

THOMAS PAINE: AMERICAN RADICAL AND FORERUNNER OF THE 21ST CENTURY

“My country is the world, and to do good is my religion.” Thomas Paine

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POLITICS WITH PRINCIPLE

“When the Truth deigns to come, her sister Liberty will not be far. Truth, the fountain of happiness, the harbinger of freedom, the basis of justice, and the source of judgment...By exploring this sacred and invaluable principle, evil is exterminated and good is produced. It is the province of all ranks of society, from prince to beggar to seek it, and it is only to be found by dispassion and fair reflection. By giving free scope to the imagination, and full discussion and promulgation of every sentiment, wherever it may spring, this sacred guide to human action will be ascertained.”

The Rights of Man, 1795

“He will now felicitate himself that the era has arrived, when the light of reason is bursting forth with effulgence, that distinguishes genuine principles from sophistical doctrines, (my underline), and be convinced of the utility of the former over the latter. By reasoning and thinking for himself, he will not relinquish those rights which are inalienable to his nature...”

The Rights of Man, 1795

“Reason obeys itself; and ignorance submits to whatever is dictated to it.”

The Rights of Man, 1795

Commentary

Paine calls for the politics of noetic reasoning which awakens conscience through the thoughtful exploration of democratic principles in relation to contemporary social and political issues. This rounded approach which calmly examines multiple proposals in relation to pressing issues would be inclusive of

diverse sentiments as well as dispassionate and humble before the daunting task of pursuing the public good. By invoking universal principles of “liberty and justice for all” within a context of trust, our indivisible Union could be existentially honored in the open forums of dialogue and debate rather than subtly subverted by intellectual “jockeying”, fueled by the desire to uphold narrow ideological programs and moneyed interests.

Questions

1. What exactly is a “principle”? Can we “step back” from impulses so as to be able to calmly view a principle as a rational basis for thought, deliberation, and action? How inclusive or exclusive should a political principle be? Does a genuine democratic principle such as “justice for all” lend itself to multiple possible interpretations and an even richer array of possible applications to emerging contemporary issues? Does Robert Maynard Hutchin’s observation that “the classical is always contemporary” shed light on the paradoxical truth that a principle is simultaneously unchanging at its core but dynamically evolving in its creative application to diverse issues?
2. Are politically charged ideological terms such as “capitalism”, “socialism”, “free enterprise”, “libertarianism”, and/or “progressivism” linked to sophistry or can they be thoughtfully used to reveal different aspects of concrete, practical political proposals? To what extent, in practice, do such political “isms” illuminate current conditions and future possibilities or oversimplify them; thus prematurely walling off dialogue and mutual fact-finding about policy impacts?
3. What might be meant by the phrase, “You can’t have liberty without unity”?

GOVERNMENT WITHIN A ROBUST CIVIL SOCIETY

“Some writers have so confounded society with government as to leave little no distinction between them...Society is produced by our wants, and

government by our wickedness; the former promotes happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively restraining our vices.

Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil...Here then is the origin and rise of government: namely, a mode rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world; here too is the design and end of government, viz. Freedom and security.”

Common Sense

The more perfect civilization is, the less occasion has it for government, because the more does it regulate its own affairs and govern itself.”

The Rights of Man

Commentary

For Paine, society begins as a moral compact between man and man. Society becomes a cooperative “workshop for democracy” when each citizen develops the “virtues of the heart”—tolerance and civility for diversity, and a willingness to share one’s time and unneeded resources by attending thoughtfully to the needs of others. Such sociability, voluntary sharing, and “barn-raising” spirit contributes to collective happiness and strengthens public life. Government is needed to contain evil, temper institutional despotism, and insure human rights but must also foster a social matrix for the cultivation of democratically inspired civic virtues among its citizens.

Questions

1. What is the role that civil society (neighborhood groups, voluntary associations, free press, schools, and families) must play in developing intelligent habits of democratic participation and public-centered deliberation in public policy? Is this an example of what is meant by the phrase “freedom with fellowship”?
2. How can government and civil society work together to jointly create public good? What are the roles citizens can take up in “citizen engagement” or co-planning and with what accompanying responsibilities?

3. How might we educate our current and future citizens in reasoning skills for promoting the public good based on the thoughtful application of principles?
4. Can the idea of “fellowship” be reflected in political legislatures whose aim is to balance differing views and rival interests so that a sense of fraternity and civic virtues may yet be promoted?

UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND CONSCIENCE

(We) don’t grant liberty of conscience as a favor, but confirm it as a right”

Phillip Foner page 285 “Excerpt from “A Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania on the Present Situation of their Affairs” in *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 1, 5, 10, 12, 1778

“A government of our own is our natural right...(We must be) bringing forward a system of government in which the rights of all men should be preserved. ”

“We have the power to begin the world over again”

“Each age and generation must be free to act for itself...as the ages and generations that preceded it.”

Common Sense, 1776

Commentary

Thomas Paine was a catalyst for establishing a Republic of Conscience in which the right of every citizen to participate in public policy formation was encouraged and the duty of every political representative to engage in periodic constitution-building was expected. Each generation must reform its own political culture and principled civil order—from the neighborhood to the nation—in terms of moral, social, and ecological sustainability.

Questions

1. How does a person’s natural right of conscience lead to political principles such as separation of church and state and protection of individual rights?
2. How might we rethink our real civic needs and obligations? Is it possible to give fresh meaning to the prophetic phrase “think globally, act locally”?

Would a vibrant example of “thinking globally” in locus, be “Teach for All”, the global network of locally run teams of teachers who share best practices and recruit good young people in support of the aim of helping people in their countries to realize their potential?

3. How would joint, local research and planning educate us to what makes our *living place* unique—its natural ecology and diverse human talents and resources? Could such democratic planning in neighborhoods as well as townships, municipalities, and state capitols increase awareness of the human multidimensionality of public planning—its moral, social, economic, and ecological valences? If so, could this lead to a “perceptual down-shift” from the ecologically deceptive notion of “unlimited economic growth” to the tempered embrace of “sufficiency economics”? Would “sufficiency economics” allow more leisure for cultural regeneration and enrichment, allowing a more multidimensional definition of “prosperity”?
4. How can we educate our fellow citizens to express their conscience and engage in a conscientious constitution-building and civic ordering and adaptation from neighborhood to nation?

WEALTH WITH JUSTICE

“The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust...The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together.”

“Man did not make the earth, and though he had a natural right to occupy it, he had no right to locate as his property in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from whence the first title deeds should issue”

Thus, “Every proprietor, therefore of cultivated lands, owes to the community a ground rent (for I know of no better term to express the idea)... Each individual attaining the age of 21, should receive the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of land property...and the sum of

ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.”

Excerpts from *Agrarian Justice* selected by *Tom Paine Friends Bulletin*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 2002

Commentary

Each individual has a natural and equal right to some form of a guaranteed annual income provided by the government. An annual, guaranteed income effectively eliminates poverty and its accompanying miseries. It also allows the average citizen the opportunity to more effectively mesh education, skills, and civic life. In addition, it would allow more leisure to independently cultivate science, art, and literature that are often at the core of cultural renewal.

Questions

1. How do we define “true wealth”? Is there more than one criterion such as “material acquisition” or “influence”?
2. Does a man-made economic system, which generates the contrasts Paine refers to, really live up to the values, like liberty, equality, and fraternity, that are widely thought to be central to the democratic project?
3. Would a form of guaranteed annual income create a social contract of moral virtue between government and its people (a caring and “holding/nurturing” expression of public good)? Would such a basic income without categorization enhance universal justice and reduce poverty while radically expanding individual choice and freedom?
4. How do we insure intergenerational justice relative to the governmental led distribution of benefits and private initiatives for young and old alike in a world of seemingly greater inequality?

PRIVATE INTEREST WITH PUBLIC GOOD (RES PUBLICA)

“The public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals; on the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected. It is the good of all, because it is the good of everyone.”

“When a people agree to form themselves into a republic...it is to be understood that they mutually resolve and pledge themselves to each other, rich and poor alike, to support and maintain this rule of equal justice among them. They therefore renounce not only the despotic form, but *despotic principle*, as well of governing as of being governed by mere will and power, and substitute in its place a government of justice for every person in our union.”

“Dissertations, On Government,” in: *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine* ed. W. Van der Wede from *Thomas Paine Friends Bulletin*, Volume 9, Number 3, Fall 2008

“There is no article in the Constitution of this State, nor of any of the states, that invests the Government in whole or in part with the power of granting charters or monopolies of any kind; the spirit of the times was then against all speculation; and therefore the assuming to grant them is unconstitutional, and when obtained by bribery and corruption is criminal. It is also contrary to the intention and principle of annual elections.”

Compass (June 1805, associated with “Pennsylvania”)

Commentary

The public good lies less with institutions than with how we use our individual moral agency and awareness to direct and partner with our institutions for value creation for the public good. Institutions over time become imperfect and subject to mission-creep and goal displacement.

“There was a dangerous transition from the idea of government of limited powers over citizens with inalienable rights to the idea of the unlimited sovereignty and the material welfare of the majority. It is an easy step from here to the perilous position reached by most democracies today, in which individual liberties get violated in the name of national security and prestige at home and abroad, in which the mute and meek are often sacrificed at the altars of public utility and political necessity.”

Raghavan Iyer, *Parapolitics*

Questions

1. By what criteria can we assess our institutions—public and private—by degrees of “despotism” or coercion in their decision-making processes?
2. Governments make rules to advantage and protect the *average* citizen, yet cannot always account for each *unique, diverse* individual citizen, business, and neighborhood it serves. If this dynamic is true, can one make a case for government with limited powers whose public policy insures regionalization, local decentralization and diverse local autonomy rather than establishing uniform requirements in a centralized, bureaucratic State?
3. Have big, publically owned corporations become too despotic and unregulated? Can large corporations, production cooperatives, and selected nonprofit land trusts serve humanity and contribute to a sustainable world without aggrandizing and overly enclosing resources for their own narrow purposes? For example, would you trust the public good to a half dozen or more private, profit-seeking, food producing/distributing multi-national corporations, some with patented seed packages for fees, who supply much of the world’s population with their food?
4. James Madison wrote, “No theoretical checks—no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chermical idea.” John Schwarz , *Common Credo*
Virtue comes most effectively out of firm principle...that it is good and right to act in a proper manner (once tested in the court of reason) and to fit those principles into creative application with others for the common good. What do you think civic virtue is?

RELIGION AND SCIENCE ENHANCED BY THE GIFT OF REASON

“The true Deist has but one Deity; and his religion consists in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in its works, and in

endeavoring to imitate Him in everything moral, scientifically, and mechanical.”

The Age of Reason

“The choicest gift of God to man (is) the gift of reason; and having endeavored to force upon himself the belief of a system against which reason revolts, he ungratefully calls it human reason, as if man could give reason to himself.”

The Age of Reason

“He would then see that all the knowledge man has of science, and that all the mechanical arts by which renders his situation comfortable are derived from (the munificence of the Creator); his mind, exalted by this science and convinced by the fact, would increase in his gratitude as it increased knowledge; his religion or his worship would become united in the improvement as a man; any employment he followed that had connection to principles of creation—as everything of agriculture, of science, and of the mechanical arts has—would teach him more of God and of the gratitude he owes him.”

The Age of Reason

Commentary

Thomas Paine was a self-declared “Theophilanthropist”: a lover of God and Man. He believed that reverence for Deity, Man, and Nature make society truly benevolent and was the harbinger of a universal civilization of the heart. Paine pointed to “our living awareness of the Infinite Presence” in an empyrean which ever renews and enlarges man’s potentials for reason and of reasoning together for the good based on natural law. Paine believed man is accountable to Deity first and Deity is the source of man’s ability to “step back” and refine a reasoned conscience in dialogue with others. In this sense, Paine valiantly fought for universal human rights not so much for the personal freedom to do as we wished, but as an expression of Deity, reflected in each person’s innate dignity. As trustees of natural rights, we are obligated to cooperate and reason for the common good.

Questions

1. How can we understand, define, and then encourage science and religion to do good for all of mankind?
2. How can we use the discipline of science and/or the religious quest to improve ourselves and our reasoning broadening and deepening our awareness of larger spheres of knowing with humility?
3. How can scientists and religious practitioners see themselves as partners in pursuing knowledge for the good and the disinherited rather than being mutually walled off from each other?

FREEDOM WITH SACRIFICE

“Those who expect to reap the benefit of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it.”

Crisis IV, 1777

“Heaven knows how to put a proper price on its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated... lay your shoulders to the wheel...Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and repel it.”

Crisis 1, December 1776

“I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. ‘Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.”

The Crisis, No. 1

Commentary

Confucius said, “To see what is right and not to do it, is want of courage or principle.” A universal principle is like a moral compass, a rational basis for

making a decision overtime, but how it is expressed in particular situations will vary and will be difficult and complex. Others may not share our principles, but if the universal is also in the particular, however latent, conflicts can be useful because respecting differences allows one to learn about one's own point of view while drawing out relevant principles. If one self-consciously practices a principle over time, one can gain clarity and go the "heart" of a situation while *individually exemplifying*, in modes like Gandhi and King, a sense of universal responsibility . Thus, one can appreciate the Persian proverb which declares that when times get darker, it is easier to see the light. Paine put these most poignantly when he said:

"These are the times that try men's souls...The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. 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 everything its value."

The American Crisis

Questions

1. In today's world, what are "the fatigues" of supporting individual freedom?
2. How can we spread hope and virtue as sustainable "contagions" with and through others in the midst of a "time of troubles"?
3. Is Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl who stood up for education and was shot, a contemporary example? Who might be other contemporary examples?

"...Thomas Paine's central place in an American radical tradition stretching from the Revolution to the present...reminds us how Paine's words still resonate in American society today."

Eric Foner, Columbia University

ADDENDUM: UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES AND THE CHALLENGES OF APPLICATION

Generally, a universal principle (e.g. non-violence) is one which is beyond a specific context of space and time, and, yet, contains myriads of applications in historical space-time through embodied individual action and collective deliberation. Examples of universal principles in the political realm may include liberty, equality, and justice.

Universal principles may be put into a series of abstract propositions such as in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Functioning similarly to axioms in mathematics, principles can be the basis of deliberation and pursuit of truth. Thus, as the Declaration states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident..” Principles can provide a moral compass, a North Star, a basis for developing criteria for action, challenging each person to apply them in practice. They are a basis of true education.

Principles can act as ideals. As the philosopher St. Martin noted, “The ideal is only truth at a distance.” Martin Luther King drew on the ideals of the Founding Fathers and the New Testament, as is apparent in his “I have a Dream speech.”

If principles are universal, then they are present, albeit latent, in human beings writ large (in the heart) and can be evoked or re-evoked in different forms in different language or in one’s bearing (beyond language) in particular situations and even different cultures. Ho Chi Ming and other modern revolutionaries called the U.S. Declaration of Independence one of the most revolutionary documents and *an inspiration* to their respective causes. Corresponding to the universality of “freedom” beyond a particular culture, it has been empirically measured that the effect of feeling free on life satisfaction is universally positive (Fischer and Boer), and the positive effect of feeling free on life satisfaction is a cross-cultural universal (Deci and Ryan 2000, Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan 2003, Haller and Hadler 2004).

The challenge thus lies in creatively relating principles to particulars in personal, civic, and political life.

To be potent and actualizing, principles and ideals must be practiced. There are no guaranteed outcomes. This thinking and acting process always concerns the application of human judgment involving persons and situations, and our ability to “sift” and learn from thoughtful applications over time. It is akin to conducting careful scientific experiments with an open outlook with feedback.

William Lee Miller’s volumes on Abraham Lincoln illustrate how one can hone and test a principle in political encounter over time; thus continually deepening understanding of others, while evolving one’s own views. To make a principle “one’s own” is to have “a lived experience”, applying it in particular circumstances, with a keen sensitivity to divergent standpoints. In politics, this calls for each committed participant to listen, reflect, and seek common ground in principles, policies, and procedures in order to build a common nexus of understanding as well as visible communities of consensus.

The politics of principle involves the dynamics of yielding and asserting, the art of imaginative empathy, as well as that of rational argument. Above all, it requires transparent acts of self-correction without fuss and fanfare. By honing recognized principles in the fires of dialogue, disagreement, and responsible practices, the *polis* can be strengthened in the collective quest for the common good. Such public engagement can also deepen one’s own clarity and understanding of any given principle and its range of application.

It is through the test of humility and honesty that one learns not to see a principle as simply an image or “golden calf” of investing one’s ego with merely the outer image, with overly generalized, statistically determined theories of human nature, or facile slogans or “sound-bites”. Instead of falling prey to self-righteousness—or perhaps worse—to the imperious urge for immediate, all-encompassing solutions, one should constructively engage other minds in genuine attempts to deliberate, to “think through” a fresh application of a lasting principle, including encompassing relations with other principles, that approximates the common good in living situations or a wide application of pursuing truth. Thus, in the example of exploring “freedom”, one might pursue “freedom” with the intent of making sure that each person has sufficient opportunity and economic means to pursue it.

Without principles, social interaction, however democratic, is rudderless and politics without principle descends into excess passion, overreliance on charismatic leaders, and the rigid partialities of self-interest and expediency. Thus, for example, is a rationale for a Supreme Court which must decide whether political deliberations and legislative enactments resonate with our highest legal principles.

Raghavan Iyer writes, “One can believe in the principle and lower one’s sights in practice, not hypocritically, but from an awareness that the achievement of any given time, place, and context will imperfectly reflect a worthy ideal.” Because persons have different viewpoints, great leaders must be flexible in their creative, fresh application of principles to particular circumstances in order to create unity for a greater common good. Like Paine and Lincoln, unity may involve self-sacrifice wherever the interests of others are to be benefitted by our endurance. By stating reasons in open discussion based on principled thinking, one retains one’s own integrity while, even if blocked, potentially influencing lines of reasoning and significant events in the future.

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