

Thomas Paine and the times that try men's souls

Ed Dodson reviews *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* by Harvey J Kaye

Professor Harvey Kaye provides us with a stimulating and enjoyable examination of, first, the life and times of Thomas Paine, and, second, the influence of his words and deeds on events to come. The very fact that this book has been written speaks volumes. The thoughtful reading public has a desire to learn about the author of *Common Sense* and his contributions to history, moral philosophy, political philosophy and political economy. As someone who has studied much of the available material on Paine and provided my own assessment of Paine's contributions, I found Professor Kaye's treatment valuable and unique.

This book is less about the details of Paine's life. It is more about the influence his ideals and writings had on the thinking and behaviour of others. These were the people who came to share Paine's passion for justice - and for bringing to an end the entrenched privilege that produces the division between haves and have-nots in our societies. Professor Kaye joins others in recognising Paine's pivotal role in igniting and keeping aflame the revolutionary torch. "Paine saw all of history turning on the outcome of the American colonies' conflict with Britain," writes Kaye. Coming so soon from Britain, where the "rights of Englishmen" were quite narrowly enjoyed, Paine realised that North America could become the safe haven for the oppressed and enslaved of the Old World. The key was not just independence, but the establishment of a democratic republic.

I am reminded of Peter Drucker's book *The Future of Industrial Man* (1942). In it he describes the early phase of the uprising against British authority as a conservative counter-revolution. The landed and other conservative elements in the colonies, Drucker said, were demanding a return to the long period of "salutary neglect" under which they had acquired their wealth and social positions. Paine, to their chagrin, called attention to all of the inequities characteristic of colonial society. Now was the time for the creation of a new societal structure. "Paine," observes Kaye, "called upon Americans to make a true revolution of their struggles."

Paine's idealism was clearly ahead of its time. The blueprint he provided, in *Common Sense*, first, and then throughout his later

writings, certainly called for a "revolution in the state of civilization." But it was a blueprint shared by few others. With independence secured, the natural inclination of those in power to do whatever they could to entrench themselves and their positions, again arose. As Professor Kaye observes, not even Thomas Jefferson possessed anything close to the deep faith in participatory democracy that stood at the heart of Paine's political philosophy. Yet, Jefferson proved a more accurate forecaster of the immediate future than Paine. Their contemporaries saw to it that the new United States of America was established as a republic. The most hated elements of Old World political and economic power - monarchy, hereditary aristocracy,

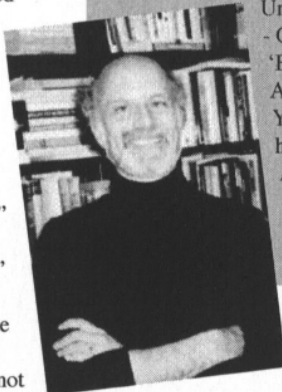
government should refuse," he declared.

Despite the protections individuals gained under the first constitutional amendments, very little time passed before widespread disillusionment began to set in. Many of the disillusioned found inspiration and passion for righting wrongs by absorbing Paine. Professor Kaye's research reveals that even those who were repulsed by Paine's Deist spiritual beliefs and his attacks on mainstream religion, found solidarity with his positions in the socio-political arena.

In my own writing, I describe Paine as the "architect of cooperative individualism," a set of moral principles upon which the just society - one that secures and protects equality of opportunity - is established. With Paine's death, the torch of cooperative individualism nearly went out. None of those who followed Paine in the nineteenth century fully grasped the depth of his principles, nor adopted them as their own. Not until Henry George emerged in the last two decades of the century was the torch again raised, its flame ignited. Professor Kaye writes briefly about Henry George as a reformer whose "plan to re-create American equality and democratic life descended directly from *Agrarian Justice* and clearly reflected Paine's spirit." Henry George never referred to himself as a Paineite or as having been strongly influenced by reading Paine. That said, they clearly came from the same mould. And, as Paine's success came after coming to America, George's occurred after serving as a correspondent of the *Irish World* covering the Irish resistance to British rule.

Here I digress momentarily to correct Professor Kaye's restatement of Henry George's proposal regarding landed wealth. George did not, as Professor Kaye writes, argue "that government should severely tax landowners' profits." Rather, George expanded on Paine's argument in *Agrarian Justice* that anyone who controls land owes to the community a ground rent for the privilege. George explained that every parcel of land yields a ground rent, the amount of which is determined as an outcome of market dynamics. If the community collects all ground rents via taxation, the landowner, as such, cannot sell land for profit. Interestingly, George later wrote approvingly of the pioneering writing on the land question by the French group of political economists known as the

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primogeniture and entail - were removed. With a huge and nearly empty

continent to subdue, and with fortunes to be made speculating in land, the framers of the Constitution compromised principle for expediency. They ignored both slavery and the land question. The more thoughtful among them hoped these and other issues could be resolved as the nation matured. As Professor Kaye reminds us, however, the new nation was seriously divided over unresolved sectional, territorial and financial interests. It is worth noting that neither Paine nor Jefferson participated in the Constitutional Convention. From Paris, Jefferson wrote favorably of the proposed constitution, but in a letter to Madison in December 1787 he expressed concern over the absence of a bill of rights. "A bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just

Physiocrats. Paine was likely introduced to physiocratic ideals by their most important American adherent, Benjamin Franklin. And while in France during the early stages of the French Revolution Paine was undoubtedly warmly accepted within this circle of enlightened intellectuals, many of whom would meet their end during the Jacobin reign of terror. One of the leading physiocrats - Pierre-Samuel du Pont de Nemours - escaped France to establish what can only be described as an American dynasty of economic power. Only recently have the French people been re-introduced to the legacy of the Physiocrats, dismissed to a large extent by European intellectuals as irrelevant in a world where land and land ownership were thought of as minor concerns. The landed have certainly felt relief that their entrenched privilege was not jeopardised by the policies of social democrats during their periodic opportunities to hold political power. Paine was, to be sure, far more revolutionary in his thinking than the Physiocrats ever were; yet, in the realm of political economy what they offered was a deep insight into the causes of the maldistribution of wealth. I have long been convinced that Paine's *Agrarian Justice* came about as a result of his exposure to physiocratic principles.

Many of those who were first influenced, at least in part, by reading Paine, would later in life become admirers and supporters of Henry George. Samuel Clemens, who, Professor Kaye writes, "genuinely admired Paine," eventually met and befriended Henry George in California and accompanied him on a speaking tour of Australia. Clemens' essay 'Archimedes' is Henry George on "the land question" as interpreted by Mark Twain. Louis F. Post, also mentioned by Professor Kaye, became Henry George's most dedicated supporter, serving as editor of George's New York newspaper, *The Standard*, and carrying on George's work after his death in 1897.

Paine's influence on the thinking of leading socialists, such as Eugene Debs, should not be surprising. George Bernard Shaw and other Fabian socialists traced their commitment to social causes to lectures delivered in Great Britain and Ireland by Henry George during the 1880s. Clarence Darrow also shared a great admiration for both Paine and George. In 1933, Darrow actually delivered an address to the Henry George Congress, held that year in Chicago. In a very real way, Paine's writing - more than that of any other else (eg Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*) - added legitimacy to what people heard from Henry George. They were both men of the people, from the working class, possessed of remarkable intellects and a commitment to truth.

As proponents of departures from tradition and long-established socio-political arrangements, both Paine and George have been discovered by the opposing political camps. Within the Henry Georgist community there has long existed a strong individualist-libertarian wing. It has developed its principles under the tutelage of writers such as Franz Oppenheimer, Francis Neilson, Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov. Others in the community, many of whom worked in government or in the professions, sought an expanded role for government and looked to the societal 'rent fund' as the source of revenue for meeting societal needs.

The individualist wing never abandoned Paine nor his moral principles, as interpreted by their leading lights.

We need to understand that the structure

“Paine was, to be sure, far more revolutionary in his thinking than the Physiocrats ever were; yet, in the realm of political economy what they offered was a deep insight into the causes of the maldistribution of wealth.”

of social democracy that exists in the West today is a tenuous compromise between the entrenched privilege and justice; between what John Locke described as liberty and license. Professor Kaye's work makes an important contribution to this understanding. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith coined the phrase 'countervailing power' to describe this accommodation, characterised by big business, big government and big labor. Fourth and fifth legs have been added to this stool since the end of the Second World War - a big non-profit sector and a big NGO sector functioning on the international arena.

For those Americans who accept diligence as integral to our responsibilities as citizens, the intellectual and moral struggle has been to both preserve and protect what is good, and to remedy what is not good; to expand the democracy and to secure equality of opportunity. The deep disagreement is over the

measures required to do so. And, here, Paine is an attractive source of powerful rhetoric for statists and anti-statists alike. Even within ourselves, the contradictions can be ever-present. The mainstream conservative tends to argue against restrictions on activity in the realm of property, but for restrictions in the realm of individual behavior. The mainstream liberal tends to argue just the opposite. Yet, in terms of public policy, these arguments often come down to differences of degree rather than absolutes. Did Paine ever compromise principle in the interest of incremental change or progress? Yes, of course. How else does one explain his friendship with and support of slave-owning leaders such as Jefferson? Or his willingness to help the American cause for independence by soliciting financial and military assistance from a despotic French monarchy? Yet, he consistently stated his views openly for all to read, and exposed himself to very real personal dangers from those he attacked.

To fully appreciate Paine, one must study Paine at some depth. This, Professor Kaye appropriately concludes, is the last thing the proponents of entrenched privilege want to happen. "Paine's texts may be selectively read and variably interpreted, but as much as those on the political right can quote and try to command him, Paine himself was no conservative. He was a radical, a revolutionary democrat. He fought to liberate men and women from the authoritarianism of states, classes, and churches and to empower them to think and govern themselves."

The contradictions emerge even when intent is clearly sincere. Thus, we should not be surprised by the example of President Woodrow Wilson. He campaigned for a global vision of a remade postwar world based on "revived ideas Paine first advanced in *Rights of Man*". At the same time he was side-stepping the Constitution in order to suppress opposition to United States involvement in the First World War. As Professor Kaye recalls, "Wilson and his appointees ... would license authoritarian acts and foment a reactionary political climate that would outlast the war itself." Paine would have been appalled at the Wilson administration's attacks on the freedom of speech and of the press. He would have been in the forefront of those calling for Wilson's impeachment and affirmation of the Bill of Rights.

I am heartened to find Professor Kaye crediting Louis F. Post with using his influence to counter the Wilson administration's harsh treatment of "radical immigrants and aliens." Louis F. Post was, indeed, a staunch defender of individual liberties. Professor Kay might well have added the name of another Henry Georgist,

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Frederic C. Howe, to that of Post. Howe was instrumental, as Wilson's appointed Commissioner of Ellis Island, in humanising the treatment of immigrants coming through that facility. Howe had gained his political credentials working in the mayoral administration of the Henry Geogist mayor of Cleveland, Ohio, Tom L. Johnson. Howe's book, *The Confessions of a Reformer* (1925) is an extraordinary commentary on the Progressive era and the emergence of liberalism in the United States.

The one person who, in my mind, ranks close to Henry George as lifting Paine's torch of cooperative individualism is only alluded to in passing by Professor Kaye. This is the philosopher Mortimer J. Adler. Among his accomplishments over a life that spanned nearly a full century, Adler served with Robert M. Hutchins (Chancellor of the University of Chicago and later founder of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions) as co-editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and as creator of the Great Books reading programme that continues to this day. Professor Kaye notes that as the United States entered the Second World War "a radio series on the 'Great Books of Western Civilization' dedicated a program to contrasting [Edmund] Burke and Paine on liberty." Adler's book, *The Common Sense of Politics*, written in the 1970s, is well-described as an update on Paine's *Rights of Man*. I have long felt these two books ought to be required reading for

any student of the liberal arts.

Paine's extensive body of work provides us with much to ponder. His willingness to seek truth and write objectively about what he found, regardless of the consequences to himself and his own standing in the world community, is a standard desperately needed today. Professor Kaye concludes that "conservatives do not - and truly cannot - embrace him and his arguments." Certainly, those who today call themselves conservative do not embrace the same moral principles as did Paine. Paine believed in universal moral principles. A world plagued by artificial scarcity continues to adhere to moral relativism - to the false principles of ethnic nationalism and pseudo-religious group sovereignty. Paine would certainly be dismayed that we have achieved so little after so much sacrifice.

Central to Paine's morality is the principle that the earth is our equal birthright; from that principle all law must arise. No person or groups of people have a greater claim to any portion of the earth - and its natural resources - than any other. Ground rent must be paid for the privilege experienced when the community (thought of in its universal sense) grants to some exclusive control over any portion of the earth. Absent this, those who labor - who produce goods and provide services - are at the mercy of the landed. Paine called for what I describe as a "labor and capital goods theory of

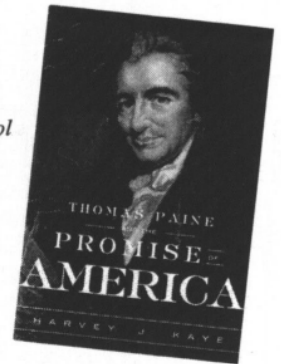
property" buoyed by public policies remedial in character (eg, inheritance taxes and the establishment of citizen trust funds). He put his faith in participatory democracy to allow citizens to decide the proper responsibilities of government; on what public goods and services ought to be provided out of the revenue raised by fair and equitable taxation. He is, without question, the father of cooperative individualism.

I join with Professor Kaye in hoping the expanding interest in Paine and his ideas will serve to stimulate a more sincere public discussion of what constitutes the just society. The revolution Paine helped to ignite is far from completed, and in many ways has been subverted beyond recognition. Despite what Paine wrote, the times that try men's souls have yet to come to a close. **L&L**

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Plan B: try again, fail again, fail better

Geoffrey Lee is not convinced by Plan B2.0 and looks forward to its next version.

Plan B2.0 is subtitled *Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*. The 2.0 indicates that this is an updated and expanded version of the 2003 edition. Plan A is, of course, the path on which we travel at the moment. We know where that

is leading us - to the day when the oil runs out; to global warming and rising seas; to dangerous climate change and to serious water shortages. One alarming picture the author paints is of the Aral Sea where the shoreline has retreated 165 miles from its original

ports, where ships lie stranded in the sands and the salt concentration in the shrunken sea has killed all the fish.

The Plan B solution includes wind power, gas-electric hybrid fuels, solar cells, reforestation, biomass, and stabilising population. Already, Brazil produces 40% of its automotive fuel from sugarcane-based ethanol, and China is the first country where fish farm output (*with its own issues - ed*) exceeds oceanic catch.

Although Plan B may alleviate our current and future global problems it is doomed to failure in its attempt to cure poverty and reduce the gap between rich and poor. The author estimates that Plan B requires an additional annual expenditure of \$161 billion. He points out that the world is now spending \$975 billion annually for military purposes. But if the

additional money is to come from governments under present arrangements, then the financial beneficiaries will be the landowners not the dispossessed poor.

Lester R. Brown, who is president of the Earth Policy Institute, seems never to have heard of Henry George or land value taxation. Unless he can write geogist economics into *Plan B3.0* we shall not be able to solve the fundamental problems that will undermine all his ecological and environmental proposals.

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The author's organisation has concerns similar to the US-based Earthrights Institute to which the editor directs him: www.earthrights.net

