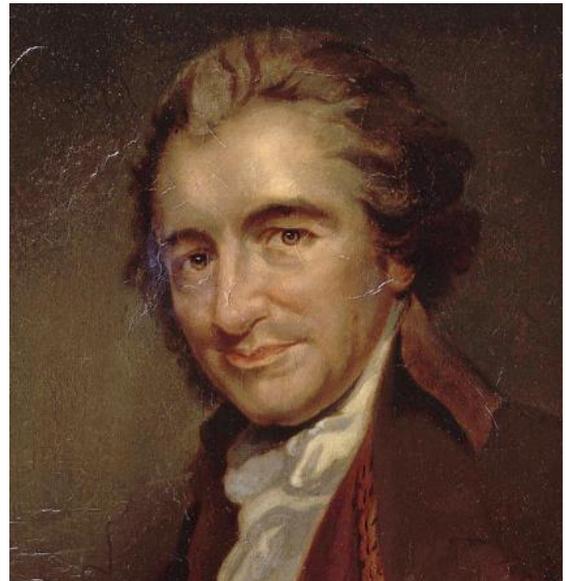


6.10 Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man" (1791)

Source: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rights_of_Man

Questions

1. Who was Thomas Paine?
2. Why did Paine write *Rights of Man*?
3. According to Paine, what are the origin of rights and when is revolution legitimate?
4. How are Paine's proposals for aiding people similar to other reform proposals in recent history?
5. What does Paine's political involvement in France, the United States, and Britain suggest about Enlightenment ideas?
6. In your opinion, why did Paine open with a letter to George Washington?



As an essayist, Thomas Paine played a role in both the American and French Revolutions at the end of the 18th century and was active in radical British politics. After conservative British politician Edmund Burke denounced the French Revolution in 1790 for destroying the fabric of society and its traditional institutions, Paine responded with *Rights of Man*. Burke believed that dictatorial government was a necessity because of corrupt nature and that the majority needed to be governed by a wealthy aristocratic minority. Paine countered that popular revolutions were legitimate when governments did not safeguard the natural rights of their people. He also called for government programs to promote education, employ the poor, and assist the elderly. The book probably sold a million copies at a time when literacy was much less widespread.

Paine opened the book with a letter to United States President George Washington where he wrote: "I present you a small treatise in defense of those principles of freedom which your exemplary virtue hath so eminently contributed to establish. That the Rights of Man may become as universal as your benevolence can wish, and that you may enjoy the happiness of seeing the New World regenerate the Old."

A. "It is a perversion of terms to say that a charter gives rights. It operates by a contrary effect — that of taking rights away. Rights are inherently in all the inhabitants; but charters, by annulling those rights, in the majority, leave the right, by exclusion, in the hands of a few ... They . . . consequently are instruments of injustice . . . The fact, therefore, must be that the individuals, themselves, each, in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a contract 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."

B. By the operation of this plan, the poor laws, those instruments of civil torture, will be superseded, and the wasteful expense of litigation prevented. The hearts of the humane will not be shocked by ragged and hungry children, and persons of seventy and eighty years of age, begging for bread. The dying poor will not be dragged from place to place to breathe their last, as a reprisal of parish upon parish. Widows will have a maintenance for their children, and not be carted away, on the death of their husbands, like culprits and criminals; and children will no longer be considered as increasing the distresses of their parents . . . The poor, as well as the rich, will then be interested in the support of government, and the cause and apprehension of riots and tumults will cease.