

THE JOURNAL
of
RADICAL HISTORY
of the
THOMAS PAINE SOCIETY



Volume 12, Number 4, 2015

JOURNAL OF RADICAL HISTORY

Volume 12. Number 4. 2015

ISSN 0040 813

Published by the
Thomas Paine Society

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THOMAS PAINE, OUR CONTEMPORARY

Chris Hedges



Thomas Paine is America's one great revolutionary theorist. We have produced a slew of admirable anarchists—Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Dorothy Day and Noam Chomsky—and radical leaders have arisen out of oppressed groups—Sitting Bull, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Cornel West and bell hooks—but we don't have a tradition of revolutionists. This makes Paine unique.

Paine's brilliance as a writer—his essay *Common Sense* is one of the finest pieces of rhetorical writing in the English language—is matched by his clear and unsentimental understanding of British imperial power. No revolutionist can challenge power if he or she does not grasp how power works. This makes Sheldon Wolin's book *Democracy Incorporated* and his concept of "inverted totalitarianism" as important to us today as Paine's writings on the nature of the British monarchy were in 1776.

There were numerous American leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, who hoped to work out an accommodation with the British crown to keep America a British colony, just as many now believe they can work through traditional mechanisms of power, including electoral politics and the judicial system, to

reform corporate power. Paine, partly because he did not come to America from England until he was 37, understood that the British crown had no interest in accommodation; today, the corporate state similarly has no interest in granting any concessions. It became Paine's job to explain to his American audience the reality of British power and what effective resistance would entail. Paine knew that the British monarchy, which wielded the global imperial power that American wields today, was blinded by its hubris and military prowess. It had lost the ability to listen and as a result had lost the ability to make rational choices. The inhabitants of New York would discover this when British warships and mercenary troops besieged the city.

Paine created a new political language. He wrote in crystalline prose. *Common Sense* was read by hundreds of thousands. It was the first political essay in Enlightenment Europe to call for a separation between *civil society* and *the state*, terms that many writers had considered interchangeable. Civil society, Paine argued, must always act as a counterweight against the state in a democracy. Power, he warned, even in a democracy, carries within it the seeds of tyranny.

Paine, as George Orwell and James Baldwin did later, used his pen as a weapon. It was a weapon deeply feared by the monarchies in Europe, as well as the Jacobins in France, who imprisoned Paine and planned to execute him for denouncing the Reign of Terror. He spoke an undeniable truth. He called his readers to act upon that truth. "My motive and object in all my political works, beginning with *Common Sense*," Paine remembered in 1806, "... have been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government, and enable him to be free."

"Where liberty is, there is my country," Benjamin Franklin once said to Paine. "Where liberty is not, there is my country," Paine replied. For Paine, the role of a citizen extended beyond national borders. The fight of those living under any system of tyranny was his fight. "When it shall be said in any country in the world 'My poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am a friend of happiness': when these things can be said," Paine wrote, "then may that country boast of its constitution and its government."

The key to social change, as Eric Foner pointed out in *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, is "a change in the nature of language itself, both in the emergence of new words and in old words taking on new meanings." The call for revolution that was advanced by Paine, as by writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, came through the new language of secular rationalism, rather than

the older language of traditional religion. But Paine, unlike Rousseau and other philosophers, wrote in the everyday language of working people. He drew from their experiences. And he was the first writer to extend political debate beyond the refined salons to the taverns. He hated the erudite, florid prose of philosophers such as Edmund Burke, calling that type of philosophical and academic language "Bastilles of the word." He saw liberty as being intimately connected with language. And he knew that those who seek to monopolize power always retreat into arcane language that is inaccessible to the masses. Paine's clarity will have to be replicated. We too will have to invent a new language. We will have to articulate our reality through communitarianism in an age of diminishing resources rather than the language of capitalism. And we will have to do this in a form that is accessible. Foner cites this as one of Paine's most important achievements:

Paine was one of the creators of this secular language of revolution, a language in which timeless discontents, millennial aspirations and popular traditions were expressed in a strikingly new vocabulary. The very slogans and rallying cries we associate with the revolutions of the late eighteenth century come from Paine's writings: the "rights of man," the "age of reason," the "age of revolution" and the "times that try men's souls." Paine helped to transform the meaning of the key words of political discourse. In *Common Sense* he was among the first writers to use "republic" in a positive rather than derogatory sense; in *The Rights of Man* he abandoned the old classical definition of "democracy," as a state where each citizen participated directly in government, and created its far broader, far more favourable modern meaning. Even the word "revolution" was transformed in his writing, from a term derived from the motion of planets and implying a cyclical view of history to one signifying vast and irreversible social and political change.

Paine also understood what despotic regimes do to the soul. Despotic regimes—and here the corporate state serves as a contemporary example—make war on reason and rational thought. They circumscribe free speech and free assembly. They marginalize and silence critics. They make all institutions subservient to despotism, or in our case corporate power. They employ relentless propaganda to rob people of the language to describe their daily reality. They render them politically alienated. Those who live under despotic regimes, Paine noted, finally lose the ability to communicate their most basic concerns and grievances. And this suppression, Paine understood, has consequences. "Let men communicate their thoughts with freedom," Paine wrote, "and their indignation fly off like a fire spread on the surface; like gunpowder scattered, they kindle, they communicate; but the explosion is neither loud nor dangerous—keep them under restraint, it is subterranean fire, whose agitation is unseen till it bursts into earthquake or volcano." Finally, Paine understood that war is always the preferred activity of despotic states, for, as he wrote, war is essentially "the art of conquering at home."

Paine, who refused to profit off his writings, suffered for his courage. When he returned to England, where he wrote "The Rights of Man," he was persecuted, as he would later be persecuted in France and in America upon his final return. John Keane in his biography *Tom Paine: A Political Life* describes some of what Paine endured as a radical in late 18th century England. Government spies tailed him constantly on London's streets, sending back a stream of reports to the Home Secretary's office. Those parts of the press that functioned as government mouthpieces pelted him with abuse. "It is earnestly recommended to Mad Tom," snarled the *Times*, "that he should embark for France, and there be naturalized into the regular confusion of a democracy." Broadsheets containing "intercepted correspondence from Satan to Citizen Paine" pictured him as a three-hearted, fire-breathing monster, named "Tom Stich." Open letters, often identically worded but signed with different pen names, were circulated through taverns and alehouses. "Brother Weavers and Artificers," thundered "a gentleman" to the inhabitants of Manchester and Salford, "Do not let us be humbugged by Mr. Paine, who tells us a great many Truths, in his book, in order to shove off his Lies." Dozens of sermons and satires directed at Paine were published, many of them written anonymously for commoners by upper-class foes masquerading as commoners.

The power of Paine, as in the case of Orwell or Baldwin, was that he refused to be anyone's propagandist. He may have embraced the American Revolution, as he embraced the French Revolution, but he was a fierce abolitionist and a foe of the use of terror as a political tool, a stance for which he was eventually imprisoned in revolutionary France. He asked the American revolutionaries "with what consistency, or decency" they "could complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousand in slavery." He stood up in the National Convention in France, where he was one of two foreigners allowed to be elected and sit as a delegate, to denounce the calls in the chamber to execute the king, Louis XVI. "He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression," Paine said. "For if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself." Unchecked legislatures, he warned, could be as despotic as unchecked monarchs. He hated the pomp and arrogance of power and privilege, retaining his loyalty to the working class in which he was raised. "High sounding names" like My Lord, he wrote, serve only to "overawe the superstitious vulgar" and make them "admire in the great, the vices they would honestly condemn in themselves." He ridiculed the divine right of kings. The British monarchy, which traced itself back seven centuries to William the Conqueror, had, he wrote, been founded by "a French bastard landing with armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives." And he detested the superstition and power of religious dogma, equating Christian

belief with Greek mythology. "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit," he wrote. Paine posited that the "virtuous people" would smash the windows of the Christian God if he lived on earth.

His unrelenting commitment to truth and justice, along with his eternal rebelliousness, saw him later vilified by the leaders of the new American republic, who had no interest in the egalitarian society championed by Paine. Paine attacked former revolutionaries such as George Washington in the United States and Maximilien Robespierre in France who abused power in the name of "the people." He was driven out of England by the government of William Pitt and then, after nearly a year in prison, was ousted from Jacobin France. He was, by that time, an old man, and even his former champions, in well-orchestrated smear campaigns, routinely denounced him for his religious and political radicalism. The popular press in America dismissed him as "the drunken infidel." But Paine never veered from the proposition that liberty meant the liberty to speak the truth even if no one wanted to hear it. He died, largely forgotten, a pauper in New York City. Six people went to his funeral. Two of them were black.

Originally published by Popular Resistance (www.popularresistance.org)

CHARLES BRADLAUGH AND JOHN DE MORGAN, RIVALRY REPUBLICANISM AND RIOTS

Terry Liddle

(A lecture given following the 2010 AGM
of the Freethought History Research Group)

Charles Bradlaugh is quite well known beyond the ranks of Secularists. He founded the National Secular Society in 1866 and there is a statue of him in Northampton, which he represented in Parliament. And a new biography of him by Byan Niblett was published in January.

Nowadays, John De Morgan is hardly known even amongst radical historians, but in the 1870s his name was a household word. It was alleged that in reality he was a Belfast barber named Kelly. But his claim to have been educated in all the principle academies, and his job as a teacher of elocution, oratory and advanced English imply otherwise. So, too, does a glance at his publication *De Morgan's Monthly*. In articles on politics, religion and social issues in Vol.1, number 2 he quotes Demosthenes, Pythagoras, Aesop, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Luther, Wesley, Caesar, Euclid and Homer. This places him far above the educational attainments of the average Victorian tradesman, however among some shop keepers and artisans, particularly those of a radical inclination, there was a tremendous thirst for knowledge, which the workingmen's clubs of the day tried to cater for.

He started out as a boy preacher advocating the joys of temperance, but by the mid-1860s he had become a sceptic. In 1870 he was publicly supporting a strike of foundry workers and in 1872 together with three others he formed the Cork branch of the International Working Men's Association – the First International. Among the coachbuilders of cork, who were fighting for a nine hour day, it found a receptive audience. De Morgan was elected secretary and by March 1872 it claimed a membership of five hundred. However, it was not unopposed, and from the pulpit of Saints Peter and Paul Roman Catholic church canon Maguire thundered that the International were a bunch of murders, who would put priests up against the wall and shoot them. Good

Catholics were urged to crush its machinations. A meeting attacking the International ended in a fight. The internationalists captured the stage and the meeting was abandoned.

Two armed constables of the Royal Irish Constabulary were stationed outside De Morgan's home. This increased to four after dark and the police visited the employers of members of the International. Catholic and Protestant clergy united to denounce them as the spawn of Hell. De Morgan lost many of his pupils and claims he was starved out of Cork.

He arrived in Huddersfield in July 1872 where he used his oratorical skills, being described as having a wonderful tongue and speaking with florid eloquence, to lecture on subjects ranging from the poetry of love to disestablishment of the Irish Church. He drew up a lecture programme which he sent for publication to Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. Wary of infiltrators and assuming that publication would imply a measure of endorsement, Bradlaugh asked De Morgan to give details of his antecedents. De Morgan provided them. "If you are loyal, you can count of my aid to push you on," said Bradlaugh.

The fall of Napoleon III in France and the Paris Commune had revived a flagging British republicanism. From Aberdeen to Taunton some eighty Republican Clubs were formed. In Norwich the Secularist Robert Cooper tried to form a Republican Party.

De Morgan became the secretary of a committee of Yorkshire Republican Clubs. A meeting of these resolved that a National Conference be called in Sheffield. Despite misgivings from the London Republicans led by Bradlaugh, the programme for the Sheffield Conference was published in the *International Herald* and *Reynold's Newspaper*. De Morgan was one of the signatories to the programme which was addressed to "Citizen Brothers" and called for a government based on the rights of man. When the conference met, 16 clubs were represented, it resolved to call itself the National Republican Brotherhood, and stood for adult suffrage, a pure ballot, equal electoral districts, no state church, free secular education, nationalization of the land, repeal of the game-laws, currency reform, shorter parliaments, payment of members and the establishment by legal means of a Republican form of government. De Morgan was elected secretary.

De Morgan was greatly influenced by the social republican Thomas Smith who became treasurer of the NRB. In his pamphlet *Letters On The Commune*, published by the Nottingham branch of the IWMA in 1872, Smith outlined the principles of the social revolution: the emancipation of the conscience, the emancipation of man – the abolition of serfdom and the equality of all before the law, the emancipation of women, the emancipation of the land-the right of the people to the soil, universal education, getting rid of war, the destruction of all privileged castes and the domination of class over class.

Smith's influence can be seen in an article published in the September 1876 issue of *De Morgan's Monthly* in which he stated: "Rise ye, then, as one man, determined to conquer or die. We have a message of peace or war. Peace, if our rulers are wise. But we cannot await the revolution, if the people are to starve, that princes, aristocrats, and capitalists may revel in luxury."

De Morgan defined his own Republicanism in an article in his *De Morgan's Monthly* in September 1876. He wrote: "I take it that Republicanism can be summed up in a sentence, viz that intellectual ability, ability in conjunction with moral conduct, or moral conduct alone, ought to receive the prizes of life, and no other possessions should be regarded meritorious In practice, an entire reconstruction of society...the undeserving rich would become poor and the undeserving poor comparatively rich."

Among the members of the Brotherhood's Council was William Harrison Riley, an O'Brienite and Manchester clothing worker, he was the publisher of the *International Herald*, the organ of the International's British section

Bradlaugh, who refused to join the Brotherhood's Council, branded it as a treasonable conspiracy, the Brotherhood had adopted James Linton's green-white-blue Republican flag, and he attacked De Morgan for his reckless language, accusing him of absconding with the funds of a Manchester Temperance society. Bradlaugh and his supporters, including GW Foote, convened a meeting in Birmingham to form a rival National Republican League. Bradlaugh attacked the landed aristocracy in his *The Land, The People and The Coming Struggle*, advocating the break up of their estates. He followed this with his *Impeachment of the House of Brunswick*, Victoria, he wrote, "...is enormously rich... and grows

richer daily. " He concluded : "I loath these small breast-bestarred German wanders whose sole merit is their loving hatred for one another. In their own land they vegetate and wither unnoticed. Here we pay them highly to marry and perpetuate a pauper race. If they do nothing they are good. If they do ill, loyalty gilds the vice till it looks like virtue."

In 1872 De Morgan visited striking weavers in Barnsley and offered to organize a dramatic benefit to boost their funds.

To complicate matters, there was a third Republican organisation. Over three nights the Eleusis Club in Chelsea had held a conference to form a Universal Republican League. The remarkable Dan Chatterton was a member of this group. He advocated Victoria should be redeployed as a washerwoman and in an open letter to the Prince of Wales proclaimed: "...the revolution of the belly without brains, a revolution that will sweep you, Prince, and the entire gang of royal lurchers into the ranks of labour or off the face of the earth, like the vermin you are."

As Republicanism declined as an organised political force, its tradition was taken on by the numerous clubs which catered for the recreational, educational and political needs of working men. These clubs secured the election to the Vice-Presidency of the Club and Institute Union of Charles Bradlaugh. Bradlaugh in turned unfurled the banner of the United Radical Club with its symbol of Liberty trampling on a prostrate despotism, with its broken shackles and its minions , priestcraft and despotism. The Clubs opposed the Tory government's support for Turkey in its war on Bulgaria, supported Home Rule for Ireland, attacked Royal grants and advocated abolition of the House of Lords. At the time of Victoria's jubilee, the Clubs held lectures under the title *The Queen's Jubilee, or Fifty Years of Flunkysism; and what it has Cost the People.*

When the radical poet John Leno, a Chartist and Internationalist who lived long enough to contribute to the Socialist League's *Commonweal*, who often recited in the Clubs and whose verse was set to music; was old and ill, the Clubs collected enough money to grant him five shillings (25p) a week.

As the fortunes of Republicanism waned, De Morgan became secretary of a short-lived Working Men's Parliamentary

Association. Republicanism was not his only political interest. He was an anti-vaccinationist and a supporter of the Tichborne Claimant. The Claimant, Arthur Orton, was a semi-literate failed butcher and horse breaker from Australia. His supporters believed his case to be an example of the calumny of the ruling class and a conspiracy to prevent a manual labourer from claiming his birthright. Prevented from speaking on behalf of the claimant on Wimbledon Common De Morgan became an enthusiastic supporter of Commons rights. It was another supporter of the Claimant, the Plumstead lawyer Edward Kimber, who brought De Morgan to Plumstead where the Common was threatened with enclosure. The Radical MP and apostate Republican Charles Dilke had drawn attention to this in Parliament.

As London expanded the remaining open spaces were threatened with enclosure. The radicals of the day saw them as the recreation grounds of the people, a welcome escape from the dirty crowded slums such as Hog Lane in Woolwich. They were also sites for open air meetings. The Greenwich and Deptford Secular Society, in which Robert Forder was a leading figure, held meetings on nearby Blackheath. Chartist meetings had been held there in the 1840s, and on May 28 1870 the Greenwich Advanced Liberal Association, in which Forder was also involved, held a meeting to oppose the enclosure of Blackheath. A Republican meeting was held there on June 4, 1871.

De Morgan had spoken to a crowd of 40,000 on Hackney Downs and when prevented from speaking on Wimbledon Common he had defended himself in the following court case. He formed the Commons Protection League which established a branch in Plumstead in early 1876 and set about fund raising and organizing large outdoor meetings. On June 2, 1876 a demonstration was held through the chief streets of Woolwich and Plumstead. On July 1, a crowd of 2,000 assembled in Beresford Square, Woolwich with the aim of marching on Plumstead Common and removing the fences which had enclosed part of it. Having torn down the fences, the crowd departed via Burrage Road singing *Rule Britannia*. The following day a confrontation took place between demonstrators attempting to destroy the repaired fencing and the police who were pelted with stones.

The next day the police were again pelted. The furze was set on fire with broken fence posts and fire fighters who attempted to

extinguish it were also pelted. The police turned a fire hose on the demonstrators. There were complaints of police violence against "respectable working men" On July 5 a crowd gathered in Beresford Square to hear Commons Protection League speakers orate from the balcony of the *Ordinance Arms* public house. De Morgan stated he had received two summonses for his part in the demonstrations. On July 3 Thomas Hughes a local businessman and Tory had attended Woolwich Police Court and taken out subpoenas against De Morgan and others for maliciously destroying fences on Plumstead Common.

The trial took place in Maidstone In October, the defendants being De Morgan, Robert Forder, an active Secularist, James Fitzgerald and Francis White. Bail had been set at £100 for De Morgan and £50 for the others. De Morgan was defended by Kimber and Forder defended himself. 150 people had travelled to Maidstone and marched to the court in support of the accused. The judge was J. G Talbot, a Tory MP. Hughes had been his election agent. Among the defence witnesses were Robert Martin, treasurer of the Forder Defence Fund (this had raised £46) and Victor Le Lubez of the Greenwich and Deptford Secular Society of which Forder was a leading member.

The jury took just 15 minutes to reach its verdict. De Morgan being found guilty of malicious injury and incitement to riot amid hisses and cheers from the courtroom. The others were acquitted. De Morgan was imprisoned for a month with a fine of £50 or another month. As De Morgan was taken to prison the others returned to Woolwich where they were met by a crowd of 3,000 which escorted them to the *Ordinance Arms*.

In prison De Morgan was treated as a first class misdemeanant. He could keep his own clothes, have visitors and was allowed writing material. This enabled him to write a pamphlet about his imprisonment. On November 5 the Kent County authorities received a telegram from the Home Secretary cancelling the fine. This was followed by another telegram ordering his immediate release.

On his release he returned to Woolwich where he spoke at the *Ordinance Arms* and the *Queen's Arms* in Plumstead and took part in a 20,000 strong demonstration, which grew quickly to 40,000, to celebrate Guy Fawkes Day. Their opponents, Hughes the

businessman and Vincent the journalist and prosecution witness, were burned in effigy on the Common.

A local school board election meeting called by candidates allied to Hughes had to be abandoned, and two members of the Commons Protection League stood for election to the school board. When three workers from Woolwich Arsenal launched a suit to prevent military access to the Common their case was dismissed and costs awarded against them. The Commons Protection League issued a challenge to the authorities to attend a meeting in Beresford Square and arrest the men. The Attorney General announced that he would consent to have the writs put aside.

There was a falling out between De Morgan and Forder, which ended in a highly disorderly meeting in a Plumstead pub. This may have been because Bradlaugh had organized a fund to defray Forder's costs while De Morgan would not have seen a penny.

Throughout 1877 the struggle on the Common continued with De Morgan and his followers attempting to destroy a sandpit which had been dug there. An injunction was taken out against him and five others. The Master of the Rolls warned them that if the injunctions were broken they would soon not be out of prison. De Morgan turned his attention to struggles elsewhere.

The most notable was a Selston in Nottinghamshire which ended in a riot. De Morgan was imprisoned for contempt. In 1880 a biography of him appeared: *Sketch of the Life and Labour of John De Morgan, Orator, Elocutionist and Tribune of the People* written by Sylvester St Claire. It was published in Leeds where he had been elected a member of the School Board. He tried to secure the Liberal nomination for the parliamentary seat. When failing to get this, he emigrated to America, where he worked as an agent for the Texas Emigration Union and as a tax collector on Statton Island. He became a short story writer and then a novelist, although he continued to write on such political topics as Irish Home Rule. It was a strange end for a man who had played such a leading role in the Radical politics of the 1870s.

Bradlaugh's story is well known. His publication of the influential weekly the *National Reformer*, his relationship with Annie Besant, their prosecution for publishing a pamphlet on birth control, his

conflict with Edward Aveling, his struggle to be elected MP for Northampton, his refusal to take a religious oath of loyalty to Queen Victoria, his opposition to Socialism and his controversy with Karl Marx are the stuff of radical history, a history which deserves to be far better known.



Terry Liddle

This article is published in memory of the late Terry Liddle,

A SHORT HISTORY OF FREETHOUGHT IN GERMANY(1881-1949)

Coralie Charry

When one talks of German Freethought, one thinks of grand figures like Wilhelm Liebknecht, the only member of the Reichstag who, with August Bebel, protested together against the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. Or again of Ludwig Buchner, the great scientific materialist, author of *Force and Matter*. If the grand figures of German Freethought are well known, with the exception of Max Sievers, one cannot say the same of its organisations.

The traditions and history of German Freethought are very similar to those of France, despite the obvious differences in organisation. It was on April 10, 1881 that there was born the first German Freethought organisation, the Deutsche Freidenker Bund in Frankfurt On Main . It was at the same time an association for mutual aid and popular education and a dissident political organisation. Its foundation took place in the context of the development of popular universities and associations for the education of German workers.. The Freethinkers took part in the foundation of Urania, a society for making scientific knowledge available to all, and particularly in the editions of *Urania-Freethinker* in Jena in 1924.

Meanwhile, German Freethought split irreversibly. The desire of many workers not to be dominated by bourgeois Freethinkers and not to be restricted in the leadership and activities of Freethought associations necessitated the foundation of the Zentralverband der Freidenker. If one can say that in France organised Freethought resulted from a meeting of the workers' movement and the bourgeois republican movement, in Germany it resulted without doubt from the split of working class Freethinkers with bourgeois Freethinkers. This explains why French Freethought fought vigorously to maintain its independence, while the German Freethinkers voluntarily integrated themselves into the workers' party.

At the start of the 20th century the proletarian Freethought movement arose with the foundation in 1908 of the Zentralverband der Friedenker, soon renamed the Zentralverband der

Proletarianischen Freidenker. Bourgeois Freethought had no concept of being linked with a class or a particular political party. On the other hand, proletarian Freethought placed its anticlerical and antireligious struggle within the context of class politics. Its circle of influence was confined to working class organisations and was dependent on The Social-Democratic Party (SDP). It distinguished itself by its ideological struggle against the bourgeoisie and their political atheism. Werner Conze described proletarian Freethought as a "sect" in pre-war Social Democracy. In effect, because of its relationship with bourgeois Freethought it had adopted a very political aspect to its struggle, in this it experienced the opposition of the great majority of German Social Democrats. This caused it to uselessly deploy its forces in a particular philosophical struggle.

The indifference of the Party's militants did not stop the Zdf/ZpFD from considering itself the third force of the movement after the trade unions and the party. In effect the ideological and philosophical vanguard of the proletariat. It sought to attack bourgeois society itself with the aid of the party.

These tensions rapidly became conflicting points of view. Despite the threat of Menke who proclaimed that the party could not put philosophical demands in its programme, the movement for intellectual liberty forgot to its cost to maintain Social Democracy's leading relationship with the independent initiatives of the ZpFD. According to the rules, the ZpFD acted on the basis of the modern workers' movement, a formula vaguely interpreted to mean collaboration between the unions and the party and prevented the involvement of the new anarchist federation and other unorganised radicals.

In creating profound divisions in the German workers' movement, the First World War damaged the ZpDF in the short term. For a while, the divisions in the workers' party created in the ZpDF an illusion of power, the cadres of the movement carrying on their activities autonomously. The ZpDF considered itself the organisation which had preserved intact the unity of the German working class, despite the conflicts and the splits in the SPD. In effect, it was more attractive to the left of Social Democracy than the Communists. This reinforced its view of being the ideological corrective for the workers' organisations, the leading force capable of preserving the unity in struggle of the working class.

The ZpFD could not prevent the conflict between the SPD and the newborn Communist Party (KPD) breaking out in its ranks. The second round of Presidential elections in 1925 put to the acid test the independence of the ZpDF and destroyed the illusion of the neutrality of the objectives of Freethought in relationship to the parties.

The polemic of Anna and Walter Linderman against the doctrine of the three cornerstones and for the unity of the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party reduced to nothing the idea that there had been an ongoing unity of Freethinkers since 1908. The ZpFD had come to recognise the primacy of the KPD in the class struggle and inter-organisational relationships, that is to say, it renounced its autonomy to subordinate its activities to the politics of the KPD, its self subordinated by the troika of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin and then of Stalin alone. The Lindermans paved the way for a politicisation of the Freethinkers Federation which it was impossible to resist.

The KPD was more interested in annexing the ZpFD than the Social Democrats. In effect, while it had no love for proletarian Freethought, it understood the power of mobilising a satellite in its service. The Freethinkers of the ZpDF took part in dismantling the long term objectives of their federation, together with other cultural organisations adhering to the KPD.

The proletarian Freethought movement appeared at the start of the century and developed under the Weimar Republic and was a central part of the working class cultural movement. The proletarian Freethought movement occupied an important role in insisting on the importance of civil educational reform in the workers' movement. For its part, the SPD at its Kiel congress in 1927 adopted as its official policy of the separation of the struggle for socialism from questions of the origins of the world. The split between the SPD and Freethought was complete.

Paradoxically, the disappearance of the ZpFD as an autonomous organisation and the division in the workers' parties led to a revival of Freethought in Germany. In the political scene in Germany in the 1920s this led to the strengthening of the organisation known as the Deutsche Feidenker-Verband.

At its founding in 1905 it was no more than a group of Berlin Freethinkers campaigning for incineration. Until 1918, it remained a local body presenting an anticlerical case for the incineration of its members, without any aim of advocating Freethought ideas. It developed throughout Germany as the Verein der Freidenker für Feuerbestattung or VFF but continuing to make the case for incineration, without out any relationship with Freethought in its rules, without an atheist programme or politics until the 1920s.

It was impossible to foresee the exceptional destiny of this little workers' organisation. On October 1, 1922 the Communist Max Sievers¹ became the director of the VFF. Little by little he built a specific Freethought organisation. Under the Weimar Republic, the Freethinkers demanded separation of church and state, decriminalisation of abortion and the secularisation of education with the abolition of scholastic privileges for the religious.

At the end of 1925 appeared *Der Freidenker*, the organ of the VFF. In the first article which he published in it, Sievers gave to this new Freethought a theoretical foundation.² "More than one so-called Freethinker has come into the circle of Freethinkers to find his inspiration there and to pass his leisure time. But the Freethinker should only use his understanding and knowledge as weapons in the fight to free humanity from intellectual servitude. Being a Freethinker means being a fighter."

Several things distinguished this proletarian orientation. Above all if it was politicised under the influence of Sievers, it did so independently of the KPD as well as the SPD, which saw it as nothing more than a reservoir of voters. Sievers affirmed that the Freethought movement could not be an ersatz political movement. The VFF was not politically organised atheism but an organisation of Freethought. Finally, unlike the ZpDF, it would not make the error of letting itself be taken over. In reaction to efforts to submit it to the interests of the SPD, the VFF developed the aspiration to be recognised in its own right, that is to say the right of Freethought to constitute an independent organisation and not be incorporated into the SPD. This break with the tradition of proletarian Freethought was its safeguard.

In 1927, Sievers, who had left the Stalinist KPD for the SDP, was elected president of the VFF. In 1930, the organisation adopted the name Deutscher Freidenker-Verband which reflected its new

position in the Freethought movement. In this period the DFV developed at a giddy speed. Its attraction is explained by its having all the advantageous conditions for its adherents to benefit from a pledge. The DFV had inherited from the VFF its statute of trust, this was a social assurance which attracted more and more workers.

The new orientation of the DFV favoured a rapprochement with the Gemeinschaft Proletrischer Freidenker, the new name for the ZpFD, which led to a fusion. It was distinguished from its predecessor by its political independence and its very open character, yet the difference between the two movements should not be exaggerated. In his 1925 article, Max Sievers developed the idea of a Freethought which ensured the unity of the working class. He deplored the splits and sought rapprochement between the workers' parties. He also developed the idea of the corrective ideological role of Freethought. He interpreted the division of the workers' parties as the consequence of a failure of instruction in theoretical work of their militants. He stated that the principle task of Freethought was to remedy this failure.

If it did not declare itself proletarian, the DVF was none the less socialist and working class. German Freethought had taken on an irreversible class nature. The DFV took on the best traditions of the ZpFD, before its annexation by the KPD, and also took on the position towards the parties which its predecessor had had at the beginning of the 1920s.

When Sievers raised the role in enlightening the conscience of the proletariat that Freethought could play, he presented it as the incontestable ideological vanguard, which in all intellectual working class questions was far removed from the doctrine of the three pillars. With this difference, the DVF became a truly formidable force. In 1929 it had 500,000 members, 230,000 in Berlin and was continuing to grow. On the eve of the Nazi seizure of power it had more than 600,000 members.

Its mass organisational character and its rapid growth can explain its role, other than the advantages of its social pledge, as a movement of workers faced by their enemies, a role the DFV could effectively play, while the workers' parties were incapable of uniting to counter the Nazi menace. Max Sievers was a partisan of workers' unity against fascism and a severe critic of the politics of

confrontation between the KPD and the SDP, the cause of the German workers' defeat.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933 they immediately banned the *Deutsche Freidenker-Verband*. Max Sievers was arrested on February 27 in connection with the Reichstag fire, but was released in April. He was allowed to leave for Brussels. On August 23 he was deprived of his German nationality by the Nazi government along with others such as Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann.

He immediately returned to the struggle against the tyrannical power in Germany. He continued to publish *Der Freidenker*, in the Saar until the Nazi victory in the referendum in 1935. He then published the *Sievers Korrespondenz* in Belgium. He worked with his comrades to organise the resistance in the German emigration and create a federal movement. To this end he founded in 1937 a weekly journal *Freies Deutschland* subtitled *Organ des deutschen Opposition*. Around this journal arose a federal movement which could be called the Free Germany Movement, the leading element was composed of the Freethinkers of the DVF. Thus the resistance movement was the continuation of German Freethought in exile and underground.

Max Sievers was murdered by the Nazis in 1944. It was not until 1949 the military authorities occupying Germany allowed the DFV to reform.

Endnotes

1. Born in 1887 into a Berlin working class family, Max Sievers was wounded in the First World War. He joined the Independent Social Democratic Party and edited *Arbeiter-Rats*. In 1920 he joined the KPD and was a secretary at its headquarters. Disapproving of the attempted coup of the March Action he joined the *Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*. When this disintegrated he rejoined the KPD. In 1939 he attempted to emigrate to the USA but being refused a visa, he returned to Belgium. He was arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo and tried for treason. He was beheaded in Brandenburg prison in January, 1944.

2. Republished in French in *L'Idee Libre* No. 284.

Translated by Terry Liddle

THE THETFORD PAINE - according to Albert Meltzer

In No. 2, 2014, of the *Journal of Radical History* we published two articles on Joseph Lewis, who gave the statue of Thomas Paine to Thetford in 1964. Since then I have come across Albert Meltzer's recollection of the unveiling of the statue in the town on June the 7th, 1964, which he states he attended. Meltzer (1920-1996) was a well-known British anarchist. The piece comes from chapter eight of his autobiography, *I Could'n Paint Golden Angels* (AK Press, 1996). The article was sent to the editor some years ago by the late Terry Liddle with the suggestion that the TPS should comment on it. Having now acquired his copy of Meltzer's book, I found the source. I was tempted to write a piece refuting many of the errors in Meltzer's recollection, not least that Lewis had converted, but rather than so I request members and readers to comment. One fact he gets approximately correct is the rain, as having myself been present at the unveiling, I would not describe it as being as bad as Meltzer recalled.

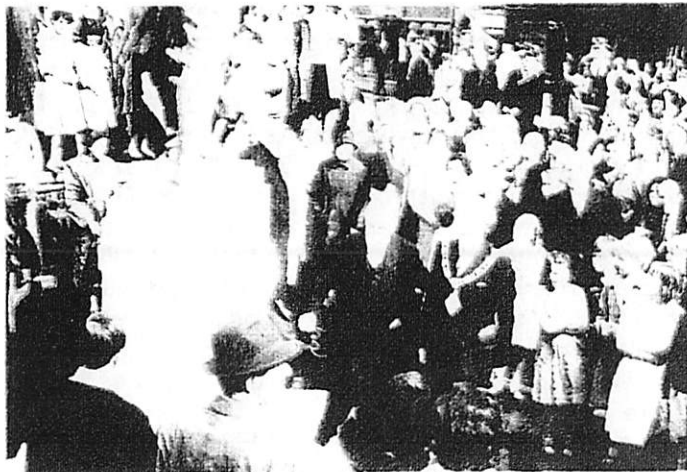
Blasphemy and treason, somewhat belatedly, beset my official invitation from the Mayor of Thetford, Councillor Richard Easten to attend the unveiling of the statue of Thomas Paine, in the presence of the French and American ambassadors. I am sure Cllr. Easten didn't realise what it was about. The grandly-sounding Thomas Paine Foundation had decided to start putting into effect the words of Ralph Ingersoll [The suggestion was Napoleon's not Ingersoll's, whose forename was Robert - ed.] that a statue of gold should be erected to Thomas Paine in every city where freedom was cherished, or something like that.

A slick Brooklyn go-getter, Joseph Lewis had started the Foundation and raised cash for building statues of Paine had already succeeded in getting one in America and had got another erected in Paine's birthplace, Thetford. He had invited all Freethinkers of any prominence plus the local US troops, the Deputy Mayor, Cllr. the Lord Fisher and any local dignitaries who cared to come, as well as the two unsuspecting ambassadors and the local MP. But the plans had encountered a snag.

The statue had been due to face Paine's birthplace but it was now occupied by the British Legion who protested indignantly that Paine had fought for the Americans and French against the British which made him a traitor, and they weren't having him looking at them even in gold (it turned out to be brass). This was in accord with aristocratic Tory tradition, English gentlemen like Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton were not 'traitors' but historically justified rebels and in retrospect gallant opponents, Cart construction worker still plain 'Tom', however, who subverted the folks at home, they could not forgive after 200 years.

The statue had therefore been built outside the parish church and I went along with some stalwarts of the National Secular Society invited as an old friend of their prophet F. A. Ridley. The NSS was still in its proletarian god-bashing period, as the days of the new Humanism, when new academic became old cleric writ large, had come and not yet conquered. The American gentleman was determined to cash in on the new academic boom and had prepared a lengthy address, to be published "as read at the Thetford unveiling". It rained bucketful in heavenly disapproval of the event, as it was seriously stated locally, while he droned on in a Brooklyn Jewish accent remarking, "I guess if you folks can take this weather, I can". Their excellencies the ambassadors were drenched, as they sat in their places of honour while the small crowd took refuge in doorways. Finally the local Tory MP came to speak and said no more than "Rain stops play" and pulled the strings that unveiled the statue, to gasps of horror of all bar the atheists as it was decorated with decidedly from *The Age of Reason*. None was more astounded than the good Lord Fisher unless perhaps it was another and more distinguished Lord.

Soon after this fantastic event, at which I am sure Thomas Paine would have laughed his head off, Mr. Lewis found an even more profitable field for his endeavours and converted to Christianity. If he is still going, I am sure he is doing well as the radio gosseller I am told he became. Anyway, there were no more statues of gold to Thomas Paine in any more cities.



Joseph Lewis and the Mayor of Thetford viewing the newly unveiled statue of Thomas Paine. Photo: Nigel Sinnott.

Reviews.

SELECTED WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE. Edited by Ian Shapiro and Jane E Calvert with an introduction by Ian Shapiro and Contributors from J. C. D. Clark, Jane E. Calvert, Eileen Hunt Botting. New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2014.

This is a very enjoyable and informative read for Paine scholars and the general reader. The introduction by Shapiro is briefly efficient, allowing the newcomer to access Paine's writing either as a read or as a reference facility, the major writings being selected. What makes this volume particularly worth reading are the essays at the rear of the book, these are fresh and new, and of great value to the scholar.

J.C.D Clark's essay *Thomas Paine: The English Dimension* is truly informative, asking searching questions about Paine's development, stripping away the hyperbole that is often used in the promotion of Paine. This is a hard honest look at the world Paine lived in and the way that world shaped Paine as a reactionary, not as a visionary. Clark's use of the prolepsis concept applied to Paine, the error of assuming some future idea or phenomenon already existed in past time, liberates Paine to be studied in his own time. Clark, by removing centuries of ideological overlay, allows us to see Paine in a sharper focus.

Thomas Paine, Quakerism, and the Limits of Religious Liberty during the American Revolution By Jane E. Calvert does an excellent job of exposing the way Paine manipulated the public mind to set against the Quaker hegemony in Philadelphia. This is a sensitive and truthful account, understanding why Paine prioritised the need to fight the English over the civil rights of the Quaker fraternity. Quite harrowing, this essay debunks the trumpeting of Paine as the ultimate protector of civil rights. Paine was instrumental in setting in train, by the power of his writing, the cruel removal of many key Quakers through the war years. This has been a hidden history to date. Paine built a public perception that the Quakers were Tories, thus natural enemies to the revolutionary cause, this was a fabrication at large and led to the death and displacement of many of the Quaker cause. Paine acknowledged himself, later, that this was borne in the heat of the times, but nonetheless the story told in this essay shows a period of Paine's life that has not been thoroughly examined before.

Thomas Paine amidst the Early Feminists by Eileen Hunt Botting, unlike the first essay certainly does overlay current thinking on matters past. The title is the clue, Paine's writing is certainly filtered through the feminist lens in this writing, but with good effect. Mary Wollstonecraft's writings are discussed in

comparison with Paine's largely patriarchal viewpoint. Paine's development in acknowledging the rights of women finally maturing in his last published work *Agrarian Justice* is tracked assiduously through his writing career. There are many insightful and informative passages in this essay, weaved in with the discourse, a balanced and satisfying read.

Paul Myles

Paul Myles edited and co-authored *Thomas Paine in Lewes 1768-1774: A Prelude to American Independence*, and is currently a doctoral student at the University of St Andrews in Intellectual History on the subject of Thomas Paine in Lewes.

Rights of Man: A Documentary of Thomas Paine by Melvyn Bragg.

This documentary was commissioned by BBC 2 and broadcast at the 9.00pm across the UK in early 2015. Bragg managed to tell the big story of Thomas Paine's life in just under an hour with optimism and energy. It was well researched, taking us to the locations that Paine lived, worked and fought in. The documentary had high production values, befitting at last one of our most proficient writers and activist. The beginning showed Barack Obama using Paine's words in his inaugural presidential address. A powerful start, it set the tone for the whole hour, placing Paine in the pantheon of great political writers with no doubt. Bragg informed us that Paine inspired many other writers, including John Steinbeck and Herman Melville. There was enough information of this kind and other surprisingly fine grained detail to keep even the most ardent Paine scholar interested. It was a feat of film making to deliver this serious topic that clearly could engage the general viewer as well. Bragg set about the task by not only consulting the obvious academic experts, but also the Thomas Paine Society UK. The story was narrated by Melvyn Bragg on location interspersed with expert interviews. He interviewed Stuart Wright, our treasurer, who was mayor of Thetford, about Paine's time in the town. I was interviewed in Lewes about the time Paine spent there. Professor Jerry White talked about London, Craig Nelson and the excellent Edward Larkin in America and Dr. Ruth Scurt in Paris.

The programme was on the BBC|player for a week or so and broadcast twice, but it would be useful to have this documentary on sale by the BBC, as it is a good educational resource. The main aim of the Thomas Paine Society UK is to disseminate knowledge about Thomas Paine and to this end the documentary certainly delivered. Let us hope it stays available for many years to come.

Paul Myles.



The Mayor of Thetford, Councillor R. Easten, giving the address of thanks
Below: The sculptor, Sir Charles Wheeler gives a speech



THOMAS PAINE

ON THE MONARCHY

– I have always considered monarchy to be a silly, contemptible thing, I compare it to something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity, but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to open, and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter.

ON TYRANNY

– Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered: yet we have this consolation with us, that, the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.

ON THE CHURCH

– All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

ON SLEAZE

“The people of England, wearied and stunned by parties and alternatively stunned by each, had almost resigned the prerogative of thinking. Even curiosity had expired and a universal languor spread itself over the land. The Opposition was visible no more than as a contest for power, whilst the mass of the nation stood torpidly by as a prize”.

ON PARLIAMENT

– With respect to the two houses, of which the English Parliament is composed, they appear to be effectually influenced into one, and, as a legislature, to have no temper of its own. The Minister, whoever he at any time may be, touches it as with an opium wand and it sleeps obedience.

ON RICH AND POOR

– The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together.

ON GOOD GOVERNMENT

When it shall be said in any country in the world, “My poor are happy; neither ignorance or distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive – when these things can be said then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.

