

Agrarian Justice: Paine, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and Economic  
Egalitarianism in the New Republics

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In the winter of 1795-96, a year after his release from prison in France and a narrow escape from execution during the Terror, Thomas Paine wrote a political pamphlet, Agrarian Justice, that confirmed his continuing belief in the principles of the French Revolution and added a significant dimension to his egalitarian theories. Agrarian Justice, published in 1797, has been somewhat overshadowed in Paine's oeuvre by his powerful advocacy for the American Revolution, and his masterworks, The Rights of Man and The Age of Reason. But it is worthy of our attention because of its amplification of the consideration of economic rights that Paine had broached in The Age of Reason. Linking the concept of human rights to the question of land ownership, Paine forwarded the concept that the legitimacy and the progressive development of civilization depends upon the recognition that "the earth" is "the COMMON PROPERTY OF THE HUMAN RACE" (AJ 398).<sup>1</sup>

Both the title of Paine's work and its key assumptions connect it with a tradition of agrarian thought which was influential in both the French and American political contexts. Paine, himself more an urban and cosmopolitan figure than a

pastoral type, is typically not counted with either the physiocratic school of agrarian economic theorists that emerged in France in the late eighteenth century, or the American form of agrarian social theory best represented by Thomas Jefferson and Michel-Guillaume de Crèvecoeur, author of Letters from an American Farmer (1782). Paine's turn to the terminology and some of the fundamental concepts of agrarianism, however, is significant. Paine and Jefferson were correspondents who held a mutual respect, but who also had their differences. Paine, too, may have read or at least had an acquaintance with Crèvecoeur's book, which had currency in England in the early 1780s and was published in two editions in France in the middle 1780s, but this is only speculative. What is significant about Agrarian Justice is Paine's employment of a key agrarian assumption to formulate an early version of public welfare philosophy, and to link that policy to the discourse on human rights in which Paine had been, and continues to be, so influential. His use of this framework of thought in this stage of the emergence of the new French republic can be usefully compared with the important articulations of an agrarian myth in the American context by Jefferson and Crèvecoeur.

## II

The Agrarian philosophy of the French physiocratic school, most notably articulated by François Quesnay in his Tableau Économique (1759) emphasized the importance of the cultivation of

land as the primary source of wealth.<sup>2</sup> The surplus value created by a nation's farmers through the cultivation of crops was the key determinant of a nation's economic well-being. In the new American republic, these theories took on a wider dimension and influence as they were articulated by Jefferson and Crèvecoeur, who hailed not only the economic value of land cultivation, but its personal and societal values as well. The farmer was not only the source of a nation's wealth, the American agrarians contended, but the anchor of its stability and its moral values. Jefferson and Crèvecoeur transformed agrarianism from an economic theory to a cultural myth, one which spoke to the direction that the rapidly developing new nation would take.

The best-known statement of this conception of the virtues of farming is Jefferson's discussion of "Manufactures" in the nineteenth query of his Notes on the State of Virginia, written in 1781-82 and published in 1787. Rejecting the ideas of "the political economists of Europe . . . that every State should endeavour to manufacture for itself," Jefferson argues that the "immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman" creates a different set of circumstances in America. "While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff." Such work estranges them from the conditions that nurture lives of virtue and fulfillment. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine

virtue."<sup>3</sup> Jefferson uses the term "virtue" here in its fullest sense, not restricting it to a narrow moralism, but including in it a sense of living and active power. The farmer is close to the fundamental and originating energy of nature, and also becomes in essence a part of that energy. The work of farming, Jefferson writes, "is the focus in which [God] keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth." The virtuous energies generated by agricultural labor guarantee, Jefferson believes, a morally whole culture.

"Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age has furnished an example," Jefferson concludes, maintaining that the best path for America is to build a society grounded in the work of farmers on their own land.<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson's assumptions about the values and virtues of the agrarian life were given literary form in Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer, a work built from a series of sketches written in the 1770s and early 1780s, and published in 1782, when Jefferson was completing his Virginia Notes. Crèvecoeur's farmer James, who narrates the text as a series of letters to an English correspondent (Jefferson's Notes were written in reply to queries from "a Foreigner of Distinction"), describes an idyllic life on a Pennsylvania farm from which an egalitarian and mutually supportive society was beginning to emerge. Mixing a close knowledge of the detail and cycles of nature with a hymn to the disciplined labor of farm life, James paints a utopian picture of the new American republic. Although Crèvecoeur undercuts this

idyllic vision in the later part of the text, and left unpublished manuscripts which cast further shadows on his initial bright images of farm life, it is those optimistic early portraits of the farmer content in his calling and secure in his community that have left the deepest impression on American culture.<sup>5</sup> "Where is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity," James asks, "than that of the American farmer possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us?"<sup>6</sup> Most notably, Crèvecoeur described a process of almost complete transformation or rebirth that follows upon a European peasant's acquisition of a farm in North America, an early and influential articulation of the agrarian version of the American dream. "From nothing to start into being; from a servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a free man, invested with lands to which every municipal blessing is annexed! What a change indeed! It is in consequence of that change that he becomes an American" (83). As Crèvecoeur's depiction of American life suggests, the agrarian myth was a formative one for the American consciousness, and it reinforced the cherished image of many French intellectuals of America as a rustic paradise.<sup>7</sup>

Paine and Jefferson were friends and correspondents who held each other in mutual respect and shared in the experience of the American Revolution. But Paine was far from being an agrarian in the Jeffersonian sense, and his difference from Jefferson is

instructive. He did not reject the theory that agriculture is a basic source of social wealth; indeed he would embrace it in a sense in his late work. But his milieu and his audience differed from Jefferson's. The first thirty-seven years of his life, spent mostly in smaller English towns, learning a trade as a staymaker, shopkeeper and government revenue officer, and he seems to have come alive only after emigrating to Philadelphia. It was Franklin who helped him come to Philadelphia, and his experience and orientation is in many ways akin to Franklin's. Paine lived the life, and understood the people, whom Jefferson distrusted, a non-agrarian working class who were beginning to demand a larger role in the institutions that governed them, and a larger share of the economies to which their labor contributed. The social image of the virtuous farmer that we find in Jefferson and Crèvecoeur did not resonate with Paine. He spoke to the discontent of this class as he found it in the American colonies, and then in England, and with less success, in France. Agrarian Justice can best be understood as Paine's adaptation of agrarian economic assumptions to the situation of this growing population.

### III

In his preface to the Agrarian Justice, Paine tells us that his new consideration of human rights and the progress of civilization was spurred by one of his theological critics, Bishop Landaff, who had entitled a sermon "THE WISDOM AND GOODNESS OF GOD, IN HAVING MADE BOTH RICH AND POOR" (AJ 396).

God did no such thing, Paine responded: "he made only Male and Female; and he gave them the earth for their inheritance" (AJ 396). Poverty, Paine goes on to argue, is not in the natural state of things; it "is a thing which is created by that which is called civilized life" (AJ 397). If humans have created poverty through their social arrangements, Paine believes, they can begin to alleviate it through social processes as well. He thus outlines a plan of taxation that guarantees every citizen a small initial sum of money at age 21, an inheritance so to speak, and a small maintenance after the age of 50. And, he insists, "it is a right and not a charity that I am pleading for" (AJ 400).

Paine's advocacy of tax policy as a response to inequalities in the distribution of income, has clear relevance to political practice and public policy in our era. His argument is grounded in his concern about the extremes of wealth and poverty that had emerged in the evolution of modern society, and their resulting social wreckage and personal devastation. These are the very conditions, it should be noted, that were fundamental to the outbreak of the French Revolution. "The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilized," Paine observes, a situation that calls into question the equation between civilization and progress. Paine argues that it is not at all clear whether what we refer to as civilization "has most promoted or most injured the general happiness of man." What has been granted to some has been denied to many others. "On the one side the spectator is

dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness." Both of these conditions, Paine writes, "he has erected" (AJ 397), as a member and beneficiary of civilization.

As we can see from his formulation of this description, Paine is interested not only in portraying the great divide between rich and poor, but also in implicating his imagined spectator, (and of course his readers) in the construction of this state of affairs. As men and women who function within the society, they must assume responsibility for it. Paine intends to show those who are the beneficiaries of civilization that they have a corresponding responsibility to address its costs to others, to begin a process of rebalancing a system of human distribution and consumption that has lost its equilibrium. Civilization is the result of human choice and will, Paine suggests, a constructed or artificial condition. That is a crucial recognition, for what has made by men and women can be unmade or remade. Paine's experience in the American Revolution, and more dramatically in the French Revolution, had confirmed for him both the artificiality and the fragility of human social constructs. In Agrarian Justice he hopes to employ that essential truth in the progressive betterment of the poor, and as he sees it, of civilization as a whole.

But in order to define and describe civilization as a construction, he must differentiate it from a prior state of affairs which he calls the "natural state," or the "natural and

primitive state" (AJ 397), that mythical original condition in which humans initially existed on the planet. Here we find that Paine, like many of his eighteenth-century philosophical colleagues, had to resort to some questionable anthropological and ethnological analysis. That original condition of the natural state is lost to us in time, except for the glimpse of it that Paine believes we can find in the peoples of the North American continent. "To understand what the state of society ought to be," Paine explains, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural or primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America" (AJ 397). He finds that the "spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes" in Europe are not found among the Indians; nor do we find among them "those advantages which flow from Agriculture, Arts, Science, and Manufactures" (AJ 397). Paine sees the Indian as a kind of mean for the vastly different conditions of civilized men and women--neither as degraded by poverty as the European poor, nor as enriched by the elements of civilized progress as the European middle and upper classes. "The life of the Indian is a continual holiday, compared with the poor of Europe; and, on the other hand, it appears to be abject when compared to the rich" (AJ 397).

We cannot, perhaps, blame Paine too severely for sharing some of the preconceptions of his time and place, nor for failing to understand the enormous diversity of Indian cultures and situations. Suffice it to say that, like many others, he found

in the peoples of North America a new way to conceptualize Europe and to recognize its form of society not as an inevitability but as an alterable product of human history. Nor did Paine unqualifiedly pronounce European civilization superior to the kind of life he imagined among the Indians, wryly commenting that civilization was perhaps "erroneously" named, and that the assumption of its superiority is "a question that may be strongly contested" (AJ 397). Paine uses the Indian to represent a kind of egalitarianism that he can associate with the "natural" state. This allows him to depict the extreme poverty of modern society as a distortion of the natural order of things, a disequilibrium that should, and inevitably will, be righted. We might speculate here that Paine's sensitivity to such a distortion was sharpened by the recent events of the French Revolution, where the severity of the economic imbalance generated a violent social calamity. Paine writes now, as his title tells us, less as a revolutionary than as a maker of public policy offering a plan for "Meliorating the Condition of Man" (AJ 396).

#### IV

If there is an egalitarian principle underlying the natural order of things, if, as Paine emphasizes (with capitals), the earth is "the COMMON PROPERTY OF THE HUAMN RACE" (AJ 398), then those in civilized society who have been relegated to poverty have been denied a fundamental right. This is a crucially important point, one which Paine elaborates with great emphasis.<sup>8</sup>

Paine was by no means the first to broach such a concept, we should note. Eric Foner has explained how Paine tapped into a set of ideas implicit in Locke's theory of property, which was expanded by William Ogilvie and Thomas Spence in England, and François Babeuf in France. This line of thought claimed that a universal right to land existing in the state of nature overrode existing laws and systems of private land ownership.<sup>9</sup> While Paine was cautious in his policy recommendations concerning the redistribution of property, his vivid and persuasive explanation of the concept of a universal right to the natural resources of the earth make Paine's text an important point of reference in the history of property theory. "I have entitled this tract Agrarian Justice, to distinguish it from Agrarian Law," Paine writes. A system of absolute justice would provide for an equal stake in the earth's resources for each individual as they were born, but existing law, which protects the private holding of land, excludes most men and women from this inherent legacy in the earth. "Nothing could be more unjust than Agrarian Law in a country improved by cultivation," Paine writes, underlining "the hard case of all those who have been thrown out of their natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property" (AJ 399-400). Such dispossession is a violation of the fundamental order of things, or the state of nature. "There could be no such thing as landed property originally," Paine argues, a point that brings out the powers of striking illustration and the sardonic edge that gives his prose such

bite: "Man did not make the earth, and though he had a natural right to occupy it, he had no right to locate as his property in perpetuity any part of it: neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from which the first title deeds should issue" (AJ 399).

While Paine did not believe that the whole course of human history could be redone from the beginning, he felt that this basic recognition can guide future social policy. Those who have not been born to landed property must be treated as if they had a right to landed property. In practical terms this meant that a portion of the wealth generated by property should be directed to them as part of their inalienable rights as human beings.<sup>10</sup> But what principle should guide such a transfer? Paine again referred to the concept of a state of nature to propose a rationale: "The first principle of civilization ought to have been, and ought still to be, that the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period" (AJ 398). Civilization, Paine believes, can only justify its worth if it does not harm those who comprise it. Civilization must include all men and women in the benefits that it produces.

Two important implications flow from this principle. First, those who require economic assistance from society are entitled to such assistance as a right, not as the objects of charity. Paine recognizes that it is not advisable to leave it

"to the choice of detached individuals, whether they will do justice or not," and underscores the necessity of invoking "a principle more universally active than charity" in righting the wrongs of civilization (AJ 406). The reclamation of the poor must be recognized as essential to the very nature of civilization. "It is a right and not a charity that I am pleading for" (AJ 400), Paine insists. The second implication, closely related to the first, is that the owners of land owe to the larger community a portion of the value of the land which they legally hold, and others, equally entitled, do not. "Every proprietor therefore of cultivated land, owes to the community a ground-rent" (AJ 398). Paine proposes this rent as essentially a ten per cent inheritance tax on land, with some supplementation. He does not want to dispossess the landowners of property which also reflects added value that they or their ancestors have produced; nor does he want to disrupt or overturn the benefits that the cultivation of land has generated for the human race as a whole. Civilization, he feels does have its unquestionable value. What must now be done, he argues, is "to remedy the evils, and preserve the benefits, that have arisen to society, by passing from the natural to that which is called the civilized state" (AJ 398). The rent or tax that he proposes is not the confiscation of private property, but the reclamation of value that has always been, by rights, a common possession.

Paine's argument for the rights of the dispossessed is the core of Agrarian Justice, but this basic contention is supplemented by another important consideration. He maintains that righting the economic balance of civilization is not only just in principle, but will generate advantages to civilization as a whole. We might say that he proposes a measure that will lead to a true civilization, a civilization that will fulfill the promise that its name carries. The rent that Paine advocates would create a national fund from which all persons would be paid, at the age of twenty-one, fifteen pounds "as a compensation in part for the loss of his or her natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property" (AJ 400). An annual payment of ten pounds per year would also be guaranteed to the blind and physically disabled, and to those aged fifty or over. As Paine argues, this system would "immediately relieve and take out of view . . . the blind, the lame, and the aged poor." That such a measure would relieve some of the suffering of the poor is clear, but what Paine also finds appealing about it is that it would take their suffering "out of view." Those who suffer would be helped, and those who must witness suffering would also benefit. In one of his most arresting images, he writes that "the contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together" (AJ 405). Paine believes that removing the shadow of the poverty of others would actually enhance the benefits that the well-to-do draw from their wealth.

"The sight of the misery, and the unpleasant sensations it suggests, which though they may be suffocated cannot be extinguished, are a greater draw-back upon the felicity of affluence than the proposed 10 per cent. upon property is worth" (AJ 406).

At first encounter it seems as if Paine is more concerned with relieving the sensibilities of the well-to-do than we might expect. Closer examination, however, suggests that at least implicitly he is invoking a form of moral sense ethical theory by suggesting that the exploitation and suffering of others inevitably creates a moral revulsion. Human happiness and fulfillment, he suggests, can never be achieved in a society in which inequalities extreme enough to create suffering in others are allowed to exist. What might he have thought, we can wonder, if he could tour the major American cities in the early twenty-first century? But whether or not we concur with Paine's implicit moral sense assumptions, his image of the living and dead bodies chained together is a powerful one, that repays close reading. The living body is itself dead in a fundamental sense, severely hampered physically and, no doubt, traumatized psychologically. So it is with society weighed down by an impoverished class. It cannot progress as it should in material terms, nor can it flourish in its citizens' sense of worth, achievement, and well-being.

Paine is also confident of another benefit of his ground-tax proposal. The provision of a small legacy to each citizen at

the achievement of adulthood would be a benefit to the larger society by providing the necessary means for a productive life. "When a young couple begins the world, the difference is exceedingly great whether they begin with nothing or with fifteen pounds apiece." Such a legacy would increase the likelihood that they would become "useful and profitable citizens," self-sufficient and productive rather than "burthens upon society" as they began their family life (AJ 406-7). The enactment of justice through the provision of these legacies represent is also, Paine argues, an economically fruitful strategy, one which empowers the young who receive this support and benefits society through their enhanced self-reliance and productivity.

## VI

Paine is one of the great theorists of the progressive impulses of the modern age, a thinker who struck important blows against feudalism and aristocracy, and who articulated an egalitarianism that is still potent in its implications. Nowhere is this more dramatically true than in Agrarian Justice, a pamphlet written in the heat of political and policy debates, but a work grounded on ideas that are very far-reaching. In summary, I would underline two principles of this work that are of particular importance as we consider it today, principles that are very much alive and at work in contemporary progressive political thought. The first of these, as we have seen, is Paine's extension of the doctrine of individual rights into the

economic sphere through his contention that landed property is an illegitimate form of disenfranchisement for the mass of humanity, who are entitled by their very birth to a stake in the common property of humanity. Paine understands the importance of conceiving this claim as a right, rather than as the basis for a call on charitable action. Those without landed property are also rightful owners of the earth. It should be noted that Paine takes a very moderate approach to the policy implications of this claim. He did not advocate extensive land distribution for the France of the 1790's, but a system by which this right could be addressed in a way that he believed was productive to society as a whole. His aim was not to destabilize the social order further, but to balance and ultimately strengthen it, both materially and morally. He sets forth the broad outlines of a plan of taxation and modest income redistribution that he believes will accomplish that.

The second principle, not yet remarked upon, as far as I have read, in the critical literature, is Paine's linkage of universal ownership and universal rights to the fundamental productive capacities of the earth. I doubt if anyone in the 1790s, no matter how far-sighted they might have been, could have imagined that in two hundred years, humans would have gained the power to endanger the earth's productivity through environmental defilement. It would not be accurate to label Thomas Paine an ecologist, but his declaration that "the earth" is "the COMMON PROPERTY OF THE HUMAN RACE" (AJ 398) has powerful implications

for environmental policy. Unsustainable overproduction in farmlands, excessive harvesting of the ocean and other natural areas, pollution of water and air, emission-produced climate change--all of these environmental problems come face-to-face to the principle that no particular government, corporation, or group of people have rightful control over what must be understood as humanity's "common property."

It is here, I think, that we can most clearly see the influence of the agrarian tradition of thought in Paine's work. Paine employs the agrarian assumption that all value and wealth originates in the land. While he is not inclined to sentimentalize the agrarian life and the figure of the farmer in the mode of Jefferson and Crèvecoeur, he understands the importance and the power of the concept that the earth is the source of wealth, and he recognizes the crucial role that the cultivation of land has played in the growth of civilization and in its continuance. This principle, adapted of course to the technological conditions of our age, continues to be a vital assumption in addressing our building environmental crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Paine, Agrarian Justice Opposed to Agrarian Law, and to Agrarian Monopoly, Being a Plan for Meliorating the Condition of Man, &c (1797), in Thomas Paine: Collected Writings, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995). Quotations from Agrarian Justice will be abbreviated parenthetically as AJ. Agrarian Justice has had its critical admirers, and has divided commentators as to whether it should be seen as a major step in Paine's thinking, and the extent to which it should be considered radical in its political implications. David Freeman Hawke wrote that "Agrarian Justice ranks among Paine's greatest essays" in Paine (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 326. Eric Foner observed that Agrarian Justice did not indicate a departure from Paine's continuing belief in the rightness of private property, but also noted that it "established Paine as one of the pioneers of the nineteenth-century land reform movement in Europe and America." See Tom Paine and Revolutionary America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Gregory Claeys offered an extended reading of the essay's significance, terming it "the most neglected of Paine's chief works" in Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 196. Most recently Adrian Little has argued that Agrarian Justice was, for its time, "a radical attempt to incorporate a prototype basic citizen's income into his defence of natural rights," but concluded that, in the context of contemporary discussions of

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income redistribution, "Paine's ideas do not provide a substantive challenge to market-based economic systems" and thus do not adequately address the inequalities that such systems generate. See Adrian Little, "The Politics of Compensation: Tom Paine's Agrarian Justice and Liberal Egalitarianism," Contemporary Politics 5 (1999):63-73, quotation from p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> On Quesnay, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, The Origins of Physiocracy: Economic Revolution and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Gianni Vaggi, The Economics of François Quesnay (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (1789) reprinted by the Etext Center at the University of Virginia Library:  
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html>  
All quotations from Notes on the State of Virginia will be taken from this source.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Sweet offers an important perspective on the work of both Jefferson and Crèvecoeur by reminding us that "farming in eighteenth-century America was not a single, uniform activity, but a group of diverse and conflicting practices." Of particular significance is Sweet's observation that wage labor, tenant farming, and migratory backwoods subsistence farming were more characteristic forms of agricultural labor than the work of the independent, freehold farmer that Jefferson and Crèvecoeur

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idealize. See Timothy Sweet, "American Pastoralism and the Marketplace: Eighteenth-Century Ideologies of Farming," Early American Literature 29 (1994):59-80.

<sup>5</sup> The change of tone and outlook from the optimistic early portions to the darker conclusion have occasioned considerable critical commentary on Crèvecoeur's work. For further details, see Thomas Philbrick, St. John de Crèvecoeur (New York, Twayne, 1970); and David M. Robinson, "Crèvecoeur's James: The Education of an American Farmer," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 80 (October 1981):564-66.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer [1782], and Sketches from Eighteenth-Century America [1925], ed. Albert E. Stone (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 52. Further citations in parentheses.

<sup>7</sup> As Eric Foner noted, many progressive French thinkers took an admiring and uncritical view of Americans as "a simple uncorrupted people living in an agrarian arcadia" (Tom Paine and Revolutionary America, p. 235), and received Americans such as Franklin, Jefferson and Paine quite warmly.

<sup>8</sup> See Claeys (Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought, pp. 198-200) who argues that Agrarian Justice represents an important step forward from Paine's thinking in The Rights of Man.

<sup>9</sup> Foner, Tom Paine and Revolutionary America, pp. 249-51.

<sup>10</sup> Both Foner (Tom Paine and Revolutionary America, p. 251) and Claeys (Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought, p. 207) note

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Thomas Spence's more radical challenge to Paine's plan for redistribution through small payments, and his call for almost complete land redistribution to fulfill the principle of universal ownership.