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Introduction: Background of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Political  
Philosophy and Thomas Paine

Central to the rise of 18<sup>th</sup> Century, French political thought was the importation from England of the ideas of John Locke and Isaac Newton. Key figures in the French Enlightenment such as Voltaire and Montesquieu had visited England in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century and were responsible for its introduction and growth in France. From Locke, the idea of the natural rights of individuals rooted in reason and deduced from natural law made an impact upon the intellectuals. From this vantage point, French political theory accepted the idea of limited government, that man's right to liberty property, and the pursuit of happiness were incompatible with theories of monarchy by divine right. Based upon reason, all men were born free and possessed the right to determine their national form of political obedience. Man had voluntarily surrendered only minimal powers to the state in exchange for peace and security. He maintained the right to revoke them when violations occurred. In Locke, the French as well as the European

Bowles, J., *Western Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1948.

Gay, P., *Voltaire's Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1959.

middle class had found an advocate for political and economic liberalism. Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin in America as well as Voltaire and Rousseau in France had found the necessary grounds for political and social change. From Isaac Newton, the French inherited a new method of analysis to counter the older scientific method of Descartes. People saw the world as regulated by universal laws to which God was also obedient. Man had only to master the rules with to understand God and reality. Just as the law of gravitation applied to all falling objects in the physical world, so similar laws governed social and political institutions. It was the duty, therefore, of 18<sup>th</sup> Century man to ascertain these immutable laws and discover the underlying truth of all social and political organization.

The Fame of Thomas Paine rests on his ability as a political pamphleteer and propagandist. He made an appeal to the masses that corresponded similarly in its effect to that of Rousseau in France. More as a fighter than as a political philosopher, he devoted his life to the causes of freedom, liberty, and justice. Possibly because of his meager education, his work always directed toward erasing political and social injustices rather than to the erection of political systems. The

appearance of Common Sense on the eve of the American revolution and the publication of Crisis during that conflict, acted as the intellectual and emotional levers that contributed to the success of the movement. His primary purpose was to state a case or to refute an attack, not to indulge in the irrelevancies of prose style. Two themes run throughout his major works. The first is the natural rights of man, often stated with more force and cogency than given in the writings of John Locke. That the state formed for man and not man for the state is a point Paine makes repeatedly. Second is freedom from superstition, in reference to which his analysis of organized religion caused many people to turn against him during the latter years of his life.



Thomas Paine, a portrait in oil by George Romney, 1792 (From the Collection of The New-York Historical Society)

A recognized legend in the founding of this country, Thomas Paine took part in three revolutions as an author and revolutionary activist. His role in American history, as well as world history, is monumental.

## Chapter 1: Paine's Thought on Various Subjects

Thomas Paine agreed with many of his contemporaries, such as the nature of Lockean political theory. Paine believed in essential rights and liberties of all human beings, including the right to resist tyrannical authority. These beliefs passed on to Americans in his famous pamphlet *Common Sense*, the treatise which turned the American rebellion into a revolution for democratic rights, and *Crisis Papers*, written in the heat of the revolution to rally the American forces. After *Common Sense*, it was very difficult for the colonists not to be convinced that separation from the empire was correct.

Paine brought forth ideas of a constitutional convention that eventually met in Philadelphia In 1787. He proposed the present Federal Constitution. He furnished every thought that now glitters in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence started the main war for independence. After Jefferson announced it on July 4, 1776, many

Dudley, William, *The American Revolution: Opposing Viewpoints*, Greenhaven Press, San Diego, 1992

colonists raged and fought for their freedom against the dreaded redcoats.

Paine stated, "I believe in the equality of man, and that religious duties consist in doing justice, in loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy." He also said, "I believe in one God, and no more, and I hope for happiness beyond this life." Paine used many religious tracts as well as political tracts. He undertook them "to bring man to a right reason that God has given him [and] to impress on him the great principles of divine morality, justice, mercy, and a benevolent disposition to all men and to all creatures."<sup>1</sup>

All of these thoughts of Thomas Paine constitutes the main reason for Paine's argument against society which therefore helped ignite the American Revolution.

<sup>1</sup> Fruchtman, Jack Jr., Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom, Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 1994



## Chapter 2: Common Sense

Written on the eve of the American Revolution, Paine's purpose was to convince the American people of the rightness of their cause and to prove the impossibility of reconciliation with England. He demonstrated the virtues of the republican form of government and pointed out the fallacies in monarchical institutions. Its publication in 1776 caused an immediate stir among the colonists, and it went through several editions quickly.

"Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government, which we might expect in a country without government, our calamity heightens by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer. Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise." (pg. 27)

Edited by Kramer, Lloyd S., Paine and Jefferson on Liberty, The Continuum Publishing Company, New York, 1988

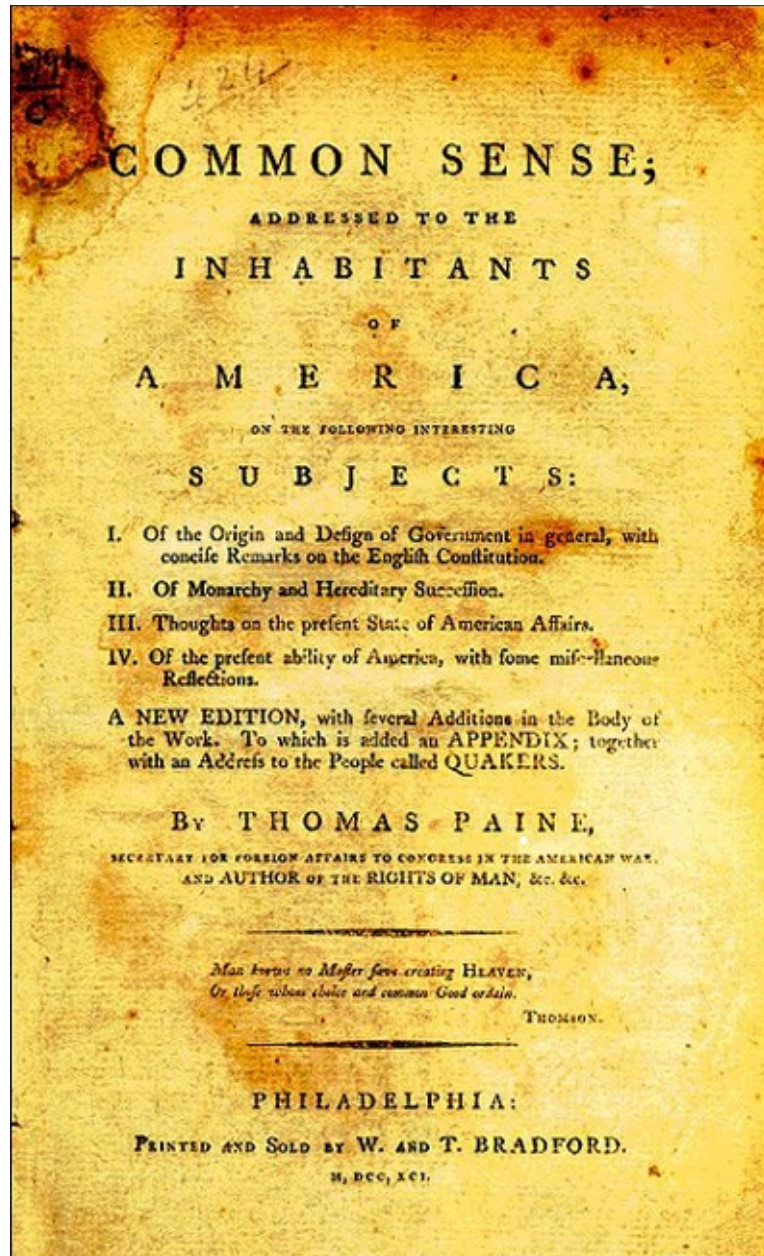
The above quotation shows the essence of Paine's argument against monarchy lies in his distinction between government and society. All governments are bad, and only society is good; hence all governments are necessary evils of which the monarchical form is the worst, and democracy the best. Paine saw kings as tyrannical, and oppressive of the common man. The colonists who read Paine's pamphlet learned the faults of monarchies.

"I draw my idea of the form of government from a principle in nature which no art can overturn, viz. That the more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered; and with this maximum in view I offer a few remarks on the so much boasted Constitution of England. That it was noble for the dark and slavish times in which it was erected, is granted. When the world was overrun with tyranny the least remove, subject to convulsions, and incapable of producing what it seems to promise, is easily demonstrated." (pg. 30)

Paine states the England's monarchy has so many rules which make the system so corrupt, and that they are trying to use the same system in the America makes the colonists ever angrier. Paine stated his argument in

a language designed to inflame, to convince his readers that there were no alternatives and to get away from this corrupt government, the colonists must go to war.

Common Sense with no doubt inspired many colonists to fight for independence. Common Sense turned out to be the first best seller published in America, with 100,000 copies sold in the first six months.



Published anonymously by Thomas Paine in January of 1776, Common Sense was an instant best-seller, both in colonies and in Europe. Written at the outset of the American Revolution, Common Sense became the heaven which inspired the colonists to strengthen their resolve for independence.



### Chapter 3: The Crisis

In 1776 Paine enlisted in the American Revolutionary Army. Paine continued pamphleteering during the war in *The Crisis*, a series of 16 papers. During Washington's disastrous retreat to the Delaware River in that year, he penned this stirring pamphlet to be read by the colonists in their hour of peril. The pamphlet inspired General Washington so much that he ordered it read before every regiment in the continental army. Its opening lines have become immortal in the history of the American republic.

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink in the service of their 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 this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

It can well be said that it was as much this pamphlet as Washington's military strategy that led to the defeat of the British at Trenton and restored some measure of confidence among the American colonists.



Conclusion: What was the effect of the political thought of Thomas Paine upon the outbreak of the American Revolution?

The major political revolutions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had intellectual preparations that contributed ultimately to their success. In the English Glorious Revolution of 1688, John Locke had written his *Second Treaties on Civil Government* and other works to justify the rise of parliamentary government as oppose to monarchical oppression. The natural rights of man and his express right to revolution were important parts of its views. In France, Rousseau laid the intellectual groundwork for the French Revolution. In his *Social Contract*, he pointed out the abuses of the Bourbon dynasty and developed the ideas of freedom and equality that became battlecrys for the revolutionaries of 1789. So too, Thomas Paine was the spiritual and intellectual leader of the American Revolution. As all revolutions need a philosophical framework in which to organize and present their ideas in coherent form, it fell to Paine the task of putting together the grievances of the colonist. As a transplanted Englishman, he drew upon the heritage of Locke and wrote a series of pamphlets and



articles that summarized the dissident views of the American people. In *Common Sense* and *Crisis*, he was able to crystallize the arguments of the colonists and give them an intellectual respectability that made the revolution seem all the more correct. While not a systematic political philosopher, Thomas Paine contributed to the American cause the same intellectual arguments that Locke and Rousseau did in their respective revolutions.

Thomas Paine was one of the recognized legends in the founding of this country. He was an author and revolutionary activist who took part in three revolutions. His role in American history, as well as world history, is monumental. John Adams said: "Without the pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain." Paine's impact on philosophy and politics helped mold the age of democratic revolutions and reverberates down to us. In fact he was the first to use the word "democracy" in fighting for human rights.

The chief value of Paine to the American Revolution came from his ability to translate abstract concepts to make them meaningful to the common man. While political philosophers might debate the idea of natural rights or economists might discuss the disadvantages of British

mercantile policies in North America, Paine brought the issues down to the masses. As a political propagandist and pamphleteer he rarely used the idea of the social contract to justify a revolution. He tried to show that the British monarchy was incompetent and corrupt, hence the colonist had the right to rebellion. The average man could understand issues of oppression and individualism, not political theory. It is to the everlasting credit of Paine that he put on paper clearly the innermost thoughts of the average man and objectify a consensus that led to military victory in 1783 at Yorktown.

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