

In Memoriam: Alfred F. Andersen and the Tom Paine Institute

Brent Ranalli, The Cadmus Group, October 2016

brent.ranalli at cadmusgroup.com

**This discussion paper is based on a presentation delivered at the International
Conference of Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College on October 19, 2012**

I could probably point to a dozen or more books or more that profoundly changed the way I look at the world when I was a student, but only one moved me to write a letter to the author. It was *Downwardly Mobile for Conscience Sake* (Tucson, AZ: Tom Paine Institute, 1993), edited by a woman named Dorothy Andersen. The book is an anthology of essays written by people who have chosen to reject consumerist values and live on low incomes for a variety of reasons: environmental, or religious, or out of solidarity with the world's poor, or to avoid paying taxes that would support an imperialist regime. Dorothy herself contributed a chapter where she told her personal story, and her husband Al also contributed a chapter that not only told his story but offered a penetrating analysis of our economic system, a social and economic critique that was like nothing I had seen before. It was profoundly radical, but not socialist or Marxist or anarchist. It was neither left nor right. If you could categorize it at all, it was built on Quaker values. I was an idealistic youth of about 20, and I found Al and Dorothy's personal

stories so compelling, and Al's social and economic analysis so intriguing, that I immediately wrote to the couple, and that letter in 1996 was the beginning of a friendship and a correspondence that lasted many years. We exchanged visits in Massachusetts and Oregon. After I had spent some time in Europe, Al tried to set me up managing a youth hostel near his home in Eugene, and I was tempted to take this opportunity to spend more time near the Andersens, but ended up opting instead to settle close to home. As I began a career in environmental policy and started a family, we gradually fell out of touch. But when I heard that Al had died in 2010 I knew I wanted to do something to honor and remember him. The 2012 International Conference of Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College, at which a version of this paper was presented, provided an opportunity to do that. Al Andersen was a truly original American political philosopher, one who deserves to be more widely known than he is. In giving a brief overview of his life and work, my intention is to make at least a small contribution towards "putting him on the map," showing how he fits into larger intellectual traditions, and giving a sense of Al the thinker and the man.

A conference on Thomas Paine was an appropriate forum for talking about Al Andersen's legacy, because Paine was one of Al's most important influences and precursors. The affinity between the two men's views was great enough that when Al decided he need to have an institution to house his intellectual and advocacy efforts, he dubbed his organization the "Tom Paine Institute."¹

¹ As an American, Al was probably unaware, as I was also until recently, that the nickname "Tom" was used by Paine's political enemies in Britain to belittle him, and that Paine himself never used the short form. The short form has been embraced in recent years by many, like Al, who admire Paine's fighting, populist spirit.

To give a brief biographical sketch:² Alfred Frederick Andersen was born in 1919 to a family in the Danish community in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was, like his father, mechanically inclined, and after he earned a degree in civil engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute he became a partner at his father's machine shop. But as an undergraduate he was also exposed to the revolution that was underway in quantum physics, and this sparked an interest in philosophy. He took graduate classes in philosophy at Yale and Columbia. He began thinking about social reform, and when his father retired he tried to organize the shop of about 20 employees on democratic principles.

During World War II, several experiences shaped his political views and radicalized him: one was that the Federal Reserve Bank of New York foreclosed on the family business, despite the fact that the shop was contributing to the war effort. The second was that Al was imprisoned for refusing military service as a conscientious objector. (As he later explained, he felt that he could not consent to subordinating his conscience to the commands of a military officer.)

After the war, Andersen and his first wife Connie Manende became active in Quaker circles working on peace and justice issues. He continued his studies in philosophy and held several teaching posts, in addition to working an assortment of jobs over the years, tinkering as an inventor/entrepreneur, and investing in real estate. In the 1950s he was active in the intentional communities movement, and founded and served as president of the Fellowship of

² I am indebted to Dorothy Andersen for providing a biographical summary that supplements the autobiographical accounts in Al's own writing. I also thank Project Censored for getting me back in touch with Dorothy, and especially to Mary Lia for facilitating my communication with Dorothy while researching this paper.

Intentional Communities. In the 1960s the family moved to Berkeley, California, to participate in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and work with students and faculty at the University of California on peace and justice issues. For many years Andersen had refused to pay income tax for reasons of conscience, and it was in Berkeley the IRS seized and auctioned off the family's home.

It was also around this time that, with their three children grown, Andersen and his first wife separated amicably. In the 1970s Al participated in several United Nations special sessions, and at one of these he met Dorothy Dungan Norvell, a woman with a Quaker background who was soon to become his second wife. The couple settled in Ukiah, California, where Andersen wrote his first book, *Updating the Early American Dream* (Ukiah, CA: Tom Paine Institute, 1984), revised and reissued a year later, with forewords by Howard Zinn and others, as *Liberating the Early American Dream* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1985). This very rich book laid out the results of a lifetime of reflection on philosophy, politics, economics, and societal reform. By this time, feeling the need for some kind of institutional structure, Andersen had established the Tom Paine Institute to promote the radical reform ideas that his book described. The Institute never grew beyond a two-person operation. In the 1990s Al and Dorothy moved their home base to Eugene, Oregon, where Dorothy edited *Downwardly Mobile* and Al wrote his second book, *Challenging Newt Gingrich Chapter by Chapter* (Eugene, OR: Tom Paine Institute, 1996)--a title he later regretted, as it dated the book. In truth, the short-lived Republican Revolution merely served as a springboard for Andersen to discuss larger issues. This book covers much of the same ground as the earlier book, but was designed to be more accessible, and also includes some refinements and shifts in emphasis. Al and Dorothy

continued to write and attend conferences and promote the reform ideas of the Tom Paine Institute until Al's death in 2010 at age 91. The Tom Paine Institute no longer operates, but Dorothy has donated money to the progressive organization Project Censored to sponsor essay contests and other activities that keep alive Al's legacy.

Turning to Al's intellectual contributions: I'll briefly trace three strands of Al's thought: first, in economics (including his radical proposals for reforming capitalism); second, in moral and political philosophy (including his radical proposals for reforming representative democracy); and third, in metaphysics.

1. Economic critique and vision

It is Andersen's economic reform ideas that connect him most directly to the legacy of Thomas Paine. The germ of Andersen's reform project was the recognition that the earth and all natural resources belong to mankind in common, and that when individuals enclose a piece of it as private property they deny their fellows of the benefit of it. This principle has a long history, and Andersen was especially struck by Thomas Paine's forceful articulation of the problem, and his proposed solution, in *Agrarian Justice* (published in 1797). Whereas John Locke had asserted that a man was justified in taking as much from the common stock as he could work with his own labor, so long as "enough, and as good" remained for others,³ and

³ It is debatable whether the condition that "as much and as good" must remain for others could have been met in Locke's own day. The popular but erroneous European conceit that natives of the Americas, Australia, etc. did not practice agriculture or otherwise "improve" their land with their own labor was attractive precisely because it created the appearance of virgin land available for the taking. Today, in a much more crowded world, it would be even harder to argue that Locke's condition could be satisfied.

whereas Henry George in the nineteenth century would propose the institution of a land tax to support government operations, and other more radical philosophers attacked the very notion of private property itself, Paine proposed that those who profited from the ownership of land should contribute to a common trust fund (via inheritance taxes), out of which payments would be made to members of the public, especially to support the elderly and start young people on their careers.

Andersen extended this idea by proposing the establishment of nested trust funds, ranging from the local to the global. So a portion of the rent from use of common heritage resources like urban real estate, agricultural land, forests, and minerals would go into a global trust fund that would pay dividends to all people on the planet, and a portion would be distributed among members of the community in the immediate vicinity of the resource. Andersen also proposed including within the scope of “common heritage” accumulated technical knowledge, so companies in high-tech sectors would also pay in to the global trust fund. Dorothy has written of the Tom Paine Institute’s advocacy over the years that “there was widespread agreement on the principle” of Common Heritage Trust Funds, “but implementation remained, and remains, daunting.”⁴ Nevertheless, one should not conclude that the idea is entirely impractical. Variants on Thomas Paine’s basic idea have been implemented. The most prominent example, perhaps, is the Alaska Permanent Fund, which since 1982 has paid annual dividends out of oil revenues to every Alaska resident.

⁴ From a brief biographical sketch of AI written by Dorothy in August 2010.

2. Political and moral philosophy and reform proposals

In his political and moral philosophy, Andersen begins with the observation that every person is endowed with a sense of fairness or justice, a moral compass. Our moral compasses are diverse and imperfect. Al argues that the sense of justice can be trained and improved, that in some individuals it is more finely tuned than others, and that some people are more out of touch with their conscience than others. But for Andersen individual conscience is *the foundation* of morality and law. When individuals join in communities, through the slow process of dialogue the community comes to establish standards of morality and justice that may be codified, but these are always subject to change as individuals continue to consult their consciences.⁵

Discernment of what is fair in a given situation takes time, especially in a group setting; therefore the pace of social and technical change matters. If the pace of social and technical change outstrips the ability of the community to digest that change and develop shared fairness principles around it, injustice will result. For this reason Al spend much of the 1960s in a quixotic effort to convince university researchers to go on a sort of a Lysistratan strike, halting the production of new technical and scientific knowledge for the federal government until the nation got its moral house in order. His choice to settle in Berkeley was partly on account of the fact that the University of California administered all research and development of nuclear weapons for the U.S. military at the time.

⁵ Andersen does not address the question, whether morality is then entirely socially constructed, or whether objective moral principles are “discovered.”

In his analysis of early American history, Andersen viewed the Articles of Confederation as providing the right sort of framework for slow, careful moral deliberation.⁶ What he called the “early American dream” was the ambition of ordinary men and women to live free of oppression and injustice, to find fulfillment in minding their own affairs, and to build supportive communities. He saw the intellectual underpinnings of this in the writings of such men as Roger Williams, William Penn, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine. He argues that this “early American dream” is still latent in the American character (and manifested in such ways as the intentional communities movement), but that it has been overshadowed by the more conventional “American dream” of materialist consumption and status-seeking. In the secret, unauthorized drafting of a new constitution in 1789, in the way it was rammed through the state legislatures, in the calculated advantages it gave to commercial interests and land speculators like Washington, and in the way this constitution was successfully manipulated and corrupted by political operatives like Hamilton, Anderson saw a coup d’état that was not only a literal usurpation of power, but also an act that increased the pace of national business to the extent that threw the nation morally off balance, a state it has been in now for over 200 years.

Hamilton, for Andersen, typifies what he calls the “aggressive and acquisitive” individual, the type who has a weak and untrained conscience or is out of touch with his moral sense, and therefore pursues meaningless conquests, and does so in a way that tramples on the rights of others. These are the type of person who in their avarice enclose and monopolize the commons, denying others’ access, thus creating inequity and the exacerbating the need for the

⁶ Andersen promotes decision-making by consensus, and draws on Native American and Quaker traditions and Group Dynamics theory to show how public business could be conducted on this way. Since the Continental Congress had no power to coerce member states, its decisions too were more or less consensus-based.

sort of formal “fair sharing” trusts outlined earlier. These are also the sort of individuals who gravitate toward positions of power, where they are capable of committing gross injustice through the organs of government.

In his positive vision of what government *should* look like, Andersen’s basic premise is that the only legitimate purpose of government is to prevent and remedy injustice. Any sort of coercive force by government, including collections of fines and fees and even lethal force, depending on the circumstance, may be justified in order to prevent and remedy injustice. But use of coercive force by government for any other purpose would itself be unjust. That includes conscription, mandatory education, and taxation to fund services of any sort the individual has not specifically agreed to.

Most of the functions of government, Andersen thinks (and here he sounds like a classic libertarian), could and should be undertaken by voluntary associations, in which people freely and conscientiously commit to undertaking and underwriting shared projects.

Andersen is left with the problem of how to make and keep government moral, how to deal with the fact that those who care about justice the least tend to gravitate toward positions of power. He offers at least two possible solutions. In his first book, Andersen proposes that communities should establish formal watchdog institutions, independent of government, whose sole purpose is to monitor the various levels and branches of government and report on matters of justice or injustice they find (not unlike the role of “fourth estate” that the news media are sometimes supposed or urged to play). This will empower people to put appropriate pressure on their representatives, or to withdraw their consent entirely from a corrupt

governmental institution, turning to another to remedy the situation or establishing a new one to replace it. (In Andersen's vision we may have a variety of governments with overlapping jurisdictions—as, indeed, we have to a certain extent today with overlapping federal, state, and municipal governments plus water districts and other utility districts, homeowners associations, etc.)

A second solution, developed most fully in the *Challenging Newt Gingrich* book, is to reform the way legislative representatives are selected. On the premise that those who have firsthand knowledge of candidates' character are fittest to select them for office, Andersen proposes a truly "federated" system of electing legislators, where people choose their local government representatives, local legislators select state legislators from among their own midst, and state legislators select federal legislators from among themselves, etc. Again, Andersen offers a historical critique: he goes back to the Constitutional Convention of 1789 and the Federalist Papers and evaluates the adequacy of arguments made there for and against for direct election of federal officeholders, and the motives behind those arguments. In particular, he deftly skewers James Madison's argument in Federalist Paper No. 10 that large electorates are more likely to select fitter officeholders than smaller electorates.

3. Metaphysics

Al Andersen was not only a highly original thinker, he was also a courageous and principled man of action in his own way, who stood up to coercive institutions like the military draft board and the IRS when he felt it was required of him. Underscoring his philosophy and his personal courage was a quasi-religious view of the nature of the universe. This metaphysical

view, which he called the “persons-in-community paradigm,” and later the “cosmic community paradigm,” was grounded in his studies of quantum mechanics. He outlined it in some of his published writings, and he was working on a book-length treatment of it in his later years, tentatively titled “A Cosmic Community Paradigm.”

We are used to thinking of matter as solid and ultimately real, and thinking of mind and spirit as secondary—epiphenomenal, or somehow less real, or in any case problematic and in need of explanation. Quantum mechanics teaches that matter is not solid at all—that matter is mostly empty space, and the parts that are not empty space can be better understood as probability functions and waves than as anything truly solid. When viewed as a collection of waves, the universe looks more like a signal than an object, and a world of signal is a world where mind and spirit are at home. What is ultimately real, in this view, is persons, and communications among and between persons. And the physical universe itself can be viewed as a sort of a *carrier wave*, a communications platform like an FM or AM band on which persons can live and move and exercise their own communicative capacities. The carrier wave itself would then constitute a communication from a being or beings of a higher order, wiser than us.

What is most essential about us as conscious beings, in Andersen’s view, the part that is deepest and most in touch with and informed by the wiser being or beings that create and sustain us, is precisely our conscience, our sense of fairness. The purpose of our lives in this

world, in this matrix of real people and pseudo-real objects, is to broaden and deepen our exercise of this faculty, the sense of fairness, in community with others.⁷

Conclusion

To conclude: With this paper I hope to help spur interest in a thinker who was truly an American original. His style of writing was didactic rather than academic, which perhaps kept him from reaching a wider audience in the academy, but it is clear and forceful and well-reasoned. As a man he was not perhaps a great organizer, adept at putting his ideas into practice or making arrangements for his intellectual legacy to be carried on in any institutionalized fashion, but one could not help but be drawn in by his seriousness, his quiet humor, his thoughtfulness, and his conviction and commitment. He also had a remarkable zest for life: one incident that I recall fondly was playing one-on-one basketball with him in Eugene, when I was 25 and he was 81. I'm sure he left an impression as deep and deeper on many others as well.⁸

Furthermore, if he was correct in his view of the universe, there was no particular need for him to be anxious about passing on a precious intellectual legacy, because the principles he stood for were universal principles; they had been articulated before by others (such as Thomas Paine), and they would doubtless be hit upon and articulated again and put into practice by

⁷ Furthermore, because there are some injustices (e.g., those involving death of an innocent) that cannot be compensated in this lifetime, Andersen deduces that there must be a plane of existence beyond this life.

⁸ In terms of family, Al is survived by Dorothy, and also by his three children from his first marriage and their families.

others in the future (as, indeed, Peter Barnes and others have pressed forward with the idea of common heritage trusts).

It was not my specific intention when I set out to write this paper to draw parallels between the lives of Thomas Paine and Al Andersen, but I cannot help remarking on a few of them in closing. There are, obviously, the Quaker ties and the espousal of similar political principles and economic programs. There is also the fact that both were mechanically inclined and avidly interested in scientific developments of their day. Both were men of unshakable integrity; both widely travelled, taking up local causes wherever they found themselves; and both were buttressed in their theorizing and their activism by a quasi-religious conviction about the goodness of the universe, a conviction that others might see as not religious at all, but which served these two men well.