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Economic Equality in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions

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WHILE hierarchy had been a cornerstone of medieval and early modern societies, during the Enlightenment literate Europeans began to discuss the desirability of human equality. That ideal carried over into the Age of Revolutions (1775–1824), when some authors and activists specifically pursued *economic* equality. I will provide a brief survey of plans and policies on both sides of the Atlantic that aimed to introduce some form of equality or at least take the edge off of existing inequality.

In an essay contest organized in the French city of Dijon in 1754, participants had to answer the question "What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?" Among the contestants was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was already a well-known writer. His submission was published the following year as *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*. Although he famously presented private property as an important source of inequality, Rousseau also wrote that the establishment of property constituted the start of civil society. In his view, private property was a prerequisite for citizenship, and being a citizen meant having private property rights.[1] Rousseau's essay, then, did not launch a frontal attack on the institution of property. Yet the Genevan *philosophe*

[1]David S. Siroky and Hans-Jörg Sigwart, "Principle and Prudence: Rousseau on Private Property and Inequality," *Polity* 46 (2014): 381–406, 396–397.

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warned of the dangers of economic inequality. "As for wealth," he wrote, "no citizen should be so rich that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is compelled to sell himself." When that happens, those who are less advantaged may be forced to follow the will of someone else rather than their own. In other words, economic dependency will entail a loss of freedom.[2]

In general, proponents of economic equality were rare during the Enlightenment. Opposition was the norm, as shown by Rousseau's approximately dozen rivals for the Dijon essay prize. The author of "Discourse I" wrote that inequality among men makes them happy.[3] It is the powerful spur of poverty "which forces us to find in ourselves talents which we would perhaps have ignored or at least neglected in a more favorable situation. It was therefore absolutely necessary that one half of the human race, to put it mildly, should be born in poverty, in ignorance, in obscurity or in slavery."[4] Those two halves, added the author of "Discourse X," are in a harmonious relationship: "The need of the poor for the goods of the rich and the need of the rich for the labor of the poor places them in a kind of dependence on each other and forms a bond between them that unites them indispensably."[5] Introducing equality in today's world, maintained the author of "Discourse VII," would mean to create a society in which force is the only law, in which injustice would be unrestrained. The industrious man would see the idle and useless citizen enjoy the fruit of his sweat: "Talent, ignorance, activity, laziness, vice and virtue would have the same reward."[6]

Such ideas may have been uncontested in subsequent decades, but the crisis of the French monarchy in the late 1780s was accompanied by radical new ideas. A group of high-ranking noblemen complained in a memorandum addressed to

[2]Frederick Neuhouser, "Rousseau's Critique of Economic Inequality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41 (2013): 193–225, quote on 197.

[3]Roger Tisserand, *Les concurrents de J.-J. Rousseau à l'Académie de Dijon pour le prix de 1754* (Paris: Boivin et C[ie], 1936), 59.

[4]Tisserand, *Les concurrents,* 54.

[5]Tisserand, *Les concurrents,* 186.

[6]Tisserand, *Les concurrents,* 150.

the French king about the dangerous turn that public opinion had taken. Viewpoints, they wrote, which until recently seemed to be the most reprehensible now appear reasonable and just. "Soon property rights will be attacked; the inequality of fortunes will be presented as an object of reform; already the suppression of feudal rights is being proposed as the abolition of a system of oppression, a remnant of barbarism."[7] As these men predicted, the supporters of economic equality soon multiplied in France. Some property-owning men in British North America also feared changes during the revolution, especially given its democratic nature. Loyalist Jonathan Boucher, for example, believed that democracies naturally "aim at an equality of possessions." Those who promise to equalize property, he wrote, will attract the votes of the majority.[8]

The idea that equality must extend to the economic realm was echoed on many occasions. During the short-lived Tiberina Republic of Perugia (1798), some local Jacobins argued that the poor would not commit a crime by appropriating land, since they would claim a portion that they genuinely needed, while it was superfluous for the wealthy. Besides, they said, it would amount to regaining land they had been robbed of in the first place.[9] Writing in the early republic, the librarian and schoolteacher Robert Coram in Wilmington, Delaware, reinterpreted John Locke's theory of property by claiming that Locke held that "a man has a right to as much land as he cultivates and no more." Coram went on to defend an equal distribution of property. "[I]f the earth," he wrote, "supports its inhabitants in the present unequal division of property, it will support them under an equal division."[10] Coram's voice was one of many in

[7]Memorandum to the King by the Count of Artois, the Prince de Condé, the Duke of Bourbon, The Duke of Enghien et the Prince of Conti, December 12, 1788, in J. Mavidal and E. Laurent, eds., *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* (Paris: Société d'Imprimerie et Librairie Administrative P. Dupont, 1867–1879), Ser. 1, vol. 1: 487.

[8]Anne Y. Zimmer, *Jonathan Boucher: Loyalist in Exile* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 285.

[9]Delio Cantimori, *Studi di storia,* 3 vols. (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1976), 3: 577.

[10]Seth Cotlar, "Radical Conceptions of Property Rights and Economic Equality in the Early American Republic: The Trans-Atlantic Dimension," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4 (2000): 191–219, quote on 193–194.

the early American republic calling for a more equal division. A broad movement emerged to bring about a nation based on individual family farms by limiting individual purchases of the newly organized federal territories.[11]

Yet these proponents usually stopped short of proposing perfect equality. Thomas Paine, for example, did not mind that poverty would persist and that rich men would continue to enjoy their riches, as long as "none are miserable in consequence of it."[12] Similarly, the authors of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen did not aim to level all fortunes. Article 11 provided for the allocation of a portion of the surplus of proprietors to those who could not live by working. Implicitly, therefore, the Declaration accepted that some citizens would have a surplus.[13] Still, a limit was established to the fortune one could possess. The Parisian *sans-culottes* shared this goal. An excessive inequality of fortune must be abolished, they believed, while at the same time the number of proprietors should grow. Only in this way would an "equality of enjoyment"—a phrase used ubiquitously in France in 1793–94—be achieved.[14]

Some practically-minded men came up with concrete plans to reduce existing inequalities by proposing the establishment of property limits of some sort. In 1780, with the Revolutionary War in full swing, the *Boston Gazette* suggested that an agrarian law that limited the size of the landholding of any individual to 1,000 acres would be the most effective means "whereby we shall maintain the character of a free Republic,

[11]Daniel R. Mandell, *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America, 1600–1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 98, 106.

[12]David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 125; Gareth Stedman Jones, "An End to Poverty: The French Revolution and the Promise of a World beyond Want," *Historical Research* 78 (2005): 193–207, quote on 201; and *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Moncure Daniel Conway, 4 vols. (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902–1908), 3: 337.

[13]Cf. *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen, avec commentaires* (Strasbourg: Impr. de G.-L. Schuler, n.d.), 11–12.

[14]Albert Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II. Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire 2 juin 1793–9 Thermidor an II* (Paris: Libraire Clavreuil, 1958), 467–469.

preventing monopolies of land."[15] The French Revolution also produced a number of concrete proposals. One member of the Convention, Nicolas Hentz, suggested that 100,000 pounds of wheat must be the largest fortune one could receive, an amount to be reduced in a more enlightened future to 500, which will suffice, he argued, to make even the largest family happy.[16] The orator Claude Fauchet opined that those who received 50,000 livres in land rent could not acquire more land.[17] Subsequent revolutionaries suggested much lower caps. In notes he left behind, Robespierre's associate Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just limited leased land to a maximum of 300 *arpents* (roughly equivalent to 300 acres), which was close to the ceiling discussed in the French Convention in October 1793 without resulting in legislation. In petitions they sent to the Convention, peasants themselves generally suggested that 150 acres would enable them to lead a comfortable life.[18]

Establishing a ceiling for property was not enough for the poet, professor, and abolitionist Antoine de Cournand. He preferred the redistribution of land. In each square league of the country, he proposed, the state would assume control of one-third of the land, which it would lease against compensation. The owner would retain the rest of the land, exempt from all taxes. Each individual of twenty-five years of age would draw lots for the portion that would be his. A family would be free to have its head draw lots in the canton of France that it was to inhabit, for the number of portions equal to that of the individuals of which it would be composed. In fact, all landed property would revert to the state within one generation. Inheritance was therefore abolished.[19]

[15]Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy 1760–1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 128.

[16]Session of the Convention of 9 August 1793, in *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860,* series no. 1, vol. 70 (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1906), 649.

[17]Henry Cros, *Claude Fauchet 1744–1793: les idées politiques, économiques et sociales* (Paris: Émile Larose, 1912), 112.

[18]R. B. Rose, "The 'Red Scare' of the 1790s: The French Revolution and the 'Agrarian Law,'" *Past & Present* 103 (1984): 113–30, 126, 128.

[19]Antoine de Cournand, *De la propriété, ou la cause du pauvre. Plaidée au tribunal de la raison, de la justice et de la vérité* (Paris, 1791), 14–16. Rose, "Red Scare," 123.

To be sure, those in favor of an economic redistribution were a minority during the Age of Revolutions. Even the revolutionary Presbyterian minister (and short-term acting president of Princeton University) Jacob Green, who was sympathetic to the establishment of "something like an equality of estate and property," found that equal property "cannot be expected." His solution to prevent the dependence of "common people" on those economically more powerful was for them to live frugally and virtuously.[20]

Did all the talk about redistribution bear fruit? The Jacobins considered imposing a limit on the accumulation of property in response to a demand by middling peasants and *sans-culottes,* but failed to take that step when push came to shove.[21] A massive transfer of property did eventually take place in France, as confiscated ecclesiastical properties and those that had belonged to the royal domain were sold to numerous groups in French society. Peasants, however, ended up with only one-third of them. A law of 1796 that forbade the sale of these *biens nationaux* in small lots shut the door to small and medium-sized peasantry, which had fervently hoped to acquire more land since the start of the Revolution.[22]

One deceptively simple solution proved persistent during the Age of Revolutions. Instinctively backed by many a farmer, the so-called "agrarian law" referred to the equal division of all land. The law never gained much support in Revolutionary North America, but was frequently discussed by Italian thinkers in the 1790s.[23] The agrarian law, rooted in Greek and Roman Antiquity, had appealed to Italians in the eighteenth century

[20]S. Scott Rohrer, *Jacob Green's Revolution: Radical Religion and Reform in a Revolutionary Age* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 203.

[21]Massimiliano Tomba, "1793: The Neglected Legacy of Insurgent Universality," *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 5 (2015): 109–136, 120.

[22]Bernard Bodinier, "La vente des biens nationaux: Essai de synthèse," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 315 (1999): 7–19, 12.

[23]Mandell, *Lost Tradition,* 76–77.

but faded as an ideal until the advent of the French Revolution, when it gained new supporters.[24]

Although historians agree that the agrarian law was no immediate by-product of the Revolution in France, it did emerge during the Great Fear that gripped much of the countryside in the weeks after the storming of the Bastille. The Fear featured imaginary brigands, supposedly organized by aristocrats, who were bent on destroying the harvest. According to a committee of the local estates, brigands in the Dauphiné preached the equality of wealth, which could be accomplished by pillage.[25] Subsequently, the agrarian law seems to have led an underground existence until the late spring of 1790, when the deputy of the eastern town of Charolles reported to the Assembly that in his region men were roaming around with false decrees proclaiming the agrarian law.[26] By the first months of 1791 the agrarian law was widely discussed. The *Révolutions de Paris,* at the time the journal with the largest circulation in the country, urged the wealthy to voluntarily relinquish some of their property in order to halt its momentum.[27] In the National Assembly and its successor, the Convention, however, the agrarian law actually met with opposition. In a move to quash the radical notion of equal wealth once and for all, the Convention passed a law imposing the death penalty on anyone who proposed the agrarian law.[28]

Like the Jacobins, Thomas Paine, who lived in France from 1792 through 1802, was no proponent of the agrarian law. As an inhabitant of the earth, he wrote, every man is initially its joint proprietor, but when landed property was introduced, those

[24]Daniela Donnino Macciò and Roberto Romani, "All Equally Rich: Economic Knowledge in Revolutionary Italy, 1796–1799," *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* 14 (1996): 23–49, 35.

[25]"Les mouvements populaires dans le monde rural sous la Révolution française: État de la question," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Moderne* 85 (1986): 19–29, 24. Hubert C. Johnson, *The Midi in Revolution: A Study in Regional Political Diversity, 1789–1793* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 166.

[26]L. Lataste, Louis Claveau, Constant Pionnier et al., eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860,* series no. 1, vol. 16 (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1883), 110.

[27]Rose, "Red Scare," 121–122.

[28]Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

who cultivated the land (or inherited or purchased it) became the owners of the value that was added. Paine considered that perfectly legitimate: "Whilst, therefore, I advocate the right and interest myself in the hard case of those who have been thrown out of their natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property, I equally defend the right of the possessor to the part which is his."[29]

Another solution that gained some traction in Revolutionary settings was the division of common lands. Prior to the French Revolution, governments in Prussia, Austria, Bavaria, Milan, and Tuscany had already introduced such a partitioning in the hope that it would provide a solution to steady population growth and high cereal prices.[30] The attempted reforms met with opposition from peasants who emphasized their dependence on communal pastures to maintain livestock production by small proprietors and landless families.[31]

In France, the assault on common lands had also started in the old regime but was not immediately continued by the French Revolutionary government. What ultimately led the Convention to opt for division was the subsistence crisis that was unambiguously connected to land hunger. The sale of the abovementioned *biens nationaux* had not provided relief for small farmers.[32] The Convention's decree of June 10, 1793, which clarified the way to go about divisions, actually gave men and women, farmhands as well as milkmaids, who were otherwise powerless, equal chances by assigning the shares by ballot and per head rather than per hearth. Learning from the fact that here and there small farmers who had come into

[29]Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice opposed to Agrarian Law and Agrarian Monopoly; Being a Plan for the Melioration of the Condition of Man, by Creating in Every Nation a National Fund, 1797* (London: R. Carlile, 1819), 7.

[30]Nadine Vivier, *Propriété collective et identité communale: Les biens communaux en France 1750–1914* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998), 29; Reiner Prass, "Die Reformen im Dorf. Gemeinheitsteilungen im Beziehungsgeflecht dörflicher Gesellschaften," *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 41 (2000): 71–84, 75.

[31]Clemens Zimmermann, "Bäuerlicher Traditionalismus und agrarischer Fortschritt in der frühen Neuzeit," *Historische Zeitschrift,* Beihefte, 18 (1995): 219–38, 227.

[32]Vivier, *Propriété collective et identité communale,* 127.

possession of a piece of land were forced to sell it to settle debts, the plots were declared inalienable for ten years.[33]

The division of common land did not prove to be a panacea. Because of numerous practical problems in implementing the law, many localities that had voted for partition did not put it into practice.[34] In addition, the outcome sometimes fell short of the expectations since the plots that became available were insufficient to support a family. Pastures that were transformed into arable land proved to be hardly fertile, while it became abundantly clear what villagers often already knew, namely that the chief beneficiaries of communal pastures had often been better-off farmers with large herds.[35]

In Spanish America, division of the commons was not undertaken until the advent of independence. For indigenous people in the Argentine provinces, the end of tribute and juridical inequality meant that their villages no longer had rights to their common land, which they had used to pay the tribute, nor to maintain their ethnic leaders, who had been in charge of the tribute. Thus, many villages lost their lands, which were sold, usually by the town councils.[36] Indigenous communities in other parts of Spanish America almost invariably aimed to hold on to some form of autonomy and especially to communal landed property. They ran up against the widely-held view among political and economic elites that communal property was a root cause of indigenous poverty, a view that legitimized the division of communal lands among the natives. The leaders of newly-independent Mexico shared this view. Communal property, they argued, was incompatible with individual liberty. The issue remained a divisive one in the decades to come,

[33]David Hunt, "Peasant Movements and Communal Property during the French Revolution," *Theory and Society* 17 (1988): 255–283, 274; Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 103.

[34]Vivier, *Propriété collective et identité communale*, 159.

[35]Gérard Béaur, "Über eine mehrdeutige Diskussion. Gemeinheitsteilungen, Eigentumsfrage und agrar-ökonomischer Fortschritt (Frankreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert)," *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 41 (2000): 33–44, 37.

[36]Gabriel di Meglio, "The Southernmost Revolution. The Río de la Plata in Early Nineteenth Century," in Wim Klooster, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Age of Atlantic Revolutions*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 3: 252–76, 275.

as indigenous communities lost their lands, sometimes legally but often illicitly. At mid-century, rights to communal property were abolished for good, but the plight of natives did not improve.[37]

Discussions about economic reforms were ubiquitous during the Age of Revolutions, yet only the agrarian law embodied true economic equality. Even for Jacobin politicians, however, that law was too radical. Other much-debated proposals during the Revolutionary Era, in France and elsewhere, were rather intended to reduce the disparities between rich and poor, especially in terms of landownership. Even where such reform efforts were successful, they tended to reshape the agrarian world without affecting the emerging industrial society, in which landed property did not feature prominently. What is more, industrial capitalism soon created new inequalities that would only widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

[37]Manuel Ferrer Muñoz and María Bono López, "Las etnias indígenas y el nacimiento de un Estado nacional en México," in Virginia Guedea, ed., *La independencia de México y el proceso autonomista novohispano 1808–1824* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Doctor José María Luis Mora, 2001), 355–407, 392–400.

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