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Tom Paine: Utopian?

MARK JENDRYSIK

We have it in our power to begin the world
over again.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense (Political Writings 44)*

What makes someone a utopian? What standards can be applied to judge whether or not an author can be inducted into the pantheon of utopian visionaries? In the case of Thomas Paine we can expand the question. What happens if that writer's dreams and hopes are substantially realized? Is it possible to be considered utopian in one era and mundane in another?

In *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, Eric Foner says repeatedly that Paine is a utopian, or that his thought has utopian aspects, but Foner never really clarifies just what he means. Foner writes, for example, "Paine's utopian vision of the future stirred men to action" (xvi). Is Paine's utopian vision one of a belief in progress? In the individual? In the goodness of society? What Foner calls Paine's utopianism may exist at the intersection between his traditional civic republicanism, his belief in the inevitability of scientific and social progress, and his attachment to free markets and individual liberty. Paine lived with a dual vision, one both forward-looking and traditional. While rejecting history as a guide he, perhaps unconsciously, used the civic republican tradition.¹ He believed that republican government could nurture or create a uniform, shared public-interest and citizen self-control. It would advance the rule of reason and maintain an ethic of self-sacrifice for the public good. Part of the utopian nature of Paine's thought comes from the difficulty—some might say the impossibility—of reconciling the divergent forces in the two main streams of his political theory. These two beliefs were an attachment to the common good and individualism. Paine lived before the era of mass industrial capitalism and during a time of expanding frontiers

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and opportunity for the common man (or at least for white immigrants to North America). Paine wrote at perhaps the only time in history when these two views, self-interest and public interest, could be held in tension and, to an extent, reconciled.

A number of authors provide standards which can be used to situate Paine's ideas and projects within the utopian tradition. According to Russell Jacoby's categories, Paine is both a blueprint and an iconoclastic utopian. While Jacoby suggests that the two styles are fundamentally opposed, I believe that Paine effectively combines them. For him, utopianism is first expressed in iconoclasm. In all his major works and especially in *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*, he smashes the idols and shibboleths of his time: kingship, established religion, aristocratic hierarchy, and unexamined tradition. By the time he arrives at his most clearly "utopian" work, *Agrarian Justice*, he and the revolutions he supported and lived through have delegitimated monarchy and aristocratic privilege and have replaced them with new universal principles. Thus, in *Agrarian Justice* he moves directly to laying out his utopian blueprint for a just and equitable society.

Paine can also be identified as a critical utopian since his work "give[s] voice to an emerging radical perception and experience that emphasizes process over system, autonomous and marginal activity over the imposed order of a center" (Moylan 211). He always supports direct democracy and the rights of the common man against the claims of aristocratic elites (both monarchical and republican) to a special right to rule. His works are "expressions of the aspiration for human fulfillment towards which our political experience should always be directed" (Lancaster 111). However, unlike the critical utopians described by Tom Moylan and Ashlie Lancaster, Paine is never afraid to project a blueprint for the future. So, he combines aspects of a critical, iconoclastic, and blueprint utopian.

Paine is also utopian because he moves thought beyond the edge of the known world. He presents a vision of a possible future that is within the reach of humanity. His utopianism can also be seen in his method. As Krishan Kumar notes, a utopian work is "more than a social or political tract aiming at reform, however comprehensive. It always goes beyond the immediately practicable. . . . But it is never simple dreaming, it always has one foot in reality" (2).² Paine, like all true utopians, holds a mirror up to his times and critiques its abuses. It is this critique which makes Paine's utopian planning

plausible and compelling: “His practical proposals . . . combine breathtaking vision, a humble respect for ordinary folk, and a sober recognition of the complexity of human affairs” (Keane xiii). And after his critique, Paine, like Thomas More, shows the outline of a better way.

Finally, Paine is utopian because he shares a key tenet of utopian writing, a faith in the ability of human beings to shape their world. Thus, his work also fits in the tradition of utopian social theory discussed by Lyman Tower Sargent. Like other utopian social theorists, Paine sees human progress as inevitable, but he recognizes the need for direct action to motivate that progress. He looks to a better future shaped by human action and will (*Political Writings* 166). He is also a utopian because he sees the revolutionary changes of his era as not simply a set of limited reforms, but as a total reordering of human existence which must sweep the whole world and for all time (*Political Writings* 16, 30). One strong piece of evidence that Paine can be considered a utopian social theorist is his penchant for putting his political and social goals in programmatic form. He often writes detailed plans for organizing new republican societies. In *Rights of Man*, he puts forward a fourteen-point plan for a new France (*Political Writings* 248–249). In “Plan of a Declaration” (prepared in October 1792 as part of an effort to draft a constitution for France), Paine lays out 33 key points for a reformed nation (*The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* 2: 558–560).

Paine may also be considered millenarian in some aspects of his thought. His works include strong currents of a “‘redemptive futurism’ or ‘political messianism,’ the crusading faith that a revolution in the social and political order would uproot the tares of evil in man and create a new and sinless humanity” (Canavan 680). Foner suggests that Paine converted millennialism to secular utopianism in America: “To the millennial view of the American past as a stage whereby God’s kingdom would be established on this earth, Paine added the future destiny of America as a society defined by its commitment to liberty and its isolation from the old world” (81). But his is also a world vision: “Citizenship for him implied the global abolition of despotism and injustice” (Keane xiii).

Paine’s work no longer surprises modern readers. Repetition has weakened the force of his ideas. Many of his radical ideals have become modern commonplaces. This fact makes him less likely to be seen as utopian. His language has been appropriated by political movements of all kinds and

stripped of its radical content. Even Ronald Reagan felt safe quoting Paine (Kaye 4).³ Many of his goals have been realized. His plans in *Agrarian Justice* resemble nothing so much as old-age pensions and disability relief. As Jacoby notes, when he asks his students to “sketch out their own utopias” he receives plans for a more “comprehensive welfare state” (xiv). For some, the fact that much of what Paine desired has actually come true may remove him from the ranks of utopian thinkers.

Thomas Paine has not generally been considered a particularly deep or complex political theorist. But his influence in the political debate over the American and French revolutions cannot be overestimated. Indeed, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that he—uniquely among the leaders of the American Revolution—“merits a place on the Mall or Tidal Basin as the only authentically radical voice, the only unblinkered democrat, the only patriotic prophet whose vision remains relevant and resonant for our time” (Ellis).⁴

His works brought him worldwide fame. *Common Sense* (1776) is credited with converting American opinion to the cause of independence. His *American Crisis* pamphlets (1776–1783) gave support to the cause of the revolution at critical times.⁵ In *Rights of Man* (1791–1792), he defended the French Revolution and explained its worldwide significance. The brilliance of Paine’s work in both *Common Sense* and the *Rights of Man* was acknowledged even by his adversaries. In these works, he demolished the foundations of monarchy. But he went further. He undermined the basic assumptions behind class-based and static societies. In *The Age of Reason* (1794), he laid out his case for a religion based solely on human reason (and in the process alienated many of his friends and supporters). Finally, in his last major work *Agrarian Justice* (1795), he laid the intellectual and moral foundation for the modern welfare state. Paine is that rare figure whose words can truly be said to have changed the world: “From his starting point of the rights of man, Paine develops arguments for popular sovereignty, universal suffrage, representative government, and a citizenship based on formal equality and on the existence of a threshold of welfare below which individuals will not fall” (Philip xxi). Certainly, within the context of the eighteenth century these would be seen by many as utopian goals.

John Keane has stated, “Paine swam comfortably in the cosmopolitan waters of the Enlightenment” (232). He stood in the forefront of almost every “progressive” cause of his day. He spoke out against slavery, colonialism,

religious intolerance, inequality, and poverty; he spoke out in favor of the rule of the people and of reason. He believed that the creation of republican political orders would produce nearly universal peace (*Political Writings* 8) and that “science, the partisan of no country,” would bring forth a new era of human prosperity (“Letter to Abbé Reynal,” *Complete Writings* 2: 241).⁶ As Gary Kates has suggested, “One of Paine’s most cherished purposes was to convince readers that the various political changes affecting late eighteenth century Europe and America were part of coherent and rational development towards a better world” (569).

Paine focused on the promise of the future because as a “typical child of the Enlightenment, he viewed the past as an almost unbroken reign of ignorance, superstition and tyranny” (Canavan 680). For Paine, history is a catalog of injustice—there was no mythical golden age. Paine does not look back into the past for models of society—as, for example, More does for Utopia. For Paine, the past is merely a burden. In his writing, history becomes a story of oppression, violence, and the unjust use of force to maintain the power of kings and nobles (*Complete Writings* 2: 543, 547; *Political Writings* 8ff, 172).

A key utopian feature in Paine’s thought is his commitment to the ideal of universal revolution. He believes that “democratic values [are] both universal and self-enacting” (Ellis). As Paine himself asserts, “What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude” (*Political Writings* 180). While John Diggins is correct to say that “Paine, like Jefferson, saw the [American] Revolution as an act of liberation that freed America from all ties to the Old World and indeed to the past itself” (38), revolution is, for him, more than simply a regional event. Revolution is not merely an American or French event. It has changed all history. Its ideals were and are unstoppable. They represent the wave of the future. Paine notes in *Agrarian Justice*:

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, nor the ocean that can arrest its progress; it will march to the horizon of the world, and it will conquer. (*Political Writings* 336)

For Paine, a new history of humanity begins with the American Rev-

olution. But revolution goes beyond the merely political. The revolutions of the late-eighteenth century have changed the very way human beings see the world. As he notes in his celebrated "Letter to Abbé Raynal" (1782),

Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used. We can look back on our own prejudices, as if they had been the prejudices of other people. (*Complete Writings* 2: 243)

Changing government and creating new political and social orders will liberate human beings from the toils of superstition and misperception. After the revolution, people see the world as it is not as their fear or the power of tyrants makes it: "The present age will hereafter merit to be called the Age of Reason, and the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world" (*Political Writings* 258).

The power to shape the world lies in the hands of the people. John Keane, in his biography of Paine, refers to this idea as a "Copernican revolution in the field of politics" (121). The revolution in politics was supported by a revolution in methods of political writing: "Paine repudiated the language and style of classical discourse and delighted in exposing those 'who reason by precedent drawn from antiquity'" (Diggins 38). Paine's great popularity as a writer stemmed from his recognition that "words are deeds" and that a new politics required a new style of writing. The rise of the people to political power must be accompanied by the creation of a new language that the people can understand and use to articulate their political goals. "Bastilles of the word" must fall before a new straightforward republican manner of speaking and writing (Keane xi).⁷ In effecting this revolution, Paine changed what words mean: "In *Common Sense*, Paine literally transformed the political language. 'Republic' had previously been used as a term of abuse in political writing; Paine made it a living political issue and a utopian ideal of government" (Foner 75). Paine even boldly praised the democracy of ancient Athens: "We see more to admire and less to condemn, in that great, extraordinary people, than in anything which history affords" (*Political Writings* 177). He placed himself in opposition to the conventional wisdom of his times that

saw democracy as mob rule.

We can argue that Paine's vision would comfortably fit within the civic republican mind-set, except for the fact that he accepted modern economic arrangements and even celebrated them.⁸ Paine was never interested in the limitation of capitalism or the abolition of private property (Foner 251). He accepted Locke's idea that cultivation and improvement of the land created a just title to property (*Political Writings* 326). In some ways, Paine was as utopian about the power of free trade and capitalism as any follower of Von Hayek.⁹ Paine, like Adam Smith, was enthralled by "liberating implications" of the new doctrine of the free market (Foner 157–158). He saw free markets as an expression of human freedom and as a means for the common man to attain his full potential. Commerce also has the power to create peace. Paine states, "if commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable of, it would extirpate the system of war, and produce a revolution in the uncivilized state of governments" (*Political Writings* 208). The fact that raw materials are spread all over different parts of the world shows that commerce is meant to bring nations together for peace and mutual advantage:

Commerce is no other than the traffic of two persons, multiplied on the scale of numbers. . . . For this purpose she has distributed the materials of manufactures and commerce in various and distant parts of a nation and a world; and they cannot be procured by war so cheaply or commodiously as by commerce; she has rendered the latter the means of extirpating the former. (*Political Writings* 208)

Paine's experience as a small-tradesman in England prior to his immigration to America may help to explain his conversion to free-market economics. As a trained stay-maker, Paine in his economic activity and freedom of action was restricted by all manner of guild regulations and feudal rules. Paine (rightly) saw much of the economic regulation of the time as an attempt to control the economic activities of the lower and middle classes (in the American sense of the term) for the benefit of the aristocracy (*Political Writings* 219–220). Perhaps because of this experience, Paine came to see republican or popular government as the solution not only to the political questions of the day, but also to the economic ones. In a republic, "every man

is a proprietor in government and considers it a necessary part of his business to understand. It concerns his interest because it affects his property" (*Political Writings* 183). According to Eric Foner, "Republican government would . . . allow full rein to the natural laws of civil society, ensuring that all classes would share in economic abundance, and that inequalities of wealth would reflect differences in individual ability and effort" (96).

His beliefs about law show the limits of his utopianism. Law cannot exist forever—we cannot bind our posterity (Foner 199):

There never did, nor never can exist a parliament . . . or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding or controlling posterity to the "end of time," or of commanding forever how the world shall be governed, or who shall govern it. (*Political Writings* 63)

This view is clearly opposed to the utopian attitude that human beings can create a "machine that will go of itself" (Kammen 18). In this way, the Founders such as Madison were more utopian than Paine (or Jefferson—who figured on a revolution every generation). After all, these men put *Novus Ordo Seclorum* ("New Order of the Ages") on the great seal of the United States.¹⁰ This action bespeaks a utopian vision far surpassing anything in Paine.

Paine sees principles and the right as universal and permanent (Christian 372). But these qualities can never make us accept that the entire future course of our history can be fixed by men living in the present:

The wrong which began a thousand years ago is as much a wrong as if it began today; and the right which originates to-day is as much a right as if it had the sanction of a thousand years. . . . Time with respect to principles is an eternal NOW; it has no operation upon them: it changes nothing of their nature and qualities. But what have we to do with a thousand years? Our lifetime is but a short portion of that period, and if we find the wrong in existence as soon as we begin to live, that is the point of time at which it begins to us; and our right to resist it is the same as if it never existed

before. ("Dissertation on First Principles of Government" [1795], *The Thomas Paine Reader* 455)

So, hereditary monarchy is as much an absurdity as writing a constitution that will last forever. But we must always keep in mind that for Paine change was progressive. The era of revolution had opened a time in which human knowledge and liberty can move forward. In order to maintain this progression, we must avoid becoming complacent and self-satisfied. There can never be a time in which a final political or social answer will be reached. But we, as free people participating in republican government, can be assured that we are moving toward something better.

Human Liberty as Utopia

In order to attain the utopian goal of liberty, both the body and the mind must be liberated from the toils of political oppression and mindless superstition. For Paine, America becomes the stage on which to play out the universal drama of liberty. Prior to his arrival in Philadelphia in 1775, Paine had imbibed the image of America held by English dissenters. He ratified that image soon after his arrival in the New World: "*The degree of improvement which America has already arrived at is unparalleled and astonishing, but 'tis miniature to what she will one day boast of*" ("Useful and Entertaining Hints" [1775], *Complete Writings 2*: 1022). For Paine, as Foner has argued, America "was a land of abundance and equality, where individual merit, not social rank, set the limits on man's achievement" (16). It is a simple matter for Paine to link this picture of a favored and unique land with his desire to sweep away injustice and oppression in the world. Paine sees the American Revolution as opening a space for liberty in a world which has, by his lights, declared war upon human freedom. He gives eloquent voice to this belief in *Common Sense*:

O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose
not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand
forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun
with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted
round the globe. Asia and Africa have long ago
expelled her. Europe regards her as a stranger,
and England hath given her warning to depart.

~ 147 ~

O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an
asylum for mankind. (*Political Writings* 30)

In Paine's terms, America will provide a last refuge for liberty. But perhaps more importantly, America will become the base for the liberation of humanity (*Political Writings* 16).

Paine's *Common Sense* serves to liberate the minds of his readers from certain traditional beliefs. He deconstructs the idea of monarchy. He shows how its origin is tainted by violence and crime (*Political Writings* 13). He demonstrates, through the use of biblical passages, that God objects to the institution of monarchy (*Political Writings* 11). He shows how a republic is the only just form of government, for a republic is the only type of government that can allow natural human liberty to flourish. It is the only form of social order which is based in human equality (*Political Writings* 28–29).¹¹ Finally, republican government guarantees peace: “The republics of Europe are all (and we may say always) in peace. Holland and Switzerland are without wars, foreign or domestic” (*Political Writings* 26).

Paine was driven by a boiling sense of the injustice of all existing governments. Kings and rulers lord it over the suffering masses and perpetuate suffering and brutality. Social order cannot be maintained unless the conditions of poverty and oppression under which most people live are ended. He notes in *Rights of Man*:

When, in countries called civilized, we see
age going to the work-house, 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. Its
entrance into life is marked with the presage of
its fate; and until this is remedied, it is in vain
to punish. (*Political Writings* 212–213)

In 1790, Paine saw all existing governments (except perhaps the republican government in the United States and the revolutionary government in France) as monuments to tyranny. They all failed to do what governments are

required to do by the laws of nature and justice:

Civil government does not consist in executions; but in making that 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, imposters and prostitutes; and even the poor themselves, with all their wants upon them, are compelled to support the fraud that oppresses them. (*Political Writings* 206)

The very act of establishing a republic is utopian. While all other forms of government are rooted in ignorance and superstition, the rule of the people is the epitome of reason. But a republic does more. It unleashes the forces pent up by tradition and oppression:

Government in a well constituted republic requires no belief from man beyond what his reason can give. He sees the *rationale* of the whole system, its origin and its operation; and as it is best supported when best understood; the human faculties act with boldness, and acquire, under this form of government, a gigantic manliness. (*Political Writings* 147–148)

In a republic, and only in a republic, people see their private good as embodied in the public good. They gain the confidence to act. This confidence is embodied in the American and French Revolutions, which have begun the process of freeing the world from despotism (*Political Writings* 258). And that process will continue:

As reforms, or revolutions, call them which you please, extend themselves among nations, those nations will form connections and conventions, and when a few are thus confederated, the progress will be rapid, till despotism and corrupt government be totally expelled. (*Political Writings* 260)

However, political freedom and, indeed, world liberation are not enough. The human mind must also be liberated. Paine links the progress of science with the cause of human liberty. The submission of nature is a necessary feature of a perfected society (*Complete Writings* 2: 1023). His attitude toward science verges on the ecstatic. His own life was spent, when not in political agitation, in attempting to build iron bridges and to educate the people about the advances of Enlightenment science.¹²

Paine also sees a necessary connection between religious and political liberty: "In the proportion that *spiritual freedom* has been manifested, *political liberty* has increased" ("Thoughts on Defensive War" [1775], *Complete Writings* 2: 54). Religious freedom was and is a natural right, not merely a grant from the powers that be: "In America we do not grant liberty of conscience as a favor but confirm it as a right. And in doing so we have in point of justice exceeded every part of the known world" ("Address to the People of Pennsylvania" [1778], *Complete Writings* 2: 285). Governments must renounce any claims over the consciences of their citizens or subjects. Paine demands an end to "the adulterous connection of church and state" (*Political Writings* 268). He hoped to move his readers toward "the pure and moral religion of Deism" (*Complete Writings* 1: 537); only then can reason, which Paine calls "the choicest gift of God to man," take its proper place as man's sole guide (*Political Writings* 286).

Religion must be reduced to its most basic principles and shorn of all its accreted "priestcraft," which is only a cover for political oppression: "The age of ignorance commenced with the Christian system" (*Political Writings* 299). Christianity is a "system of falsehood, idolatry and pretended revelation" (*Complete Writings* 1: 537). The liberation of humanity from superstition and illogic will also liberate science from the restraints placed upon it by the ignorant. The claim that scientific discoveries somehow violate the laws of God is a dangerous absurdity. Human beings only discover the existing truths God has created. Those who claim science undermines religion live in a world of willful, proud, and, ultimately, blasphemous blindness. Paine elaborates on this point in *The Age of Reason*:

It is a fraud of the Christian system to call the sciences *human invention*; it is only the application of them that is human. Every science has for its basis a system of principles

as fixed and unalterable as those by which the universe is regulated and governed. Man cannot make principles, he can only discover them. (*Political Writings* 292)

The liberation of the state from religious control and vice-versa will also liberate learning. No longer will students feel an obligation to study the dead languages of ancient Greece and Rome. Instead, students will solely apply themselves to the development of scientific knowledge. They will come to appreciate the world and to trust themselves. They will see that “everything, therefore is a miracle in one sense, whilst in the other sense, there is no such thing as a miracle” (*Political Writings* 312). Religion must be a reflection of man’s wonder at the existence and bounty of the world. In practical terms, he is willing to accept any belief, so long as it does not challenge republican principles and the holders of that belief do not attempt to oppress those who disagree with them. In some ways, that remains a utopian dream.

Agrarian Justice: Paine’s Utopian Project?

Paine’s utopian vision reached its culmination in his last major work, *Agrarian Justice* (1795). He begins from a premise of radical equality: “It is wrong to say God made *rich* and *poor*; He made only *male* and *female*; and He gave them the earth for their inheritance” (*Political Writings* 323). All social and political orders which fail to recognize and respect human equality are illegitimate by definition. Since almost every state in the world, according to Paine, violates the principles of equality, all states are therefore liable to be overthrown and replaced. In this work, Paine lays out the principles of a truly just state.

In order to do this, Paine defines a number of terms. First, he declares that poverty is not natural. Poverty was and is a human creation amenable to human solutions: “Poverty, therefore, is a thing created by that which is called civilized life. It exists not in the natural state” (*Political Writings* 324).¹³ Second, he declares that while the division of the world into private property has been a great boon for humanity in general, it has produced great injustice as well:

It has dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural

inheritance, without providing for them, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss, and has thereby created a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before. (*Political Writings* 326)

The dispossession of much of the human race of its natural right to subsistence was defended as “natural” or “necessary” by Paine’s contemporaries. For them, the poor had no claim on the community. Paine argues that this cannot be the case: “It is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for. The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust” (*Political Writings* 331). Defenders of inequality mistake unjust social and economic orders for the natural order.¹⁴

The centerpiece of Paine’s plan is an award of fifteen pounds to each person who reaches the age of twenty-one, “as compensation, in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property,” and an old-age pension of ten pounds a year once an individual reaches the age of fifty (*Political Writings* 327). Justice requires that the state make this provision since the charitable actions of private individuals are capricious and unpredictable: “In all great cases it is necessary to have a principle more universally active than charity; and with respect to justice, it ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not” (*Political Writings* 332). Justice to the poor and aged must be universally applied, or it is meaningless.

However, Paine recognized that we cannot merely appeal to some universal sense of justice if we are successfully to implement such a project. Self-interest plays a role as well. Since the vast majority of people are indeed poor, or at least not rich, they will benefit from the security provided by the plan. The wealthy and powerful will also benefit from the reduction of social upheaval and unrest, which are the result of poverty: “To remove the danger, it is necessary to remove the antipathies, and this can only be done by making property productive of a national blessing, extending to every individual” (*Political Writings* 333–334). Under Paine’s system, greater individual wealth will automatically be translated to greater wealth for the nation through transfers to the “national fund”: “[T]he more riches a man acquires, the better it shall be for the general mass; it is then that antipathies will cease, and property placed on the permanent basis of national interest and protection” (*Political*

Writings 335–336).

Finally, to meet the objections of those who declare that all taxes and transfers of money are theft, Paine declares that realizing social and economic justice is a universal obligation. Since humans do not create themselves and no person really generates his own wealth, all people have a mutual debt to every other person and to society. His explanation of why this is the case is worth quoting in full:

Separate an individual from society, and give him an island or a continent to possess, and he cannot acquire personal property. He cannot be rich. So inseparably are the means connected with the end, in all cases, that where the former do not exist the latter cannot be obtained. All accumulation, therefore, of personal property, beyond what a man's own hands produce, is derived to him by living in society; and he owes on every principle of justice, of gratitude, and of civilization, a part of that accumulation back again to society from whence the whole came.
(*Political Writings* 334)

For Paine, our very existence as free beings is a product of civilization. Our reason allows us to mold and shape the social order for good ends. There are no good or just reasons for men to be subject to the bad effects of civilization. There is equally no reason for human beings to accept the inequality of the social world as “natural.” Perhaps what makes *Agrarian Justice* the apex of Paine's utopianism is less the program itself as it is Paine's heroic refusal to accept any limits on the ability of human beings to shape the world. In Paine's utopia, we can enjoy all the benefits of civilization, science, abundance of all goods, equality, and peace without having to accept any of the so-called costs of civilized life.

Tom Paine: Utopian

While it has been suggested that Paine believed that government might eventually “wither away,” I think that he hoped for a limitation on government which could only occur in a peaceful, republican political universe. Since, for Paine, the source of international conflict, domestic taxation, and the op-

pression needed to maintain kings and their minions is tyrannical power, the end of the rule of kings can only produce good outcomes. These outcomes would include the freeing of public resources for the relief of poverty and the propagation of science.

Paine's vision of a political world based on the peaceful interaction of republics, free markets for both products and ideas, and the continual development of science can be usefully compared with the vision of Immanuel Kant in his work *Perpetual Peace* (1795). It is unlikely that either knew of the other's work. But each author showed the utopian hopes that arose early in the age of revolution. Both demonstrated that for brief periods in human history, the utopian becomes the norm. Bold visions of a better future come into focus, if only to recede when the harsh realities of power and human perversity reassert themselves and once more take center stage in politics.

Paine had a boundless faith in the ability of ordinary human beings to shape their social, political, and economic worlds. In doing so, they have no need to rely on myths, traditions, gods, or experts. Perhaps this viewpoint is where Paine is a true utopian. For Tom Paine, human beings create their own futures, and they do so by acts of reason and free will. These acts can and will liberate and perfect the whole human universe. For Paine, people truly have the power to begin the world all over again. They can sweep away the accreted injustices of the centuries and establish, if not an earthly Jerusalem, a just and equal society in which all people are free to attain their full potential. Paine's utopia, then, is not a place, it is a condition. His is world that might be if we but will it.

There is another way to look at Paine's work, however. Perhaps Paine is the rarest of utopian thinkers, one whose plans and dreams for humanity have, in part, been attained. It may be that a reformer is merely a utopian whose hopes and dreams have been realized. This is not to suggest that Paine would rest easy in the modern world. Clearly his dreams about the abolition of poverty and the advent of universal peace through popular government have yet to be attained. Perhaps hoping and fighting for justice and equality is always utopian. This is where Paine's utopianism remains to inspire us.

Endnotes

¹ "Civic Republicanism" can best be described as the belief that in republics citizens will rise above self interest and act virtuously and for the

common good. See John P. Diggins' *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest and the Foundations of Liberalism* for a discussion of this idea as it applies to American politics. For the classic discussion of civic republicanism and its influence on the American Revolution, see J. G. A. Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*.

² Here I use, but take issue with, Kumar's definition of utopia. He claims that "utopia describes a state of impossible perfection which nevertheless is in some genuine sense not beyond the reach of humanity" (3). I believe that Paine presents an attainable set of goals. However, these goals would indeed have appeared out of reach and impossible to many of his contemporaries.

³ As Joseph J. Ellis notes "oddly enough over the last 30 years Paine's chief fans have appeared on the conservative wing of the Republican Party, making Paine, like Jefferson, the proverbial man for all seasons" (15).

⁴ In fairness to Ellis, I should note that he is not blindly positive in his assessment of Paine.

⁵ George Washington ordered the first *American Crisis* number read to his troops before the attack on the Hessians at Trenton in 1776 (Kaye 58).

⁶ Paine also found time to speak out against dueling, against British imperialism in India, and for the rights of women as well. It might also be argued that opposing all forms of hereditary privilege was utopian in the late eighteenth century (and may still be).

⁷ Paine is not suggesting the creation of a whole new language. He merely demands that English be written in a clear and direct manner, stripped of all pretension: "The new theory of rhetoric—which Paine would so effectively employ—rejected the traditional preference for flowery and elegant style over substance" (Kaye 24).

⁸ Civic republicans (such as Machiavelli or James Harrington, or even Thomas Jefferson) were suspicious of commerce. They believed that the pursuit of money through business weakened civic virtue. They often juxtaposed "virtue' with 'corruption'—or 'virtue' with 'commerce'" (Pocock ix).

⁹ See, for example, his long and somewhat tedious discussion (in *Rights of Man*) of the finances of the British government in which he proposes the ending of trade-distorting taxes and monopolies (*Political Writings*

223ff).

¹⁰ For a useful analysis of the idea of escaping history and time and its effect on the founding of the United States, see Michael Lienesch's *New Order of the Ages: Time, the Constitution and the Making of American Political Thought*, especially his introduction.

¹¹ Paine denies that political or social liberty can come from the acts of "strong men." He refers caustically to Alexander the Great ("The Madman of Macedon") and Julius Caesar (*Complete Writings* 2: 54, 256, 1114). He did, however, exhibit a brief and mistaken enthusiasm for Napoleon.

¹² For a discussion of Paine's interest in bridges as an expression of his political and social goals, see Keane 267–270.

¹³ The reader should keep in mind that Paine is not in any way a primitivist. He believes that we cannot return to a pre-political state. Civilization, with all its problems, is a given. There are no "noble savages" for Paine. Life outside the "civilized state" is limited and poor and not to be romanticized (Christian 369). For his attack on "primitivism," see the opening paragraphs of *Agrarian Justice*. For the inevitability of the creation of government and the state, see the first pages of *Common Sense*.

¹⁴ While Paine may seem to be close to Rousseau on the corruption by society of human nature, Paine always points out that bad political systems and not society per se are the cause of corruption.

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