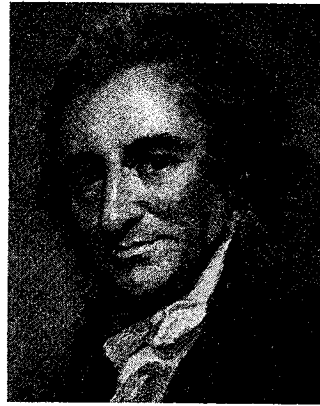


Agrarian Justice

by

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Thomas Paine

"IT IS a position not to be controverted that the earth, in its natural, uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, *the common property of the human race.*"* So wrote Thomas Paine, the soul of the American Revolution, in a little known essay entitled, "Agrarian Justice." It was written in 1797 while staying with James Monroe following Paine's release from Luxembourg prison in France, in which the infamous Robespierre had kept him languishing for almost a year until Robespierre's death brought Paine his freedom.

"Poor Tom," whose pen was probably the most powerful of all in his day in the cause of freedom and the rights of man, became so influential in three powerful countries,—England, France and America—that the governments of those countries feared him. England put a bounty on his head. France, after having made him an honorary citizen of the Republic, threw him in jail and was saved from the infamy of having guillotined him only by a fortuitous circumstance.

**The Life and Works of Thomas Paine* edited by William M. Van der Weyde, Volume X, Thomas Paine National Historical Association.

He was an astute economist, years ahead of his time. In reading "Agrarian Justice" one is reminded of *Progress and Poverty*, for in discussing civilization Paine points out, "on one side, the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other, he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness; both of which it has erected. The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilized. To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America. There is not, in that state, any of those spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes in all the towns and streets in Europe.

"Poverty, therefore, is a thing created by that which is called civilized life. It exists not in the natural state."

He believed that civilization resulted from the cultivation of the land which, thereby, enabled millions to exist whereas only a few could otherwise have existed. But civilization brought with it the problems of property and land tenure for he stated, "as it is impossible to separate the improvement made by cultivation

from the earth itself, upon which that improvement is made, the idea of land property arose from that inseparable connection, but it is nevertheless true, that it is the value of the improvement, only, and not the earth, itself, that is individual property." How many economists today recognize this simple truth that wealth only is private property and not land?

In ringing terms he declared, "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 whence the first title-deeds should issue."

That he anticipated Henry George is obvious for he said, "Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated lands, owes to the community a *ground rent* (for I know of no better term to express the idea) for the land which he holds; and it is from this ground-rent that the fund proposed in this plan is to issue." However, unfortunately, he did not follow up that concept by suggesting that the community collect this ground-rent by the simple expedient of charging the landowner rent for the land to which he had title.

Instead, he advocated the creation of a fund to be established over a period of years as the owners of landed property died, by taxing away 1/10th of their estates. He advocated this as partial recompense for the injustice caused by landed property, for he said, "Cultivation is at least one of the greatest natural improvements ever made by human invention. It has given to created earth a tenfold value. But the landed monopoly that began with it has produced the greatest evil. It has dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance, without providing for them, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for the loss, and has thereby created a species of poverty

and wretchedness that did not exist before."

He bluntly stated "In advocating the case of the persons thus dispossessed, it is a right, and not a charity, that I am pleading for. The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust."

The fund was to be established in order to give to each individual attaining "the age of 21, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property." In addition, there was to be given "the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age."

Some, who have only glanced over "Agrarian Justice," felt that all he was advocating was some form of welfare scheme to help the aged and to give the young a start in life. But he said he was advocating it, "in lieu of the natural inheritance (land) which, as a right, belongs to every man, over and above the property he may have created, or inherited from those who did."

Where did Paine get his understanding of ground rent. No one knows. He claimed most of his ideas on freedom and the rights of man were his own. Time and again he stated that in order to understand anything one had to revert to the simplest fundamentals and no doubt when he looked at the state of poverty existing, he, as Henry George, cast his mind back to simple primitive living and by logical analysis arrived at the same fundamental concepts that Henry George had. After all, the truth of man's relationship to his fellow man and to the earth lies all about him. All man needs do is to think clearly and logically and he will arrive at the same answers.

HENRY GEORGE NEWS