

Funding the Future

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

The subject of this essay is the eighteenth-century Norfolk-born moral philosopher and revolutionary reformer Thomas Paine. This is the result of a suggestion from my wife, Jacqueline, who felt his omission from this series was a mistake, as he fits into this project particularly well.

Paine was a contemporary of Adam Smith, with a very different career trajectory. He is a valuable bridge between moral philosophy and democratic economics as the thinker who insisted that political freedom is meaningless without economic security, and that the legitimacy of any society rests on its willingness to guarantee the dignity of the poorest.

Thomas Paine was one of the most radical minds of the eighteenth century. He was a man whose writings helped ignite the American Revolution, inspired democratic uprisings across Europe, and challenged the very foundations of monarchy, hierarchy, and inherited privilege. Yet Paine was not only a political revolutionary; he was also a visionary of economic justice. In *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice*, he argued that true freedom could not exist in a society where people lacked the means to live decently.

For Paine, the greatest threat to liberty was the economic insecurity that made ordinary people vulnerable to exploitation, dependency and fear. Political rights, he insisted, are hollow when those who supposedly possess them are denied the material conditions necessary to exercise them.

Hence, the Thomas Paine Question: ***If political liberty is meaningless without***

economic security, why do we still pretend that freedom can exist alongside poverty, dependence and deprivation?

Freedom requires independence

Paine insisted that freedom was more than the right to vote or speak. It required independence, or the ability to stand on one's own feet, free from domination. A citizen who must beg for work, who fears starvation, or who lives at the mercy of a landlord or employer is not free in any meaningful sense.

He recognised that economic precarity breeds subservience. Those dependent on the goodwill of the wealthy cannot challenge injustice. They cannot refuse exploitation. They cannot speak truth to power. Paine therefore argued that the first duty of a democratic society is to protect its citizens from the vulnerabilities that make them easy to dominate.

The moral claim of the dispossessed

In ***Agrarian Justice***, Paine proposed something astonishing for his time: a system of universal payments funded by taxing accumulated land wealth. He argued that land, as a gift of nature, belonged to everyone in common, and that private property in land was legitimate only if society compensated those who had been excluded from its benefits. That compensation was to take the form of a universal endowment for young adults and pensions for older people — a proto-basic income designed to secure dignity and independence.

This was not charity. It was justice. Paine believed that society owed its members the means to live free lives. Without such provision, he argued, the promise of equal rights was a fraud.

The challenge to inherited privilege

Paine's deepest critique was directed at systems that preserved wealth and power through inheritance. He saw hereditary privilege as the root of both political and economic inequality. Whether in monarchy, aristocracy, or concentrated wealth, inheritance created classes of people free from work and responsibility, while leaving others trapped in lives of drudgery.

For Paine, influenced as he was by his own involvement in the French Revolution, a society claiming to honour equality could not tolerate such arrangements. Wealth unearned and unaccountable was a threat to liberty because it conferred power without merit. Democracies, he insisted, must continually dismantle the structures that allow some to dominate others through inherited advantage.

Democracy as a social contract of care

Although Paine is often regarded as a champion of individual rights, he was equally a theorist of collective responsibility. He believed that the purpose of government was to secure the well-being of all, not merely to protect property. A society that left people destitute had failed its most basic duty.

Paine saw democracy itself as an expression of mutual care: citizens acting together to secure the rights and welfare of each other. Public provision was therefore not an intrusion on freedom but its safeguard. Taxation was not confiscation but the collective expression of solidarity.

Why Paine remains radical

Paine's relevance today is unsettling. He argued that liberty cannot coexist with inequality so significant that it denies people independence. He insisted that society has a duty to provide economic security to all. He proposed mechanisms designed for this economic era that would redistribute wealth from the fortunate to the vulnerable.

In a world of precarious work, low wages, unaffordable housing, insecure care, and extreme wealth concentration, Paine's claims are a direct challenge to the modern neoliberal order. They expose the contradiction of societies that proclaim freedom while tolerating conditions that render citizens powerless.

What answering the Thomas Paine Question would require

To take Paine seriously would require turning the rhetoric of freedom into a material reality. At minimum, that would demand:

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Securing economic independence, ensuring that every citizen has the means to live without fear or dependence through universal services, income support and public investment.

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Confronting concentrated wealth by taxing unearned advantage, inheritance, and rentier income so that power cannot accumulate without accountability.

*

Recognising public provision as liberty-enhancing by treating health, education, housing, and care as the foundations of freedom, and not as optional expenses.

*

Restoring democratic purpose, using government not as an umpire of markets but as the guarantor of equal standing and dignity.

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Embedding economic rights alongside political ones, acknowledging that rights mean little if people lack the capability to exercise them.

These are not reforms around the edges. They are the conditions of a democratic republic worthy of the name.

Inference

The Thomas Paine Question exposes a contradiction at the heart of modern liberal democracy. We celebrate supposed political liberty while maintaining economic structures that deny millions the independence required to make liberty real. Paine insists that freedom must be supported by material security, that rights must be backed by resources, and that equality must be sustained through public duty.

His challenge is as radical today as in the eighteenth century. If we claim to value liberty, we cannot maintain an economy built on precarity, rent extraction, inherited privilege, and structural insecurity.

To answer his question is to rebuild democracy on the foundations he set: freedom not as a legal fiction, but as a lived reality shared by all.

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