

Thomas Paine and his *Rights of Man*

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Abstract. This paper examines the historical context, the content of Thomas Paine's book, *Rights of Man*, and its impact on British working class. Paine, a British philosopher involved in the American independence movement, wrote *Rights of Man* in response to Edmund Burke's criticisms of the French Revolution. The book defended the principles of the French Revolution and inspired workers to fight for their rights. Paine's ideas on innate rights, representative democracy, and the roots of poverty resonated with the underclass workers. The conclusion highlights Paine's contributions to democratic revolutions and his influence on the establishment of the American republic. Paine's ideas continue to shape modern society and inspire ongoing democratic movements.

1. Introduction

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was an English philosopher involved in the American independence movement who was influential throughout Britain, France and the United States. Born in 1737 to a poor family in Norfolk, England, Paine had firsthand knowledge of the hardships borne by the underclass by the time he was first introduced to the Enlightenment ideas of freedom, equality and democracy in the 1770s. In 1774, he traveled to America, where he joined the country's fight for independence from Britain. Paine then went on to write *Common Sense*, a 47-page pamphlet advocating independence from the British, in 1776, inspiring other colonists to join the fight as well.

Although Paine is best known for *Common Sense*, he also wrote another book, *Rights of Man*, which was just as influential in Europe as *Common Sense* had been in America. Paine published *Rights of Man* after having returned to England from the United States in 1790, when the French Revolution was in full swing. The British scholar Edmund Burke (1729-1797) had just published *Reflections on The Revolution in France*, which criticized the French Revolution and reaffirmed Britain's conservative political system, and *Rights of Man* was written in response. By defending the principles of the French Revolution, with its calls for representative democracy and its focus on the needs of the poor, *Rights of Man* not only recognized the significance of what was going on in France, but also influenced the labor movement in Britain, inspiring countless workers to fight for their rights.

This paper examines the influence of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* on the British labor movement, with a particular emphasis on how the book's defense of the French Revolution encouraged Britain's working class.

The discussion is broken up into four parts. Chapter 1 explores the historical context of Paine's book, why he chose to write it, and the immediate impact it had in Britain and France. Chapter 2 offers an in-depth discussion of the book's contents, including Paine's ideas on innate rights, his praise for representative democracy, his criticisms of monarchy, and his analysis of the roots of poverty. Chapter 3 discusses the impact of *Rights of Man* on the British labor movement, focusing on why its ideas were so popular among underclass workers. Finally, the conclusion provides an overview of the book and explains how it influenced future generations.

The primary sources referenced in this paper includes Paine's *Rights of Man*, *Common Sense* and other works, as well as newspaper articles, memoirs and other materials dating from the Industrial Revolution.

2. The Historical Context Behind *Rights of Man*

One of the most famous British politicians and thinkers of the 18th century, Thomas Paine was, along with Marquis de Lafayette, one of the few activists to have played significant roles in both the American and French Revolutions.^[1] Paine's involvement in these two revolutions crystallized his democratic ideals, and his *Rights of Man* became an ideological template for future democratic revolutions.

To some extent, Paine's early life in England laid the intellectual foundation for *Rights of Man*. Born on January 29, 1737 in Thetford, Norfolk to a family of corset makers, Paine dropped out of school at the age of 13 to work as an apprentice for his father and left home at 18. Living in poverty, he studied philosophy, astronomy and mathematics on his own and began working as a tax

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officer in 1772, which inspired him to write *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, a pamphlet criticizing his working conditions and attacking the corruption of British politics. Paine was soon dismissed for requesting a raise on behalf of his fellow excisemen, and he left England for North America in October 1772. Paine's early experiences made him deeply cognizant of the hardships experienced by the lower classes, which became the driving force behind his efforts to promote democratic reform while enabling him to see the world from the perspective of the poor. It was this sympathetic attitude toward the downtrodden that helped pave the way for *Rights of Man*.

After arriving in the British colonies in 1772, Paine actively promoted his democratic ideas which quickly garnered him a measure of fame among the local populace. In 1775, after becoming editor of *The Pennsylvania Journal*, he published *African Slavery in America*, which called for the abolition of slavery in the colonies. The military rebellion against Britain's colonial rule also began in 1775, but the nascent independence movement initially lacked an underlying ideology. People at the time held vague attitudes toward the revolution and were unable to define what they were trying to accomplish with the war or even whether they wanted to make peace with Britain.^[2]

This changed in 1776 with the publication of *Common Sense*. Selling more than 100,000 copies within three months, *Common Sense* attacked the British plundering of the North American colonies, exposed the corruption of the British monarchy, and advocated for the establishment of a republic, with each colony having its own independent government. The book inspired the colonists in their struggle for independence, ultimately leading to the rise of the United States as an independent, sovereign nation, and providing an ideological framework for its founding principles.^[3] George Washington and Thomas Jefferson both heavily promoted Paine's work and even used his writings to inspire their troops during the war.^[4] At the same time, Paine's involvement in the formation of the United States as a constitutional democracy enriched the development of his own ideology, eventually forming the basis for his *Rights of Man*.

More than a decade later, when the French Revolution began in 1789, Paine used the plain-language style which had made *Common Sense* such a success to write another work aimed at promoting democracy in France. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke had warned against throwing off "the yoke of laws and morals" as the French Revolution took on a more extreme character.^[5] Paine's *Rights of Man* forcefully countered this view by defending the Revolution's underlying ideology, criticizing Britain's constitutional monarchy, and promoting radical republican ideas. *Rights of Man* not only inspired the French to continue their own revolution, but had a significant impact on the British underclass as well, going so far as to inspire a similar revolution against the British monarchy. The book's appeal to wage laborers was readily apparent, and it was often referenced by workers involved in demonstrations like the sailors' strike on the Tyne in 1792.^[6]

Thomas Paine's role in the American independence movement enabled him to develop and refine his

democratic ideas, which allowed him to effectively counter criticisms of the French Revolution, ultimately leading to the publication of *Rights of Man*. Yet it was precisely because Paine's ideas were informed by his first-hand experience with the tribulations of the lower class that this book was able to inspire revolutions in both England and France.^[7]

3. The Ideology behind *Rights of Man*

As the culmination of Paine's own beliefs, *Rights of Man* offers a comprehensive overview of the revolutionary ideas which he had developed over the course of his involvement in the American War of Independence, and which became particularly important for the British Labor Movement.

First and foremost, *Rights of Man* drew a distinction between the Enlightenment idea of the "natural rights of humans" as rights inherent to all people and "civil rights" which are artificially ascribed to certain individuals as members of society. According to Paine, these natural rights include the right to equality, freedom, the pursuit of happiness and revolution, and serve as the foundation on which all democratic politics is founded. Paine's views on the right to the pursuit of happiness was even incorporated into the language of the Declaration of Independence.

Second, *Rights of Man* also drew a distinction between society and government. According to Paine, society arises out of the need for human beings to cooperate, while government stems from the existence of evil as a necessary means to prevent individuals from harming each other. He also believed that the higher the functioning of society, the smaller the role that government needs to play, and that society is best able to promote happiness when the role of government is limited. Developed in response to the French Revolution and reflecting Paine's critique of the British government, Paine therefore believed that while "society in every state is a blessing... government even in its best state is but a necessary evil."^[8]

Third, in addition to criticizing Britain's constitutional monarchy as primarily focused on personal gain, *Rights of Man* also promoted representative democracy based on the idea that only a representative republic would be able to truly serve the people. According to *Rights of Man*, such a representative system based on a republican form of government would have three characteristics: universal suffrage; adherence to the three principles of "public interest, justice and representativeness"; and a constitution which was above the government. As for Paine's critique of the monarchy, it arose out of his own experiences in England with what he saw as the oppression of the British lower class at the hands of the government. The success with which the representative republic he promoted was subsequently established in the United States only confirmed his belief that republics are superior to monarchies.

Finally, *Rights of Man* proposed a number of radical social reforms. For example, Paine suggested "giving four pounds a year to every child under fourteen years of age from a poor family, so that the parents of these children

could send them to school to learn to read, write, and do general arithmetic,” and “giving six pounds a year to every person between the ages of fifty and sixty, and ten pounds a year for those over sixty until his death.”^[9] He also advocated for an allowance of 20 shillings for poor couples who had just married, a stipend of 20 shillings for poor women who had just given birth, burial expenses for those who died abroad, and employment opportunities for the poor.^[10] These radical initiatives to improve the living conditions of the disadvantaged embodied his sympathy for the downtrodden, having grown up in poverty himself, though he was well aware of the practical difficulties of implementing them.

To sum up, Paine’s *Rights of Man* not only adopted ideologies from the Enlightenment, but also reflected Paine’s own experiences in the American Revolution, proving to be enormously influential throughout Europe and inspiring British laborers to question the status quo. Representing a comprehensive overview of Paine’s democratic ideals, the book cemented his place as one of the most important political thinkers of his time.

4. The Impact of *Rights of Man* on the British Working Class

Aside from the economic and social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1794) were two of the most significant events of the 18th century, and the impact that *Rights of Man* had on the British working class is closely related to both.

While the American Revolution began as a revolt against Britain’s oppression of the North American colonies, its impact extended beyond Britain to the world at large. For many British citizens, the colonists’ victory highlighted the shortcomings of Britain’s constitutional monarchy and intensified the social conflicts which had been exacerbated by the corruption of the government.^[11] In this respect, the republic established by the former colonies was viewed as a welcome alternative to the British monarchy, setting the stage for the global center of power to shift away from Europe and prompting Europeans to consider the limitations of their own political systems and traditions. Paine’s personal involvement in the American Revolution allowed him to draw detailed comparisons between the British monarchy and the newly-established republic, and his deep understanding of both made his criticism of the monarchy even more convincing.

Paine’s *Rights of Man* was informed by his experience with the American Revolution, yet it was also written in direct response to the French Revolution as a refutation of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. A prominent British conservative who spoke against the French Revolution, Burke (1729-1797) argued that since the power of the monarch did not derive from the people, he had no responsibility to act according to the people’s collective will.^[12] According to Burke, a century had passed since the Glorious Revolution (1688) had installed William and Mary on the throne in England, but the Bill of Rights (1689) it produced served more to ensure

uninterrupted Protestant succession and parliamentary checks on the monarchy than it did to ensure natural rights for all citizens.^[13] Arguing that hereditary aristocracy and monarchy remained despite the Glorious Revolution’s validation of the concept of the social contract, Burke characterized the Glorious Revolution as more of a “constitutional adjustment” than a revolution per se.^[14] Like Burke, Paine also did not want to bring about a radical bourgeois revolution like what happened in France, fearing that the “reign of terror” and devolution into anarchy would spread to Britain.^[15] Yet he nonetheless sought to implement parliamentary reform in Britain, and his views on the merits of the French Revolution, as expressed in *Rights of Man*, ultimately won out among the British reading public.^[16]

The relationship between the American and French Revolutions is also important to recognize. In fact, the French Revolution began at least partially in response to the deficit stemming from the government’s support for the American Revolution, which forced it to increase taxes and further exploit the poor. This in turn accelerated the shift in power toward the former colonies, where the newly-established republic began to attract greater attention in Europe, leading to increasingly divisive debates over the relative merits of the monarchy and the republic.^[17] At the same time, the rise of newspapers and other media, especially pamphlets, offered the British working class a greater understanding of the conditions of the former colonies, whose fledgling democracy was deeply inspirational.^[18] And with his personal involvement in the establishment of the republic, Paine was in a perfect position to contribute to this understanding.

Overall, the ideas expressed in Paine’s *Rights of Man* were informed by his experience with the American and French Revolutions, as well as by his early years living in poverty. As discussed above, these revolutions led to a fundamental reassessment of Britain’s constitutional monarchy, whose corruption had long been a source of discontent among the working class. In addition to advocating for the establishment of a republic in Britain, Paine also popularized the idea that certain rights are inherent and that government should act in the interests of the people, which provided ideological support for the reform of the parliamentary electoral system and inspired the Labor Movement to push for improved living conditions for the lower and middle classes.^[19]

Paine’s radical social reforms also resonated with the working class, who welcomed the prospect of subsidies to assist the elderly and the poor.^[20] According to Paine, poor families tended to have more children and elderly people, which is why he proposed the establishment of a compulsory education and pension system.^[21] He also advocated for subsidies to improve the living conditions of infants, unemployed vagrants, newlyweds, and other disadvantaged groups, thereby reducing crime, and for narrowing the gap between rich and poor. Paine’s argument that the rich should share their wealth to achieve social harmony, while radical and unrealistic, was one generally supported by the working class and inspired the British Labor Movement.^[22]

Rights of Man sold more than 50,000 copies in its first year of publication and more than 200,000 copies by 1793, setting a publishing record while raising the political consciousness of Britain's working class and inspiring them to pursue freedom and fight for their rights.^[23] As recounted in one leaflet published in 1792, which recorded a conversation between a striking employee and his boss, when the boss asked the employee to consider his family, the employee replied, "What is a wife and children compared to freedom? Whenever I think of the *Rights of Man*, I never think of my family's gain or loss!"^[24] At the same time, *Rights of Man* also inspired the establishment of many workers' organizations, which actively promoted the book's dissemination. According to Michael Daly, organizations like the Society for Constitutional Information (1780), the Sheffield Constitutional Society (1791) and The London Corresponding Society (1792) were some "of the earliest and most radical expressions of organized working class calls for parliamentary reform in England."^[25]

Established in 1780 to promote broad parliamentary reform, the Society for Constitutional Information had a limited audience and was on the verge of dissolution when *Rights of Man* was published. But the book provided it with a second life, and the Society for Constitutional Information printed and distributed it at a discount while inviting Paine to attend meetings and electing him an honorary member. Many other militant workers' organizations also received copies of *Rights of Man*, which they distributed to their members and the public. Given its blatant critique of the British government, however, the book was soon banned and the Society for Constitutional Information and various other organizations were charged with treason and sedition.^[26]

Founded in 1791, the Sheffield Constitutional Society consisted mainly of craftsmen and was led by Joseph Gales (1761-1841), a newspaper publisher who was also a friend of Paine. The Sheffield Constitutional Society often studied and discussed Paine's ideas at its meetings, where members convened to read books and newspapers and to debate freely. The influence of Paine's ideas on the members of this organization is reflected in an anecdote in which someone who came forward to defend the government was condemned until it was discovered that he had not read *Rights of Man*, at which point he was pitied.^[27] Following the passage of the Seditious Meetings Act of 1795, Gales and his wife eventually fled to America where they remained active in rallying the working class through their newspapers.^[28]

The London Corresponding Society, which was founded by nine artisans in 1792, was also deeply interested in the ideas behind *Rights of Man*, and its members endorsed Paine's proposals for economic reform. The aim of The London Corresponding Society was to fight for parliamentary reform, universal adult male suffrage, and annual general elections, so as to promote "freedom of the press, simplicity of the law, impartiality of judges...good education for the young and better provision for the old."^[29] As with Paine's proposals, this organization sought to improve workers' rights through the establishment of a republican form of government,

ideas which lived on and became part of the Chartists' platform of the 1830s.^[30]

5. Conclusion

Thomas Paine was a British philosopher who made significant contributions to the world's modern democratic revolutions. Paine participated in the two most important democratic revolutions of the 18th century, namely the French Revolution and the American Revolution, which he defended with his own ideas, encouraging the masses to fight for their rights and realize their visions. A pioneer of influential ideas which helped define the times, Paine was also a political activist who promoted the wholesale transformation of global institutions in the 18th century.

Notably, Paine's contributions were not limited to ideas alone. He not only played a significant role in the American Revolution, contributing directly to the founding of the U.S. republic, but also actively defended the French Revolution. *Rights of Man* helped inspire the revolutionary activities of thousands in France and brought the debate over Britain's own monarchy to the fore. Having grown up poor himself, Paine was attuned to the needs and demands of the masses, and his writings were used by the British labor movement to improve working conditions across the country.

Paine's contribution to the establishment of a new American republic, which stemmed from his critique of the British monarchy as antiquated and corrupt, has been particularly influential. Inspired by Paine's ideas, the American colonists eventually united and defeated Britain, establishing a republic which deepened people's understanding of democracy and inspired democratic revolutions around the world. In fact, many of these revolutions are ongoing to this day, and Paine's democratic practices and ideas continue to resonate in today's society.

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