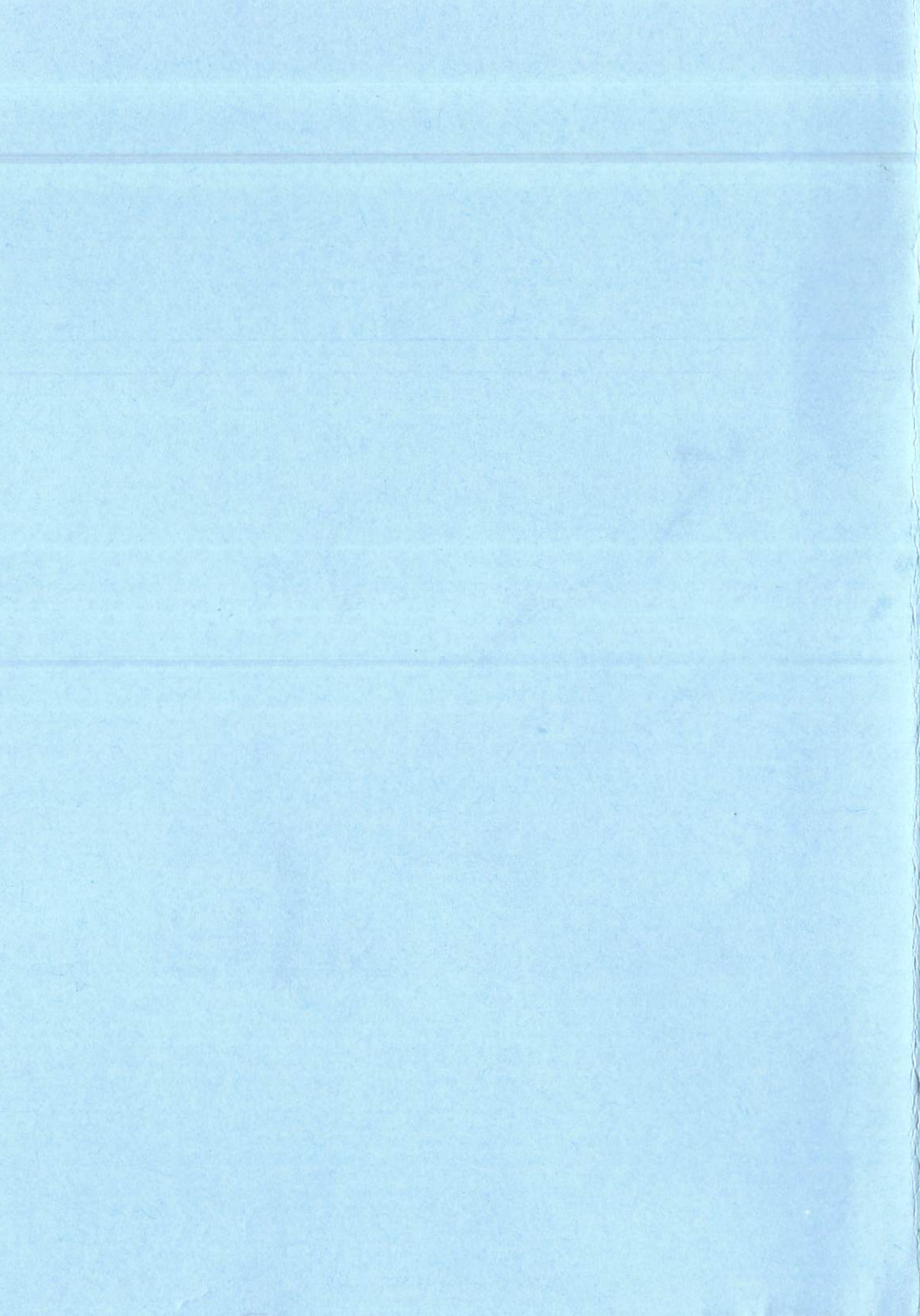


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The Silver Tsunami & Popular Panics

Lynne Segal

(2014 Thomas Paine Lecture, University of East Anglia)

It is nice to celebrate a man who, like most revolutionary activists, was largely uncelebrated in his lifetime. Born in 1737, at forty one Paine had to flee England for America to avoid debtors prison; at fifty seven he had to flee France, having been imprisoned after the French Revolution he supported and fought for. On his death in America, at seventy-three, only six mourners attended his funeral – two of them black men, probably former slaves. (Paine had been one of the very first, some say the first, to argue for the abolition of slavery in the 1770s). As Robert Ingersoll would later write of Paine's death:

One by one most of his old friends and acquaintances had deserted him. Maligned on every side, execrated, shunned and abhorred – his virtues denounced as vices – his services forgotten – his character blackened, he preserved the poise and balance of his soul. He was a victim of the people, but his convictions remained unshaken. He was still a soldier in the army of freedom, and still tried to enlighten and civilize those who were impatiently waiting for his death.

Being a 'soldier in the army of freedom' is not always an easy life, which is over two centuries later it is an excellent thing that we are still celebrating the man and his ideas. Once again, we are commemorating Thomas Paine and his struggles for individual rights and liberty, most famously in his manifesto celebrating the French revolution, *The Rights of Man*, published in two parts between 1791-2. As many of you will know, it was written in response to the philosopher Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution, expressing his conservative belief that only aristocrats who are born to rule could do so in the wisest manner. In contrast, Paine insisted in the inherent equality and capacity of all rational men to design democratic institutions for representative democracy. His dream was to help build an egalitarian, republican society. Many might see his legacy, especially his espousal of secularism and democracy, as more relevant than ever today – however contested his thoughts were, above all then, and – if in somewhat different terms – also today.

I will not say so much about the secularism here, but what is of abiding interest to us all, I think, are the battles still being fought so passionately around the

possibilities and puzzles surrounding notions of individual rights. This is all the more true for feminists like me, pondering the complexity surrounding issues of rights, particularly in the area where the public realm intersects with the private domain – the world of care, contentment and well-being.

So I want to paint a broader picture, and I would like to think that Thomas Paine, that man so neglected in his own old time, would appreciate what I have to say in defence of the rights and impediments to a good long life, which most of us surely hope to lead, whatever our age. Now interestingly, even before Paine published his *Rights of Man*, one of his small group of radical intellectuals in London at the time, Mary Wollstonecraft, had penned her own riposte to Edmund Burke, called *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in 1790. She accused Burke of being an absurd and sentimental fantasist in his belief in the wisdom of the nobility. This text foreshadowed her more famous *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published two years, the very same year as Paine published the second half of his *Rights of Man*.

For Paine, as for other radical men of the day (and Wollstonecraft was one of the few women in their midst) radicalism 'was a staunchly masculine affair', an endless celebration of the 'political virility' of the ordinary man, as my friend, the historian Barbara Taylor, illustrates so well in her excellent book on Wollstonecraft: *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*¹. Reason and rationality were seen as tightly entwined with Manhood, never with Womanhood. Hence, as you'll probably know, women then were legally excluded from the political rights enshrined in the new French constitution of 1791, with the best-known radical men of the day declaring that women's home-centred, dependent lives disqualified them for citizenship. As the French revolutionary Charles Talleyrand had declared: 'the less [women] participate in the making of the law, the more they will receive from its protection and strength ... when they renounce all political rights, they will acquire the certainty of seeing their civil rights substantiated and even expanded'. We know what to think of that today, think Saudi Arabia, where the same concern for the 'gentle' sex remains – 'protecting' them from driving cars and much else in life. Similarly, in the British parliament the radical reformer Charles Fox insisted, falsely, in 1797, that the question of female enfranchisement had 'never been imagined' by any serious politician...that sex is dependent on ours'.

Like Paine, but even more firmly, Wollstonecraft believed in the inherent equality of *all* individuals, women as well as men, declaring in *The Rights of Women*, that it was only because women were denied any adequate education that reason and rationality were seen as male. Wollstonecraft's goal was to bring about true equality by eradicating, as she had put it, 'every species of

subordination'. Thus, like Paine, she spoke not just of rights, but of equality, agreeing with Paine about the need for equality, but extending his arguments to claim: '...the more equality there is established among men, the more virtue and happiness will reign in society'.

Now, there's a thought to conjure with in these once more increasingly unequal and, from the rates of depression we read about, increasingly unhappy times! Moreover, with the heads of the large corporations earning over a thousand times more than they pay their average workers, I don't think we can say there is much virtue in the running of our affairs today. For if we leap forwards two centuries, to these obscenely unequal, unhappy, ungenerous times, we find that this is the very same argument we hear from some today, and with fulsome statistical backing. For instance, it comes from sociologists such as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. It comes also from certain epidemiologists, such as Michael Marmot, in his book, simply called, *The Status Syndrome*. Wilkinson and Pickett both present elaborate statistics to reveal that the greater the inequality in any society, the greater the levels of illness, anxiety and erosion of trust between people. Similarly, Michael Marmot's research drawn from thirty years of data surveying diverse countries around the world showed that the psychological experience of inequality had a profound effect on health, happiness and longevity. Thus the less a person's control over their lives and opportunities, and the lower the relative status of an individual in any hierarchy (even say in civil service rankings) the greater the stress and anxiety, and the shorter and sadder the lifespan.

To say the least, it is disconcerting therefore to note the ever-deepening inequality that is tolerated, if not encouraged, today. This year kicked off with Oxfam reporting that the world's 85 richest individuals are now worth as much as the bottom seven billion – billion! – with even a few of the global elite worried about the ever growing disparities between the rich and the poor. As everyone not blinded by the rhetoric of market fundamentalism knows, the new 'austerity' regimes of stringent welfare cuts, combined with acceptance of all the cunning ways the rich so easily avoid taxation, continues to increase inequality daily.

Finally, this concern with rights, justice, equality and wellbeing, brings me to my subject for tonight, the topic of my own recent research and writing, on ageing and old-age. We hear such contradictory things about the situation of old people today. Alarm bells have been sounding for years about the growing number old people in our midst. From the close of the last century there has been a constant insistence from many that we are all facing a 'demographic time-bomb'. 'Gray Dawn: The Global Aging Crisis', was how the US investment

banker, doubling as social commentator, Peter Peterson, in 1999, summed up what he claimed was one of the greatest social hazards facing the developed world in the twenty-first century. His rhetoric became apocalyptic as he drew to his close: 'Global aging could trigger a crisis that engulfs the world economy. This crisis may even threaten democracy itself.'

This form of moral panic helps explain one seemingly rather paradoxical situation. We are nearly all living longer, indeed on average a whole generation longer, yet, this has done nothing to shift the cultural antipathy towards old age. In Britain, ten million people are currently over sixty-five years old, around a sixth of the population, with that number likely to double over the next few decades.³ And today there are already more people over sixty-five than under sixteen. However, it is precisely such facts that have been used by many to fan fears against this growing numbers of old people. In actuality, as writers such as Yvonne Roberts points out, 'over-65s are a net contributor to society at a rate of 30 to 40 billion pounds a year because they pay tax, spend money that creates jobs and are volunteers, carers and significant contributors to charity'.⁴ Thus older people overall may provide as much care as they receive, with older partners, friends and neighbours often looking after each other, and above all providing significant amounts of childcare for grandchildren, but all this is set aside, doing little to offset the rising alarm over this greying of the population.

Tellingly, in his parting statement to the British House of Lords as Archbishop of Canterbury at the close of 2012, Rowan Williams suggested that negative stereotypes of the ageing population are fostering attitudes of contempt and leaving them vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse. Indeed, there is thus aversion towards the very topic of ageing, as I discovered when trying to get my book published! All my former publishers rejected the topic at once – too depressing, people are only interested in the new, and the young. The journalist and writer Anne Karpf found the very same thing trying to write on the topic, as indeed had Simone de Beauvoir, over 40 years ago, when researching her book *Old Age*.

Yet, even if many people may wish only to avoid the topic, the issue of ageing will not go away. One might say that a new spectre is haunting this government of ours, the threatening 'silver tsunami' of old people. This image comes from the words of one of Britain's best-known novelists (though recently decamped for New York). He is feeding fears of a cultural and economic crisis being caused by this ominous 'silver tsunami' of old people. In his words: 'There'll be a population of demented very old people, like an invasion of terrible immigrants ... I can imagine a sort of civil war between the old and the young in 10 or 15 years' time.' His solution, obviously courting much of the publicity it garnered, was to suggest 'euthanasia booths': 'There should be a booth on

every corner where you could get a martini and a medal.' This the once Leftist writer has perhaps merely reverted to kind, becoming in old age ever more like his father, Kingsley, a type of peevish provocateur, on the look out for publicity for books that are not quite as acclaimed as he would like them to be.

Others are less savage than Martin Amis (not calling for suicide booths for the elderly on street corners – which by the way is a very hackneyed idea. (In 1882, Anthony Trollope wrote a satirical dystopian novel on the theme: *The Fixed Period*, in which he imagined a future society set in 1980, where euthanasia became compulsory between 67 & 68). But no, this is not the general call today, nevertheless, in other ways there has been a public orchestration of hostility towards the ageing population, and especially towards my own generation, the so-called 'baby boomers' now entering old age. It neatly combines two favourite conservative mantras: trashing the legacy of the radical Sixties generation; while also denigrating those seen as potentially unproductive or in need of welfare support (supposedly having accrued excellent state pensions - though of course, as we'll see, many have not, especially women).

Interestingly, in Britain and the USA, the places I have studied, new forms of ageism emerged most strongly in the 1990s. It was then that the eminent cultural historian and gerontologist, Thomas Cole, warned that the extent of the federal budget deficit in the USA was creating an increasing 'possibility of intergenerational warfare between young and old', in his now classic text *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (1992). What he did not mention was the extent of the media's role in inciting such warfare. His compatriot, that incisive scholar of ageing and cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette was meanwhile busy compiling an extensive register of the ways in which many of the most popular media outlets were actively manufacturing a form of homogenized generational combat throughout the 1990s, mocking the 'greedy Baby Boomers', those approaching retirement, supposedly responsible for impoverishing those in their wake. "Crybaby" Boomers "hate their kids". Some declared this 'Boomer-bashing' had become a new 'national pastime'. (That's the interesting thing about ageism, it's as if the old were a race apart, as though the young today will not themselves be old tomorrow!)

In the UK, the most vicious of the media attacks on the 60+ generation occurred a little later, especially following the fiscal crisis of 2008, when the British media joined the chorus of denunciations of those typecast as Baby Boomers. 'Crisis? Blame the baby-boomers, not the bankers', was the headline in *The Times*, February, 22nd, 2010, introducing an article by the paper's principle economics columnist Anatole Kaletsky. Kaletsky ended his analysis of

the current economic crisis with a warning of the huge dangers of 'the rapidly escalating cost of government-financed pensions and healthcare as the baby-boom generation, born from 1945 onwards, starts to retire'. The idea that an entire population of the new elderly could be declared 'selfish' might seem obviously rather dim-witted, but it was the argument propounded by no less than the Conservative Cabinet member, David Willetts, who put all his authority behind the attacks on my generation in his book, published in February 2010, entitled *The Pinch: How the baby-boomers took their children's future – and why they should give it back*. Ignoring altogether the role of reckless fiscal gambling following the deregulation of the banking sector, as well as the gigantic accumulation of personal bonuses in that sector, Willetts instead blamed the current crisis on 'the self-interest and electoral dominance of the huge generation of baby-boomers' – as summed up in his provocative sub-title. Willett's view, echoed by Kaletsky, is that the only way to avoid permanent crisis in Britain would be to take drastic measures to reduce the pension and health costs of the generation now entering their Sixties. Other manifestos quickly appeared with the same noxious message: on BBC websites, the journalist, Neil Boorman published his own polemical manifesto inciting generational blame, *It's All Their Fault*, seemingly a call to arms for the young to line up against the older generation: the young are all now 'living in the shadow of the Baby Boomer Generation'.⁵ Others across the political spectrum soon followed, with erstwhile Labour Party figures, such as Frances Beckett, launching his own very similar critique: *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us?*, with its now familiar subtitle, *How the Children of the Sixties Lived the Dream and Failed the Future*.

The chorus is now so familiar, with even usually measures voices such as Will Hutton joining the 'Mea Culpa, Guilty as Charged'. So we need to row back, once more. Far from all Boomers have shared Hutton's luck. Although the number of pensioners living in low-income households has fallen in recent years, over 20% of those who live in poverty are pensioners, rising to around 30% if they are single women, with at least a third of that group being people in their sixties. It is important to note that some Boomers have no good fortune to feel guilty about, remaining instead often vulnerable, sometimes isolated, and with meagre pension entitlements. This may be for reasons of class, ethnicity, disability, ill-health, or other circumstances; indeed, sometimes among my close acquaintances, hard times have come precisely because they refused to buy into any of the lures of professionalism and the corporate world. We should not need the assistance of Pat Thane, that meticulous researcher on old age in British history, to direct us to the residual poverty of my generation. Writing a few years ago, Thane indicates that for many women 'the difficulties...of providing for their old age have been known for over a century, have changed little and have never gone away ... Our pension system has been

characterized by a state pension too low to live on and dependence on occupational and private pensions which cannot provide a comfortable old age to the low-paid and irregularly employed, most of whom are female'.⁶ A report from the Nuffield Foundation, just published as I write, highlights the latest scandal that the slashing of Council welfare budgets in recent years leaves some 250,000 elderly people without state-funded help for their basic care, including bathing, dressing and eating. Two years after coming to power, in 2010, our current coalition government proposed to cut spending on adult social care by a further one billion pounds in the coming year alone. It has kept its brutal promise.

Hiding this reality, the very latest budget from the Tories in Coalition is likely to incite even more animosity towards the elderly, with headlines telling us that the "Blues have turned Grey". Well, one could add, metaphorically, yes, they are turning grey, but only for those with a little silver in their pockets, as well as in (what remains) of their locks. Yes, there is now help for older people with savings, given the expansion of the amount that can be invested tax-free in ISAs, as well as more freedom over how the elderly can spend the pension money they have accrued. So, shockingly to me, it is precisely all the low-paid and irregularly employed older people who will receive no benefit at all from this self-serving targeting of a certain elderly vote, those with sufficient spare funds to be making investments. Indeed, as Nick Pearce, from the Institute for Public Policy Research indicates, you would need be earning around £125,000 to make the most of the Chancellor's new £15,000 a year limit on ISAs for elderly people. At a time of growing poverty and further austerity cuts, he concludes, with presumably ironic understatement: 'these are hardly the people who should be the priority for additional tax breaks'. This government's repetitive mantra of 'helping the hardworking' is not-so-hidden code for suggesting that those whom, for whatever reason, are outside the workplace or who have not already accrued significant funds are underserving of help. It thus continues the attack on people's entitlements to welfare at all ages, which has been the whole thrust of neo-liberal rhetoric of over the last few decades: turning the better off against those less well off than themselves. The deep disdain towards the poor is captured in the humour of our True Blue London Mayor, Boris Johnson, joking a few days ago that if 'foolish old folk' spent their pension pot too early as a result of the latest government 'reforms' allowing them to do so, it would be their own fault. They will have to survive 'living in rusting Lamborghinis and eating tins of dog food'. What a laugh!

For certain, as some of you will know only too well, many of the younger generation are indeed suffering from the ongoing economic recession. However, to blame that older generation for the effects of policies many of us comprehensively opposed is not only spurious, but is used to foreclose any

useful analysis of the present. It is growing inequality *within*, not *between*, the different age cohorts that is the significant outcome of current economic and social crisis. Many leading economists have been making this point for years, Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman simply being among the better known. Here, the British economic journalist Larry Elliott also points out that it is the still-growing concentration of wealth at the top, together with the undermining of trade unions and the eroding of welfare protection, that is the motor of inequality in times when markets are unregulated.

It should be evident, then, that this is far from an easy climate to try to turn around those enduring fears and phobias we are likely to have around old age, with the world at large so eager to pit the young against the old, inciting generational tension. The iconic pictures of old age have always been negative. Think of those road signs, two figures bent double, and frail, that Age Concern has been complaining about for years. It is hard to shake the enduring image of ageing as a process of seamless decline. Moreover, this remains the case, even though we have recently heard more talk of 'ageing well', endorsed by government sources and certainly the marketing of cosmetics and other solutions to keep the signs of old age at bay. However, as some have noticed, the problem here is that the rhetoric of ageing well tends to double as the possibility of not really ageing at all, or not showing too many signs of being old, but determinedly insisting that it is possible to stay forever young – with a little help from the burgeoning pharmaceutical and cosmetic markets, and more.

Added to classic fears of old age is the fact that there has always been a double standard when it comes to cultural attitudes towards ageing. Fears of ageing are fed almost from birth by terrifying images in myth and folk-tale – the hag, harridan, witch, or Medusa. However, such frightening figures are not incidentally female, they are quintessentially female, seen as monstrous because of the combination of age and gender. Think of the famous Dutch painting, *The Ugly Duchess* also known as *A Grotesque Old Woman*, a satirical portrait painted by the Flemish artist Quentin Matsys. No equivalent symbolic resonance trails through time attached to male figures. As the incisive commentator, Susan Sontag wrote over 40 yrs ago, the Double Standard of ageing means that women are aged by culture far faster than men, discarded sooner, both in the private world and, in the public.

The fact that women are aged by culture faster than men, as well as confined to fewer areas of the labour market, often taking time out from work, or working part-time when having children or to encompass other aspects of care work, has lasting implications for their rights and well-being, especially in old age. Women overall have a much smaller pension pot, and they are for many

reasons far more likely to end up living alone, with no companion to care for them. Just six months ago, the interim report of The Commission on Older Women set up by the Labour Party, and chaired by Harriett Harman, provided exhaustive evidence of the continuing invisibility of older women in public life. In the BBC, for instance, 82 % of broadcast presenters over the age of 50 are men, only 18 % are women. More generally, unemployment amongst women aged 50-64 has increased by 41 % cent in the last two and a half years, compared with one per cent overall.

Nevertheless, if older women are especially at risk from the ageism in our culture, the fears and disparagement of old age, now strengthened by demographic panics, do affect us all. Interestingly, the very first way we have of dealing with the general horror of ageing has been with disavowal. When older people are interviewed their opening comment is likely to be 'I don't feel old'. This is what elderly informants routinely told the oral historian Paul Thompson when he interviewed them some years ago. Their voices echoed those he'd found in autobiography and archived interviews. The oral histories collected by the writer, Ronald Blythe found the very same thing: one 84-yr-old reflects: 'I tend to look upon other old men as *old* men – & not include myself. ... My boyhood stays imperishable and is such a great part of me now. I feel it strongly – more than ever before'. Or ponder this: 'How can a 17-year-old, like me, suddenly be 81?', the exactingly scientific developmental biologist Lewis Wolpert wrote in his book, with its ironic title: *You're Looking Very Well*. Not long ago, a large survey in the US found that at fifty almost half of all respondents said they felt at least ten years younger than their chronological age, while a significant number in their late sixties and early seventies reported feeling at least 20 years younger than their actual age (Pew Research Centre, 2009).

What does this tell us? Well, first up, I think it highlights the realities of ageism. The noxious images of old age are ingrained within us – old people are pathetic, if not abject. 'This is not me', people rightly feel, rejecting any identification with notions of old age as frailty and passivity, dependence, always coded as feminine to begin with. It is this that lies behind many men's fear that ageing will 'turn them into a woman' – a more fragile and dependent creature. This idea is highlighted in a recently published alarming depiction of ageing written by Bill Miller, professor of law in the USA, called *Losing It*. In the footsteps of many men before him, one of the chief causes of Miller's lamentation here is that ageing turns men into women, or at the very least 'neuters them': 'which is what old, even middle, age effectively does to males anyway'.

However, there is another aspect of this disavowal that I call 'temporal vertigo'.

Yes we age, and are certainly aged by culture. Yet in another sense we feel we remain the same. Certain threads through time, the identities we have constructed for ourselves, which we try to hold on to at all costs, usually remain (at least, unless our sense of self is destroyed by general neglect & isolation). Thus Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, at 49, 'I sometimes feel that I have lived 250 years already, & sometimes that I am still the youngest person on the omnibus'.⁸ At 73, Doris Lessing summed up this feeling, 'The great secret that all old people share is that you really haven't changed in seventy or eighty years. Your body changes, but you don't change at all. And that, of course, causes great confusion'. This is a simplification, but it does suggest just how much creative work needs to be done in thinking about the radical ambiguities of ageing (which I try to do in book, *Out of Time*)⁹.

How then might we affirm old age? And this return me to a topic Tom Paine, or Wollstonecraft, would have approved of. One approach to the perils of ageing is to search out spaces of resistance, rethinking not just issues of equality, but combating the anti-statism so prevalent in our time. We also need to rethink the meaning of 'dependency', and the ways in which it has been so heedlessly pathologized of late, while questioning the current misleading mantras of 'self-reliance' and autonomy. In my own field of psychosocial studies it seems obvious that forms of dependency are a part of the human condition, since we gain any sense of ourselves *only* thru our ties to others. Yet, it is just those ties of dependence that we have been firmly taught to repudiate and abhor in these neo-liberal times. Notions of dependency have mutated into metaphors of psychological inadequacy, which we have imbibed from Thatcher onwards. John Moore, the Secretary of State for Social Security at the height of this Thatcherite drive against state dependency in the late 1980s exemplified the move: 'A climate of dependence can in time corrupt the human spirit'.¹⁰ We never hear that it is possible for old people who require care, much like young dependent people, to give back quite as much as they receive: a situation best captured through notions of interdependency. Contrary to Ayn Rand, it is the man (or woman) who thinks they stand alone, in no need of their fellow creatures, who may be the pathetic and impoverished creature. With nothing but their competitive gloomy selves to care for, or about, depression often looms ominously.

As I see it, affirming old age can entail searching for spaces of resistance, not so much eschewing suffering (which always shadows human life, at any age) as trying to avoid either complacency or despair by still looking for ways of appraising and responding to life. It matters less whether it is joy, sadness or anger that seems the most appropriate reaction to what we can comprehend of worldly matters, near and far. As Simone de Beauvoir said, concluding her own pioneering book on old age, our lives have meaning so

long as we can attribute 'value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion'. Possibilities for speaking out, even for taking new risks, do not pass with youth, any more than serenity or withdrawal necessarily comes with ageing. In his final years, already battling against the leukaemia from which he died, aged 67, Edward Said explored what he called the 'late style' style of many ageing artists and writers, seeing there not quiet tolerance and self-acceptance of old age, but rather intransigence, difficulties and contradictions evident in their aesthetic productions.¹¹ For some, the battle begins with trying to beat back both the denigration and the social marginalization of the elderly, with its distinctive gendered overtones. Over the centuries older women, in particular, have proved valuable as resisters, feared for their disobedience, anger, outspokenness and general non-conformity, even if they have more often been mocked than appreciated in that role.¹² It is not hard to flesh out images of ageing defiance, but whereas gossip is more likely to be a favourite tool of the relatively powerless, older people's dissidence today sometimes emerges from voices that have remained influential over the decades.¹³

In *Out of Time*, I look at some of those powerful older voices, challenging the dynamics of our time, determined to speak out against the destructiveness of the soaring inequality of a time, and the iniquitous search for scapegoats to blame. One who often inspired me was the passionate American poet, Adrienne Rich, whose socialist, feminist polemic against the neglect of those silenced and suffering continued to inspire others right up to her dying breath. Along with other ageing radicals, Rich hated the harsh drift towards 'neoliberalism' in the social and political life of the USA over the last three decades, with its unbroken commitment to private enterprise and its hostility towards welfare spending, as fiercely articulated in her collection from the 1990s: *Dark Fields of the Republic*.¹⁴ This led her to announce a role for the older woman, the older person, as 'radical sceptic', a person able to look back through time, observing the struggles of the past alongside the disorders of the present.

And so to conclude, what the radical sceptic might note today is that the way in which our latest moral panic – the so-called time-bomb of ageing – is used instrumentally as cover for the determination to enact welfare 'reform', another code name for cuts. There has always been an alternative school of economic thought that argues that it is precisely welfare cuts and other austerity moves, alongside squeezing down of the wages of the poorest, that perpetuate the economic crises they are supposed to rectify. To name again only one of these prestigious alternative voices arguing against the need for any rolling back of welfare, whatever the ageing of the population, the Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman points out that it is not the countries with the most generous welfare spending that are the ones in trouble across

Europe. Yet, as he hastens to add: 'Not that the facts will convince anyone on the right: 'the blame-the-welfare-state meme is nonsense', but it is sadly all too convenient for policies determined to place market forces, and market forces alone, in control of every area of our lives.

In relation to ageing, this particular anti-state, anti-welfare meme has its own distinct destructiveness, not just in the deepening poverty of the 20 per cent of elderly poor, but it is also that identifying the elderly as a social problem furthers the process of marginalizing and denigrating the elderly in general. As we have seen, this has already had effects on the precocity of older people in the labour market and in public life generally, especially in relation to older women. In his book *The Imaginary Time Bomb*, the economist Phil Mullen argues cogently that it is not the ageing trend itself that is the true threat so much as the cultural obsession with it, and the ideological uses it is put to. Like others, he points out that this alarmism also serves not only to devalue the lives of the elderly, but also erodes intergenerational trust, and above all reinforces cynical and regressive beliefs that it is completely futile to search for solutions to 'the big problems of poverty, social inequality and oppression'.

As I was preparing this talk I came across some more recent research suggesting that the political rhetoric surrounding the ageing panic has been exaggerated. In an article for the *British Medical Journal*, November 2013, entitled 'Population ageing: the time bomb that isn't?', in November 2013, social demographers Jeroen Spijker and John MacInnes present elaborate computations to show that the extent, speed, and effect of population ageing have all been exaggerated. This is because older people, those defined as above the retirement age, are today healthier, and fitter than their peers in earlier studies, and the requirements for care have been falling for many of them. They agree that demand for services may well continue to rise, but not at the alarming rate hitherto suggested, and that it will 'continue to be driven by other factors, chiefly progress in medical knowledge and technology'.

Moral panics have always have always been manipulated for political and economic purposes, as Stuart Hall argued in *Policing the Crisis*. They operate in distinct ways, in the case of ageing as a warning that we should expect less from our social services, and as a way of reinforcing tensions and divisions between the young and the old. Yet it is in the interest of neither the young nor the old to exacerbate fears of ageing, the one dynamic that none of us can avoid. The forms of invisibility, even abjection, which many people experience in old age can make it hard for some of the elderly to know how to maintain bridges with those who come behind them. Nevertheless, we have increasing numbers of mentors to encourage us, once we look out for them. The life-long North American union activist, sex radical, peace campaigner and civil rights

advocate, Maggie Kuhn is one of them. In 1970, after being forced into retirement by the Presbyterian Church at 65, she founded the Gray Panther Movement. It welcomed both young and old to work together for a good life for all, and soon spread to other states in the US. Until her death at 90, in 1995, Kuhn succeeded in surrounding herself with people of all age groups. And she became bolder the older she got. Towards the end of her long life she decided that she would do or say something outrageous every day. 'Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind - even if your voice shakes', she said. Were Paine around nowadays, I'd like to think he would have been interested in joining her gray panther movement, with its stripes of red, green and silver.

WHY DO WE REMEMBER JOSEPH LEWIS?

Martha Spiegelman

How did the statue of Thomas Paine come to be raised in Thetford; Morristown, New Jersey; Parc Montsouris in Paris? Because Joseph Lewis, the renowned Freethinker of the mid-twentieth century campaigned for these memorials and raised and donated funds for their creation.

How was it accomplished that a US postage stamp commemorating Paine was issued in 1968?? Because Lewis lobbied with determination for it, starting in 1928.

Why do many Paine advocates contend that he was the true author of the *Declaration of Independence*? Because in his book, *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence* (1947), Lewis put forward persuasive reasoning and explanations in support of Paine's authorship of the founding document.

Joseph L. Lewis, son of a merchant, was born in 1889 in Alabama. He had little formal schooling and went to work at an early age. His avid life-long reading, nevertheless brought him to Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899), "the Great Agnostic", and, in turn, to Thomas Paine. Ingersoll, in the latter part of the 19th century, played his role in keeping Paine before the American public, just as Lewis would do the same in the mid-20th century. The Great Agnostic was a Freethinker and Lewis became one too, but went on to be a "public atheist".

By 1920, Lewis, now in New York City, joined the newly founded Freethinkers Society for which later as the Freethinkers of America, he became its president and moving force all the rest of his life. He started a publishing company, Freethought Press Association, which received many contributions from prominent authors and was a great success in sales. It brought him sufficient wealth so that he and his wife could maintain three residences; in New York City, the town of Purdy in Westchester County and Miami Beach. Most important, he used his wealth in many freethought and egalitarian causes, as outlined here.

His newsletter, *Freethinkers of America*, started in 1928, underwent changes to Freethinker, and then to *Age of Reason*, a homage to Paine. As with his book publishing, the newsletter attracted many well-regarded writers. Lewis brought

a number of legal suits to re-establish separation of religion and state in America as constitutionalists expected. He was mostly unsuccessful with the suits but his efforts kept the question in the minds of people generally as well as giving encouragement to freethinkers, nontheists and humanists. Lewis also provided the impetus and funds for the restoration of the Ingersoll Birthplace Museum in Dresden NY, operated by the Centre for Inquiry.

Lewis' dedicated atheism was often on view. At the ceremony for the Thomas Paine postage stamp in January 1968, in Philadelphia. Lewis asked that prayers be omitted. "If Thomas Paine were alive, he certainly would certainly oppose the injection of religion in his behalf". His request was ignored and he left the room even though the stamp was his own achievement. He had originally been designated as master of ceremonies, an honour that was withdrawn days before the ceremony, probably because of his atheism.

Some may have called him irascible for his tenacious and lengthy argumentation and firm stand on principle. But many were attracted to his heartiness and justness and generosity, and were well rewarded by his friendship. His own stated position was quoted in the *New York Times* obituary:¹ "An atheist cannot be mentioned in the same breath with that impulse and that conviction which produces religious mania, religious strife, religious hatred, religious prejudice. Religious love is clannish: Christian loves Christian and Jew loves Jew, Atheists love everybody, they are lovers of mankind".

Only a few months after the issuance of the Paine postage stamp, Joseph Lewis died of a heart attack, in 1968. In the *Times* obituary,¹ an associate is quoted as saying that Mr. Lewis was "a jolly, good-natured, pleasant man, very energetic despite his age". One appreciation of him is by Carl Shapiro.² "No one in this century has done more research, written more essays, commentaries, articles, books, letters to newspapers, delivered more speeches, raised more money for the erection of statues, and dedicated almost fifty in promoting the greatness of Thomas Paine than the late Secretary and Founder of the Thomas Paine Foundation, Joseph Lewis".

Anecdotes: At the unveiling of a bronze marker at Paine's gravesite in New Rochelle, Lewis remarked,² "While it is true that Thomas Paine needs no monument, it is only too true that the American people, and the people of the world, *do need* a monument to Thomas Paine".

At the Paris dedication of the Thomas Paine statue, Lewis said,² "This statue is to both a symbol and a beacon, a symbol of the eternal principles of justice and humanity for which Thomas Paine was so pre-eminently a representative, and a beacon to guide mankind in the solution of the problems that menace his

peace and his happiness... and that the name of Thomas Paine will forever be synonymous with liberty, equality, fraternity”.

Books: Lewis wrote twenty books. Beside *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence*, he wrote about other Freethinkers: Lincoln, Jefferson, Franklin, Luther Burbank. Voltaire, Ingersoll. His book, *An Atheist Manifesto* (1954) countered the then popular notion that atheism was un-American and a Communist tool.

Notes

1. New York Times, November 5, 1968.
2. Quotes came from www.freethoughtbooks.com, With Carl Shapiro's death seven years ago, the website Independent Publications came to an end.



Herbert Cutner and Joseph Lewis photographed at the inaugural meeting of the Thomas Paine Society at Conway Hall, London, October 1963

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Sir Charles Wheeler with the model of the statue of Thomas Paine, at the inaugural meeting of the Thomas Paine Society at Conway Hall, London, in 1963. This was the first public viewing of the statue.

A FEW RECOLLECTIONS OF JOSEPH L. LEWIS (1889-1968)

David Rickards

Prior to our first meeting in the early 1950s, I had known Lewis very well but only from a distance since our correspondence took place either by mail or telephone. By then, I had submitted a few articles and a poem to his magazine, *Age of Reason*. In those days the spectre of Senator Joseph McCarthy over shadowed the concept of Freethought. Joseph Lewis told me he liked my ideas and style a great deal and he published about everything which I sent to him. Then one day, I had the opportunity to visit New York on business and asked if it would be possible to meet him in person. "Of course", he said, "Meet me for lunch, on Park Avenue". (I don't recall where; maybe it was a club?) It was very ritzy, and I remember how impressed I was. Struck by his piercing gaze during our initial handshake, I came to the conclusion that I could not continue to deceive him.

I said, "Mr. Lewis, sir, I must confess I have not been entirely honest with you. I have been writing exclusive Freethought articles, cartoons and poetry under a number of pseudonyms. I have published in a number of Freethought publications from the *Truth Seeker* in London, England, to the *Rationalist* and from the *Friendship Liberal League* to the *Progressive*, but none of them knew my real name!"

"That's great!" he laughed out loud, "I don't care what you call yourself so long as I like your point of view and the way you express it and I do!" We shook hands and this was the start of a long friendship.

During our lunch, we exchanged a lot of personal stories. I remember that he told me how difficult it was for a person in the publishing business to determine how much potential an unknown was going to have. "Have you missed some good ones?" I asked naively. "Oh! Yes", he readily admitted, going on to describe his refusal to see any merit in Philip Wylie and his book *The Generation of Vipers* which went on to become a best seller together with the many books that followed it. I just never thought he would be so popular", Lewis said regretfully.

From that time on I was in frequent touch with Joseph Lewis and sent him a lot of material for publication. I purchased 400 copies of his low cost paperback edition of Paine's *The Age of Reason* which I gave to newcomers at local

Humanist meetings.

The next thing I remembers was taking my wife and two children to Europe in the summer of 1959. We had been in touch with Mr. Lewis after a visit to the Robert Green Ingersoll home in Dresden, New York. We drove down a winding road lined with massive evergreen trees to the Lewis' stately home in Westchester County for a visit and were invited to stay for dinner. What a treat it was to spend a leisurely few hours looking through his magnificent home and breaking bread with Mr. and Mrs. Lewis.

I had a chance to look through the Lewis' extensive library and saw how he prepared his anthologies by cutting quotations out of books and pasting them on boards. Remembering that there were no computers in those days. It reminded me of the way in which Thomas Jefferson reputedly constructed his version of the New Testament.

Mr. Lewis had wonderful rapport with our kids, who were then aged four and six years, and were on their very best behaviour!. He was very kind to both of them. The story I must share with you took place after dessert. We all enjoyed a lovely meal served by a butler and a maid, followed by a delicious home-made chocolate cake. "Now is there anything else you would like?" Mr. Lewis asked my daughter. "Yes, please", she said solemnly, "I would like you to wrap up what's left of the food so we can take it with us!" Mr. Lewis gave her a bog chuckle and smile and said, "Why don't we divide it up so we can all have some tomorrow?" And so we did! (I was talking to my daughter recently - who is now 61 - and she remembers the incident very well).

We finally left and headed for the coast from which we were departing for our visit to the UK. We were sad to hear that in less than a year, a great storm had destroyed the magnificent blue spruce trees in Lewis's driveway.

I worked with Joseph Lewis through the years. The next time I visited with Mr. and Mrs. Lewis was in 1962 when our family headed for Mexico over the Christmas holidays to go to the Yucatan. On the way we stopped at their residence in Miami Beach where we basked in the sunlight alongside Mr. Lewis' pool and private harbour. His home was situated on a stretch of waterway which connected private residences to the sea. The swimming pool was a replica of a residence in Pompeii or Herculaneum from ancient Roman times with extensive mosaic tile work. Of special interest to me, as a veterinarian, was the artwork depicting a large dog with the warning, in Latin, "Cave Canem!" In other words, "Beware of the Dog". Lewis talked with all of us about his life's work and we partook of refreshments. How lucky we were to have had the opportunity to see this great man and to be his guests. This was

to be our last encounter.

It was my ambition to visit Chichen Itza to witness sunrise on December 25. This is where the Mayan faithful used to make a human sacrifice to the gods to insure that the sun would faithfully rise the next year. We expected to see crowds of people, but since the weather was unusually cold, we were the only visitors.

After that I helped Lewis with his wish to fulfil Napoleon's prediction that one day every country in the world would have a statue of Thomas Paine in their principal city. Lewis was determined to erect such a monument in London, but we found the idea was unpopular. At that time, my father, Charles Henry Rickards was a Common Councillor for the city of London (an elected office similar to that of Alderman in the US). London had its own Lord Mayor and its own government, almost like a separate state within the country. I contacted my Dad and asked what he could do. We supplied all the details and soon found out that there was at this time considerable antipathy to Paine in England. My father was never able to change their minds in London. He did, however, make an effort to pass the word to the people of Thetford and as you know, that is where the famous statue was finally placed.

I have many other recollections to share with you about Joseph Lewis and all his activities. The last contact I remember was a telephone call made to me in 1968. Lewis was planning to make a stop in Cleveland on a speaking tour. "Say, Doc, what can you tell me about a guy called Alan Douglas? I'm supposed to be a guest on his show next week and I thought you might know him". I told Lewis that I knew Douglas quite well, in fact I'd been a guest veterinarian on his radio and TV shows several times.

"I don't think you'll have any problems. He (Douglas) has an abrupt and challenging style, but underneath it all, he's charming and very liberal minded".

The show never came off, I'm sorry to say. A few days later, I was sad to read in the newspaper that Lewis had suffered a heart attack and died. A few months later, Alan Douglas committed suicide. Life can be full of unpleasant surprises.

Postscript

I was not nearly as well-read in those days as I am now, or I might have challenged Joseph Lewis on how he discovered his theory that Paine was the author of the Declaration of Independence. Lewis wrote extensively about the Declaration and his ideas that Paine, not Thomas Jefferson, was the actual author. Lewis' theories are certainly convincing, but his claim that they were

unique was certainly not true. Even going back to John Adams, Timothy Pickering's critique of Jefferson shows that there were doubts 200 years ago. I find it hard to believe that someone as intellectual as Lewis would not have seen Joel Moody's book on Paine and the Declaration, of 1872, or Professor Van Buren Denslow's [1833-1902] book on *Modern Thinkers* (1874). Denslow went into great detail about his theory that Paine was the real author of the Declaration. Furthermore, Denslow wrote to Robert Ingersoll and asked for his comments in a preface. You can find a copy of the Ingersoll preface on the subject in the *Collected Work of Robert Ingersoll* (Vol.12, page 13). Denslow had another theory, that Paine was identical with the mysterious high powered English political critic who wrote under the name of "Junius". Ingersoll agreed with him completely on the Declaration and Paine but disagreed about Junius. Apparently Lewis missed all of them.

I consider myself to have been very fortunate to have had the privilege of knowing Joseph Lewis so well. He was an extraordinary person with piercing eyes and a gravelly voice. He always struck me as being extremely aware of the subject, any subject, and was always ready to take over the discussion at high speed. Just think of the many examples when it looked as though he was being excluded but had the audacity to insist on speaking. It was so typical of Lewis, and he did it over and over. Remember his long fight to get a Thomas Paine stamp.

One last Story

A few years ago I was visiting Niagara on the Lake in Ontario, Canada, which is a great little town dedicated to George Bernard Shaw and his works. I heard that a famous biographer [since deceased] of GBS was in town and I wanted to meet him> he was gracious enough to give me an audience and I asked him among other things if he had read Lewis's comments on his visit to England with GBS. He had! Unfortunately he pooh-poohed the idea and said it was probably mostly fiction: Shaw was very reclusive especially in his later years and it is doubtful that anyone in his right mind would ever get a taxi to drive across England to have tea with him! I totally disagreed and added that if Lewis said he was there, he was there! Probably in an elegant limousine and its my guess, although I never knew Shaw personally, that the two of them got along very well!

I suggest that the reader look into all of Lewis' works, including the scholarly *Ten Commandments*, the quotes in, *Wisdom and Inspiration from the Writings of Thomas Paine*, *Ingersoll the Magnificent*, and *In the Name of Humanity*, and, of course, *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence*. You may not always agree with him but you won't be disappointed.

PLACES WITH PAINE ASSOCIATIONS

Extracted from a portfolio compiled by the Mayor of Thetford, Stuart Wright



Thetford Town Sign



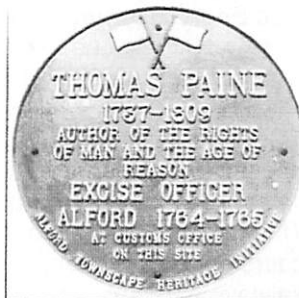
Thomas Paine's House , Sandwich



Beehive Yard, Diss



George Hotel, Grantham



Windmill Hotel, Alford



Thomas Paine Statue outside Lewes Library

THOMAS PAINE 1737-1809

HERE EXPUNDED HIS
REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS.
THIS INN IS REGARDED AS
A CRADLE OF AMERICAN
INDEPENDENCE WHICH HE
HELPED TO FOUND WITH
PEN AND SWORD.

Plaque on the White Hart Hotel, Lewes



Bull House, Lewes



Obelisk, Angel Square, Islington



Old Red Lion, Islington



Parc Montsouris, Paris



10 de la rue de l'Odéon, Paris



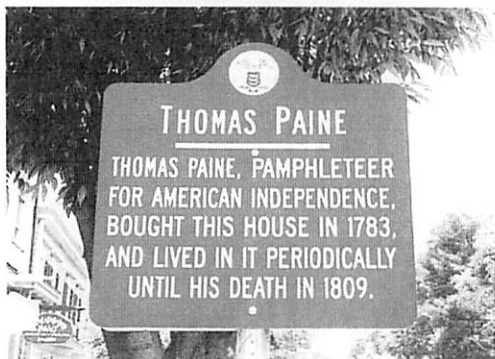
Information panel, Philadelphia



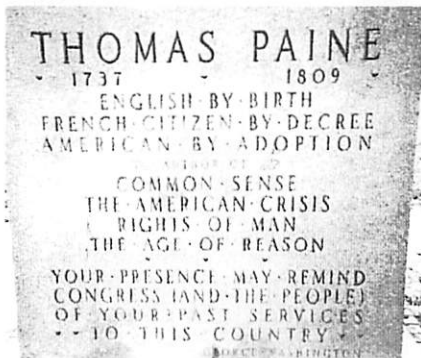
Thomas Paine Plaza, Philadelphia



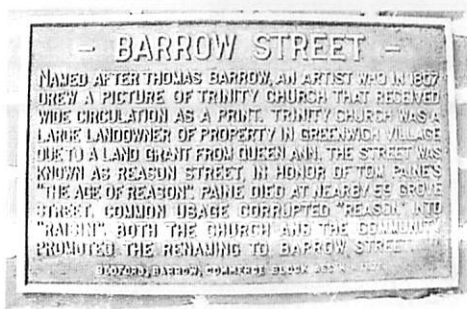
Bordentown



Thomas Paine House, Bordentown



Morristown, New Jersey



Barrow Street, Greenwich Village, New York
 Formerly known as Reason Street in
 honour of Paine's Age of Reason.



Plaque on 59 Grove Street, Greenwich Village, New York.



Thomas Paine Park, New York



Bust of Paine, Iona College, New Rochelle



Thomas Paine Cottage, New Rochelle



Paine's burial marker stone, New Rochelle



Thomas Paine Monument, New Rochelle

