What Would Tom Paine Advocate Today?

By Robert Meeropol / January 28, 2021

Robert Meeropol is the younger son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were prejudicially executed by the U.S. in 1953 for allegedly giving atomic secrets to the U.S.S.R. He is founder of the Rosenberg Fund for Children, and an avid friend of Tom Paine, and a generous member of Thomas Paine Friends. Meeropol presented this ZOOM talk on January 28, 2021 as a fundraiser for the Latin American Relief Fund, and the talk served also as the Thomas Paine Birthday program for the Amherst M4 chapter of TPF. He gave a previous version, in person, for the Amherst chapter’s Paine Birthday in 2020. The Zoom talk of 2021 attracted a large audience and was very well received, and did raise funds for LARF.

Perhaps some in attendance are unfamiliar with Tom Paine. As a North American, I’m surprised by this, because during the American Revolution he was perhaps the most famous, or notorious depending upon your belief system, American revolutionary on the North American continent.

Tom Paine was born in Thetford, England, on January 29, 1737 (or February 9, 1737). Using the earlier date, tomorrow would be his 284th birthday. He came to the American colonies in 1774. He engaged in a number of employments, but became famous as a revolutionary philosopher. His pamphlet, Common Sense, helped inspire the American Revolution. John Adams wrote: “Without the pen of the author of Common Sense, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain.”

You could say that Tom Paine represented the radical wing of the American revolutionary impulse. He was the most influential thinker of the revolutionary period, but once the new order was established, he was relegated to a secondary position by the more conservative powers that came to be. Only six people attended his funeral when he died in New York City in 1809 because he was ostracized for a pamphlet he wrote attacking a literal interpretation of the Bible and Christian doctrine generally. He advocated for human rights, women’s rights, a minimum wage, the right of rebellion, and against slavery. He was prescient— a prophet born well before his time.

Much more could be said about Tom Paine’s actions and writings, but that is not the focus of my talk today.

My favorite quote from Tom Paine is, “The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.”

I would change “mankind” to “humankind,” but otherwise that quote is close to a succinct summary of my worldview.

I’m not a big fan of ideological labels. Describing people as socialists, capitalists, communists, anarchists, or some other “ist,” often obscures, rather than clarifies, their beliefs. However, if you called me a Tom Painest, you wouldn’t be far off the mark.

What would Tom Paine, or a Tom Painest, advocate today?

I use the word “advocate” because that’s who Tom Paine was. He didn’t mount the barricades. He joined the revolutionary army but he wasn’t much of a fighter. He used his pen to promote actions and support policies. And as John Adams wrote, during the American revolution, his pen turned out to be mightier than many British swords and cannons. So, what would be advocate today?

It is safe to say that Paine knew nothing about climate change, but I think that he would advocate today for making sustainability, rather than growth, our primary focus.

As a person of the Enlightenment, someone who elevated reason and science, he would argue first for applying our scientific knowledge to make a realistic assessment of what we face. Given that climate change is a global problem that must be tackled by all people, everywhere, advocating for revolutionary change in order to achieve global sustainability is exactly what someone would do who believed in doing good for the entire world and all people who live upon it.

I don’t know how much Paine knew about environmental interactions and so do not know if he understood that doing good for all people also requires doing good for the plants and animals we share the planet with. But as an Enlightenment man of reason and science, if he were alive today, he would quickly reach that conclusion.

So, what is a realistic assessment of what we face? Most of us have heard a lot about bigger storms, worse droughts, hotter temperatures, coupled with more erratic weather in general. We’ve also heard about sea level rise and catastrophic weather events causing 10s, even 100s, of millions of climate refugees, and that this will cause widespread misery, social chaos and war.

I hate to say it, but that’s a sugar-coated assessment. Once we cross a certain threshold (the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, and the Paris accord set that number at 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius, or approximately between 2 and 3 degrees Fahrenheit), we will trigger a self-perpetuating cycle of temperature increases that we can do nothing to stop. And that will result in several more degrees of warming, a self-propelling cycle.

If that happens, massive methane releases will poison our atmosphere, growing food will become close to impossible and most drinkable fresh water will vanish. In other words, we won’t be able to breathe the air, drink the water and there will be no food. That’s what we face and that’s why it is no exaggeration to say we face an existential crisis.

Why hasn’t it been presented to us in this manner? I quote from an essay Jonathan Franzen published in the New Yorker in 2019, that begins to explain this. He wrote that avoiding this kind of talk is not surprising, “Psychologically, this denial makes sense. Despite the outrageous fact that I’ll soon be dead forever, I live in the present, not the future. Given a choice between an alarming abstraction (death) and the reassuring evidence of my senses (breakfast!) my mind prefers to focus on the latter.” So do we all.

We shake our heads and express sorrow and sympathy for the animal and plant victims of the Australian fires. But we don’t give...
a thought about it happening closer to home. The recent firestorms in northern Alberta, in California, and Australia will not be confined to those areas as the weather becomes hotter and more erratic. Once we cross the threshold I described a few moments ago, and possibly even before, it will become inevitable that more forests will burn just like those in California and Australia. I’m not predicting this will happen in hundreds of years; I predict that sometime in the next several decades our forests will burn. Imagine the mixed forests of the Northeast United States, or boreal forests of the Canadian shield, or the tropical rain forests in the midst of a firestorm.

And firestorms are a good word for it, because these fires are so potent that they create their own weather. Meteorologists have observed an unprecedented type of cloud formation during the Alberta and Australian fires. The technical name is pyrocumulonimbus clouds. They are caused by the energy released during the fires and they create lightning, thunder and tornado-like winds that spread burning embers over long distances. Australians have begun to call them fire clouds. None of us wants to imagine them in our forests.

Scientists are human and not necessarily politically astute. Back in 1988, head NASA scientist James Hansen publicly predicted what has happened since and what we are facing. He might have also been correct at that time when he said that if we attacked the problem immediately and applied our collective political will we could turn this around. But the world’s weather seemed benign at the time, and powerful economic and political forces reacted by creating the vast array of climate denial propaganda that plagues us to this day.

All the scientists could think to do, as it became less likely that we could turn this around, was to scream more shrilly that we must act and that it isn’t too late. They said it in 1990, in 2000, in 2010 and during every year since. That didn’t help as the decades rolled by. People could rationalize: you said the sky was falling in 1988, you have said it over and over again for 30 years and the sky is still up there. Until the last few years, such skepticism helped delay the realization that Hansen was right.

Some scientists came to believe it was too late and gave up in despair. Others, and this goes well beyond scientists, educated themselves and understood what was happening, but became reluctant to tell the whole truth because it was so dire and overwhelming that they feared it would discourage action.

And this last fear is a very real one. When I bring this up, a common response is, “What a downer.” Yes, confronting the horror we face is a downer, but isn’t making a comment like that designed to shut off discussion? Isn’t it in fact a form of climate change denial? It says, let’s not talk about this. But if we don’t talk about it, how can we address it? Tom Paine would say we must mobilize the masses on a global scale in order to make our best efforts to combat this. He would be the last person to say don’t talk or write about it.

I hope that no one who hears this talk will ever try to stifle climate change-related discussion by saying it’s a downer. Better still, if you hear someone else say it, confront her/him about it.

As a political strategist, Tom Paine would also make a realistic political assessment. His application of the science to our political situation would lead him to conclude we are unlikely to change the global power structure quickly enough to avoid crossing the thresholds I talked about before. However, Paine never shied away from taking on long odds, so I bet, confronted with this crisis, he’d pen a pamphlet. Perhaps he’d title it Environmental Common Sense. In this pamphlet he’d outline how to make our most effective effort to save ourselves and the productive capacity of the planet.

What kind of change would he urge? As a revolutionary who looked at social structure as a whole, he would urge that our survival now depends on transforming our basic social ethic from competition to cooperation. He would see the need to place the environment over profit and the economy. To repent, he would note that sustainability, rather than growth, must be our guide-star.

How much time do we have? If we don’t turn things around in the next ten years, how long before we blow through the threshold that will generate self-perpetuating changes that we will be unable to stop and render the planet virtually uninhabitable?

Scientists tell us that it takes thirty years to feel the full impact of the greenhouse gases we’ve pumped into the atmosphere in any given year, and that in the last 30 years we’ve pumped as much greenhouse gases into the atmosphere as we did in the previous 150 years. During those 150 years we increased global temperatures by one degree Celsius, so it is reasonable to project that we’ll reach the two-degree Celsius threshold by the time we feel the full effect of the gases we’ve pumped into the atmosphere since 1990. That is around 2050, but, of course, such dates are hard to pin down exactly.

A very well-connected and well-funded British think tank, the Breakthrough Institute, has produced a policy paper that sheds further light on how much time we have.

It points out that the world has several major bread baskets: California’s Central Valley, the US/Canadian plains, and the rice bowls of China and India, along with rich agricultural river deltas like the Mekong and Nile. The report predicts that climate change could lead to the simultaneous crop failure of all of them by 2050. Once that happens, we will face global societal breakdown. I’ll have to live to over 100 to experience it, or more likely die by it, but I fear for my children, their children, and all the younger people on this Zoom. Blowing through the 2-degree Celsius threshold will generate at least another two degrees of warming, bringing the total to four degrees Celsius. About that, the report says, “Scientists warn that warming of 4 degrees C is incompatible with an organized global community. … The World Bank says it may be beyond adaption.” The World Bank is hardly a radical organization.

Given this time frame, Paine would recognize that every day

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counts, but he’d also acknowledge that, although we must try, any progress we can make, during the 10 years the scientists claim we have to drastically cut our emissions, probably won’t prevent us from crossing the self-perpetuating threshold of further temperature rise. However, since it might, it would still be worth pursuing.

He’d also acknowledge that it might not and so it would be wise to brace ourselves for all the nastiness that is coming down the pike. Again, a quote from Jonathan Franzen’s article illuminates what I mean by this. Franzen writes, that if we can’t win the battle against climate change outright, ...other kinds of action take on greater meaning. Preparing for fires and floods and refugees is a directly pertinent example. But the impending catastrophe heightens the urgency of almost any world-improving action. In times of increasing chaos, people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than the rule of law, and our defense against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, and functioning communities. In this respect any movement towards a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action. Securing fair elections is a climate action. Combating extreme wealth inequality is a climate action. Shutting down the hate machines on social media is a climate action. Instituting a humane immigration policy, advocating for racial and gender equality, ... these are all meaningful climate actions.6

I doubt Tom Paine knew much about social media, but he wrote about and advocated for every other progressive action mentioned in the quoted language. For instance, in Common Sense, Paine saw our emerging nation as an asylum for persecuted people. He’d be turning over in his grave if he saw what is happening today at the Mexican border to the American human rights haven he dreamed.

Before I close, I’ve also been asked to say a few words about the 2020 election and its aftermath.

Remember what Jonathan Franzen wrote about the growing need for functioning democracies, legal systems and communities and the growing threat of tribalism and armed force. It is clear that holding those involved in participating in and in promoting the US Capitol insurrection must be held to account.

What else might Tom Paine say about the 2020 election? He wrote, “Men who look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey, soon grow insolent; selected from the rest of mankind their minds are early poisoned by importance; and the world they act in differs so materially from the world at large, that they have but little opportunity of knowing its true interests, and when they succeed to the government are frequently the most ignorant and unfit of any throughout the dominions.”

Wow. Tom Paine died well over a hundred years before Donald Trump was born, but he still described him to a T.

On the Democratic side, he would applaud Joe Biden’s recognition that combating climate change must be a priority. However, he’d be concerned about Biden’s apparent hesitancy to hold the politicians who promoted the storming of the Capitol fully to account. And he’d also note that directly confronting American and global extractionist corporations is necessary to save us. Biden is way, way better than Trump, but Paine would still be concerned that Biden will not make the basic structural changes necessary to save us. Perhaps we can talk more about this in the question and response period.

I’ll leave you with a final thought.

What does it mean to say “the world is my country”? If the world is your country, it means you do not give your allegiance to any particular country. It means that you don’t believe in nationalism. It means that you don’t elevate any nation above others. It means that patriotism is obsolete, except in the sense that you express your love for your country, by taking actions to benefit all countries including your own. And because we face an urgent global crisis that requires global cooperation, Tom Paine’s basic philosophy, “The world is my country, all mankind are my bretheren, and to do good is my religion,” has never been more timely.

* Rosenberg Fund for Children, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, public foundation, makes grants to aid children in the U.S. whose parents are targeted, progressive activists. Since its start, in 1990, RFC has awarded more than $7.5 million to benefit thousands of children whose parents have been besieged because of their involvement in movements such as the struggles for civil liberties, to wage peace, safeguard the environment, combat racism and homophobia, and organize on behalf of workers, prisoners, immigrants and others whose human rights are threatened. RFC also assists youth who themselves have been targeted as a result of their progressive activities. http://www.rfc.org

+ The Latin American Relief Fund, LARF, is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit charity that assists migrants and refugees and finds shelter and aid for them in Mexico. LARF seeks to raise awareness of the plight of migrants fleeing from violence, crime, poverty, and the consequences of climate change. http://www.latinalamericanrelieffund.org

1 Thomas Paine, Rights of Man (1791, part 2).
6 Thomas Paine, Common Sense (1776).