Paine’s Failed Vision of an Exceptional America

I

Thomas Paine began his rallying call for the independence of the American colonies, with the message “the cause America is in great measure the cause of all mankind.”¹ This was a statement intended to mark America as both, intimately connected to the rest of the world and at the same time set apart and exceptional. America was for Paine the “asylum for mankind”, the place where freedom, which had been expelled from every other part of the globe, could make its stand.² This imagery, conjured by one of the revolutions most influential pens, has remained central to American identity. It can be seen echoing through the imagery that some of the United States most prominent leaders have used to define America’s place in the world calling it an “empire of liberty”, the “last best hope of Earth”, a “shining city on a hill”, and the “indispensable nation”.³ In this sense Paine’s vision for America seems to fit with Stephen M Walt description of statements of ‘American Exceptionalism’ which “presume that America’s values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration…” and imply that the “United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage.”⁴ Paine’s vision of an exceptional America however, was not simply one of American greatness, there had been many great nations, empires and civilizations but America was to be different. This idea of America as different and set apart from the rest of the world is at the very heart of much of the American Exceptionalism literature from Alexis de Tocqueville through to Seymor Lipset. Paine argued that by realising both the spirit and principle of liberty the American peoples were going to establish a new kind of political community that would be an example to the world. The clearest image guiding Paine’s vision of America was not what America would be, but what she must not be. America must not be just another nation; she would not be part of the European inter-national system, which he described as America would not be just another nation “too thickly planted with kingdoms to be long at peace”.⁵

While Paine was not the first or the last to express the arguments central to his revolutionary pamphlets Common Sense or Rights of Man, his style of writing and use of imagery made them some of the most widely read political tracts of the time.⁶ At the time George Washington described Common Sense as “working a powerful change in the minds of many men”, and John Adams complained about it being the ‘Age of Paine’. Subsequently Common Sense has been described as “the most immediately influential political or social tract ever published” in America, and with the exception of Marx Paine has been called, “the most influential pamphleteer of all time.”⁷ As Eric Foner argues the power and prominence of Paine arguments in the American Revolution

² Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 30-31; Paine, ‘Rights of Man: Part First’ [1791], Complete Writings I, 354
³ S. M. Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’, Foreign Policy, November 2011; He is refereeing here to Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Regan, Madeline Albright
⁴ Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
⁵ Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 21
has meant that he “contributed too much to the image Americans had of themselves and to the language in which they expressed their political and social aspirations, to be completely forgotten.” Paine has continued to be a controversial figure in American politics with presidents like Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson all admiring, but he has generally been a maligned figure with prominent figures like President Theodore Roosevelt describing him as a “filthy little Atheist”. More recently Paine has been invoked by both Republican and Democratic presidents. Ronald Regan in his 1980 speech accepting the Republican Party’s nomination as president evoked Paine to say that “we have it in our power to begin the world over again” and George H W Bush also referred to him on various occasions while president. Barak Obama in his inaugural speech also found a prominent place to quote from Paine’s Crisis Paper I, showing the continued influence of Paine’s voice in American political consciousness.

This paper explores the parallels between the vision and arguments Paine put forward for a new political community in America and the arguments of American Exceptionalism which have been identified by people Lipet and Ian Tyrrell. I argue that Paine’s imagery played an important role in shaping this idea of America, but that the American exceptionalism that developed was not the exceptional America that he intended or envisioned. Drawing on Walt’s five American Exceptionalism myths consider to what extent America became the kind nation Paine hoped it would not. I consider the foundations of Paine’s vision of a new form of political community in America cast against the image the European inter-national system of which it has subsequently become the leading member. Finally I ask whether gaining a better understanding of Paine’s foundational image of an exceptional America can help us appreciate the values embodied in our present way of life and offer any insights into the problems which face us today.

The idea that America is exceptional first and foremost refers to the notion that there is something qualitatively different about America compared to all other countries. While a number of critics and advocates have taken this to also mean that America is in various ways better than other countries, Lipset stresses this is not what most have meant when using the term exceptional to describe America. At the heart of American Exceptionalism argument is the idea that what Michael Foley calls the ‘American credo’ has led to the creation of society and system of government that operates differently from other nations and in particular from European nations. The intention here is to highlight the parallels between Paine’s augments and the central tenets of the American Exceptionalism and suggest that Paine’s revolutionary imagery was an important in the initial development of the American identity which has “allowed the United states to establish a self image of exceptionalism.”

Central to arguments of Exceptionalism is the act of comparison, such a self image becomes established only in comparison to others. A key component of the American exceptionalism

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10 Foner, Thomas Paine and Revolutionary America, 269; H. Kaye, Thomas Paine and the Promise of America, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 183
11 Kaye, Thomas Paine and the Promise of America, 3
14 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 18
16 Foley, American Credo, 3
The starting point for most arguments of American exceptionalism is that America’s revolutionary origins mark them out as exceptional in the course of human history. As Lipset describes it America was the “first new nation”, and only the second colony to become independent, and this made it something new and different on earth.\textsuperscript{18} Tyrrell in his study of the role of American Exceptionalism in accounts of American and international history, highlights that while the focus on the nation-state has been a feature of historical accounts around the world for the past two hundred years. But he observes in no other country has the nation-centred focus been as strongly embraced as in America. He argues that “the idea that America was a “special case “outside” the normal patterns and laws of history runs deep in the American experience.”\textsuperscript{19} This has lead many writing on American history form a “liberal world view” to portray American as being able to avoid the “class conflicts, revolutionary upheaval, and authoritarian governments of “Europe” and presented to the world an example of liberty for others to emulate.”\textsuperscript{20}

The idea that the establishment of an independent American political community was a special moment in history is a central aspect of Paine’s argument in \textit{Common Sense} and his \textit{Crisis Papers}. Paine was clear that the American Revolution was not simply for independence but for the establishment of political community where the ideas and reason which had been found in theory in Europe could be put into practice in America. He told his fellow inhabitants of America, that they had “given birth to a new world, and erected a monument to the folly of the old.”\textsuperscript{21} When he talked about “preparing in time an asylum for mankind”\textsuperscript{22} he was clear that this was an opportunity outside of the normal pattern of history to escape the corruption power of custom.\textsuperscript{23} America he argued need not look back to the Greeks or Romans for example, as they had already achieved something those great civilizations had not in embracing both spirit and principle of liberty. It was to this new America and no other place or time that the world should look for example as theirs was “the most virtuous and illustrious revolution that ever graced the history of mankind.”\textsuperscript{24} Such images were clearly important in establishing the notion central to American exceptionalism arguments about America’s special and unique place in the world.

The next aspect of the exceptionalism arguments, which develops out of this understanding of America’s revolutionary origins, is that America is unique in being organised around a set of ideas and not common history or social class. Highlighting this G.K. Chesterton described America as

\textsuperscript{17} A. de Tocqueville, \textit{Democracy in America}, (trans) H. Reeve, (ed) H. S. Commager , (London: Oxford University Press, 1946); Lipset, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 17-8
\textsuperscript{18} Lipset, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 18
\textsuperscript{19} Tyrrell, ‘American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History’,1031
\textsuperscript{20} Tyrrell, American Exceptionalism in the Age of International History, 1031, 1031-4
\textsuperscript{21} Paine, ‘American Crisis V: To The Inhabitants of America’ [21 March 1778], \textit{Complete Writings I}, 123
\textsuperscript{22} Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 31
\textsuperscript{23} Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 3
\textsuperscript{24} Paine, ‘American Crisis V: To The Inhabitants of America’, 123-4
“the only nation in the world founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.”

This idea of an American creed as Foley argues is one that has remained central through to our current era, where George Bush has evoked this common foundation of principle, in calls to arms in fighting the ‘war on terror’. This is a creed centred upon a set of core values, liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire.

While writers like Paine drew these ideas from the enlightenment writings in Europe, it was in America that they claimed they could be properly realised without the corruption of custom. As Richard Hofstadter put it, unlike other nations, it was America’s fate “not to have ideologies, but to be one.”

The result of this is Lipset argues is that it has very particular implications of national identity. In Europe where the national identities of countries such as Britain or Sweden are related to community, it makes little sense to talk of someone becoming un-British, un-English or un-Swedish. However in America where national identity is ideological in origin it is not a matter of birth but commitment to the ideological cause that makes one America. To reject the American creed regardless of birthplace makes one un-American and in an important way to stand opposed to America.

While Americans have retained a sense of their different European ancestry and traditions, as Americans they are united by the idea of America.

This idea of America as not some other nation, but as a melting pot of national, cultural and religious identities, who are united a desire to overcome the prejudices of Europe and establish a truly liberal political community is the central image of Common Sense. All men, Paine argues, are born into some small parish of streets and houses and it is in this local vicinity that we most associate and come to embrace out fellow parishioners as neighbour. But Paine argues it is by extending the relationship though wider and wider acquaintance with the world that “through regular gradations we surmount the force of local prejudice.”

In Europe Paine argued this acquaintance with the world stopped at the scale of nation leading men to perceive themselves as Englishmen, Dutchmen, Swedishmen, to be in a state of enmity and competition with their fellow men. However in America the distinctions of English, Dutch, Swedish, stand in the same relation of those of streets and houses and they have come to embrace what Paine describes as a “continental mind.”

This is an idea of political community that places at it centre the values of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and free commerce. Paine was though acutely aware of the power that the customs and partiality of Europe could have if it was allowed to take root in America, and so he talked of a ‘touchstone to try men by’ which set out that any inhabitant of America who did not support the practical actualisation of this idea of political community in an “independent states of America in the same degree that his religious and political principles would suffer him to support the government of any other country of which he called himself a subject, is, in the American sense of the word, A TORY; and the instant that he endeavors to bring his Toryism into practice, he becomes A TRAITOR.”

Paine insistence on devotion to the American cause which was a constant theme of his crisis arguments goes beyond the mere idea of America as independent and sets out a vision of what it means to be American which is markedly different form the construction of identities in Europe. A vision of American identity which seems to hold remarkable parallels with the image subsequently central to American exceptionalism arguments.

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25 G. K Cherston quoted in Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 18
26 Foley, American Credo, 4
27 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 18; Foley, American Credo, 3; lists them as Freedom, individualism, democracy, egalitarianism, rights and rule of law
28 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 18
29 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 31
30 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 19
31 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 20
32 Paine, ‘American Crisis III’ [19 April 1777], Complete Writings I, 77
Paine’s assault on Tories also highlights another prominent argument advanced for American exceptionalism about the kind of political groupings which have developed in the United States. In Europe it has been observed that the hierarchical structure of society created an emphasis on group characteristics and class consciousness. The result of this has been the prominence of strong left and right parties. In America however as H G Wells pointed out neither a socialist, Labour type party nor a conservative, Tory type party like those found in European countries, have developed. Instead America has been dominated by parties which represent “pure bourgeois, middle-class individualistic values.” Most notable is the lack of development of socialist parties which have seen an emphasis placed on the role of the state in promoting social welfare in Europe, which has seen them allocated a high proportion of GDP on improving the living conditions of the poorest members of society. America by contrast has placed a far greater emphasis on opening up individual mobility, evident Lipset argues in the high proportion of America’s GDP spent on education compared to other nations.

This again has a certain Painian echo to it as throughout his writings while siding with the Whig faction within America and being adamantly opposed to Toryism as they tended to be the supporters of the monarchy, Paine rejected the idea of both Whig and Tory and wished them both to be removed from America upon independence. He finished Common Sense with these words “Let the names of Whig and Tory be extinct; and let none other be heard among us, than those of a good citizen; an open and resolute friend; and a virtuous supporter of the RIGHTS of MANKIND, and of the FREE AND INDEPENDANT STATES OF AMERICA.” Paine’s aversion to these parties was more than a simple rejection of the class divides and hierarchical structure of the European social and political system, it also indicates his aversion to the power and intrusive role of the state in people lives. Paine starts Common Sense by emphasising the virtue of society and the ‘necessary evil’ of government, in doing this he makes a case for the importance of individual rights, and argues that the end of government is security and freedom, but that such a government should be as limited as possible. These arguments reflect Lipset’s points that the focus on individualism in America can be seen in the prominence of citizens demanding and expecting protection for their own rights. For example Paine insistence on written constitutions was based on the idea that it would clearly establish not only the form and manner of government would but also rights of citizens in relations to their government. Paine argued throughout his writings that if only people were freed from the oppression of custom and allowed to think for themselves, they would realise the abuses of power perpetrated by government over them and would seek to establish a community and government of the natural principles of equality. Central to this argument was the emphasis on education and free rational thought.

The lack of social hierarchical and status differences in America which have been the focus in post-feudal societies has also had another affect on the development of its society. Lipset

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33 Tyrrell, 'American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History', 1034-5
34 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 31-2
35 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 31-32
36 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 21-2
37 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 21-22, 81-4
38 Paine, 'Common Sense', 46
39 Paine, 'Common Sense', 5-6
highlights that a number of proponents of American exceptionalism have noted that America has a “special religious character.” While in most of Christendom churches have been hierarchical, linked to the institutions of government and their members born into the congregation, America has been characterised by a large number of different denominations and sects. When contrasted with Canada, Japan and European countries, which have dominant state churches linked to the state, the American approach to religion clearly appears make it an outlier. De Tocqueville described America as having voluntary approach to religion, and Foley highlights that this has been linked to the “individualised nature of divine contact and salvation in the protestant tradition.” The difference this approach to religious and social association can be seen Lipset highlights in the high level of Americans expressing faith in god and church attendance compared to Europeans.

The origins of this aversion to state supported religion and the exceptional religious character can be clearly seen in Paine’s writings. He argues that the establishment of one denomination of religion to the exclusion of all others in Britain fostered unsociable narrow mindedness and enmity. America he made clear was made up of the “persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe.” He could see that there was a strong and unique religious character in America that had developed out of their shared experience of oppression of the European governmental system. In addressing the oppression brought by monarchical government Paine’s devotes considerable time to addressing its origins and continued support it receives from the established churches of Europe. He sets about refuting the notion of the divine right of kings, quoting scripture at length. A central feature of Paine’s argument was that religion had been made deliberately obfuscatory especially in Catholic countries where the withholding of scripture from the people was clearly designed to keep them oppressed. There is, he argued, “as much kingcraft as priestcraft in withholding the scripture from the public in popish countries.” Monarchy he concludes is the “papacy of Government”, making clear the oppression of the European religious and political institutions conspired to produce. Paine’s emphasis of the use of scripture in his arguments also signifies the importance he recognised of individual engagement with God and religion in America. Paine was to develop this idea of individual engagement with God in his final major work the Age of Reason, which argued for the idea of a “god of moral truth, and not a god of mystery or obscurity”. This idea of moral truth at first sits well with the strong sense moralism that as Lipset sets out is important to the arguments of American exceptionalism. However Paine’s attempt in Age of Reason to apply the principles of Newtonian science and bring reason to the bible, in order to remove the ‘hag of superstition’ which the Christian system has brought into the world, is perhaps also one of the clearest points of departure of Paine’s vision for America and the path which the newly independence nations was taking. While written with the express purpose of countering the growth of atheism in France, it was interpreted by many of Paine’s critics as an argument for atheism, and would be

40 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 60
41 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 19
42 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 61
43 Foley, American Credo, 38
44 Paine, Age of Reason [1794], Complete Writings I, 465
45 Paine, Crisis VIII [ March 1780], Complete Writings I, 163
46 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 19
47 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 12
48 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 12
49 Paine, ‘Crisis III’ [ 19 April 1777], Complete Writings I, 90
50 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 9-16
51 Paine, ‘Age of Reason’, 506
52 Paine, ‘Age of Reason’, 487
used by his political opponents to discredit the full implications of his arguments for the development of a new kind of politics in America.53

III

Harvey Kaye highlights that for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Paine’s “pivotal role in the making of the United States was effectively erased in the official telling...” But he goes on to argue that while Paine may not have been publically credited “…His contributions were too fundamental and his vision of America’s meaning and possibilities too firmly imbued in the dynamic of political life and culture to be so easily shed or suppressed.”54 As much as Paine wrote of the need for the establishment of the Independent States of America, he argued for the creation of an exceptional America, something new and different in the world, an outlier from the subjection corruption and oppression that had chased freedom around the globe. The parallels between Paine’s arguments for independence and vision of America and the arguments central to the American exceptionalism literature, suggest a clear example of the continued influence of Paine language and imagery to the shaping of America.55 Paine offers a vision of an exceptional America that is both a qualitatively different from the rest of the world in the manner Lipset highlights, and destined to play a unique, distinct and positive role on the world stage in the manner Tyrell and Walt identify.56 But ultimately the American exceptionalism which Lipset, Tyrell and Walt discuss is in many important ways not the exceptional America that Paine envisioned or intended. While Paine ultimately hoped for a future where America would be described as being, as Walt puts it, “a lot like everyone else”, where America would no longer be exceptional, this was a very different vision of how America and the world would be ordered.

Lipset is very clear in setting out his study of American exceptionalism that exceptionalism arguments can only be made using a comparative perspective, and Paine’s arguments are no different. Paine sets his idea of America up against the social and political systems of Europe and it is in comparison with Europe or rather against the image of a corrupt, oppressive Europe that America was to be developed. First and foremost America was not going to be just another nation, entangled in the inter-national system of Europe which he described as being “too thickly planted with kingdoms to be long at peace.”57 Paine’s concern was not that Europe was too densely populated or even that it should be organised into different states, but rather with the fact that states and kingdoms were created and maintained for the aggrandizement of particular men and not for the sake of good government, order or to represent the disposition of the people. While in large part Paine attributed this to the despotic forms of governments in Europe, his concern extended beyond this to the character of nation and the way national identity was understood and actualised in the world. Some of the clearest articulations of this concern are found in his discussions of the idea of national honour.

“There is such an idea existing in the world, as that of national honour, and this, falsely understood, is oftentimes the cause of war. In a Christian and philosophical sense, mankind seem to have stood still at individual civilization, and to retain as nations all the original

54 Kaye, Thomas Paine and the Promise of America, 6
55 Kaye, Thomas Paine and the Promise of America; Foner, Thomas Paine and Revolutionary America
57 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 21
rudeness of nature. Peace by treaty is only a cessation of violence for a reformation of sentiment. It is a substitute for a principle that is wanting and ever will be wanting till the idea of national honour be rightly understood. As individuals we profess ourselves Christians, but as nations we are heathens, Romans, and what not... It is, I think, exceedingly easy to define what ought to be understood by national honour; for that which is the best character for an individual is the best character for a nation; and wherever the latter exceeds or falls beneath the former, there is a departure from the line of true greatness.”

For Paine it was not enough for the newly established American nation simply to have a clear written constitution, a representative form of government, and the separation of church and state. This would only make America different in the form and spirit, but would not make America different in principle. For Paine America had to establish a different idea of national honour, not based in the principle of individual civilization that conceives of the greatness and liberty of America as measured against those of other nations. Britain’s great mistake for Paine had been that they measured their liberty in their ability to “bid defiance to the world” to be unconstrained in acting upon their whim by other nations.

That America did not become exceptional in this sense is seen clearly in Barak Obama’s argument in response to the question of whether he believed in American exceptionalism, saying he believes in American exceptionalism in the same sense that “Brits believe in British exceptionalism, and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” What Obama highlighted was that fundamentally American exceptionalism is no different from any other nation’s belief in their own greatness or “patriotic chest thumping” as Walt describes it. America on this view is just another nation who have a strong sense of national greatness and national honour, leading to a national self image of exceptionalism. America, Obama went on explain, is exceptional in that it continues to be world’s largest economy, have an unmatched military, and possesses a core set of values, enshrined in their constitution, laws, democratic practices, and belief in free speech and equality. So while highlighting the advances America made on European political social systems, and the role they have played in “leading the world towards peace and prosperity”, American exceptionalism still ultimately rests on their comparative advantage over other nations.

This is the point that Walt raises in his discussion of American Exceptionalism and he argues that while there are some areas where the United States does seem to have unique qualities such as a high level religiosity, and a strong commitment to individual liberty, these have blinded Americans “to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else.” In most areas Walt argues America has been similar to other nations and especially in foreign relations America’s policies he argues have like every other nation been determined “primarily by its relative power and the inherently competitive nature of international politics.” It is exactly in this area of competitive international politics that Paine envisioned America being exceptional in rejecting. In highlighting the extent to which America is just another nation, Walt addresses what he argues are the five main myths which perpetuate the American exceptionalism position. These myths have roots in the image of America that Paine set out and by considering Walt’s points alongside

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58 Paine, ‘American Crisis VII’, 146-7
59 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 20
60 Obama B. Talking at the NATO summit on Afghanistan 04/04/09,  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDuBpEYKCSA (accessed 24/05/09)
61 Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
62 Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
Paine’s arguments we start to develop a clearer image of where America departed from Paine’s vision.

First Walt argues that there is a myth that there is something exceptional about American exceptionalism. He argues that while American leaders often refer to unique responsibilities and capabilities, this is actually a feature of most great power nations to view themselves as superior to others around them. This argument highlights the current of thought that we see in Obama’s message about American exceptionalism, that it is a facet of national pride. When we see Paine’s arguments about the exceptional position of America, it was not just in comparison to others around them, but also other great nations and empires historically. Paine was not referring to power of military or economic might but of the exceptionalism of their politics, and the way they act in the world. He was aware that other nations had claimed themselves to be superior to others and believed they were advancing some greater good, this was the claim of Britain in his time, and it was against this image that he cast his vision of America. Britain he argued held a great position of power, the capability and even a spirit of liberty, but instead of using this to “civilize both the eastern and western world” she has used them to “proudly to idolize her own “thunder,” and rip up the bowels of whole countries for what she could get.”

So for Paine Walt’s argument that America is “simply the latest nation to sing a familiar song” in claiming their exceptionality, highlights America’s lapse into the customs and superstitions of European social and political practices. What would have made America exceptional is not thinking that they were special, but making sure that they were not.

This leads to Walt’s second myth that America is a “uniquely virtuous nation”, and as such is better than other nations, due to its love of liberty, peace, human rights and the rule of law. This is of course exactly what Paine argued it was at its establishment and it was this that made it an outlier from the rest of the world. What Walt highlights is that this argument about America is not supported by the historical record, as while they may not have been as brutal as past great powers, they have still been one of the most expansionist in the modern era. This touches on exactly the danger that Paine warned against in his crisis writings that it would take more that a change in the system of government it required a change in the whole political and social systems by which people’s lives perceptions and actions are shaped. Ultimately what Walt demonstrates is that while they have talked a good game on issues such as human rights, peace and liberty, US leaders have done what they thought best when confronted by external dangers and have “paid scant attention to moral principles”, and in doing so they have acted as if the international level is a qualitatively distinct and different level of politics which for Paine it was not.

Walt’s third Myth is that America’s exceptionalism is due to a special genius located in the political foresight of the founding fathers, the constitution they created, and priority they placed on individual liberty. While Walt argues that “there is more than a grain of truth in this version of American history”, he makes the point that what has made “America’s present position owes as much to good fortune as to any special genius or “manifest destiny.” Paine certainly thought that the American Revolution had brought a number of men of great genius and talent to the fore, but he did not believe that this was a genius unique to the revolution. He argued that the talents of such men can lay dormant until death unless they are uncovered and nurtured. It was

64 Paine, ‘American Crisis II’, 66
65 Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
essential he argued not to view the genius of people like founding father with too much esteem and reverence as this may blind them to the need to construct a government that could bring forward the equal genius in future generations that was brought out by the extreme events of revolution.\textsuperscript{66} Paine was well aware of the great supply of resources that America was lucky enough to hold, but this only emphasised for Paine America’s responsibilities in regards to the rest of the world. After all America, Paine extolled was “the cause of all mankind”.

The influence of such statements in shaping America’s self-image should not be underestimated. Walt’s forth myth that “the United States is responsible for most of the good in the world”, would appear to be directly correlated to such foundational messages. Paine envisioned that America by separating from Europe would establish a government that would set an example of peace and liberty for all the world.\textsuperscript{67} What Walt shows is that this is exactly what many have argued America has already achieved. Highlighting the belief of former presidents like Bill Clinton that the United States is “indispensable to the forging of stable political relations”\textsuperscript{68} and scholars Like Samuel Huntington who argues that US primacy is essential for the “freedom, democracy, open economies and international order in the world.”\textsuperscript{69} Again Walt accepts that there has been some truth to this lie argument, but argues that while the United States have played a role in these areas they have not been the only or even most important actors involved and that America has set aside their ideals where it was in their advantage. That America was not the only nation working towards freedom, popular government, open economies, and peace does not diminish Paine’s vision of America. However that it was Europe and in particular Britain that had to lead the fight against slavery and the status of women suggest an America infected and influenced by the prejudice of European society which he fought so powerfully banish from American soil. Perhaps the most concerning of Walt’s observations for Paine’s vision of America, is that the United States has so frequently been on the wrong side of struggles such as that “against apartheid in South Africa and backed plenty of unsavoury dictatorships… when short-term strategic interests dictated.”\textsuperscript{70} For Paine America had been set up by men fleeing such oppression and the effects of the short term partial interest of governments, and America was meant to stand as the beacon of liberty against this.

Finally Walt argues the fifth myth of American exceptionalism is that “God is on our side”, that the United States has an ordained mission to lead the rest of the world. Once against this notion seems to have foundations in the foundational ideas of America. Paine described America as an Asylum for mankind, evoked notions of providence in relation to the cause of America, and frequently cast America as fighting on the side of God against Satan.\textsuperscript{71} Something that Lipset highlights is a common feature of American exceptionalism arguments.\textsuperscript{72} However Paine’s argument was not that every action of America was ordained by God but rather that they were fighting on the side of justice and as long as they stuck to the good principles of liberty and Peace they would continue to find themselves in this position. Walt highlights that this has become a myth of American exceptionalism because prominent America leaders like George W Bush and

\textsuperscript{66} Paine, ‘Rights of Man: Part Second’ [1792], Complete Writings I, 368
\textsuperscript{67} Paine, ‘Crisis III’, 83
\textsuperscript{68} Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
\textsuperscript{70} Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
\textsuperscript{71} Paine, ‘Crisis I’ [23 December 1776], Complete Writings I, 55; ‘Crisis II’, 59, 66; ‘Crisis III, 87; Paine, ‘American Crisis V: To General Sir William Howe’ [21 March 1778], Complete Writings I, 119
\textsuperscript{72} Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 20, 65-7
Ronald Reagan have started to express the belief that their actions have been preordained.\textsuperscript{73} Such hubris for Paine was involved in the kind of false understanding of national honour that leads a nation to idolize their own thunder, and commit national sins. There is perhaps a note of Paineian influence in the wisdom of Lincoln’s words of advice highlighted by Walt and Jim Wallis, that American’s instead of assuming that God is on their side “should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God’s side.”\textsuperscript{74} Central to Paine’s deist arguments in Age of Reason had been that the revelations of the bible were essentially hearsay and that we truly find god in the world around us. For Paine this is a principle that people should carry into all aspects of life, testing, reaffirming on building on those well founded points and overcoming those local prejudices which are no longer of practical use in the world.

IV

It is easy to look at Paine’s arguments and vision of America and regard him as an idealist utopian thinker; to look at his argument for the establishment of a new world and see him as a man who espoused good principles but lacked a sense of the realities of the world. But while there is some truth that he was an optimistic thinker, to dismiss his arguments as unrealistic idealism would be to treat his arguments as if they were talking directly to our understanding of the world, using our concepts and values. We should not start out with the assumption that just because Paine’s vision of America was not fully actualised, and may seem odd from our current understanding of the world, that he proposed unsustainable unrealistic way of orientating his world. Indeed by recovering how he thought about his world, we gain an understanding of the decisions which have shaped our world and can appreciate more fully the values embodied in our present way of life.\textsuperscript{75}

Paine’s vision of America, and beyond that the world, was not simply based on some hopeful notion that people were told to be nice to one another the world’s problems would be fixed. “These are the times that try men’s souls”\textsuperscript{76} was a message not just for the revolution and origin, but for the establishment and practice of America. Underlying Paine’s arguments is not a notion that people are innately good, but rather an understanding that they are impelled into society in the same manner that gravitation acts to a centre, and so are social creatures.\textsuperscript{77} In all other parts of the world for Paine the relations of society and government had been inverted, and the people made to see the ends of their lives as resting in the government placed over them. As John Keane puts it for Paine “despotism turns the world upside down: potential citizens become sycophantic subjects, causes and effects appear reversed, and states and rulers claim to be the real source of property, power and prestige.”\textsuperscript{78} While Paine realised that there would always be a need for the evil of government, he did not accept that the effects of despotism either wrought directly through monarchy or indirectly though the continuation of the prejudices and existing customs were inevitable.

For Paine the problem with Europe was that they had stopped their acquaintance with the world, and so had fallen under the force of local prejudice. In America he argued they had they had recommenced their acquaintance with the world, and in doing so had overcome the local

\textsuperscript{73} Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’
\textsuperscript{74} J. Wallis, God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left doesn’t Get it, (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), xviii;
\textsuperscript{76} Paine, ‘Crisis I’, 50
\textsuperscript{77} Paine, ‘Rights of Man: Part Second’, 357
\textsuperscript{78} Keane, Tom Paine, 297
prejudices of conflicting national identities, and embraced a continental identity. America was then for Paine not just another nation, because he was it as a continental political community. This idea of continental politics was not new, people such as William Penn, John Bellars, Abbe de Saint-Pierre, King James III and Cardinal Alberoni had had all suggested European systems peace and government. But Paine was clear that such a new system of politics was not going to become established first in Europe. In America he saw a relatively empty uncorrupted and distant land perfect for the establishment of government on the principles of natural equality and uncorrupted understanding of man. For Paine the starting point for thinking about society and politics was neither the national community nor the autonomous individual, but rather social situated and constituted people. As such the central principle guiding Paine’s understanding of human relations was the teaching drawn from Christianity to “account all men their neighbours; and love their neighbours as themselves; and to do to all men as they would be done by; to do good to all men.” Paine emphasised this not because it was morally good but logically true, as those people who close to us both physically and socially are, in an importance sense, part of who we are and so what concerns them also is of concern to us.

It is in light of this foundation in Paine’s thinking that his arguments regarding national honour and character become clear. He argues that the problem with the way politics is orientated in the world around him was that people as individuals profess themselves, but assume some other identity when considering ourselves as nations, which leads people to behave in a way wholly inconsistent with the Christian self they claim as their true identity. But for Paine there is no distinction to be drawn between crimes committed by kings or common men, armies or individuals, so no distinction should be drawn between the decency of behaviour expected. If we are Christian and treat our neighbours as we would be treated, this can have no boundaries, it can have no exceptions. When Paine says that it is easy to define what national honour ought to be, because what is the best character of individuals is the best character of nations, he makes clear that in order for the best character to exist in one it must also exist in the other. We can profess ourselves good, Christian, moral, freedom loving people as a political community, but if we act as heathens as nations we must also be heathens as individuals, and ultimately this will become manifest in the constitution and practice of the nation internally as well as externally. Paine’s argument is not that the character of individuals should be transposed on to nations or the other way round, but that they are inextricably linked. To argue that nations can act in a manner different from individuals is to simply push the flaws of individuals to a different areas rather than addressing them as flaws and issues which need attention. While these flaws and prejudices continue to exist, they remain a problem for men in all parts of their lives.

The idea of continental American political community is premised on the idea that by forming larger political community petty national distinctions would be overcome and the prejudices associated with them surmounted. America would be a political association focused on commerce, as it was through commerce that men on a large scale attended to those necessities and wants which their individual powers are insufficient to provide for. This for Paine is the natural pattern which impels men into society and by following this pattern national communities will also be impelled into society in the same manner that gravitation acts to a centre. Such a political community would find its liberty, prosperity and security not in its ability to “bid

79 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 20
82 Paine, ‘American Crisis I’, 55-6
83 Paine, ‘Common Sense’, 20, 5; Paine, ‘Rights of Man: Part Second’, 357
defiance to the world” but in its ability to find these things as much in their neighbours as in themselves.

V

While it should not be claimed that Paine is the origin of the idea of American exceptionalism, the echo of his words and imagery in the development of the United States and generation of an exceptional self-image is quite clear. The strong parallels between Paine’s concerns about European society, the images of a new American political community he created, and the main tenets of American exceptionalism arguments are striking. Paine envisioned a country founded on the ideas of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and free commerce that would stand as an example to the rest of world as the first truly free modern nation. He stressed the necessity of setting aside the hierarchical and divisive social politics and religious structures and customs, and creating a constitution that enshrines the place and rights of the people over government established to protect them. In doing this he made clear the American people were creating an exceptional political community, an asylum for mankind, unlike anything else in the world. Much of this imagery has remained central to American identity and seems to have had a significant role in shaping the United States through to the account of America and American exceptionalism in Lipset’s study. But we have also seen that while Paine’s ideas may have contributed to an the belief that America is exceptional, and to the notion that it has a role in shaping the rest of the world, the manner in which America developed diverged in significant ways form his vision of an exceptional America.

Walt’s Myths of American exceptionalism highlights that America is in most ways just another nation. This is certainly the pragmatic message contained in Barack Ohama’s view of American exceptionalism. It is not however the ordinary status of America that signifies the failure of Paine’s vision, after all his design was not for America to be a permanent outlier but rather the first of a new normality among nations. The failure of his vision of America can be seen in America becoming a nation in the European mode, and as Walt puts “a state embedded in a competitive global system” in which conduct is shaped by nationalism and relative power, leads states to compromise political principle for security and prosperity.

Paine however did not accept that this system of inter-national politics was inevitable, but was the consequence of local prejudice and a false idea of national honour. The concern Paine expressed for the dangers of European custom prejudices, which he labelled toryism, also shows his understanding of the potential for America to follow the path which was eventually to lead them to the foremost position in the European international system. But while Paine’s continental politics may seem from our position somewhat fantastical, idealistic and unrealistic, he was quite serious about the possibility of them being realised in the world, something that we should take quite seriously. The foundation of Paine’s arguments is an understanding of people as social beings, social situated and constructed individuals. It is on this understanding of politics that Paine based his idea of continental mind that could surmount nationalist prejudice, and such an understanding of politics raises serious questions for the values such as sovereignty, autonomy, rights, justice, and even liberty and democracy, which are often unthinkingly accepted as part of our present ways of life.

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84 Walt, ‘The myth of American Exceptionalism’