Thomas Paine and the French Revolution

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Thomas Paine, the most widely read political thinker in the late 18th century, played a notable role in the American Revolution, in the development of popular radicalism in Britain, and in the French Revolution. Many of his works appeared in both English and French, and a few in other European languages, and were widely distributed, but there is no doubt that he is best known to modern readers for his influence in America and Britain rather than for his impact on the French Revolution. Most modern scholars who have studied his ideas and actions have been based in the UK or the USA and they have rarely studied his years in France as carefully as his years in Britain or America. Only a handful of French scholars, notably Yannick Bosc, Jean Lessay and Bernard Vincent, have devoted monographs to Paine’s years in France. Now, Carine Lounissi has surpassed their achievements in the depth of her research and the sophistication of her analysis of the ideas Paine propagated in France. In 2012, Carine Lounissi, a senior lecturer at the University of Rouen, produced this massive and original analysis of all Paine’s major writings, which she situated in the political and philosophical contexts of his times: La Pensée politique de Thomas Paine en contexte: Théorie et Pratique (Paris: Honoré Champion). She has now produced in English an even deeper analysis of political ideas that Paine expounded, in his major and minor writings and speeches while active in French politics. In doing so, she has placed all anglophone scholars in her debt.

In congratulating her on the substantial virtues of her new monograph, however, it needs to be made clear from the outset that this is overwhelmingly a study of the ideas Paine expressed in his writings and speeches. It is not a study of his personal, social or economic life in France. This is partly because of a lack of evidence about some aspects of Paine’s life in France, such as his personal relations with leading revolutionaries, his activities in political clubs, and the role he played in the constitutional committees on which he sat. It is also due to Dr Lounissi’s decision to largely ignore Paine’s relations with American diplomats in Paris, to omit any mention of his experiences in prison between 28 December 1793 and 4 November 1794, about which there is evidence available. Her readers might also have expected some information on how Paine could afford to live so many years in Paris.

There are, however, very substantial merits in what Dr Lounissi does provide her readers. No scholar has been so detailed and accurate about what ideas Paine expounded in his writings and speeches during his years in France. She not only examines all of his major writings at this time, but also his lesser known works
aimed at French readers, his contributions to such revolutionary journals as *Le Républicain* (1791), *La Chronique du mois* (1792) and *Le Bien informé* (1797-1800), as well as the speeches he delivered to the French Convention and the executive of the Directory. She notes that Paine could read French quite well, but he was unable to deliver a lengthy speech in French before a French assembly. His speeches, therefore, had to be translated and delivered for him by a friend, such as Jean Mailhe or Jean-Henry Bancal, or presented in a printed translation. His inability to give speeches in French may have reminded his enemies that he remained a foreigner, despite being accorded French citizenship as early as August 1792.

In her in-depth and sophisticated analysis of Paine’s ideas, Dr Lounissi examines Paine’s writings and speeches in roughly chronological order and in the context of the volatile politics of revolutionary Paris. She explores his contribution to the intense and passionate debates on whether it was possible to reform the French monarchy, to promote popular sovereignty, to encourage the free discussion of political ideas by all citizens, to suggest new constitutional frameworks, to advocate universal manhood suffrage, and to advocate the right of subsistence for the poor. In exploring such ideas, Paine met with both admiration and hostility, collaborated with some French revolutionaries and made enemies of others, and recognized that he had sometimes to compromise the purity of his principles in his efforts to promote both republicanism and democracy.

Dr Lounissi insists that Paine was a serious political thinker, who offered practical solutions to concrete problems and challenged received interpretations of political concepts in works aimed at educated as well as less educated readers. Over the decade he spent in France, Paine engaged in the most important political debates sparked off by the rapidly changing power struggles of these revolutionary years. Although he never wrote a history of the French Revolution, a task he sometimes contemplated undertaking, he did consistently describe the political changes occurring in France, often tried to justify these developments, and even tried to influence them. From the beginning he tried to explain the causes and nature of rapidly changing events, both in his correspondence and in his *Rights of Man*. Dr Lounissi compares Paine’s views of the early stages of the French revolution with those advanced by other non-French writers, such as Edmund Burke and James Mackintosh. She stresses the role Paine accorded to individuals, to the influence of enlightened thinkers and the American Revolution, and to the impact of public opinion. Paine was convinced that the principle of monarchical government was undermined long before France became a republic. His account of the early dramatic events of the French Revolution were often inaccurate, because he was in England when they occurred, and he wrote as a polemicist not as an impartial historian. He played down the violence of these years and claimed that the supporters of revolution were motivated more by cool reason than violent passions. He was also ignorant of the economic factors influencing the early stages of the French Revolution, though he did recognize that a popular revolution was driven forward by the fear of a monarchical counter revolution.

Paine did not become directly involved in the French Revolution until June 1791, when Louis XVI’s flight to Varennes led him to call for the abolition of the monarchy in the contributions he made to *Le Républicain* in 1791 and *La Chronique du mois* in 1792. He was in England from July 1791 to September 1792 and had to submit his articles from there and without first-hand knowledge of political developments in Paris. Shortly before his return to France he was granted French citizenship and was promptly elected to the Convention for the Pas de Calais. Paine served on the committee chosen by the Convention to draft a new French constitution, but there is no surviving evidence of any contribution that he made to these discussions. In journal articles and in speeches delivered for him in the Convention, however, he continued his attacks on monarchy and supported the creation of a French republic. These contributions were generally well received, but more controversial were Paine’s views on the trial of Louis XVI and the punishment to inflict upon him. He was convinced that the king should be found guilty, but he opposed his execution, preferring to see him imprisoned and then banished when peace was achieved with the enemies of revolutionary France.

Paine’s role in the trial of Louis XVI is well known. More open to debate are the reasons why Paine fell afoul of a majority in the Convention and provoked the hostility of the Jacobin faction. On this topic Dr Lounissi breaks new ground. Whereas many accounts of Paine’s activities explain his arrest on his close
association with the Girondin party in the Convention, Dr Lounissi denies the existence of such a 'party' and insists that Paine was very much his own man at this time. Although he did meet with leading thinkers and politicians who have been described as members of a Girondin party, such as Condorcet and Brissot, and he contributed to the same newspapers and journals as they did, these men did not form a coherent party and there is limited evidence of their direct connection with Paine. Moreover, while they did share some of the same political views as Paine, they also disagreed with him on some major issues. Paine and Condorcet, for example, disagreed about whether to support a unicameral or bicameral legislature, about how extensive the franchise should be distributed, and about how to deal with poverty. For his part, Brissot was much more involved in partisan politics and political disputes than was Paine. Unfortunately for Paine, however, his political ideas and principles were often quoted with approval by politicians who were hated and feared in the Convention by the Mountain and leading Jacobins. Paine’s involvement in the trial of Marat, his concern about the influence that the Paris communes exerted on the Convention, and his English birth and language (when France was now at war with Britain), encouraged his critics to order his arrest in late December 1793. This, however, was months after the arrest and execution of leading Girondins.

Released in early November 1794, following the Thermidorian reaction, Paine was able to resume his seat in the Convention. In his *Dissertation on First Principles* (1795), he tried to explain the reasons for the Terror. He denied that it had resulted from too much democracy and claimed that the executive had been too powerful and had failed to establish good relations with the legislature. During the debates on the new constitution, which led to the creation of the Directory, Paine supported, in contributions inside and outside the Convention, the proposal that the new legislature should be elected on the basis of universal manhood suffrage. He regarded the exercise of the franchise to be a natural and universal right and not as a reward or virtue for the possession of certain qualifications. He wanted universal adult male suffrage to be the foundation for a democratic republic. In his opinion, a republic based on a restricted franchise would face the threat of rebellion and perhaps even revolution. Paine’s efforts, however, had little influence on the Convention, where, surprisingly, a large majority had been much more scarred by what had happened during the Terror than Paine had been.

Although Paine had opposed the new constitution established in France in 1795 and refused to take up his seat in the Council of 500, Dr Lounissi shows how he was prepared to moderate his commitment to democracy in order to support the new political system. While never abandoning his support for universal male suffrage, Paine was prepared to write praising the Directory for restoring public order and the rule of law, for improving the economy, and for establishing better relations with several foreign countries. He even dedicated his pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice* (1797) to the Directory and the legislature, no doubt hoping that they might implement some of his proposals. He also welcomed the defeat of the Babeuf conspiracy and praised the Directory for putting down a royalist rising. While recognizing that the new French constitution was far from perfect, he regarded it as an improvement on all previous French regimes. Rather than criticizing the French government, he preferred to focus his hostility on Britain, the arch foe of the French Revolution. He wrote *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* (1796), copies of which were translated and distributed by the Directory, in an effort to convince Britain’s enemies that its financial system was corrupt and close to collapse. He also wrote several essays urging a French invasion of Britain and support for a rebellion by the United Irishmen. Overthrowing the monarchy in Britain, restoring France’s good relations with the USA, and offering suggestions for improving the lot of the poor, took precedence at this time over Paine’s desire to establish a truly democratic republic in France.

Paine did not publicly react to the Brumaire coup that destroyed the Directory and marked the rise of a more authoritarian Consulate dominated by Napoleon Bonaparte. Dr Lounissi suggests that Paine may have become concerned about his personal security. He certainly preferred to write essays on how to achieve economic, commercial and transport improvements in France rather than suggesting alternative constitutional arrangements. Paine still hoped that Bonaparte might be persuaded to launch an invasion of Britain. He respected Bonaparte’s talents and, despite his concern about the growing authoritarianism of the Consulate, he refrained from voicing his criticisms until *Le Bien informé* was closed by the government. Even then, he still seemed to prefer the French political system to that in Britain. He did not openly
denounce Napoleon until he was safely back in America. This did not persuade him to ignore Napoleon’s
talents or to give up hopes that he might yet successfully invade Britain and destroy its monarchical system
of government.

By the time Paine left France to return to America, in 1802, he had become somewhat disenchanted with the
French Revolution, but he remained a Francophile and did not regret his efforts to provide France with an
effective and just republic. He never denied the legitimacy of the French Revolution and nor did he ever
attack any French political leader with the ferocity that he attacked George Washington and William Pitt. He
consistently advocated a republican regime, supported popular sovereignty, advocated civil, political and
social equality, desired a free press and widespread participation in public affairs, and proposed measures to
improve the lot of the poor. His personal experiences in France, when his own freedom was curtailed and
even his life was endangered, did not persuade him to give up a belief in the merits of any of his major
political proposals. Dr Lounissi does, however, acknowledge that he tempered his criticism of French
regimes that did not live up to his high expectations and he came to recognize that it was not easy to
implement all of his central beliefs. A free press and popular participation in politics did not necessarily lead
to a democratic republic. A written and legitimate constitutional framework did not automatically produce
equal justice. A strong legislature elected on a wide franchise did not guarantee a just republican regime.
There was a need for all three benefits, but partisan politics could prevent these being established.

Dr Lounissi has produced an intelligent and sophisticated analysis of Paine’s political ideas during his years
of involvement with the French Revolution. She has made an exhaustive effort to read everything she can on
Paine’s writings and speeches and about the impact of these ideas on other supporters of the French
Revolution. In her careful text and more than 1200 chapter endnotes she makes it clear when there is or is
not evidence for the claims she and other historians have made about Paine’s contribution to the political
debates in revolutionary France. It appears that she has written this monograph in English, without the
assistance of a translator, which is a notable achievement in itself. I found only a very few sentences that
might have been more elegantly expressed and a mere handful of typographical errors. As with many French
books, however, the index is limited to the names of persons mentioned in the main text. Her monograph
will be essential reading for any serious student of Paine’s ideas. Other readers, however, may find her text
more daunting. She assumes that her readers will not only possess a detailed knowledge of the revolutionary
context in which Paine operated, but will be familiar with the interpretations offered by a variety of other
historians and with Paine’s and France’s complex relations with American diplomats and with the US
government during these years.

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