

Good the importance of thomas paine's "common sense" in american history literatu...

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History 1745, US History to 1865

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Introduction

Thomas Paine wrote “ Common Sense” in the first month of 1776, and by the end of the year, it had sold 150, 000 copies throughout America, constituting itself as the country’s first “ best seller”. In this pamphlet, he put forth all the arguments that had been built up by the time, regarding the Colonies’ right to independence, and the evils of absolutist monarchy. The ideas of Natural Laws, and the roles and limitations of the Government, which are expressed in this document, were in wide circulation in the educated circles at the time, and even the common people with little education felt the injustice of absolute rule and lack of rights. However, most people in America were still undecided if it would be best for the American colonies to proclaim their

independence or not. By means of his clear and persuasive writing style, in which he outlined with great talent in simple words that anyone could understand, the ideals and the rights that the people in America should fight for, he popularized the idea of an American revolution in a way that all people could understand and agree with. Therefore, the role of Paine's "Common Sense" was to reflect and to reinforce, at the same time, the dominant Enlightenment ideology in a persuasive way and using simple language that all the people could understand. "Common Sense" is an extremely important text in American history because it reflects the essence of the political and philosophical thought of the Enlightenment and it voices for the first time the idea of an American identity born in diversity, upon which political discourse is based even today.

Historical Context

After his arrival in the colonies in 1774, Thomas Paine, a man of humble origins, with an interest in science and with some experience in pamphlet writing, began mixing with radical journalists. He became the editor of the Pennsylvania Magazine, which focused on the colonial resistance against the British policies, and this endeavor was highly successful. From the material and focus of the magazine, "Common Sense" was born. Explaining his sources of inspiration for the work, Paine wrote that, "I saw an opportunity in which I thought I could do some good, and I followed exactly what my heart dictated. I neither read books, nor studied other people's opinions. I thought for myself". By stressing the fact that the ideas supported in the book was "common sense", and did not require any philosophical or political

knowledge. Rather, it came from an awareness of the 'natural rights' of all individuals that should be intuited and should represent the basis of any fair society.

The document thus reflected the power of the Enlightenment ideology of the time, which had been spread through the works of authors such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Isaac Newton, and which emphasized the role of reason in the state decisions and choices, thus undermining the authority of the Church and of the absolutist monarchy, who ruled the people not because they were the most efficient institutions, or because they had been chosen, but by the power of tradition and self-appointment. Paine may have come in contact with these ideas while he was in England, more specifically, in London and in Lewes, both of which were important centers for radical thought. Even though his sudden explosion of radicalism may seem unlikely at first, Paine had nourished the ideas expressed in the pamphlet for years, and once he reached America, he suddenly found himself in the perfect environment to set his thoughts free.

Document Description

"Common Sense" is a forty-eight pages long pamphlet in which Paine discusses the merits of the Republic as a form of government, as compared to the hereditary monarchy. It encompassed a clear and convincing argument in favor of freedom, as the only possible solution to the problems of the colonies. The pamphlet is divided into four parts, each creating an argument for an aspect of the debate and trying to break the ties between the Colonists and their native country, which had already become very weak.

The first section deals with the ideal design of the government, and the values and reasons for its existence. He uses the example of a group of people sequestered in an isolated part of the world, where they are forced to form a government in order to be able to function together and make sure that everyone respects the rules. The second section argues against absolutist hereditary monarchy and Paine's description of the ascension of William the Conqueror is one of his most famous fragments, being formulated as follows: " A French bastard landing with an armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original". Paine then continues to dismiss the hereditary rule, by showing that many of the kings were unworthy, inefficient or plainly foolish rulers.

The third section, called " Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs", analyses the relationships between England and the colonies in an attempt to prove that independence is the best course of action, and sketches the structure of government of the new republic, as he conceived it. He argued in favor of a new Continental Charter which would establish the rights and freedoms of the people, as well as religious freedoms and other revolutionary ideas. The fourth and final section, called " On the Present Ability of America, with Some Miscellaneous Reflections", expresses Paine's belief that America has the necessary military resources to confront England, and that it will further flourish and develop as a result of gaining independence. This section was necessary in order to reassure Americans who feared that the Colonies were too weak and did not have enough

resources to go to war against England, and then to thrive without England's support.

Historical Significance

Among other things, Paine was the first writer to have ever dared to attack the monarchy so radically, and thus, his pamphlet represents the accumulation of many years of radical thought, which were finally voiced in the most persuasive form that they could have taken. Paine was both passionate about this issue, and talented enough to give the perfect form to the sum of hopes, ideas, values and arguments in favor of Independence. Because it focused on the problems that concerned the American colonies at the time, and it was written in a language that all people could understand, and with extreme radicalism that most people agreed with, but little had the courage to express, there is no wonder that " this work was universally read, and very generally applauded. The first edition was quickly sold". As a result, many of the people who still had doubts, or hesitated to start an unequal war with England, changed their minds. " Common Sense" was therefore a crucial document which helped to spark the revolution, and from this perspective, its historical value is inestimable. This is both because it constitutes an example of exquisite rhetoric and because it illustrates the system of thinking of 18th century revolutionaries, and their motivation. However, no other radical had considered going so far as rejecting the statute of England as the " mother" of the colonies, or their own statute as Englishmen, as Paine did. He felt that America was more than an extension of the English society in the new world, it was a unique society formed from

the representatives of many nations and as such, it has a unique opportunity to start fresh. This is also significant, because Paine recognized the unique nature of the American colonies and saw value in the different origins of their inhabitants, rather than a weakness.

Moreover, "Common Sense" is an important historical text because to its publication, one can trace the origins of the American identity, and political discourse, as everyone knows it today. Thomas Paine managed to convince the representatives of all colonies that they are not separate groups, and that they have a unique American identity. The terminology he used, and the political ideas he raised, are still used today in political speech, and in national identity discourse. His claims about a continental union are almost unexplainably optimistic considering the circumstances, and his assertions regarding the relationships between government and societies, and the evil within, which must be controlled, have become standard in American political thought

Conclusion

Therefore, as this paper showed, "Common Sense" is a very important historical text, for several reasons, most important of which is that it represented the spark which determined the colonists to abandon their fear and indecision, and start the war. The value of this work consists in the fact that it gathers together the Enlightenment ideas of the time, and the radical political discourse which had never been voiced publicly with such force and courage, but also, in such radical terms. These ideas were expressed with great rhetorical power, and in easy language, thus reflecting Paine's desire

to reach as many people as possible, and constitute itself as a tool in the hands of the revolutionary leaders.

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