

Radical Revisions: Thomas Skidmore reads Thomas Paine in 1829 New York



Half a century after the American Revolution, mid-Atlantic urban workers toasted Thomas Paine. In the streets and taverns of Philadelphia and New York, they praised the author of *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*. These men realized that poverty and inequality were not inevitable but could instead be overcome.

One of them was Thomas Skidmore, the leader of the New York workingmen's movement that went on strike against plans to extend the workday in 1829. The publication of Skidmore's four-hundred-page treatise, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, coincided with the strong showing of the Workingmen's ticket in the state elections held in November 1829. Skidmore argued that all laws favoring the perpetuation of property ran counter to the democratic principles on which the American Republic had been founded. This deeply held conviction about the legal basis of economic inequality explains why Skidmore, unlike so many of his peers, did not exalt Paine for being a revolutionary hero of 1776 or laud his legacy as the voice of "common sense." Instead, Skidmore attacked Paine's theories of political economy, directing his readers' attention away from Paine's more familiar patriotic writings and toward his lesser-known *Dissertations on Government; The Affair of the Bank; and Paper Money*. This pamphlet revealed the problematic implications of the famous radical's thought when viewed in a different temporal context, one marked both by political democratization and economic inequality.

Skidmore saw in the American Revolution, not only the democratic legacy of 1776, but also the unjust foundation of a republic based on economic inequality. In his opinion, the creation of the national and state finance structures set forth in the Constitution—the institution of banks, the formalization of public debt, and a private credit system—had initiated a process of "accumulation," by establishing an economy that favored the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Reading Paine's *Dissertations* alongside Skidmore's *The Rights of Man to Property!* helps us chart the tensions between the political revolutions of the eighteenth century and the economic revolutions of the nineteenth. By the time that Skidmore took up his pen, the expansion of suffrage had emancipated white laboring men throughout the North, opening politics up to citizens who criticized the alarming levels of poverty and economic dependence engendered by the exploitation of wage labor. As the expectation of personal independence inherited from the Revolution gave rise to a pointed critique of wage labor, a new generation of radicals, Skidmore included, began to revise older ideas to suit their own circumstances.



Mr. Thomas Paine, engraved by Augustus; artist, Peel (date unknown). Courtesy of the American Portrait Print Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Skidmore and Paine in 1829 New York

City

In 1828, the democratic reforms sweeping the United States culminated in the election of President Andrew Jackson. Over the course of the 1820s, this spirit of reform had worked in New York to gradually open the vote to all adult white males, including laborers who were beset by a serious economic recession. The economic downturn placed additional financial pressure on employers, who attempted to increase their profit margins by lengthening the workday from ten to eleven hours. In March 1829, journeymen—a mixed lot of propertyless men, mainly white, who worked in different trades as blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, masons, and so on—called public meetings to declare their refusal to work for more than ten hours per day.

The strike was successful, and even after employers renounced their plans to lengthen the workday, the journeymen continued meeting. They expanded their critique of the U.S. economy, shifting their focus from working conditions narrowly defined to broader questions about politics and society. They also challenged the partisan structure of the Second Party System by attacking politicians in both the Whig and Democratic parties as “aspiring demagogues, who have ... feelings—no interest, in common with workers.” Far from serving the public, according to the laborers’ critique, these men were party hacks who were “prompted only by ambition and avarice.” For this reason, New York’s radical journeymen decided to enter the November 1829 New York state election by running a slate of their own candidates, men who stood independent of the political establishment. The candidates ran on a platform that included a call for changes in the prevailing working conditions in shops and manufactories, but their proposals also extended far beyond the realm of wage labor. They demanded a string of reforms (ranging from the repeal of chartered banks to the abolition of commercial monopolies) that were calculated to appeal to the economic interests of small artisans and wage earners. When the votes were counted, the platform’s appeal was undeniable; the Workingmen’s ticket managed to poll nearly one-third of the total vote.

This was the social and political context in which Skidmore published *Rights of Man to Property!* Born in 1790 into a struggling family in Newton, Connecticut, Skidmore moved to New York City at the age of twenty-nine and set up shop as a machinist. Unlike most other artisans of the era, he would not remain confined to the obscurity of his workshop. His encounter with Paine’s writings when he was a boy and his continuing immersion in political theory pushed him into New York’s fervid political scene. By the end of the 1820s, Skidmore’s experiences in the workplace and at the polls led him to connect the revolutionary legacy of 1776 to a biting critique of the economic hierarchies that continued to structure society. In *Rights of Man to Property!*, he criticized “great wealth” as “an instrument which is uniformly used to extort from others [the workers], their property in their personal qualities and efforts.” In his opinion, the

interest that the debtor paid the banker or creditor, the rent that the worker paid for his house or land to large proprietors, and the profit that the employer made by selling goods produced by workers all contributed to what he called "overgrown wealth."

Skidmore's trenchant attack on capital accumulation was not new. Paine himself had explicitly cited "accumulation" as a primary cause of economic inequality. In his 1796 pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*, which borrowed from a wide-ranging British dissident literature, Paine criticized the monopolization of land in Europe, arguing that "it has dispossessed more than half of the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance," forcing a growing number of men to sell their labor for wages. Like Paine, Skidmore denounced the rising disparity between the material conditions of the many (who were weighed down by the demands of labor) and the few (who enjoyed the privilege of significant property). But unlike Paine, Skidmore pressed these remarks to their logical conclusion, arguing that "*all men should live on their own labor, and not on the labor of others.*" In his opinion, "the possessors of property ... have no right to their property when they use it, for the purpose of converting their fellow beings into slaves to labor for their use." Workers had been reduced to the status of "possessions growing out of injustice." To find the origins of this insidious inequality, Skidmore looked back to the foundational moment of the young republic: the American Revolution. Remarkably, he pointed his finger at Thomas Paine, the man who many of Skidmore's allies associated with the promise of liberty launched by the Revolution.



Title page from Thomas Paine, *The Political Writings of Thomas Paine ...*, vol. II (New York, 1830). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Skidmore's case against Paine rested on the latter's *Dissertations on Government; The Affair of the Bank; and Paper Money*, published in 1786. With the *Dissertations*, Paine entered a bitter controversy over public finance and banking. In September 1785, popular protests forced the Pennsylvania Assembly to repeal the charter granted in 1781 by the Continental Congress and the State of Pennsylvania to establish the nation's first bank, the Bank of North America. Funded by merchants' voluntary subscriptions, the bank was intended to finance the Revolutionary War. Indeed, this is precisely why Paine supported the bank and why he subscribed five hundred dollars of his own money to support it. But Robert Morris—Philadelphia merchant and the bank's major subscriber, congressional representative, and superintendent of finance from 1781 to 1784—and his economic partners and political allies lent their support to the bank with an additional political project in mind.

The Bank of North America was more than a commercial bank used for private transactions. It was also intended to serve as a national bank, holding government funds and issuing notes that Morris and his allies hoped would come

to serve as the national medium of exchange. When Congress incorporated the subscribers by recognizing them as a corporation "able and capable in law," it gave them de facto power to control both money lending and the quantity of money in circulation. As Robert Morris argued before the Continental Congress on July 29, 1782, the Bank of North America could do more than manage the war debt; it was positioned to "distribut[e] property into those hands which could render it most productive." In other words, the bank and its governors could and would exert enormous influence on the economy. In practice, that meant reducing the money supply and restricting credit. The former policy raised interest rates, making it more difficult for debtors to get out of debt while ensuring that creditors received a substantial return on what they had loaned. Some men were forced to sell their property to cover their debts; others saw their property foreclosed. The restriction of credit limited access to capital to a small circle of merchants, and it frustrated workers' ambitions to achieve economic independence by acquiring land or a workshop. Moreover, the "necessity" of redeeming the public debt incurred by the war served to justify national taxation, thus serving the financial interests of the bank's primary subscribers or stockholders. Put simply, the nation's first bank, along with the system of public debt and private credit, facilitated what Skidmore later termed "overgrown wealth." This fact was not lost on Pennsylvania's farmers, artisans, and radicals, who were incensed by the bank's refusal to accept the paper money printed by the Pennsylvania Assembly to relieve debtors in the hard times that followed the Revolution; it was their outrage that prompted the assembly to repeal the bank's charter in 1785.

Surprising as it may seem, in the conflict over the bank charter's repeal, Paine sided with the merchants and creditors. His *Dissertations on Government; The Affair of the Bank; and Paper Money* argued against the acts that repealed the charter and expanded the printing of paper money to discharge debts. According to Paine, these were policies unfit for a representative government because they violated private contracts and depreciated the value of money. Moreover, the acts gave state governments too much power—namely, the power to violate the right of private property. "There can be no such power in a republican government, the people have no freedom, and property no security where this practice can be acted," he warned. Paine insisted that, since no law could revoke a private contract, the act repealing the bank was "unconstitutional." Ultimately, Paine, Morris, and the bank prevailed. After a year and a half of acrimonious debates, the Bank of North America was rechartered.

Looking back on this early bank war from the vantage point of the 1820s, Thomas Skidmore aligned the Paine of the *Dissertations* with the founders and with the federal Constitution, which stipulates that "no State can coin money" or "pass any bill of attainder, *ex post facto* law, or law impairing the obligation of contracts," thus giving private contracts and private property the force of law. Paine's support for the Bank of North America and all it represented explains why Skidmore singled out the *Dissertations* for criticism, rather than the more familiar *Common Sense* or *Rights of Man*. Skidmore aimed to show that

Paine had committed “such a blunder, as that of attempting to erect an equal government, upon a foundation where inequality had already found an existence.” Far from dismantling economic inequality, the federal government took “measures to perpetuate it.” In Skidmore’s opinion, Paine, like the founders, “never seemed to have perceived” that “their system of rights, in its practical effect, went to give to one human being living under it, the privilege of taking so much of the property of the preceding generation as would enable him to live in idleness on the productions of the labour of others.” In other words, accumulation, coupled with inheritance, was the problem. Although Skidmore acknowledged that Paine had “supported the rights of the people of all nations, with an energy, and an ability, perhaps never excelled,” he also argued that he had “wandered into some misconceptions.” From Skidmore’s perspective, Paine failed to understand what was at stake in the bank’s repeal and, by extension, in the creation of a federal government. Paine had failed to realize that debates centering on the purpose and structure of government had obscured a question that was of crucial importance to Skidmore: “*How long does a man own property?*” The property law championed by Paine in 1786 and enshrined in the Constitution not only enabled a few men to accumulate a disproportionate amount of property; it also enabled them to pass it along to their sons. It all but guaranteed that economic inequality engineered by one generation would be perpetuated in the next. In the *Dissertations*, then, Skidmore discerned a first important attempt to use constitutional authority to sanction economic inequality. It set the stage, in his opinion, for the inequities built into the federal Constitution, which constructed property law to consolidate the political influence of merchants–stockholders of the bank–over public finance and private credit.



Title page from Thomas Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!* (New York, 1829). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Skidmore offered a complex vision of the Revolution, one that could not be reduced to the promise of liberty in 1776, and implied a radical critique of the constitutional order that emerged out of the Revolution. Indeed, he argued that the federal government had made possible a “*first appropriation*” and then the “*transmission*” of property. This two-fold process had invested a specific class with the power to ensure that subsequent generations could only gain property through wage labor (if they were able to gain it at all). Looking back at the debates about debt and property that followed the Revolution, Skidmore identified the moment when American society was “divided into two distinct classes; proprietors and non-proprietors; those who own the world, and those who own no part of it.”


Reading Paine and Skidmore together allows us to chart the changing meaning of the revolutionary language of 1776. Skidmore did not deny the Revolution’s radical legacy, nor did he condemn Paine altogether. However, he could not

celebrate Paine in 1829 without requiring the expiation of Paine's sin in 1786—his endorsement of a government based upon economic inequality. Once this sin was paid for, Skidmore could again use the more familiar figure of Paine—that of the revolutionary hero of 1776—to inspire the workingmen's movement. In order to overthrow the “the present edifice of society, and to build a new one,” Skidmore borrowed from *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* the political principle that no government could hold the power to bind the next generation. But he extended this definitive democratic ideal from politics per se to the realms of the economy and society more generally. In Skidmore's terms, the fundamentally undemocratic accumulation of wealth that was encouraged by early national property law ran counter to “the rights of every subsequent generation.”

In other words, the democratic language that emerged from Skidmore's critical reading of Paine was rooted in questions of class that the American Revolution left unresolved. These questions were political in the broadest sense; they focused not only on what constituted a democratic government but also on the socioeconomic hierarchies that shaped it. At the same time, the class meaning that Skidmore ascribed to the revolutionary language of 1776 testifies to the enduring expectation of personal independence that citizens of the early republic inherited from the Revolution. In the revolutionary eighteenth century, *Common Sense* offered a common language that united master artisans and journeymen in support of political emancipation and unfettered trade. Half a century later, Skidmore enriched the eighteenth-century lexicon with new words like *appropriation* and *class*. In so doing, he attempted to revise the revolutionary language of 1776, rendering it better suited to address questions of economic and political democracy. Consider the title Skidmore chose for his treatise: if *The Rights of Man to Property!* pays homage to Paine's eighteenth-century radicalism, it also extends that radicalism to nineteenth-century social and economic problems.

Which Paine for Americans?

The Thomas Paine who emerges from a reading of Skidmore's 1829 text is more complicated than the familiar revolutionary author of *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*; he is more contradictory than the stock character of the American radical tradition who appears two centuries later in Philip Roth's *I Married a Communist*. Instead, another Paine comes into view. This one is an ambiguous figure caught up in a hard-fought political battle in which there was more at stake than the foundation of representative government; the battle also helped establish the legitimacy of the initial processes of accumulation. The point here is not to reveal an inconsistency within Paine's thinking and much less to fault him for failing to anticipate the class-divided society of fifty years later. After all, American society had been fundamentally transformed between the 1780s and 1829. Rather, the point is to take another look at what we think we know about Paine and to examine how his shifting significance can help us understand a pivotal moment in American history.

 Title page from Thomas Paine, *Dissertations on Government; The Affairs of the Bank; and Paper Money* (Philadelphia, 1786). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

From Skidmore's vantage point, Paine appears as a problematic writer and a flawed revolutionary. On the one hand, Paine condemned debtors who wanted to curb the accumulation of wealth. On the other, he never abandoned the democratic thrust of *Common Sense*. If he argued that property rights helped protect the fruits of men's hard labor, he also helped legitimate a constitutional order in which those same rights became tools for profit and exploitation. Paine's 1786 intervention in defense of the Bank of North America and Skidmore's 1829 criticism of Paine remind us of the connections between politics and economics, both at the nation's founding and in the decades that followed. Paine himself never expressly addressed the development of capitalism in the United States, much less its relation to legal and political structures. But by tracing Paine's obscure pamphlet from its role in an early bank controversy through its resonance for radical politics in the early republic, we can begin to consider the problematic relationship between the creation of the federal government and the initial process of private financial accumulation, which was an indispensable prerequisite for the transition to capitalism.

Further Reading:

On politics, labor, and democratization in the early republic, see Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1998) and Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005) and *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984). All quotations from Skidmore come from Thomas Skidmore, *Rights of Man to Property!* (New York, 1829). On Paine's reputation in the early republic, see Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976); Alfred F. Young, "The Celebration and Damnation of Thomas Paine," in *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York, 2006); and Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York, 2005). Paine's *Dissertations on Government* has been reprinted in Philip S. Foner's edition of the *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. II (New York, 1945). On Robert Morris and his associates, see E. James Ferguson, *The Power of the Purse: A History of American Public Finance* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961) and more recently Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York, 2007). The ordinance of December 31, 1781, and Robert Morris's 1782 speech before the Continental Congress are reprinted in Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journal of the U.S. Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vols. XXI-XXII.

The author is indebted to Eric Foner for characterizing Skidmore's title (*The Rights of Man to Property!*) as an homage to Paine and an extension of Paine.

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