

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

THOMAS PAINE  
RIGHTS OF MAN  
COMMON SENSE

AND OTHER POLITICAL WRITINGS



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AND OTHER POLITICAL WRITINGS

TOM PAINE was born in Norfolk in 1737. After rudimentary schooling he was apprenticed to his father, a staymaker, and later also tried his hand variously as a teacher, exciseman, and tobacconist. At the age of 37, in 1774, his various enterprises having failed, he emigrated to America. He quickly sided with the colonists in their controversy with Britain and in 1776 wrote two of the most powerful pamphlets of the Revolution, *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*. After the Revolution, in 1787, he returned to Europe and was caught up in the opening stages of the French Revolution. His *Rights of Man* (1791–2), written as a defence of France against Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), was the most widely read pamphlet of the decade. Its success, coupled with the rise of a popular movement for political reform in Britain and Paine's unrepentant *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* (1792) resulted in his being outlawed. A year later, as a deputy to the National Convention in France, he fell foul of the Jacobins and was imprisoned. He was released at the end of 1794 and went on to write *Dissertation on the First Principles of Government* (1795) and *Agrarian Justice* (1796), which develop still further his earlier arguments for an egalitarian yet liberal democratic order. Paine returned to America in 1802, to be vilified as an atheist by the Federation party (primarily because of his *Age of Reason* (1794), an attack on Christianity). He died in obscurity in 1809.

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THOMAS PAINE

*Rights of Man*  
*Common Sense*  
*and Other Political Writings*



*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*

MARK PHILP

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This collection is for my children, Joe, Ruth, and Hannah. Their various contributions gave added resonance to Paine's insistence that 'every age and generation must be free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it.' Given their ages, their sovereignty is still a long way off, although we already disagree about exactly how far. But when it comes, they could do a lot worse than to have Paine's work to hand.

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## INTRODUCTION

BETWEEN 1775 and 1815, from the beginning of the American Revolution to the end of the French, the meaning of the term 'revolution' changed dramatically. In the mid-eighteenth century, revolution involved a change in government, and in a more specialized sense, a return to the basic principles of the constitution: it had no connotations of progressive and permanent change. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the lexicon of reformers and radicals the term had come to mean a process of rapid, fundamental, and progressive social and political change. Reform efforts were no longer directed by a backward-looking concern with an original constitution or uncorrupted state; instead, they became linked to a belief in the advancement of mankind from barbarism to civilization, based on the spread of enlightenment and the recognition of the inalienable rights of man.

No individual's writing better exemplifies this transformation of the language of social and political change than that of Thomas Paine (1737-1809). And no individual has a better claim to be the world's first international revolutionary. Paine was a man of multiple citizenships: he played a major role in the American and French Revolutions, and did his best to ensure their imitation in Britain and Ireland. He had a wide circle of acquaintance among leading figures of this age of revolutions, including Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, Burke, Condorcet, Lafayette, Danton, and Napoleon. He also held office under the Continental Congress during the American Revolution, acted as unofficial ambassador for America in Britain in the late 1780s, and in 1792 was an elected member of the French National Convention. In Britain, he earned the double distinction of being the most widely read of the radical pamphleteers of the 1790s, and the one whose works were most often prosecuted. He was outlawed in Britain in 1792, nearly guillotined in France in 1794, and anathematized as a Jacobin and infidel in America on his return in 1802.



Unlike most of those with whom he worked, however, Paine was not born into a position of power and influence. His father was a stay-maker of modest means, able to provide only a basic education for his son at the local grammar school, together with a training in his craft. Neither the education nor the training was much appreciated: Paine ran off to sea while working for his father, and although he later practised as a stay-maker, he found alternative ways of making a living when he could. In the first thirty-seven years of his life, almost without exception, nothing to which he turned his hand succeeded. In 1774 he emigrated to America after failure as a stay-maker, excise officer, tobacco-nist, sometime teacher, and as a husband. He was a disillusioned and disappointed man, but he was still, as far as we know, reasonably orthodox in his political views.

The fever he contracted on the voyage to America nearly killed him, but once he had recovered he secured employment as an editorial assistant and writer for the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, based in Philadelphia. In this role, and through his developing contacts in coffee-house society in the city, he was introduced to American politics just as the first casualties of the conflict with Britain fell at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. In January 1776 he published his *Common Sense*, the most powerful and widely read of the early demands for American Independence from Britain. Within a year it sold over 150,000 copies and, according to many contemporaries, it did more than any other publication to persuade America of the justice and necessity of independence. Thereafter, Paine became a major figure in the pamphlet and newspaper controversies of the Revolution, and in both local and national politics. He brought his pen to bear whenever he felt the American cause needed upholding, and he wrote some of his finest prose in the bleakest days of the war. Most famously, as Washington's troops retreated again and again in the face of the British advance in December 1776, he provided the rallying cry his new countrymen needed:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of every man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. (p. 63)

Paine's services to the cause of independence were recognized by the Continental Congress, who employed him as secretary to its Foreign Affairs committee. The appointment was short-lived: Paine leaked privileged information in an attempt to prove the untrustworthiness of Silas Deane, one of Congress's agents negotiating with France. Although widely attacked at the time, Paine was subsequently vindicated when Deane, in 1781, wrote a series of letters from Antwerp encouraging reunion with Britain. But Paine had already been rehabilitated, having been appointed clerk to the Pennsylvania Assembly in November 1779, and Congress acknowledged his value by paying him a salary from the secret service fund to write for the congressional cause as the war drew to an end. As the last of his *American Crisis* letters makes clear, he was convinced of the need for a federal power to act as a unifying force in what threatened to be a fragmented country.

Paine's commitment to America was unconditional; he fought for it with the passion of a convert. Yet, as John Quincy Adams later remarked, he had 'no country, no affections that constitute the pillars of patriotism'.<sup>1</sup> What Adams refused to acknowledge was that Paine's devotion was not to the country itself, but to the principles for which it stood: to liberty and equality, and to the prospect of realizing a political order based on representative government, unscarred by the European legacy of hereditary privilege and monarchical government. Paine took America to his heart in the same way as he later adopted the cause of revolution in Europe: for the principles it sought to realize, not because of some emotional attachment to place. In abandoning his native country in 1774, he left behind all particular attach-

<sup>1</sup> Cited in David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York, 1974), 33.

ments. Although *Common Sense* is a clarion call to Americans to defend their patrimony, it is one which proclaims universal values of freedom and equality and which rests its appeal on reason, nature, and sentiment. In keeping with these commitments, Paine characterizes himself not as British, American, or French, but as a citizen of the world, and the cause he defends is similarly universal in scope: 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.' (p. 53)

These were not, for Paine, mere theoretical claims. He was not an abstract political theorist, nor is it easy to identify those thinkers by whom he was influenced. He was wholly self-taught in political theory and he disclaimed any indebtedness to others, insisting, for example, that he had never read Locke. His political philosophy is less the product of a system and more a response to the polemical cut and thrust of contemporary political controversy. It is easy to see why commentators, such as J. G. A. Pocock, find him 'difficult to fit into any kind of category'.<sup>2</sup> Paine's political theory was forged in political conflict and hammered out in the midst of war and revolution. When writing he drew on the arguments of coffee-house political circles and on the cultural baggage he had accumulated on his travels. He had an astonishing memory, not least for his own writings, which contemporaries claimed he could and would recite in full at the drop of a hat. Comments by others also clearly stuck in his mind—such as a phrase from an obscure Italian political theorist, Dragonetti (pp. 33 and 359)—but, for the most part, he collected material from his discussions with others and from sources close to hand, and worked them up into his own distinctive style of argument. There is, however, a basic touchstone for Paine's thinking, namely his enduring intellectual and personal investment in his distinctive understanding of the American Revolution. In the translation of the American cause from a little local difficulty into the cause of all the world, Paine found a sense of purpose and a sense of himself which he had lacked in England. Paine's American Revolution was one which legitimated, and gave a focus for,

<sup>2</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), 276.

the resentments, frustrations, and anger generated by his life in England. In embracing the new world he was repudiating the old; in beginning the world again he was starting his own life again; and when he returned to Europe and became involved in the reform movements of Britain and France, he sought to reform the old world in the light of the new.

In the five years after the end of the war, Paine more or less left politics behind, becoming absorbed in a series of scientific experiments—some on a design for a smokeless candle, but most concerning the design and construction of a single-arched iron bridge. The bridge bore the trademark of its country of origin: made up of thirteen sections (the number of states), it was designed to span the rivers of America whose spring ice floes made bridges using piers unsuitable. Ever impatient, Paine balked at the long delays he met in Pennsylvania as the State Assembly debated whether to fund a bridge on his design to span the Schuylkill, and decided to try his luck with it in Europe. In April 1787 he embarked for France.

Paine travelled between England and France from 1787 to 1792, initially because of negotiations over financing and building a model of his bridge, but increasingly because of his involvement with the politics of the two countries. When in England he visited leading members of the opposition and acted as an informal source of information for Thomas Jefferson (then American Ambassador in Paris) about British attitudes to America and France. Through his contacts in Paris, first through Jefferson and Lafayette, and subsequently through the liberal intellectuals of the Girondins,<sup>3</sup> he kept in touch with the opening stages of the revolution and was soon drawn into it in a more practical way. In September 1792, despite being unable to speak French, Paine found himself nominated and elected as a representative to the National Convention in three constituencies. His

<sup>3</sup> The Girondins were a loosely organized political grouping in the early period of the French Revolution, named after the area of origin, the Gironde, of several of their deputies. The group was distinctive for its early republicanism and its advocacy of war. After a period of ascendancy in 1792 they fell from power in the late spring of 1793.

reputation in France was partly derived from his American writings (which, thus far, had been suitably edited in translation to remove the attacks on monarchy) and his *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* (1782), in which he sought to explain the nature and significance of the American Revolution to a European audience. But it had a more recent basis in his *Rights of Man* (1791 and 1792), written as a defence of the French Revolution and its principles in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

Burke's *Reflections* was a double-edged attack aimed at both the French revolutionaries and their English sympathizers. It provoked a pamphlet war which began by challenging Burke's interpretation of events in France, but quickly became a polarizing controversy about the basic principles of politics. This controversy in turn prompted a revival of the extra-parliamentary movement for reform which had first appeared in the wake of the American war. By early 1792, organizations for political discussion and for promoting reform in Britain were spreading throughout the country; and the initiative for political reform began to move from the élite-dominated associations of the early 1780s to the democratically organized, mass-membership societies of the middling and artisan ranks. The political aspirations of these societies began moderately but many developed radical demands for annual parliaments, universal manhood suffrage, and the reform of the apportionment of parliamentary seats. As the government proved increasingly hostile to reform, attitudes hardened and the societies looked for new ways to exert pressure on parliament.

Paine's *Rights of Man*, issued in two parts (March 1791 and February 1792), was without doubt the single most successful response to Burke, selling in unprecedented numbers and circulated throughout the country by the radical societies. Moreover, it undoubtedly helped radicalize the aspirations of many in the societies. The pamphlet's success so alarmed the government that in May 1792 a Royal Proclamation against seditious writing was issued, together with a warrant against its author. By the time the case came to court, Paine was in France, helping to design a republican

constitution. The hand-picked jury outlawed him, and he never returned to England. Thereafter, the radical movement in Britain was led into an ever more confrontational stance towards the government, spurred on both by Paine's *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* (1792), which called for a convention to be popularly elected to create a republican constitution, and by government prosecutions and the rise of popular loyalism. Early in 1794, Scottish courts handed out draconian sentences against radical activists attending a British convention for reform in Edinburgh; and in May 1794 the leading members of the two major English organizations, the Society for Constitutional Information and the London Corresponding Society, were arrested and held in the Tower. They were eventually acquitted at the end of the year but although their fortunes revived in the summer of 1795, when there was extensive popular protest against food shortages and the war, they were further constrained in their activities by acts passed at the end of 1795. Although radical societies continued to meet until the early 1800s, they were increasingly forced to do so clandestinely.

Meanwhile, Paine's involvement in France had become a more hazardous enterprise. He was denounced by Marat for speaking against the execution of Louis XVI, and was associated by Robespierre with the Girondins, who were arrested in June and executed in October 1793; as a result he was left increasingly exposed. He was finally arrested, in December 1793, a matter of days after completing the first part of his denunciation of Christianity and priestcraft, the *Age of Reason*. His ambiguous nationality did not help him: as a British national he could be imprisoned without trial; as an American, he could claim more consideration. But the American Minister, Gouverneur Morris, refused to claim him as a fellow national, thereby condemning him to continued imprisonment and probable death. Paine somehow avoided the summary trial to which victims of the Jacobin Terror were subjected, and he also narrowly escaped death from the diseases rife in the Luxembourg prison. Luckily—on his account, providentially—he survived both Robespierre's 'Reign of Terror' and Morris's indifference to his

plight, and with the recall of Morris and the intervention of his replacement, James Monroe, he was released in November 1794.

Paine's involvement with the French Revolution continued after his recovery. He remained a member of the Convention, and was unanimously welcomed back by it in the winter of 1794-5. He also published two of his most important pamphlets in the following twenty-four months. In *Dissertations on First Principles of Government* (1795), he attacked the limitations on suffrage included in the Constitution of 1795 and made unequivocal his commitment to universal manhood suffrage. This was followed by *Agrarian Justice* (1797), in which he responded to the attempted coups by left and right against the Directory by elaborating a justification and a plan for a basic inheritance right for all citizens at the age of twenty-one, to be derived from taxation and provided as compensation for the private ownership of land. Although his *Rights of Man: Part Two* (1792) had advanced a plan for a redistributive element in taxation, it was only in *Agrarian Justice* that he justified such claims and linked them to a more general argument about the social responsibilities of legitimate government.

When Paine finally returned to America in 1802, fifteen years after leaving, the political atmosphere had changed dramatically and he found himself a ready target for Federalist attack. This was partly a result of his writings—his *Age of Reason* (1795 and 1796), with its assault on Christianity and the authority of the Bible, and his bitter invective in his *Letter to George Washington* (1795) against what he saw as his abandonment by America during his time in the Luxembourg, alienated many. So too did his public boasting of his friendship with Jefferson, who was now president. Jefferson stuck by his friend, and even had him to stay at the White House; and Paine continued to write, becoming increasingly vituperative in his attacks on the Federalists, but he never regained his former standing. His health gradually deteriorated and he became subject to fits. Never a temperate man, nor clean in his personal habits, he ended his life in squalid isolation, cared for by the wife of his friend Nicolas Bonne-

ville, with whom he had lived in Paris. After his death, his one-time critic turned disciple, William Cobbett, had his bones dug up and returned to England, where they were promptly lost. The absence of a final resting place is not inappropriate. Paine's philosophy was universal: he was a better 'citizen of the world' than he could ever have been the subject of a state.

Paine's writings bear witness to his revolutionary activities, and provide us with a detailed picture of the evolving understanding of social and political change at the end of the eighteenth century. They also help us to see that Paine himself plays an important role in this process.

The changing understanding of revolutions in this period is attested by Paine's developing sense of the significance of the American Revolution. *Common Sense* insists on the exceptional character of the American case, seeing it as an asylum for mankind, the last uncorrupted country and resting place for freedom. The biblical parallel to Noah is explicit: 'The inhabitants of heaven long to see the ark finished in which all the liberty and true religion in the world are to be deposited'.<sup>4</sup> However, he also believes that Americans must seize the time or their liberty will be lost: 'Virtue is not hereditary, neither is it perpetual' (p. 52); if America remains under English rule she will succumb to the corruption which marks the states of Europe. Yet he does not represent America as a state of nature: 'Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence' (p. 5), and there is no attempt to claim that America retains its original state of innocence. His optimism about America's role rests on his view that the country is united by interest, reason, and sentiment—that is, by a common sense that the collective good can no longer be served by subservience to Britain. The very title of Paine's first revolutionary work appeals to the utterly obvious nature of Americans' shared interests and concerns, and to the naturalness and reasonableness of their common cause: 'as well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the

<sup>4</sup> Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (Secaucus, NJ, 1948), ii. 93.



continent forgive the murders of Britain'. (p. 35) But Paine also appeals to virtue: his readers should not mistake 'a cold matter of interest' for the demands of their 'bounden duty'.<sup>5</sup> They must be prepared to pay the costs of their just resistance. They must try the case not solely by reference to their interests, but 'by those feelings and affections which nature justifies, and without which we should be incapable of discharging the social duties of life, or enjoying the felicities of it'. (p. 26)

As the revolution draws to a close a more general set of claims begins to emerge in his writings. The reconciliation of the liberty and property of the individual with the claims of the common good is achieved less by an appeal to virtue and more in terms of the triumph of reason. 'The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark . . . There is no possibility, neither is there any term to express the supposition by; of the mind *unknowing* anything it already knows'.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with this new optimism, his *Rights of Man* and his other later works present America as setting the example which the rest of the world will follow. What was first seen as an exception now sets the rule: 'The independence of America . . . (has) been accompanied by a revolution in the principles and practice of governments.' 'No sooner did the America governments display themselves to the world, than despotism felt a shock, and man began to contemplate redress.' (p. 210) Now that such revolutions have begun 'it is natural to expect that other revolutions will follow.' 'Reason, like time, will make its own way, and prejudice will fall in its combat with interest.' (p. 212) In these works Paine moves from a static conception of revolution to one which sees it as the product of the progress of reason and civilization through history. In place of the pre-political pastoral idyll indicated in the opening pages of *Common Sense*—'the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise' (p. 5)—the idyll is now projected into the future: 'the more perfect civilisation is, the less occasion it has for government.' (p. 216)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* i. 205.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 244.

As Paine generalizes the American case, he leaves behind the parochial conventions of much eighteenth-century political thought. The shibboleths of mixed government—the balanced constitution, the Revolution Settlement of 1688, and the rights of the free-born Englishman—are systematically jettisoned. In their place he advances a political theory based on the equal natural rights of man, which he subsequently develops into an argument for equal rights of citizenship and a degree of economic equality.

Although there is a clear egalitarianism throughout Paine's writing, such as his denunciation of hereditary orders in *Common Sense*, his debunking of titles in *Rights of Man*, and his arguments for some element of distributive equality in *Agrarian Justice*, he only gradually develops the distinctions between natural and civil rights which mark *Rights of Man*, and only later still does he link rights claims to questions of material equality. The earliest works do insist on the natural equality of men and their equal right to freedom: 'Whenever I use the words *freedom* or *rights*, I desire to be understood to mean a perfect equality of them. Let the rich man enjoy his riches, and the poor man comfort himself in his poverty. But the floor of freedom is as level as water.'<sup>7</sup> However, the equality of rights is largely implicit in *Common Sense*, and while there is an indication in his *Candid and Critical remarks on a Letter signed Ludlow* (1777) of the distinction between natural and civil rights which is explicitly drawn in *Rights of Man*, there is little sign in this earlier work of the equally important distinction between perfect and imperfect rights.

*Remarks on Ludlow* . . . suggests a view of natural rights as liberties appropriate to the state of nature which are exchanged for civil rights in a state of society. In the *Rights of Man*, written nearly fifteen years later, he insists that 'every civil right has for its foundation, some natural right pre-existing in the individual, but to the enjoyment of which his individual power is not, in all cases, sufficiently competent'. We can thus distinguish between those natural rights 'in which the power to execute is as perfect as the right itself'

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. ii. 287.

(p. 119)—as in the right of freedom of conscience—and those in which the power of the individual is imperfect. This distinction, however, is not the fruit of Paine's response to Burke, since it is foreshadowed in a letter written to Thomas Jefferson in February 1788—a letter prompted by a discussion the evening before (probably in the company of Lafayette and other French constitutional reformers) of a pamphlet by James Wilson on the new federal constitution. This letter is an important link between Paine's thinking on America and his later contributions to the reform movements in Europe.

The distinction between natural and civil rights was commonly, but loosely, drawn in the eighteenth century. Burke himself invokes the distinction in his *Reflections*. But what was at issue between Burke and Paine was the question of how far natural rights are surrendered for the rights of civil society. In 1788, Paine read Wilson as arguing that the more rights we entrust to civil society the better. Burke similarly insists that the advantages of civil society cannot be secured without the surrender of 'the first fundamental right of uncovenanted man, that is, the right to judge for himself, and to assert his own cause . . . Man cannot enjoy the rights of an uncivil and of a civil state together.'<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the first part of *Rights of Man* argues that where our power to execute our natural right is perfect government has no legitimate jurisdiction. Thus freedom of conscience is a natural right which no government can curtail. Where we need the assistance of others to enforce our natural right, as in the right to redress, we 'deposit this right in the common stock of society'. We do not give up the right so much as entrust it, and society does not grant us anything we are not already owed by natural right. Our civil rights are simply those natural rights for which we require 'the arm of society'. (p. 120)

With hindsight we can recognize distinct currents of thought in the eighteenth century on these issues, but for

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1993), 60. See also Wks. 110; O'B. 150; p. 52 (these abbreviations refer to other editions as indicated on p. 435).

many of those who used rights arguments, not least Burke and Paine, it was often only in the heat of debate that their inchoate sense of these distinctions crystallized into clear doctrinal positions. Paine's settled view of the distinction between natural and civil rights emerges in his discussions with Jefferson on the Federal constitution. In the second part of his response to Burke, however, he extends his position to make a more general set of claims concerning social equality and the welfare of citizens, and he develops his argument still further in *Agrarian Justice*.

In *Agrarian Justice* the rights-based, rather Lockean, claims for formal equality of *Rights of Man* are expanded into a more substantive (un-Lockean) egalitarianism. Moreover, where Paine had once praised the pacific effects of commerce, he now doubts that either commerce, or civilization more generally, is inevitably beneficial. Civilization has operated in two ways: 'to make one part of society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot of either in a natural state'. (p. 416) To remedy the defects which arise from the inequality of property, Paine argues that each proprietor owes a ground rent to the community for the land he or she cultivates. There are limits to the amount of redistribution Paine believes is justified. He holds that the cultivator has a right to his or her produce while the claims of others are limited to a ground rent, based on their original common title to the earth. But he also begins to recognize that the distinctions between land and cultivation, and between the individual's efforts and the effects of society, are not easily drawn. Wages are not always just, not least in that they do not take into account the needs of a whole lifetime—so that many labourers become indigent when they are no longer able to work. By paying too little for labour, 'the working hand perishes in old age, and the employer abounds in affluence'. (p. 428) For these reasons, private property cannot be treated as wholly inviolable; society has a legitimate role in regulating it. Indeed, as he argues in his *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*, the right to property is but one right, 'and that not of the most essential kind. The protection

of a man's person is more sacred than the protection of property . . .' (p. 400)

For Paine, the state of civilization which prevails in Europe is 'as unjust in its principle, as it is horrid in its effects; and it is the consciousness of this, and the apprehension that such a state cannot continue when once investigation begins in any country, that makes the possessors of property dread every idea of revolution'. (pp. 428-9) The solution is clear: each person must benefit from the system of private property which is established. To achieve this requires that the riches of one are seen to benefit the condition of the poorest: 'when the more riches a man acquires, the better it shall be for the general mass; it is then that antipathies will cease, and property be placed on the permanent basis of national interest and protection'. (p. 429). That is, 'to form a system, that, while it preserves one part of society from wretchedness, shall secure the other part from depredation'. (p. 429) Inequalities, when restrained by the principle of reciprocal benefit, will remove the social basis for revolution and will provide a firm foundation for government.

From a sense of the equality of mankind, and from a recognition that the proper end of government is the protection of those natural rights for which our natural power is deficient, Paine also develops a further extension of rights theory—namely, the right to self-government. In the second part of *Rights of Man* he uses the American example to show the appropriate relationships between the nation, its constitution and its government. Paine is a constitutionalist, not in the sense of favouring an intricate and balanced system for the division of constitutional powers, but in the sense of believing that a government can only be legitimate if it operates within a constitution established by a sovereign people. 'A constitution is a thing *antecedent* to a government, and a government is only the creature of a constitution.' (p. 122) The necessary complement to his account of natural rights is his assertion of the ultimate sovereignty of the people. It is first expressed tentatively in *Common Sense*—'A government of our own is our natural right'—and subsequently insisted on in *Rights of Man*: 'a nation has at all

times an inherent, indefeasible right to abolish any form of Government it finds inconvenient, and establish such as accords with its interest, disposition, and happiness'. (p. 193) In his *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* and *Dissertation on First Principles*, he makes it clear that the sovereign people must retain their individual sovereignty through their right to vote for their representatives. 'The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected. To take away this right is to reduce a man to a state of slavery . . .' (p. 398) (This view makes his lack of interest in women's suffrage seem strikingly myopic.)

From his starting point of the rights of man, Paine develops arguments for popular sovereignty, universal suffrage, representative government, and a citizenship based on formal equality and on the existence of a threshold of welfare below which individuals will not fall. It is these basic principles which he believes the revolutions of America and France have established, and which demonstrate their radically different character from their predecessors. The changes they have brought about are both progressive and permanent: 'Ignorance is of a peculiar nature; once dispelled, it is impossible to re-establish it . . . though man may be *kept* ignorant, he cannot be *made* ignorant.' (p. 169) The artifices by which monarchy, aristocracy, and hereditary government have retained their hold in Europe are being stripped away as the 'principles of universal reformation' inaugurated in the American Revolution spread irresistibly across the world. (p. 210) 'Government founded on a *moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible, hereditary rights of man*, is now revolving from West to East, by a stronger impulse than the government of the sword revolved from East to West. It . . . promises a new era to the human race.' (p. 213) As despotisms decline, and the representative system spreads, 'the animosities and prejudices fomented by the intrigues and artifice of courts will cease' as will the ruinous wars of Europe. '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.' (p. 321)

Revolutions may invoke matters of principle, but they must be made by men and women. Modern revolutions, indeed, have been characterized by the involvement of the people—the masses, as they have been contemptuously referred to. In the nineteenth century, the espousal of revolutionary principles was coupled for the most part with attempts to harness the revolutionary agency of the working people. The roots of this mass-mobilization have been recognized in the activities of the Parisian *sansculottes* and in those of their artisan brethren in the radical societies of London. There have also been attempts to identify precursors in the radical artisan circles in which Paine mixed in Philadelphia. But to insist on the class credentials of these groups is of limited value. Modern historiography rightly encourages us to think less about some a-priori conception of class, and more about the processes by which groups come to be bound together by a common political lexicon and by common aspirations and objectives.

While it is possible to insist on Paine's class credentials, which are certainly closer to the artisan classes than most of his radical contemporaries, it is more instructive to focus on the part he plays in the formation of a populist, democratic political discourse levelled against the hierarchical and elitist orders of the *anciens régimes* of Europe. Paine is one of the first and most brilliant stylists of a vernacular prose, capable of reaching the ordinary reader and shattering the traditional attitudes of respect and deference for their social and political superiors. Although there was a growing movement in the print culture of the late eighteenth century which experimented with a more accessible prose style, Paine is undoubtedly one of its most strikingly successful exponents. Even today, readers find Paine's plain, unpretentious style both readable and powerful. Two hundred years ago, many found it a revelation. It is not difficult to imagine the impact of the first *Crisis* being read aloud to the dispirited troops of Washington's army; nor to doubt that Paine's words would have echoed in the minds of many after their subsequent triumph at Trenton. Similarly, it is easy to see the appeal of Paine's forthright iconoclasm when denouncing hereditary

and monarchical institutions in the *Rights of Man*. An audience composed of 'those whom providence dooms to live on trust', as Burke put it,<sup>9</sup> would have had no difficulty in appreciating Paine's insistence on their rights as members of a sovereign people against the absurdities of the hereditary system: '... the idea of hereditary legislators 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.' (p. 134) The system is clearly risible, but it is also insulting: 'To inherit a government, is to inherit the people, as if they were flocks and herds.' (p. 224) This is angry, and powerfully assertive, prose: 'All that the noble asks of me is that I recognise his superiority because of his birth, while the king requires my submission: I am amused by the noble; I feel like setting my foot upon the King.'<sup>10</sup>

Because of the easy style of his writing and his knack of capturing the sentiments of his readers (and because he never sought to control the copyright of his work), Paine's pamphlets achieved phenomenally high sales and circulation. In America, *Common Sense* was the most widely sold pamphlets of the whole Revolution; in Britain, the *Rights of Man* outsold Burke three times over within two years; in ten years it probably did so thirtyfold. Indeed, he was prosecuted in Britain less for what he said than for the fact that it was not confined to 'the judicious reader' but was reaching those 'whose minds cannot be supposed to be conversant with subjects of this sort . . . the ignorant, the credulous, the desperate'.<sup>11</sup> The sheer reach of his work indicates his importance in forcing a broadening of the political nation and the democratizing of national politics. If he did not succeed in undermining the frauds of hereditary and monarchical imposition and priestcraft, he forced them to defend their claims before a larger audience whose loyalty could no longer be assumed.

The success of the *Rights of Man* and its prosecution

<sup>9</sup> *Reflections*, M. 97; Wks. 147; O'B. 195-6; P. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Foner, ii. 545.

<sup>11</sup> *State Trials*, ed. T. B. Howell (London, 1812-20), xxii, case 574, 381-3.



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