rights, the quest for universal truth—that drove Enlightenment as an historical movement.

reactionary, even premodern notions like provincialism, fundamentalism, and the organic community (usually defined by racial status).

¹¹⁷ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 11.

¹¹⁸ David Braff, “The Forgotten Founding Father: The Impact of Thomas Paine,” 23.

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