COMMENTARY

Monuments to Liberty

Did Thomas Paine write the whole of *Rights of Man*, and if not, what does that mean for our understanding of the French Revolution?

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Here is a familiar outline account of the French Revolution, long established and echoed in various forms in many textbooks. The Revolution's antecedents can be traced to Louis XIV. He was a despot: by show and ostentation, he lured the French into an attitude of subordination and political passivity. Only among subsequent philosophers was a spirit of liberty preserved. Montesquieu gave that spirit veiled expression. Voltaire dared to write open satire against statecraft as well as priestcraft; he deserves the thanks of mankind, whatever his personal motives. Rousseau and Raynal expressed high ideals of liberty. Quesnay and Turgot showed that the administration of government could be reformed. Together, they spread throughout their country a spirit of political enquiry, and prepared the way for the reception in France of the example of the American Revolution.

The French troops who served in America during the revolutionary war learned lessons about the practice and principle of liberty. News of the American Revolution, circulating in France, proclaimed the rights of man and justified resistance to oppression. Little of America's impact was owed to France's chief minister, Vergennes, who was by his nature a despot, but something was owed to Franklin, America's minister at the French court, and something also to Lafayette, the French soldier serving in America, who was familiar with colonial leaders and their civil government. After the peace in 1783, returning French soldiers and officers carried the spirit of liberty back to France.

There, Louis XVI's minister Calonne had by his profligacy destabilized French national finances; the *parlements* resisted the imposition of new taxes, and their resistance evoked national support behind those ancient institutions. Thus opened a period of political manoeuvre in which the ministers attempted to secure backing from other bodies, and so to circumvent the troublesome *parlements*. These political intrigues, at court and in the newly-summoned Assembly of the Notables, turned out badly for Calonne, who was dismissed after Lafayette's charge that he was guilty of corruption. Lafayette also sought to close the Bastille and abolish *lettres de cachet*, which effected arbitrary arrest, but a majority of the nobles in the Assembly still supported both. Conflict over the national finances continued. Lafayette countered a ministerial attempt to make the Assembly a tax-granting body; when the new prime minister, the Archbishop of Toulouse, forced the registration of additional taxes at a royal *lit de justice*, the Paris *parlement* resisted, and the King was induced to promise the recall of the Estates-General.

Louis's ministers tried to frustrate that recall by establishing a new constitutional body, the *Cour plénière*, but this initiative was checked, the Archbishop fell, Necker was restored as minister, and the Estates-General assembled for the first time since 1614. Its recall only opened up endless political conflict over its composition and procedure. Finally the Third Estate claimed the authority of the nation and renamed itself the National Assembly; the First and Second Estates then joined the Third in this single chamber, by implication possessing sovereignty.

Certain malcontents from the clergy and aristocracy sought to prevent this amalgamation of chambers, but they provoked a widespread national anti-aristocratic reaction. Led by the Comte d'Artois, the King's brother, these malcontents now tried to close the National Assembly, whose members reconvened in a nearby tennis court and showed their resolve to defend their new institution. The plot for a military coup was pressed forward, but the scheme was foiled. The ministers ignored Lafayette's three attempts to send deputations from the National Assembly, over which he now presided, to confer with the King, until the moment when the ministers' position suddenly disintegrated. They now fled, the Bastille fell, and the troops that had been converging on Versailles dispersed. Counter-revolution was frustrated. Without seeking retribution, the National Assembly set about forming a constitution founded on the rights of man and the authority of the people.

This is an agreeably familiar story; so deeply absorbed, indeed, that its status as just one possible interpretation of complex and chronologically extended events has been largely forgotten. Historians labour to refine or diversify this version, but most of them now once more sympathize with its essentials. With the decline of the Marxist model of the French Revolution in recent decades, interpretative fashions have drifted back to this older reliance on the Enlightenment and natural rights, and on the teleology that saw these discourses slowly growing since the late seventeenth century, spread by prophets and pioneers, but eventually triumphant in 1776 and 1789.

Beyond the ranks of professional historians, the wider public is subliminally convinced that that was, broadly speaking, how things were. This deep conviction can be explained, for the story as set out above is only an abridgement of the account that first appeared in Thomas Paine's phenomenally successful *Rights of Man* (1791). About 6,000 words in length, it forms the central historical passage in that work. It is located in its pages just before the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*, a famous document which therefore appears to vindicate the preceding narrative. Few of the component parts of this story were wholly new, but in *Rights of Man* they were memorably drawn together and given classic expression. To English-speaking observers it seemed that the story must in its essentials be true, since Paine was there to observe events, and since Paine, as England's greatest revolutionary, naturally had a unique insight into the nature and causes of what is conventionally termed the "Age of Revolutions".

Rights of Man certainly achieved canonical status. Published in that remarkable work, this model has powerfully shaped the understandings of the French Revolution held by Anglophone readers from 1791 to the present. They (and I) came to take it for granted, and so we failed to notice the problem. This 6,000-word narrative is eloquent, idealistic and visionary. There is, indeed, only one difficulty: Paine cannot have written it. He wrote it out; some of it he put into his own words; but he cannot have been the primary author. If so, this model cannot rest on his authority. Indeed, its status as merely one possible interpretation comes again into focus.

Paine was undoubtedly the author of the remainder of *Rights of Man*, and its readers have naturally looked to that work for an explanation of the French Revolution. But the adulation or blame heaped on Paine's book by its supporters or opponents has occluded the strangeness of this 6,000-word passage. It is, to begin with, different in tone from the rest of the work. The prose is unlike Paine's, although he evidently contributed some phrases (the joke that "nobility" was just a synonym for "no-ability" is one he may have remembered reading in the local newspaper when he was an exciseman in Lewes, Sussex). He may have been responsible for the report of the Comte d'Artois' visit to the Parlement of Paris on 17 August 1787 – "I was then standing in one of the apartments through which he had to pass, and could not help reflecting how wretched was the condition of a disrespected man" – though this is not certain.

Elsewhere, *Rights of Man* displays Paine's typically prominent authorial voice; by contrast, this narrative is mostly written in a mandarin third person. Paine was a master of the direct and the specific; this narrative is often couched in uplifting generalizations. Examined more closely, its prose seems not to be that of an Englishman at all; it reads like the

English prose of a native French speaker. A research team at Iona College, New York, is engaged on a computer analysis of Paine's known prose against the prose of certain anonymous works conventionally ascribed to him, and we await the publication of their results. Meanwhile, caution is appropriate. The ascription of authorship on the basis of prose style alone is notoriously treacherous. Paine's style was highly distinctive; even so, a subjective judgement that this narrative passage was not primarily by Paine would be inconclusive if the argument were not supported by evidence. I contend that it is so supported.

First, what of the content of this narrative? It, too, is unlike anything else in Paine's writings. Elsewhere, he showed no significant knowledge of French history, although he was well informed about English history since the Revolution of 1688. Paine did not elsewhere discuss the French *philosophes* in any depth, or credit them with a key role in preparing the ground for revolution. He did not analyse the French *parlements*, or compare them with the Westminster Parliament and the colonial American assemblies. Immediately after the peace of 1783, Paine did not elsewhere assert any great lesson brought back to Europe by the returning French troops.

More telling again, he did not elsewhere reveal knowledge of French high politics after the fall of Necker in 1781. For Paine, politics was merely "jockeyship", not the difficult and respectable art of getting important things done. The author of this narrative boasted of knowing "a sort of secret history" of the way the First and Second Estates in the Estates-General merged into the Third: Paine made no such boast of privileged access about any other French political episode. In other places he wrote nothing of the Assembly of the Notables, or the *Cour plénière*, or the complex political manoeuvres that surrounded such bodies. He would not have understood exchanges of conversation like that between the Comte d'Artois and Lafayette, printed in this narrative, for Paine did not speak French. In any case, his humble social standing meant that he could not have moved in court circles.

Rights of Man did indeed cite one French source for the history of the Estates-General, *L'Intrigue du Cabinet*. This was evidently Louis-Pierre Anquetil, *L'intrigue du cabinet sous Henri IV et Louis XIII terminée par la Fronde* (four volumes, Paris: Moutard, 1780). But since he was not a French speaker, Paine was unlikely to have found his way to this text himself, or understood it if he had found it. In general, this narrative gave an insider's view, and Paine, while in France, was never an insider. Even had he been a member of the social elite, he was out of France for most of the time covered by this passage, for he was in America from November 1774 and (except from one brief visit) returned to France for an extended period only in May 1787.

Who, then, can have written this 6,000-word narrative? I suggest that its author was probably Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), and that it embodies not neutral history but his very personal perspective on events. What evidence supports this ascription? The author would have needed to know much about France: to have formed views on the significance of Louis XIV's monarchy, on the general impact of the writings of a series of *philosophes*, on French public opinion, on the possible relation of the American war to France, on the history of the *parlements*, and on the detail of French high politics from 1783 to 1789. The author may also have had a grudge against Vergennes and Calonne, and a strong admiration of the Marquis de Lafayette, since the hero of this narrative is none other than Lafayette himself, whose role it consistently overstates. (Lafayette was not exactly "chosen to preside" over the National Assembly: he was only elected to fill the chair during late night sittings, which would have been beyond the strength of the elderly Archbishop of Vienne, and there is no record that Lafayette did this on more than a few such occasions.)

Especially, Lafayette's lifetime's achievement was in America, and this episode the narrative foregrounds. "The peculiar situation of the then Marquis de la Fayette is another link in the great chain", declared *Rights of Man*. "He served in America as an American officer under a commission of Congress, and by the universality of his acquaintance, was in close friendship with the civil government of America, as well as with the military line. He spoke the language of the country, entered into the discussions on the principles of government, and was always a welcome friend at any election." Arguably, this passage was expressed in the third person in order to conceal the vanity of its author. The overstatement continued. Thanks to his experience in America, Lafayette "was better acquainted with the science of civil government than the generality of the members who composed the Assembly of the Notables could then be"; consequently, "the brunt of the business" in that Assembly "fell considerably to his share". These were hardly modest estimates.

Earlier in *Rights of Man*, Paine acknowledged that Lafayette had provided him with the text of "some proposals for a declaration of rights" made "to the National Assembly, on the 11th of July, 1789" and Paine offered a reason for his friend's bringing it forward then ("M. de la Fayette has since informed me"). *Rights of Man* heaped praise on the Frenchman's role in the American Revolution: "His conduct through the whole of that enterprise is one of the most extraordinary that is to be found in the history of a young man, scarcely then twenty years of age". Paine recounted Lafayette's farewell address to Congress, which Paine is unlikely to have witnessed. So we know from elsewhere in *Rights of Man* that Lafayette provided Paine with information, and at least one document.

It has also escaped notice that the organization of Paine's famous book is, in part, repetitive. For this 6,000- word passage was not the only narrative about France in *Rights of Man*: there were two others, which preceded it. Indeed, the third and longer one oddly went over again the ground covered in the previous two: this suggests that the third passage may have been an interpolation, inserted by Paine when it came to hand. The first narrative, of about 2,250 words, concerned the fall of the Bastille on July 14 , 1789; the second, slightly shorter, covered the "October Days" of October 5–6 that year, when the Paris mob, or an organized part of it, marched to Versailles and compelled the royal family to return under escort to the capital, where they were henceforth effectively prisoners.

Paine's first narrative began with the evocative introduction: "The mind can hardly picture to itself a more tremendous scene than what the city of Paris exhibited at the time of taking the Bastille". Such expressions seem to give his account the authority of an eyewitness. In reality, Paine was in England at the time, and must have relied on others for his information.

Next, Paine turned to the October Days, challenging the accuracy of Edmund Burke's account of that episode. Again, Paine did not reveal that he had been in England at the time. His hero in the march to Versailles and the return to Paris was again Lafayette, who, according to Paine, restrained the Paris mob. "By an amiable and spirited manner of address, he had hitherto been fortunate in calming disquietudes, and in this he was extraordinarily successful." By his communications, sent by express, Lafayette had persuaded the King not to withdraw to Metz, but to remain at Versailles and so preserve the possibility of a compromise. Paine added a footnote: "I am warranted in asserting this, as I had it personally from M. de la Fayette, with whom I have lived in habits of friendship for fourteen years". At Versailles, "M. de la Fayette became the mediator between the enraged parties". The next day "M. de la Fayette had a second time to interpose between the parties". Thanks to Lafayette, the march to Versailles had a "peaceful termination".

Towards the start of *Rights of Man*, Paine had dramatized his idealistic rejection of Burke by quoting Lafayette's farewell speech to the American Congress. After the 6,000 word-passage discussed here, in his "Observations" on the text of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*, Paine applied Lafayette's speech to this subsequent French episode: "Having now traced the progress of the French Revolution through most of its principal stages, from its commencement to the taking of the Bastille, and its establishment by the Declaration of Rights, I will close the subject with the energetic apostrophe of M. de la Fayette – *May this great monument raised to Liberty, serve as a lesson to the oppressor, and an example to the oppressed!*" To this eulogy Paine added a footnote: "N.B. Since the taking the Bastille, the occurrences have been published: but the matters recorded in this narrative, are prior to that period; and some of them, as may easily be seen, can be but very little known". Other accounts of the taking of the Bastille had indeed appeared in print in England; but Paine wished to distance his own account from them. It seems he thought he had access to more reliable information.

Back in England, Paine set about writing *Rights of Man, Part the Second*, published in London in February 1792. It was dedicated to Lafayette. Returning to Paris in September that year, Paine at first stayed with his French friend. Indeed at that time he knew no Frenchman better than he knew Lafayette. And the strongest piece of evidence that Lafayette had supplied Paine with the substance of the 6,000-word narrative, as well as other information, came from Lafayette's own hand, for on January 12, 1790 he had written to George Washington: "Common Sense [Paine] is writing a Book for you – there you will See a part of My Adventures – I Hope they will turn to the Advantage of My Country and Mankind in General". The evidence, then, is cumulative, and Lafayette's letter importantly supports this contextual reinterpretation.

What, if this hypothesis is correct, were Lafayette's motives? He was an ambitious player in French Revolutionary politics, seeking to advance his own career and his own vision. This career soon ended disastrously when the Terror, spiralling out of control, threatened his own life, and he fled, surrendering to Austrian troops in August 1792. In France, Lafayette's name was henceforth widely disparaged. But at the outbreak of the Revolution, he had had bright prospects. What better way of propagating his version of events, with himself at their centre, than feeding his interpretation to his English friend, a brilliant journalist but one who knew little of France and would have been unable to check Lafayette's story? And it was a tribute to Paine's talent as a journalist that he could assimilate such information and use it to such effect.

It seems, then, that this passage is very probably not a history primarily written by Paine but in origin Lafayette's self-serving publicity, part of his attempt to become the George Washington of the French Revolution. If so, Paine seemingly accepted uncritically the account of his patron.

Indeed Paine was not a historian, and his status in some quarters as the key Anglophone interpreter of his age calls for careful analysis; his achievements were different. He never wrote a full history of the French Revolution, or of the American. The confident historical claim of this de-attributed narrative that the American Revolution inspired the French needs to be treated with caution. Certainly, returning troops had some role in France. But there were few officers who took very prominent parts in French politics, apart, of course, from Lafayette himself.

If *Rights of Man* is not primarily Paine's reliable historical insight into the nature and causes of the French Revolution, what is the book's intellectual foundation? The title reasonably leads us to expect a work on natural rights theory, but that is not quite what we get. True, rights are everywhere in Paine's text, repeatedly invoked yet hardly unpacked other than to say that man has rights because God gives them to each individual at the moment of that individual's creation.

We must, then, re-examine the historical interpretation, dependent not least on *Rights of Man*, that the French Revolution was essentially a long-anticipated protest against natural rights denied and the instantiation of natural rights in a society that rights now transformed. If so, "rights" in *Rights of Man* begin to look somewhat different. No longer do they seem the intellectual core of the book. Increasingly, they look like truisms, the self-evident terms of a discourse that had broadened out to the point where their practical relevance was seriously diluted.

Indeed, Paine's English understanding of natural rights as divine gifts was different from the secular understandings that were evidently predominant in Paris. If so, in what sense were natural rights discourse and Enlightenment discourse, as echoed by Paine, really the keys to the "Age of Revolutions"? If Lafayette was indeed the primary author of this central passage of *Rights of Man*, the consequences for our general assumptions about this foundational episode are considerable, and Paine's undoubtedly important writings deserve a closer and less hagiographic reading than they sometimes receive. Historians have much re-thinking to do.