Teaching "'The Age of Paine': Radicalism, Revolution, and Religion" at New School University

TPF Board Member, Joyce Chumbley, interviews Frances Chiu, an instructor in the Humanities and Social Sciences departments at New School University in New York City, about her course on Thomas Paine. Chiu has been teaching "The Age of Paine" online since 2006. She has published in Eighteenth-Century Life: Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net; and Notes and Queries. More recently, she has edited Ann Radcliffe’s Gaston de Blondelville (1826) and Sheridan Le Fanu’s Rose and the Key (1871) for Valancourt Books.

Frances, how did you become interested in Thomas Paine?

I have to confess that I'm a relative late-comer to Paine. In fact, there was even one stage in my life when I was prejudiced against him, ignorantly assuming that he was a conservative since Reaganites and libertarians were so fond of claiming him for one of their "own" in the 1980s.

As such, it was with some reluctance that I picked up Rights of Man—and only because I was extremely interested in William Blake back in the early 1990s. But after a few pages, I was hooked and deeply amazed to find someone not only tackle hereditary government, socioeconomic disparities, and offensive wars with such passion, but also provide the very first blueprint for public education and Social Security; I couldn't help thinking how uncannily applicable it was to American society two centuries later. I then read The Age of Reason, Common Sense, and afterwards, the essays from Pennsylvania Magazine and continued to be struck by his progressive attitudes towards women, slaves, and native Americans. (By the way, even if he didn't pen all of the essays, I think it's still to his credit that he chose to publish them.) This was a man who truly epitomized the Enlightenment.

What made you decide to teach a course on Paine?

Paine's actually always been a part of the classes on literature and history that I've taught here at New School, and back at Oxford University where I completed a doctorate in English literature; it's difficult to grasp fully the rise of Romantic and even Victorian literature without some knowledge of his contribution to the rise of modern liberalism and the ways in which it helped determine concepts of personal identity and social criticism. A number of more immediate factors, however, did compel me to propose a class centered on Paine.

First of all, with everything that was going on in our nation back in late 2004

and (now)—a useless war, a reckless and irresponsible White House, an ever-rising religious right, and the skewering of anyone who dared to dissent, whether it was the Dixie Chicks, John Kerry, or the ordinary blogger for that matter—I knew it was time for a class that would expose undergraduates to the beginnings of modern liberalism, just in case anyone had forgotten that this was what helped advance America, and indeed, much of the West.

But it was my reading of John Keane's powerful biography of Paine that ultimately led me to devote a course almost exclusively to him. I was profoundly moved by his tragic end: if anyone was a modern Prometheus, it was Paine. How many people fully realize that in America alone, he served as a soldier in the Continental Army, that he walked 35 miles from Trenton to Philadelphia, that he donated nearly all of his earnings to the cause of independence, and that he helped expose Silas Deane for his money laundering? He gave his all, intellectually, physically and financially speaking—arguably more than anyone else then. And yet, Paine came to be treated by the founding fathers more or less like the hired help or the nanny who came to nurse America: even Jefferson came to distance himself from him. Since then, Paine has remained in a state of relative oblivion—more Prometheus bound, than unbound.

What do you cover in your class?

At first, I was contemplating a class that would cover all of Paine's major works: Common Sense, the American Crisis papers, Rights of Man, The Age of Reason and Agrarian Justice. I wanted to teach these alongside works by other writers of his period in order to yield a better understanding of Paine's ideas and rhetorical strategies in the contexts of the late 18th-century trans-Atlantic world. But it quickly dawned on me that such a syllabus would be pretty unrealistic for a 9-week online class. So I ended up focusing on Common Sense, Rights, and Reason. As far as I can tell, this is one of the very few classes in the U.S. that concentrates primarily on the writings of Paine.

In case you're wondering how an online class operates, I would have to say that it's not unlike an internet forum where everything—class discussion, formal written assignments, lectures, group projects, etc.—takes place via the New School online portal. Every Monday, I post up a lecture and start a new thread with a few questions. Since it is online, I place considerable emphasis on regular class discussion. I expect my students to read their texts and respond intelligibly not only to the questions I post on Mondays, but also to ones I ask in turn when responding to their posts: they're expected to substantiate their ideas with examples from the texts. The minimum for any student is three posts a week but many go beyond that. As you can imagine, it's a reading and writing intensive class for them as well as for me—I log in at least five times a day and respond regularly to their posts so that I won't get behind either. All of these discussions are supplemented by my weekly lectures on the beginnings of the American Revolution, mid-to-late 18th century British reformist discourse, the French Revolution, and the traditions of Protestant Dissent and deism. So anyone who thinks that an online class is a "gut" is making a big mistake!

In the first week, I have my students read a few selections from John Cartwright's Letters on American Independence (which I've had personally to type because there is no modern scholarly edition) and Jefferson's Summary Rights on British America. I have them compare Cartwright's and Jefferson's approaches to the subject of independence: What do they focus on? How do they make their arguments? How do their styles (i.e., imagery, tone, structure, etc.) vary? In the following week, my students examine Common Sense, which they in turn compare to Cartwright and Jefferson. It's here that they begin to realize just how revolutionary Paine's approach was.


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both ideologically and stylistically, from the use of metaphor down to the choice of italics and capitalization.

In week 3, we turn to the French Revolution debate, spending one week on Burke before proceeding to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Paine's *Rights of Man*, and a few excerpts from Godwin's *Political Justice* in weeks 4 and 5. Much of the focus is, of course, on *Rights of Man*, parts 1 and 2. Again, I ask students to analyze the differences in idea and style; for instance, how did Burke view the role of tradition and the "establishments"? How do Paine's ideas on the monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy diverge from Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's? What are their relative strengths and weaknesses?

Then, in weeks 6 and 7, we shift to the subject of religion, beginning with Baron d'Holbach's *Christianity Unveiled* and excerpts from Volney's *Ruins of Empire* in week 6, and Paine's *Age of Reason* in week 7. Here, too, we compare and contrast, analyzing their various emphases.

Finally, in week 8, I post a little mock quiz where they have to identify twenty or so quotes—who, what, and the significance of each passage (this is a lot of fun!)—and then we discuss Paine's overall accomplishments: What is it that truly distinguishes Paine from other contemporary thinkers? How have we inherited his legacy, both in terms of ideas and populist style? Who comes closest to donning his mantle today?

What are the challenges you've met with in your class and how successful do you think it's been?

One immediate challenge is getting the students used to reading 18th-century prose, just because it's considerably more complex than our style today, with clause layered upon clause, subject-verb inversions, extended antecedents, etc. They almost invariably encounter difficulties with Cartwright, Jefferson, Wollstonecraft, and particularly Burke, albeit to varying degrees. Some of it really does require translation! Interestingly, but not surprisingly, they have fewer problems with Paine; this perhaps just goes to demonstrate how direct and accessible his language was, as if spanning the 18th and 21st centuries. (I'm sure Paine, the bridge builder, would not mind this metaphor.) A number of them have commented on his modern balance of passion, informality and erudition.

Overall, I've been very satisfied, even thrilled by the manner in which my students have engaged with the readings; and I should add I've had a variety of students ranging from 20-year-olds to seasoned attorneys, journalists, and yes, CEOs. For the most part, my students have shown that they are capable of discerning and understanding how the contexts have changed even if the issues have remained essentially the same (i.e., economic disparities, lingering race/gender inequities, etc.). There are disagreements every once in a while: this is where as an instructor you have to hold the class together. In all cases, you need to show your students where they're correct—and where they've veered off in the wrong direction. I think that I've done this tactfully in most instances: at least, no one has complained about this on my evaluations so far!

Sometimes it's hard not to get off-topic occasionally—especially with the upcoming presidential elections this year. When reading *Rights of Man*, for instance, a few students were quick to point out how our democracy today bears all of the flaws associated with a monarchy! And after reading my lecture on late 18th century Protestant Dissent and its reformist, even radical, social and political agendas, one student commented on Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright. To me, this indicated that they were not reading passively, but actively. I like to think that Paine and his progressive contemporaries would approve.

Tell us a bit about your own scholarship.

I'm currently working on a book on horror and the rise of modern liberalism: namely, the ways in which the development of horror was shaped by the rhetoric of reform and the growth of national identity. I think it's no coincidence that just as Paine, Richard Price, and even Burke were conjuring up visions of the undead in order to comment on a supposedly modern Britain riddled with medieval anachronisms, novelists were drawing upon comparable visions of creepy, crumbling, supposedly haunted castles.

Nor do I think it's a coincidence that Mary Shelley, daughter of William Godwin and wife of the radical Percy Shelley, would create a sympathetic monster who begins by trying to do good before being persecuted like Paine (who was interestingly deemed a "demon" and "monster" by the conservatives of his day!). Considering that Godwin might have modeled his own protagonist, Caleb Williams, after Paine, this is a possibility. As such, it's almost appropriate that Paine was dug up by William Cobbett after the publication of *Frankenstein*. If any of you are interested in the ways in which novelists reacted to the turmoil of the 1790s, I would recommend my edition of Ann Radcliffe's *Gaston de Blondeville*. My introduction analyzes it as a veiled commentary on the age of George III and its irrational treatment of political dissenters. (Paine is of course discussed here.)

Any plans for 2009, the bicentenary of Paine's death, and afterwards?

Yes! As well as teaching this class again that fall, I'm organizing a symposium, "A New Era for Politics: Thomas Paine and the Legacy of Modern Liberalism" at the New School. It's going to focus on the meaning of Paine's works for our lives today. So far, the good news is that I've asked Harvey Kaye—who would be a perfect match with his recent study of Paine and his legacy—to be plenary speaker and he appears to be interested! However, we do need funding: so we'll see how that goes. I will be sending out a call for papers shortly.

Beyond that, I'd like to get involved in a production of a film or at the very least, a documentary on Paine. His life was one of immense courage, conviction, and adventure, in other words, one that can inspire all of us as Americans. It's important to remember that long before any of our presidential candidates came along, Thomas Paine had already spoken of the powers of hope and change. Paine is the one Founding Father who can help us reclaim American liberalism—loud and proud.

The course will be offered again in fall 2009. See website www.newschool.edu