

Frances Chiu, Ph.D - THE ROUTLEDGE GUIDE TO PAINE'S RIGHTS OF MAN

Reviewed by 21CR



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Chiu, Frances

The Routledge Guidebook to Paine's Rights of Man

London & New York: Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group, 2020.

292 pages

Frances Chiu has written, in my view, the single most valuable work written on Thomas Paine. This claim with regard to the singular nature of Dr. Chiu's book rests on three bases; the simplicity, clarity, and careful logic of its prose, its careful and consistent research, and on the intellectual and historical goals presented in the introduction: that is, to situate Paine in the development of Western political thought and to explain Paine's argument, intellectual evolution, and his *contribution* in RIGHTS OF MAN.

Certainly Paine's biography is a compelling story and an number of fine scholars and historians

have done their best to tell the tale with accuracy and even some sensitivity. A few standouts might include Harvey J. Kaye's *Thomas Paine and the Promise of American* (Hill and Wang, 2005), John Keane *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Little, Brown and Company, 1995), Alfred Owen Aldridge *Man of Reason, the Life of Thomas Paine* (J. P. Lippencott, 1959), or Jack Fruchtman *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994).

And almost every author who has written on Paine has discussed his purported influences, the default themes being his bi-religious Quaker/Anglican upbringing and the ideas of John Locke. Prof. Chiu takes the reader behind his Quakerism to its earliest antecedents and the genealogy of English and continental republican ideology.

The introduction to the *GUIDEBOOK* amounts to a crash course in Western republicanism and the history of natural law thought from the 12th century canon writer Gratian (died c. 1155) to Grenville Sharpe (1735-1813). Among the brightest touchstones to which Dr. Chiu draws the eye of her readers; the somewhat obscure and often glossed radicals of the 1381 Peasant's Revolt (Watt Tyler's Rebellion) and the 1642-1651 English Civil Wars in which a king lost his head. Chiu's gem of an introduction traces the development of natural rights thought in relation to the concepts treated in Paine's *RIGHTS OF MAN*; hereditary government, economic justice, populist rhetoric, class conflict, and political representation.

For those familiar with the sound of Paine's literary "voice," listen to the cleric John Ball (c. 1338 – 15 July 1381) from the Peasant's Revolt or Wat Tyler's Rebellion:

"When [Adam](#) delved and [Eve](#) span, who was then the [gentleman](#)? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have

appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty.”

Ball, John. *Cast off the Yoke of Bondage*. 1381.

To which Tom Paine, replied:

’Tis the inequality of rights that keep up contention”

Thomas Paine. *A SERIOUS ADDRESS to the PEOPLE of PENNSYLVANIA, on the present situation of their affairs*. from the *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 1, 5, 10, 12, 1778.

Or Gerrard Winstanley, the True Leveller of the English Civil War:

“The power of enclosing land and owning property was brought into the creation by your ancestors by the sword; which first did murder their fellow creatures, men, and after plunder or steal away their land, and left this land successively to you, their children. And therefore, though you did not kill or thief, yet you hold that cursed thing in your hand by the power of the sword; and so you justify the wicked deeds of your fathers, and that sin of your fathers shall be visited upon the head of you and your children to the third and fourth generation, and longer too, till your bloody and thieving power be rooted out of the land.”

Winstanley et al.,

A Declaration from the Poor and Oppressed of England, 1649.

And Thomas Paine again:

“It is impossible that such governments as have hitherto existed in the world, could have commenced by any other means than a total violation of every principle sacred and moral. The obscurity in which the origin of all the present old governments is buried, implies the iniquity and disgrace with which they began. The origin of the present government of America and France will ever be remembered, because it is honourable to record it; but with respect to the rest. even Flattery has consigned them to the tomb of time, without an inscription. It could have been no difficult thing in the early and solitary ages of the world, while the chief employment of men was that of attending flocks and herds, for a banditti of ruffians to overrun a country, and lay it under contributions. Their power being thus established, the chief of the band contrived to lose the name of Robber in that of Monarch; and hence the origin of Monarchy and Kings.”

Thomas Paine

RIGHTS OF MAN, Part 2.

Here is chief root and line of descent for Paine’s ideas. Without doubt others have touched on this subject and a few have even pointed broadly to these same origins. But no one to date has written as expansive and clear an explanation or provided comparable and as interesting support for the case. The introduction alone is worth the price of the book.

The main body of the work is an explanation and contextualization of the actual body of Paine’s RIGHTS OF MAN, Parts 1 and 2. Paine is well known for his “plain English” approach to writing, but there are nevertheless obstacles in Paine’s writing for students and others unfamiliar with 18th century speech. For students and non-students alike there may be, moreover, deficits when it comes to a deep understanding of the historical context of RIGHTS and to the targets of Paine’s rhetoric – to whom did he speak? To what issues did he speak? What were the contemporary and future responses to RIGHTS and to Paine’s advance of republican ideology.

Did he in fact advance republican thought at all? Chiu's step-by-step, chapter by chapter, and section by section review of Paine's RIGHTS answers these and other questions with clear, direct, and well-supported prose; an epic achievement.

The *Guidebook to Rights of Man* is not, however, mere hagiography. The author swings a two-edged keyboard. Did Paine overstate the world-significance and high character of the 1787-89 Constitutional Convention? Did he live to regret it? What about slavery? In Chiu's words, " ... in light of Paine's detestation of slavery," what explains "his silence on the safeguards for its continued practice" in the new Constitution of the United States? (Chiu, 187-88). Paine praises transparent and open government. And yet the entire U.S. Constitution-making process was marked by secrecy and usurpation. The doors were locked, windows shuttered, and no delegate allowed to speak publicly; nor were official records kept. The press was barred. No delegate to the convention was authorized, moreover, by their respective state legislatures to do more than edit and revise the Articles of Confederation; and yet, an entirely new document emerged to the consternation and, in some cases, resignations of delegates. Dr. Chiu's dissection of the dissonant clash between Paine's optimistic assessment of the proceedings versus the reality of the matter are in Part 2, Chapter 4. Nor is this the only place in which Paine comes under Chiu's critical review. This is a work of scholarship; critical and yet carefully balanced.

A word about the Conclusion to this work, designed to bring the RIGHTS OF MAN forward into the 20th century: here Dr. Chiu's intellectual and philosophical scope are given rein. Grotius and Winstanley, Priestley, the wages of hand-weavers, Bronterre O'Brien, William Cobbett, the Federal Reserve, wage and tax development in the 21st century, the two Thomases Piketty and Frank, every US president from Ronald Reagan onwards including Pres. Trump, a coherent and daring analysis that clarifies the continued relevance of Paine's great RIGHTS. The struggles

heralded by Paine and confronted in his RIGHTS OF MAN are still the central themes of society and politic. As Paine himself wrote:

“All this seems to shew that change of ministers amounts to nothing. One goes out, another comes in, and still the same measures, vices, and extravagance are pursued. It signifies not who is minister. The defect lies in the system.”

Thomas Paine

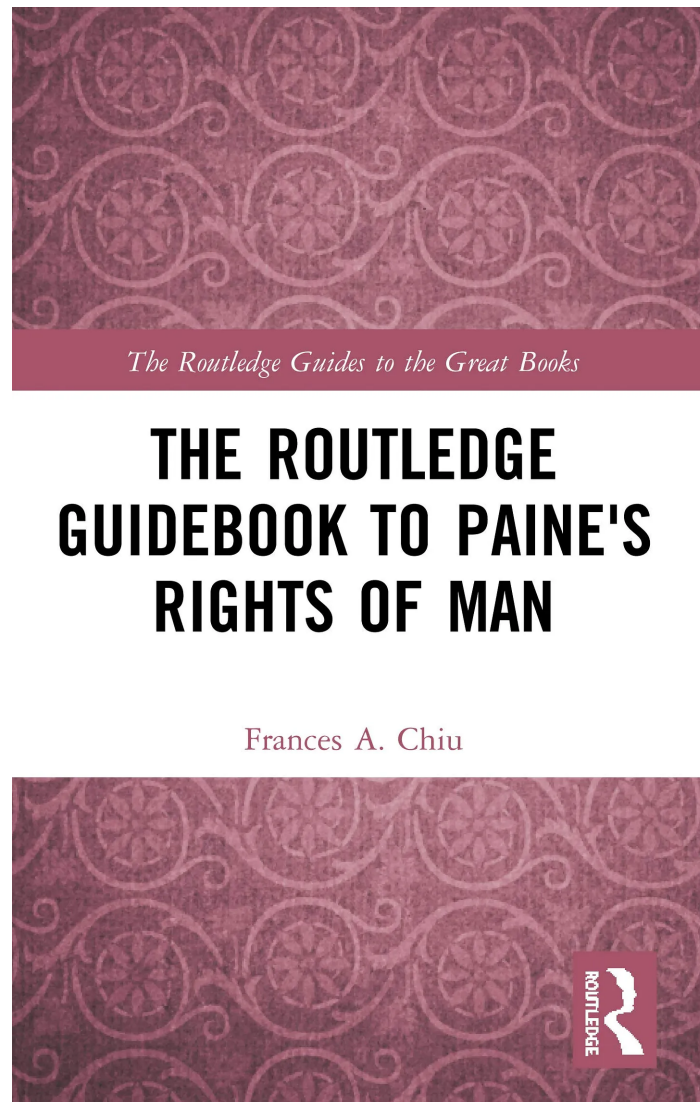
RIGHTS OF MAN

Applying Principle to Practice, Chapter 5 - Ways and Means of Improving the Condition of Europe Interspersed with Miscellaneous Observations, Part 7 of 8.

Thomas Paine left a roadmap he believed necessary for a just and stable system. He hoped that the nescient United States would adopt them. In her conclusion, Dr. Chiu shows precisely and, I believe indisputably, that it did not.

To my mind, this work deserves a broader exposure than is likely to be achieved in its present format and marketing schema. The *Taylor and Francis* edition is designed and distributed primarily as a text book for undergraduate college use. There is no doubt that it is suitable for the graduate setting as well. But *Guidebook to Paine's Rights of Man* is as well, I think, a work accessible and readable by a broader and more popular audience. For all those with an interest in Thomas Paine, the American and French Revolutions, contemporary politics, and the development of Western republican and democratic thought, it is required reading. And in the meantime, it's available on Amazon and other online booksellers, or directly from *Taylor and Francis*.

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The above is a re-write of a review initially posted at the time of this book's publication. As with all good writing, I believe, it benefited from close edit.

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