The Significance of the Letter to the Abbé Raynal in the Progress of Thomas Paine’s Thought

Thomas Paine, in the earliest publication of The Rights of Man, identified himself as the author of Common Sense and the Letter to the Abbé Raynal, thereby implying that of all his writings so far offered to the public these were the most important. Common Sense produced so great an immediate effect that its importance has never been minimized, but the Letter has been either ignored or dismissed with brief notice by biographers and critics. This continued neglect of a document which Paine himself considered important is due, no doubt, to the fact that its chief significance has been strangely overlooked. Moncure Conway says of it: “The chief interest of the pamphlet, apart from the passages concerning the military events of 1776, lies in its reflection of events in the nine months ¹ during which the paper lingered on his table.” Frank Smith agrees, seeing in it only “a rationale of the Revolution” combined with a narrative of the military events that took place during the period Paine spent in writing it.²

True, the Letter does rationalize American conduct and describe the American state of mind during the discouraging first year of the Revolution, and if it does no more than this investigators are justified in giving little regard to it. However, a study of the Letter sequentially with Paine’s other writings plainly shows another significance: The Letter contains the earliest, and a substantially complete, formulation of the author’s internationalist views. Since Paine was “the first modern internationalist,”³ it seems especially appropriate that his earliest appearance in that character be recognized now, when so many of the political theories which were violently

¹ From the end of November, 1781, to September, 1782.
³ Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1927), I, 327.
contested in the eighteenth century are being reexamined and reaffirmed or rejected.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate (1) that Paine was a practical man, not a constructive thinker; (2) that the principle of his thinking was to adapt his humanitarianism to successively larger concepts of human relationship as he became aware of them; (3) that in this expansive process the Letter represents the stage where Paine actually ceased to think in nationalistic terms and became a practical internationalist; and (4) that the province of his inquiry continued to enlarge thereafter to include the extra-political concerns of human society, having already reached, in the Letter, the widest political extension of which it was capable. Obviously the third point of these four is the central one in this investigation, but it can be effectively considered only in relation to the others.

I

Thomas Paine was not primarily concerned to make reason and the will of God (presumed in the phrase to be identical) prevail. He was impelled by an almost incredibly active beneficence—not by mere benevolence. Therefore he insists upon the necessity for believing in "universal philanthropy; by which I do not mean merely the sentimental benevolence of wishing well, but the practical benevolence of doing good." Consequently he believed that theories were only valuable when applied to real human problems—a belief which finds repeated utterance throughout his writings. He dismisses Locke's *Of Civil Government* as of little value because, "It is a speculative, not a practical work." Likewise he says that the great fault of Rousseau and the Abbé Raynal is their lack of practicality. His gravest charge against the Abbé is that he is cynical, more in love with ideas than with men. The Abbé's inquiry into the motives of the French-American alliance, an inquiry which provoked Paine's *Letter* in answer, was prompted by the philosopher's curiosity rather than by the philanthropist's desire to be

5 In his newspaper controversy with Cheetham.
6 *Writings*, II, 334.
useful. The true glory of Christ, Paine thinks, is that he was a philanthropist, not a system-maker: "Jesus Christ founded no new system. He called men to the practice of moral virtues, and the belief of one God. The great trait in his character is philanthropy."

It is reasonable to conclude, then, that Paine was not a lover of ideas for their own sake, a philosopher; neither was he an egoist, believing that all other persons were the mere animated furniture of the world; but he was, as he so often insisted, a philanthropist, impatient of theory unless it could be made of immediate service to men. To the philanthropist the reality of a situation consists in its immediate significance to persons: To the philosopher a situation is important as the demonstration of the operation of a system. Paine appreciated the significance to humanity of a situation by realizing what it meant to himself multiplied by the number of the human race, for he saw all of society as himself multiplied, and felt an intensity of concern for those whose hearts he knew by knowing his own.

He used the conventional artillery of logic to attack evils, and sincerely believed that his arguments were unborrowed, original, even spontaneous:

there are two distinct classes of what are called Thoughts; those that we produce in ourselves by reflection and the act of thinking, and those that bolt into the mind of their own accord. I have always made it a rule to treat those voluntary visitors with civility, taking care to examine, as well as I was able, if they were worth entertaining; and it is from them I have acquired almost all the knowledge that I have.

This is hardly the assertion of a philosopher, whose whole profession implies belief in the superior validity of ideas produced by "reflection and the act of thinking."

II

A sort of unity, spiritual rather than logical, in Paine’s consideration of human problems, resulted from the fact that his beneficence was himself and could not be alienated.

His principles were his instinct of benevolence voiced. They are

8 Ibid., II, 99.
9 Ibid., IV, 39-40.
10 "I neither read books, nor studied other people's opinion." Writings, II, 463.
11 Ibid., IV, 64.
easily stated: Participation in the human community is the only good that all of us know to exist certainly. Every person in the world community has the right and the capacity to participate. Therefore, all human situations should be considered with reference to all, not to a few, nor to a class. The end of all institutional action is to promote the public good, which is not a thing in itself [like the modern German Staat], created by the surrender of rights of individuals and higher than they. Paine understood that the latter concept was possible and carefully disavowed it:

Public good is not a term opposed to the good of . . . every individual collected. It is the good of all, because it is the good of everyone: for as the public body is every individual collected, so the public good is the collected good of those individuals.12

We have here a practical identification of individual interest with individual good, of collective interest with collective good—in short, of interest with good. Paine does not recommend altruism to men, but desires them to know their own interest and secure it: “As to mere theoretical reformation, I have never preached it up. The most effectual process is that of improving the condition of man by his own interest; and it is on this ground that I take my stand.”13 Interest being reciprocal and universal, once discovered it will bring order and happiness into human organizations, since the quarrels of men “are accidental and equivocally created.”14

Since Paine was, above all, humanitarian and practical, and found both motive and sanction for social behavior in the sum of individual interest, it is easy to understand the progress of his thought. His extension of concern from personal, immediate, and local distresses, through national problems, and international affairs, ultimately to religion and metaphysics, was a natural enlargement of his active humanitarianism, which, wherever it attacked evil in human institutions, found them broadening out into larger relationships where the causes of evil were still to seek:

It is pleasant to observe by what regular gradations we surmount . . . local prejudices, as we enlarge our acquaintance with the World.15 . . . In con-

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12 Ibid., II, 137.
13 Ibid., II, 456.
14 Ibid., I, 268.
15 Ibid., I, 87.
templating a subject that embraces with equatorial magnitude the whole region of humanity it is impossible to confine the pursuit in any single direction. It takes ground on every character and condition that appertains to man, and blends the individual, the nation, and the world.\textsuperscript{16}

His plea for the excisemen, and the journalistic essays which appeared after his American journey, deplored slavery, the condition of women, duelling, titles, tyranny, the several striking particulars of oppression, showed his humanitarianism aroused and solicitous, but so far without practical application. He had not gone beyond the stage of considering the plight of individuals to the further stage of considering the plight of nations and the world. Pride, avarice, and cruelty were the immediate causes of misery, but he soon thought he had discovered an anterior cause in the monarchical government which profited by and perpetuated them. In writing for the Revolution he found a way of doing good instead of merely wishing well.

\textbf{III}

Paine says his attention was turned to government, not by natural prepossession with politics, but by a humanitarian impulse: “I had no disposition for what is called politics.”\textsuperscript{17} “At my first setting out in public life, . . . I saw an opportunity in which I thought I could do some good, and I followed exactly what my heart dictated. I neither read books nor studied other people’s opinion.”\textsuperscript{18}

His attention being thus diverted to politics by a national emergency, he thought in nationalistic terms until the period of emergency had almost ceased to exist. His earlier political writings attempt to distinguish the good and evil principles in national governments. Those governments being good that are in the public interest, monarchical government is evil because it furthers an opposed interest: “it is the pride of kings which throws mankind into confusion.”\textsuperscript{19} Most of the miseries of nations are in consequence of wars in which they can have no interest.\textsuperscript{20} Monarchies being not in the public interest, and possessing no inherent right (for they were

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, II, 454.
\item \textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, IV, 63.
\item \textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, II, 463.
\item \textsuperscript{19}\textit{Ibid.}, I, 75.
\item \textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, I, 278.
\end{itemize}
founded on conquest and usurpation), ought to be overthrown.\textsuperscript{21}

The conceptions of the right nature of government which are implicit in *Common Sense* and the *Crisis* papers did not receive their fullest development until *The Rights of Man*, when, not under the necessity of giving most attention to concerns of the moment, Paine could elaborate his theory. In the meantime, in the later *Crisis* papers and in the *Letter*, he had become aware of the international implications of the American war, and *The Rights of Man* is, therefore, an international rather than a national document.

It appears that the prospect and consummation of alliance with France and Spain, the English appeal to ancient prejudice against those countries, and the consequent necessity of defending the Alliance as being good as well as expedient, gave occasion for the practical extension of his professed universal benevolence to international rather than merely national affairs. There is no evidence to show that Paine had thought in internationalistic terms earlier. Although R. G. Adams has demonstrated that, from the first, certain political thinkers, American especially, regarded the dispute between England and America as a problem in international federation, he evidently does not class Paine with those thinkers. Paine had not been in America long enough to observe more than the immediate situation, and in England he apparently had neither acquaintance with nor interest in colonial affairs. It was with him a further case of applying his principles to the fact that confronted him. Principle with him was often nothing more than an assertion of sympathy for someone.

Although none of his contemporaneous utterances suggest that he realized the contest in its early stages as a problem in federation, there is evidence that in a later, broader view he did so realize it, and even supposed perhaps that he had done so from the beginning. He says in *Crisis* number VII, "When you saw the state of strength and opulence, . . . which America arrived at, you ought to have advised her to set up for herself, and proposed an alliance of interest with her, and in so doing you would have drawn . . . more real advantage . . . than from any weak and wrangling government that you could exercise over her."\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., I, 206.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., I, 289.
The Revolution, Adams says, ended the British-American connection as an experiment in federation, which it incipiently was, before it culminated in that sort of relationship which now exists between England and the dominions—a practical working out of the problem that may have resulted partly from England's too-late realization of her mistaken position in regard to America.  

Paine's importance in this situation was that he violently precipitated the end of those protracted negotiations through which statesmen in the two countries were attempting to bring about autonomy within federation.

It is reasonably certain, then, that until near the end of the Revolutionary period Paine was an internationalist in sentiment only, and that the *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, marks his conversion to larger political views. This production possesses an ampler interest than any of his earlier writings for several reasons: 1) It is easier to justify an action to the performer than to an observer of it, for the performer is willing to believe himself just without much demonstration. Paine was rationalizing American behavior to people in other countries, in the *Letter*, not to the Americans themselves, as in the earlier writings, and was therefore concerned to produce the strongest arguments of which the case was capable. 2) He had to base his argument on a higher ground than national interest, since his audience was international, and therefore not to be moved by demonstration of the advantage to America only of revolution. 3) The *Letter* was intended to advance a general and universally applicable theory, instead of to meet specific occasions. 4) It was matured over a much longer period than the earlier writings, and is more thoroughly reasoned and deliberative.

In this publication he describes the forces working for a federation of the principal European powers and the United States; the circumstances which make such federation appear practicable, even inevitable; the obstacles which had to be removed; and the advantages that would result from peaceful international collaboration.

The civilizing influence of commerce, of science, and of letters (and in America the influence of geography, perhaps) prepared men's minds; and the imminent (when Paine was writing the

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success of the Revolution combined with the satisfactory continuance of the French Alliance made federation appear practicable.

It is an observation I have already made in some former publications, that the circle of civilization is yet incomplete. Mutual wants have formed the individuals of each country into a kind of national society, and here the progress of civilization has stopped.

There is a greater fitness in mankind to extend and complete the civilization of nations with each other at this day, than there was to begin it with the unconnected individuals at first; ... The wants of the individual, which first produced the idea of society, are now augmented into the wants of the nation, and he is obliged to seek from another country what before he sought from the next person.

Letters, the tongue of the world, have in some measure brought all mankind acquainted, and by an extension of their uses are every day promoting some new friendship. ... Science, the partisan of no country, but the beneficent patroness of all, has liberally opened a temple where all may meet. Her influence on the mind, ... has long been preparing it for higher cultivation and further improvement. ... Commerce ... has had a considerable influence in tempering the human mind.

Thus ... the world ... is put into a fitness not only to admit of, but to desire, an extension of civilization. The principal and almost only remaining enemy; it now has to encounter, is prejudice; for it is evidently the interest of mankind to agree and make the best of life.

Perhaps no two events ever united so intimately and forcibly to combat and expel prejudice, as the revolution of America and the alliance with France. ... Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution, more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used. ... It was not all the argument, however powerful, nor all the reasoning, however eloquent, that could have produced this change, so necessary to the extension of the mind, and the cordiality of the world, without the two circumstances of the revolution and the alliance.

Here, then, Paine practically surmounted another of the "gradations of prejudice." To anyone interested in the history of ideas, therefore, the Letter must seem more significant for this fact than for reasons hitherto assigned.

The Letter explains why, since international federation is desirable, it has not been already reached. In Crisis, number VII, written

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24 This idea appears in Paine's writings early and late, e.g., "Crisis," number VIII, Writings, I, 300.
25 For a less favorable opinion of the influence of commerce, see "Common Sense," Writings, I, 107.
26 Writings, II, 102-105.
to discredit the English commissioners to the Colonies, who were trying to weaken the Alliance by appealing to the traditional prejudice against France, Paine had already noticed disapprovingly the evils of nationalistic spirit, which prevents international harmony.27 In the Letter nationalism is again assailed as an obstacle to pacific relations among nations, and the author adds that hitherto men had not progressed in civilization far enough for such relations to be possible. Before national civilizations were perfected, before the world grew populous, before there was a world society, "the wants of men were few and the objects within his reach. While he could acquire these, he lived in a state of individual independence." 28 Then, too, countries warred in hope of conquest, but now the "world has undergone its divisions of empire, the several boundaries of which are known and settled. The idea of conquering countries like the Greeks and Romans, does not now exist; and experience has exploded the notion of going to war for profit. In short, the objects for war are exceedingly diminished." 29 The current wars in Europe were not wars of conquest, but were intended to preserve the balance of power.30 The conclusion, then, is that prejudice, uncivilization, nationalism, the greed of conquest, have been so far dispelled by the operation of the benign influences already distinguished that the world is now clearly ready to "complete the circle of civilization."

Having shown the world's fitness for international federation, the Letter sets forth the advantages to be derived from it. Most of them are implied in the earlier argument: Peace, with freer commercial relations and consequent prosperity for all; unhampered literary and scientific relations; relief from the burden of taxes necessary to support wars; in general, a richer humanity for all. Freedom of the seas, so necessary for maintenance of peace and commerce, would be assured by naval limitation:

[The] combined powers . . . will render their reputation immortal, by establishing the perfect freedom of the ocean, to which all countries have a right, and are interested in accomplishing. The sea is the world's highway.31

27 Ibid., I, 279.
28 Ibid., II, 103.
29 Ibid., II, 104.
30 Ibid., II, 110-111.
31 Ibid., II, 128.
... [No] one nation should, in time of peace, exceed a certain number of ships of war... [for] there appears no end to the extent to which navies may be carried.  

As for the conditions necessary to maintain a prosperous and peaceful international arrangement, Paine is ambiguous in the Letter. He assumes no doubt that the powerful motive of interest, which is to produce this harmony, will operate to continue it; but he does not specify what must be the qualifications of the countries federated. Probably his vagueness on this point is due to an awareness that the conditions which ought to obtain within countries did not in fact exist in France. The Abbé had so charged in his observations on the Alliance, and Paine answered that the objection had no relevancy, since all nations operate as republics in international federation. But he had suggested as early as Common Sense that monarchical government is inconsistent with international harmony, and had repeated the same view in nearly every succeeding publication, and in The Rights of Man he was to assert vigorously that representative government is a necessary condition of pacific relations between nations, since the cementing force of any league must be the common interest, and this a non-responsible government can disregard. Undoubtedly he was silent on this point in the Letter because to acknowledge it would have rendered ineffective his justification of the Alliance. Perhaps his later elaboration of it was partly in consequence of his having imbibed French physiocratic opinion (in which insistence on representative government as necessary to international harmony was a cardinal point) in the interval between publication of the Letter and publication of The Rights of Man, for we know he was remarkably susceptible, without realizing it, to environing opinion.  

IV  

All the points outlined in the Letter were given a brilliant expansion in The Rights of Man, although little that was new in Paine's internationalist thinking was there introduced. The changing needs
of government were briefly discussed, and Paine somewhat inconsistently (for he had generally maintained that monarchical governments were rooted and grown old in evil) suggested that something might be said for the view that existing forms of government had once been proper. The change made necessary by the evils now characteristic of old governments could only be accomplished by world revolution, toward which there was now a universal inclination. Everywhere a more liberal habit of mind was evident, and there was prospect of human regeneration. National prejudices, which seemed so great an obstacle to international harmony, would, almost paradoxically, render it the more secure, for "Nations, like individuals, who have long been enemies, without knowing each other, or knowing why, become the better friends when they discover the errors and impositions under which they had acted."

In *The Rights of Man*, as in the *Letter*, Paine attributed the impulse necessary to realize an international federation to the examples of the Revolution and the French Alliance added to the steady influence of commerce and the "tranquil arts." The French Revolution was powerfully augmenting this impulse. Therefore: nothing of reform in the political world ought to be held improbable. It is an age of Revolutions, in which everything may be looked for. The intrigue of Courts, by which the system of war is kept up, may provoke a confederation of Nations to abolish it; and an European Congress to patronise the progress of free Government, and promote the civilisation of Nations with each other, is an event nearer in probability, than once were the revolutions and alliance of France and America.

These opinions concerning the aptness of the age for reform and for profiting by liberal examples are no more than expansions of the same ideas already traced in the *Letter*. Likewise with his discussion of the advantages consequent upon reform. Peace, so necessary to the interest of the people, must follow; and then prosperity, through the extension of commerce. His comments here are too profuse to admit of detailed notice. The commercial interde-

35 *Writings*, II, 388-89.
41 See, as typical, *ibid.*, II, 413, 437.
dependence of nations is insisted upon, as well as the truth that wars of conquest (although he had earlier insisted that there no longer were any such wars), to be expected under non-representative government, are inimical to commercial interest. So important an influence did Paine conceive commerce to be that, although he had elsewhere called it a “moral nullity,” and spoken of it disparagingly in Common Sense, he here attributes to it an unique efficacy in civilizing mankind. Further, international peace would diminish taxes. The proposed league could effectually urge the independence of South America (apparently for the advantage of other nations more than for her own), and would make it unnecessary for governments to maintain expensive armaments and navies.

The advantages of such cooperation being obvious, and men’s minds prepared for conversion, its realization has been delayed only by the selfishness of politicians, the pride of nobility, the obstinate evil of courts, and the general interest of governments opposed to that of nations. There had been earlier revolutions in the world, not happy in their results, but the one in prospect would have a better effect than they, because:

The revolutions that formerly took place in the world had nothing in them that interested the bulk of mankind. They extended only to a change of persons and measures, but not of principles. . . . Government founded on a moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, . . . interests not particular individuals, but nations in its progress, and promises a new era to the human race.

Hopeful as he was at this time of a complete regeneration of mankind, the inhumanities and futilities of the French Revolution soon abated his optimism, and he began to conceive that something more

42 Ibid., II, 457-58.
43 Kingsley Martin quotes Bentham and Adam Smith as evidence that these views were generally held.
44 Writings, II, 456.
46 Ibid., II, 511.
47 Ibid., II, 511.
48 Preface to The Rights of Man.
49 Writings, II, 320.
50 Preface to The Rights of Man.
51 Writings, II, 404.
52 Ibid., II, 404.
than governmental reform was requisite to secure happiness and justice to men. In *The Rights of Man* he had said, "If universal peace, civilization, and commerce are ever to be the happy lot of man, it cannot be accomplished but by a revolution in the system of governments." When he came to write *Agrarian Justice* five years later he said, "A revolution in the state of civilization is the necessary companion of revolutions in the system of government." The two states which he had before assumed to be identical he now recognized as distinct. The modification marked another transition in his thinking, a transition which was evident in the views he had already expressed in *The Age of Reason*, where he had concluded that religion is the ultimate tyranny, and that the tyrannies of religion and government cannot be dissociated. In attacking religious tyranny his principal appeal is, characteristically, to human feeling, against the monstrous God he found in the Old Testament. Almost equally characteristic is his belief that science, combatting all prejudice, will discredit revealed religion. It is worthy of notice that Paine was as plain and positive in his attack on religion as in his attack on corrupt government. The more prudent thinkers of the time realized that religion was too intimately connected with the passions of the people to be overtly attacked, but perhaps Paine supposed them to be as ready for religious as for political conversion. At any rate, with a notable and willful disregard of caution he addressed his argument directly to the people; and J. B. Bury justly says of *The Age of Reason* that:

*It is remarkable as the first important English publication in which the Christian scheme of salvation and the Bible are attacked in plain language. . . . Paine is the first to present with force the incongruity of the Christian scheme with the conception of the universe attained by astronomical science.*

In this, the broadest expression of his humanitarianism, which had pushed itself with an unexampled *élan* through all the institutions in which men are interested, we find Paine still trusting pathetically to the instrument he had borrowed from the age, and which

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54 *Ibid.*, IV, 211.
had not justified his faith in it: the power of reason to free men from prejudice and impel them to reform.

V

In this survey an attempt has been made to discover the principle of Paine's thinking and to trace its operation by examination of his writings. The question remains: What stage in Paine's progress to a thoroughly developed philosophy did the *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* represent? Paine did not, in an exact sense, arrive at a thoroughly developed philosophy. He never went beyond the supposition that all the unhappiness of man was the result of wrongly formed and administered institutions, and his whole thought was concerned with the reformation, or limitation of the influence of institutions over men. However, there was a progress, if not a philosophy, in his opinions, and the *Letter* represents a significant stage in this progress. It shows Paine's political opinion at its fullest development, and many of the opinions expressed in it have vitality still. The protean character of ideas is strikingly evident in the changed guise of many of his favorite ideas in our own day. The necessity of world revolution is insisted upon by all those who wish to remake the world on new plans or old plans renewed. There is a desperate insistence in democratic nations that representative government is necessary to the maintenance of international harmony and individual happiness. The British control of the seas is condemned by Hitler on much the same ground as that taken by Paine. The Nazis profess a desire for world peace and commerce, but established and insured on such a basis as Paine would have considered incompatible with human happiness. Like Paine, the Germans assail the principle of the balance of power as bloody and evil, but would replace it by destroying equality rather than by obliterating national distinctions, as Paine desired to do. Paine's views on the liberalizing effect of free trade have had recent powerful advocates. And there is abundant evidence now of the disturbing effect on world harmony of non-responsible governments.

Paine was perhaps as free from stubborn prepossession as any man in history (and as hasty in acquiring new theories as in casting old ones away), but throughout his life he retained an assumption,
never justified in his own experience, of man imaging a beneficent creator. He could not think that the myriad far-shining galaxies whirl in splendid futility, that they are not evidences of the same energetic tenderness which he discovered in himself. That he could not discard this premise made him, perhaps, undistinguished as a thinker, but supremely useful as a man.

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