

EXAMINING COMMON SENSE:  
A GRAMSCIAN ANALYSIS OF THOMAS PAINE  
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This paper is an analysis of Thomas Paine's "common sense", not only his famous pamphlet with that title, but also his "common sense" as the concept was developed by Antonio Gramsci. It is an attempt to see Paine's work through the lens of Gramsci's "common sense." Gramsci's "common sense" is a concept he developed as a tool for critical analysis of change, how it occurred and what were its obstacles and limits. In examining "common sense" Gramsci focused on folklore, language and people's beliefs.

The use of the term "common sense" in everyday life usually means something that everyone knows or should know that actually makes good sense. For Gramsci, "common sense" is neither good sense or bad sense alone, although his connotation of term usually emphasizes bad sense. "Common sense" is "the 'philosophy of the non-philosophers', or in other words the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed. Common sense is not a single unique conception identical in time and space. It is 'the folklore of philosophy'."<sup>1</sup> "Common sense" is where the legacy of the past and human agency meet in a piecemeal and contradictory fashion. It is the primary mode of thinking a

society shares and employs. It is what most of us believe to be real and hold to be natural.

Gramsci, a leader of the Italian Communist Party in the 1920' and 30's, developed his idea of "common sense" while he was in prison. He wanted to understand why fascism succeeded in Italy. After the failure of the Communist Party in Italy to spark a workers' revolution and Mussolini's rise to power Gramsci was arrested in 1926 and spent most of the rest of his life in jail until his death in 1937. He died several days after being released. During his time in prison Gramsci wrote what is now referred to as his *Prison Notebooks*.

Gramsci was trying to understand why revolution did not sweep the industrial West as traditional Marxism predicted. It seemed to Gramsci that the revolutionary strategy that was used in Russia was not going to work in the West because of the complex nature of "civil society" in the advanced industrial capitalist countries. Merely seizing state power alone as was done in the USSR, which Gramsci called a "war of maneuver", was not a viable strategy. In Russia the state was "everything" but not so in the West. "In the developed capitalist countries, the ruling class possesses political and organizational

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci in *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*. ed. David Forgacs. Schocken Books: 1988. p. 343.

reserves that it did not possess in Russia."<sup>2</sup> Seizing state power in the advanced industrial nations could be an important step in transformation, but it would not create a new hegemony and society. "Civil society" was where the battle for the West would occur. Gramsci defined civil society as the collection of all of the private institutions that influenced the running of society; the businesses, the media, the church, the unions and civic organizations. The power of civil society in the West created a need for different revolutionary strategy, a strategy he called a "war of position." Civil society had also created a complex set of accepted beliefs, its own "common sense." This is why addressing and understanding "common sense" is so critical. It plays a pivotal role in Gramsci's overall worldview.

While Gramsci was in prison, Stalin had consolidated power in the USSR and in the Second and Third Internationals. Gramsci saw some disturbing trends in these developments, that he called "economism." Gramsci's attack on "economism" recast the relationship between the base and superstructure. This was his most fundamental contribution to Marxist thinking. Gramsci has been called "the

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann. *Gramsci and the State*. Lawrence and Wishart: 1980. p. 249.

theoretician of the superstructure."<sup>3</sup> For Gramsci, Marxist "economism" misunderstood the proper relationship of the superstructure to the base. It is in this context that Gramsci's idea of "common sense" must be understood.

Gramsci believed that the politics emerging from "economism" created an elitist vanguardism, which he opposed. For Gramsci, the modern political party, which he referred to as the modern Prince, needed to have a dialectical relationship with the people, not a top-down vanguardism. Gramsci wanted a politics where the modern political party was the vehicle for a dialectical dialogue between the "common sense" of the masses and the philosophy of a new group of intellectuals, whom he called "organic intellectuals", who would be connected "organically" to the mass. Gramsci contrasted "organic" with "traditional" or "crystallized" intellectuals, who saw themselves as above the mass.<sup>4</sup> Organic intellectuals would work with the masses on creating a new hegemony.

While Gramsci saw "common sense" as primarily an obstacle to the creation of a new intellectual-moral bloc and new hegemony, not all "common sense" is bad sense. The philosophy of the intellectuals, traditional and organic,

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Texier. "Gramsci, Theoretician of the Superstructures" in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. ed. Chantal Mouffe. Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1979. p. 48.

as well as the masses can have important misconceptions and need to be critiqued. Gramsci, in this way, does not necessarily privilege the intellectuals over the masses.

It is also important to understand how Gramsci is using the word philosophy. He is not using it in its traditional sense. Philosophy is lived, he is not only referring to an isolated world of ideas. Therefore, philosophy is integrated into everyday life. Gramsci writes "every man finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that he is a philosopher, an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world, or to modify it, to bring into new modes of thought."<sup>5</sup> The relationship between philosophy and practice, is what Gramsci calls the philosophy of praxis. For Gramsci, practice becomes theorized after it has reached a level of "common sense." The dialectical dialogue around "common sense" designed to create specific practices is the central activity of politics.

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice A. Finocchiaro. *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought*. Cambridge University Press: 1988. p.87.

<sup>5</sup>Marcia Landy. *Film, Politics and Gramsci*. University of Minnesota Press: 1994. p. 79.

Applying Gramsci's "common sense" to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* must start with an examination of the world of Thomas Paine. Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America* seeks to understand the unique features of the liberal tradition in the United States. He does this by comparing American and European liberalism. According to Hartz, Americans see the liberal world as "natural" whereas Europeans see it as created.<sup>6</sup> This view of liberalism is one of the central features of American "common sense." Hartz' insight is significant in understanding the development of American "exceptionalism", particularly America's lack of a strong socialist tradition as compared to Europe.

Where does this "natural" view of liberalism come from? According to Hartz, the liberalism that developed in Europe, primarily in Britain, was transplanted to America as a "fragment" of its original entity in Europe, and proceeded to develop in America in its own exceptional way. Liberalism developed in response to the feudal world of Europe with its rigid class structure and hierarchies. European liberalism also developed a revolutionary tradition because for liberalism to succeed feudal structures had to be destroyed. The French Revolution is

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Hartz. *The Liberal Tradition in America*. in *Readings in American Politics and Liberalism*. ed. Timothy Killikelly. Kendall/Hunt Publishers: 2000. pp. 4-9.

the most prominent example of this phenomena. The European revolutionary spirit combined with class resentments left over from the rigid feudal world was what later attracted the working class Europeans to socialism. The American world was much different. Although aristocratic pretensions and notions of class certainly did exist, there was no feudal hierarchy to be destroyed in the colonies itself in the American Revolution. The demand was for independence from England, not for the destruction in England of its feudal hereditary hierarchy. According to Hartz, the lack of a feudal tradition is central to the development of this "natural" view of liberalism and also helps explain the general indifference and the outright hostility of the American working-class to socialism.

Enrico Augelli and Craig Murphy in *America's Quest for Supremacy and the Third World* have an insightful Gramscian analysis of "common sense" in America. They identify three major aspects of American "common sense"; liberalism, denominational religion, and faith in science.<sup>7</sup> All three play a significant role in the arguments that Thomas Paine makes in *Common Sense*. Those familiar with Paine's ideas may easily see how liberalism and faith in science are part

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<sup>7</sup> Enrico Augelli & Craig Murphy. *Common Sense in America*. in *Readings in American Politics and Liberalism*. ed. Timothy Killikelly. Kendall/Hunt Publishers: 2000. pp. 18-22.

of his worldview, but knowing his anti-biblical views stated in *The Age of Reason* they may doubt that denominational religion fits it. Augelli and Murphy argue that a central element of American nationalism and exceptionalism, the idea that America is a special place in the world, a sanctuary of liberty and opportunity, comes from the evangelical spirit of Northeastern Puritanism. The Puritans' belief that God had chosen them among all others in the world to come to a land to avoid religious persecution, made them in effect the new Israel, became grafted on to American nationalism. It is this idea that has developed as part of American "common sense." Paine wrote in referring to America that it is "as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years." because the Reformation preceded the discovery of America.<sup>8</sup> This sanctuary is a sanctuary of freedom with all its liberal assumptions. It is this idea of America as a special place, that is most consonant with this "denominational religion" aspect of American "common sense." This view of the United States as a sanctuary of freedom was common among liberals and radicals in England and Europe that Paine associated with.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Paine. *Common Sense* in *Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. p. 25.

While this view lost its strictly religious connotations, it did not lose its missionary zeal. In the same missionary tone, Paine professes that "the sun never shined on a cause of greater worth"<sup>9</sup> than the American call for independence. Paine also made direct references to the Bible to support his arguments that will be discussed later.

Paine articulated a sense of missionary destiny that connected the cause of American independence to a faith in science and "reason." "Reason" became connected to support for a liberal view of the concept of individual freedom which in turn was seen as central to a new barely regulated market-economy. These interrelated set of ideas became American "common sense." Furthermore, the phenomena of his best-selling *Common Sense*, meaning its widespread dissemination and popularization, connected these ideas to the mass in a new way. "Common sense" theory was becoming "practice."

Thomas Paine was from both the American and European liberal worlds and he showed impulses that strongly relate to both the American and European versions of liberalism. He played a significant role in England, France and the United States' liberal traditions. This makes him a particularly interesting person to examine in applying

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

Gramsci's concept of "common sense." Because "common sense," is often peculiar to a particular time and place it does not often easily translate across cultures and nations, but in the case of Thomas Paine, we can examine "common sense" that maintains its local particulars, but that also translates across the Transatlantic world of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Where exactly was Thomas Paine's "common sense" from? Was it English, American or French "common sense"? The answer is an amalgam of all three, but ultimately it is more American than British, and more British than French. Paine was expressing the British liberal-radical Whig ideology that had developed from the Leveller politics of the 1640's. This view represented a London radicalism of a particular class of artisans and skilled wage-earners in the middle class who believed that the British system, particularly its hereditary politics, were keeping them down. But these views were certainly not the "common sense" of British society in the 1770's. These views had a more receptive audience in colonial America in the 1770's, especially in the cities. This is the context for Paine's arrival in Pennsylvania in November 1774. The emerging middle class ideology in Europe and America had several interrelated corresponding views that ended up becoming the

core of its worldview. It was fascinated by anything "scientific" and painted an Enlightenment world of science that sought to understand what was "natural." It applied this view to politics as well. It was reform-minded and supported an egalitarian and democratic politics and sought to create a republican form of government. This middle-class also has strong admiration for the entrepreneurial spirit and at least on the level of argument supported free-trade and free market concepts as central to individual freedom.

These ideas ran against the grain of British aristocratic politics, but became American "common sense." In Philadelphia, this class of artisans had Benjamin Franklin as their emblematic hero. The Ben Franklin axioms of "a penny saved is a penny earned", etc. became the core of a new hegemonic thought that Paine articulated and popularized so effectively. Paine became a leader in creating what Gramsci called a new intellectual-moral bloc between the middle and working classes. These middle-class artisans transmitted their "Ben Franklin" values to the lower-class artisans and fellow citizens. They promoted literature, literacy and interest in science along with values of the Protestant work ethic and prosperity. Middle-class values of hard work, prosperity, social

mobility and an ideal of an "autonomous" individual became, and remain, the moral center of American "common sense."

The politics based on these assumptions of American "common sense" has played itself out in terms of class in a variety of ways. The ideal of a moral system based on the hard-working autonomous individual can be turned against the rich or the poor depending upon a variety of circumstances. If the public generally perceives the wealthy as not having "earned" their way in the world, particularly in hard economic times, resentments can be turned against the upper class. But the demonization of the poor as lazy parasites lacking the work ethic, leeching off societies' hard-working middle-class can lead the middle-class and even elements of the working poor into political alliances with those much above them in class and wealth. In modern America, much of the race politics is connected to these ideals and becomes, oxymoronically, a "moral" basis of racism.

Work ethic politics is deeply ingrained in everyday American life. It gets its power in part from a morality tale about the nature of work and the worthiness of each individual. In this story, work itself is a moral good, mainly because the individual learns to become an effective "autonomous" self, learning not to "burden" those around

him or her, or society at large. Another enormous source of this power comes from the resentment of work and the desire to escape its discipline. The grind of the discipline imposed by this work ethic is resented countless times throughout the day, played out over and over again. The "autonomous" individual's ability to put up with the grind somehow becomes a sign of a superior moral character.

"Common sense" is not some mere manipulation of the powerless by the powerful. It has implications that are far-reaching and can actually be used against the rulers in revolutionary ways. But as one surveys an entire set of "common sense" ideas, rulers must have some important elements of "common sense" on their side if they want to maintain and create the intellectual and moral hegemony that is key to the public's acceptance of their rule as legitimate. The ruling class has an advantage in gaining mass consent. According to Gramsci "this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production."<sup>10</sup>

The colonial American politics of the 1770's saw the emergence of a less deferential artisan class. There was a spirit of an egalitarian politics of participation that was

to become central to the "common sense" developing in America. Paine identified with these radical artisans and their egalitarian politics. Soon after his arrival he became editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1775. He published articles attacking hereditary succession or as he stated in *Common Sense*, "of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived."<sup>11</sup> Paine found his calling when he wrote *Common Sense*. His arguments were not new, but his style helped give these ideas a popular voice. He connected the argument for American independence with the struggle for a republic based on representative government and democratic principles and an attack on the British monarchy and the principle of hereditary succession. He became the popularizer and articulator of the newly emerging American "common sense".

A commonly held belief in the colonies and in Britain was that the British system of government was a "perfect balance" among the Crown, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Paine ridiculed this notion, arguing that this so-called "balance" was a farce. He argued that the entire logic of having a House of Commons was to check the King.

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gramsci in *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*. ed. David Forgacs. Schocken Books: 1988. p. 307.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Paine. *Common Sense* in *Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. p. 20.

The reason for this check was that the King could not be trusted because the thirst for absolute power is a natural disease of monarchy. The system is based on the idea that the commoners are more worthy than the King, which made sense to Paine. The British system's flaw was that the King gets to check the commoners who are supposed to be wiser to begin with. He called this an absurdity and that the nature of the position of King makes him one of the worst people to make decisions because he is excluded from the people and important information. The only admiration of the British system is to be found in the House of Commons check on the King. The King and the House of Lords are tyrannical and add nothing to the freedom of the state of the people. The House of Commons represent some hope for republican ideals. Paine adds that in England, it is the people and not some "perfect balance" of the British constitution that makes the Crown not as oppressive as the absolute monarchs in the rest of Europe.<sup>12</sup> Beyond the use of "reason" to attack hereditary succession and the hierarchies of oppression of monarchy Paine also use religious arguments as well. According to Paine, mankind is originally equal in birth and only oppression and avarice create distinctions

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 10-12.

between the rich and the poor. Distinctions between King and Subject have no natural or religious reason for existence. Hereditary succession is the Devil's plan for the promotion of idolatry, Scriptures for big government by Kings.<sup>13</sup> Considering the anti-Christian rhetoric of Paine in *The Age of Reason*, it seems ironic that he is so concerned with making sure that his point of view is supported by Scriptures.

Thomas Paine could be considered an "organic intellectual" by Gramsci's definition, even though he was barely living in America when the Revolution began. Gramsci wrote, "Every social group... creates... organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields."<sup>14</sup> The American Revolution itself was creating a new era, a new way of thinking, and a new politics. Paine was the articulator of a new emerging hegemony based on a new intellectual-moral bloc.

Paine's foray into the Scriptures highlights his understanding of the "common sense" of the colonies. Paine understood that an appeal to evangelical elements in the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Gramsci in *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*. ed. David Forgacs. Schocken Books: 1988. p. 301.

colonies was important in building the broad coalition in helping create the intellectual moral bloc that could bring a new vision of power and a new hegemony into existence. In the years after the writing *Common Sense*, John Adams was to take Paine to task for its religious tracts calling them "ridiculous". Paine laughed and "expressed contempt for ... the Bible" and saying that he would one day write a tract on religion, which he did in *The Age of Reason*.<sup>15</sup> Although Paine could be seen here as Machiavellian, in its worst sense, I would argue that he was not. Gramsci wrote quite a bit about Machiavelli and certainly challenged our "common sense" ideas about him. Gramsci argued that Machiavelli was "a democratic philosopher"<sup>16</sup> who articulated the most progressive trends of his era by writing about politics for "those not in the know"<sup>17</sup> on the reality of politics. Gramsci argues that the problem of the traditional view of Machiavelli begins with seeing his work as having "universal" application to politics. It is only when one understands and sees him in his historical context can he be appreciated for his principles of politics. The same could be argued that Paine was also doing this in using

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. Oxford University Press: 1976. p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> Benedetto Fontana. *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation Between Gramsci and Machiavelli*. University of Minnesota Press: 1993. p.1.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice A. Finocchiaro. *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought*. Cambridge University Press: 1988. p.129.

both "reason" and "religion." All one needs to do is to look at the reaction in United States to Paine's anti-religious views expressed later in his career. He was vilified at worst and ignored as irrelevant at best. When Thomas Paine died, one of his friends, Joel Barlow, had received a request of information on Paine from a possible biographer. Barlow replied, "it appears to me that this is not the moment to publish the life of that man in this country. His own writings are his best life, and these are not read at present."<sup>18</sup> Paine's reputation in America was stained in no small part because of his anti-biblical views, although this was not the only reason for his soiled reputation. Federalist and pro-British newspapers excoriated Paine's reputation for political reasons.

Paine's dilemma can be summed up in with the question "What is a revolutionary intellectual to do?" On the one hand, you must articulate and mobilize an unspoken voice, or express it in a way that resonates to the masses. But sometimes, you need to critique the masses' "common sense" to move society forward in a progressive direction, although it may be unpopular. There is no one correct solution to this dilemma.

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<sup>18</sup> David Freeman Hawke. *Paine*. Harper & Row Publishers: 1974. p.1

When he wrote *Common Sense* he was speaking to the mass to bring them into politics so as to increase their likelihood of creating a progressive new common sense and hegemony. In *The Age of Reason* he sought to challenge the "common sense" within the American community.

Paine was certainly familiar enough with the Bible for his own purposes. The Bible stories he chooses make the same points that he made with "reason", but some of his arguments are creative extensions of these Scriptures. The first story is of Gideon defeating his enemies and protecting the Jews. The Jews ask Gideon to be King and for his son to be King. Gideon replies "I shall not rule over you, my son shall not rule over you, the Lord shall rule over you."<sup>19</sup> Gideon's point, according to Paine, is that there is no such right as a hereditary monarchy although the supremacy of the Lord seems more to the point. The other Bible story Paine refers to is when Samuel warns the people against monarchy. The Lord tells Samuel, the patriarch, that there will be no King, but the people insist and forsake the Lord and Samuel and follow the practice of the Heathens and create a King.<sup>20</sup> Paine comments that these stories are often kept from the laity because it

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Paine. *Common Sense in Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. p. 13.

is in both the interest of King and Priest. Monarchy he says is "the Popery of government."<sup>21</sup> Paine was using the anti-Catholic feeling of the denominational Protestant religions in America who also were supportive of his egalitarian, republican politics. Paine genuinely felt these negative feelings towards Catholic doctrine, but he made sure to attack the only Catholic hierarchy by attempting to associate it with the British monarchy which he argued was an unholy alliance. No mention was made of his generally anti-biblical views.

A widely used form of argument is to string together and connect a series of interrelated "common sense" ideas. This can even be done when one is making an argument against a particular "common sense" in order to create a new "common sense." Paine's argument against hereditary succession and monarchy essentially follow a variety of interrelated emerging "common sense's" dealing with liberalism and its central themes; individualism, a strong work ethic, a sense of an egalitarian relationship of rulers to ruled, an affinity for finding what is natural, and using reason and science as arguments.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

Paine argues that the acceptance of a monarchy is a lessening and degradation of ourselves, individually and collectively. Hereditary succession gives someone an honor that they do not deserve. Honor can only belong to the individual and can not be given to an heir. Hereditary succession is unnatural, falsely assuming that the original King was honorable. Later on, stories and fables were developed to justify and legitimize hereditary succession. Those who think of themselves as born to rule become insolent and are poisoned by their own self importance. Stability and order was probably the reason why people accepted it, Paine conjectures. This argument is also false. Britain has had eight civil wars since the time of the Magna Carta.<sup>22</sup>

Paine then asked the question, "What to Kings do?"<sup>23</sup> This question is particularly relevant in England where the House of Commons is inching the British government towards republicanism. The Crown is viewed as a parasitic institution because they do not have much to do. This clearly relates to the emerging bourgeois work ethic of the class that Paine is speaking for.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp.15-19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

Paine's *Common Sense* is filled with many American "common sense" ideas. Paine writes of America that "resolution is our inherent character."<sup>24</sup> The idea that America is a "can-do" nation reflects its faith in science, the idea that an experimental approach will achieve results. Implicitly tied in with this faith is a belief that freedom and "resolution" work hand-in-hand because freedom lets these experiments flourish and produce results. This also ties in with beliefs about the "naturalness" of liberalism and moral superiority of the work ethic. The idea that it is only a matter of time, that progress is inevitable, that with hard work and perseverance that results will occur reflects, in my view, a naïve Enlightenment optimism. Faith in science does not mean an understanding (or lack of understanding) of science. It is just the faith that it will achieve results.

Paine writes that "it is the will of the Almighty, that there should be diversity of religious opinions among us: It affords a larger field for our Christian kindness."<sup>25</sup> I read this as a call for tolerance implicit within liberalism but it could also read as American "common sense" that is derived from the Protestant denominational

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

religions themselves. The new American social contract that Paine called for was based on a sense of obligation of each citizen to support the right of the separate parts of the society to live in a world of freedom; a freedom that involved respect for differences of Christian denominations, of personal traits, and of property rights.

Paine also called for an egalitarian republican form of government. Paine called for elections every year for a President who would be elected by the Congress. The Presidential candidates could only come from the state that was selected by lot that year. This way every state would have a President for their territory over a 13 year period. He called for a 3/5 majority vote to pass laws. He wanted to include specific provisions guaranteeing freedom of speech in a new constitution. They would be no King, the law would be King.<sup>26</sup>

A British "common sense" belief that supported British hegemony, the idea of a "perfect balance" of Crown and Parliament, became a central point of attack for Paine. But it is also interesting to note that the basis of his new "common sense" begins with one element of the "perfect balance", the House of Commons. Paine wrote that the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp.32-34.

British system was two parts tyranny, one part republican.<sup>27</sup>

The republican part is the basis of his attack on the monarchy and the development of a new system. This is how "common sense" often changes. Some element of a current "common sense" is challenged by repudiating it by either using other unchallenged elements of "common sense" or using part of that "old" idea as the basis of that new challenge. A new American nationalism was developing based upon the liberal radical tradition that developed in England and Europe. These ideas were supported by the experience of everyday life in the colonies in a way that was not throughout England and Europe. Although aristocratic notions of those who were of the "better sort" and the "middling sort" and "meaner sort" existed in the colonies, life was different in America. The ruling classes within the colonies themselves were primarily businessmen. Their aristocratic pretensions developed not from bloodlines alone, but from the making of money. Within the colonies itself, there was no strictly feudal aristocratic class. It was easier in this environment to create a liberal society. There was no monarchy or lordly class to destroy or kill. There was simply the demand that the British system, with its mix of aristocratic and republican

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

notions let America be left alone with its republican notions. The entire politics within the colonies after independence reflects this. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries American conservatives were British liberals and American liberals were British radicals in outlook. British conservatives were still supporting the British system with a strong emphasis on tradition, the tradition of monarchy, tempered by the voice of the people, the concept of the "perfect balance."

The situation in France was different from both the colonies and England. There was no idea of a "perfect balance." There were no republican features of its system that Paine found redeeming in any way. Liberal resentments had no viable outlet within the system for expression. France was where the heart and soul of the revolutionary tradition that Hartz refers to was strongest. While Paine had his influence on events in France, France also had its influence on him. It was after his experience in France that his ideas start to reflect the 19<sup>th</sup> century radicalism in which socialist ideas flourished.

Thomas Paine's adventure into the French Revolution can help us understand how "common sense" ideas from one area can overlap and influence other areas while also revealing significant differences. The French Revolution's

slogan of "liberty, fraternity and equality" reflects the same liberal ideals prominent in America and in Britain during this time. Also in France it was the same middle-class ideology that spawned a coalition of middling and poorer elements, particularly in the cities to change society. But differences with America are clear.

Revolutionaries in France needed to destroy the power of the monarchy and an aristocratic class on their own soil. This created in France and in Europe a revolutionary spirit. According to Hartz, the Americans, lacking the need to destroy an aristocratic class, never developed this revolutionary spirit and viewed liberalism as a natural phenomena. In England and France liberalism was viewed as created not natural. This view of liberalism combined with the revolutionary spirit, or tradition as Hartz calls it, made Europe a more fertile ground for the socialist appeals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The American working-class were less attracted to a socialist vision of the future. Furthermore, the increasing outlets for political participation for the lower and middle classes throughout the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States reinforced the individualistic characteristics of American society.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Louis Hartz. *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Harcourt Brace: 1955. and Seymour Martin Lipset & Gary Marks. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. W.W. Norton: 2000. passim.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was the emerging American "common sense." The ideas he articulated spoke to the core of America's version of liberalism. But Thomas Paine's more European versions of liberalism came to the fore in other writings. There is a tension in liberalism between an individual's freedom from the state and its repressive apparatus and a call for a collective cooperative responsibility that each member of society has to the community. This puts the state in the liberal society in a peculiar position relative to its citizens. When is collective cooperation just another form of repression? When is a call for individual freedom just a shirking of social responsibility? These questions can be contentious particularly when it comes to the state's relationship to the market. Is the market for the common good? Or is it for individuals to pursue their own interests? Policies can be designed to smooth out these conflicts but the tension remains.

Paine's work generally rejected or ignored this tension. Comparing his thought to James Madison is instructive. Madison developed an elaborate structure of government designed to smooth out these tensions that he believed "naturally" existed between "those who hold and those who do not hold property." He made a clear

distinction between a republic and a democracy. Madison wanted a republic where representatives, "whose love of justice and patriotism" will make them better spokespeople for the people than the people themselves. Pure democracies, he argued, "would be spectacles of contention and turbulence" and would be inconsistent with personal freedom and the rights of property.<sup>29</sup> Paine never made this distinction. He simply preferred a republic because of its convenience.<sup>30</sup> He rejected the tension between the people as collective and competitive individualism, particularly in America. He had come to America with the attitudes of his London radicalism that viewed America as an egalitarian sanctuary. While Madison argued that if "men were angels that would be no need for government"<sup>31</sup>, Paine argued that government itself was the corrupting influence. Paine attempted to make a clear distinction between government and society. Madison saw a need to protect property rights against majority factions because men were not angels. Paine had a more hopeful vision for a Lockean liberalism, a future full of Enlightenment optimism where human beings could reach their full potential individually and

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<sup>29</sup> James Madison. "Federalist Paper #10" in *Readings in American Politics and Liberalism*. ed. Timothy Killikelly. Kendall/Hunt Publishers: 2000. pp.58-61.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. Oxford University Press: 1976. p. 217.

<sup>31</sup> James Madison. "Federalist Paper #51" in *American Government: Readings and Cases*. ed. Peter Woll. 11<sup>th</sup> Ed. Harper Collins: 1993. p. 47.

collectively. Without a repressive state that caused enormous problems by creating false hierarchies and rigid oppressions that caused poverty and wretchedness men could become the angels they were meant to be.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Rights of Man* in 1791 Paine writes glowingly of America, "the poor are not oppressed, and the rich are not privileged. Industry is not mortified by the splendid extravagance of a court rioting at its expense. Their taxes are few, because their government is just."<sup>33</sup> But Paine's experience in France brought out a more radical version of liberalism that dealt with the class distinctions that were growing as the market economy spread, or as he called it the growth of "civilization." In 1796 Paine wrote *Agrarian Justice* as a response to Watson, the Bishop of Landoff who wrote "the wisdom and goodness of God in having made the rich and poor."<sup>34</sup> Paine was also responding to the suppression of the "conspiracy of the equals" of Gracchus Babeuf, the first communist movement of modern times.<sup>35</sup> In much of *Agrarian Justice* Paine sounds like a variation of Marx. Paine argues that "civilization" creates benefits and

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<sup>32</sup> Eric Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. Oxford University Press: 1976. p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Paine. *The Rights of Man, Part Two* in *Paine: Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. p. 555.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Paine. *Agrarian Justice* in *Paine: Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. p. 396.

evils and one of the first objects of legislation is to deal with those evils. Poverty is not just created by government but by the entire course of "civilization" as it proceeds. The object he argues is to remedy the evils while preserving the benefits. He elaborates further in *Agrarian Justice* some of the ideas he articulated in *The Rights of Man* about the development of the welfare state. First he starts with his main overarching principal: that the condition that every person born into the world after "civilization" commences should not be worse than the period before. He argues that the idea of a landed property started with "civilization." Those who improve the land deserve their share of what improvements they made. But monopoly of the land has created great evil, depriving the dispossessed of the natural inheritance, in which everyone shares. Paine proposed a national fund, where every person would get 15 pounds at age 21, and get 10 pounds every year after the age of 50 and those who are blind or lame would get 10 pounds a year. This system, he argues, will remedy the evils of civilization. So while Paine blames monopoly for the creation of this poverty he does not blame the owners of the land themselves. It is the system of "civilization" itself that is at fault. Landowners have

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<sup>35</sup> Eric Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. Oxford University Press: 1976. p. 249.

improved the land and society gets benefits from that. They can only be blamed if they seek to deny a remedy for the dispossessed. Here he sounds like a halfhearted Marxist, blaming the inherent flaws on the system, while toning down his rhetoric against the wealthy.<sup>36</sup>

Although Paine's analysis is consistent with 19th century radicalism, he was no Leveller. Paine went out of his way to deny that equality of property was either possible or desirable."<sup>37</sup> Paine recognized, at least in Europe, the tensions inherent in creating a liberal state, between the individualism of the market economy that he sees as essential to freedom and the needs of the community, particularly those left dispossessed. In *Agrarian Justice* Paine argues for the development of a generous welfare state that will create a progressive capitalist civilization. Paine goes further against the individualism inherent in liberalism and against the Protestant idea of charity as a solution to poverty. He writes "There are in every country some magnificent charities established by individuals. It is however but little that any individual can do when the whole extent of

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Paine. *Agrarian Justice* in *Paine: Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. pp. 397-400.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. Oxford University Press: 1976. p. 250.

the misery to be relieved be considered. He may satisfy his conscience but not his heart."<sup>38</sup> His plan, he argues, will reach the whole and it ought not to be left to detached individuals whether there will be justice or not. Furthermore, personal property is the effect of society. Individuals cannot make money without society. Part of that money is owed back to the community. In further recognition of the class nature of capitalist society he argues that the accumulation of personal property is often is the result of paying too little for labor.

Louis Hartz argues that support for socialism among the European working class comes from a combination of the European world filled with class hierarchies and a revolutionary spirit of rebellion against those differences. It was Thomas Paine when living in the middle of a revolutionary European world articulated the basics of 19th century radicalism, while also articulating a plan that was a logical precursor to the modern welfare state. But during his time in America he articulated of an American version of liberalism, one that Hartz argues

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Paine. *Agrarian Justice* in *Paine: Collected Writings*. ed. Eric Foner. The Library of America: 1995. p. 406.

Americans mistakenly see as "natural. One that is consistent with American "common sense."<sup>39</sup>

Paine was an articulator of the ideas of the radical movements of the late 18th and early 19th century Transatlantic world. He gave voice to the people's new "common sense" in ways that moved the masses. He expressed the ideas that were circulating that connected to people in exciting ways. At other times he was vilified for expressing unpopular views, particularly when he challenged the American public's "common sense" views on religion.

Applying Gramsci's "common sense" to the life and work of Thomas Paine illuminates the radicalism of the Transatlantic world in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. By following Paine's "common sense" we can examine change, see its obstacles and see how similar ideas play themselves out differently in differing places and contexts.

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<sup>39</sup> Louis Hartz. *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Harcourt Brace: 1955. passim.

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