Tom Paine and
The Idea of Progress*

Though a few scholars, H. H. Clark and V. L. Parrington among them, have commented on Tom Paine’s glowing optimism and his heralding of a new world as the result of significant contemporary events, no one has fully analyzed Paine’s thought as it related to the idea of progress current in the eighteenth century. Miss Lois Whitney, it is true, devotes some attention to the problem, but her conclusions seem based on a too-restricted sampling of Paine’s works. A thorough searching of the important writings of Paine for his comments on progress was held essential in the attempt to give his ideas a fuller consideration than they had previously received, and a far wider survey was demanded in view of the reason for the inadequacy of the one attempt made to analyze his thought. For the purpose of overcoming the limitations of previous studies, therefore, all of Paine’s writings except a few miscellaneous verses and prose pieces in the last volume of the Patriot’s Edition were read.

The idea of progress is defined generally by J. B. Bury as the belief that “civilization has moved, is moving, and will move in a desirable direction.” Various differentiae and concomitants of this definition appear in Mr. Bury’s book, and do not fail of notice in the investigation here. The definition does not count out the belief that there have been and will be occasional minor retrogressions.

As primitivism is antithetical to the idea of progress, it is advisable in evaluating a writer’s thought concerning man’s status in regard

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2 Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (Baltimore, 1934).

to the past, present, and future to explore his writings carefully for
the ideas—which have been iterated and reiterated for some twenty-
two centuries\textsuperscript{4}—about the possibility of a golden age at some time
in the distant past, and the ideas about the state of happiness of
contemporary savage peoples.

Primitivism as a philosophy of history is the belief that the earliest
condition of man and of human society was the best condition.\textsuperscript{5} This
conception Lovejoy calls chronological primitivism. Primitivism as
“a theory of values, moral or aesthetic or both”\textsuperscript{6} he designates as
cultural primitivism, and defines it as “the discontent of the civilized
with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature
of it. It is the belief of men living in a relatively highly evolved and
complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisti-
cated in some or in all respects is a more desirable life.”\textsuperscript{7}

The primitivist, of either type, is likely not to believe in progress
of any sort, though beliefs in primitivism and progress have ap-
peared side by side.\textsuperscript{8} In any event, one concept cannot be studied
without some attention being given to the other.

One common ground of opposition for the two ideas has been
the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns. A preliminary
condition to the idea of progress is the belief that Greece and Rome
had not reached an intellectual plane unattainable again.\textsuperscript{9} On this
point Paine seldom expressed himself, though he often referred to
past ages in his arguments against monarchical and hereditary gov-
ernments. But in the \textit{Crisis} he definitely took the stand that the
ancients had been eulogized too much, and saw no reason for “yield-
ing the palm of the United States to any Grecians or Romans that
were ever born.”\textsuperscript{10} “What Athens was in miniature,” he also said,
“America will be in magnitude.”\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{4} Lovejoy, Preface to Miss Whitney’s book, xi.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., xi.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., xi.
\textsuperscript{7} Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, \textit{Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity},
\textsuperscript{8} Cf. Miss Whitney, \textit{op. cit.}, 1.
\textsuperscript{9} Bury, \textit{op. cit.}, 66.
by William Van der Weyde (10 vols., New Rochelle, New York, 1925), II, 35. These
volumes will be referred to hereafter as \textit{Works}.
Of Paine’s attitude toward Indians and their life it may be noted that his most laudatory comments about them were made shortly after he came to the colonies (before the Indian depredations of the Revolutionary War) and later when he was far away in both time and space—across the Atlantic in France several years after he left America. In “Agrarian Justice” (1797) he remarked that among the Indians there could not be found “any of those spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes in all the towns and streets of Europe.” On the other hand, he also said that the luxuries of civilization were not found among them. Civilization had worked two ways: “to make one part of society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot of either in a natural state.”

Though he saw the evils of civilization, he did not advocate a return to the state of nature rather he would retain the benefits of civilization and work toward eliminating the evils. He also criticized the Indians for carrying on a warfare of indiscriminate destruction.

Now comes the crux of this discussion of Paine and primitivism. Miss Whitney quotes the following passage from Paine: “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. . . . Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise.” Then she comments on the passage:

These are the words of Thomas Paine at the beginning of his career, and the statement shows the strain of primitivism that his writings never lost, in spite of the fact that he is classed as one of the most radical of the progressivists. One searches for the widest philosophical basis of Paine’s political thought through a mass of discussions of particular problems, but what one finds reveals the astonishing fact that Paine uses nearly every one of the primitivistic presuppositions as the basis of a prophecy of unlimited progress. His panacea is the characteristic primitivistic one: go back to nature; study man in the earliest stages of his existence; find out the laws of nature; simplify!

Miss Whitney proceeds to build up her case by citing the Rights of Man and quoting from it. Those persons who reason by citing

12 Works, X, 9-10.
13 “Prospect Papers,” Works, IX, 112.
14 “Common Sense,” Works, II, 98.
precedents from antiquity (she is paraphrasing Paine) do not go back far enough into antiquity; they should go back to man as he was created. Going back as far as that teaches, first,

that men were created equal without distinction of rank—'The artificial NOBLE of an hereditary aristocracy shrinks into a dwarf before the NOBLE of Nature'; and second, that he was created both with wants that drove him into society and with social affections that made society his greatest source of happiness. . . . If governments had not started as a usurpation of power instead of a delegation of power all would have been well. It is only false systems of government that have made man the enemy of man. 'The more perfect civilization is, the less occasion has it for government, because the more does it regulate its own affairs and government itself. . . . Man, with respect to all these matters, is more a creature of consistency than he is aware, or than governments would wish him to believe. All the great laws of society are laws of nature. . . .' The central principle that nature has to teach is simplicity. 'I draw my idea of the form of government from a principle in nature which no art can overturn, viz. that the more simple a thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered.'

All this is about as pure primitivism as one could wish for. 16

The judgment expressed by Miss Whitney seems somewhat hastily arrived at, for had she read Agrarian Justice she would have found Paine setting up a somewhat elaborate system of administering an inheritance tax fund, which would have made the government of France increasingly complex. Second, though Paine advocated going back to primitive society to get at the origin of rights, he seemed not to argue that such a state was desirable. Man being what he is, he needs government to afford him protection. If he were good, he would need no government. Paine was not arguing, in the first quotation from the Rights of Man which Miss Whitney cites, that the original state of society is best; he was simply saying that by considering man in his original state, his natural rights can be determined. As to the quotation concerning the "NOBLE of Nature," Paine would say, undoubtedly, that the title "Noble of Nature" could be applied to a highly-civilized man as well as to a primitive man. In refutation of the next point, society as a source of happiness is not necessarily tied up with primitivism; it can operate in a complex civilization as well as in a simple state. Never, it seems apparent, did Paine advocate dispensing with gov-

ernment; he advocated reforms in government, and looked to
government to ameliorate evil conditions.

Two of the ideas that Miss Whitney paraphrases seem to show
an inconsistency in Paine himself. He says that “government is the
badge of lost innocence,” and then, according to her, that it is only
false systems of government that have made man the enemy of
man; and that, if governments had not started as a usurpation of
power instead of a delegation of power, all would have been well.
If all governments are bad, then why refer to some as false, with
the implication that there are true systems? On the other hand, if
there are true systems of government, can they be called bad? In
the second paraphrase, is not Paine implying that a government
started as a delegation of power is good?

Had Miss Whitney looked closely on page 413, of volume II of
Conway’s edition of Paine’s works, from which she obtained the
passage relating to the delegation instead of the usurpation of power,
she would have found Paine referring to “man, naturally as he is,
with all his faults about him.” In the light of Paine’s fundamental
assumptions of government displayed on nearly every page of his
writings, he should never have referred to government as a “neces-
sary evil” but simply as “necessary.” The evil making government
necessary is in man. As to “lost innocence” he was referring to the
story of the Fall, which he later scorned as a myth.

Thus, in summary, government is necessary, man being what he
is; and Paine’s main thesis was that, since it must exist, it should be
made the best possible kind. That kind is representative as opposed
to hereditary and monarchical government, which he saw to be the
principal cause of the miseries and unhappiness of man. This view
of government as a humanitarian agency for remedying the evils
inflicted on society by misgovernment cannot be reconciled with the
idea that government is the “badge of lost innocence” and that the
simpler a government is, the better it is. Paine may have meant to
advocate that to perform any set of functions, however complicated,
the best form was the simplest, which might be in itself, however,
rather complex. The general evidence seems to support the argu-
ment that the view of Agrarian Justice is near Paine’s funda-
mental thought on government, for throughout all his writings he
looked to a system of democratic representation to relieve the sufferings of mankind.

II

An attempt has been made to show that whereas a superficial study of Paine’s works might serve to class him as a primitivist, a more careful and complete study indicates that he was not a primitivist at all. Though he saw that “the baleful custom of misgovernment is so universal and the consequent sufferings of nations throughout the centuries have been so dreadful that the soul of man, helpless and blinded, has almost lost the faculty of vision,” 17 and that the Old Testament “is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind,” 18 he was forward-looking, striving to correct the evils of civilized society, never advancing the return to a simpler state; and he never doubted that the world was approaching the millenium. His every attack on monarchical government ends on a rising note of optimism concerning the near certainty with which man is bound to throw off his shackles, and, by accepting the system of democratic representation, which Paine sees as relatively simple compared to the complexities of monarchical government with its devious ways, innumerable intrigues, and oppressive measures, rise to a state of happiness never before achieved. Early in his writings he declared: “We [Americans] have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand.” 19 In the Rights of Man he again expressed his boundless optimism: “The best constitution that could now be devised, consistent with the condition of the present moment, may be far short of that excellence which a few years may afford. There is a morning of reason rising upon man, on the subject of government, that has not appeared before.” 20

He did not propose, let it be emphasized again, a going back to

nature for anything but first principles to apply to one’s thinking on political matters. “As man must have existed before governments existed, there necessarily was a time when governments did not exist,” he argued, only to prove his contention that the powers of government had to be originally delegated by the people. That these powers are still delegated, he maintained by affirming the continuing and ever-new compact between the people and the system of rules they have set up.

The American and French revolutions marked a great progress in the war on evil government, and Paine was highly enthusiastic at one time about their immediate influence. He thought that they would establish principles of freedom, which, he said, can move from one country to another “where an army of soldiers cannot” and can “march on the horizon of the world” until they conquer. Nothing can stop their progress. The American Revolution, he glowingly remarked, “has contributed more to enlighten the world, and diffuse a spirit of freedom and liberality among mankind, than any human event (if this may be called one) that ever preceded it.” But he regarded the French Revolution as of even greater value in the betterment of the world because of France’s nearness to the other great nations of the globe. He wrote: “It is to the peculiar honor of France, that she now raises the standard of liberty for all nations; and in fighting her own battles, contends for the rights of all mankind.”

Paine’s theories of government and of natural rights led to a plan for a league of nations. This idea of the solidarity of peoples, according to Bury, was “an important element in the growth of the doctrine of Progress.” The Abbé de Saint-Pierre had proposed a universal league of nations in 1713, and by the latter half of the eighteenth century it must have been a topic of current discussion and interest. In 1782 in the Letter to the Abbé Raynal Paine compared the place of a nation in the family of nations to the place of an individual in one nation. He put it thus: “The circle of civiliza-

22 “Agrarian Justice,” Works, X, 34.
24 “Address to the People of France,” Works, VII, 267.
tion 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. For it is easy to see, that nations with regard to each other (notwithstanding the ideal civil law, which every one explains as it suits him) are like individuals in a state of nature. They are regulated by no fixed principle, governed by no compulsive law, and each does independently what it pleases or what it can. Just as individuals, then, in a state of nature, needing a certain restraint placed upon them to prevent their doing harm to their fellows, form a society for the common good of all, so do individual nations need to give up certain rights to a society for their common good. Paine here was simply applying his theories of government, expressed as far back as Common Sense, to nations instead of to individuals. The nation, without restraint, is compared to the individual in a state of nature.

Paine went on to consider the possibilities of progressing to the goal of a league of nations. If we had known the world in its state of barbarism, he argued, we might have failed utterly to see how it could have been given the form it now possesses. Since we have seen the accomplishment of this great feat, we should not doubt the accomplishment of a world nation. The wants of individuals in society have grown until they have become the wants of nations; and nations can satisfy these wants only by cooperating with other nations. The present condition of the world has changed the cast of the mind of man and he is now more able than ever to fit into a new and improved order of life.

One of the important results of a universal league of nations would be world peace, a goal which usually figures in the Utopia pictured by the believer in progress. Before international union can be achieved, monarchies, according to Paine, must give way to such improved systems of government as those instituted by the rising democracies of France and America. As to the future, Paine wrote that a European congress to support free government and bring about improved relationships between nations was "an event nearer probability than once were the revolutions and alliances of France and America."

26 Works, IV, 166.
28 "Rights of Man," Part 2, Works, VI, 211.
III

In Paine's time, revolutionary speculations on the political state of man were accompanied by speculations on the social and moral condition of the human race. If one believed that social evils were not the result of man's own limitations, but had their origin in ignorance and prejudices, then man's state could be improved by the diffusion of knowledge and the removal of prejudices. Paine held that prejudices were largely the result of evil governments, but ignorance, he thought, might be abolished by the future accomplishments of science.

With his age, Paine saw the vast possibilities of science in promoting the comfort and felicity of mankind. That he possessed wide capabilities for scientific research and invention is indicated by the success of his iron bridge, and it is to be lamented perhaps that he was drawn away from the study of science to the consideration of politics, as important as his achievements were in the latter.

Early in his career in America he expressed the hold that science had for him, and in his typically unrestricted enthusiasm envisioned a great development in the future. He thought it ridiculous to call sciences "exhausted subjects." The divine mechanism of nature (I am paraphrasing Paine) shows by contrast that the most refined inventions are still absurdly simple and there is immense room for development, which will surely come. Future ages may exceed the modern age almost as much as the modern age has exceeded the past. "Improvement and the world will expire together; and till that period arrives, we may plunder the mine, but can never exhaust it!" Here, in addition to predicting the continued progress of science, Paine showed that, unlike many of the primitivists, he held no brief for the theory that nature was decaying. To him the laws of nature were immutable, a belief necessary to the idea of progress.

Science was important to Paine not only in adding to the social and economic welfare of man but also in pointing the way to a true

29 Bury, *op. cit.*, 127.
31 Some French writer, when controversy over the relative merits of the ancients and moderns was in full swing, went so far as to say that the dogs in America no longer had the power to bark.
32 Bury, *op. cit.*, 66.
religion. Scientific principles were at the very root of Paine’s attitude toward religion, the old systems of which, he thought, must inevitably yield to the march of progress.

Soon after he had written *Common Sense*, he saw the probability of a revolution in the system of religion following closely after a revolution in the system of government. The old systems of government, with the “adulterous connection of church and state,” had effectually prevented discussion upon established creeds, and upon first principles of religion. But the way for discussion opened as new systems of government appeared. That being so, Paine declared: “Human invention and priestcraft would be detected: and man would return to the pure, unmixed and unadulterated belief of one God, and no more.”

Here, of course, is the idea that man had retrogressed in matters of religion, but as the emphasis is on the present and the future, there is no inconsistency with Paine’s belief in progress.

The close relationship between science and deism, the only religion conformable to Paine’s notions of science, are of course dwelt on fully in the *Age of Reason*. Paine wrote: “It is from the study of the true theology that all our knowledge of science is derived,” and “The Almighty lecturer, by displaying the principles of science in the structure of the universe, has invited man to study and to imitation. It is as if he had said to the inhabitants of this globe that we call ours, ‘I have made an earth for man to dwell upon, and I have rendered the starry heavens visible, to teach him science and the arts. He can now provide for his own comfort, and learn from my munificence to all, to be kind to each other.’”

As man breaks down the barriers of ignorance, Paine contended, he will become aware of the falsity of the Christian system and will discover the true theology. Speaking of the Christian system, he commented: “How different is this to the pure and simple profession of Deism! The true deist has but one Deity; and his religion consists in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in his works, and in endeavoring to imitate him in every thing moral, scientific, and mechanical.”

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Science, particularly astronomy, had made the Christian system ridiculous, Paine declared. It has taught us that there are many worlds and a "mighty ocean of space." "From whence then could arise," questioned Paine, "the solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on his protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple! And, on the other hand, are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a redeemer? In this case, the person who is irreverently called the Son of God, and sometimes God himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of death, with scarcely a momentary interval of life." 

Paine's scientific attitude of mind led him unwaveringly to what he considered the true theology—deism. In religion, as well as in government, science, commerce, etc., man was throwing off the shackles of ignorance, and a great indication to Paine that the world was progressing lay in the fact that more and more people were accepting deism. It is interesting that Paine considered deism as probably the height of perfection. "The only religion that has not been invented, and that has in it every evidence of divine originality, is pure and simple deism. It must have been the first and will probably be the last that man believes." 

IV

A discussion of Paine's ideas on progress could not entirely ignore the various reforms he proposed, such as extension of the suffrage, emancipation of slaves, poor relief systems of various kinds, an equitable tax system, and the granting of more rights to women. The

38 Conway, op. cit., IV, 73-74.
39 Ibid., 190. Paine had very little to say concerning literature and the arts. He often lumps in the words and arts in his discussion of the sciences, but his interest was in science, in the more useful aspects of knowledge. As to the progress of literature, he made one important claim: that he had brought political writing to a higher place than it had ever occupied before ("Rights of Man," Part II, Works, VII, 17). In "The American Crisis," No. 13, Works, III, 247, he wrote: "If, in the course of more than seven years, I have rendered her [America] any service, I have likewise added something to the reputation of literature, by freely and disinterestedly employing it in the great cause of mankind, and showing that there may be genius without prostitution."
various reforms in themselves are not important for the problem under discussion here: our problem is whether Paine believed that the world would eventually accept all the reforms he advocated. And the answer is that, though the immediate outlook might be rather dark, he always believed in the eventual triumph of an enlightened humanity.

Another point worthy of brief mention is Paine's attitude toward the concept generally referred to as the principle of posterity. This principle involving the moral obligation of making sacrifices for the sake of future ages is, Mr. Bury says, "a direct corollary of the idea of Progress." 40 Of the frequent references Paine makes to the responsibility of mankind to posterity, one of the most striking describes the case of a noted Tory at Amboy who, standing at the door of his inn with a child by his side, asked merely for peace in his day. 41 He should have said, Paine pointed out, "If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace." 42

Paine also applied the principle of posterity to hereditary succession and, of course, to the compact theory of government. Nations capable of reason, he asserted, "would revolt at the idea of consigning their children and their children's children, to the domination of persons hereafter to be born, who might for anything they, [nations] could foresee, turn out to be knaves or fools." 43

An idea inconsistent with the idea of progress is that of the doctrine of Providence. 44 Progress must be the result of man's innate abilities without any help from divinity. Although Paine mentioned Providence occasionally, it seems clear that he was in no sense concerned with a particular Providence which intercedes in the minor affairs of man's life; and by the time the Age of Reason was composed he obviously believed that the only working of Providence was through the immutable laws of nature and the order set up for the universe. In 1792 he wrote: "Man is ever a stranger to the ways by which Providence regulates the order of things. The interference

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41 See also the late Prime Minister Chamberlain's "peace in our time."
43 "Letter to the Addressers," Works, VII, 211. See also "Letter to the Abbé Raynal," Works, IV, 163.
44 Bury, op. cit., 73.
of foreign despots may serve to introduce into their own enslaved countries the principles they come to oppose. Liberty and equality are blessings too great to be the inheritance of France alone.”  

V

A careful consideration of Paine and the idea of progress seems to indicate a constantly-recurring basic idea: that the progress which he looks for can and will be achieved under an improved system of government (in other words, by a representative democracy). Humanitarianism may provide the motive, but a democratic government is the principal means by which reforms will be achieved. Commerce will play its part, science will help much, and a new religion will ultimately be adopted, but the reiterated emphasis is always upon the rôle of government. Paine did not maintain that man is naturally good, but he did hold that the interest of the majority tends toward the good rather than toward the bad. Under monarchical governments the majority cannot express itself and, therefore, cannot follow its best interests as it can under a representative government.

Paine’s writings show a definite development of political thought. When he wrote “Government is the badge of lost innocence,” he went along with the prevailing idea of the English thinkers, who, with Locke, thought that the function of government was principally negative. Later he came into contact with and was influenced by French thought, and so, in Agrarian Justice for instance, he looked upon government as a positive means of bettering society. Mr. Bury sums up the French thought as follows: “Most of the French theorists believed in the possibility of moulding society indefinitely by political action, and rested their hopes for the future not only on the achievements of science, but on the enlightened activity of governments.”

Frequently Paine is referred to as a popularizer of prevailing ideas. And indeed most, if not all, of his ideas were well-established

45 “Address to the People of France,” Works, VII, 269.
46 Bury, op. cit., 218.
47 Ibid., 218.
48 Whitney, op. cit., 207.
when he wrote: his contribution was to give force rather than
direction to new principles. This, perhaps, is merely another way of
saying that he was a popularizer. Certainly most of his beliefs were
held by others. For example, Voltaire believed, as did Paine, “that
wars and religions have been the great obstacles to the progress of
humanity, and that if they were abolished, with the prejudices which
gengender them, the world would rapidly improve.” \(^49\) Turgot con-
sidered Christianity a hindrance or an enemy to civilization, \(^50\) as
did D’Holbach, who thought that man was born neither good nor
bad. \(^51\) Most amazing is the likeness between the ideas of Paine and
those of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, who proposed a universal league
of nations; wanted to form a Political Academy; thought that
progress was retarded by wars, superstition, and the jealousy of
rulers fearing that progress in the science of politics would be
dangerous to themselves; looked upon the Middle Ages as a period
of retrogression; believed that there were no irremovable obstacles
to man’s eventual perfect happiness if governments were sufficiently
enlightened; who, unlike Voltaire but like Paine, believed in im-
mortality of the soul, in heaven or hell; and who was both a
humanitarian in advance of his age and a deist. \(^52\)

The similarity between Paine’s ideas and those of the Abbé de
Saint-Pierre presents a problem which lies outside the scope of the
present study, however. To recapitulate briefly the arguments ad-
vanced in this paper, Paine is shown, when his whole thought is
carefully analyzed, to have no important primitivistic concepts. By
accepting the advanced social, scientific, and political theory of the
time, and being stimulated by his humanitarianism and the emotions
aroused by the two great revolutions, he was wholeheartedly a be-
liever in the idea of progress.

\(\textit{Purdue University} \quad \text{V. E. Gibbens}\)

\(^{49}\) Bury, \textit{op. cit.}, 149.

\(^{50}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 157.

\(^{51}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 169.

\(^{52}\) Bury, \textit{op. cit.}, 129-143. Naturally the question arises as to how well Paine knew
the works of Saint-Pierre. Both writers allude to the scheme of Henry IV for a league
of nations. Of course, Paine had referred to Henry IV in an early paper on dueling,
probably before he had had an opportunity to read Saint-Pierre. In his reference to
the plan of Henry IV, on the other hand, he hinted that his information was at
second-hand from the French writers.