

What, in Paine's view,
is wrong with
monarchy essay



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Thomas Paine was born January 29, 1737 in Thetford, Norfolk.

Despite an unremarkable early life, he went on to have astonishing experiences in the two biggest political upheavals of his time, the American and French revolutions. Paine's work is typical of the period of the Enlightenment, in its call for reason over superstition; many of his ideas were influenced by earlier philosophers, most noticeably Rousseau. An outspoken republican, Paine set out to undermine what he termed 'old governments', and replace them with a more genuinely representative administration based on reason. The Rights of Man is a good example of Paine's thinking in this respect, as it includes a call to establish a welfare state and a full democracy. At the time when Paine began his work, the Revolution as we think of it today was in its beginning phases.

The Estates-General, an assembly of the different classes of French citizenry, had been called in 1789, and there were calls for a more constitutional government, but the protests so far had been relatively peaceful in relation to later periods. Paine left England for America in 1774 on the advice of Benjamin Franklin, and arrived in Boston just as the conflict between the colonists and England was reaching its height. Soon afterwards troops in nearby Lexington shot at a crowd, and Paine was moved to write a pamphlet backing the protests against British rule, which he called Common Sense. He became an influential figure in the American Revolution, and was America's first Foreign Secretary, but returned to England in 1787 after falling out with the nation's other leaders.

Paine began writing *The Rights of Man* in November 1790, as a response to Burke's conservative *Reflections on the French Revolution*, and completed the first part in February of 1791. Part two was published the following year. It was aimed towards the ordinary working people, using everyday language, to garner as large an audience as possible. Paine's experiences in America must have politicised him, for there is no record of any dissidence before *Common Sense*. Essentially, Paine believed that the people in a state had a right to choose the form of their government, and adopted a view similar to Rousseau's that the nature of the state people live in can affect their characters.

Like Rousseau, Paine's philosophy centred on the question of the states' legitimacy to rule: 'The fact therefore must be that the individuals themselves, each in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a compact with each other to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist. This is the main thrust behind much of Paine's argument: sovereignty resides in the people, and no individual, or any body of men, are entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it. In this way, Paine reasons that monarchical power is illegitimate; he held monarchies were despotic and can only be maintained by the use of force - he wrote that, 'the original hereditary despotism resident in the person of the king, divides and sub-divides itself into a thousand shapes and forms'. So, far from entering into a compact with each other, monarchy creates turmoil and sets the populace at each others' throats. Paine felt monarchies are unnatural, and so the only way they could develop in the first place was

by unnatural means: the use of violence. Paine held that ' it could have been no difficult thing in the early and solitary ages of the world .

.. for a banditti of ruffians to overrun a country, and lay it under contributions. Their power being thus established, the chief of the band contrived to lose the name of Robber in that of Monarch; and hence the origin of Monarchy and Kings.

These points underlie much of Paine's argument, and apply specifically to the British monarchy, which was in power as a direct result of William of Normandy's invasion. Specifically, the points Paine railed against most were the aristocratic system, which he perceived as corrupt, and hereditary law, which he thought was simply absurd. He pointed out that while monarchy might be hereditary, intelligence and other qualities required in a ruler are not. He wrote that the idea of a ' hereditary legislator is...

as absurd as a hereditary mathematician'. The passing down of power simply by decree meant that any nature of man could become King, whether suited for the role or not. And by declaring their children would automatically inherit their powers, monarchs take choice of government away from succeeding generations, which he also felt to be invalid: he wrote that ' there [can] never exist a parliament, or any description of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controlling posterity to the " end of time," or of commanding for ever how the world shall be governed, or who shall govern it...

.. Every age and generation must be free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. ' The aristocratic laws of

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primogeniture meant that only the firstborn son of a peer would inherit his estate - other children would receive nothing. This meant that the disinherited children of the rich and powerful were, in Paine's terms, 'cast like orphans on a parish, to be provided for by the public'. They were often granted sinecures - meaningless government posts that nonetheless granted a salary.

If the monarchy were removed, by implication there would be no need for this kind of parasitical nobility. The nobility is not just a leech on the public, however: by setting itself apart from the general stock of society and intermarrying constantly, they have a 'tendency to deteriorate the human species'. So it seems it's almost a duty to bring down the aristocracy; by doing so, we would in effect be improving the human race! Paine considered there to be two basic types of Government: those that rise up over people as a result of conquest, such as the British monarchy, and those that are chosen by the people themselves and rise up with them, such as the American democracy. This was why Paine believed the republic to be the ideal form of government: the former were born of oppression and ignorance, while the latter were products of reason. Paine felt the opportunity to choose a head of state would guarantee a responsible leader; he contrasted the American procedure for electing a President, in which no man below thirty-five could be nominated, with the age young kings could assume both their thrones and full responsibility for their realms: as young as 18. Paine, in writing his book for the ordinary people in England, emphasised something sure to be close to their hearts: taxes.

Under the English system, members of the aristocracy were entitled to large sums of public money. He believed that accepting so much shows an immoral character, and that such people were not suited for public office. Also since 'the state of a King shuts him off from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly', monarchs could not represent their subjects because they were not in touch with their own people. By instituting a republic, the people would remove both their greatest tax burden and their greatest warmonger: the person of the monarch. Monarchs demand a huge and unmerited amount of money for themselves, and justify ever-rising taxes by constantly instigating wars with each other. By contrast, Paine produces a fully-costed budget for a republic, and demonstrates not only how much public money is lost to the ruling classes, but how this money could be used to bring about a welfare state; for example, the 'Duke of Richmond alone .

.. takes away as much for himself as would maintain two thousand poor and aged persons'. The inefficient nature of the monarchical system meant that while the money existed, it could not be spent on worthy causes. This demonstrates that the British monarchy, at least, did not exist for the betterment of the people, as Paine believed it should, but simply to further their own selfish ends. The minimal government spending Paine advocates would follow from instituting a republic would not only bring misuse of public funds to an end, but allow this money to be used for the betterment of society, for example by setting up public workhouses to feed the poor.

Paine's theme throughout *Rights of Man* is the simple illogicality of the monarchy. As an enlightenment writer, he was trying to expose the

superstition based on the monarchy in the hope of contributing to a new society based on reason.