

Review: The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America: 1600 to 1870. Daniel R Mandell, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.
Reviewed by H. William Batt / January, 2022

Historian Daniel Mandell's most recent book, his fourth, is an important contribution for students interested in the relationship between property, wealth, and history. Although it was issued in 2020, it has not received much attention. It deserves to, however, particularly because its roughly fifty pages of copious citations alone after a dense 250-page narrative make it worthy of note. He has unearthed substantial new material.

The book begins by framing the historical dialogue as ranging between two poles: "on the one side, the belief that all property should be held in common, and on the other the assumption that every household should have enough property to avoid dependence and that government should prevent extremes of terrible poverty or excessive wealth." (p 5) Among notes in passing we learn that General Henry Knox reported to George Washington that his troops believed that all land should be held in common. (p 94)

The time span, between 1600 to 1870 allows the author to trace American democracy when wealth was mostly in land, and before the emerging industrial revolution provided wealth in other forms. Classical economics developed and reached maturation based on the unfolding of American geography as well as European. Locke's *Two Treatises* contributed early to these views, but they later became suppositional at best. We learn how much land, called property in that era, had a part in evolving democratic forms, in social structure as well as in law.

Early British movements contributed like the Levelers and the Diggers had egalitarian views, but there were many others, by contrast, who pressed their case for the protection of hierarchies. Hamilton and Robert Morris were foremost among them. Terms like one's "betters" and "gentlemen" had very special meanings. They referenced especially the land speculators, merchants, and bankers, all in a position to manipulate currencies and especially specie. Although the tracts of Malthus and Ricardo were available in the US shortly after their appearance in England, the surfeit of pamphlets and newspapers exerted an even more widespread influence. The point being that socio-political tensions pulled both ways. One must recall this was in an era when there were few standard measures of quantity, and fixed prices for merchandise were much a matter of debate, all leading to further confusion in valuing commodities – be it land, goods, services, and money.

It becomes abundantly clear by this historical account that the public discourse of the period in question was much richer than is commonly recognized, particularly to ideas threatening traditions. To take two instances only, Tom Paine's ideas as expressed in *Agrarian Justice* were suggestive if not explicit in the printed media of the time. There was also frequent reference to the Biblical notion of the Jubilee as a suitable solution to growing wealth inequities. Virginia was one of the first colonies to see to the abolition of primogeniture and entail. References to these ideas and others call for gratitude to Professor Mandell for citing so many.

There is far too much in this book to cite all the subjects discussed. Bounty land given to war veterans, as well as land sales opened up the west, the significance of growing

childhood education, property qualifications for voting, state property taxes, the rise of political party significance, the issue of slavery, the relevance of the French revolution – all these have a part in this rich book. The nuances of evolving history are nowhere better examined than in the chapter on education. Mandell ends it writing, “the country would thread the difficult channel between the Scylla of aristocratic wealth and authority and the Charybdis of anarchy and disdain for property.”

For those interested in tracing the rich discourse of political economy throughout the 19th century, and especially the thought of Henry George, Mandell’s book provides a generous account of the popular literature leading up to that era. Greater disparities in wealth appeared as industrial enterprises offered new financial opportunities. They were amplified further by the growing opportunities for education, the hunger for knowledge and pursuit of solutions to popular questions. It is often asked what literature inspired Henry George, given that his library is lost. Mandell’s rich account of the earlier decades suggest much of what George might have read.

The relationship between property and wealth is never distant, and is explored in one chapter, particularly noting the importance of Thomas Skidmore’s book *The Right of Man to Property*. Because land ownership is never a remote subject, its relationship to explanations of wealth is explored in several tracts of the period. And literature from England as well as France and Germany also offered economic solutions.

The economy grew richer and more varied as the 19th century ensued. There were the first panics in 1819 and 1837, the first major environmental crises, and, of course, the first major immigration wave from Europe. All this led to greater diversity in the modes of agriculture and manufacture as well as to proposals for dealing with disease and poverty. The growing diversity of the new nation was reflected in greater discussion about the place of government and the integration of state populations. Public and private responses were varied, and led in some instances to civil strife. The breadth of treatment of these various events is usually cursory, but the rich documentation provides easy accessibility for deeper exploration for readers who wish it.

Carrying the full scope of this narrative over the course of almost two centuries brings the book to its *Epilogue*. It notes how the support for tempered wealth abated with the failure of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War South, with how the “Captains of Industry” came to be venerated in the work of Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism, in the popular Horatio Alger stories, and in the growth of industrial monopolies. So, this book is very timely, because the number of recent books documenting the current inequality of income and wealth need to be reminded that this nation’s history witnessed a time early on when wealth was not so accepted or venerated. It is helpful also in noting that property, meaning mainly land, was the primary basis of wealth.

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