



Thomas Paine's Common Sense

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06wg9dw>



Speakers:
 Kathleen Burk, University College London
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Notes about the episode:

Intro:

- January 1776** (Philadelphia): an **anonymous** pamphlet was published entitled Common Sense addressed to the inhabitants of America.
- => 150 000 copies sold in the first few months
- => Best selling book the American history
- => At that time, half of the population had either read it or read about it

About Thomas Paine:

- Had arrived from England barely **a year** before
- **37 YO**, had only written a few articles prior (CS)
- He argued: the colonies should **abandon** all hope of resolving their disputes with Britain and proclaim their **independence** immediately
- He vigorously attacked **monarchy** generally & George III in particular
- Many American **scandalized / inspired**
- He's been called one of the **Founding Fathers**



- TP= born on January 29, 1737, in the small village of Thetford in Norfolk, England
- Mother = **Anglican VS** father = **Quaker** 🚨
- **Self-made man**, just like Benjamin Franklin. Left school when he was 13 YO. Wanted to see the world. First: London
- **Staymaker** (= corset maker), he started at **13 YO**
- **1768**: Became a tax collector or **excise man** for George III's government and worked in Grantham for two years
- **Debated** very well => influential
- Taste of politics + experience in writing & talking
- Common Sense = **NOT** his first political pamphlet
- The Case of the Officers of Excise: 1772 (England)
- Became part of an intellectual & Enlightenment society: went to lectures + met important people

Quakerism:



- TP attended & worshiped in the Quaker Meeting House at Thetford from the age of six
- He would also learn that women are self-evidently equal to men, that justice & integrity are the natural fruits of a good life, that liberty should be the goal of social evolution, & that freedom in all things is a right - rather than a gift.

Pivotal moment:

- Went back to London (after being an excise man) and met **Benjamin Franklin**
- BF = a **self-made** man,
- More or less adopted Paine, his "**adopted political son**"
- Paine decided to go to America (not unusual at the time)
- BF appreciated what he could do (and his politics knowledge + his talent for writing)
- BF offered Paine his help when he decided to settle in America (**network**)
- Introduced Paine to important people such as **Robert Aitken**
- Start in **journalism** (but quarreled a lot with his publisher - almost from the get-go)



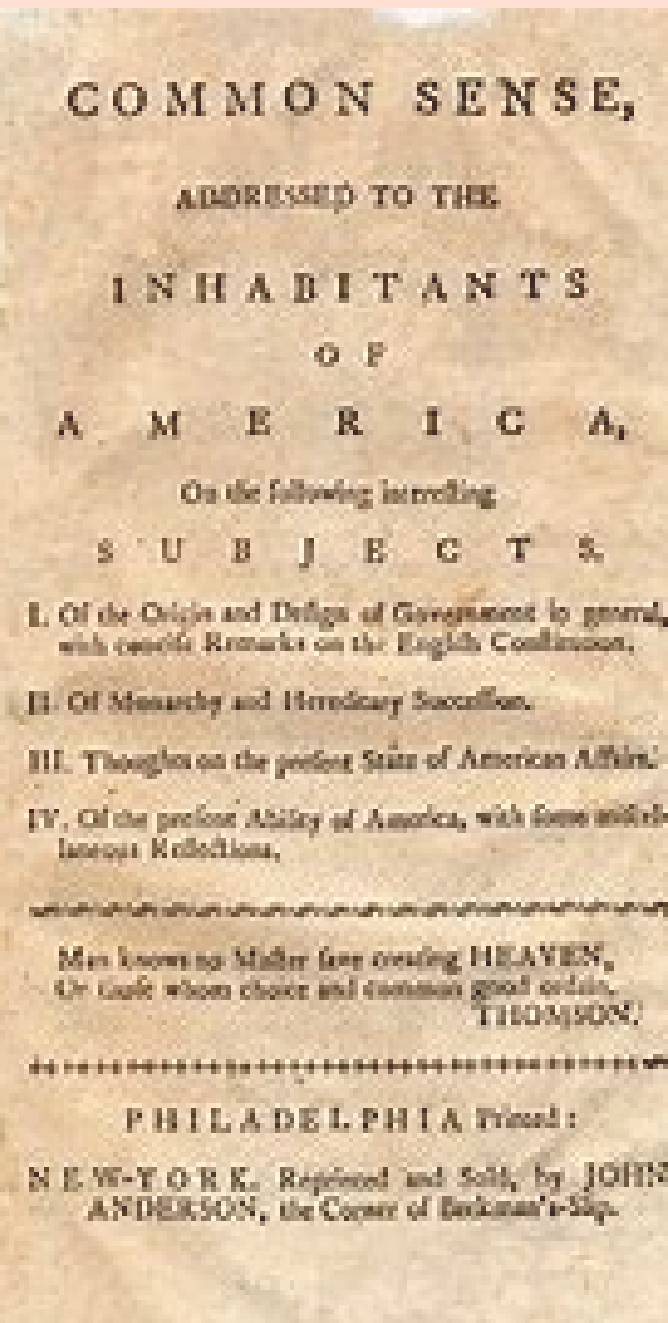
Arrival in America (1774):

- Repressive measures at that time
 - In 1774: the (political) climate was toxic
 - The colonists came together for the first continental congress just before Paine's arrival
- => He arrives right into the heart in this stage of the Revolution
- 1774/1775: Efforts to unite the 13 colonies & protest
 - Americans thought: **corruption** in Parliament = the reason why Britain is acting this way for people
 - & **That George III** would use the *royal prerogative* to act for the American people. But he refused to hear their voices.
 - Paine met **physician, Robert Rush**.



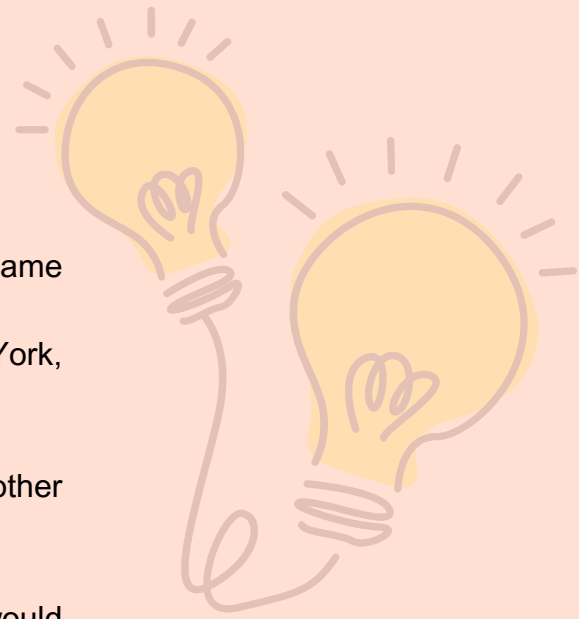
About Common Sense (January 1776- Philadelphia):

- Paine explained his goal was to free people from **tyranny** (*the monarchy*)
- Robert Rush said he gave Paine **the title & the idea**
- Rush was too afraid to lose his practise so suggested Paine to publish it
- October 1775: Franklin, now back in America, wants him to publish his work
- Taste of success: **Pennsylvania Magazine** was the best-selling mazine at that time in America
- He knows how to press Americans' buttons
- Essays: one about the **abolition of salvery (Jan 1 1775)**
 - > led to the first abolition society
- Passion to *produce*
- 46 pages
- [Manifesto: "you're not as well-off as you think"]
- Proposes a question + an argument against what was then accepted & he proposes a solution
- Government = evil. Should be the **servant** of the people not the **master**
- Questions **the idea of monarchy** (= biblical curse) => VICERAL attack
- The role of monarchy = crucial (the King was expected to **save** Americans)
- A "**funny**" pamphlet => TP is **clever** in his way he uses his religion to attack monarchy
- **John Adams** was **furious** with Paine for using the Old Testament in order to point out how monarchy was the root of all evil
- **Sentiments held in common** can glue people together => **Common Sense**



Main ideas in Common Sense (January 1776- Philadelphia):

- Looking at what's going on in America
- Before = empire was a good thing but no longer the case
- Empire= **trade & protection**
- **BUT** can trade with **the rest of Europe**
- How can an **island** control the **continent**?
- What we need: **UNITY**
- Paine feels American
- He's **furious** when in the first edition there's the publisher name and the mention "**written by an English man**"
- Massuchets/ Virginia = **rebellious** VS New Jersey, New York, Georgia = **Loyalists**
- Paine tells them to **unite**
- America at that time = **unsophisticated** compared to the mother country
- Some states had slavery = division **highlighted**
- Paine was rather **traditional** : he imagined an America that would not be that different from Britain at the time
- Short, **declarative**, sentences
- Common Sense = **2 big arguments**
- INDEPENDENCE = **anti colonial** revolution
- DEMOCRACY = **political** revolution



How was Common Sense received by Americans?

- Common sense = read **widely**
- Intellectual **content BUT** not really an intellectual book per say
- Paine didn't like quotations, didn't refer to political theory, he called for **COMMON SENSE**
- Accessibility of the book = **POPULARITY**
- **Mixed** reactions
- "**It changed men's minds**" Washington said
- Franklin said "it was **wonderful**"
- BUT there was an awful lot of **actions against** the pamphlet
- Published in **Europe**: from London to Vienna to Moscow
- He wrote it to be **heard** as well as to be read (the book was read **publically** in coffee houses)
- 1776: **Founding Fathers** talked the incredible effect the pamphlet was having
- Washington in particular thought this was, as he put it, "**unanswerable**"
- Washington was trying to persuade people to volunteer for the army at that time => Common sense = **useful recruitive source** for him
- John Adams had **REAL reservations** about it
- Constitutionally / politcally more **conservative** than Paine
- **Alarmed** at Paine's suggestions (annual elections, democratic spirit)



Vocabulary:

Nouns:

- Pamphlet
- Staymaker = corset maker
- Enlightenment
- Monarchy
- George III
- Founding Fathers
- Journalist/ journalism
- Manifesto
- Sentiments
- Knowledge
- Accessibility / popularity

Verbs:

- Publish
- Address
- Read
- Abandon
- Debate
- Inspire
- Quarrel
- Glue
- Resolve

Talking about
Thomas Paine
& his pamphlet

Adjectives:

- Best-selling
- Anonymous
- Scandalized
- Inspired
- Self-made
- Funny
- Revolutionary
- Clever

Timeline:

29 Jan 1737

Thomas Paine is born in Thetford in the county of Norfolk, England.

1776

Thomas Paine publishes his revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense*.

1792

Thomas Paine publishes his *Rights of Man* part 2. He moves to France

1796

Thomas Paine publishes his *Agrarian Justice*.

8 Jun 1809

Thomas Paine dies in New York.

1774

Thomas Paine leaves England for North America.

1791

Thomas Paine publishes his *Rights of Man* part 1.

1794

Thomas Paine publishes his *Age of Reason* part 1.

Part 2 in **1795**

1802

Thomas Paine returns to the United States.