

The application of Paine's enlightenment ideas in the American Revolution: a case study of *Common Sense*

Le HUANG

Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350007, China

Abstract: Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was an influential Anglo-American intellectual, theorist, and revolutionary who lived through key historical events. As a witness to both the American and French Revolutions, his experiences deeply shaped his enlightenment ideas. During the American Revolution War, his *Common Sense* showcased the practical application of his theories. Though Paine's contributions have often been overlooked over time due to changes in the environment, the interests of the people, and political differences, his ideas still hold significant importance in the history of the American Revolution.

Key words: Thomas Paine; North American War of Independence; *Common Sense*

1 A preliminary exploration on the formation of Paine's democratic political thought

1.1 The influence of the British constitutional tradition

Thomas Paine lived in Britain until he was thirty-seven, and his political ideas were deeply rooted in the British constitutional tradition. Following the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the rise of royal authority, the *Magna Carta* of 1215 became a key milestone. During the Renaissance, republican ideals, including liberty, equality, and democracy, gained prominence and began shaping Britain's constitutional framework. In *Common Sense*, Paine argued that the British political system was made up of "the base remains of two ancient tyrannies" mixed with new republican elements. These included the remnants of monarchical and aristocratic power (the King and the House of Lords) and the republican element (the House of Commons). Paine's radical democratic views emerged from the context of British freedom and constitutionalism. Growing up in Britain as a member of the lower classes, he was keenly aware of the inequalities and deceptions within the political system, which gave his critique of British governance considerable force.

1.2 The influence of 18th-century enlightenment thinkers on the old continent

The Enlightenment, which began in 17th-century England and flourished in 18th-century France, greatly influenced Paine. As a product of this era, Paine believed in the power of reason, as emphasized by enlightenment thinkers, and argued that individuals should use reason to understand their true interests. Though he did not cite specific philosophers, Paine's works clearly reflect enlightenment ideals. For example, his theory of "natural rights" replaced the "right to property" with the "pursuit of happiness", focusing on rights as expressions of power, and challenging the restriction of political participation based on property ownership. Paine's view of human rights centered on the survival rights of the

working class, offering a more democratic interpretation of "natural rights" [1]. In some ways, Paine's ideas developed from Locke's human rights doctrine. Though Paine claimed to have never read Locke, his views on property and rights were influenced by Locke's focus on the sanctity of property and Rousseau's belief in its importance for human life. However, Paine went beyond Locke and Rousseau by transcending property rights in his discourse on human rights. In *Common Sense*, he argued that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental right, rejecting the enlightenment view that property was the core of rights. Paine's social contract theory also stood out: he distinguished between "society", which promotes happiness by uniting people, and "government", which arises from human vice and restrains our actions. This led him to argue that the people had a right to revolution, opposing the long-held belief that rebellion was antisocial and must be suppressed.

2 *Common Sense* and the American Revolution

2.1 A brief overview of the British polity

In *Common Sense*, Paine began by critiquing the British political system, subtly expressing his views on the relationship between society and government, and highlighting his adherence to social contract theory. He argued that the British system was neither advanced nor liberal, with its monarchy and rigid class structure perpetuating inequality between the colonies and the mother country. The presence of the aristocracy, embodied by the House of Lords, symbolized the ongoing oppression of the lower classes by the elite. Even the "freedom" claimed by the House of Commons, which made up only a third of the system, was limited by the influence of the monarch and the Lords. The British political system, despite its outward appearance of fairness, ultimately revealed its flaws, as the monarch's will was imposed on the people through parliamentary decrees. Paine's critique of British governance began with an appeal to natural principles. He argued that government arises from humanity's inability to govern itself and exists to ensure liberty and security. He then compared the British system to these natural principles, exposing its contradictions and addressing the psychological barriers that kept Americans loyal to the Crown. As Paine put it, "We can't make a fair judgment when we're influenced by bias or prejudice, and we can't judge ourselves honestly when bound by stubborn loyalties [2]."

2.2 On monarchy and hereditary succession

In this section, Paine uses biblical scripture to explain that monarchy is not a divine or natural right but a product of the people's choices. He argues that in Catholic countries, kings and priests work to keep people ignorant of these truths because monarchy supports the Catholic Church's power. Paine asserts that while the first king might be chosen, hereditary succession creates injustice, as future generations cannot freely choose their rulers. He claims, "Though they may say, we appoint you to be our king, they cannot say, your descendants shall forever rule over us." Paine critiques the glorified history of kingship, arguing that hereditary rule has not brought peace but turmoil, particularly since the Norman Conquest. Most monarchs, driven by greed and personal vendettas, have caused suffering. He also critiques the king's role in government, stating, "The nearer any government approaches to a republic, the less occasion there is for a king." Paine argues that the monarchy weakens Britain's government and the House of Commons by monopolizing power. Through his critique of monarchy, Paine exposes the moral failings of the British monarchy, showing how it fosters poverty and division. He calls on the American people to fight for freedom, equality, and independence, highlighting the right to happiness as central to their struggle against Britain's flawed system.

2.3 The situation in the New World of the Americas

In this section, Paine urges the North American people to reconsider their views on Britain and adopt a more rational perspective on the American Revolutionary War. He uses facts and logical arguments to show that independence is the only realistic option, rejecting reconciliation as futile and pointing out that staying tied to Britain would only continue to

harm the colonies. Paine argues that reconciliation would prevent alliances with European powers like France and Spain, keeping America in a subordinate position and dragging it into conflicts from Britain's disputes, leading to further losses. Paine challenges the widely held belief that Britain is America's "mother country" by analyzing the demographics and religious makeup of the colonies. He asserts that Europe, not England, is America's true parent, saying, "Europe, not England, is the parent country of America". He argues that Europe is unstable, while North America is geographically isolated and should remain neutral. Paine emphasizes that Britain's conflicts with other nations are not America's concern and that the colonies have no obligation to seek peace with a nation that has exploited them. Paine explains that the colonies must fight back in self-defense, as Britain refused to negotiate, and any terms it offered would be disadvantageous. He argues that once the war begins, returning to the pre-war status quo is impossible, and independence is the only way to secure stability. Paine notes that the colonies have already set up the Continental Congress, which provides unified governance, and therefore, the time for independence has arrived. The Continental Congress, authorized by the people, has the legitimate authority to create a new government. Finally, Paine points out the current strength of North America, urging a clear declaration of independence to gain support from France and Spain. He suggests developing naval defenses and building warships for commerce and manufacturing to raise funds. He warns against delaying the move for independence and urges the people to seize the opportunity to achieve the best possible outcome.

3 The practical value and significance of *Common Sense* in the American Revolution

Paine spread enlightenment ideas in North America, earning the title "the Voltaire of America". In 1782, he declared, "Americans have left behind the prejudices of the Old World and embraced new ideas of freedom, enlightenment, and reason" [3]. His most influential work, *Common Sense*, challenged outdated beliefs and promoted a new vision for the colonies. Paine argued that resistance to Britain would be futile if it only led to harsher repression, as seen in Britain's treatment of India. Paine's analysis of the colonies' situation and the need for foreign aid inspired many to arm themselves for the cause. Behring called *Common Sense* the finest pamphlet of the American Revolution, praising its ability to tap into the colonists' political consciousness and ignite the revolutionary spirit. Though Paine's ideas weren't entirely new, his fresh presentation made people reconsider the relationship between the colonies and Britain. Eric Foner noted that Paine, upon arriving in America, already carried radical ideas. In *Common Sense*, Paine argued that revolution was simply common sense, not rebellion. He rejected the Old World's standards and feudal relationships, asserting that rights were natural, not granted by kings. Paine's judgment of the English political system was particularly powerful, as no one could speak more convincingly than someone who had lived under it.

4 The decline of the influence of Paine's ideas after American independence

4.1 Paine's personal ideas went against the interests of the American people

Paine was a successful propagandist but not a successful thinker. He was an atheist (or natural theist), and his ideas were forward-looking and utopian. However, within just a few years, these ideas faced significant resistance. After American independence, the country had to focus on creating a stable nation, establishing social order, and governing with practical solutions that aligned with the tradition of freedom and democracy. Paine's vision, though idealistic, was out of touch with the realities of post-revolutionary America. The country, in need of stability, no longer desired radical change but instead sought peace and security. By then, mainstream thinking had shifted away from Paine's radical ideas, which were no longer welcomed by the American people. Moreover, Paine's writings after the revolution lacked the boldness of his earlier works. As Zhu Xueqin noted, Paine had *Common Sense*, which challenged political traditions; *The Doctrine of Human Rights*, which challenged social traditions; *The Doctrine of Agrarian Justice*, which challenged economic traditions; and *The Age of Reason*, which challenged religious traditions [4]. Despite these radical ideas, after the revolution, Paine's

influence waned, as his vision no longer fit with the country's evolving needs.

4.2 Exploitation by political dissidents

After the American War of Independence, Paine returned to Europe and participated in the French Revolution. When he returned to North America in the early 19th century, his ideas had become more radical, shaped by the French bourgeois revolution. However, these more extreme democratic (revolutionary) ideas were rejected by Americans. At the same time, the shockwaves of the French Revolution had emboldened Americans with the ideals of equality that Paine had championed. However, as North America evolved, its development diverged from the path of the Revolution. Paine's ideas, instead of aligning with this new direction, became marginalized. The Federalists, driven by political differences, exploited his ideas, and public opinion was manipulated, leading to Paine's ideas being abandoned by the American people for a time.

5 Conclusion

Thomas Paine was a key figure in promoting the North American Revolution and a leading thinker of the American Enlightenment. He argued that monarchy and hereditary systems were the "root of all evils" and championed ideas like the "right to happiness" and "natural human rights". His views on the relationship between "society and government" deeply reflected the ideas of his time. By defending the anti-British movement, Paine sparked democratic awareness and fueled anti-British sentiment in North America. He was a selfless advocate for freedom, using his pen to inspire the American people and ignite the flame of liberty and equality across the Atlantic. Paine's revolutionary spirit and ideas are a lasting testament to human wisdom. We should evaluate Paine objectively, acknowledging that every idea has its time and context. His concepts, though limited by the era and social circumstances, were groundbreaking and deserve thoughtful analysis. His vision was ahead of its time and remains worthy of respect and further study.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Xiao HQ. 2007. On the enlightenment thought of Thomas Paine. Xiangtan University.
- [2] Thomas P. 2015. *Common Sense* (translated by Ma Qinghuai). Beijing-Commercial Press.
- [3] Thomas P. 1782. Letter to the Abbe Raynal. *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2.
- [4] Zhu XQ. 1987. The hero of two worlds-Thomas Paine. *Journal of Henan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, 1: 92-101.