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EDITORIAL

THOMAS PAINE.

By DANIEL DE LEON

AS “rehabilitators” the Paine celebrations were superfluous. Social progress is rehabilitating the illustrious author of the *Age of Reason* and of *Common Sense* and co-founder of the American Republic more than any set praises could. Time is taking charge of proving the “dirty little atheist” a cleaner, a larger and a more truly religious man than the petty, mentally and morally unclean killer and shooter who dared wag his tongue against him. As to the churches, the “higher criticism” that the leading Protestant ministers are pursuing, and the powerful Modernist Movement in the Catholic church itself, whose brightest intellects are now only repeating facts and arguments, many of which have long ago been stated and advanced by Paine—these are so many acts of homage rendered to the memory of the great pioneer of enlightenment. There is no better rehabilitation of a man than for his quondam foes to adopt the principles for which they once condemned him. This has been done to Paine—and is done more and more—and will be done in even larger measure as the race progresses onward. The rehabilitators have been carrying coals to Newcastle.



THOMAS PAINE (1736–1809)

It is not by rehabilitating him that our generation can honor itself by honoring Paine. The shades of a man, cast in the large mold of Paine, feel greatest gratification if the admiration and gratitude bestowed upon his merits do not serve to conceal some error which is harmful, and which he himself, with maturer experience, would have corrected; while, on the other hand, the shades of such a man can only grieve if his merits are used to blur, worse yet, to justify the mistake.

Paine has been praised by his “rehabilitators” for voting against the beheading of Louis XVI and for having braved the enmity of the French revolutionists for the stand he took in the matter. Such being his convictions, it was the manly thing to stand by them—regardless of personal consequences. But were his convictions sound, under the circumstances?

The beheading of Louis XVI was as benevolently sagacious an act as was the shooting of Maximilian at Queretaro. There are times when a symbolic act, performed upon a conspicuous theater, though cruel in appearance, is the benignest in fact.

Had the Austrian Maximilian,—the invader of Mexico, who, with the protection of two foreign temporal thrones, those of Napoleon III and of Pius IX, sought to wade through slaughter and rapine to a throne in Mexico—been allowed to escape with his life, then the measure would have been construed as denoting a self-stultifying respect for the “brother of an Emperor.” The consequences would have been of the worst for America. As it was, we have been left alone to solve our own problems without foreign intervention, and in the regular course of social evolution. No more Archdukes dared take their changes.

Had Louis XVI, who betrayed France to the Duke of Brunswick, then ready to invade the land, been treated with “benign contempt,” the issue of the French Revolution—that shake-up so necessary to all Europe—would probably have been different. An act, that looks like a display of respect for one to whom no respect is due, both encourages the foe and discourages the militants in revolt.

True enough, as Paine said, it was not against the man but the monarchy that the revolution was directed. There are times when such distinctions are too fine to be perceived. The mailed glove is harmless without the hand inside of it. It was not as a moralist but as a statesman, at the critical hour of a revolution when a whole Nation’s welfare trembled in the scale and a great Cause was at stake, that Paine figured in France. After an accomplished Revolution, with society settled and safe, the principle of benignity IS benign, because wise; during a Revolution, with society in a state of dynamics, the principle of benignity is UNbenign, because unwise.

Paine erred when he voted against the beheading of the traitorous representative of the long line of bloodstained and equally traitorous Capetingians.

It was an error that our generation can do the shades of venerated Thomas Paine no greater favor than to point out, lest, the principle being accepted, evil come to all that Paine himself held dearest.

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