

# Radical Plainness: Thomas Paine's Political Pamphlet and the Rhetoric of Revolution

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**TITLE:** "Radical Plainness: Thomas Paine's Political Pamphlet and the Rhetoric of Revolution"

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines Thomas Paine's revolutionary writing and his rejection of monarchy and hereditary aristocracy, while promoting republican self-government, especially in his contributions to the genre of the American political pamphlet. Through close analysis of his political pamphlet *Common Sense*, this study reveals how Paine transformed political discourse by employing accessible language and rational argumentation to dismantle the philosophical, politic and religious foundations of monarchical rule in general, and of British monarchy in particular. Thomas Paine's political pamphlet thus emerges as his personal political manifesto, but also a comprehensive, well-established expression of a political vision which has inspired many political and revolutionary movements and has sparked ever since its publication lively debates about democracy, the role of politics in the lives of the citizens, religious freedom, economic and social inequality.

**KEYWORDS:** political pamphlet, the American Revolution, independence, American literature, republicanism, civil rights.

**TITLU:** „Simplitate radicală: pamfletul politic al lui Thomas Paine și retorica revoluției”

**REZUMAT:** Articolul de față este o trecere în revistă a principalelor scrierilor politice ale lui Thomas Paine și o analiză a atitudinii sale față de monarhie și aristocrația ereditară. Autorul promovează în pamfletele sale politice ideea că singura șansă pentru America, în special, dar și pentru întreaga lume, în general, este ieșirea de sub dominația imperiului și autogovernarea în cadrul unei republici independente. Printr-o analiză atentă a pamfletului său politic intitulat „*Common Sense*”, acest studiu urmărește să arate modul în care Paine a transformat discursul politic tradițional prin utilizarea unui limbaj accesibil și a argumentației raționale cu scopul demolării fundamentelor filosofice, politice și religioase ale monarhiei, în general, și ale monarhiei britanice, în special. Pamfletul politic al lui Thomas Paine se conturează astfel ca un manifest politic personal, dar și ca expresie bine fundamentată a unei viziuni politice care a inspirat multe mișcări politice și revoluționare ulterioare și care, încă de la publicarea sa, a stârnit dezbateri aprinse despre democrație, despre rolul politicii în viața cetățenilor, despre libertatea religioasă, despre inegalitatea socială și economică.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** pamfletul politic, Revoluția americană, independență, literatură americană, republicanism, drepturi civile.

## Introduction

Counted among the greatest minds of the American intellectual revolution whose goal was a brutal, definitive, permanent liberation from the chains of the British empire, the prerequisite for a clean, promising new start, Thomas Paine is also one of those who laid the theoretical foundation for the great changes in eighteenth-century America. According to John Ryder, the writings of philosophers Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, James Madison “provided the theoretical background to and the substance of the social and political events of the revolutionary years and the period of the development of the Federal Constitutions in the 1770s and 1780s” (Ryder 2004, 4). Thus, these most prominent representatives of early American thought, as many other intellectual, political or religious figures of the time, contributed to the building of a new nation by fueling the hope for a great future but also other “beliefs” which would later give rise to damaging ideas that would haunt the American cultural, social, political and religious landscape for centuries, and would take various shapes such as the Puritan City on a Hill, i.e. the New Canaan in the New World, American exceptionalism, the Manifest Destiny, and eventually, closer to our times, American imperialism, leadership and dominance of the world.

Nevertheless, even though the new and refurbished Land of Promise has never been built in America, the American “revolutionary leaders from 1776 through 1789 succeeded in constructing a new republic,” a republic which “was not then, nor is it now, the model of pure virtue that many of its most vocal supporters assert, it is nonetheless a positive historical development of extreme importance. Jefferson, Paine, Madison and others legitimated, in a way no one else had been able to do, the concepts of rights, of sovereignty of popular government, of republicanism, of religious freedom, and of democracy” (Ryder 2004, 7).

Thomas Paine, sometimes labeled an (early) socialist, a republican, a liberal, a Jacobin democrat, a deist, an anarchist etc., was rather a combination of (almost) all of these who strongly believed in the freedom of the citizens and their right to a good life under the protection of the state, of the political structures that must serve the citizen and contribute to the development of the entire society. He was a revolutionary writer, a pamphleteer, a controversialist, “a progressive journalist and statesman” (Fruchtman 1994, 1), an influential intellectual figure in both Europe and America whose ideas provided the foundation for liberal-democratic thought. A secular thinker by definition, he was by no means an atheist, but along with other eighteenth-century American intellectuals, such as Thomas Jefferson and Ethan Allen, for example, believed in God the creator of the world, but he rejected the Divine Providence, i.e. Πρόνοια/Providentia, Christian theism altogether.

These great spirits of the American Enlightenment were all deists, adhering to the idea that God is a “mechanical principle,” not a personal, caring Supreme Being who interacts with his creation, maintains a dialog with it, and guides it in order to ensure the fulfilment of the divine plan. On the contrary, they were deists, whose “God was not a loving father or vengeful lord, as more traditional theologians postulated, but was more of a mechanical principle necessitated by the prevailing scientific and philosophical ideas. The deist’s God was also not the source of salvation, so deism had no need of churches, ceremonies, and clergy” (Ryder 2004, 19). Though this attitude might look like the foundation of a new, protestant religion, it was more like a shift of focus from traditional religious belief to a more secular, materialist, scientific, and philosophical perspective upon human society, life, and the world, in general: “It was not in any traditional sense a religion. It was, rather, an intellectual nod in the direction of religion while endorsing a largely secular, naturalist, and humanist understanding of the world and society” (Ryder 2004, 19). To them, the break with English imperialism also implied separation from other traditional forms of constraint, and the building of a new society, of a new world designed for those who inhabit it and not for any external authority that is destined to control it.

This article examines Thomas Paine’s revolutionary writing and his rejection of monarchy, along with hereditary aristocracy, while promoting republican self-government, especially in his contributions to the genre of the American political pamphlet. Moreover, this paper argues that Thomas Paine’s political pamphlet represents his personal political manifesto, but also a comprehensive, well-established political vision which has inspired many political, revolutionary movements, and has sparked ever since lively debates about democracy, the role of political power in the lives of the citizens, and economic inequality.

### **Thomas Paine as an “Inventor” of a New Political Audience and a New Political Language**

According to most estimations, the political pamphlet was one of the best represented genres of revolutionary literature during the American Revolution with more than two thousand pieces written and published at the time, in numerous copies devoured by readers interested in both politics and American writing. For example, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* sold more than one hundred thousand copies in the first few weeks after its publication (Robyn 2016, 232), being universally accepted as the most successful and influential political pamphlets ever published in America (Keane 1995, 108).

Born in England, on January 29, 1737, to a Quaker father and an Anglican mother, Paine lived mostly in London, but also in Sandwich and Margate, while still on the old continent. After a few months at sea, in November 1774, he arrived in Philadelphia, where he was soon to be employed as editor of *Pennsylvania Magazine*. His first pamphlet, the one he wrote in 1775, was published anonymously after consultation with Benjamin Rush, David Rittenhouse, Benjamin Franklin, and Samuel Adams, under the

title *Common Sense*. The great role of Paine's pamphlet was to show that the break from Britain was both necessary and inevitable (Philp 2025).

Baptized an Anglican, a believer, Paine rejected the church as an institution which he probably saw as the promoter of British imperial values, but he accepted his role on earth and his divine mission, namely to become an "apostle" of freedom: "Beneath his criticisms of organized religion lay an abounding faith and belief in the wonders of God's universal creation. He truly thought he was undertaking God's work on earth: to better the condition of human beings everywhere. Paine held that a person could believe in God, could believe that the spirit of the divine permeated every aspect of the universe, and at the same time deny that the teachings of organized religion possessed more than a particle of truth" (Fruchtman 1994, 2). Therefore, according to his commentators and as he explained in his writing, he clearly saw his role since the beginning of his career as bearer of "the political and social message that human beings could improve their living conditions when they acknowledged the godliness of life itself and their own creative abilities to transform political and social evils into liberty, equality, and justice" (Fruchtman 1994, 2).

He did not support merely formally the common people's desiderata, but he took part in the political life both on the old continent and in the new world, contributing to the major political changes of the time. He used in his writing the language spoken by those whose interests he represented, in an attempt to show that the superiority of the aristocracy (and the Christian clergy) is not a birth right (Clark 2023), but rather an undeserved privilege. This is what he targeted in his most famous works, such as *Common Sense* (1776), *Rights of Man* (1792), and *The Age of Reason* (three parts published in 1794, 1795, and 1807).

More precisely, in *Common Sense*, he advocates for the independence of America and for its total breakaway from the domination of the British crown, referring to "monarchy and aristocracy as vestiges of feudal conquest, tyrannies which stifle economic and social progress, frustrating the talents of their citizens and reducing them to hereditary 'flocks and herds'" (Clark 2023); in *Rights of Man*, "he deepens and extends this critique, describing monarchy as an age-old confidence trick whose purpose is to extract money from the common people and keep them in superstitious ignorance. Since a great man may have a stupid child, having an unelected heritable monarchy inevitably leads to having stupid leaders. Further, Paine argues, since a heritable monarchy is inherently a despotism, despotic power becomes systemic" (Clark 2023). In *Age of Reason*, a piece he wrote during the French Revolution while he was in Paris, Paine declared his rejection of institutionalized religion, and, hence, his support for a secular state, and his belief in the Christian God.

A commoner himself, Thomas Paine fought for the weak, for the oppressed, climbing the social and intellectual ladder slowly but majestically, managing to elevate himself from being a corsetmaker, an unskilled worker, a preacher, an exciseman, an English teacher, a writer, while he was in England, or a soldier, a political thinker, adviser and writer, a war correspondent, while he was in America, to the status of "a citizen extraordinary," "the greatest political figure of his generation," and "the most prominent writer during the Revolutionary struggle against the British" (Keane 1995, ix). His complex, tumultuous life, dominated by admirable success, but also great suffering from sickness, imprisonment, rejection, provided him with the opportunity to become an influential figure on an international scale, both in Europe and America, where he became known as "as the world's chief public defender of republican democracy — a living symbol of the modern fight for the rights of citizens against warring states and arbitrary governments, social injustice and bigotry" (Keane 1995, x).

He was a man of his time, but as some of his commentators argue, due to his revolutionary concept about the state, about democracy, about society, and, obviously, due to his great mastery of the "crisp" nineteenth-century English language, Paine seems to write and act as one of our contemporaries, emerging as a familiar figure of today's political and literary landscape (Keane 1995, x), of course, if we ignore his physical appearance and some aspects of his style which keep him deeply rooted in his own time.

These aspects are easily visible in the three pieces which contributed to his international fame, both during his lifetime and after his death, namely *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of*

*Reason*. Thomas Paine supported the literary revolution and the separation from the language and literature of the empire, as much as he supported the political separation from the British crown and the British political tradition. According to Keane, the “grand master of modern prose” started and conducted his own “revolution in political language” and, we could add, contributed to the emergence of a new, revolutionary literary tradition, indebted to the English language and literature spoken and written in Europe indeed, but also so much different from it and eager to become independent and build its own destiny. His writing addressed those who had not been targeted by the old political and literary traditions, who had had a distinct role in the old society, a role they had been assigned to fill indefinitely, without any possibility of aspiring to a better, higher status. His wrote for those that were not able to understand complex language, literary forms or ideas, for those who could barely read, but who nevertheless had the right to be represented, to be addressed and considered. Hence, his style was simple, direct, and his language was “crisp,” albeit full of well-crafted humor and metaphors: “His books, pamphlets, letters, essays, and poetry tried to communicate complications simply. They invented a plain style crafted to capture the attention, and secure the trust, of audiences previously accustomed to being pushed about or ignored, not being written for, talked about, and taken seriously as active citizens” (Keane 1995, x).

Besides inventing a style addressing a public that used to being ignored or lied to, Thomas Paine also took on the difficult task of inventing a public that had to possess at least two main characteristics: awareness of their new role in society and of the existence of a new, still-in-the-making, nation. Looking into this process, Edward Larkin analyzes an article published under the pseudonym “Curioso” in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1775, in which the author compares the British and the Americans represented as two colonies of red and brown ants, respectively. He ends the article arguing that the American colonies (the brown ants) must fight the “redcoats” (the British, i.e. the red ants), in order to protect their “freedom and property” (Larkin 1998, 250). By representing the British as ants, as bugs, Paine was actually using allegory to hint to his ideal of democratizing society, of showing that human society is an open space, one that must be available to each and every citizen, including those who work and/or fight for its freedom and well-being not just to the members of the privileged class who enjoy full citizenship and are entitled to express their opinions freely.

Larkin thus argues that Paine was set to both win the attention of the public that was already inhabiting the public sphere, and to create, to “invent” a public willing and able to provide, in return for his respectful attitude, legitimacy for both him as a public figure and for his ideas. In Larkin’s own words, “Thomas Paine was fundamentally involved in constructing a particular version of the public, which would then provide him with a legitimating constituency. The public whose opinion Paine wished to represent and enfranchise, however, was radically different from the public that was typically included in eighteenth-century political debates” (Larkin 1998, 252). This was by no means an easy task, since, beyond the mere attempt at creating such a public, Paine also had to create a language that he could use to communicate with the newly emerged audience without excluding the extant inhabitants of the public sphere: “In order to expand the public sphere to make it more accessible to common people, then, Paine had to invent a language that would represent them as legitimate participants in the public sphere. Paine’s acute understanding of the nature of the public sphere, as an invention, and his ability to manipulate public opinion was by no means accidental; on the contrary, it was intimately linked to his training as a magazine editor, his conception of writing, and his self-identification as a professional political writer” (Larkin 1998, 252).

Another article published in the same issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, entitled “Thoughts on Defensive War” and signed (by Paine, probably, but not necessarily since there are significant differences between the author’s approach and Paine’s perspective upon spiritual freedom) “A Lover of Peace” uses another metaphor, the metaphor of the parent red with the blood of his children, which obviously refers to the same British redcoats. Moreover, in the lead article, “The Utility of This Work Evinc’d” (also known as “The Magazine in America”), Paine wrote for the first issue of the same magazine, another metaphor is used to describe the magazine as a “beehive,” symbolizing diversity and his democratic vision. Chapin and Nowakowski interpret Paine’s metaphor as “the image of a bouquet

of flowers that accompanied it, meant to represent the magazine's diverse and (from the perspective of a modern reader) eclectic mixture of subjects and genres," also admitting that the "beehive [...] is also a traditional image, popular in the eighteenth century but long predating it, of a natural social and political order and was part of the colonists' and the early republic's self-representation" (Chapin and Nowakowski 2016, 51, 52).

Therefore, Thomas Paine greatly contributed to the "invention" of a new audience, a new political language and a new attitude that paved the way for the fight for independence and for the transition of the people from the status of colonists to that "inhabitants of America," or Americans. He promoted diversity, acceptance for the common people in their own plain English language, and a universalist perspective upon the Americans' desire for freedom, which represents and contributes to the whole world's fight for freedom (Kelleter 2009, 99).

### Thomas Paine's Common Sense

His best-known work both in America and worldwide has a great merit, namely that it "turned the dispute between imperial center and colonial provinces into a revolution in the modern sense of the word," and "replaced a rhetoric of grievance and petition with fierce invective against 'the Royal Brute of Britain' by "[a]rguing that England's taxation policy violated the natural rights of the American colonists, rather than their inherited privileges" (Kelleter 2009, 98). *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* was published anonymously on January 10, 1776, soon after his arrival in America (in 1774). The publication of *Common Sense* soon sparked great debate among the American patriots who shared in the same ideals of independence from Britain and social welfare. John Adams, a leader of the Revolution and the one who was to become the second president of the United States of America (1797-1801) praised the literary value of *Common Sense* and the craft of its author, but, from a political point of view, he rejected him as a populist whose voice might damage republican ideals. In a letter to his wife (dated March 19, 1776), Adams argued that the author of *Common Sense* is nothing but a fraud and an incompetent republican: "Indeed, this writer has a better hand in pulling down than building;" "I should have made a more respectable figure as an architect if I had undertaken such a work" (Kelleter 2009, 99).

Adams actively engaged in this dispute by writing a response to Paine's pamphlet titled *Thought on Government*, which, paradoxically, supported the values promoted in *Common Sense* by the "Star of Disaster," the "Disastrous Meteor" of American politics: independence from Britain, freedom and equality for all, the need for a constitution. Their misunderstanding heralds the future divergent opinions regarding the significance of the American Revolution: "The inability of these two founding figures to find common ground anticipated the militant clash of opposing interpretations of the American Revolution that would shake the new United States in the 1790s and that would become a defining mark of American culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Kelleter 2009, 99). On the positive side, their controversy initiated the free debate that would continue to improve the American democracy, the republic, and to give a powerful voice to a variety of opinions that have contributed to constructing the image of the United States of America as the land of the free. Moreover, as Kelleter argues, "The most heated controversies in American history, starting with Adams and Paine's 1776 dispute over *Common Sense*, have not been between local interests and universal principles, but almost always centered on the question of how to coordinate universal principles and local realities" (Kelleter 2009, 101). This apparently broad generalization is nothing but a restatement of Paine's universalist view of the American cause as the cause of the world, a perspective that sounded too appealing, too optimistic to be rejected by his fellow Americans.

*Common Sense*, along with the other political writings by Thomas Paine and by other prominent figures of the time, gave rise to both a new ideal of independence, but also to a new, all-American literature, one that famously started with "political tracts and philosophical treatises," a "true American literature – true to its nation's wish for local circumscription as well as to its yearning for boundless universality – can be found after the Declaration of Independence, indeed provoke by it: fictions obsessed with their own provenance, mongrel genres, faux classicism, expatriate fantasies and

regionalist tales, stories of migration and adventure, visions of deception and passing, raptures and conspiracies" (Kelleter 2009, 102–3).

Nevertheless, Thomas Paine's political pamphlet, which participated in this "provocation" of American literature, may also be read as a literary piece, one that contributes to the emergence of the new literature and to the reshaping of a language brought to America that seemed incapable of fitting into the new context without the necessary adjustment to its new function and the new people, the new culture it was meant to serve. Praised by prominent figures such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or Benjamin Rush (Ferguson 2000, 466), *Common Sense* is, according to Pütz and Adams, the work that coined the term the "United States of America," but which also introduced "rhetorical patterns" which "have become intrinsic to American political speech, and" which "are now permanently embedded in the expressions of identity on which the culture depends" (see Ferguson 2000, 466–67).

Even though it addresses the "inhabitants of America," *Common Sense* is an appeal to the whole world in support of freedom and equality for all: "[a]lthough *Common Sense* is a clarion call to Americans to defend their patrimony, it is one which proclaims universal values of freedom and equality and which rests its appeal on reason, nature, and sentiment. In keeping with these commitments, Paine characterizes himself not as British, American, or French, but as a citizen of the world" (Philp 1998, x), who is thus entitled to represent the cause of all freedom fighters in Europe, America and elsewhere. Paine states the role of his work he labels "a pamphlet" in the fourth paragraph of his Introduction to *Common Sense*: "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested" (Paine 1998b, 3).

The pamphlet contains four main sections announced by the anonymous author on the title page, after the subtitle: I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with concise Remarks on the English Constitution; II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession; III. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs; and IV. Of the present ability of America, with some miscellaneous Reflections, in which Paine declares his support for a form of government which is freely decided by the people but must be different from the (British) monarchy and calls for action against the occupant as prerequisite for the birth of a new nation. According to Paine, government is "a necessary evil," and must exist in any state with its sole purpose to provide "security" for its people: "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 calamities is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer" (Paine 1998a, 5). The government is formed when the people decide that they need representation, and establish an electoral system for moral virtue cannot rule the world and, thus, cannot support help people achieve "happiness": "[a]nd as this frequent interchange will establish a common interest with every part of the community, they will mutually and naturally support each other, and on this (not on the unmeaning name of king) depends the strength of government, and the happiness of the governed" (Paine 1998a, 7).

Monarchy is by no means an acceptable form of government in America. Paine argues that it is too old and, even though, it is combined with republican ideas (the parliament), it cannot work in those times and place, mainly because it is based "on two ancient tyrannies": the hereditary monarchical and aristocratical tyrannies, both features of the outdated governance system of the oppressor (Paine 1998a, 8). Paine's conclusion is that the only reasonable form of government for America and for the world is the republic, since the existence of the English monarchy is nothing but the effect of their national pride: "The prejudice of Englishmen, in favour of their own government by king, lords, and commons, arises as much or more from national pride than reason" (Paine 1998a, 10), and cannot be exported to other independent countries.

From a religious point of view, monarchy is not acceptable as a form of government according to deist Paine because it is an invention of "the Heathens," it was adopted by the Jews three millennia after the creation "under a national delusion," which made them replace their previous form of



government, i.e. "a kind of republic administered by a judge and the elders of the tribes," and then was adopted by Christians even though it "is ranked in scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reserve is denounced against them" (Paine 1998a, 11, 12). If monarchy is "one of the sins of the Jews," hereditary succession is similar to "the original sin" and adds to its "evils;" since Saul became king "by lot" and all kings in the world have always been appointed "by election" then it becomes clear to Saul that all future generations must enjoy the same right: to elect their ruler. Paine's universalist conclusion is that hereditary succession is both absurd and evil, both anti-Christian and anti-human and that salvation implies a return to the human condition before the original sin and to the form of government before monarchy: "For as in Adam all sinned, and as in the first electors all men obeyed; as in the one all mankind were subjected to Satan, and in the other to Sovereignty; as our innocence was lost in the first, and our authority in the last; and as both disable us from re-assuming some former state and privilege, it unanswerably follows that original sin and hereditary succession are parallels. Dishonourable rank! Inglorious connexion!" (Paine 1998a, 17).

Paine's argument, not at all unexpectedly, leads to an analysis of the "evils" of the English monarchy which are even greater: hereditary succession, minors taking the throne "at any age," bloody wars for the throne, the parliament's bias on the matter. He uses all this evidence to declare, and this applies to the whole world, that "[i]n short, monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom only) but the world in blood and ashes. 'Tis a form of government which the word of God bears testimony against, and blood will attend it" (Paine 1998a, 18). His humorous presentation of the English monarch's job description turns both the person of the king and the form of government to the least desirable option for any nation: "the pretty business" of all "crowned ruffians" is to start wars and to appoint people to vacant position, and thus "to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears" (Paine 1998a, 19).

Next, Paine turns to America, and in the first paragraph of the section "Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs," he argues that he just intends to provide the reader with factual information about America and open his eyes, allowing him to draw any conclusions he will see fit: "I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense; and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves; that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day" (Paine 1998a, 19).

Of course, all evidence he provides supports his idea that America's separation from Britain will end all evils of the empire and will allow the inhabitants of America to decide for themselves what wars they must fight, what business they must conduct and where, for the alleged protection offered to the colonies by "Great-Britain" is nothing but an expression of the Europeans' immediate interest and their wish to keep the colonies disconnected from one another, but still in a relationship through the "parent country," "as sister colonies by the way of England"; this, according to Paine, "is certainly a very round-about way of proving relationship, but it is the nearest and only true way of proving enemyship" (Paine 1998a, 22). Here, Paine adds another argument against the relationship with England which is meant to plant fear in the hearts and minds of those who still supported the dangerous dependency of the colonies from the crown of England. This would, in his opinion, make the colonies fight England's wars but also start wars among themselves, which is unacceptable.

The terminology Paine uses in his argument is also meant to destroy any reference to England as "mother country," and thus to cancel any feeling of inferiority the Americans might experience when analyzing the facts he is presenting. The pamphleteer uses all his literary genius to divert the reader's attention from England as the mother country, and turn it towards a much bigger entity, a more reasonable choice, both from a historical and a logical point of view: "But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families; wherefore the assertion, if true, turns to her reproach; but it happens not to be true, or only partly so, and the phrase parent or mother country hath been jesuitically adopted by the King and his parasites, with a low papistical design of gaining an unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds. Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. [...] we claim

brotherhood with every European Christian, and triumph in the generosity of the sentiment” (Paine 1998a, 22).

Because he is sure that his “evidence” is so strong that it would resist any analysis, Paine decides to give up his previously announced scientific objectivity, assume his role as a political pamphleteer and declare his option openly as an English-born American: “I am not induced by motives of pride, party, or resentment to espouse the doctrine of separation and independence; I am clearly, positively, and conscientiously persuaded that it is the true interest of this continent to be so; that every thing short of that is mere patchwork, that it can afford no lasting felicity,—that it is leaving the sword to our children, and shrinking back at a time, when, a little more, a little farther, would have rendered this continent the glory of the earth” (Paine 1998a, 28). Ultimately, independence is the only option that would guarantee peace and prosperity for the colonies, and, following the great example of the states in Europe, the only acceptable form of government is the republic.

After presenting all this evidence, Paine moves on and proposes a government system which he identifies with the only available option for the united sister colonies in America: a President, a Continental Congress of 390 people convening annually, focused on domestic issues exclusively; this requires equal representation, depending on the size of each colony organized in districts. Paine also proposes an electoral system for electing the president which ensures rotation so that each colony might give a president. The majority that he considers “just” for passing an act of law is “no less than three fifths of the Congress.” The guiding principles for his proposed system of government are equality and representativeness, which he recommends as sanctioned by God himself, by humorously asserting that “He that will promote discord, under a government so equally formed as this, would join Lucifer in his revolt” (Paine 1998a, 32). In other words, if monarchy is similar to the fall of man, breaking the law in a republic is similar to the fall of the dark angels from Heaven.

In the section titled “Of the present ABILITY of AMERICA, with some miscellaneous REFLEXION,” Paine argues for the independence of the colonies as a natural way of the world and compares the American and the English fleets to prove that the colonies are able to raise a great army for both defense and attack. Moreover, he expresses his support for religious pluralism guaranteed by the state: “As to religion, I hold it to be the indispensable duty of all government, to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do therewith [...]. I fully and conscientiously believe that it is the will of the Almighty, that there should be diversity of religious opinions among us: It affords a larger field for our Christian kindness. Were we all of one way of thinking, our religious dispositions would want matter for probation; and on this liberal principle, I look on the various denominations among us, to be like children of the same family, differing only, in what is called their Christian names” (Paine 1998a, 43).

Thomas Paine’s conclusion in *Common Sense* is that the only resolution of the conflict between the sister colonies and England would be a declaration of independence as a matter of extreme urgency, which would enable America to be recognized internationally, especially by other European powers as a country in its own right, inhabited by a nation different from the English nation. In the Appendix to the second edition of *Common Sense*, he advocates for an independent America, the sole entity responsible for its own welfare: “It is now the interest of America to provide for herself. [...] it is the interest of America to be separated from Britain. [...] Because the longer it is delayed the harder it will be to accomplish” (Paine 1998a, 48, 49). The final paragraph in the Appendix expresses Paine’s wish for an independent America in which religion and politics are separated and in which every citizen enjoys civil and religious freedom: “And here without anger or resentment I bid you farewell. Sincerely wishing, that as men and Christians, ye may always fully and uninterruptedly enjoy every civil and religious right; and be, in your turn, the means of securing it to others; but that the example which ye have unwisely set, of mingling religion with politics, may be disavowed and reprobated by every inhabitant of AMERICA” (Paine 1998a, 59).



## Conclusions

Thomas Paine's political pamphlet thus emerges as his personal political manifesto, focused on the wish for an independent American republic, that may become the home of all its inhabitants, born in America or elsewhere, but it is also the expression of a seminal political vision which has served as a great source of inspiration for many other nations, political movements, political lines of thought, continuously fueling debates about the state of democracy in general, and about political doctrines, citizenship, civil rights, religious right, or equality of chances.

Throughout *Common Sense*, in particular, his message is that renewal is mandatory, that the breakaway from tradition, from old, harmful ties is the basic requirement for the advancement of all nations in general and for America in particular, because "the past could not be allowed to determine the present" (Ferguson 2000, 481) anymore. "Rhetorically, every theme [he addresses in *Common Sense*] held in common the erasure of a previous history. A government without kings, the timeless sanction of nature, the cruelty of forebears, the separate nuclear family, the innocent child – none of the images in question welcomed a return to the past" (Ferguson 2000, 482). Breaking away with his own past, Thomas Paine wrote a political pamphlet that requires permanent revisiting by all those interested in a total, and brutal, distancing for the past as the prerequisite of renewal and progress. His *Common Sense* is not thus not just an old text rooted in a distance, now irrelevant, but a living manifesto past, an effective timeless political instrument (Rosenfeld 2008, 634, 667) written for the revolutionary minds inhabiting any age, inhabiting any place, and fighting for the general good, for the welfare of the public, for equality and freedom.

Moreover, *Common Sense* is not only a provocative political pamphlet meant to stir emotions related to the possibility and opportunity of creating a new nation, a new state in America, but also the acknowledgement of a preexistent crisis able to, if not produce, at least facilitate the revolutionary change: "in the cultural and economic fruition of the American colonies, an intensifying identification with and consumption of Englishness—a veritable Anglophilia—led to an eventual crisis: the colonies came to see themselves as central, rather than peripheral, actors in the empire, deserving of the same political rights, certainly, but also warring in defense of true Englishness so as to supplant the declining and corrupted British Empire" (Kilgore 2013, 368). The "Anglophobic" fervor of the American Revolution was just a step away from this "Anglophilic", peripheral, diasporic crisis, and voices such as that of Thomas Paine found ways to address the public in the most personal and convincing tones, stirring those feelings generally known to fuel revolutions and fundamental political changes.

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