

Rendezvous with Thomas Paine

I OPENED THE DOOR on the other end of the corridor of Fame, and there, peering through the centuries, stood Tom Paine. So this was the fallen idol of three nations! He was broken and old in this dingy New Rochelle dwelling. Only his eyes were magnificently young; they glowed like coals.

"I'm from the magazine *Analysis*, Mr. Paine," I said. "You were gracious enough to grant us an interview."

"I'm glad I'm not completely forgotten," he replied. There was a touch of bitterness in his voice. "Won't you please sit down? It is a long story, and some of your readers may care to know . . ."

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When Tom Paine, approaching forty, reached the shores of America, he left behind him a hostile England. Here it was different. A brave young nation was about to commence its struggle for independence. Into this fight, with the zeal of the crusader, the newly-arrived pamphleteer threw himself. His *Common Sense* was intellectual dynamite.

"Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil," he proclaimed—and shocked the "rich and well-born." Monarchy was worst of all. "There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to

act in cases where the highest judgment is required. . . . How impious is the title of sacred majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust!"

There was, however, such a thing as "good" government, but we must seek very thoroughly to find it. "And as a man who is attached to a prostitute is unfitted to choose or judge of a wife, so any prepossession in favor of a rotten constitution of government will disable us from discerning a good one."

Before "good" government can come about, monarchy must be destroyed, for monarchy is born of conquest. "This is supposing the present race of kings in the world to have had an honorable origin; whereas . . . we should find the first of them nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang. . . . A French bastard landing with an armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original."

The lust for freedom is the prerequisite of "good" government. "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 expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

Now that the struggle had begun, there was no end of brilliant propaganda. Paine believed that could he but convince the public of the necessity of establishing a central government on the principles of justice, then might would become right. He was a reformer. His *Crisis* series opened with the ringing call to arms: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of the country; but he that stands it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have the consolation with us that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

War is generally undesirable, but on some occasions needful. "In a general view, there are few conquests that repay the charge of making them, and mankind are pretty well convinced that it can

never be worth their while to go to war for profit's sake. If they are made war upon, their country invaded, or their existence at stake, it is their duty to defend and preserve themselves, but in every other light, and from every other cause, is war inglorious and detestable."

And so he pamphleteered, worked selflessly and nobly, dreaming of the day when, following his own example, humanity would become free and unselfish. But when the day of liberation came, the politicians had no more use for him. Disillusioned and hurt, he sailed back to England.

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Here, he thought, people would welcome the champion of liberty. Then came his *Rights of Man*, in defense of the French Revolution.

To begin with, "if the mere name of antiquity is to govern in the affairs of life, the people who are to live a hundred or a thousand years hence, may as well take us for a precedent, as we make a precedent of those who lived an hundred or a thousand years ago. The fact is, that portions of antiquity, by proving everything, establish nothing. It is authority against authority all the way, till we come to the divine origin of the rights of man, at the Creation. Here our inquiries find a resting place, and our reason finds a home."

Man is essentially an individualist, and is forever free. The State constantly attempts to destroy this freedom. "It is not among the least of the evils of the present existing governments in all parts of Europe, that man, considered as man, is thrown back to a vast distance from his Maker, and the artificial chasm filled up by a succession of barriers, or a sort of turnpike gates, through which he has to pass."

Man is possessed of certain inalienable natural rights. "Natural rights are those which appertain to man in right of his existence. Of this kind are all the intellectual rights, or rights of the mind, and also all those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness, which are not injurious to the natural rights of others."

Man, in the exercise of his natural rights, entered into a *social compact* not to harm or be harmed by his fellow-men. ". . . the *individuals themselves*, each in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a compact with each other, to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist. . . .

To suppose that any government can be a party in a compact with the whole people, is to suppose it to have existence before it can have a right to exist."

Once established, the government was still nothing but a composition of "unmixable" natural rights. ". . . The power produced from the aggregate of natural rights, imperfect in power in the individual, cannot be applied to invade the natural rights which are retained in the individual, and in which the power to execute is as perfect as the right itself." The government is "nothing more than a national association acting on the principles of society. . . . Government is no further necessary than to supply the few cases to which society and civilization are not conveniently competent. . . . The more perfect civilization is, the less occasion has it for government, because the more does it regulate its own affairs, and govern itself; but so contrary is the practice of old governments to the reason of the case, that the expenses of them increase in the proportion they ought to diminish."

Moreover, ". . . the obscurity in which the origin of all the present old governments is buried, implies the iniquity and disgrace with which they began. . . . Those bands of robbers having parcelled out the world and divided it into dominions, began, as is naturally the case, to quarrel with each other. What at first was obtained by violence, was considered by others as lawful to be taken, and a second plunderer succeeded the first. . . . From such beginnings of governments, what could be expected, but a continual system of war and extortion?"

However, thought Paine the reformer, there is a place for "good" government, the function of which is to regulate affairs for the "common welfare." Such were the new governments of America and France, where true freedom was about to prevail. The old governments lived only for and by taxation. "Excess and inequality of taxation, however disguised in the means, never fail to appear in their effects. As a great mass of the community are thrown thereby into poverty and discontent, they are constantly on the brink of commotion; and deprived, as they unfortunately are, of the means of information, are easily heated to outrage. 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.”

The Rights of Man was a bombshell; its explosion drove Paine out of England, and straight into the heart of the French Revolution.

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Two nations had vilified him for his bold utterings, but here in France, thought Paine, it would be different. An oppressed peasantry, fighting for its very existence, definitely could and would adopt the principles of Individualism. He pleaded for an end to chaos, the establishment of “good” government and a cessation to all slaughter. His courage brought him his reward. He landed in prison.

An exciting stroke of luck saved him from the guillotine. For one whole year, ill nearly to death, he languished in prison. When he emerged, he brought with him his masterpiece against religious bigotry and oppression, *The Age of Reason*. It brought on him opprobrium which has endured to this day.

Organized ritual and dogma are the mainstays of Statism, he wrote. How terrible it is for the individualistic man to regard “himself as an outlaw, as an outcast, as a beggar, as a mumper, as one thrown, as it were, on a dunghill at an immense distance from his Creator, and who must make his approaches by creeping and cringing to intermediate beings, that he conceives either a contemptuous disregard for everything under the name of religion, or becomes indifferent.”

Paine set up his famous creed:

“I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy. But, lest it should be supposed that I believe many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe and my reasons for not believing them.

“I do not believe the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. 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.”

France no longer wanted him. He who fought for freedom throughout the world, had no place therein which he could call his home. Evidently, the earth no longer was available to man for his use. Angriily, he wrote his remarkable *Agrarian Justice*.

Everywhere one sees poverty amidst plenty. "On one side, the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other, he is shocked by the extremes of wretchedness. . . . The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilized."

It is not true, as claimed by the Church, that God had made the "rich" and the "poor." "He made only *male* and *female*; and He gave them the earth for their inheritance."

Land monopoly is responsible for all the evils of poverty and Statehood. ". . . the landed monopoly . . . produced the greatest evil. 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."

Land can never be privately owned. "It is a position not to be controverted that the earth, in its natural, uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, *the common property of the human race*. . . . There could be no such thing as landed property originally. Man did not make the earth, and though he had a natural right to *occupy* it, he had no right to *locate as his property* in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from whence the first title-deeds should issue. Whence then, arose the idea of landed property? I answer as before, that when cultivation began, the idea of landed property began with it, from the impossibility of separating the improvement made by the cultivation from the earth itself, upon which that improvement was made. . . .

"Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated lands, owes to the community a *ground-rent* . . . for the land which he holds. . . ." Such rent should be apportioned among all the members of the community according to a just formula. Only then would justice triumph. "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 on the horizon of the world, and it will conquer."

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Tom Paine finished his story. He was again in America, but now thoroughly damned and — most ironic of all fates — called a "foreigner."

"I don't blame you for hating bureaucracy and the whole structure of Statism," I ventured.

"But I don't," he replied. "The only way in which the principles that I espoused can be brought to blossom on this earth is by constant reform in government. We must have honest men elected to office . . ."

His voice was barely audible as it sounded through the mists of Time.

"Don't forget," he cried. "Write to your Congressman."