

The Real Rights of Man

A Lecture

Delivered at Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1775

by Thomas Spence

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A lecture read at The Philosophical Society in Newcastle on November 8th, 1775, for Printing of which the Society did the Author the Honour to expel him.

Mr President, -- It being my turn to lecture, I beg to give some thoughts on this important question, viz.: -- Whether mankind in society reap all the advantages from their natural and equal rights of property in land and liberty, which in that state they possibly may and ought to expect? And as I hope you, Mr President and the good company here, are sincere friends to truth, I am under no apprehensions of giving offence by defending her cause with freedom.

That property in land and liberty among men in a state of nature ought to be equal, few, one would be fain to hope, would be foolish enough to deny. Therefore, taking this to be granted, the country of any people, in a native state, is properly their common, in which each of them has an equal property, with free liberty to sustain himself and family with the animals, fruits and other products thereof. Thus such a people reap jointly the whole advantages of their country, or neighbourhood, without having their right in so doing called in question by any, not even by the most selfish and corrupt. For upon what must they live if not upon the productions of the country in which they reside? Surely, to deny them that right is in effect denying them a right to live. Well, methinks some are now ready to say, but is it lawful, reasonable and just, for this people to sell, or make a present even, of the whole of their country, or common, to whom they will, to be held by them and their heirs for ever?

To this I answer, if their posterity require no grosser materials to live and move upon than air, it would certainly be very ill-natured to

dispute their right of parting, for what of their own, their posterity would never have occasion for; but if their posterity cannot live but as grossly as they do, the same gross materials must be left them to live upon. For the right to deprive anything of the means of living, supposes a right to deprive it of life; and this right ancestors are not supposed to have over their posterity.

Hence it is plain that the land or earth, in any country or neighbourhood, with everything in or on the same, or pertaining thereto, belongs at all times to the living inhabitants of the said country or neighbourhood in an equal manner. For, as I said before, there is no living but on land and its productions, consequently, what we cannot live without we have the same property in as our lives.

Now as society ought properly to be nothing but a mutual agreement among the inhabitants of a country to maintain the natural rights and privileges of one another against all opposers, whether foreign or domestic, it would lead one to expect to find those rights and privileges no further infringed upon among men pretending to be in that state, than necessity absolutely required. I say again, it would lead one to think so. But I am afraid whoever does will be mightily mistaken. However, as the truth here is of much importance to be known, let it be boldly fought out; in order to which it may not be improper to trace the present method of holding land among men in society from its original.

If we look back to the origin of the present nations, we shall see that the land, with all its appurtenances, was claimed by a few, and divided among themselves, in as assured a manner as if they had manufactured it and it had been the work of their own hands; and by being unquestioned, or not called to an account for such usurpations and unjust claims, they fell into a habit of thinking, or, which is the same thing to the rest of mankind, of acting as if the earth was made for or by them, and did not scruple to call it their own property, which they might dispose of without regard to any other living creature in the universe. Accordingly they did so; and no man, more than any other creature, could claim a right to so much as a blade of grass, or a

nut or an acorn, a fish or a fowl, or any natural production whatever, though to save his life, without the permission of the pretended proprietor; and not a foot of land, water, rock or heath but was claimed by one or other of those lords; so that all things, men as well as other creatures who lived, were obliged to owe their lives to some or other's property, consequently they like the creatures were claimed, and, certainly as properly as the wood herbs, etc., that were nourished by the soil. And so we find, that whether they lived, multiplied, worked or fought, it was all for their respective lords; and they, God bless them, most graciously accented of all as their due. For by granting the means of life, they granted the life itself; and of course, they thought they had a right to all the services and advantages that the life or death of the creatures they gave life to could yield.

Thus the title of gods seems suitable enough to such great beings; nor is it to be wondered at that no services could be thought too great by poor dependent needy wretches to such mightly and all-sufficient lords, in whom they seemed to live and move and have their being. Thus were the first landholders usurpers and tyrants; and all who have since possessed their lands, have done so by right of inheritance, purchase, etc., from them; and the present proprietors, like their predecessors, are proud to own it; and like them, too, they exclude all others from the least pretence to their respective properties. And any one of them still can, by laws of their own making, oblige every living creature to remove off his property (which, to the great distress of mankind, is too often put in execution); so of consequence were all the landholders to be of one mind, and determined to take their properties into their own hands, all the rest of mankind might go to heaven if they would, for there would be no place found for them here. Thus men may not live in any part of this world, not even where they are born, but as strangers, and by the permission of the pretender to the property thereof; which permission is, for the most part, paid extravagantly for, though many people are so straitened to pay the present demands, that it is believed if they hold on, there will be few to grant the favour to. And those land-makers, as we shall call them, justify all this by the practice of other manufacturers, who take all they can get for the products of their hands; and because that everyone

ought to live by his business as well as he can, and consequently so ought the land-makers. Now, having before supposed it both proved and allowed, that mankind have as equal and just a property in land as they have in liberty, air, or the light and heat of the sun, and having also considered upon what hard conditions they enjoy those common gifts of nature, it is plain they are far from reaping all the advantages from them which they may and ought to expect.

But lest it should be said that a system whereby they may reap more advantages consistent with the nature of society cannot be proposed, I will attempt to show the outlines of such a plan.

Let it be supposed, then, that the whole people in some country, after much reasoning and deliberation, should conclude that every man has an equal property in the land in the neighbourhood where he resides. They therefore resolve that if they live in society together, it shall only be with a view that everyone may reap all the benefits from their natural rights and privileges possible.

Therefore a day appointed on which the inhabitants of each parish meet, in their respective parishes, to take their long-lost rights into possession, and to form themselves into corporations. So then each parish becomes a corporation, and all men who are inhabitants become members or burghers. The land, with all that appertains to it, is in every parish made the property of the corporation or parish, with as ample power to let, repair, or alter all or any part thereof as a lord of the manor enjoys over his lands, houses, etc.; but the power of alienating the least morsel, in any manner, from the parish either at this or any time hereafter is denied. For it is solemnly agreed to, by the whole nation, that a parish that shall either sell or give away any part of its landed property, shall be looked upon with as much horror and detestation, and used by them as if they had sold all their children to be slaves, or massacred them with their own hands. Thus are there no more nor other lands in the whole country than the parishes; and each of them is sovereign lord of its own territories.

Then you may behold the rent which the people have paid into the

parish treasuries, employed by each parish in paying the Government its share of the sum which the Parliament or National Congress at any time grants; in maintaining and relieving its own poor, and people out of work; in paying the necessary officers their salaries; in building, repairing, and adorning its houses, bridges, and other structures; in making and maintaining convenient and delightful streets, highways, and passages both for foot and carriages; in making and maintaining canals and other conveniences for trade and navigation; in planting and taking in waste grounds; in providing and keeping up a magazine of ammunition, and all sorts of arms sufficient for all its inhabitants in case of danger from enemies; in premiums for the encouragement of agriculture, or anything else thought worthy of encouragement; and, in a word, in doing whatever the people think proper; and not, as formerly, to support and spread luxury, pride, and all manner of vice. As for corruption in elections, it has now no being or effect among them; all affairs to be determined by voting, either in a full meeting of a parish, its committees, or in the house of representatives, are done by balloting, so that votings or elections among them occasion no animosities, for none need to let another know for which side he votes; all that can be done, therefore, in order to gain a majority of votes for anything, is to make it appear in the best light possibly by speaking or writing. Among them Government does not meddle in every trifle; but on the contrary, allows each parish the power of putting the laws in force in all cases, and does not interfere but when they act manifestly to the prejudice of society and the rights and liberties of mankind, as established in their glorious constitution and laws. For the judgment of a parish may be as much depended upon as that of a House of Lords, because they have as little to fear from speaking or voting according to truth as they.

A certain number of neighbouring parishes, as those in a town or county, have each an equal vote in the election of persons to represent them in Parliament, Senate, or Congress; and each of them pays equally towards their maintenance. They are chosen thus: all the candidates are proposed in every parish on the same day, when the election by balloting immediately proceeds in all the parishes at once, to prevent too great a concourse at one place; and they who are found

to have a majority, on a proper survey of the several poll-books, are acknowledged to be their representatives.

A man by dwelling a whole year in any parish, becomes a parishioner or member of its corporation; and retains that privilege till he lives a full year in some other, when he becomes a member in that parish, and immediately loses all his right to the former for ever, unless he choose to go back and recover it by dwelling again a full year there. Thus none can be a member of two parishes at once, and yet a man is always member of one though he move ever so oft.

If in any parish should be dwelling strangers from foreign nations, or people from distant countries who by sickness or other casualties should become so necessitous as to require relief before they have acquired a settlement by dwelling a full year therein; then this parish, as if it were their proper settlement, immediately takes them under its humane protection, and the expenses thus incurred by any parish in providing those not properly their own poor being taken account of, is discounted by the Exchequer out of the first payment made to the State. Thus poor strangers, being the poor of the State, are not looked upon with an envious eye lest they should become burthensome, - neither are the poor harassed about in the extremity of distress, and perhaps in a dying condition, to justify the litigiousness of the parishes.

All the men in every parish, at times of their own choosing, repair together to a field for that purpose, with their officers, arms, banners, and all sorts of martial music, in order to learn or retain the complete art of war; there they become soldiers. Yet not to molest their neighbours unprovoked, but to be able to defend what none have a right to dispute their title to the enjoyment of; and woe be to them who occasion them to do this, they would use them worse than highwaymen or pirates if they got them in their power.

There is no army kept in pay among them in times of peace, as all have property alike to defend, they are alike ready to run to arms when their country is in danger; and when an army is to be sent

abroad, it is soon raised, of ready trained soldiers, either as volunteers or by casting lots in each parish for so many men.

Besides, as each man has a vote in all the affairs of his parish, and for his own sake must wish well to the public, the land is let in very small farms, which makes employment for a greater number of hands, and makes more victualling of all kinds be raised.

There are no tolls or taxes of any kind paid among them by native or foreigner, but the aforesaid rent which every person pays to the parish, according to the quantity, quality, and conveniences of the land, housing, etc., which he occupies in it. The government, poor, roads, etc. etc., as said before, are all maintained by the parishes with the rent; on which account all wares, manufactures, allowable trade employments or actions are entirely duty free. Freedom to do anything whatever cannot there be bought; a thing is either entirely prohibited, as theft or murder; or entirely free to everyone without tax or price, and the rents are still not so high, notwithstanding all that is done with them, as they were formerly for only the maintenance of a few haughty, unthankful landlords. For the government, which may be said to be the greatest mouth, having neither excisemen, customhouse men, collectors, army, pensioners, bribery, nor such like ruination vermin to maintain, is soon satisfied, and moreover there are no more persons employed in offices, either about the government or parishes, than are absolutely necessary; and their salaries are but just sufficient to maintain them suitably to their offices. And, as to the other charges, they are but trifles, and might be increased or diminished at pleasure.

But though the rent, which includes all public burden, were obliged to be somewhat raised, what then? All nations have a devouring landed interest to support besides those necessary expenses of the public; and they might be raised very high indeed before their burden would be as heavy as that of their neighbours, who pay rent and taxes too. And it surely would be the same for a person in any country to pay for instance an increase of rent if required, as to pay the same sum by little and little on everything he gets. It would certainly save him a great deal of trouble and inconvenience and Government much

expense.

But what makes this prospect yet more glowing is that after this empire of right and reason is thus established, it will stand for ever. Force and corruption attempting its downfall shall equally be baffled, and all other nations, struck with wonder and admiration at its happiness and stability, shall follow the example; and thus the whole earth shall at last be happy and live like brethren.