“Life, Liberty, Humanity” and Paine's Path to Justice
www.leftforum.org/content/life-liberty-humanity-and-paines-path-to-justice-501c4-planning-roundtable
by Victor Madeson*

On the 103rd anniversary of Paine’s death (June 8, 1809) our LIFE, LIBERTY, HUMANITY panel discussion at the Left Forum** focused on planning a 501(c)4 organization to be launched on December 10, 2013, the 65th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR Day), the progeny of Paine’s Rights of Man (1791-92). We met at noon on the second day of the Left Forum annual conference at Pace University (near City Hall) in New York City. Noam Chomsky was the keynote speaker in the plenary session following the noon cluster of panels. Oliver Stone spoke in the evening. The central theme for discussion by hundreds of speakers this year was the economy and ecology.

Our panel discussed the shape of a national structure intended to begin on UDHR Day 2013. Thomas Paine offered a proven approach to similar social organizations. Our proposal would promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other ideals that Paine formulated in such texts as Rights of Man (1791-92), Agrarian Justice (1797), his letter on Constitutional Reform (1805). For example, the title for the panel was inspired by Paine’s argument to spare the life of Louis XVI, when he said “My language has always been that of LIBERTY and HUMANITY, and I know that nothing so exalts a nation as the union of these two principles.”

The planning agenda suggested a reading list that included Stone and Kuznick’s Untold History of the United States (2012, NY: Gallery Books) for a historical framework since World War 2, and Ralph Nader’s Seventeen Solutions (2012, NY: Harper). Wheeler’s Life and Writing of Thomas Paine (1908, NY: Vincent Parke and Company) was a source for “Society for Political Inquiries” (from vol. 9), as were Agrarian Justice and Constitutional Reform (both from Wheeler’s vol. 10). Other documents included: Thomas Paine’s Agrarian Justice; and an 1805 "Letter and Compass on Constitutional Reform" (both from Vol. 10). These, the UDHR, and a list of “Things We Can Do,” can all be downloaded from the above website in PDF format.

Besides myself (www.valorww2.com/Author.html), the participants were also members of Thomas Paine Friends and included Patrick Roxberry, a combat infantry veteran (Veterans for Peace; Veterans of Foreign Wars; Vietnam Veterans of America); Robert Taetsch (retired engineer and real estate developer; Lepoco Peace Center); and Dr. Vincent Stravino (retired medical doctor; former Army captain; VFP; Lepoco). Karen Thorsen (media producer; formerly with Simon & Schuster, Life Magazine, and Time) attended, but was too late to be in the roundtable, having been delayed enroute from Connecticut by road flooding. The severe weather also prevented Michael DeDora (United Nations representative for Center for Inquiry) from attending this year. Louise Legun (Founder of VIP Thomas Paine Chapter 152) had to cancel and another speaker (Yannis Tsiligakis) was double-scheduled for noon. Kamill Ghoshal (www.philosophyinaction.org) again provided video support. Michael Moore visited four floors above, absorbing part of our potential audience. Consequently, the planned roundtable became a four-way panel discussion.

After an introduction, Patrick presented a short summary of Paine’s "Letter and Compass on Constitutional Reform" (1805). Robert spoke of the World War 2 Atlantic Charter and “Four Freedoms” and how it led to the United Nations. Vincent highlighted the importance of the United Nations and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was followed by a discussion of how a 501(c)4 organization compares to a 501(c)3 and the benefits of both. Essentially, neither allows political activity, but the 501(c)4 offers anonymity for large donors. It does not have a tax write-off. Thomas Paine Friends is structured as 501(c)3, and fits the definition of an educational, historical, memorial, charitable organization, and it can attract donors who may be looking for charitable write-offs. In contrast, Societies for Political Inquiry, by whatever name, could be established as 501(c)4 to attract veterans and donors whose interest extends beyond educational goals. You can contact me (vmvalor@yahoo.com) directly for more information on these distinctions. In any case, we do not expect to start accepting significant contributions until 2014.

The specific structure for these Societies was not established but we can imagine something like Henry George Schools, Toastmasters International, or Nation Associates, leading towards a chapter per Congressional District and a “clearing house” for every four districts. It might begin with a national clearinghouse to ease administration and communication, but a grassroots structure is essential for success. The Republican Party-dominated Tea Party Patriots are not a good model because of their narrow focus on taxes and corporate rights, but that’s a topic for a longer future discussion.

From Common Sense to Commons Sense

A BBC production calls Paine, “The most valuable Englishman ever.” In that context, Rights of Man (Parts 1 and 2) is a logical root of the UN’s “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, as the modern concept of human rights. The nexus from Rights of Man to the 1805 "Letter and Compass" is evident

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www.thomas-paine-friends.org
from his role in the proposed French Constitution of 1793 (the Girondins Constitution), and the essay Agrarian Justice, which was written while Paine resided with Monroe (1795-96). It continued the discussion on equality from Rights of Man with an emphasis on ending poverty. The pamphlet dwells upon the misappropriation of common property by private owners and proposes a system, somewhat like Social Security, and an inheritance tax, to reverse the virtual theft from the great mass of the people (as Henry George later propounded).

To see how some founding elitists instead copied royal values we can remember the preservation of serfdom (slavery) and legal royalism. Paine considered himself “Left” of the French First and Second “Estates” and is a better model for American reformers than Karl Marx. This need not be argued here, except to urge a study of Paine’s 1805 “Letter and Compass on Constitutional Reform”. For example:

There is no article in the Constitution of this State, nor of any of the states, that invests the Government in whole or in part with the power of granting charters or monopolies of any kind; the spirit of the times was then against all such speculation; and therefore the assuming to grant them is unconstitutional, and when obtained by bribery and corruption is criminal.

Primarily, we raised the possibility that activists should shift resources towards emulating the pragmatism of a most valuable citizen of the world and his model for political inquiry (SPI) Each “club” would have leeway in the bylaws and incorporation. The only significant objection was that our group should avoid duplicating the efforts of similar existing groups. If we focus on a grassroots effort, rather than being a “top-down” structure, there should be no conflict with local interaction. Narrowing of the agenda from the broadly based idea of “Political Inquiries” to retaking of the Commons and Human Rights will also limit any overlap with existing groups.

In conclusion, the panel served its planned purpose. It opened discussion about a specific organization. Between now and December 10, we need to draw up legal papers and bylaws in order to launch a national clearing house with at least one 501(c)4. If all goes well, in a few years there will be a number of such chapters around the country and most of them would be affiliated with Thomas Paine Friends. We’ll be looking for charter members willing to gather around the country. As more information becomes available, it will be posted either in the TPF Bulletin or on the TPF website.

* Details on author are at www.valorww2.com/Author.html
** The Forum was largely coordinated by members of the City University of New York Sociology Department since about 1983, and evolved further from the Socialist Scholars Conference in 2005. With thousands in attendance, it claims to be the largest annual gathering of the Left in North America. Its website offers videos and a wealth of information, www.leftforum.org/content. Victor Madeson, a board member of Thomas Paine Friends, organized panels in 2012 and 2013; TPF members participated in both.
*** Reformer Henry George in his book Progress and Poverty (1879, New York: E.P. Dutton), traced the idea of an inheritance tax to Agrarian Justice; he also suggested a single tax to make up for the loss of the people’s common property.