

# Michael Foot

## *Thomas Paine and the Democratic Revolution*

Mr. Chairman and Mr. President, I make one or two brief preliminary words of thanks for those who have organized this Colloquium. I can assure you that we owe a great debt to the United Teilhard Trust and to all those who arranged this meeting. And, speaking on behalf of the Thomas Paine Society in Britain, we would like to express our great good wishes to you for the way it has been arranged and for the thought in arranging it and for the details and kindness we have been shown. And especially, I know all my friends from England would wish me to stress this: Robert Morrell is the real person who sustained the Thomas Paine Society in England. Many of you who have been to England and studied there, or in other ways have met him, know that there is not the slightest doubt that there would not have been a Thomas Paine Society kept alive in England if it had not been for Robert Morrell. He is the person who should really be here making the response, but I would wish to send his good wishes to the Colloquium, too.

As I came across, flying to New York to take part in this occasion, throughout last night, or whenever it was, I have forgotten the exact timetable, but I thought it was a stunning time to come to such a meeting as this in New York, all arranged under the auspices of Thomas Paine, of course. Indeed, it might be said that he had fixed most of the arrangements and that neither of the two chief leading people [President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev] who are engaged in ceremonies elsewhere throughout this week would have been able to carry through their operations at all if it had not been for Thomas Paine. I am sure that would have been Thomas Paine's conclusion because he quite often took a very properly elevated view of his own achievements. But even this might have been a bit beyond his comprehension.

But it is perfectly true that if it had not been for Thomas Paine none of us would have been sitting around this table, and if it had not been for Thomas Paine it would not have been possible for this great occasion – because I think it is a great occasion – to have taken place in this Republic over these last two days and for the [nuclear non-proliferation] agreement that has been reached. Of course we are all hoping that it is

going to go very much further still. But it is made in the spirit of Thomas Paine. It is made in the spirit of drawing back from the precipice which seemed to be opening before the world, and so it is a momentous week for all of us. Under no better auspices than those of Thomas Paine could we meet to agree to celebrate.

I was also partly prompted in these thoughts because muddled up in my mind with Thomas Paine, whom I was reading as I came across through the night, I was also reading some other people, too – some of the works of the President of this Republic and of the General Secretary of the Soviet Union.

I was reading the latest book by Mikhail Gorbachev, and I recommend everybody to read it. He is not as good a writer as Thomas Paine, I may say, but it is a very good book, nonetheless. I believe that it is a book pretty well every word of which is written by him, and it is very difficult to read that book and not think that it is not the achievement of somebody who really does want to tell the world what he is thinking, what he is doing, and what he hopes to achieve. It is certainly not the book of somebody who is churning out something for purely propaganda purposes. There is one sentence there that struck me. And, again, I am sure it would not have been written if it had not been for the existence of Thomas Paine. For Mikhail Gorbachev writes in his book, describing the atmosphere of what is happening in the Soviet Union: 'Today it is as if we were going through a school of democracy again.' I hope he is. His democracy is not the kind of democracy in which people believe in the United States, or in Britain or France, or in most of the Western world. It is not the same democracy as that which Thomas Paine hoped to bring into being. But, nonetheless, I do believe that it is something different from what went before in the Soviet Union. It is not the kind of democracy which was the tired, debased use of the word which previous operators in the Soviet Union have employed, in my judgment. I believe that there is a school of democracy through which Mr. Gorbachev has been reared. And in the book he describes how hundreds of people in the Soviet Union have been writing to him about what is happening there, or what is not happening there, and of course he is now having the same experience all over the world. I think that is a very important development. Maybe Thomas Paine was watching over Mikhail Gorbachev when he wrote those parts of the book.

As for the President of this Republic, he is also another of Thomas

Paine's pupils. He, maybe, does not always acknowledge it, but it happens to be the case. A few years ago, in 1984 I think it was, I was slightly startled to switch on a television program and I heard President Reagan quoting the words of Thomas Paine. I did not know he was so familiar with the works of our hero or his deeds even, but still he quoted him without any disparagement whatever, and I think we should take these things as we find them. President Reagan said, quoting Thomas Paine, 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again,' one of the great and famous phrases of Thomas Paine that went around the world. As I say, when I heard that speech by President Reagan first, I thought one of his speech writers had done it for a wager. I thought somebody had said: 'I bet you can't get in a quotation from Thomas Paine.' But, you see, Thomas Paine carries through his education in the strangest ways.

Here now, I believe that in this week the world has seen by far and away the most hopeful development since the invention of nuclear weapons, and I believe that it can lead the world along the path to the total abolition of these weapons, and I am sure that Thomas Paine would approve.

Thomas Paine's reputation has grown steadily over recent years. This Colloquium is one sign of his worldwide recognition. The next few years will see a further enlargement of his fame and honor, since the events in which he played a unique role are, most properly, to be commemorated even by those who may never have known his name. Both the land of his birth and the land of his adoption have been seeking to make some amends for the outrages they committed against him during his life. However, it is the French Revolution of 1789, with all its endless political and intellectual reverberations, which now seems more than ever a dominating event in world history. Thomas Paine prepared the way for it by his role in the American Revolution. He became a leading instigator of the English Revolution which was still unborn.

He was the first ardent exponent of *democracy* when that word, in its modern connotation, had scarcely appeared in the dictionary. Yet he always knew what he meant; and he said it in plain English. This last was his most revolutionary act. His English language has become as near to a universal language as the world has ever known. And it is no bad thing for the world that he always strives, and so often succeeds, to speak the language of common sense, human rights, hatred of empires, and –

despite all his natural belligerence – a true love of peace and a new international order.

Now, these few introductory remarks were meant to be very brief. But it is natural for Thomas Paine to take command, and transform his immediate struggle into one of universal significance. That is what he was always doing in every battle in which he was ever engaged. I must not be distracted from mentioning some of the recent or prospective events in the fields of publishing or propaganda which will help to ensure the fresh return of his doctrines and his writings. Penguin Books has published, most appropriately on both sides of the Atlantic, *The Thomas Paine Reader*. And there are some copies available here, thanks to Leo Zonneveld, who has carried them right across New York after considerable labor – all the more to be treasured on that account. Never before have so many of his essential writings been concentrated into one volume. I am not saying that there are not other parts of Paine's writings that are still extremely valuable, but there has been an attempt made to concentrate as many of the very greatest ones in one volume. Only in 1945 in the massive two volume edition edited by Philip Foner, or in 1892, in the six volume edition of Paine's *Life and Writings*, compiled by Moncure Conway, have more of his writings been conveniently collected together.

This year, also, the beginnings of a new major biography by George Spater has been published. He had already written a new modern biography of William Cobbett, which added greatly to the literature of our country in that period, and he was the right man to do the same for Thomas Paine. His death deprives us of that completed work, but the pages already available prove what a treasure it would have been, and indeed the pages themselves now, those which have been gathered together, make an indispensable addition to the Paine library. Meantime, in England our foremost modern philosopher, Sir Alfred Ayer (if I can call him that – I dare say he wouldn't object – and he is the true successor of Bertrand Russell), has chosen Thomas Paine to succeed his recent biography of Voltaire. Meantime also, we should not forget to mention – Thomas Paine would allow no such oversight – that our greatest film producer, Sir Richard Attenborough, who made *Gandhi* and *Cry Freedom*, the film which exposes the infamy of apartheid, has chosen as his next subject, Thomas Paine. I am sure he will do it on the spacious and imaginative scale that is required. Once again, the choice is

startlingly appropriate. Thomas Paine was one of the very first exponents of the iniquities of imperialism – of the British variety on the Indian sub-continent or of slavery on this one.

The greatest of great men must be judged by their understanding of the age in which they live and the imprint they leave on those that follow. On this double test, Thomas Paine, was the greatest Englishman of the eighteenth century, when there was no shortage of competitors. He was the man who supplied the link between the three revolutionary movements of the epoch, in America, France, and Britain.

Yet, 'Mr. Common Sense,' as he liked to be called when he first started writing here on this continent, was denounced as a drunkard, a wife-deserter, a traitor, a blasphemer, a most profligate wretch without a single redeeming virtue, in Theodore Roosevelt's notorious phrase, 'a filthy little atheist,' gracelessly changed to deist when he realized he had been wrong about that, too, but still with the emphasis on the filth. From this contrast and catalog, it might be assumed that the story is the familiar one of the prophet without honor in his own country and period who eventually reaps his deserts in the eyes of posterity. But not at all: the history of Thomas Paine and his reputation is a much more topsy-turvy affair, and indeed casts a most bizarre light on the whole twisted process of historical judgment.

For Paine, in his lifetime, commanded a notoriety and popularity such as only pop-stars may have today. He wrote the best political best-seller of all time, second only to the Bible. He was idolized by mobs as well as detested by the kings and courtiers and hangers-on whom he lambasted. He was already acclaimed for his pre-eminence by contemporaries whose fame soon became much more securely established than his own – by George Washington, by Thomas Jefferson, by William Cobbett, by Napoleon, who allegedly said when he unearthed his hero in a Paris garret: 'A statue of gold ought to be erected to you in every city of the universe.' It was from such heights that his name and glory were dragged down into the dirt, and the more one looks back upon the episode, the more one is driven, against the normal probabilities, I would say, to accept the notice of a kind of sinister Establishment conspiracy.

Most of the accusations against his private life are false or misleading or unbalanced. Many of them derived from a posthumous political spite or perhaps rather from the irrepressible fears which he planted in orthodox minds or hardened hearts or comfortable ruling cliques. Not

only was Thomas Paine a true revolutionary; he invented for his purposes a plain, downright English style which everyone could understand. He anticipated and forecast the whole democratic revolution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, in particular, his tone of voice runs through all the great utterances of American freedom, from the Declaration of Independence itself, to the Gettysburg Speech and the finest burst of Franklin Rooseveltian eloquence. The Declaration of Independence – I know that some of the historians have argued about it – but the Declaration of Independence, wrote H. G. Wells with all his English modesty, is ‘one of those exemplary documents which it has been the peculiar service of the English to produce for mankind.’ And there is something in what he said. Dispute may be possible about Paine’s exact role in its drafting; but without Paine’s influence, without the method of pamphleteering he had brought with him from London to Philadelphia, could Thomas Jefferson have written in those terms? I think it is extremely difficult to imagine that he could have done, and therefore he played a major part at the critical moments of the foundation of this great Republic.

Nothing could shake his own conviction that within his own lifetime or slightly afterwards – and thanks largely to his own Atlas-like exertions – the world would be turned upside down. He knew he possessed the implement which could work the miracle – the power of free speech, free writing, and free thought. Nothing could induce in him a hairsbreadth of doubt; the bigger the bonfires they made of his books, the bigger would be the sales. No other figure in history can ever have believed in *the power of freedom* – and not merely its virtue – with Paine’s single-minded intensity. That was his secret. ‘Mankind,’ he said, with his grand simplicity, ‘are not now to be told that they shall not think, or they shall not read.’ And incredibly, he was proved right, as near as mortal man can be.

Time and time again, both in his lifetime and in the years since his death, the forces of censorship and suppression thought they could exterminate him and his ideas forever. Time and again, those forces have been shown that his free word was too strong for them. English courts brought in the verdict of high treason, but they could not stop the sale of the *Rights of Man*. The men in power in Paris would have sent him to the guillotine, but they could not stop his writing *The Age of Reason*.

An American President would have stripped him of his good name as

a citizen of the United States of America, he who had been the first almost certainly to frame that famous title, but every succeeding generation of American citizens turned back to his pamphlets which first called upon the American people to declare their independence and to summon their uttermost powers of resistance, in their darkest times. He, more than anyone, took the trouble to explain why the cause of American revolt against English oppression was the cause of all mankind. And the words are still there, still burning on the page. They retain their force today, in Asia, Africa, in the old continent and the new ones.

I do not say these things only to honor a great Englishman who became and boasted that he was a citizen of the world, although that would have been a good enough reason. I say them also because so much of what he said remains startlingly relevant, indeed still revolutionary.

If he were writing today, there is no doubt he would give his blessing to the Agreements that have been signed here on this continent during this week. He would give his blessing to the foundation of the United Nations and its Charter; he would be demanding only that those provisions should be more rigorously and adventurously applied. We were mentioning before that the right of small nations should be remembered during this week. Their rights are enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations more plainly than in any previous document or by other diplomatic means.

If Paine were writing today, he would give the backing of his international vision to the cause of strengthening the United Nations and its Charter. He was one of the very first writers who started to develop the ideal of settling international disputes by arbitration, and not the resort to arms.

If he were writing today he would certainly give his support to arms control. Indeed, I cannot believe that he would not be giving his full support to the pursuit of the abolition of nuclear weapons in their entirety. I recommend some passages in the Gorbachev book, a quite exceptional passage in the writing of a leading political figure throughout the world. Gorbachev describes in that book what happens if great powers try to uphold the logic of saying that they have the right to keep nuclear weapons because that is the only way they could be defended. He argues with many of them – I will not now specify who they are but the British Prime Minister happens to be number one on the list – when they seek to argue that only by nuclear weapons can we

protect ourselves. The British Prime Minister has dared to go on television in the Soviet Union and say that nuclear weapons were the only means of enabling the small countries to protect themselves against the large ones, and Mr. Gorbachev had to do his best to dismantle such a lunatic piece of logic. In the book he does it very politely but extremely effectively. So I hope that will be another enticement for people to read the book. I have not the slightest doubt that we are going to be arguing about this for a number of years ahead, but where Thomas Paine would be urging us on to fresh fields of achievement, no doubt about that.

If he were writing today, Thomas Paine would be seeking to create a fresh system for educating the whole of the world in our modern dangers and modern perils, and in the means of escape from them. We have had in Britain over these past ten to fifteen years one of the best developments, in my opinion, that of the Open University, which offers a modern education, by modern means of communication – radio and television – the possibilities of a university education for multitudes of people who would not have been able to consider it before. I have in my own constituency in Wales numbers of people who were thrown out of the pits or the steel works, or lost their jobs in their forties and fifties who previously would have had no chance of thinking how they might have been able to make full use of a university education. Thanks to the Open University, they have been able to do so. I do not think we use this wonderful instrument in anything like the scale that we should, but there it is. Now it is proposed that under the Commonwealth aegis or name, there should be a Commonwealth University, whereby these new means should be used to spread forms of education. I do not advocate the imposition of some centralized doctrine to be spread, but we should use the power to communicate such as we never had at our disposal before. And we must use it for the highest educational purposes. Thomas Paine would approve.

In his last major book, most of which is included in this Penguin reader I have referred to, *Agrarian Justice*, which he wrote just before his return to the American Republic – which, alas, had turned its most severe countenance upon him – he came to a sad and tragic homecoming. In that book, at that moment, he still proclaimed more confidently than ever:

‘An army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot. It will succeed where diplomatic management would fail. It is



neither the Rhine, the Channel, or the Ocean that can arrest its progress. It will march on the horizon of the world and will conquer.'

That is what Thomas Paine believed. He could make a half-sentence sound like a tocsin. He worked the miracle – as his friend William Blake exaggerated – of defeating whole armies with a pamphlet and, more miraculously still, his battle cries retain their force two hundred years later. So, certainly there was something worth celebrating in calling this Colloquium.