

# *The Limits of Revolutionary Radicalism: Tom Paine and Slavery*

ON THE TWO HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of Thomas Paine's birth, Mt. Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum prepared in 1937 to unveil his eight-foot masterpiece of Paine in Paris. Delays and postponements gave way to Nazi invasion and Paine's likeness remained hidden in a small room until 1948, when it was erected in a Paris park. Over four decades later, the United States Congress prepared to accept the statue and place it in the United States Capitol art collection, to be featured temporarily in the rotunda of the Capitol. The congressional resolution accepting the gift praised Paine's contributions and, in doing so, revealed popular and academic misconceptions of his writings and vision. "Congress," it declared, "should recognize the seminal role Thomas Paine played in the founding of our nation as well as his advocacy for individual rights and liberty worldwide"; for he was the first to insist on a written constitution "to protect the civil, religious, and property rights of people of all races." Paine's status, Congress erroneously concluded, "is further enhanced by his work as [an] . . . abolitionist." By proclaiming Paine an abolitionist and racial egalitarian, Congress perpetuated his mythical antislavery position.<sup>1</sup>

Paine's reputation has not always sparkled so brightly. Reacting mostly to his *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason*, early biographers accentuated Paine's faults, publicizing rumors of intemperance and offensive personal habits. His degraded reputation persisted until Moncure Conway published a

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<sup>1</sup> *Congressional Record*, 102rd Cong., 2d sess., 1992, 138, pt. 23:34565-67. Congress and America have come some distance in accepting Paine. In 1860, the Philadelphia City Council refused to allow Paine's portrait to hang in Independence Hall. See Moncure D. Conway, *Thomas Paine: A Celebration* (Cincinnati, 1860), 8-9.

sympathetic biography in 1892.<sup>2</sup> Since Conway's work appeared, Paine's popular reputation has improved, and his relevance grown. Testifying before Congress on behalf of Vietnam veterans in 1971, John Kerry invoked the symbolism and language of Paine's *Crisis 1*, suggesting that veterans home from the war were "winter soldiers," as opposed to the "summer soldiers" and "sunshine patriots" who abandoned the Revolution. "We need to resurrect him and hear him," wrote Jon Katz recently, contending that Paine would support free access to the information superhighway. "The Internet is Thomas Paine's bastard child. Thomas Paine should be our hero."<sup>3</sup> Conway's biography also renewed academic interest in Paine's life and work. In the last forty years, several volumes and scholarly articles on Paine have appeared, many focusing on his political and social thought, others on his language and writing style, and most diverging in their assessments.<sup>4</sup> But regardless of whether scholars view Paine as liberal, liberal republican, commercial republican, radical, radical democrat, commercial radical, bourgeois liberal, scientific deity, nomadic scientist, or urban radical, nearly all point to his abolitionism.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The two earliest and certainly the most scurrilous biographies are Francis Oldys [George Chalmers], *The Life of Thomas Pain, The Author of the Seditious Writings, Entitled Rights of Man* (10th ed., London, 1793); James Cheetham, *The Life of Thomas Paine, Author of Common Sense, The Crisis, Rights of Man* (New York, 1809); Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (2 vols., New York, 1892, 1893).

<sup>3</sup> "Statement of Mr. John Kerry, Representing the Vietnam Veterans Against the War," *Congressional Record*, 92d Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 117, pt. 9:11738-39. Jon Katz, "The Age of Paine," in *Hot Wired Network* at [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com).

<sup>4</sup> The finest study of Paine's life is John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston, 1995). Other important works include Jack Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York, 1994), *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature* (Baltimore, 1993); Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Boston, 1989); Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976); David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York, 1974); Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Man of Reason: The Life of Thomas Paine* (Philadelphia, 1959); *Thomas Paine's American Ideology* (Dover, 1984); Mark Philp, *Paine* (New York, 1989); Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984), 2-66; Isaac Kramnick, "Tom Paine: Radical Democrat," *Democracy* 1 (1981): 127-38.

<sup>5</sup> One exception is Hawke, *Paine*, 36-37; it should be noted, however, that Hawke considered Paine false in everything. He may have noticed Paine's ambivalence about slavery, but he did not explain it.

Paine's reputation as an abolitionist developed as a tangled skein of no readings, misreadings, misattributions, and carelessness. Much of this reputation is probably due to Conway, who, conflating a Quaker upbringing with Quaker abolitionism, insisted that Paine was America's first abolitionist.<sup>6</sup> Nearly all historians reject Conway's overstatement but continue to recognize Paine as among the first to advocate emancipation. Thus Jack Fruchtman considers him "a perfect anchor" to the emancipation movement and Gregory Claeys affirms Paine as "among the first to advocate freeing all slaves." "From his earliest writings," Michael Durey exclaims, "Paine had called for the freeing of all slaves," and he "never reneged from this position." These recent works reflect and perpetuate a consensus about Paine's abolitionism that is founded less on substantive evidence than on a tendency to associate Paine's distinct message of liberty and equality with more egalitarian twentieth-century conceptions of the "rights of man."<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, Thomas Paine *in no way supported slavery*; indeed he found it repulsive and sincerely hoped for its eradication. But so did many late-eighteenth-century intellectuals. It might even be argued that Thomas Jefferson, vilified in recent historical literature for his ambivalence about race, tried harder than Paine to challenge chattel slavery.<sup>8</sup> It is a great leap from private thought to public action, especially when that action challenges the racial assumptions and the social and economic foundations of a people

<sup>6</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (2 vols., New York, 1945), 2:15. Conway compared Paine to Garrison, and attributed to Paine any antislavery thought he could, even suggesting that Paine wrote the clause on slavery in the Declaration of Independence (the clause was stricken by Congress); see Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine*, 1:47, 51–52, 80–81, 154.

<sup>7</sup> Fruchtman, *Apostle of Freedom*, 50; Claeys, *Social and Political Thought*, 1; Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, Kan., 1997), 283; see as well Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 73; Keane, *Tom Paine*, 508; Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:15; James Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society 1776–1846* (Baton Rouge, La., 1982); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), 364; Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, 1933), 61, Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848* (London, 1988), 92, 116–18.

<sup>8</sup> Jefferson outlined a gradual emancipation scheme during the Revolution and in his draft of a Virginia constitution in 1783, but neither received serious consideration. See Noble E. Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 61–63; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time: The Sage of Monticello* (Boston, 1981), 316–27.

and their society. By examining what little Paine wrote about slavery, this essay argues that he made no such leap. Intellectually, Paine was antislavery, but he rarely transformed his thought into visible and public action. Throughout his lifetime Paine avoided, for the most part, the issues of slavery and abolition, and he also joined other revolutionaries in the conviction that American citizens would only be white. Few intellectuals in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world were as radical as Tom Paine, but even his thought was circumscribed by time and place. Recognizing this fact does not deny his radicalism, but it should place his radicalism in its proper context.

Abolitionism in North America, Britain, and the British colonies from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries was a movement with many origins, but the influence of Quakers is uncontested.<sup>9</sup> From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, in both Britain and North America, abolitionism grew largely from individualistic, Quaker origins into a broad-based movement with highly organized institutions. Transatlantic cooperation between Friends existed as early as the seventeenth century, but more inclusive organizations devoted to improving the lot of free and bonded blacks did not emerge until the late eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> By 1788 organizations existed in America, Britain, and France that formally recognized and encouraged one another. Given Paine's supposed abolitionist commitment, one expects to find that he actively supported and joined these early efforts toward emancipation. Growing up Quaker in Thetford, England, Tom Paine certainly learned the antislavery doctrines of his faith.

<sup>9</sup> For the debate about the origins of American antislavery, see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966); Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*; Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1977); Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1975); James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (London, 1986); Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, 1933); Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*.

<sup>10</sup> Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana, Ill., 1972), 3. On the Quaker origins of antislavery, see Thomas Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (New Haven, 1950); Jean Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, 1985); Davis, *Slavery in Western Culture*, 291-390.

Undoubtedly his sensitivity to the “rights of men” was sharpened by his family’s life in the shadow of the influential Grafton family, whose power virtually eliminated competitive elections in Thetford.<sup>11</sup> A close look at Paine’s early career, however, reveals that he seemed little concerned with making abolition of slavery a goal of his public reform efforts.

When Paine arrived in America in 1774, antislavery thought was not uncommon. Franklin outlined arguments against slavery in 1751, and James Otis, in his 1761 defense of colonial rights, perceived clearly the contradiction inherent in the colonists’ pleas for liberty. “Not a Quaker in Philadelphia,” John Adams remembered of Otis’s five-hour courtroom tirade, “ever asserted the rights of negroes in stronger terms.” Adams shuddered “at the consequences that may be drawn from such premises.” To Otis’s implication that violence could reclaim Negroes’ rights, Adams could only answer how “I adore the idea of gradual abolitions!” Paine’s future colleague Benjamin Rush published an antislavery pamphlet in 1773, and was among the most optimistic antislavery spokesmen. While Anthony Benezet had “stood alone a few years ago in opposing Negro slavery in Philadelphia,” Rush claimed that by the Revolution “three-fourths of the province as well as the city cry out against it.”<sup>12</sup>

New antislavery organizations also afforded opportunities to actively challenge slavery. In 1775 antislavery Philadelphians founded the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Kept in Bondage. During the Revolution, the society effectively dissolved, but in February of 1784 leaders revived the organization and recruited new members. Throughout the 1780s, the society’s lawyers attempted to free illegally bound slaves and insisted on strict enforcement of the gradual emancipation act passed by the 1780 legislature. In 1787, hoping to “expand their scope of operations,” members again reorganized the society as the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the

<sup>11</sup> Keane, *Tom Paine*, 9–15; David Powell, *Tom Paine: The Greatest Exile* (London, 1985), 1–56.

<sup>12</sup> John Adams to William Tudor, June 1, 1818, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (10 vols., Boston, 1856), 10:315; see also Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 232–46; Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-Keeping* (Philadelphia, 1773); David Freeman Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (Indianapolis, 1971), 104–106; Benjamin Rush to Granville Sharp, May 1, 1773, in L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1951), 1:80.

Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage. More prominent citizens joined the organization, including Benjamin Franklin, Tench Coxe, James Pemberton, Benjamin Rush, and Thomas Paine.<sup>13</sup> Yet for the most part Paine remained aloof from antislavery efforts in America, England, and France. His public neglect of slavery should not be surprising, though. Between 1774 and 1802, after all, he participated in two monumental revolutions. Moreover, as he later explained to Jefferson, "I do not permit the *whole* of my mind, nor ever did, to be engaged or absorbed by one object only."<sup>14</sup>

Much of the evidence that historians cite for Paine's abolitionism dissipates under scrutiny. Historians frequently state that Paine was a founding member of the antislavery society formed in 1775. Thomas Paine was neither a founding member, as some carelessly suggest, nor a member of any kind in this society in 1775. A secretary recorded members present at each meeting, and Paine's name does not appear in those records, nor did any contemporaries mention his attendance, nor did he ever claim participation.<sup>15</sup> Even when the society reorganized in 1784 Paine did not attend meetings. Not until 1787 did Paine go to two meetings shortly before leaving for England to peddle his iron bridge design.

<sup>13</sup> Gary B. Nash and Jean Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1991), 115, 114–36; Papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Mar. 5, 1787, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Contrary to academic opinion, the society was *not* designed to abolish slavery or the slave trade. Its primary work was in locating illegally held slaves and attempting to secure their release. It is significant, as well, that the society in Philadelphia admitted only one black man (a light-skinned one at that) from 1775 to 1859. See Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery*, 185.

<sup>14</sup> Paine to Thomas Jefferson, Apr. 20, 1805, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1465. On antislavery in England and France, see Thomas Drake, *Quakers and Slavery*, 90–91; Edward D. Seeber, *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore and Oxford, 1937); Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (2 vols., London, 1808); Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 213–54, 310–14; Paine to Thomas Jefferson, Apr. 10, 1789, June 17, 1789, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1288, 1291.

<sup>15</sup> A founding member was one present at the first meeting. The secretary of the society made two distinctions in listing attendees: members present with dues paid, and members absent with dues owed. Paine appears nowhere in these lists until 1787. See the Papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Historians making this mistake include Philip S. Foner, see his *Complete Writings*, 2:15; Harry Hayden Clark, *Thomas Paine: Representative Selections, With Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes* (New York, N.Y., 1944), lxxxvi; Fruchtmann, *Apostle of Freedom*, 51.

Historians also frequently attribute to Paine the preamble to Pennsylvania's emancipation act of 1780. This unproven assertion continues to be forwarded, probably because Philip Foner included the preamble in his collection of Paine's writings. However, there is no substantive evidence proving Paine's authorship.<sup>16</sup> George Bryan, the legislator who brought the bill forward, claimed authorship for himself. It has also been suggested that a local Quaker was enlisted to write the bill. While certain knowledge of the author is elusive, there is simply no reason to assume that it was Paine.<sup>17</sup>

By far the most powerful evidence historians cite for Paine's abolitionism are two essays he supposedly wrote in 1774 and 1775. Both essays were short pieces published in newspapers. Both articles were generally antislavery. However, close attention reveals that they are strikingly different from each other, and it seems doubtful that Paine wrote both, if either of them.

The more significant of the two, "African Slavery in America," an article of approximately fifteen hundred words, was composed in 1774 and published in March of 1775 in the *Philadelphia Journal*. The author, writing under the sobriquet "Justice and Humanity," is shocked that "some desperate wretches should be willing to steal and enslave men by violence and murder for gain." It is even more deplorable that "Christianized people should approve, and be concerned in the savage practice." In keeping with other revolutionaries, the author partially blames the English. It is the British who, by "hiring one tribe against another," steal and "enslave towards one hundred thousand yearly." The author does not reject the institution of slavery, but suggests that Africans have been illegally enslaved. They are not prisoners of war. Many "of these African nations inhabit fertile countries, are industrious farmers, enjoy plenty, and lived quietly, averse to war, before the

<sup>16</sup> Philip Foner cites Robert Brunhouse's *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790*, for evidence of Paine's authorship of the preamble. There is absolutely no evidence in that volume supporting such a claim. See also Keane, *Tom Paine*, 572-73 n. 48; this mistake is perpetuated by Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 63; Ralph Ketcham, *From Colony to Country: The Revolution in American Thought, 1750-1820* (New York, 1974), 235; Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 286; Audrey Williamson, *Thomas Paine: His Life, Work and Times* (New York, 1973), 94; Samuel Edwards, *Rebel! A Biography of Tom Paine* (New York, 1974), 72; Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine*, 1:154; Clark, *Representative Selections*, lxxxvii. Several essays which Paine probably did not write appear in Foner's definitive *Complete Writings*. See Aldridge, *Thomas Paine's American Ideology*, 286-91.

<sup>17</sup> On the authorship of the 1780 act, see Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees*, 101-2.

Europeans debauched them with liquors.”<sup>18</sup> “Justice and Humanity” challenged those who quoted Old Testament justifications of slavery, observing that Americans are Christians, not Jews. “Such arguments ill become us, *since the time of the reformation came*, under gospel light. But the chief design of this paper,” explains the author, is not to “disprove” slavery, “but to entreat Americans to consider” with “what consistency, or decency they complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery . . . without any pretence of authority, or claim upon them?” The success of the coming Revolution depends upon ending slavery as a national sin. “How just, how suitable to our crime is the punishment with which providence threatens us? We have enslaved multitudes . . . and now are threatened with the same. And while others evils are confessed, and bewailed, why not this especially, and publicly; than which no other vice, if all others, has brought guilt on the land.” The issue is not only justice for the slave, but securing the Revolution through self-purification and confession.<sup>19</sup>

Although the central point is not emancipation, “Justice and Humanity” does encourage it. “As these people are not convicted of forfeiting freedom, they have still a natural, perfect right to it; and the governments whenever they come should, in justice set them free, and punish those who hold them in slavery.” And what would become of the newly freed slaves? The old and infirm should be kept. “As to the rest, let prudent men . . . determine what is . . . best for them.” They might become tenant farmers, or perhaps “they might sometime form useful barrier settlements on the frontiers. Thus they may become interested in the public welfare . . . instead of being dangerous, as now they are, should an enemy promise them a better condition.” Finally, freed slaves, and the nations of Africa, should be converted to Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Of this relatively mild antislavery piece, Conway wrote that it was an “early manifesto of abolitionism,” and as “thorough as Garrison himself could have made it.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> [Thomas Paine?], *African Slavery in America*, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:16–19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine*, 1:51–52.

Compared to the corpus of Paine's writing, this essay is unique, both in style and content. The essay's religious undercurrent and themes of redemption and sin are unlike Paine's other writings. "Should not every society bear testimony against" slavery, the author exclaimed, "and account obstinate persists in it bad men, enemies to their country, and exclude them from fellowship; as they often do for much lesser faults?" Paine could effectively use religious persuasion, as in *Common Sense*, but it was only one of many themes, and exclusion from fellowship seems an odd punishment for Paine to suggest. Not only was the author concerned about the purity of American religion, but also, violating Paine's basic belief in self-determination, he insisted that Americans are "bound in duty" to the "Redeemer" to proselytize "the Africans in their own countries."<sup>22</sup>

Of equal importance is the author's warning that the crisis with Britain could be a divine punishment for slavery. If not confessed as a national sin and ended, slavery might become a stain upon the reputation of the nation, especially in the eyes of God. Paine did think of the Revolution in millennial terms, but never did he question its purity. "America need never be ashamed to tell her birth," he later wrote, "nor relate the stages by which she rose to empire." "This distinguished era [the American Revolution] is blotted by no one misanthropical vice."<sup>23</sup> Never did Paine waver in his belief that the American Revolution was the purest movement for liberty ever seen.

Importantly, the author also suggests that "those who hold them in slavery" should be punished.<sup>24</sup> This stern recommendation seems unlikely to be Paine's, considering that within a few years one of his closest friends would be the most prominent slaveholder in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, and another a leading Charleston slave importer, Henry Laurens.

Not only does the piece differ stylistically from Paine's other writings, his authorship is disputable on other grounds. The only evidence supporting his authorship, suggests Paine scholar Alfred Aldridge, is a letter written by an

<sup>22</sup> [Paine?], *African Slavery*, 2:18–19. Also interesting is the fact that the author refers to God as "Lord," "final Judge," and "Redeemer," but never "Almighty," "Creator," or "God" which were Paine's favorites. Although I am not convinced, Jack Fruchtman argues that the religious imagery used in this piece is consistent with Paine's later writings. See his *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 61–64.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Paine, *Crisis 13, Crisis 5*, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:231, 123.

<sup>24</sup> [Paine?], *African Slavery*, 2:18.

elderly Benjamin Rush. Rush, providing information to James Cheetham for a biography of Paine, related that he met Paine in a bookshop in 1773 (although Paine did not arrive in Philadelphia until 1774). Shortly thereafter, Rush explained, "I read a short essay with which I was much pleased, in one of Bradford's papers, against the slavery of Africans in our country, and which I was informed was written by Mr. Paine." When the two met again, Paine told him that the essay was "the first thing he had ever published in his life." Soon after, claimed Rush, Paine was hired as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. However, there is no slavery essay by Paine in any of Bradford's papers before Paine's editorship began. No other contemporary, biographer, or friend of Paine's, nor Paine himself, ever mentions this essay as Paine's. Since it appeared at least two months after other essays he published in the same journal, it could not possibly have been the "first thing he had ever published."<sup>25</sup>

More than likely Rush's confusion resulted from a simple lapse in memory, rather than misinformation furnished by Paine. In fact, each of the objections provided against Paine's authorship of this essay could be met with careful and elaborate reasoning. But considered collectively, these objections cast serious doubt on Paine's authorship. We cannot change the historical record to read how we think it should. Rush's statement simply cannot be used as evidence to suggest that Paine wrote this article. However, it is not impossible that Rush did read an antislavery piece written by Paine around the same time. And perhaps that essay was the one he recollected three decades later.

A shorter piece of fewer than three hundred words, "A Serious Thought," published in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on October 18, 1775, is also attributed to Paine. While there is no reliable evidence that Paine wrote this essay either, it does resemble his style and is consistent with his views of the Revolution and slavery.<sup>26</sup> The author, "Humanus," reflects on "the horrid cruelties exercised by Britain in the East Indies," where he reads "of natives being blown away, for no other crime than refusing to fight." Not only those cruelties, but Britain is also responsible for stirring up the Indians. Instead of providing a good Christian example to American Indians, Britain "has

<sup>25</sup> Aldridge, *Thomas Paine's American Ideology*, 286–91; Benjamin Rush to James Cheetham, July 17, 1809, in L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1951), 2:1007–9.

<sup>26</sup> See Aldridge, *Thomas Paine's American Ideology*, 291.

basely tampered with their passions . . . and made them tools of treachery and murder." She has further sinned by employing "herself in the most horrid of all traffics, that of human flesh." Britain has ravaged the "hapless shores of Africa, robbing it of its unoffending inhabitants to cultivate her stolen dominions in the West." The Revolution is prominent in this piece also, but in a different light. "When I reflect on these" cruelties, declared "Humanus," "I hesitate not for a moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain. Call it independence or what you will, if it is the cause of God and humanity it will go on."<sup>27</sup>

In this article, blame for slavery is shifted entirely to Britain. There is no mention of American responsibility nor any plea for confession of this greatest national sin. The imperial crisis does not portend a punishment against Americans for this sin, nor is the Revolution in jeopardy because of slavery. Indeed, according to "Humanus," the Revolution is Britain's punishment for slavery, the very reason independence will succeed. Foreshadowing the monarchical jabs in *Common Sense*, "Humanus" laments the fact that "the little paltry dignity of early kings has been set up in preference to the great cause of the King of kings." Particularly important, keeping in mind "African Slavery," is the recommendation with which "Humanus" concludes: "And when the Almighty shall have blest us, and made us a people *dependent only on Him*, then may our first gratitude be shown by an act of continental legislation, which shall put a stop to the importation of Negroes for sale, soften the hard fate of those already here, and in time procure their freedom."<sup>28</sup> No punishment for masters is even hinted at and the idea of immediate emancipation is ignored. First the slave trade should be stopped, then conditions improved, and finally freedom granted.

The tension between these two essays is evident in their styles, their emancipation recommendations, and how each conceives of the Revolution. Given the lack of evidence and the style, it is highly unlikely that Paine was "Justice and Humanity." Although Paine never again publicly worked for or wrote about emancipation—keeping in mind that there is no direct proof that he wrote "A Serious Thought"—the provisions "Humanus" suggested

<sup>27</sup> [Thomas Paine?], *A Serious Thought*, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, [Paine's?] emphasis.

are similar to ideas Paine elaborated later.

Virtually every scholar has assumed that Paine authored both of these essays, despite their contradictions. And these short pieces, less than two thousand words combined, constitute the entire corpus of public writings on slavery that have been attributed to Paine.<sup>29</sup> Even if we assume that Paine did write both essays, they still do not justify his reputation as a pioneering abolitionist. But considering that he may have written only “A Serious Thought,” at best a vague antislavery piece that is concerned more with the Revolution, and that he never involved himself actively in antislavery organizations, Paine’s public abolitionist reputation is unjustified and historically incorrect.

To deny Paine the distinction of being an abolitionist should not overshadow his personal hatred of slavery. Perhaps no one hated the concept more than he did. The institution was the most blatant violation of the principles to which he devoted his life. “It is chiefly the people of Liverpool that employ themselves in the slave trade,” Paine once wrote, and had “I command of the elements I would blast Liverpool with fire and brimstone. It is the Sodom and Gomorrah of brutality.”<sup>30</sup> An unpublished poem he wrote during the French Revolution urged readers to

See Afric’s wretched Offspring torn  
From all that Human heart holds dear,  
See Millions doomed in Chains to Mourn,  
Unpitied eve, by a Tear<sup>31</sup>

But Paine never actually witnessed the mass of human property toiling south of Delaware. Perhaps if he had ever journeyed to the plantations of the Carolina lowcountry or to Barbados, he would have become the abolitionist

<sup>29</sup> Even his most recent biographer assumes Paine wrote them. See Keane, *Tom Paine*, 99–100. The exception is Alfred Owen Aldridge, who observes that the first documented Paine remark on slavery did not appear until 1776 in a footnote. See Aldridge, *Thomas Paine’s American Ideology*, 291; for footnote, see Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:82.

<sup>30</sup> Paine to Thomas Jefferson, Jan. 25, 1805, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1462. Paine also wrote that man “has no property in man.” *Rights of Man*, pt. 1, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:251.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted from Aldridge, *Thomas Paine’s American Ideology*, 291.

scholars have claimed he was. The important distinction to be made, however, is between private and public antislavery, and between antislavery and racial egalitarianism. This is a distinction difficult to make, perhaps, because Paine's radical *political* views are conflated with his *personal* views of slavery. Typifying this trend is Audrey Williamson's claim that "Paine's was the first voice to be raised in support of the negro as a free citizen."<sup>32</sup> But nowhere in his writings does Paine suggest civic or social equality for American Negroes. Indeed, Paine did not extend the "rights of man" to all men, and throughout his career, he implicitly excluded not only free and enslaved blacks, but also Indians from participation in American civil society.

For Paine, Indians represented the ultimate other; they were the antithesis of civilization, people existing in a state of nature. While they had no place in his universal civilization, they served admirably as examples of uncivilization. Although it is doubtful that Paine ever experienced any meaningful contact with Indians, he still drew upon them as metaphors. Britain's policy toward the colonies, "instead of civilizing, has tended to brutalize mankind . . . she has made war like an Indian against the religion of humanity." When some British soldiers, "contrary to the practice of all nations but savages," executed an American militia officer, Paine reminded the British commander that the "history of the most savage Indians does not produce instances exactly of this kind."<sup>33</sup>

For Paine, Indians provided a way of understanding the benefits and dangers of civilization. "To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America." Indian society exhibited no poverty, no want. "The life of an Indian," Paine remarked, "is a continual holiday, compared with the poor of Europe; and, on the other hand it appears to be abject when compared to the rich."<sup>34</sup> Indians were not political or social realities, nor were they members of American society in general. They existed, both physically and intellectually, at the periphery. It is useful to observe that Jefferson, while sharing many of Paine's racial assumptions, still believed that Indians and whites might eventually

<sup>32</sup> Williamson, *Thomas Paine*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Paine, *Crisis 7, A Supernumerary Crisis*, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:142-218.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:610.

amalgamate into a single race and society.<sup>35</sup>

Paine knew that Negroes and Indians lived in America, but they were not members of society. America, Paine succinctly wrote in *Common Sense*, “hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe . . . [w]e claim brotherhood with every European Christian.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when he explained America to Frenchmen in his *Rights of Man*, Paine remarked that America was populated by the descendants of Englishmen, Dutch, Scots, Irish, Germans, Swedes, French, “and some few of all the European nations.”<sup>37</sup> When he wrote to his close friend Henry Laurens, Paine elaborated on what classes exist in society. “The first useful class of citizens are the farmers and cultivators.” Next, Paine continues, come “the various orders of manufacturers and mechanics.” These are followed by merchants and shopkeepers.<sup>38</sup> Nowhere in his public or private writings does Paine suggest citizenship or social equality for Negroes or Indians. I am not arguing that Paine was blind to the existence or importance of blacks and Indians. Rather, I am suggesting that his conception of America was strictly political, economic, and abstract, and not complicated by social realities. In Paine’s thought, America was not a geographical region, but a republican polity, and anything outside the polity he ignored.

This may partially explain why during the American Revolution Paine never supported recruiting slaves to fight for American liberty. He understood well the difficulty in getting enough Americans to fight. Certainly, allowing slaves to fight for their own freedom and for the freedom of America provided them a stake in society.<sup>39</sup> The British, although not necessarily motivated by humanitarianism, exchanged freedom for service.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1944, 1972), 210–13, 256–57.

<sup>36</sup> Paine, *Common Sense*, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:19.

<sup>37</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, pt. 2, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:360 n.

<sup>38</sup> Paine to Henry Laurens, spring 1778, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1142–43.

<sup>39</sup> For Paine’s recognition of manpower shortages, see Paine to Blair McClenaghan, May 1780, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1183–1185.

And one of Paine's close friends, Col. John Laurens of South Carolina, also explored the possibility of freeing slaves for service, something he and Paine might have discussed during their diplomatic mission to France.<sup>40</sup> Yet Paine remained silent or objected to such proposals. He scoffed at British peace offers in 1778, after Americans had endured "an undeclared war let loose upon them" with "Indians and negroes invited to the slaughter."<sup>41</sup> Paine did not deny the natural equality of free blacks or slaves (although he never suggested it either). He simply did not think of them, or Indians, as beneficiaries of the Revolution.

It seems doubtful that Paine ever really thought Negroes would become equal members of American civilization without considerable help. "I despair of seeing an abolition of the infernal traffic in Negroes," Paine wrote Rush from Paris in 1789, "[we] must push that matter further on your side of the water." But Negroes were not yet capable of freedom. "I wish that a few well instructed could be sent among their brethren in bondage," Paine suggested, "for until they are enabled to take their own part, nothing will be done."<sup>42</sup> It is quite true that he thought perhaps in time slaves could be freed, with the right provisions. Although more optimistic than Jefferson about the possibility of a biracial, if still unequal, American empire, Paine also seemed to share the assumption that Negroes and slaves were unfit for republican civilization. They might become free, but not equal, and not citizens.<sup>43</sup>

Paine's doubts about the possibilities of black people in a republic are most clearly revealed in his writings on the Haitian Revolution and its implications. The first socially radical revolution in the New World, it was a complex political and social event, involving slaves, mulattos, rich white planters, and poor whites. In August of 1791, taking advantage of instability caused by the French Revolution, the slaves revolted. Within weeks, their

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Quarles, "Lord Dunmore as Liberator," *William and Mary Quarterly* 15 (1958), 494-507; on Paine's unofficial mission to France see Keane, *Tom Paine*, 202-13.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Paine, *Crisis* 6, *Crisis* 10, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 1:135, 190.

<sup>42</sup> "To A Friend in Philadelphia," Mar. 16, 1789, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1286. The correspondent was later identified as Benjamin Rush, see Hawke, *Paine*, 411 n. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom*, 69-73; see especially Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 3-43.

number neared one hundred thousand.<sup>44</sup> For Americans, the slave revolt represented the danger of their own revolutionary principles. While the early stages of the French Revolution validated American revolutionary ideology, the thought of a free black nation in North America shocked northerners and horrified southerners. One might think that this revolution epitomized Paine's principles of equality and liberty, but Paine was not yet prepared to welcome Negroes into civilized society.

Given his lack of interest in actively promoting abolition and civil equality for blacks, it should be no surprise that Paine was unimpressed by the Haitian Revolution. During its initial stages he showed no joy and little surprise. "We have distressing accounts here from St. Domingo. It is the natural consequence of Slavery and must be expected every where. The Negroes are enraged . . . and are determined, if not to relieve themselves to punish their enemies."<sup>45</sup> Years later, as the black revolution struggled to survive a French blockade, Paine still withheld his outright support and approval. He thought of the island and its revolution not as an embodiment of his own political principles, but as a possible commercial advantage, or danger, to the United States. Advising President Jefferson to steer a careful course between Toussaint and Napoleon, Paine warned that the "affair of Domingo will cause some trouble in either of the cases in which it now stands. If armed merchantmen force their way through the blockading fleet it will embarrass us with the French Government." On the other hand, reasoned Paine, "if the people of Domingo think that we show a partiality to the French injurious to them there is danger they will turn Pirates upon us." But if the United States could mediate the dispute, she would gain "a great commercial and political standing." And when the confidence of the people of Domingo is gained "by acts of justice and friendship," Paine shrewdly explained, "they will listen to our advice in matters of Civilization and Government, and prevent the danger of their become pirates, which I think they will be, if driven to desperation."<sup>46</sup>

The Haitian Revolution never meant to Paine what historians assume it

<sup>44</sup>C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (2d. ed. rev.; New York, 1963, 1989), 96.

<sup>45</sup>Paine to William Short, Nov. 2, 1791, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1321.

<sup>46</sup>Paine to Thomas Jefferson, Jan. 1, 1805, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1453-55.

should have meant.<sup>47</sup> He did not publicly endorse it, nor did he privately identify it as an extension of his own political ideas. As it did for Jefferson, the black revolution remained for Paine a dangerous and unstable event, something to be feared rather than celebrated. Wary of Bonaparte's designs on North America, President Jefferson reneged on his promise of support for crushing the rebellion, allowing the black republic to survive. Jefferson then refused to recognize the nation and imposed an embargo on trade with the former rebels.<sup>48</sup> The French disaster in Haiti, however, ensured American control of Louisiana. When Frenchmen in the recently purchased Louisiana territory petitioned Congress for the right to import slaves, Paine could only remind them of slavery's injustice and issue them this warning: "[do] you want to renew in Louisiana the horrors of Domingo?"<sup>49</sup> Acquiring Louisiana also forced Americans to organize a huge new territory, and the prospect of extending American republicanism to a vast territory was a challenge Paine could not ignore.

Paine may have styled himself a "citizen of the world," but he never wavered in his devotion to America. "America is the country where my heart, and what property I have lie," he once wrote, "and to which I shall return." He could hardly be restrained when, in 1806, a New York election supervisor refused to accept his ballots on the grounds that he was not an American citizen.<sup>50</sup> When the Louisiana Purchase more than doubled the size of America, Paine was poised to offer his vision for its settlement and conversion to republicanism. While neither a "Utopia" nor an "Oceana," Paine's plan for Louisiana comes closer to them than anything else he wrote. His suggestions are not comprehensive or voluminous, but they summarize his ideas about American Negroes, slavery, and American civilization.

<sup>47</sup> Keane claims that Paine "keenly supported" the revolution, yet provides no evidence. Keane, *Tom Paine*, 322.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Matthewson, "Jefferson and Haiti," *Journal of Southern History* 61 (1995), 209–48, 211, 221. See also Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War With France, 1797–1801* (New York, 1966), 294–326; O'Brien, *The Long Affair*, 282–96.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Paine, "To the French Inhabitants of Louisiana," in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:968.

<sup>50</sup> Paine to the Marquis of Lansdowne, Sept. 21, 1787, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1266; Keane, *Tom Paine*, 520–22. He later sued but his case was thrown out.

Paine's comments on Louisiana were drawn out by a petition Frenchmen sent to Congress demanding the rights of American citizenship. Outraged, Paine published a response that criticized the Frenchmen, reminding them that they were "arriving at freedom by the easiest means that any people ever enjoyed it; without contest, without expense . . . . And you already so far mistake principles, that under the name of *rights* you ask for *powers*; *power* to *import and enslave Africans*; and to *govern* a territory that *we* have *purchased*." Paine refused to consider elevating the territory's residents to a level of equality with Americans until "the emigrations from the United States into Louisiana become equal to the number of French inhabitants."<sup>51</sup>

Paine outlined for President Jefferson a settlement plan for the new territory. Of prime concern was the creation of a distinctly American citizenry. This required, he explained, a provisional government, for "the present inhabitants know little or nothing of election and representation."<sup>52</sup> Since the French and Spanish languages were dominant there, it would also be necessary to establish schools to teach English, "as the laws ought to be in the language of the union." The next major consideration was settling the territory with the proper inhabitants. "The people of the Eastern States are the best settlers of a new country, and of people from abroad the German peasantry are the best. The Irish in general are generous and dissolute. The Scotch turn their attention to traffic, and the English to manufactures." Indentured servants from Germany would be the best people "to bring into Louisiana—because they would grow to be citizens."<sup>53</sup>

Paine specifically warned Jefferson against extending Negro slavery into Louisiana, for "besides the immorality of it," it would be a "certain way of preventing population and consequently revenue." Paine explained to Jefferson that slavery did not "belong to the class of principles" with which a federal government should concern itself. But it is fortunate in this situation, he continued, that "the interests of Government and that of humanity act unitedly." Paine did not reject slavery on humanitarian principles alone, but upon economic arguments. More revealing is Paine's

<sup>51</sup> Paine, "To the French Inhabitants of Louisiana," 2:965; Paine's emphasis. Paine to Jefferson, Jan. 25, 1805, 2:1457.

<sup>52</sup> Paine to Thomas Jefferson, Aug. 2, 1803, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, 2:1441.

<sup>53</sup> Paine to Jefferson, Jan. 25, 1805, 2:1457, 1458, 1461.

suggestion that free Negroes might be sent to Louisiana. "I recollect when in France," he wrote to Jefferson, "that you spoke of a plan of making the Negroes tenants on a plantation." "I think that numbers of our free Negroes might be provided for in this manner in Louisiana. The best way that occurs to me is for Congress to give them passage to New Orleans, then for them to hire themselves out to the planters for one or two years; they would by this means learn plantation business, after which to place the men on a tract of land."<sup>54</sup>

It is significant, if not surprising, that Paine wanted to keep slavery out of Louisiana. Indeed, posterity would smile on Jefferson had he taken this advice. Still, it is important to point out two themes revealed in these brief writings. First, Paine never suggests freeing slaves and sending them to Louisiana. What he does suggest is sending free Negroes to the new territory. He does not imply that they might grow into citizens. By his account, they could become productive plantation cultivators, free, but not citizens. It is the European and American immigrants, especially German peasants, who should be brought. "This appears to me," observed Paine, "the best and quickest method of peopling, cultivating and settling Louisiana and we shall gain by it a useful industrious set of citizens."<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, Paine's recommendations reflect the opinion that whites and free blacks could not live together in the American republic. True, Louisiana would become part of America, but what should be emphasized is that Paine endorsed moving free Negroes from the eastern states to the frontier, from the center of America to the periphery. This plan certainly appealed to Jefferson and other Americans, who found it difficult to accept the idea of a multiracial republic. In the early 1780s, Jefferson himself proposed a gradual emancipation plan contingent on the removal of Negroes.<sup>56</sup> Although Paine seemed more willing than Jefferson to keep free blacks on the continent, his views were marked by ideas about race and nationality

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 1458, 1464.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 1461.

<sup>56</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, in Koch and Peden, *Life and Selected Writings*, 255–57; see also Jefferson to Jared Sparks, Feb. 4, 1824, in Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984), 1484–87.

similar to those that informed Jefferson's outlook.<sup>57</sup>

Paine's comments on Louisiana reveal both his antislavery sentiments and his feelings about blacks in American civilization. "I have now written you a long letter," he concluded to Jefferson, "[the] subjects it treats of . . . are more for private communication than for publication." (Jefferson, of all people, did not need such a warning.) "The letter to you on the Domingo business is of the same kind."<sup>58</sup> The private Paine abhorred slavery, but the public Paine could or would do little. Perhaps he realized too well the futility of such a fight. Or perhaps even he could not escape all the intellectual constraints that the eighteenth century imposed on even the most enlightened men.

A friend of Paine's once asked him why "he had not taken up the pen to advocate the cause of the blacks." Paine could only respond that "an unfitter person for such a work could hardly be found. The cause would have suffered in my hands. I could not have treated it with any chance of success; for I could never think of their condition but with feelings of indignation."<sup>59</sup> Paine undoubtedly hated slavery, but he also recognized that it was too well entrenched, too deeply rooted in society to be eradicated with the scratch of a pen, even his powerful pen. However, it was not simply the *power* of slavery that Paine struggled against; for in Quixote-like fashion he attacked monarchy and established Christianity, both powerful social institutions. But these attacks were grounded upon linkages to political despotism and tyranny. Paine deplored slavery, but he was first a revolutionary. And, like other revolutionaries, Paine's vision was bounded. He envisioned a universal civilization, but one of white European and American citizens in well-designed republics. His eyes were blind to many issues that today's historians find distressing. Slavery, race relations, and women's rights were simply not parts of his revolutionary universe.

Championing Tom Paine's twentieth-century radicalism has created not only an abolitionist image, but a feminist one as well. Many scholars believe

<sup>57</sup> See Peter Onuf, "To Declare Them a Free and Independent People': Race, Slavery, and National Identity in Jefferson's Thought," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (1998), 1-46.

<sup>58</sup> Paine to Jefferson, Jan. 25, 1805, 2:1461.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in John Epps, *The Life of Thomas Walker* (London, 1832), 142.

that a 1775 article erroneously attributed to Paine “represents one of the earliest pleas for the emancipation of women published in America.” Philip Foner included the essay in his edition of Paine’s works “because it indicates his interest as editor of the magazine in the subject.” For nearly seven decades, historians (including Foner) have known that Paine was not the author, yet they have continued to cite this essay as evidence of his radical and egalitarian thought. “Paine’s sentiments were for the immediate liberation of women,” one scholar has recently written, “just as he argued for the liberation of slaves everywhere.”<sup>60</sup> But Paine was guided by racial, ethnic, and gender assumptions similar to those of Jefferson and other revolutionaries.

Separating the mythical Paine from a Paine situated in the late-eighteenth-century Anglo-American world is difficult. Paine’s writing style, which emphasized directness, clarity, and simplicity, is familiar to modern readers. His political message, divorced from its essential context, is easily appropriated into twentieth-century conceptions of liberty, equality, and basic human rights.<sup>61</sup> Thus Paine appears to us a modern thinker who meant what his words connote to us. Confusion with his universal language and a misreading of evidence has created an image of Paine that exaggerates his radicalism, especially concerning slavery.

Paine’s abolitionist reputation, nevertheless, is founded on no substantial evidence, but is rooted in the assumption that he intended the “rights of men” for all human beings. But he did not invest slavery, citizenship, and liberty with the meanings we give them. As demonstrated above, Paine could not, or would not, publicly agitate for emancipation. Of the two antislavery

<sup>60</sup> Foner, *Writings*, 2:34. Fruchtmann, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature*, 64. On Paine’s authorship, see Frank Smith, “The Authorship of ‘An Occasional Letter in the Female Sex,’” *American Literature* 2 (1930–31), 277–80. Among many who mistake Paine as the author are Winthrop D. Jordan, “Familial Politics: Thomas Paine and the Killing of the King, 1776,” in Richard M. Fulton, ed., *The Revolution that Wasn’t: A Contemporary Assessment of 1776* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1981), 222; Elaine F. Crane, “Dependence in the Era of Independence: The Role of Women in a Republican Society,” in Jack P. Greene, ed., *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (New York, 1987), 254–55; Isaac Kramnick, intro. to *Common Sense* (New York, 1976), 28. Kramnick’s error is most unfortunate for it is a standard undergraduate text and has undergone multiple printings.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Gordon S. Wood, “Disturbing the Peace,” *New York Review of Books*, June 8, 1995, 22; Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, xx; Jack P. Greene, “Paine, America, and the ‘Modernization’ of Political Consciousness,” *Political Science Quarterly* 93 (1978), 92; Keane, *Tom Paine*, xiii.

essays attributed to him, only one resembles his writing style, and neither stands out as an abolitionist tract. Nowhere in his public or private writings does Paine extend the promise of citizenship or even equality to Negroes. The closest he could come, as shown in his plans for Louisiana, was implying that they could be rendered productive and less dangerous through diffusion.

The point of this essay is certainly not to deride Paine or his vision. Indeed, the results of his political thought, as expressed in our more egalitarian and democratic world, would have pleased him. But he, along with his contemporaries, belonged to the eighteenth century and shared its assumptions. This is perhaps most evident by returning again to the comparison of Paine and Jefferson. Their feelings about Negroes and slavery are remarkably similar, although Paine, obviously, never bought, owned, or sold slaves. But both men privately hated slavery and, for the most part, publicly ignored it. Both exhibited the ability to make blacks politically and socially "invisible" through the concepts of race and national identity. But Jefferson worked harder than Paine to find a solution for America's foremost social problem. Indeed, there seems little doubt that of the two revolutionaries it was Jefferson who harbored the most passionate and intense hatred of slavery. Yet Paine is remembered as an abolitionist, and Jefferson as an ambivalent racist.<sup>62</sup>

Merrill Peterson has suggested that important historical figures become symbols, "perhaps many symbols, through which men of different persuasions and at different times seek to comprehend their experiences." The historical image "is a mixed product of memory and hope, fact and myth, love and hate, of the politician's strategy, the patriot's veneration, and the scholar's quest."<sup>63</sup> The myths of Paine, or of Jefferson, reflect academic and public efforts to shape both the past and the present. While "Jefferson's life has come to symbolize America's struggles with racial inequality," Paine's life, as revealed by Congress's 1992 resolution, has come to represent the

<sup>62</sup> With Jefferson, of course, the argument can be made that his actions encouraged slavery. For a fair, if critical, analysis of both arguments, see William W. Freehling's revised essay, "The Founding Fathers, Conditional Antislavery, and the Nonradicalism of the American Revolution," in William W. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York, 1994), 12-33.

<sup>63</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 443, vi.

triumph of racial equality, "individual rights, and liberty worldwide."<sup>64</sup> But the image of a racist, hypocritical Jefferson that recent scholarship has created seems little different from the caricature of Paine extending the hand of freedom and equality to all human beings.

Some historians have carefully sifted Jefferson's life to demonstrate his and the Revolution's failures, especially concerning race and slavery. But some historians overlook with equal vigor the fact that even radicals such as Paine operated within the same confines of eighteenth-century presumptions about race and gender. Replacing a fallen Jefferson with a mythical Paine is unjust to both and slights the contribution each made to the Revolution and posterity. Jefferson himself struggled with the contradictions between his professed beliefs and his lifestyle dependent upon slave labor. Yet he did champion a new, more egalitarian vision of America, one founded on an unprecedented faith in the common man. Paine, to be sure, wished to extend democratic government even further than Jefferson, if not as far as today's historians believe he intended. Paine's and Jefferson's contributions to the spread of basic human rights and democratic government should not be slighted simply because they did not fully realize and welcome the far-reaching implications of their own ideas.

Perhaps we should not condemn Jefferson for refusing to free his slaves, nor censure Paine for not committing himself to abolitionism, but ask rather how their ideas influenced the fate of slavery and equality in American society. It is impossible, of course, to say with any certainty how the institution of slavery might have fared without Jefferson or Paine. But it does seem reasonable to think that each bequeathed to posterity ideas about liberty, society, and government which were later used to challenge slavery and continue the Revolution.

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<sup>64</sup> Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory 1943-1993," in Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, 418; *Congressional Record*, 102d Cong., 2d sess., 1992, 138, pt. 23:34565-67.

