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# German-American Liberalism and Thomas Paine

THE SHIFTING EVALUATION OF THOMAS PAINE'S WRITINGS PRESENTS A MOST fascinating episode. Theories have been advanced to show that Paine's ideas were gradually appreciated because the cultural climate of the country changed. The crusading efforts of men like Robert Ingersoll and Moncure Conway have also been given their just due. However, the influence which German-Americans had in the re-evaluation of Thomas Paine has long been overlooked. This paper will try to give evidence to show that German-Americans contributed not a little in creating a new public image of Paine, and in arousing the interest of Moncure Conway—Paine's foremost biographer and editor—to undertake his monumental work.

The German-Americans with whom we will be primarily concerned here are the refugees of the Revolution of 1848. The Forty-Eighters, as they are often called, were for the most part well-educated and emancipated men, who sought political as well as cultural freedom on our shores. They championed a cosmopolitan humanitarianism based on natural law and the inalienable rights of man which transcended all national and racial boundaries. Spiritually and ideologically they subscribed to the creed of rationalism made popular by the age of enlightenment. With this heritage it is not too difficult to see why they were receptive to the writings of Thomas Paine.

The Forty-Eighters demonstrated pro-Paine sympathies immediately upon arrival in this country, for they had become acquainted with the writings of this man in Germany. In his recent article, "Die Aufnahme von Thomas Paines Schriften in Deutschland," [1] Hans Arnold points out that Germans had published Paine editions soon after they appeared

[1] Hans Arnold, "Die Aufnahme von Thomas Paines Schriften in Deutschland," *PMLA*, LXXIV (September 1959), 365-86.

originally. *Common Sense* had been translated and was read in Germany as early as 1777.[2] Germans exhibited a great interest in the cause of the American Revolution. They likewise were attracted to Paine's reflections on the French Revolution, as incorporated in the *Rights of Man,* and were able to read this work in translation.[3] It was a third work by Paine, however, *The Age of Reason,* which appeared in translation in Hamburg in 1794,[4] that will concern us most here. This treatise was destined to become a favorite of the Forty-Eighters, because they saw expressed here their own religious ideas.

Although *The Age of Reason* was considered well-nigh heretical in America, when it first made its appearance, it received a kinder reception in Germany. For in that country the religious controversies with Reimarus and the pantheistic feuds revolving about Spinozism had helped to create an atmosphere in which the Bible and church dogma were not considered infallible. Furthermore, a Germany conditioned by eighteenth-century deism and classical humanism was not shocked by Paine's liberal Christianity, but was able to view it objectively. According to the German literary historian, Eschenburg, *The Age of Reason* created much interest in his native land,[5] and this opinion is substantiated by the fact that new editions of *Das Zeitalter der Vernunft* were published in Münster in 1799 and 1802.[6]

In the first decades which ensued after these publications, Paine seems to have lost favor. A series of circumstances, though, were to cause his star to rise once more. Most important in this respect was the appearance of the works of Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss, which respectively fostered a materialistic philosophy and cast grave doubts as to the historical personage of Jesus. In the intellectual climate occasioned by such writings, Paine's ideas could thrive. And when the Revolution of 1848 broke out, it was not only Paine's views on religion which received increased attention, but his ideas on political freedom as well. Consequently, there was a flurry of new Paine publications in German on the part of the revolutionaries and their sympathizers. Some of these appeared in Germany, some in America, and others appeared mutually in both. I shall mention the more important ones: *Thomas Paines theologische Werke,* with a foreword by Heinrich Ginal, appeared in Philadelphia in 1847, and in Stolberg am Harz in 1848. Gustav Struve

2 Arnold, pp. 366-67.

3 Arnold, pp. 370-71.

4 Thomas Paine, *Das Zeitalter der Vernunft,* trans. H. C. Albrecht (2 vols.; Hamburg und Lübeck, 1794).

5 *Annalen der brittischen Geschichte* (Tübingen, 1796), XIII, 313-14.

6 Thomas Paine, *Das Zeitalter der Vernunft,* ed. Marcell Molkenbuhr (Münster, 1799 and 1802).

included representative political writings of Paine in his book, *Die Väter unserer Republik in ihrem Leben und Wirken,* which was published in New York in 1847. Another work which sought to acquaint the revolutionaries with Paine's political ideas was John Grtis's *Republik oder Monarchie? Beantwortet durch Thomas Paines Gesunder Menschenverstand und Menschenrechte,* published in Hamburg in 1848 and in Chicago in 1849. Finally, the standard German edition, *Sämtliche Werke von Thomas Paine,* translated and edited by H. Ginal in three volumes, appeared in 1851-52 in Philadelphia, and was reprinted several times during the course of the next two decades.

From the bibliographical material just presented it is evident that Paine's writings were readily available to the Forty-Eighters. One of the most influential men of this immigrant group, and a Paine enthusiast, was Friedrich Hecker. He had led the uprising of 1848 in Germany and retained his popularity and leadership in the United States. Settling on a farm in Illinois, he continued fighting for the revolutionary ideals by writing and lecturing extensively. In 1851 he wrote the foreword to a new Paine edition of *Rechte des Menschen,* which was published in Leipzig in 1851. Paine is depicted as a champion of religious, social and political freedom in the tradition of Thomas Münzer, Sikkingen and Hutten. Furthermore, it is the deistic philosophy of *The Age of Reason* which Hecker greatly admires.[7]

A close friend of Hecker's, who was equally influential among the Forty-Eighters, was Gustav Struve. His book on Paine mentioned above is convincing evidence that he sought to acquaint his fellow men with the colonial American writer. Struve was well known as an orator among German-American circles in New York and Philadelphia.[8]

If the publishers, editors, translators and orators already alluded to were the pathfinders, it remained for the various German societies to introduce Paine to the masses. Specifically, it was the freethinking societies which assume prominence here. These "Freimännervereine" or "Freisinnige," as they were called, were organized in Germany, and represented a rationalistic revolt against supernaturalism, clericalism and dogmatism. Their religious philosophies varied from agnosticism to atheism, and from anticlericalism to a liberal Protestantism. Freethinkers believed in the potentialities of man. They asked for no intervention from a supernatural force. They were quick to accept all the implications of the concept of evolution, the perfectibility of man, and they stressed man's duty to question, investigate and doubt. There were a few German

7 Thomas Paine, *Die Rechte des Menschen* (Leipzig, 1851), pp. vii-xiv.

8 Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), p. 155.

freethinking societies in America as early as the 1830s, but they received their greatest import from the refugees of 1848. One of the earliest organizations was the Cincinnati Freimännerverein. The Cleveland Freimännerbund organized in the early 1850s, a Milwaukee society was founded in 1852,[9] and ere long most of the larger cities in the Midwest had societies of this type. New York had its German freethinkers as did New Orleans, but by and large the Midwest was the hotbed for this radical group.[10]

By the middle of the 1850s, it had become a ritual with the German freethinking organizations to celebrate Paine's birthday (January 29). Such an anniversary celebration in Milwaukee in 1853 attracted over six hundred persons, representing twenty-three Wisconsin societies.[11] In the following year the assemblage at the Milwaukee Paine festival approved a platform which contained some interesting and revealing features. By way of introduction it commemorated Paine's efforts in the cause of liberty during the Revolution, and remembered him as a champion of freedom in all its forms, and as a bitter foe of prejudice, superstition and traditionalism. In the spirit of Paine the platform attacked church dogma, nativism, temperance laws and existing labor conditions.[12] The significant fact here is that the German-Americans were not paying homage to Paine, the historical personage, but to the man as symbol. In the minds of the German freethinkers the figure of Paine represented the ideal, enlightened America they envisioned, and conversely, it graced the banner under whose colors they would do battle against any American customs and traditions which they detested. At Paine rallies in Milwaukee and elsewhere Germans challenged the traditional Puritan concepts and mores. First and foremost, they advocated a more liberal, humanitarian and enlightened religion. In an obvious appeal to the masses they defended the right to observe the Sabbath in the European manner. For them Sunday was a time for dances, theater-going, picnics, visits to beer gardens and for relaxation in general. Germans likewise protested against the nativist tendencies of the Know-Nothing party and their allies to consider the European immigrants as second-class citizens. Whenever temperance laws were proposed or adopted, a vigorous protest was registered against them at the Paine celebrations.

Paine anniversaries, with platforms similar to the one depicted above, were commonplace at midcentury. New York had such a celebration as

[9] Wittke, p. 128.
[10] Wittke, p. 129.
[11] Wittke, p. 133.
[12] Wittke, p. 131.

early as 1851;[13] Karl Heinzen mentions a gala occasion in the same city in 1856, which consisted of a program of speeches, a banquet and a ball.[14] Cleveland Germans paid homage to Paine in 1853.[15] In this period Paine was also revered in Cincinnati, then the leading city of the Midwest.

We must pay particular attention to German-American activities in this city, for they were to have a profound influence on Moncure Conway, the eminent editor and biographer of Thomas Paine. Contemporary newspapers help us to recreate the atmosphere of this age. Already in 1852 the *Cincinnati Volksblatt* had called local secret religious societies a curse on humanity.[16] Two years later representatives of radical German societies from Toledo, Sandusky, Massillon, Dayton, Hamilton, Akron, Columbus and Cleveland met in the Freethinkers hall of Cincinnati. The platform they adopted reveals well their views. Resolutions were drawn up denouncing Sunday closing laws, opposing the reading of the Bible and reciting prayers in public schools and legislative bodies.[17] The *Cincinnati Volksfreund,* which considered itself tolerant and broad-minded, nevertheless complained in an editorial on October 2, 1856, about the growing number of atheistic and pantheistic organizations.

It was just about this time, November 1856, that Moncure Conway came to Cincinnati as pastor of the First Universalist church. He was at once impressed by the stimulating intellectual atmosphere of the city, particularly among its German element. He took note that one-third of the population was German,[18] and that some of the most interesting citizens of Cincinnati were Germans—refugees of the Revolution of 1848. Conway was particularly attracted to August Willich, editor of the *Cincinnati Republikaner,* and a leader among the German freethinkers and Turners.[19] Willich had been active in the Paine celebration of 1854 in Milwaukee,[20] and his religious convictions were those of a rationalist and humanist.

Conway was fascinated by the religious ideas expounded by the liberals in Cincinnati, and mentions that he attended some meetings of a small society of "infidels" who gathered every Sunday in a room on Fourth Street. Conway relates that the group obviously did not believe in God or in immortality, and that they paid particular homage to Thomas

13 *New Yorker Staatszeitung,* January 14, 1851.
14 *Der Pionier* (newspaper published in Cincinnati), February 3, 1856.
15 *Wächter am Erie* (Cleveland), February 2, 1853.
16 *Cincinnati Volksblatt,* July 29, 1852.
17 Wittke, p. 131.
18 Moncure Conway, *Autobiography* (Boston and New York, 1904), I, 255.
19 Conway, p. 268.
20 Wittke, p. 131.

Paine, a fervent apostle of theism.[21] To these freethinkers, Paine, by virtue of his book, *The Age of Reason,* was most instrumental in promulgating rationalism and religious freedom in colonial America. It was now that Conway began to busy himself with the controversial writer, for the man whom he had heard preachers in the East mention with abhorrence was suddenly extolled in this midwestern city. Conway must certainly have known about the grandiose Paine anniversary celebration held in Cincinnati in 1859. The *Cincinnati Republikaner* mentions that for this occasion the various German freethinking societies marched to the Melodeon Hall in groups, waving banners and singing on the way. The German orator at this festive performance, August Becker, editor of the newspaper *Cincinnati Hochwächter,* portrayed Paine as a fearless advocate of equal rights for all and as a friend of freedom and progress. The Paine that Becker would honor sought to break the shackles of orthodox Christianity and free man so that he could live a full, unfettered life, as God had originally intended he should. Since Germans in Cincinnati as well as in other cities were interested in attracting Anglo-Americans to the Paine celebrations, they arranged to have English speakers as well. At the 1859 program in Cincinnati a Mr. Murray and a Mr. Anderson gave brief talks in the English language.[22]

In the ensuing year German-language newspapers continued unabatedly their anticlerical attacks and repeatedly praised the German freethinking societies for fostering spiritual and intellectual freedom. Conway was well aware of the liberal and radical ideas that were rife in the city, and he reread Paine now with them in mind. On Sunday evening, January 29, 1860, on the anniversary of Paine's birthday, Conway delivered a sermon to his congregation about the revolutionary writer, and for the first time publicly expressed himself on his revised opinion of the man. He told his audience that Paine was a true religious prophet for the nation and must be vindicated.[23] Basing his remarks for the most part on *The Age of Reason,* Conway extolled a religion which strove for moral truth and moral goodness and transcended the petty orthodoxy of the day. Conway denied the whole Christian revelation, but believed that religion must be humanized to endure.

According to Conway his vindication of Paine met with unexpected success,[24] but there was also opposition. Commenting on Conway's Paine sermon, the editor of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* expressed the view

21 Conway, p. 304.
22 *Cincinnati Republikaner,* January 31, 1859.
23 *Cincinnati Daily Gazette,* February 4, 1860.
24 Conway, p. 305.

that such radical religious ideas were not proper in church.[25] As would be expected, the *Cincinnati Republikaner,* with its freethinking editor, welcomed Conway to its cause, and gave his sermon ample coverage on the following day. In the same issue of the paper the annual Paine celebration of the preceding night received full play. Again the various freethinking societies attended the festival at the Melodeon Hall and heard a speech by August Willich, editor of the *Republikaner.* Willich's remarks centered on Paine's religious ideas, and so did the set of resolutions which were drawn up on this occasion. These resolutions, honoring Paine and expressing the views of the majority assembled, were threefold: 1) The Bible shall not be considered divine, but the work of superstitious priests. 2) A religious system that makes innocent people suffer for the misdeeds of others shall be held as inadequate. 3) All church dogma shall be put to the test of reason.[26]

Thomas Paine had now become a watchword, and as we shall see, his birthday was celebrated for decades to come. However, the Paine cult of Cincinnati would be no more significant than that in any other city were it not that the enthusiasts here inspired Conway to undertake a thorough, scholarly study of the colonial writer, which reached its fruition some thirty years later with the publication of a biography of Thomas Paine and a standard edition of his collected works.

In the few remaining years that Conway was to spend in Cincinnati, the Paine anniversaries were celebrated with the customary emotional fervor. In 1861 there was a plethora of speakers who held forth in both the German and the English languages. A Mr. Sennett lamented that Paine was not accorded a proper place in history, but he rejoiced that "the most masterly vindication of the life and character of Paine ever pronounced came from the lips of a Christian minister in a Christian pulpit in this city." [27] This is an obvious reference to Conway's speech of the preceding year. Following Mr. Sennett to the rostrum was the main German speaker, August Willich, who used his notes of the year before. As a mild rebuttal to a passage from Mr. Sennett's speech quoted above, Willich did add parenthetically that the immigrant Germans were the first to resurrect Paine and to attempt to restore him to his proper niche in history.[28]

Paine celebrations in Cincinnati continued to be an annual event, but by 1866 they were held within the smaller confines of the Arbeiterhalle. The program in 1866 consisted of a banquet, one commemorative speech

[25] *Cincinnati Daily Gazette,* February 4, 1860.
[26] *Cincinnati Republikaner,* January 30, 1860.
[27] *Cincinnati Daily Gazette,* January 30, 1861.
[28] *Cincinnati Republikaner,* January 30, 1861.

and a dance.[29] In other cities the Paine festivals followed a similar pattern. In the decade from 1860 to 1870, virtually all German newspapers in America carried accounts of Paine observances, although such stories received more coverage in the liberal, freethinking journals such as the *New Yorker Abendzeitung, Cincinnati Republikaner, Illinois Staats Zeitung* and the *Milwaukee Freidenker.*

That Paine continued to be a favorite of some conservative German-Americans as well, can readily be seen by examining copies of the *Detroiter Abendpost* for this period. The long-time editor of this influential midwestern paper, August Marxhausen, was moderate in temperament, politics and religion, but he championed Paine whenever he could. Paine celebrations in Detroit were well advertised in his paper and on several occasions he was called upon to give the memorial address. In his speech of January 1870, he portrayed Paine as a cultural leader who guided America on the path to intellectual maturity and who at all times strove for freedom of thought and speech.[30]

It was around 1880 that a new note was injected into Paine day speeches. Paine was a fighter not only for spiritual and religious freedom, but for economic and social freedom and justice as well. The German workers had begun to organize into local clubs in the 1850s, but their activities were for the most part social. Over the course of years, however, these organizations became increasingly aware of their political potentialities and began to develop them. The Paine celebration in Milwaukee in 1881, which was sponsored mutually by the Turners, the freethinking societies and the labor organizations, offers mute testimony of this shift of emphasis. The speaker for this occasion, J. S. Moses, made a traditional Paine speech, except that he called attention to Paine's efforts in the field of social reform. As Paine championed the dignity of the common man in *Rights of Man, Common Sense* and *Agrarian Justice,* so Moses would want his contemporaries to seek to improve the lot of their fellow men. As a first step in applying and implementing such ideas, the Paine gathering approved a set of resolutions which were in the form of recommendations to the state legislature. The resolutions called for a reform of the penal code to make it more humane, a tax scaled according to one's income, an eight-hour day, a child labor law and free public schools.[31] This social-laborite tone in the Paine celebrations persisted. In 1887, the speaker, Paul Berwig, made a speech that was decidedly pro-Labor.[32] In other midwestern cities the impact of the working classes began likewise to

29 *Westliche Blätter* (Cincinnati), January 28, 1866.
30 *Detroiter Abendpost,* January 29, 1870.
31 *Milwaukee Freidenker,* February 6, 1881.
32 *Milwaukee Freidenker,* February 6, 1887.

make itself felt. As mentioned previously, Paine celebrations in Cincinnati were held in the Arbeiterhalle, and were sponsored in the seventies and eighties by the "Sozialpolitischer Arbeiterverein." At the Paine anniversary in the Arbeiterhalle in 1883, the speaker, Edward Hoffmann, gave a representative address for this period, when in the main body of his speech he appealed to his audience to fight for economic freedom just as Paine fought for political freedom.[33]

Although Paine day speeches continued to strike an ideological note, it is quite evident that the birthday celebrations were lacking in fervor compared to those held around 1850. To many the anniversary was the pretext for a social gathering. Indeed, there existed in Cincinnati in the 1880s, "Der Böhmische Orden Thomas Paines," whose major function was the sponsoring of a masked ball around Paine's birthday.[34] Occasionally the traditional Paine anniversary was omitted altogether. In 1876, for instance, the *Detroiter Abendpost* regretted that the local "Vereine" did not honor the birthday of the fighter for intellectual and religious freedom that year. The short insert ended with the laconic sentence: "Times are changing." [35]

Although enthusiasm for Paine was waning, nevertheless the anniversary was celebrated fairly regularly in the important midwestern cities and in New York until the turn of the century. Speeches commemorating Paine, as already noted, frequently had a social and cultural import, reflecting controversial issues of the moment. If there was one element, though, which the anniversary speeches and articles had in common from 1850 until 1900, it was the religious one. Paine's views on religion so nearly coincided with those of the German-American intellectuals, that the German journalists and orators never ceased to remember Paine with sympathy and appreciation.

German-American journalists, as late as 1894 and 1895, continued to lament the fact that Anglo-Americans showed little appreciation for Paine, and that it was reserved for the immigrant Germans to honor his memory.[36] However, as influential Anglo-Americans such as Robert Ingersoll and Moncure Conway began to speak and write on Paine's behalf, German-Americans were quick to praise their efforts. The *Illinois Staats Zeitung* devoted several columns to a speech delivered in Chicago by Ingersoll, in which the famous orator sought to vindicate Paine's religious views. The same issue of the paper announced a forthcoming meeting to

[33] *Cincinnati Freie Presse,* February 5, 1883.
[34] *Cincinnati Freie Presse,* January 26, 1885.
[35] *Detroiter Abendpost,* January 29, 1876.
[36] *Detroiter Abendpost,* January 29, 1894; *Milwaukee Freidenker,* February 3, 1895.

discuss the organization of a permanent Paine memorial society.[37] Several days later the *Illinois Staats Zeitung* lauded a recent pro-Paine editorial in the *Chicago Tribune,* commenting that Paine would have been recognized far sooner, were it not for his religious utterances.[38] Except for an occasional editorial or speech, though, Paine was very much neglected by the English-language press.

When German-sponsored Paine celebrations were on the verge of being discontinued in Detroit in the mid-eighties, they received a new impetus as the Frauenverein, the women's organization of the Sozialer Turnverein, assumed responsibility for arranging Paine anniversaries. In accordance with its own individual views the Frauenverein engaged speakers who subscribed to religious liberalism. In 1895, by way of example, Emilie Schmemann spoke on martyrs for religious freedom and used Giordano Bruno, John Huss, Ulrich von Hutten, and Thomas Paine as her illustrations.[39] Originally, the Frauenverein held its Paine programs in the Germania Halle, but after 1890 it removed to the auditorium of the Deutsch-Amerikanisches Seminar. The latter was a private school founded and supported by freethinkers who did not want their children to be subjected to the confining atmosphere of the public schools.

Closely linked with the Frauenverein's efforts in Detroit to vindicate Paine were the activities of Robert Reitzel. This man, who was the featured speaker at a Paine celebration sponsored by the Frauenverein in 1885,[40] did more than any other German-American to preserve the memory of Paine in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. An epigenous Forty-Eighter in his radical religious and social views, Reitzel traveled across the country in the period between 1872 and 1884, lecturing to freethinking and Turner groups.[41] A favorite theme of his was Thomas Paine. From 1884 until his death in 1898, Reitzel edited a weekly, *Der arme Teufel,* the most radical newspaper in the German language to be published in America. Articles on Thomas Paine, the fighter for religious freedom, abound in this publication, especially in 1885, and are not merely confined to the issues appearing on or around Paine's birthday. Reitzel is at all times anticlerical, his favorite target being the Roman Catholic church; like Paine, he denied the inspiration of the scriptures and the divinity of Jesus Christ. The religious philosophy of Feuerbach had a lasting influence on Reitzel's thinking.

[37] *Illinois Staats Zeitung* (Chicago), January 30, 1880.
[38] *Illinois Staats Zeitung,* February 2, 1880.
[39] *Milwaukee Freidenker,* February 10, 1895.
[40] *Detroiter Abendpost,* January 29, 1885.
[41] A. E. Zucker, "A Monument to Robert Reitzel," *Germanic Review,* XX (1945), 147.

After Reitzel, German-Americans seem to have lacked an effective spokesman in the liberal, crusading tradition. However, as mentioned previously, German newspapers were quick to publicize pertinent Anglo-American activities, especially as they related to Paine. The *New Yorker Staats Zeitung,* on January 30, 1892, wrote enthusiastically about an anniversary celebration in Chickering Hall, at which Conway and Ingersoll spoke. The *Milwaukee Freidenker,* on February 2, 1896, printed a commemorative article about Conway in appreciation of his newly published biography of Paine[42] and his edition of Paine's collected works.[43] In the opinion of the *Freidenker* these literary efforts would do much to restore Paine to his proper place in American history. The collected works, as edited by Conway, quickly became the definitive edition and still enjoy that designation.

In the years that Conway's works were being published, German-American celebrations in honor of Paine were on the wane. Frequently the anniversary passed without mention in the German newspapers of the 1890s, only to be publicized and celebrated again the following year. Indeed, the writer has found no evidence of a Paine observance of any kind in German-American circles after 1905. In that year Paine was honored in the halls of the "Freie Gemeinde" in Milwaukee on his natal day.[44] German-Americans had lost the crusading, liberal ideals of the Forty-Eighters, and in the process of Americanization, the symbol of Paine seems gradually to have lost its meaning.

But in brief retrospect, the immigrant Germans—over a span of fifty years—adopted Paine as a spiritual forebear and contributed to resurrecting his name. By striving to perpetuate the ideals of the colonial writer, German-Americans helped to create a more tolerant and enlightened atmosphere in nineteenth-century America.

[42] Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (2 vols.; New York, 1892).

[43] *The Writings of Thomas Paine,* ed. Moncure Conway (4 vols.; New York, 1894-96).

[44] *Milwaukee Freidenker,* January 29, 1905.