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"The Rhetorical Situation and Common Sense"
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There is no doubt that the tinderbox of the American Revolution existed long before Thomas Paine immigrated to the American colonies in 1774. However, few could argue that Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* was not one of the sparks that contributed to America's political and military revolution that led to the Declaration of Independence in 1776. According to Merrill Jensen, author of *The Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution, 1763-1776,* the ideas that Paine expressed in his pamphlet, *Common Sense,* were not his own. Jensen claims that Paine was merely using his rhetorical skills to translate the complex ideas of Paine's contemporaries into a more common language as a means of communicating with the average readers of Paine's day.¹ Using the tool that Lloyd Bitzer gave students of rhetoric in his 1968 article, "The Rhetorical Situation," this paper will examine the social, cultural, and historical context of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense.*

According to Lloyd Bitzer, discourse comes into existence as a response to a given situation. Just as an answer follows a question or a solution follows a problem, discourse follows a given rhetorical situation. Essentially, the rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition that precedes discourse and discourse is rhetorical discourse according to how it functions as a response to the rhetorical situation that made the utterance possible. In addition, the utterance itself is limited by the rhetorical situation. The situation controls the response in much the same way that a question controls the answer to the question. For Bitzer, the rhetorical situation can be defined as:

A complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.2

Bitzer goes on to add that "prior to the creation and presentation of the discourse, there are three constituents of any rhetorical situation." Bitzer calls these three constituents

¹ Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution, 1763–1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 668.

² Bitzer, Lloyd. "The Rhetorical Situation." Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (January, 1968), 1-14.

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"exigence," "the audience to be constrained," and the "constraints which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience." "Exigence" is defined as being "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something wanting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be." Exigence is, simply put, something that happens which merits a discursive response.

In the pamphlet, *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine is making an argument for the American colonies under British rule to rebel and declare their independence. The "exigence" of Paine's rhetorical situation is that American independence was still undecided. Each of the colonial provinces (states) of the British Empire had established governing bodies for their respective states by 1774. However, these governing bodies still saw themselves as being within the British Empire. The British responded by sending troops to restore home rule and this led to the beginnings of what is now called The Revolutionary War in 1775. Each of the colonies sent representatives to the Second Continental Congress during that same year. However, the colonial provinces or states joined together to defend their right to self-governance as a colony and not to become a new country separate from the British Empire. While there were those leaning toward independence when Paine began his work on *Common Sense*, independence was not the preferred outcome of many of the colonists in America (and particularly in Philadelphia).

The historian, Howard Zinn, writes that "the consciousness of the lower middle classes grew to the point where it must have caused some hard thinking, not just among the conservative Loyalists sympathetic to England, but even among leaders of the Revolution." Zinn cited fellow historian, Gary B. Nash, who writes "By mid-1776, laborers, artisans, and small tradesmen, employing extralegal measures when electoral politics failed, were in clear command in Philadelphia" and "launched a full-scale attack on wealth and even on the right to acquire unlimited private property." Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* came out of this historical, social, and cultural context and the "exigence" out of which this discourse emerged was that in order for the Revolution to succeed, it must gain the allegiance of the colonists other

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinntyr4.html

⁶ Ibid.

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than those who occupied the upper strata of the social and economic ladder. In order to gain that allegiance, the lofty political ideals of the emerging ruling class must be translated into a language that would appeal to all of the colonists no matter what position they occupied on the social and economic ladder.

According to Bitzer, another constituent of the rhetorical situation is "the audience that must be constrained." An analysis of the audience in which Thomas Paine was trying to communicate reveals that Paine had two purposes in *Common Sense:* First, he needed to translate the lofty political philosophy of the learned elite into a discourse that could be easily understood by the middling and lower classes. Second, Paine must communicate these ideals in such a way that the middling and lower classes would feel as if they had something to gain by independence. Howard Zinn's analysis of the effects of Paine's work illustrates the implications that *Common Sense* had in terms of constraining its audience. Zinn writes that Paine's purpose was "to find a language inspiring to all classes, specific enough in its listing of grievances to charge people with anger against the British, vague enough to avoid class conflict among the rebels, and stirring up enough to build patriotic feeling for the resistance movement." Readers can see how Paine used ordinary language that the average literate reader could understand to make an argument for independence from the very beginning of the pamphlet: ""Society in every state is a blessing, but Government even in its best state is but a necessary evil. ..."

Bitzer also claims that the "constraints which influence the rhetor that can be brought to bear upon the audience" are also necessary components of the rhetorical situation. For the most part, much of the history of the European monarchy was grounded in the philosophy of the divine right of kings. Paine problematizes this foundational premise and does so in words that the "common man" can understand when he writes: "A French bastard landing with an armed bandit and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original." Paine purposely goes all the way back to 1066 when William the Conqueror, a Norman, came over from France and established the English monarchy. He goes on to challenge this foundational belief by reminding the colonists that

⁷Bitzer, Lloyd."The Rhetorical Situation." Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (January, 1968), 1-14.

⁸ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinntyr4.html

⁹ Paine, Thomas. Common Sense. http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense2.htm

¹⁰ Ibid.

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"Thirty kings and two minors have reigned in that distracted kingdom since the conquest, in which time there have been (including the Revolution) no less than eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions."¹¹ Paine's claims rest on John Locke's idea of "the consent of the governed," a philosophical principle that John Locke developed in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*. ¹² Paine is reminding his audience that throughout English history there have been those who did not consent to the arbitrary rule of the monarchy.

One could argue that economics is the elephant in the room when it comes to any armed conflict and economics was certainly important in terms of the American Revolution. Paine brings the economic constraints of colonial America to bear upon his audience when he writes: "I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge; not a single advantage is derived. Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for by them where we will..." Paine uses this economic argument to convince his audience of the practical (and economic) advantages of separating from England. Because he understands the economic imperatives of the middling and lower classes, Paine is able to bring the economic constraints of English mercantilism to bear upon his audience.

Paine is also able to bring the constraints of colonial America's recent history to bear upon his audience. The colonists had just finished fighting the French and Indian War and this event in colonial history was significant in terms of the colonial American mind. It is because of the French and Indian War that colonial America felt as if it could take care of itself with little or no help from the English. In addition, many of the colonists were not happy that they were involved in a war with the French and several Native American tribes because of England's activities in Europe. Paine illustrates this point when he explains the negative effects of its relationship with England. Paine explains that "the injuries and disadvantages which we sustain by that connection are without number" reminding the colonists that "any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain, tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Locke, John. Second Treatise of Civil Government. http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke2/locke2nd-b.html#Sect.%2095

¹³ Paine, Thomas, Common Sense, http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense2.htm

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quarrels, and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek out friendship."¹⁴ Finally, Paine emphasizes the thesis of *Common Sense* and the argument that he has been making throughout the text: "Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART."¹⁵

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* sold hundreds of thousands of copies after it was first published in 1776. Because of the popularity of the text, one could argue that nearly each and every literate person in colonial America had either read the pamphlet or knew about the arguments that Paine had made in the pamphlet. One of the reasons why this text was so popular in colonial America is because Paine had his rhetorical fingers on the pulse of the everyday colonist in colonial America. Paine understood the exigence of his rhetorical situation. In addition, Paine also understood his audience very well and crafted his pamphlet using the language and style of his discourse community – everyday people. In addition, Paine also understood the social, cultural, and historical constraints which could be brought to bear upon his audience. Bitzer's revelation of the rhetorical situation and its application to Paine's *Common Sense* shows the modern reader of this colonial text how and why American patriots in the colonies believed that they had it in their power "to begin the world over again" and how many of them came to believe that "The birth-day of a new world is at hand." 16

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.