

Here's to Tom Paine — the Forgotten Founding Father

His Rights of Man (1791–2) is more relevant than ever

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*Poor Tom Paine! There he lies
Nobody laughs and nobody cries
Where he has gone or how he fares
Nobody knows and nobody cares*

These lines from a children's song richly capture the infamy that Thomas Paine had fallen into at the time of his death on June 8, 1809 in New Rochelle, New York.

Even with the passing of 215 years, Paine is still a relatively unknown figure despite his bestselling pamphlet, *Common Sense* (1776) which urged Americans to declare independence, and his popular *American Crisis* papers (1776–1783).

After all, when Americans hear the term "Founding Father," we tend to think of our first three presidents — George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. Definitely Benjamin Franklin. *Maybe* James Madison and his *Federalist Papers* pal, Alexander Hamilton (even before his popularization by Lin-Manuel Miranda).

But as the Connecticut patriot Joel Barlow put it, "Without the Pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have been in vain."

So what destroyed Paine's reputation?

Most historians attribute this to another of his best-selling works, *The Age of Reason* (1794–5), where Paine famously lashed out against organized religion. It had arrived at an inconvenient moment – right when the US was in the midst of its second Great Awakening.

I argue somewhat differently. There is no doubt that the *Age of Reason* sounded the death knell for Paine's reputation.

However, here's my modest proposal: I believe his slightly earlier *Rights of Man* (1791–2) was the true cause of his virtual eradication from the annals of American history – and *The Age of Reason* a handy tool to nail the coffin of Paine's reputation shut.

Rights of Man, a work that is seldom taught at universities, was Paine's powerful defense of the French Revolution — and perhaps the biggest bestseller in 18th-century England, even outselling the Bible.

But if *Rights of Man* became especially popular among the working classes and poor, it also managed to alarm the landed elites — particularly those who comprised the government. An anxious Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger promptly banned *Rights of Man*, making it the first modern political text to be censored in Britain.

Meanwhile, in America, George Washington and his Federalist compatriots distanced themselves from it — despite Paine's enthusiastic dedication of the bestseller to Washington.

So why was *Rights of Man* deemed such a dangerous work? And why is it even more relevant to us more than 230 years later?

The French Revolution debate

In order to understand *Rights of Man*, we must turn back to the French Revolution and the debate it triggered in Britain.

Just as members of the Third Estate in France (the so-called bourgeoisie) were embroiled in a battle over equal representation in the Assembly, a similar but somewhat less heated scene was playing out across the Channel. During the 1770s and 1780s, the more liberally inclined Whigs had begun to push for the expansion of male suffrage, with some going so far as to stipulate that all men, regardless of property, should be able to vote.

Not surprisingly, many cheered when they learned that the Bastille had fallen on July 14, 1789 and that Louis XVI would become a constitutional monarch: France was finally modernizing — and just might prove an example for Britain to follow.

However, not all Whigs were pleased (to say nothing of the more conservative Tories).

Edmund Burke, who had sided with the American colonies in the 1770s like most Whigs, lashed out in response to a pamphlet published by the radical Dissenting minister Richard Price.

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke would criticize the Revolution while rejecting the concept of rights no less than 34 times throughout his ponderous book.

Everything was fine in France, Burke insisted. There was no need for radical change, save a few tweaks here and there. Far from being useless, a monarchy, aristocracy, and state-church establishment not only imposed necessary order, but lent a certain grace.

Family lineage and pedigree, he added, deserved respect. The well-born and well-heeled were more often than not better educated and endowed with a *je ne sais quoi*. They were the “Corinthian capital of polished society.” In fact, anything was better than a world where learning and culture were trodden by the hooves of the “swinish multitude.”

Nor was there anything wrong with the privileging of property where political power was concerned. So while “a man with five shillings in a partnership has as much right to it as a man with five hundred pounds to his own respective portion,” the man with only five shillings should *not* have the same rights in the “management of the state.”

In other words, the workings of government should be left to the wealthy and well-born.

Burke’s *Reflections* shocked and infuriated his fellow Whig MP’s and liberals, triggering a stream of outraged replies from the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft (who later published the first modern feminist tract, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*), Sir Brooke Boothby, James Macintosh, and Joseph Priestley.

But it was Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* that attracted the most attention by far.

Here, Paine pushed back at Burke, maintaining that rights were indeed important. In fact, the concept of equal rights stretched all the way back to the beginning of time, when all of “MANKIND” were “originally equals in the order of creation.” “Male” and female,” he explained, were the only “distinctions of nature,” and “good and bad the distinctions of Heaven.”

And anyway, why would man enter society “to become worse than he was before” or “to have fewer rights?”

Unlike Burke, Paine frowned on titles of nobility, dismissing them as silly and childish. In crisp prose, he countered that the French did not level man, but exalted him:

It has put down the dwarf, to set up the man. The punyism of a senseless word like Duke, Count or Earl has ceased to please. Even those who possessed them have disowned the gibberish, and as they outgrew the rickets, have despised the rattle.

As for the monarchy itself, France was to be applauded for wresting the power to declare war away from the king to the legislature. Maybe then there would be fewer wars waged over bloodlines and territories.

Paine, however, did not rule out all prospects of a monarchy at this point though. Perhaps feeling grateful for Louis XVI’s assistance to the American colonies, he appeared to trust that the young king would cooperate in facilitating the goals of the revolution — even while suggesting that a purely republican form of government would be preferable.

But after Louis XVI and his family made a failed attempt at escaping from France in June 1791, Paine changed his mind on the monarchy, making a considerably

stronger argument for a republican government in Part 2 of *Rights of Man*. The following passage is perhaps one of Paine's most colorful — and may have inspired an image in the 1939 film adaptation of the *Wizard of Oz*. The monarchy was a

silly contemptible thing kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity; but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to be open, and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter.

Many of his other ideas grew more radical as well.

Although Paine had always empathized with the more vulnerable members of society — a trait that was already apparent when he administered assistance to the poor and elderly while serving on the town council and vestry in Lewes — he became one of the few to propose solutions for them.

For one thing, he deplored the miserable conditions faced by the poor. If Rousseau had lamented a few decades earlier that the process of civilization had heightened inequality with civilized people showing less compassion, Paine turned this argument upside down. A civilized society, should improve living standards for everyone. If anything, societies which fail the most vulnerable were uncivilized:

... governments being yet in an uncivilised state, and almost continually at war, they pervert the abundance which civilised life produces to carry on the uncivilised part to a greater extent. By thus engrafting the barbarism of government upon the internal civilisation of a country, it draws from the latter, and more especially

from the poor, a great portion of those earnings, which should be applied to their own subsistence and comfort.

Ironically then, despite their great wealth and scientific advancements, European nations were far from thriving “on the principle of universal civilization, but on the reverse of it.”

It was time for Britain to take better care for the least well off.

Here, Paine expressed his concern for the elderly — a subject that few contemporaries broached. Through much of the century, the elderly were generally provided for by their families or the parish. Paine, however, desired a more standardized approach that would be implemented nationwide.

First of all, one should never have to work desperately into their 80s. If anything, a certain subsistence should be provided for those already in their 50s — a time when their physical capacities begin to weaken. And at sixty, Paine asserted, one’s “labour ought to be over, at least from direct necessity. It is painful to see old age working itself to death, in what are called civilised countries, for daily bread.”

As for the poor—the bottom thirty percent, families with more children should receive subsidies adequate to support and educate them since “a well-governed nation “should permit none to remain uninstructed.” The poor would thus be able to find more work. As it was, according to Paine, only “monarchical and aristocratical government...requires ignorance for its support.”

In order to help the most vulnerable members of society—the poor and the elderly, Paine proposed a progressive taxation that would tax the wealthiest at much higher rates.

For too long, he complained, Parliament imposed higher taxes on ordinary Britons through consumables while taxing landed property at minimal rates from the previous century. Shouldn't the wealthy begin paying their fair share?

But instead, the government poured its largesse onto those with the least need for it— for instance, the royal court which received a handsome allowance for their lavish lifestyles and the Duke of Richmond who “alone (and there are cases similar to his) takes away as much for himself as would maintain two thousand poor and aged persons.” As such, Paine wondered:

Is it, then, better that the lives of one hundred and forty thousand aged persons be rendered comfortable, or that a million a year of public money be expended on any one individual, and him often of the most worthless or insignificant character? Let reason and justice, let honour and humanity, let even hypocrisy, sycophancy and Mr. Burke, let George, let Louis, Leopold, Frederic, Catherine, Cornwallis, or Tippoo Saib [names of crowned heads and rulers] answer the question.

Not least, just as Paine advocated the beginnings of modern welfare planning and Social Security, he proposed a NATO-like alliance. With republican governments across Europe, he anticipated fewer wars. The different nations could then pool their military resources together with France and Britain reducing their navy forces by 90%.

All told, many of these ideas were radical for the 1790s. And arguably at least as radical was Paine's easy, accessible style that could be read by anyone, regardless of formal education.

Rights of Man, Part 2 proved immensely popular upon its publication in February 1792, outselling even the Bible. It was quickly translated into Dutch, French, German, Polish, and Spanish while Paine himself was elected as a representative for Pas de Calais in France — despite not knowing a word of French.

Meanwhile in Britain, *Rights of Man* triggered a sharp proliferation of political discussion groups. This in turn alarmed the literal and figurative 1%, many of whom belonged to Parliament.

The eradication of aristocratic titles? Higher taxes on land — all to fund the poor, elderly, and education for children? Critics feared that subsidies to the poor and elderly would make them “indolent” and “less inclined to work.” They would demand more. And why should impoverished children be sent to school? They'll become dissatisfied with their lives. Let them learn enough to carry out their daily tasks.

In short, they did not want a French revolution on their own shores.

So in May 1792, three months after the publication of Part 2, Paine was charged with “seditious libel.” His trial was set for December 1792.

Spies were sent to follow Paine about. Deciding that a trial might turn Paine into a martyr, officials hounded Paine on horseback to the coast of Dover prior to his departure to France.

Paine was now formally banished from his native land — upon risk of certain death. In fact, when he was preparing to leave France for America, officials were sent to search French ships for Paine in order to have him repatriated and hanged.

Nor did the powers-that-be stop there.

The roots of what we call “astroturfing” — pretending that an idea originates from “the people” when it is planted by a corporate or political entity — were planted when local magistrates and officials helped establish the rowdy Church and King groups. The bigwigs not only encouraged the burning of Paine effigies but also the chapels of Protestant Dissenters, widely believed to be sympathetic to the French Revolution: the Dissenting minister Joseph Priestley’s laboratory and home, for instance, were entirely burned down by a mob. (His family would relocate to Pennsylvania three years later.) Many of these activities were encouraged with rewards of food and drink.

Fearing that none of this was sufficient to deter ordinary Britons from following Paine, the government also hired the conservative Hannah More to write tracts for the poor. There was nothing wrong with social rank because the rich have their own problems. And besides, why should taxes be raised to help the good-for-nothing poor? Britain was a free nation where anyone could make it from rags to riches.

Not least, a slanderous, tell-all biography of Paine was commissioned.

The Age of Reason, published three years later, served as a handy means of discrediting Paine altogether in the US and UK alike. After all, who could trust a man who mocked the Bible, declaring:

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.

So the American powers-that-be brushed Paine aside as an atheist (he was a deist) during the second Great Awakening— an idea later echoed by Theodore Roosevelt more than a century later, when he referred to him as a “filthy little atheist.” Even Thomas Jefferson, whose beliefs were similar to Paine’s, managed to keep him at a distance despite surface cordiality.

For at least the next century in Britain, *Rights of Man* would remain censored. It was even illegal to display a portrait of Paine in one’s house.

The Relevance of Rights of Man in 2024

In 1789, Thomas Paine wrote to his American friend, Kitty Few Nicholson:

A thousand years hence (for I must indulge in a few thoughts), perhaps in less, America maybe what England now is!...When we contemplate the fall of empires and the extinction of nations of the ancient world, we see but little to excite our regret than the mouldering ruins of pompous palaces, magnificent monuments... of the most costly workmanship. But when the empire of America shall fall, the subject for contemplative sorrow will be infinitely greater than crumbling brass or marble can inspire. It will not then be said, here stood a temple of vast antiquity... but here, ah painful thought! the noblest work of human wisdom, the grandest scene of human glory, the fair cause of freedom rose and fell!

So here we are, 235 years later, grappling with many of the same issues that confronted Paine and his British contemporaries. We might even say the situation is worse given our knowledge and seemingly more abundant resources.

There's little doubt Paine would probably be deeply disappointed with his adopted country —with the downfall arriving much sooner than he anticipated.

First and foremost, the [US spends far more on the military than any other nation in the world](#) — including China, which has more than four times the population. There have only been 29 years where the US was not at war. (So much for Paine's belief that monarchies are more warmongering!)

Secondly, [the US not only exceeds the UK and other European nations in terms of income inequality but in wealth inequality as well](#). Yes — despite the fact that some of these countries have retained hereditary governments and peerages. (The UK, for instance, still has a monarchy and aristocracy.)

That's partly because US tax rates for the wealthy are among the lowest among advanced nations. [Jeff Bezos, former CEO of Amazon, for instance, paid zero taxes in 2007 and 2011 while billionaires paid a 1.1 % tax rate in 2018](#). As Warren Buffett once famously admitted, his secretary, who makes far less, [“pays twice the rate I do.”](#)

Thirdly, the [US has the highest child poverty rate compared to other advanced countries](#), ranking 32 out of the 38 countries in the Western trade alliance when it comes to early childhood spending. And even if Bernie Sanders has repeatedly harped upon the necessity of paid family leave and universal childcare during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, the US still has neither in 2024.

Nor are things different at the other end of the age spectrum. [The poverty rate of the elderly](#) stands at 23% in the US, 15% in the UK, 12% in Canada, 4.4% in France, and 3.1% in the Netherlands.

Not least does the US have highest incarceration rate in the world — exceeding that of China.

As such, much of what Paine says of 18th-century Britain in *Rights of Man*, Part 2, can be applied to 21st-century America:

When, in countries that are called civilised, we see age going to the workhouse and youth to the gallows, something must be wrong in the system of government. It would seem, by the exterior appearance of such countries, that all was happiness; but there lies hidden from the eye of common observation, a mass of wretchedness, that has scarcely any other chance, than to expire in poverty or infamy

Civil government does not exist 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. Instead of this, the resources of a country are lavished upon kings, upon courts, upon hirelings, impostors and prostitutes; and even the poor themselves, with all their wants upon them, are compelled to support the fraud that oppresses them.

The last sentence is one that certainly applies to the no-strings-attached bailouts to banks in 2009 (not to mention zero investigations or prosecutions) and [billionaires who received stimulus checks during the pandemic.](#)

So why does the US lag behind other advanced nations?

Although we are no longer held hostage by a laced and bewigged aristocracy as in Paine's Britain, our new power players clad in their \$8000 Italian designer suits and \$1000 shoes operate in much the same way as his Parliament — especially

since the 1980s when the neoliberal policies of Reagan and Thatcher began to reverse any gains made by ordinary people.

For just as the Whig and Tory MP's once pulled the strings of the government with their riches, Democratic and Republican members of Congress — the majority of whom are millionaires and billionaires — continue the same charade today: pretending that social and economic equity prevail. That anyone can go from “rags to riches.”

But the fact of a pay-to-play practice where candidates rely on personal wealth and contributions from deep-pocketed donors all but guarantees that only the voices of the wealthy are heard— thanks in part to Citizens United that opened the door to corporate donations.

It helps explain why Democrats from Clinton onwards have done little to improve the wages and living standards of the vast majority of Americans despite railing against the trickle-down Republicans; the same might possibly be said for the UK as well where the Tory and Labour parties are growing increasingly alike.

Paine would not have been surprised. After all, he observed that:

A change of ministers amounts to nothing. One goes out, another comes in, and still the same measures, vices, and extravagances are pursued. It signifies not who is minister. The defect lies in the system. The foundation and superstructure of the government is bad. Prop it as you please, it continually sinks and ever will.

The perception of a government rigged for the elites might explain both Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and the January 6, 2021 melee at the White House. (Many of

the participants in the latter had faced financial insecurity over the past decade.)

Again, Paine's words are prescient:

As a great mass of the community are thrown thereby into poverty and discontent, they are constantly on the brink of commotion...Whatever the apparent cause of any riots may be, the real one is always want of happiness. It shows that something is wrong in the system of government that injures the felicity by which society is to be preserved.

Finally, it is not accidental that our current social beliefs and trends uncannily reflect those from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Many Americans still believe that assistance to the poor encourages sloth.

Meanwhile, there is little interest in funding public K-12 education or making higher education more affordable.

At the same time, we are almost as fully ensconced in 18th-century nepotism as indicated by our own, newly coined term, "nepobaby." Needless to say, the idea of meritocracy is almost as much a sham today as it was back then.

And if Instagram and Tiktok offer any clues, we venerate the concept of "Old Money" — as much as any character from a Jane Austen novel. Nor do we need to be reminded that the concept of "Old Money" is, of course, an inherently racist idea in the West since only whites were allowed to accumulate wealth given our centuries long practice of slavery and prohibition of immigration from Asia.

So if our .01% chooses to blindly immerse themselves in the eighteenth century, perhaps it's also time for the rest of us to revisit Paine's *Rights of Man* and right ourselves.

Enough is enough!

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