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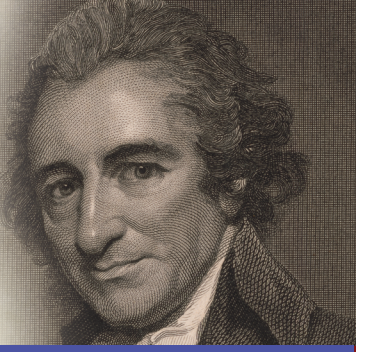
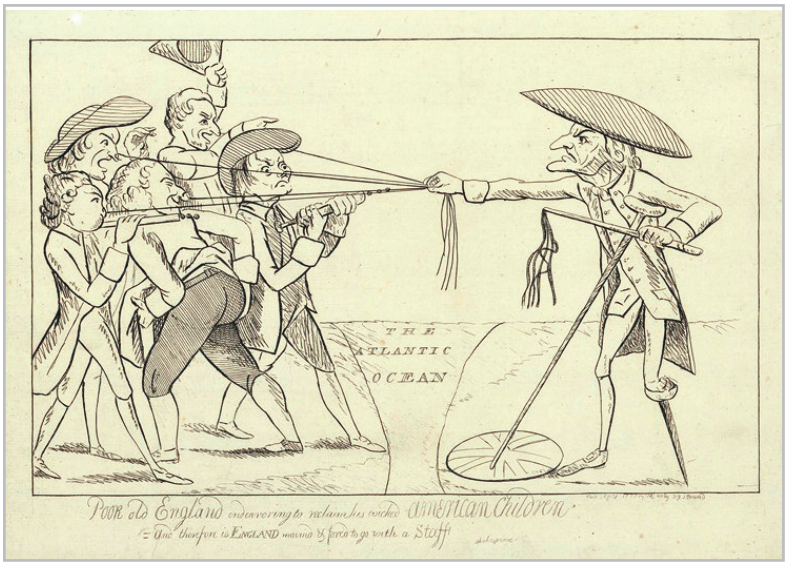


FEBRUARY 2026

Thomas Paine and Three Revolutions That Weren't

Gregory Claeys

FROM A SPEECH BY DR. CLAEYS IN LEWES, ENGLAND ON JANUARY 10, 2026, CELEBRATING THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF *COMMON SENSE*. REPRINTED WITH THE AUTHOR'S CONSENT



"Poor old England endeavoring to reclaim his wicked American children," a 1777 political cartoon shows England trying to hold on to five Americans on the other side of the Atlantic. The American in dark pants is believed to be Paine.
THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Good afternoon, and welcome. I am very grateful to Iain McDaniel and his co-organisers for bringing us together here to reassess one of the greatest figures of his time, Thomas Paine. This is an honourable, but no small task, in 2026, the 250th anniversary of the American colonies' Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. Paine's role as a "Founding Father" has often been airbrushed from history. It is time to restore him to his rightful place.

First a brief indulgent personal note, on my affection for Paine. Born in Thetford, Norfolk, he emigrated to America, then to France for a decade. I was born in France, moved to America for thirteen years, and have lived in England for forty more. My English ancestors emigrated to America in the 1850s from Cawston, Norfolk, a few miles from Paine's birthplace. Such movements broaden, while unsettling, people's outlook. Many find Paine's cosmopolitanism attractive, while ignoring the resulting alienation he endured. Today I feel I know the man more intimately than ever. One result of studying someone for a long time is that if they knocked on your door (I have dreamt this!), you would greet them as a friend, invite them in, and know what to say. So I half-expect an imminent Paine visit. We might repair to my local pub. Alas, it's "The Crown," on Crown Road. Sorry Tom!

And so to the more serious themes before us. My talk today celebrates the publication in June, 2026 by Princeton University Press of a six-volume edition of Paine's writings and correspondence. Many thanks are owed to my other five distinguished editors (Scott Cleary is here today), whose patience, fortitude, and sometimes downright heroic efforts over six years of intense labour have exhausted every imaginable pun on our subject's name, and then some. Our edition supplants Philip Foner's now-standard 1945 two-volume collection of Paine's works. It includes 403 letters, of which 166 are new, or nearly 80 percent more than in Foner.

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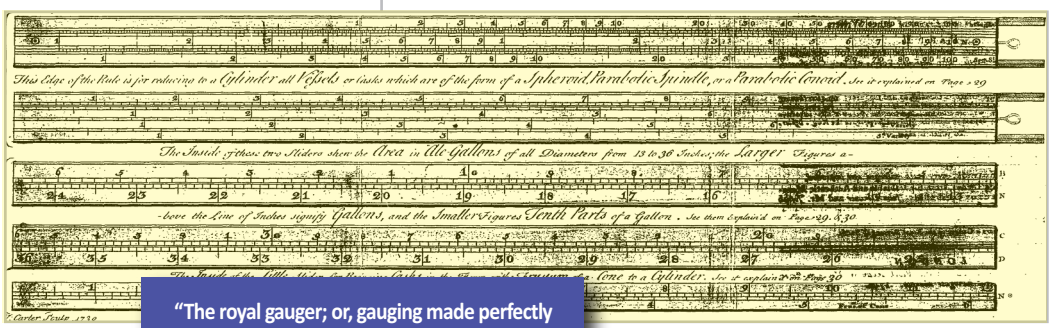
Studies in Thomas Paine seeks to expand the available knowledge of Paine's life, philosophy, politics, impact, and writings. We publish articles about Paine that are academic in nature, to discuss topics important to our membership and the public. Before publication, all articles are reviewed for rigor by a TPHA team and cleared by the authors. We welcome your comments of support or criticism, and may publish them in *Studies in Thomas Paine* as well.

Text-analysis software and author-attribution methodology have been used to tentatively identify several hundred new contributions by Paine, including, very controversially, parts of about half (34/69) of the famous "Junius" letters of 1769-72.[1] These powerfully defended the rights of Britons against corrupt and rapacious governments.[2] Twenty-nine of Paine's supposed writings are also de-attributed. At some 1.7 million words, this edition is more than half again as long as Foner's. My general introduction to the texts of over 100,000 words is the first study to use this material to portray his achievements.

A NEW PORTRAIT OF PAINE

The edition gives us quite a new portrait of Paine. We believe that, despite his later disavowals, he was a major contributor to the radical press from the late 1750s, writing anonymously and pseudonymously, a paragraph here and a letter there, on parliamentary reform, press freedom, and governmental corruption long before his first supposed 1772 publication, *The Case of the Officers of Excise.* His likely collaborators, usually unknown to each other, included Benjamin Franklin, James Burgh, and possibly Edmund Burke. His promotion of democratic republicanism in France in the 1790s can now also be further detailed, as can his frequent interventions into American politics and considerable popularity after his return in 1802, a period when he has often been supposed to have been inactive and shunned for his religious beliefs. So the awkward myth that a self-educated Paine suddenly burst upon the world writing brilliant prose in 1776, having emigrated to America after he "failed" in Britain, is disposed of, as is that of his steep decline in his dotage.



"The royal gauger; or, gauging made perfectly easy, as it is actually practised by the officers of His Majesty's revenue of excise." Paine would have used a device like this as he rode as an excise officer.

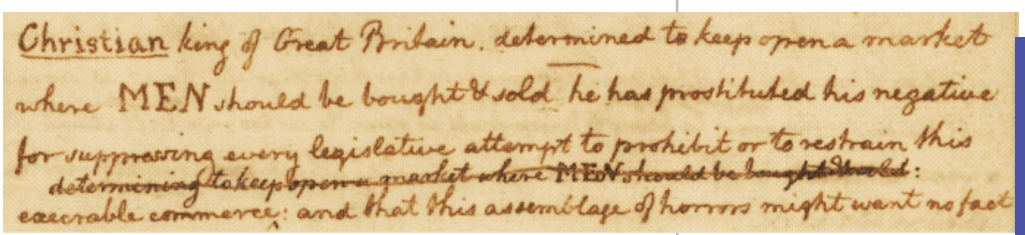
Of course it impossible to recount all this in one talk. Today I want to concentrate on Paine's shifting approach to democracy and republicanism by offering an overview of his role in the three great revolutionary events of his era, that of the American colonists; of British radicals seeking parliamentary reform; and of France in overthrowing Louis XVI and creating the first French republic. In Paine's eyes these events can be depicted in terms of three "failed" revolutions, bearing in mind, as Chou En-lai remarked of the French Revolution, that the jury is still out on this narrative. Of these, obviously, no "British revolution" occurred. (Don't hold your breath.) But to Paine, two other apparent "failures" were evident: that of the Americans, who permitted too much executive power, or what Paine termed "monarchical government," in the 1789 Constitution; and that of the French, who retreated from democratic equality in limiting the franchise in 1795, and then suffered Bonaparte's humiliating usurpation of power in 1799.

So the two key points indicated here for students of Paine and republicanism are: firstly, that from 1776-1792 Paine came to believe that if you valued political independence in the form of universal suffrage, you had to support some economic independence, or what we today call Universal Basic Income. Political independence was useless without economic independence. It is a lesson we have yet to fully appreciate. Secondly, Paine, for all his invocations of civic virtue, saw that all power corrupts, even in republics. Constant and effective checks on executive, judicial and legislative positions are mandatory. This, too, we have not yet adequately grasped.

None of the key political developments of his lifetime thus matched Paine's ideal of a universal democratic republic. Paine died somewhat embittered and disappointed. His aims of universal democracy, one man (as was then common), one vote, with great limits on executive authority and terms of office for elected public servants, and on the influence of charismatic or personal leadership, were in tatters. He would have been very unhappy at the uncivilised celebration of ignorance, stupidity, prejudice, and anti-intellectualism which besmirches our own era. But his views on limiting executive power have today taken on an entirely new meaning. Paine once boasted that "in America *the law is king*." Even in England the King never had immunity from prosecution. "No Kings" would indeed be his motto again now.

But let us not get ahead of the narrative.

The first of Paine's revolutions was announced with the unparalleled success of his anti-monarchical diatribe, *Common Sense*, of January 1776, in the July Declaration of Independence, and then the 1787 Constitution. Paine's role in instigating the Revolution was vital. As his friend James Carver succinctly put it, "No Paine, no Congress, no Independence." In the weeks the Declaration was being composed he lived near Thomas Jefferson in Philadelphia. Some suppose he supplied the anti-slavery paragraph in the original draft, which the Continental Congress removed. (Some 40 of the 56 signatories to the Declaration were slave-holders.)


Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this ~~determining to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold~~: execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact

The deletion read:

...determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: ~~determining to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold:~~ and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact.

To Paine, this deletion was the original sin of American history, seconded only by the Constitution. At this time Paine was associated with a group of Philadelphia radicals who sought to maximise popular democracy and to limit executive power. They included a professor, James Cannon; a beer brewer, Timothy Matlack; and two physicians, Benjamin Rush and Thomas Young. In June 1776, Paine and Franklin supported a Pennsylvanian proposal to extend the franchise to all resident tax-paying adult males who had renounced allegiance to Britain. This was the only way, he later noted, to avoid the "private pilfering" of the poor by the rich.[3]

The other key issue was what "checks and balances" ruling bodies might require. Short terms of office and other restraints were essential. It has been claimed that "few readers followed *Common Sense* in its rejection of the principle of balanced government itself."[4] But it has also been argued that on this issue, at this time, "the current of public opinion ran strongly with Thomas Paine rather than John Adams" (his great, philo-monarchical, opponent in this debate).[5] Paine's view contrasted sharply with those of John Cartwright, John Horne Tooke, and James Burgh, who supported a mixed constitution, with Cartwright and Tooke specifically rejecting his ultra-democratic republicanism.

Paine's confidence in unicameral legislatures echoed his faith in the average person's ability to discern and then act on the common good, and to reason and judge of character with clarity. We might question these judgments today. But they clearly hinged on the expectation of extensive education. This faith also jars sharply with his suspicion of political power as such. People, he seems to have thought, were largely honest and moral. Give them power, and the opposite might, even was likely, to be true. Corruption was one great British problem Paine had first confronted. And it soon became a great American problem.

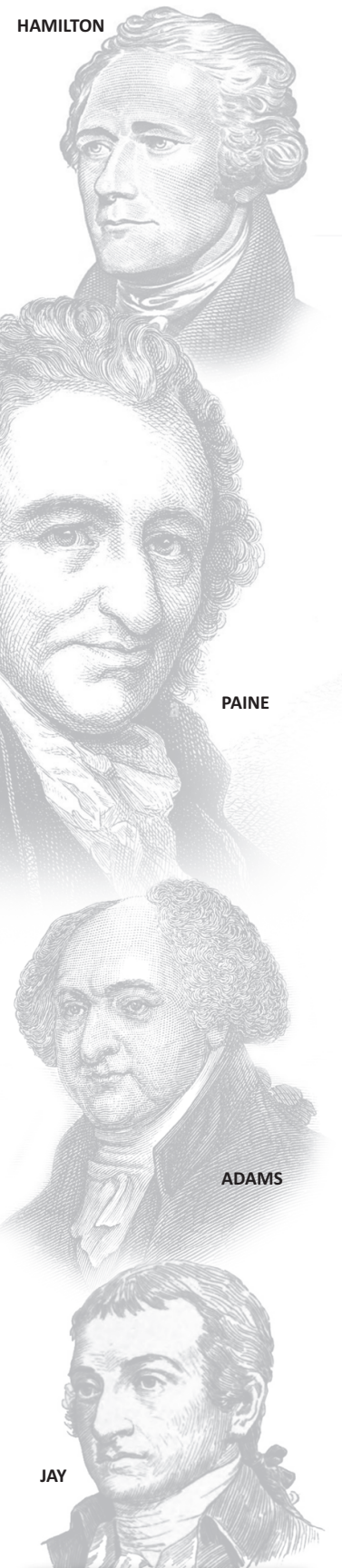
The American plan was to let enslavement wither away by ending the importation of people, followed by forbidding the movement of bonds-people to the Western Territories, plus provisions for easier manumission.

So the franchise issue—who can be presumed to be able to vote intelligently and independently—was highly contentious. Early on, at least, Benjamin Franklin sought to exclude anyone subject to undue influence, including minors and servants, as Paine also seemingly did briefly as late as 1778, upholding a requirement of personal independence and presenting a contradiction that only his 1792 and 1796 welfare programs could solve.[6] We should recall that Cartwright, Burgh, and John Wilkes thought only property owners should hold political office, while still more aristocratic republicans, like Thomas Brand Hollis, believed that "the lower class of people should not be taught even to read & write." So much for the progressive character of republicanism as such.

"THE MOST VITAL PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD"

The radicals' efforts produced the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776-90, which Richard Ryerson terms "perhaps the most vital participatory democracy in the world."[7] Here one member from each county in the state formed the twelve-member Supreme Executive Council, serving seven years but lacking veto power. Its president was elected for a one-year term by both the general assembly, who served a year but no more than four in any seven, and the Supreme Executive Council. The assembly appointed judges for seven years, who were removable at any time. A Council of Censors, elected under identical terms and conditions, could order impeachments and repeal laws deemed unconstitutional, and could alone call conventions to amend the constitution. Power resided in the general assembly, who selected the governor. He could not make appointments or veto legislation, but could remove judges for "misbehaviour." Bills could be passed only after going twice through the assembly, and could be implemented only in the following session. There were no property requirements for the franchise. African American male taxpayers could vote.[8] Such "checks" as existed were thus principally from below, from the people at large, with frequent rotation ensuring that, as Jackson Turner Main put it, "the danger of establishing an inconvenient aristocracy" was "effectually prevented."[9]

From the outset a key theme in Paine's democratic theory was thus opposition to concentrated executive power. In 1791 he applauded abolishing aristocracy, and, echoing *Common Sense*, defined a republican as someone who "opposes monarchy," monarchy being "the master-fraud which shelters all others." In 1795 he emphasized two principles governing the issue: "The one is, never to invest any individual with extraordinary power; for besides his being tempted to misuse it, it will excite contention and commotion in the nation for the office. Secondly, never to invest power long in the hands of any number of individuals."[10] Paine's hostility to kingship, and especially hereditary succession, which he said "produces monsters like a swamp breeds vipers," thus extended to mistrusting executive power as such, particularly when wielded by a single individual: "Such a man will always be the chief of a party. A plurality is far better," he wrote. Here he faced many opponents: Alexander Hamilton, for instance, wanted presidents to be elected for life (and with John Jay, senators too), while John Adams (thought Paine) wanted the post to be hereditary. In 1805 Paine attacked Pennsylvania's new constitution, which emulated the 1787 Federal Constitution, writing that "This negativing power in the hands of an



Paine disagreed with these federalists over the eventual U.S. Constitution.

individual ought to be constitutionally abolished. It is a dangerous power. There is no prescribing rules for the use of it. It is discretionary and arbitrary; and the will and temper of the person at any time possessing it, is its only rule."[11] Paine also supported elected judges (for a single term) rather than appointment by the collective executive council. Down through *Rights of Man*, he maintained that "the judicial power, is strictly and properly the executive power of every country."[12] He insisted on every generation's right to decide its own constitutional arrangements, if necessary against the supposed superior wisdom of their ancestors. "Originalism" carried no weight with him.

So from 1776 Paine promoted two American revolutions, one against Britain and the monarchy, the other against domination by property-owning elites. He was also extremely hostile to parties and factions as tending to distort political action in favour of manipulative minorities and powerful personalities. He thought it was "the nature and intention of a constitution ***to prevent governing by party***, by establishing a common principle that shall limit and controul the power and impulse of party."[13] His idea of a unicameral legislature "was always founded on a hope, that whatever personal parties there might be in the State, they would all unite and agree in the general principles of good government - that these party differences would be dropt at the threshold of the state-house." Thus "the Public Good or the good of the whole, would be the governing principle of the Legislature within it."[14] This leitmotif pervades his political writings from the 1770s onwards. Though he grudgingly accepted the 1787 Constitution (which he described as a "monarchical government" as better than nothing, he rejected any "balance" of power which favoured property, and increasingly saw poverty as subversive of democracy itself. Without democracy universal "rights" was a meaningless concept. But by 1791 Paine he believed that possessing the franchise did not guarantee a democratic republic. The relief of poverty was essential to personal as well as political independence. This underpins his famous schemes for greater equality and the redistribution of property in *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice*.

Avoiding overt partisanship obviously involved a strong commitment to what Paine described the principle of a republic, "Vertue and public spirit."[15] *Common Sense* insisted that "when republican virtue fails, slavery ensues."[16] Slightly later, Paine reiterated that "no man is a true republican, or worthy of the name, that will not give up his single voice to that of the public."[17] This meant that great inequality, and the misuse of public service to acquire wealth, would almost invariably destroy any republic: "Men whose political principles are founded on avarice, are beyond the reach of reason."[18] The implications of this assertion are hardly lost on us today.

PAINE'S SECOND STAGE

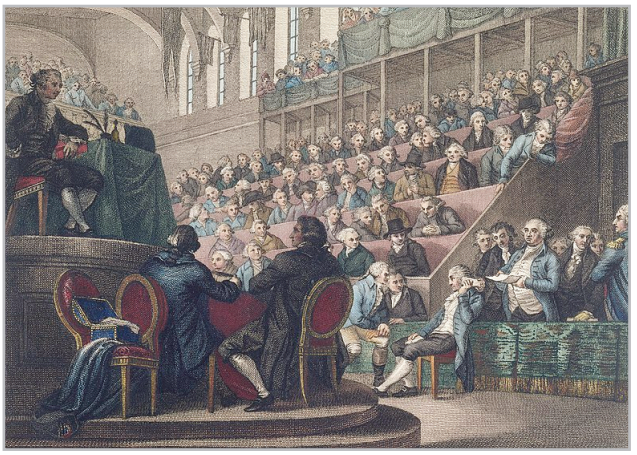
The second main episode in Paine's political career commenced with his return to Britain in 1787, and is defined by his promotion there of democratic republicanism. The astonishing success of *Rights of Man* (1791-2) is well documented: Part II sold perhaps five hundred thousand copies in a decade.[19] Early in 1792 Gouverneur Morris, the American minister plenipotentiary to France in 1792–4, wrote that Paine "seems Cock Sure of bringing about a revolution in Great Britain."[20] By November it was alleged that "Paine's pamphlet, or the very cream and substance of it, is in the hands of almost every countryman," selling for only two pence. "No book was ever published which had such a rapid circulation," remarked the Unitarian minister Thomas Fysshe Palmer at his sedition trial in 1793.[21] In 1819 it was claimed that had *Rights of Man* had "one more free year in circulation" (after May 1792), "a Revolution in England" would have resulted.[22] But the government proscribed the book on 21 May, and prosecuted some fifty vendors of the work up to 1795. Paine was widely burnt in effigy, and a massive campaign of Loyalist reaction commenced.

A 1793 copper coin shows Paine hanging. Depictions of his execution were commonplace. THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The intoxicating success of *Rights of Man* lay in Paine's ability to animate the concept of popular democracy, and turn it into a moral crusade. Confronted with Paine's description of rights, people felt as if a blindfold had fallen from their eyes. Dozens of sources reveal that reading of *Rights of Man* induced euphoric feelings of liberation, renewal, and self-worth, even of catharsis and redemption. Paine's prose brought millions strength, joy, and a powerful sense of both self-and communal assertion. By tracing rights to "Genesis" and insisting that divine intention had been violated by priests, nobles, and kings, Paine conjured up an image which perhaps only those who first encountered it in such a context, in a theologically enclosed and defined world, could fully understand. God, effectively, had been turned into a Paineite. "Nothing," reflected one observer, "fascinated the minds of the people so effectually as the doctrine of the equality of mankind."[23] In *Rights of Man* inequality was Original Sin. As with *Common Sense*, it would not be pushing the point to insist that Paine's success here crucially lay in his ability to translate a religious vernacular and style into more secular terms, as a kind of political "Awakening." For this he was extraordinarily well equipped. He had a unique capacity for luring inchoate sensibilities to the surface and exposing deep-seated resentments of inequality, injustice and corruption. He voiced what others grasped only incoherently, and spoke directly where others faltered.

PAINE'S THIRD STAGE

Respecting the third stage of Paine's career, his activities in revolutionary France, new letters and works shed further light. He journeyed to France in the spring of 1791 and was amongst the first to promote republicanism and urge the king's abdication, at a time when a majority of the National Assembly were constitutional monarchists. Fleeing certain execution at the hands of William Pitt, who had him convicted of seditious libel in December, Paine arrived in Calais in September 1792. He became a well-known figure throughout France. Prints of his likeness adorned the walls of country



The Trial of King Louis XVI on December 26, 1792 in an engraving by Reinier Vinkeles. Louis is shown in the lower right, standing and holding a piece of paper. MUSÉE CARNAVALET, PARIS

inns. His activities on behalf of democratic republicanism continued through the 1790s. Paine failed to save the French king's life, claiming that "It was not against Louis the XVIth, but against the despotic principles of the government, that the nation revolted." These principles had not their origin in him, but in the original establishment, many centuries back. As an Englishman he was imprisoned under Robespierre in December 1793, but did not suffer the fate of many of his Girondin friends. After his release on 4 November 1794 Paine went back to writing, criticising the more conservative French constitution of 1795, which produced a bicameral legislature with a franchise restricted by property qualifications.

Lamenting that in 1789 "everyone was a citizen," Paine was the sole member of the Convention to take the floor to defend the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and universal male suffrage. The Convention rejected his views, with a majority asserting that these had fuelled the "anarchy" of the so-called "Terror."[24] The Girondins attacked Paine on similar grounds. In one of the main statements of his rights theory, the *Dissertation on First Principles of Government* (1795), Paine described universal male suffrage as "the primary right by which other rights are protected," and expanded the idea of property to include that of the poor as well as the rich.[25] He also conceded that unicameral assemblies were not unproblematic, particularly where banking and finance were concerned.

Without a democratic franchise to restrain privilege, thus, rights were permanently threatened. As importantly, without bolstering the property of the poor, the franchise was useless. What Paine had come to realise since 1776 was that making democracy succeed logically demanded greater social equality, indeed a guaranteed basic income, in order to ensure independence. The "market" and sociability alone insufficient to restrain poverty. So a right to subsistence had to be guaranteed, and government—now hardly a "necessary evil"—redesigned to enforce it.[26] *Rights of Man, Part II,* thus proposed giving £4 annually to children under fourteen for education, £6 annually to the aged poor from age 50-60, and £10 thereafter, close to a rural labourer's wage of about £12 but well under an average labourer's wage in London of £25. Further funds would help educate the poorest, assist birth expenses, and pay for the funeral costs of those who died away from home.[27] These sums would be funded by a progressive taxation scheme. *Agrarian Justice* (1797) went further, suggesting a one-off payment at age 21 of £15 (thus more than a rural labourer's annual income), and a more generous pension of £10 per annum from age 50, with local bodies administering a tax of 10 percent on all inheritances.

"Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics." *Thomas Paine*

In this period Paine also published his famous deist attack on Christianity, *The Age of Reason*. He did not mince words: "The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries, that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion."[28] "Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented," he added, "there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics."[29] Paine dismissed the "the whimsical account of the creation" with which the Christian narrative began. He insisted that beyond a few simple principles, chiefly human equality, all organised religion was an imposture: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."[30]

Today we often identify *The Age of Reason* and the Quakerish pleas for peace in *Rights of Man* as the chief religious components in Paine's thought. But re-examining the key arguments in *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *Agrarian Justice* indicates the pivotal role played by religious argument in unifying Paine's political positions. In *Common Sense*, religion provided Paine with a key trope. He convinced many that it was blasphemous to contend that God approved of monarchy in principle. Following John Milton's interpretation of 1 Samuel 8, he suggested that God's denial of the Jews' request for a king meant not just one type of kingship (the traditional interpretation of the passage), but all. Either "the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government, is true, or the scripture is false," insisted Paine.[31] In this milieu, and in such a febrile atmosphere, a stronger argument against kingship was difficult to imagine. In Rights of Man the account of God's creation in "Genesis" forms the basis for all rights claims. Agrarian Justice also uses "Genesis" to argue that God gave the earth to all. In these works, Paine's early training as a Methodist lay preacher led him to draw on widely-held common beliefs about divine intention, while pushing these to radical egalitarian conclusions.

The relevance of Paine's democratic republicanism to our own age of oligarchy and plutocracy is pretty obvious. In the American case, a more democratic constitution might have saved the nation from the executive usurpation now engulfing it. Implementing Paine's views, however, would likely not have prevented the scenario we face today: few could have anticipated an executive coup through control over both houses of Congress and of the Supreme Court. But shorter terms of office for all branches of government would have mitigated its effects. Reducing the bias towards the propertied and rural and less educated areas would also likely produce fewer conservative governments. In other countries his republicanism might still have salutary effects: the British monarchy costs £500 million annually. Communications between the king and the government also remain largely secret, with Parliament largely incapable of even discussing the monarchy publicly, leaving much scope for royal influence and downright profiteering.

"a fixt immoveable hatred I have, and ever had, to cruel men and cruel measures"

—Thomas Paine

Finally, today, let me offer some reflections on Paine the man. We now possess a much more intimate view of him than previously. What springs to mind first and foremost in describing his leading motives, or dominant passions, in the language of the period, is an archaic term, but one highly resonant in eighteenth-century moral narratives: benevolence. Paine had a deep, heartfelt sense of injustice and of sympathy for the underdog, and widened its application much further than most people. It was rooted in what *The American Crisis* described as "a fixt immoveable hatred I have, and ever had, to cruel men and cruel measures."[32] In a list of vices he found "meanness" most despicable.[33] His friend Joel Barlow thought Paine "one of the most benevolent and disinterested of mankind, endowed with the clearest perception, an uncommon share of original genius, and the greatest breadth of thought." He added that he "had a surprising memory and a brilliant fancy; his mind was a storehouse of facts and useful observations; he was full of lively anecdote and ingenious, original, pertinent remarks upon almost every subject," and that "he was always charitable to the poor beyond his means, a sure protector and friend to all Americans in distress that he found in foreign countries."[34]

Once embarked on life as a public writer, Paine sacrificed not one but many fortunes in forsaking royalties from his works. He identified strongly with this role. "I know," he wrote his friend Henry Laurens in 1779, "but one kind of life I am fit for, and that is a thinking one, and, of course, a writing one." By the late 1770s, indeed, this ideal was at the core of his identity: "What I write is pure nature, and my pen and my soul have ever gone together. My writings I have always given away, receiving only the expence of printing and paper, and sometimes not even that. I never courted either fame or interest, and my manner of life, to those who know it, will justify what I say."[35] He added that "I have likewise added something to the reputation of literature, by freely and disinterestedly employing it in the great cause of mankind, and shewing that there may be genius without prostitution."[36]

PAINE, THE PERSON

Despite his early reputation as an adept debater in Lewes's Headstrong Club, Paine was often quite shy, even desperately so, shunning numerous opportunities to speak publicly. Many contemporaries record this, and a clearly embarrassed Paine pointed to it himself several times. Evidently he found his elevation from a lowly mechanic to a famous gentleman, "my becoming a public man," very challenging.[37] In an early letter (1772) he described himself as "singularly modest."[38] He confessed to Henry Laurens in 1779 that "I certainly have some awkward natural feeling which I shall never get rid of. I was sensible of a kind of Shame at the Minister's

door to day, lest any one should think I was going to solicit a pardon or a pension."[39]

He hated small talk, though less from a disinclination to socialise than some other cause, perhaps deriving from his class origins and upbringing. He probably found most topics of conversation in good company petty and unimportant, especially when discussed with the stilted politeness common to the era. Fame thus disagreed with him in many ways. But he was not aloof, and could make a distinct and striking impression on people at first meeting. Strangers warmed easily to him; the poet Walter Savage Landor recalled that he was called "Tom," "not out of disrespect, but because he was a jolly good fellow."[40] Encountering Paine in Paris in 1792, Lord Edward Fitzgerald remarked that "there is a simplicity of manner, a goodness of heart, and a strength of mind in him, that I never knew a man before possess."[41] He had, perhaps, too direct a demeanour for some; Henry Laurens noted that "he is a stranger to the Politeness of Flattery, & much addicted to speaking plain American."[42]

In terms of public virtues, Paine was distinguished by his strong sense that dignity and independence were rooted in possessing rights. He called independence "the sublimest of all human conditions."[43] He glimpsed the possibility, and emotionally shared the feeling, of a more equal society, and it gratified him greatly. He understood how far equality underpinned liberty and provided a sense of self-worth.

A statue of Thomas Paine, in Thetford, England, where he was born and lived for the first 20 years of his life. ALAMY

He had risen from obscurity to great fame on his own merits. The insufferably obsequious "servile spirit," toadyism, and abject subservience that epitomized an arrogant and snobbish monarchy and aristocracy and every institution polluted by them, was utterly lacking in his own personality.[44] (Had he been humiliated by one or more of "the great" as a mere tradesman? Very likely.) He signed one letter to the home secretary, Henry Dundas, "Not your obedient humble servant, But the contrary."[45] It could have been his motto and his epitaph.

Paine of course had vices, too, many growing from the same source as his fame. Some of these seemed to worsen over time. Reluctant to flatter others, he was unduly susceptible to flattery himself, thought Barlow.[46] There were times, indeed, when he gave the impression that the entire world revolved around his ideas. No modesty tempered his claim that *Rights of Man* was "one of the most useful and benevolent books ever offered to mankind."[47] This tendency was remarked on by many. The Irish radical Wolfe Tone said "He is vain beyond all belief, but he has reason to be vain and for my part … I believe him to be conscientiously an honest man."[48] Whose head, we might ask, would not swell with such success? He had risen from an obscure lowly artisan and tradesman without formal education to being on close, even intimate, terms with some of the world's leaders. He became a household name across the so-called civilized world.

"I know not whether any Man in the World has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine," John Adams very grudgingly conceded in 1805.[49] Many millions thought he had done more to change the world for the better than anyone else ever had. So did he. The Genevan utilitarian Étienne Dumont wrote, "He believed that his book on *The Rights of Man* could take the

place of all the books of the world, and he said to us quite sincerely that if it were in his power to demolish all the libraries in existence he would do it without hesitation so as to destroy all the errors of which they were the depository."[50] Benjamin Rush, too, recalled that "his vanity appeared in everything he did or said. He once said he was at a loss to know whether he was made for the times or the times made for him."[51]

Yet Paine both forged and mirrored the mood of oppressed millions. He rejected the unjust subservience of the system of traditional ranks and orders, and he wanted others to share his rebelliousness. His writings made people feel they were free in a way they had never before experienced. He was the Great Awakener. As Gwyn Williams puts it, "His insolence was the best cure for deference."[52] He did much to define not only the spirit of his own age but that of democracy generally. Reaching back 250 years, we are reminded of Paine's warning that "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered" (Crisis, No. I), and that the "sword of justice" remains the best "Scourge of Tyrants" (Crisis, No. II).[53] Our times again "try men's souls."

In the politics of January 2026 the key issue is: Fa, or Antifa? Not a difficult choice for those of us who had fathers fighting in the Pacific and uncles in Normandy in World War Two. We have spilled too much blood creating and sustaining democracy to lose it now. We may have lost Paine's corpse, but the message of this "lost" Founding Father resounds once again.

MAIN NEW PAINE WORKS PRINTED:
The Juryman's Touchstone or A Full Refutation of Lord Mansfields Lawless Opinions in Crown Libels Addressed to All the Jurors of England January/February (1771); Matthew Robinson-Morris, *Considerations on the Measures Carrying on With Respect to the British Colonies in North-America* (1774) [probably with Franklin].

ADDITIONAL NOTES

The Pennsylvania constitution has been described as "far more democratic than the constitutions written by other states." Among other elements, there were no property ownership requirements for either voters or legislators, just the mandate to pay "public taxes," usually the poll tax laid on every adult in the community" and "the first move to reject the traditional connection between political power and socioeconomic status since early puritan New England empowered all church members to vote."

Amongst those who took up the argument of an original community of property as established in "Genesis" to argue for its approximation in the modern world, see Robert Coram, Political Inquiries (1791), p. 51. It argues that "If in adverting from a state of nature, to a state of civil society, men gave up their natural liberty, and their common right to property, it is but just that they should be protected in their civil liberty, and furnished with means of gaining exclusive property, in lieu of that natural liberty, and common right of property, which they had given up in exchange for the supposed advantages of civil society … If civil society therefore deprives a man of his natural means of subsistence, it should find him other means; otherwise civil society is not a contract, but a self-robbery." p. 56

The poor would otherwise be permanently susceptible to being corrupted, or simply cheated, by the rich. So, as we might say today, no UBI, no democracy. This was an essential breakthrough in the language of what we now term human rights, and in the transformation of "democracy" into "social democracy." So the changes of 1792–97 aimed to make the republican goals of 1776–91 compatible with more unequal societies. Rights of Man established Paine's central contribution to this language, which now pervades global political discourse.

Clearly Paine's lifelong resistance to the concentration of political power in executive bodies and individuals and to rule by oligarchies remains more relevant than ever. Some thought that the American idea meant government in the interest of all the people, not the property-owning elite, which is the British system.

END NOTES*

[1] And 53/113 of the 1812 edn. of the Junius letters, of which 35 are Paine's alone.
[2] Here Paine was one of perhaps eleven writers in this "string".
[3] *Thomas Paine, Collecting Writings*, ed. Gregory Claeys (6 vols., Princeton University Press, 2026), vol. 1, p. 546.
[4] Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Cornell University Press, 1978), 81.
[4] John C. Miller, *Triumph of Freedom, 1775–1783* (Little, Brown, 1948), 346. He wrote:"Likewise all servants in families; because their interest is in their master, and depending upon him in sick¬ness and in health, and voluntarily withdrawing from taxation and public service of all kinds, they stand detached by choice from the common floor; but the instant they re-assume their original independent character of a man, and encounter the world in their own persons, they repossess the full share of freedom appertaining to the character" (Collected Writings, vol. 1, p. 549)..
[5] Richard Alan Ryerson, T*he Revolution Is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765–1776* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 5.
[6] See R. F. Williams, "The Influences of Pennsylvania's 1776 Constitution," 25–48. Pennsylvania's supreme court justices were later appointed for a tenure restricted only by "good behavior," which in practice has meant life, a principle supported by John Adams. The length of tenure in such posts clearly has a bearing on the issue of intergenerational justice.
[7] Jackson Turner Main, T*he Antifederalists, 1781–1788* (University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 13. Critics, it was claimed, felt that "it retains too much power in the hand of the people, who do not know how to use it, so well as gentlemen of fortune, ... and it gives no advantage to the rich over the poor" (19). They thus pushed to found a senate to represent the "better sort."
[8] This ed., 3:XX.
[9] This ed., 3:XX.
[10] This ed., 2:XX.
[11] This ed., 3:XX.
[12] Thomas Paine, Collected Writings, vol. 2, p. 216.
[13] This ed., 4:XX. See Whatmore, "[[thinspace]]'A Gigantic Manliness'[[thinspace]]"; and for a recent appraisal, Bush, Thomas Paine and the Polity of the Blood, 27–64.
[14] This vol., XX. Paine means political enslavement, in the republican sense, rather than personal enslavement.
[15] This vol., XX.
[16] This vol., XX. Even Paine's enemies conceded sales of two hundred thousand copies: William Playfair, T*he History of Jacobinism: Its Crimes, Cruelties, and Perfidies* (John Stockdale, 1795), 109. On its British reception, see my Thomas Paine: *Social and Political Thought*, 110–76; *Albert Goodwin, The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Hutchinson, 1979); Jenny Graham, *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789*–1799, 2 vols. (University Press of America, 2000); and H. T. Dickinson, "Thomas Paine and His British Critics," *Enlightenment and Dissent 27* (2011), 19–82. And for the wider and longer-term context, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Victor Gollancz, 1962).
[17] Richard Brookehiser, Gentleman Revolutionary: Gouverneur Morris; The Rake Who Wrote the Constitution (Free Press, 2003), 130. See also Melanie Randolph Miller, Envoy to the Terror: Gouverneur Morris and the French Revolution (Potomac Books, 2006), 105–21, here 111. Miller terms it a "myth" perpetrated by Conway "that Morris conspired to have Paine imprisoned in France, and treated Paine badly," as he did not himself believe Paine was an American citizen, and also because the French had authority over Paine while he was a French citizen (105, 117–18).
[18] *The Trial of the Rev. Thomas Fysshe Palmer* (W. Skirving, 1793), 123.
[19] *The Medusa; or Penny Politician* 1, no. 6 (27 March 1819), 43.
[20] [Francis Eyre], *Letter to a Friend, on the Late Revolution in France* (n.p., 1792), 22. Robespierre too had rejected restrictions on the franchise.
[21] This ed., 3:XX. "Civil government does not consist in executions, but in making such provision for the instruction of youth, and the support of age, as to exclude, as much as possible, profligacy from the one, and despair from the other. (2:522) We have Rural labourer's wages averaged about £12 in this period, and those in London about £25.
[22] This ed., 3:XX.
[23] This ed., 3:XX.
[24] This ed., 3:XX.
[25] This vol., XX. Samuel's sons had become corrupt judges and asked for a king to get impartial justice. Samuel warned them that a king would deprive them of much of their liberty and wealth, and warned, "And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day" (1 Samuel 8:18), clearly implying that God disliked the request. Paine would later repeat this argument in his *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* (1792); see this ed., 2:XX.
[26] See this vol., XX.
[27] This vol., XX.
[28] Todd, Life and Letters of Joel Barlow, 237, 239.
[29] This vol., XX.
[30] This ed., 2:XX.
[31] This ed., 4:XX.
[32] This ed., 4:XX.
[33] This ed., 4:XX.
[34] Conway, The Life of Thomas Paine, 2:294.
[35] Thomas Moore, The Life and Death of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, 2 vols. (Longman, Orme, Rees, Brown and Green, 1831), 1:171.
[36] Papers of Henry Laurens, 16:151 (1783).
[37] This ed., 2:XX.
[38] This ed., 2:XX.
[39] This ed., 2:XX.
[40] Buel, Joel Barlow: American Citizen, 278.
[41] This ed., 2:XX.
[42] Theobald Wolfe Tone, *Memoirs of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2 vols. (Henry Colburn, 1827), 2:172.
[43] Adams, *Writings from the New Nation*, 438.
[44] Quoted in Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 151.
[45] *Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, 323.
[46] G. A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*, 15.
[47] This vol., XX and XX.
[48] Daniel R. Mansell, *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America 1600-1870* ( ), pp.
[49] Adams, *Writings from the New Nation*, 438
[50] Étienne Dumont, quoted in Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 151
[51] *Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, 323
[52] This vol., XX and XX
[53] Daniel R. Mansell, *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America* 1600-1870 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

* Final paginations for Volumes 2-6 of the *Collected Writings* are still in the final proof stage, so any notes marked with an XX will be updated when the final galleys are approved in late spring.

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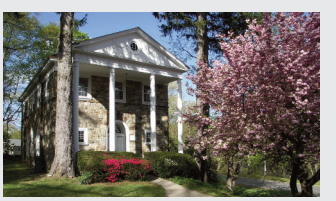

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