

Ideas beyond Borders: Studies in Transnational Intellectual History

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THOMAS SPENCE

BEYOND POVERTY AND EMPIRE

Matilde Cazzola

ROUTLEDGE



The Political Thought of Thomas Spence

The book is an intellectual analysis of the political ideas of English radical thinker Thomas Spence (1750–1814), who was renowned for his ‘Plan’, a proposal for the abolition of private landownership and the replacement of state institutions with a decentralized parochial organization. This system would be realized by means of the revolution of the ‘swinish multitude’, the poor labouring class despised by Edmund Burke and adopted by Spence as his privileged political interlocutor. While he has long been considered an eccentric and anachronistic figure, the book sets out to demonstrate that Spence was a deeply original, thoroughly modern thinker, who translated his themes into a popular language addressing the multitude and publicized his Plan through chapbooks, tokens, and songs. The book is therefore a history of Spence’s political thought ‘from below’, designed to decode the subtle complexity of his Plan. It also shows that the Plan featured an excoriating critique of colonialism and slavery as well as a project of global emancipation. By virtue of its transnational scope, the Plan made landfall in the British West Indies a few years after Spence’s death. Indeed, Spencean ideas were intellectually implicated in the largest slave revolt in the history of Barbados.

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Ideas beyond Borders: Studies in Transnational Intellectual History

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In 1944, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce called his fellow scholars to de-nationalise the study of the past, overcoming the cast in which history had been shaped from the nineteenth century onwards and that had contributed to make the nation a seemingly natural and everlasting phenomenon. Indeed, the scholarly community has had to wait more than half a century for the so-called transnational turn, which has led to many new insights but focused primarily on political and social developments. Considering the renewed interest in intellectual and conceptual history, the aim of 'Ideas beyond Borders' is to contribute to a new understanding of the ways in which ideas, discourses, images, and representations have been shaped transnationally, going beyond national, regional, or civilisational borders. The series focuses on transnational concepts and notions, such as Europe, civilisation, pan-region, etc. The timespan ranges, roughly, from the sixteenth century to the present day.

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The Political Thought of Thomas Spence

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The Political Thought of Thomas Spence

Beyond Poverty and Empire

Matilde Cazzola

First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-032-06292-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-06298-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-20158-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003201588

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Acknowledgements

The drafting of this book was funded by the Edith Saurer Fund, Vienna. I wish to thank the Fund's scientific advisory board for their generous and precious support. The preliminary research for this book was sponsored by a scholarship granted by the University of Bologna in 2014, while a part of the manuscript was written at the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, Turin, where I was awarded a fellowship in 2020. The revision of the manuscript was carried out in 2021, when I was already a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory in Frankfurt Am Main. All of these institutions have helped me, in different ways, to complete this book.

I am very grateful to the series editors Matthew D'Auria and Jan Vermeiren and to Routledge editor Max Novick, who have supported the project and assisted me during the publication process.

This book would have not been possible without the support and advice of two individuals. Raffaele Laudani has been supervising my research on Thomas Spence since 2013 and has read each chapter of this book. His constructive criticism has been invaluable, just as it was some years ago, when he read my dissertation. Marcus Rediker has for his part been providing constant encouragement and suggestions during both the writing of the manuscript and the search for a publisher that followed. To both Raffaele and Marcus I owe a deep debt of gratitude.

Several other scholars have contributed over the past years to this book in particular or to my research in general by teaching me to develop a scientific rigour and ask myself the right questions, although all errors are mine alone. I therefore wish to thank Paola Rudan, Carlo Galli, Edoardo Tortarolo, Guido Abbattista, Francesca Sofia, Niklas Frykman, Richard Drayton, Stefan Vogenauer, Peter Linebaugh, Catherine Hall, John Donoghue, and Angiolina Arru. I am deeply grateful to Martin Thom for attentively reading my manuscript and making such insightful and productive remarks, which assuredly helped me to improve the arguments of this book.

Special thanks go to the scholars of Thomas Spence who, over the years, have answered my emails; provided bibliographical suggestions;

sent articles, unpublished papers, and Ph.D. dissertations; and, last but not least, demonstrated enthusiasm for the research I was doing. I thank Alastair Bonnett, Harry T. Dickinson, Geoff I. Gallop, Terry M. Parssinen, Robert Franklin, Edmund Downey, Keith Armstrong, and Matthew Grenby. I also wish to thank the late Malcolm Chase, whom I had the privilege to meet in 2014. Thanks likewise go to Rachel Rogers and Alexandra Sippel and all the other scholars who participated as speakers for putting together a most interesting international symposium on Spence in Toulouse in 2014. I also thank all those who took part in the 2016 Annual International Graduate Student Conference on Transatlantic History at the University of Texas at Arlington and in the 2019 International Conference on Romanticism in Manchester for fruitful discussion. I also wish to express my appreciation for those scholars who, in recent years, have made Spence's writings freely available online, building such invaluable web resources as the 'Thomas Spence Society', the 'Marxists Internet Archive: Thomas Spence', and 'The Political Works of Thomas Spence'.

I thank all those individuals, publishers, and institutions that have given me permission to quote from collected editions of Spence's writings, archival sources, and other copyright material: Alastair Bonnett, Harry T. Dickinson, and Geoff I. Gallop; Breviary Stuff Publications, Spokesman, Taylor & Francis, and OpenEdition Journals; the British Library, the National Archives, the Senate House Library, University of London, and the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum.

I was lucky enough to have some incredibly supportive old friends. Other friends and colleagues have shared the joys and sorrows of research with me for years, and they have had a beneficial impact on the way I think and write. I thank Lorenzo Ravano, Martino Sacchi, Isabella Consolati, Matteo Lazzari, and Dana Portaleone. Others have helped more specifically with this book: Lia Bruna shared (and translated from German for me) the pamphlet by Adam Müller which is addressed in the Introduction, while Salvatore Poier read a paper of mine on Spence at a time when I needed advice. My new Frankfurt colleagues provided encouragement and a good dose of stress-relieving chats over lunch and tea while I was working at the revisions of my book manuscript; I especially wish to thank Victoria Barnes and Emily Whewell. Thanks are due to Edward Jones Corredera for providing useful insights into the publication process.

My heartfelt thanks go to my parents, my brother, my grandmother, and all my family for their tireless encouragement. My gratitude and my love are for Luca, who found two houses, the first in Amsterdam and the second in Turin, where I wrote this book. I look forward to our next home together.



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Introduction

‘Pearls for pigs’

This is a book about the Age of Revolution, that is, the span of time between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries characterized by recurring revolutionary waves throughout the Atlantic – in North America, France, Haiti, Latin America, and Western Europe.¹ But this was an age not only of independence movements and the rise of republican and constitutional governments against absolutism. These were also the years in which the development of global capitalism and its interrelated processes occurred: the enslavement of African captives; the expropriation and extirpation of colonized native peoples resulting from commercial infiltration, territorial conquest, and white settlement; the enclosing of the commons and the pauperization of the commoners; and the exploitation of wage labourers within the new industrial systems.² Meanwhile, the consolidation of centralized states across Western Europe entailed the growth of disciplinary apparatuses, with the increased severity of criminal justice, the introduction of professional police forces, and the erection of penitentiaries on a large scale.³ Borrowing Eric Hobsbawm’s terminology from his celebrated trilogy on the long nineteenth century, the Age of Revolution was at one and the same time an ‘Age of Capital’ and an ‘Age of Empire’.⁴ In fact, as several scholars have argued, building on the Marxian argument regarding primitive accumulation, capitalism and imperialism unfolded together on a global scale, gathering momentum between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵ However, this process was far from being peaceful, as state and colonial authorities had to address and oppose the counternarratives and counterstrategies of resistance of the dispossessed, the coerced, and the enslaved on both sides of the Atlantic. The establishment of disciplinary and penitentiary systems can itself be interpreted as a concrete, concerted response to the alarming struggles and episodes of insubordination which were spreading worldwide: the slave and indigenous revolts, the trespasses against land enclosures, and the rise of urban and industrial radicalism across the Americas and Europe.⁶

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In recent decades, scholars have started uncovering and investigating the political movements and discourses that remained ‘at the margins’ of the history of political thought and its canon.⁷ By virtue of their radical nature and purposes, these movements and discourses were historically able to pose a theoretical challenge and represent an alternative to the modern theory of state sovereignty and to the capitalist mode of production and social regime underpinning it. Within the rich and diversified set of radical ideas of the Age of Revolution, particular attention has been devoted in recent years to the so-called ‘black radical tradition’ as a ‘counterculture of modernity’. Forged in the crucible of the Haitian Revolution, this tradition was further developed in abolitionist and pan-Africanist schemes throughout the Atlantic region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ Other scholars have for their part focused on the importance of the ‘outcasts’ and ‘outlaws’ of modernity, shedding light on the maritime culture of protest that was shaped on board pirate ships, merchant vessels, and warships during the modern age as a response to the coercion and dispossession inflicted by the maritime state.⁹ The analysis of these countercultures has recovered individual portraits of some of the ‘forgotten fathers’ of modernity, namely, a number of thinkers and agitators who, despite having fallen from view, played a prominent theoretical and organizational role in the anti-slavery and anti-capitalist struggles of their own day. This book recounts the thought of one of these ‘forgotten fathers’, the English radical thinker Thomas Spence (1750–1814), whose writings epitomized the struggle against land privatization and nascent industrialization in Britain. Spence is renowned for his ‘Plan’, a proposal for the abolition of private landownership and a return to the common enjoyment of the land by the members of the ‘swinish multitude’. This phrase was coined by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) to refer, with withering contempt, to the poor and working proletariat whose distress and insubordination jeopardized the security of the propertied establishment. Spence in turn took Burke’s pejorative term and used it to refer with pride to his own preferred political actor and interlocutor.¹⁰

Thomas Spence has long been considered an eccentric and anachronistic figure, as his calls for the common property of land in a Britain then undergoing industrialization allegedly confined his thought to the past. British labour historian E.P. Thompson, in his masterpiece *The Making of the English Working Class*, defined Spence as the inventor of ‘peripheral panaceas’ to social evils, which made him sound like ‘little more than a crank’.¹¹ In fact, Spence lived in the age when capital detached itself from land, becoming commercial and financial, and when the capitalist command over labourers was no longer founded on immoveable landed possessions but acquired the moveable form of money and wages. Spence witnessed the dawn of what Karl Polanyi called, in an arresting phrase, ‘the great transformation’, namely, the establishment of the

self-regulating market by means of the mobilization and commercialization of land, money, and human labour; however, he was still living in what Hobsbawm referred to as an ‘imperfectly capitalist society’, where the ‘paternalist’ authority of the landed aristocracy and the gentry met with a widespread popular insubordination that had not yet assumed the form of self-conscious ‘class struggle’.¹² Spence’s Plan, due to the fact that it echoed the radical defence of the commons by the Diggers of the First English Revolution, seemed unable to account for the unprecedented problems posed by the political and social phenomena characterizing Britain in the late eighteenth century. It is therefore unsurprising that his thought seemed ‘peripheral’, his voice sounded ‘feeble’, and Spence himself appeared as an ‘odd survival’ to historians interested in the growth of the British working class from ‘adolescence’ to ‘manhood’ during the First Industrial Revolution.¹³ Only in recent years have a small group of scholars turned their attention to Spence and his work. In 1982, with new waves of privatization initiating the neoliberal era, Harry T. Dickinson and Geoff I. Gallop edited the two contemporary editions of Spence’s writings.¹⁴ While a number of historians, Joan Beal, Malcolm Chase, Gregory Claeys, and Robert Franklin among them, have shed light on specific features of Spence’s thought and legacy in the context of the labour movement and political and intellectual developments in Britain, others have endeavoured to systematize all the recent scholarship on him.¹⁵ In 2014, to celebrate the bicentenary of Spence’s death, Alastair Bonnett and Keith Armstrong edited the collection of essays *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary*, and the international symposium ‘Bicentennial Perspectives on Thomas Spence: Radical Reformer in the Age of Revolution’ was convened at the Université de Toulouse Jean Jaurès; the papers presented at that symposium were later collected in a special issue of the interdisciplinary French journal *Miranda* entitled *Thomas Spence and His Legacy: Bicentennial Perspectives*.¹⁶ Another group of scholars has demonstrated the importance of Spence’s thought in the radical debates on the commons during the Age of Revolution, by showing Spence to have had a crucial role in projecting the Diggers’ claims for the commons forwards into the imperial and global context of the late eighteenth century. In *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have surveyed the transatlantic life and political activities of Jamaican Spencean Robert Wedderburn and presented Spenceanism as one of the ‘heads’ of the proletarian and enslaved ‘hydra’ that suffered dispossession and devised strategies of resistance to capitalism on both sides of the Atlantic in the modern age.¹⁷ More recently, in his *Red Round Globe Hot Burning*, Linebaugh included Spence in the finely woven net of advocates for commonality whose ideas crisscrossed the Atlantic region between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while, in *The Bloody Flag*, Niklas Frykman showed Spence to have been an important voice within the maritime and sea-inspired radicalism of those same years.¹⁸

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This book is a contribution to this ongoing exploration of Thomas Spence. However, while other scholars have rediscovered Spence within the fields of radical history, labour history, or Atlantic history, this book is a historical and intellectual analysis of Spence as a political thinker. Gregory Claeys, a prominent historian of political thought, has stressed Spence's importance for political theory in Britain, illustrating the key role played by Spenceanism in the genealogy and development of several intellectual currents from republicanism to revolutionism to socialism.¹⁹ However, no scholar has, until now, proposed a systematic study of Spence's political ideas, placing them in dialogue with the classic authors and key themes of modern political theory. This book will argue that the widely held view of Spence's Plan as anachronistic has served to obscure the sophistication of his thought. While he has often been described as a militant activist, whose self-education positioned him outside the realm of 'real' political thinkers, I argue that Spence has fallen victim to misinterpretation due in large part to the language he used to convey his Plan and the means he employed to disseminate it.²⁰ He engaged with modern political theory and its major authors but, having the penniless and often illiterate members of the 'swinish multitude' as his preferred political interlocutors, he had to translate his themes into a popular language accessible to 'the dregs of society'.²¹ Moreover, by adopting a 'multimedia attitude', Spence publicized his Plan not through treatises, but by what E.P. Thompson defined as 'the methods of the underground' – short pamphlets, chapbooks, minted tokens, graffiti, songbooks, and maps.²² In so doing, Spence adapted the complexity of modern political thought to suit the 'lower orders'. In one of his pamphlets, he distanced himself from 'those gentlemen, who, with their aristocracy of power, titles, [and] wealth, . . . conceive that they possess also an aristocracy of understanding' and disdainfully concluded that 'for these great men I write not'.²³ Nonetheless, Spence deemed himself a scholar, an educator, and a philosopher. At his trial at the Court of King's Bench in 1801, he proudly vindicated his stature as an accomplished political thinker: 'I stand here Gentlemen . . . not as a mere bookseller vending the works of others . . ., but as an original legislator for having formed the most compact system of society on the immovable basis of nature and justice'.²⁴ Significantly, his problems with justice were mostly due not to his practical activism (which was limited to a brief participation in the working-class association, the London Corresponding Society (LCS), in the early 1790s), but to his intellectual activities, such as the selling of banned treatises by other authors and the writing and publishing of his own seditious pamphlets from his bookstall in Chancery Lane, London, and later his bookshop in Holborn. As he wrote in the frontispiece to his periodical *Pigs' Meat* (an anthology of classic political texts cheaply reprinted for the 'swinish multitude'), he was the intellectual 'feeder' of 'pigs'.²⁵ Spence spent almost forty years of his life casting his political 'pearls' before 'swine'.²⁶

This book is therefore a history of Spence's political thought 'from below'. It sets out to reveal the popular camouflage by which his Plan was disguised, thereby decoding its subtle complexity and re-translating it into the standard language of intellectual historians. Spence's unconventional approaches to the making of propaganda are here interpreted not as the rough products of an eccentric radical but as original sources for a new intellectual history from below.²⁷ The main purpose is to reposition Spence as a non-marginal representative of the history of modern political thought by re-reading his humorous ballads, his subversive tokens, and his half-penny pamphlets from a conceptual perspective. Within a discipline that usually assumes political treatises by recognized philosophers to be the source par excellence for historians of political thought, this book will, instead, rely on pamphlets and chapbooks, songs and rhymes, judicial proceedings, newspaper articles, unpublished manifestos and broadsides, and artistic and folklore productions. This differentiated set of sources, which are widely used within the fields of social history and the history of popular culture but are usually considered as minor and unimportant by intellectual history and the history of political thought, will be here analyzed *as treatises*, namely, as reservoirs of theoretical notions. Therefore, archival sources will here serve to recover neglected features of the thought, rather than the life, of Thomas Spence. Nonetheless, by stressing the material relation existing between Spence's Plan and its historical and social context, this book implies a contiguity between the history of political thought and social history. It analyzes Spence not only by linking him to other thinkers and traditions of thought, but also by contextualizing him within the historical and social developments of his age: the private and state-driven enclosures of the commons and the organized resistance to privatization; the American and French Revolutions and the British wars against France; the birth of the factory system and the debates on the Poor Laws; the commercial transition from mercantilism to free trade; and the rise of the abolitionist movement and the Haitian Revolution.

The current oblivion surrounding Spence's name is at odds with his renown in nineteenth-century Europe, as he was even mentioned by Karl Marx in *Theories of Surplus-Value* (1862–3) as the 'deadly enemy of private property in land', while Friedrich Engels for his part recalled 'glorious old Tom Spence' in 1882.²⁸ In fact, Spence's contemporaries and the thinkers of the following generations were well aware of the political and theoretical significance of the Plan. Reliable evidence for the widespread dissemination of the Plan in the late eighteenth century is provided by the intolerance of state authorities, as Spence was beaten, threatened, hindered in his activity as author and bookseller, arrested without trial, and imprisoned several times. It is clear, then, that advocates of the established order considered him a serious political thinker and organizer. His disciples (the self-proclaimed 'Spenceans') were deemed no

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less dangerous. They became the indefatigable orators and agitators of the radical London underground in the 1810s, chalking subversive messages on walls throughout the city. As the pamphleteer and Member of Parliament William Cobbett reported in his *Weekly Political Register* in 1816, ‘we have all seen, for years past, written on the walls, in and near London, these words, “SPENCE’S PLAN”’.²⁹ Thanks to the militancy of the Spenceans, according to Alastair Bonnett, ‘Spence’s name lived on in English radical circles as a legend of incorruptible defiance’ for decades to come.³⁰ An Act of Parliament of 1817 banned all political clubs that referred to Thomas Spence, making Spenceanism the only political ideology to have ever been explicitly outlawed by the British Parliament.³¹ A contributor to the conservative periodical *The Antijacobin Review* reported in 1817 that

[Spence’s] doctrines were promulgated, and circulated in the cheapest form among the lower classes of tradesmen and mechanics. . . . No doctrine could be more directly subversive of the peace and welfare of society, than those which he was disseminating in the way which was most dangerous. The appropriate punishment . . . would have been transportation.³²

The notoriety of the Plan in the early nineteenth century is also confirmed by criticisms voiced by a number of famous contemporaries: while John Stuart Mill warned against ‘the vagaries of Spenceanism’, Thomas Malthus listed the ‘Spencean system’ among the most absurd ‘systems of equality’ corrupting the minds of ‘the lower classes of society’, and even Samuel Taylor Coleridge expressed contempt for ‘the poor visionaries called Spenceans’.³³ A counterpoint to these criticisms was offered by the prominent German romantic, Adam Müller, in an essay entitled *Spences philanthropischer Plan, Bibelgesellschaften und Gemeinschaft der Güter* (1816). Müller agreed with the basic tenet of Spence’s thought (the aversion to private landownership) but criticized his revolutionary conclusions (the revolutionary overthrow of the *status quo*). Most interestingly, Müller remarked that the Spencean doctrine had become ‘extremely popular under the pressure of misery’ across the British Isles and reluctantly acknowledged – though with grudging admiration – that Spence was no less sophisticated than other modern and more famous ‘political philosophers’, as those philosophers ‘are stronger on the practical side, while Master Spence is more consistent on the theoretical side; they are more fashionable, but he is ultimately superior’.³⁴ This book follows the path suggested by Müller, bringing to light the contributions of a ‘political philosopher’ worthy of the name, who, though little-known today, was famous – and notorious – within and beyond Britain between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.

This book, in contrast to those that have interpreted Spence as anachronistic, is intended to demonstrate Spence’s success in communicating his

political values beyond his epoch. It is of interest to note that Robert Franklin defined Spence as a 'link-man', namely, an intellectual bridge connecting the English struggles against the enclosures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the demands of the British working class of the nineteenth century.³⁵ This was due to the unique period in which Spence lived: the second half of the eighteenth century, when subsisting early modern institutions coexisted with novel production processes. Spence was a transitional thinker living in years that were likewise transitional, and his political ideas, articulated in the context of the Town Moor affair (when the Newcastle freemen prevented their commons from being privatized in the early 1770s), resurfaced in the Chartist Land Plan (1845) several decades later. As demonstrated by Malcolm Chase in his important study *The People's Farm*, the old radical tradition of the First English Revolution and the nineteenth-century working-class movement were connected by common claims, which were Spencean claims – first and foremost, the 'agrarian' belief that social injustice and political command were rooted in private landownership.³⁶ Due to the importance of the land for both the Diggers and the British socialists, Spence was the unconventional junction between them. However, he cannot properly be considered a forerunner of socialism, as he was a resolute opponent of the nationalization of land and the consequent buttressing of central power, which later became key themes within socialist schemes.³⁷ Instead, the commonality in the soil advocated by him would lead to the institutional fragmentation of the state into a decentralized parish system. Spence saw private landownership as the foundation of social inequality and political command and considered the state to be allied with the oligarchy of property owners pitted against the poor and landless. His Plan, therefore, would imply the destruction of the state apparatus and the establishment of a community-based system of services (common storehouses, free schools, and open hospitals) emanating not from a central power, but from a parochial administration. The Spencean system was outlined as intentionally loose and radically decentralized, being opposed to any collectivism and concentration of land and power. From this perspective, the interpretation advanced by the British socialist and leader of the Social Democratic Federation Henry Hyndman, who reprinted the first posthumous edition of Spence's first lecture (1775) in 1882, is misleading, as it credits the Plan with endorsing the nationalization of land.³⁸ Other scholars such as the Marxist historian and communist activist Mary Kemp-Ashraf saw Spence as the forerunner of even later ideological developments, as she wrote that 'from the point of view of the historical development of political thought, Spence may be said to have brought egalitarian democracy to the threshold of communism'.³⁹ The interpretations of both Hyndman and Kemp-Ashraf reflect the fact that Spence would not be easily understood by future generations and that his unconventional political thought, once interpreted within the confines of our understanding of political currents,

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would be stripped of its intended meaning and become inconsistent with its own presuppositions. Spence was ‘too localist and too contemptuous of authority’ in his claims for freedom and common property to sit comfortably within descriptions of him as either a pioneer of state socialism or a proto-communist.⁴⁰ However, this does not mean that it is impossible to project Spence’s Plan beyond his own time. Instead, his thought is still able to communicate something to us. As he witnessed the very beginnings of the process of state-driven privatization that is still producing increasingly violent waves of dispossession around the globe today, Spence’s claims for common property are again becoming relevant. But Spence’s ability to speak about today’s problems emerges also at a more immediate, everyday level. His words become relevant for the present day when, after an Irish radical suddenly died in Clerkenwell Prison in 1792, Spence interrogated both prisoners and warders and then warned his readers against the abuses of prison discipline and the dangers of confinement: ‘Reader, this may be my case – it may be thine; and whoever may be the next victim he will demand a tribute of sorrow from all those who are so happy as to escape the rod’.⁴¹

The account in this book of Spence’s Plan, and of its importance in the history of political thought, is divided into five different chapters. Chapter 1 provides the backdrop and sociohistorical context of Spence’s reflections. After summarizing the main contents of his Plan and its evolution from 1775 onwards, it describes Spence’s intellectual development in relation to his personal experiences and the transformations of his age. Spence’s conceptualization of the Plan was inspired by the struggle of the Newcastle freemen against the attempts to privatize their Town Moor in 1771 but was developed further in the late 1780s and early 1790s, when Spence had moved to London. Here, he was influenced by the French revolutionary ideology, popularized by the members of the LCS from 1792 onwards. Adopting the French Revolution as a template, Spence started presenting the establishment of his Plan as a revolutionary, violent, and armed action. The chapter then surveys Spence’s posthumous legacy in Britain. The Plan was first taken as a model by the Spenceans, who set up their Society after their mentor’s death in 1814. It then became a source of inspiration for Robert Owen, who stripped it of its socially radical and revolutionary purposes. Afterwards, in the 1840s, a section of the Chartist movement recovered Spence as an intellectual inspiration behind the devising of its own Land Plan. In so doing, the Chartists carried the Plan from its agrarian origins into the industrial age.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine Spence’s engagement with modern political theory. Chapter 2 focuses on Spence’s intellectual debt to certain currents of thought of the First English Revolution – the Diggers and the classical republicanism of James Harrington. Spence was deeply influenced by the Diggers and their leader Gerrard Winstanley, whose radical claims for the commons represented a powerful social addition to the narrowly

political demands of the ‘democrats’ of his own day. From Harrington, Spence drew the connection between liberty and the broad distribution of landed property, together with the idea for a republican, decentralized, and intensively politicized polity. Spence also engaged with the fathers of modern contract theory: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Like Hobbes and Locke, he questioned the origins and legitimacy of the political order in terms of the opposition between the natural state and the artifice of the social compact. But Spence’s engagement with contractualism was controversial – especially with regard to its liberal representative Locke. On the one hand, Locke had rightly stated that ‘God hath given the earth to the children of men in common’; on the other hand, however, he had justified the establishment of landed private property and imagined the covenant as the means to protect private possessions in the transition from nature to the state. Spence rejected the traditional, contractual rationale of the social compact, namely, the idea that men should forfeit a portion of their natural freedom – including their common property of the soil – in their progression from ‘savagery’ to ‘civility’. Instead, he adopted Rousseau’s alternative idea of the social contract as the means to rectify the ‘harmful’ departure from nature prescribed by Hobbes and Locke and to establish a social and political system consistent with the integrity of men’s natural rights.

Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of the Enlightenment and Jacobinism on Spence’s thought. Committed to progress, religious tolerance, and liberty of the press, the Plan was an intellectual product of the European Enlightenment. In contrast to most of his contemporaries, however, Spence equated the rights of woman and child to those of man, emerging as a vanguard thinker regarding the emancipation of women and infants. It was around the issue of rights that Spence engaged with Thomas Paine. For Spence, Paine was both an intellectual landmark (being the most advanced democratic thinker of the time and a supporter of the revolutions) and a polemical target. Indeed, Spence viewed Paine as an ally of the landed establishment and his radicalism as compromised by proprietary limitations. It was against the author of the *Rights of Man* that Spence contentiously redefined his ‘real’ rights for men, women, and children. Over the 1790s, Spence also enthusiastically supported the French Revolution. From the Jacobins, he drew the idea that the political order should be violently overthrown, to be followed then by the establishment of a provisional revolutionary government. Initially, Spence also agreed with the French Jacobins that the body politic should be republican. However, from the late 1790s, he became critical of the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, which he understood to be committed to a merely political transformation. At the same time, he overcame his earlier aversion to kingship. In fact, as the proprietary organization of society was far more important than the institutional organization of government, the Spencean Commonwealth would be either a monarchy or a republic on the

condition that all land should be held in common. Spence thus distanced himself from the proprietary limitations and political preoccupations of the French revolutionaries and emerged as a 'red' Jacobin.

Chapter 4 focuses on the transatlantic scope of Spence's Plan. It clarifies an apparent paradox: while Spence had a fixed concern about the land, he often used the sea as a reservoir of radical images to convey his revolutionary proposal. He imagined the establishment of the Plan aboard the sailing ship 'the Marine Republic' and on oceanic islands. Influenced by the radical struggles at sea of his time, such as the great mutinies at the Nore and Spithead in 1797, and by the English utopian tradition (the Land of Cockaigne, Thomas More, James Harrington, and Daniel Defoe), Spence rejected the implicit assumption that history only unfolded on terrestrial spaces, which some scholars have recently referred to as the 'terracentrism' characterizing Western political thought.⁴² This chapter also surveys Spence's astringent critique of colonialism, which he viewed as replicating overseas the same dynamics of enclosure and dispossession that landlordism had already produced in Europe. As the social and political dominion of the few over the many extended on both sides of the Atlantic, the colonies stood in need of the same revolution as England. The Plan can therefore be understood as a project of decolonization of the world by means of the abolition of private landownership globally. In fact, Spence also, remarkably enough, devised his Plan for colonial application, as he hoped that it might be established in the 'Republic of the Incas' and be adopted as the new constitution of revolutionary Saint-Domingue. After presenting Spenceanism as a transatlantic movement, the chapter concludes by surveying the startling, hitherto unknown legacy of Spence's Plan in the British West Indies, particularly in Barbados, where, according to the official documents of the local House of Assembly, it was intellectually implicated in Bussa's Rebellion of 1816, the largest slave revolt in the history of the island.

Chapter 5 shows Spence's present-day relevance by projecting his notion of common property on to contemporary political debates. These debates conceive of common property as either the commons (the fields, the waters, and the 'fruits of nature') or the commonwealth (the wealth and 'fruits of labour' produced by society). The first interpretation is represented by the works of Peter Linebaugh, Silvia Federici, and Ugo Mattei and the second by *Commonwealth*, by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.⁴³ Both sets of scholars use the notion of common property to suggest the existence of a third sphere of politics, which goes beyond the modern divide between the private and public domains. Spence embodied these two perspectives by conceiving of the Plan as a scheme for the reappropriation of both the commons and the commonwealth. In order to reappropriate the commons, Spence proposed the abolition of private landownership and the establishment of a system of parochial land management. The reappropriation of the commonwealth would, in its turn, be

achieved by sharing what Spence called ‘dividends’, which were quotas of money to be redistributed quarterly among all parishioners, regardless of their age, sex, civil status, employment, criminal convictions, or national origins. The redistribution of dividends would ensure the basic means of subsistence to everyone without requiring work. In this way, Spence’s Plan would achieve not only the emancipation of men’s work from any command imposed by either capitalists or the state, but also the emancipation of men *from* work and poverty. After the Spencean revolution, the multitude (as opposed to both ‘the people’ enclosed by national boundaries and ‘the individuals’ defined by liberal private property rights) would establish a new social order, neither capitalist nor collectivist but rather founded upon grassroots, democratic self-management.

The aim of this book is not only to demonstrate the theoretical complexity and sophistication of an altogether unconventional and little-known political thinker by uncovering in an original fashion his political thought by means of a methodological approach ‘from below’. In addition, it will be argued here that Thomas Spence can be viewed as a key figure through whom we can understand modernity and its crisis, which we are witnessing in our own times. Spence’s Plan, in fact, provided a lens through which a critique of capitalism and socialism could be made by offering an alternative to both in the years of their very making, rise, and development. These chapters are also designed to challenge the two most enduring preconceptions about Spence, which have long prevented scholars from fully appreciating his thought: that his ideas were confined to the local context of Newcastle or to the London urban underground and that his Plan harked back to the seventeenth-century claims for the commons in the thick of the early industrial age. While Spence has often been studied within a narrow context, this book sets out to deprovincialize him; although his Plan has often been considered outdated, this book intends to demonstrate its timeliness and relevance. The ambition of this work is to carry Thomas Spence from local to global history and from anachronism to modernity.

Notes

- 1 On the ‘Age of Revolution’, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848* (London: Phoenix Press, 1962); Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* [1964] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009); David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michael A. McDonnell (ed.), *Rethinking the Age of Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 2 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jeanette M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure, and*

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- Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 1997); Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007); Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons & Closure, of Love & Terror, of Race & Class, and of Kate & Ned Despard* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* [1975] (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution 1750–1850* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Victor Bailey, *Order and Disorder in Modern Britain: Essays on Riot, Crime, Policing and Punishment* (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2014).
 - 4 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London: Abacus, 1975); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987).
 - 5 ‘The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of the continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production’ (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One* [1867] (London: Penguin, 1990), 915). See also Paola Rudan, “La natura artificiale e la storia genetica del capitale: Marx e la moderna teoria della colonizzazione”, in Matteo Battistini, Eleonora Cappuccilli, and Maurizio Ricciardi (eds.), *Global Marx: Storia e critica del movimento sociale nel mercato mondiale* (Rome: Meltemi, 2020), 77–94. On capitalism and imperialism in the British Empire, see the classic essays by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, *The Economic History Review* 6/1 (1953), 1–15, and by James M. Blaut, “Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism”, *Science & Society* 53/3 (1989), 260–96. On capitalism and slavery in the Americas, see Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), and Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (eds.), *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
 - 6 On resistance in the Age of Revolution, see Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Ian Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution: Governance and Violence in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pimlico, 1983); Steve J. Stern (ed.), *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World: 18th to 20th Centuries* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Barry Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural Life and Protest in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Adrian J. Randall, *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776–1809* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Abacus, 1998);

- Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000); Laurent Dubois and Julius S. Scott (eds.), *Origins of the Black Atlantic* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience 1793–1803* (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2011); Janet Polasky, *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).
- 7 See the two recent academic conferences “Political Theory at the Margins: Fourth Oxford Graduate Political Theory Conference”, Oxford University, 8 May 2015 and “Political Thinking at the Margins Conference”, University of Virginia, 6–7 April 2017. See also Susan Herbst, *Politics at the Margins: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Siep Stuurman, “The Canon of the History of Political Thought: Its Critique and a Proposed Alternative”, *History and Theory* 39/2 (2000), 147–66.
 - 8 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [1983] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993] (London: Verso, 1999), 1–40; Raffaele Laudani (ed.), *La libertà a ogni costo: Scritti abolizionisti afro-americani* (Turin: La Rosa, 2007); David Scott, “On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition”, *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17/1 (2013), 1–6.
 - 9 Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*; Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005); Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014); Niklas Frykman, *The Bloody Flag: Mutiny in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).
 - 10 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 79.
 - 11 Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [1963] (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 161. Alastair Bonnett surveyed other representations of Spence as an anachronistic figure within developmentalist conceptions of the British labour movement in Alastair Bonnett, “Nostalgia and Anti-Nostalgia in English Radical History: The Case of Thomas Spence (1750–1814)”, *Groniek: Historisch Tijdschrift* 214 (2017), 45–57 (51).
 - 12 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* [1944] (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 74–9 and 171–209; Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 1; Edward Palmer Thompson, “Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture”, *Journal of Social History* 7/4 (1974), 382–405; Edward Palmer Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?”, *Social History* 3/2 (1978), 133–65.
 - 13 George D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People, 1746–1946* [1939] (London: Methuen, 1963), 184; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 11; Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 1. E.P. Thompson added that ‘Spence’s preoccupation with agrarian Socialism was inadequate for industrial England’ (Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 806).
 - 14 Harry T. Dickinson (ed.), *The Political Works of Thomas Spence* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Averø, 1982); Geoff I. Gallop (ed.), *Pigs’ Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence, Radical and Pioneer Land Reformer* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982).

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- 15 Robert Franklin, “The Political Ideas of Thomas Spence”, *Journal of Local Studies* 2/1 (1982), 21–40; Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money, and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815–1860* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Malcolm Chase, *The People’s Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775–1840* [1988] (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2010); Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 170–89 and 239–40; Joan Beal, *English Pronunciation in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Spence’s ‘Grand Repository of the English Language’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 16 Keith Armstrong and Alastair Bonnett (eds.), *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary* (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2014); “Bicentennial Perspectives on Thomas Spence (1750–1814): Radical Reformer in the Age of Revolution”, Université de Toulouse 2 Jean Jaurès, 27–8 November 2014; Rachel Rogers and Alexandra Sippel (eds.), *Thomas Spence and His Legacy: Bicentennial Perspectives*, special issue of *Miranda: Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone* 13 (2016) [<https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8985>, accessed 11 March 2021].
- 17 Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 287–326.
- 18 Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning*, 265–9; Frykman, *The Bloody Flag*, 200–9.
- 19 Gregory Claeys, “The Origins of the Rights of Labour: Republicanism, Commerce, and the Construction of Modern Social Theory in Britain, 1796–1805”, *The Journal of Modern History* 66/2 (1994), 249–90; Gregory Claeys and Christine Lattek, “Radicalism, Republicanism and Revolutionism: From the Principles of ’89 to the Origins of Modern Terrorism”, in Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 200–55.
- 20 Larry Gambone, *Some Forgotten Libertarians* (Lawrence: Red Lion Press, 1996), 2.
- 21 Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 322.
- 22 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 162. See also Laurent Currelly and Nigel Smith (eds.), *Radical Voices, Radical Ways: Articulating and Disseminating Radicalism in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).
- 23 Thomas Spence, “Dedication to the Swinish Multitude” [2 September 1793], in Thomas Paine et al., *Tom Paine’s Jests; Being an Entirely New and Select Collection of Patriotic Bon Mots, Repartees, Anecdotes, Epigrams, Observations &c; On Political Subjects by Thomas Paine and Other Supporters of the Rights of Man* (London: Printed for T. Spence, 1794), iii–iv (iii).
- 24 Thomas Spence, *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence for a Political Pamphlet Entitled ‘The Restorer of Society to Its Natural State’, on May 27th, 1801, at Westminster Hall, before Lord Kenyon and a Special Jury* [1803], in Dickinson (ed.), *The Political Works of Thomas Spence*, 92–104 (94).
- 25 Thomas Spence (ed.), *Pigs’ Meat; Or, Lessons for the People, Alias (According to Burke) The Swinish Multitude. Published in Penny Numbers Weekly Collected by the Poor Man’s Advocate (an Old Persecuted Veteran in the Cause of Freedom) in the Course of His Reading for More than Twenty Years*, 3 vols. (London: Printed for T. Spence, 1795), vol. 3: 1.

- 26 Tom Jennings, “*The Hive of Liberty*: Review”, *Freedom* 68/6 (12 August 2007) [<https://libcom.org/library/i-hive-liberty-i-thomas-spence-edited-keith-armstrong-book-review-tom-jennings>, accessed 23 April 2021]. Spence’s commitment was shared by other radicals of his time, such as James Parkinson, the surgeon who detected the degenerative disease later named after him and author of several anti-Burkean pamphlets, for example James Parkinson, *Pearls Cast before Swine, by Edmund Burke, Scraped Together by Old Hubert* (London: Printed for D.I. Eaton, 1793). On the political uses of ‘the swinish multitude’, see Gertrude H. Campbell, “The Swinish Multitude”, *Modern Language Notes* 30/6 (1915), 161–4; Darren Howard, “Necessary Fictions: The ‘Swinish Multitude’ and the Rights of Man”, *Studies in Romanticism* 47/2 (2008), 161–78; Mark Neocleous, *The Universal Adversary: Security, Capital and the ‘Enemies of All Mankind’* (London: Routledge, 2016), 24–36.
- 27 This methodological approach has been pioneered in Marcus Rediker, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017). See also Marcus Rediker and Martina Tazzioli, “A Motley Crew for Our Time? Multiracial Mobs, History from Below and the Memory of Struggle. An Interview with Marcus Rediker”, *Radical Philosophy* 2/7 (2020), 93–100.
- 28 Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value [1] (Volume IV of Capital)* [1862–3] (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 382. Marx also mentioned ‘Spence’s Plan’ in the third part of his work, contrasting it to Malthus’s theory of rent (Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value [3]* [1863] (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 61). See also Alastair Bonnett, “The Other Rights of Man: The Revolutionary Plan of Thomas Spence”, *History Today* 57/9 (2007), 42–8 (48).
- 29 William Cobbett, “A Letter to Henry Hunt, Esq. of Middleton Cottage, Near Andover. On the London Plots” [13 December 1816], in William Cobbett (ed.), *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register* (London: 14 December 1816), vol. 31/24: 625–56 (635).
- 30 Alastair Bonnett, “Spence and the Politics of Nostalgia”, in Armstrong and Bonnett (eds.), *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary*, 75–88 (81); Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 59–85.
- 31 Armstrong and Bonnett (eds.), *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary*, 2.
- 32 “Parliamentary Reform”, in *The Antijacobin Review; True Churchman’s Magazine; And Protestant Advocate: Or, Monthly, Political, and Literary Censor; From March to August, Inclusive* (London: 1817), vol. 52: 347–73 (363–4). This article was a reprint of an earlier version, entitled “Parliamentary Reform” and published in *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 31, in October 1816.
- 33 John Stuart Mill, *Writings of Junius Redivivus [II]* [1833], in John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (eds.), *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Autobiography and Literary Essays*, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), vol. 1: 379–90 (387); Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population; Or, a View of Its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness. Sixth Edition*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1826), vol. 2: 45; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *A Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes, on Existing Distresses and Discontents* [1817], in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual; Or the Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight* (Burlington: C. Goodrich, 1832), 71–231 (229).
- 34 Adam Müller, “Spences philanthropischer Plan, Bibelgesellschaften und Gemeinschaft der Güter”, in *Deutsche Staatsanzeigen* (Leipzig: 1817), 347–66 (355 and 359).

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- 35 Franklin, “The Political Ideas of Thomas Spence”, 42.
- 36 Chase, *The People’s Farm*, 1–16.
- 37 For a useful analysis of political terminology on ‘socialism’, ‘reformism’, ‘republicanism’, and ‘radicalism’ in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, see Geoff I. Gallop, “Thomas Spence and John Thelwall: Contrasting Approaches to Radical Theory and Practice”, *British Radical and Socialist Traditions Seminar*, University of Oxford (January 1981), 1–21.
- 38 Henry M. Hyndman, *The Nationalization of the Land in 1775 and 1882, Being a Lecture Delivered at Newcastle-upon-Tyne by Thomas Spence* (London: E.W. Allen, 1882), 1–7. Hyndman’s interpretation was recovered in Olive Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and His Connections* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1927), 170, and Terry M. Parssinen, “Thomas Spence and the Origins of English Land Nationalization”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34/1 (1973), 135–41.
- 39 Mary Kemp-Ashraf, *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Frank Graham, 1983), 26. Anthropologist Brian Morris interpreted ‘socialist’ Spence as a forerunner of anarchism in Brian Morris, “The Agrarian Socialism of Thomas Spence”, in Brian Morris, *Ecology and Anarchism: Essays and Reviews on Contemporary Thought* (London: Images Publishing, 1996), 112–22.
- 40 Bonnett, “Spence and the Politics of Nostalgia”, 75–88; Bonnett, “The Other Rights of Man”, 48.
- 41 Thomas Spence, *The Case of Thomas Spence, Bookseller, the Corner of Chancery-Lane, London: Who Was Committed to Clerkenwell Prison, on Monday the 10th of December, 1792, for Selling the Second Part of Paine’s Rights of Man: And a Bill of Indictment Found Against Him. To Which Is Added, The Affecting Case of James Maccurdy, a Native of Ireland, Who Was Committed to Clerkenwell Bridewell, for Distributing Certain Seditious Papers, Where He Died in a Few Days* (London: 1793), 15. Spence was concerned by the unhealthy and dangerous conditions of British prisons. Significantly, he dedicated two of his political tokens to philanthropist and prison reformer John Howard in Thomas Spence, *The Coin Collector’s Companion: Being a Descriptive Alphabetical List of the Modern Provincial, Political, and Other Copper Coins* (London: Printed for T. Spence, 1795), 24 (coins 164 and 165).
- 42 Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic*, 8–9; Raffaele Laudani, “Mare e Terra: Sui fondamenti spaziali della sovranità moderna”, *Filosofia politica* 3 (2015), 513–30.
- 43 Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2008); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); Ugo Mattei, *Beni comuni: Un manifesto* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2011); Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019).

1 Spence and his worlds

‘The Plan’: its contents and changes

‘Spence’s Plan’ was a direct response to the social dislocation affecting thousands of men and women, resulting from enclosures and the dismantling of poor relief that accompanied the establishment of the market economy and industrial society in Britain between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ First expounded in his lecture *Property in Land Every One’s Right*, read before the Newcastle Philosophical Society in 1775, the Plan was characterized by a number of core features that remained unaltered over the following forty years.² Starting from a sharp critique of the existing societal system, Spence devised his Plan as a project of radical social transformation detailing a new order of things to replace the old. According to him, the origins of the existing evils lay in the loss of man’s natural right to the common enjoyment of land. In fact, ‘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 connections with the animals, fruits and other products thereof.’³ The end of this original state of ‘free liberty’ and equality had been caused by an act of usurpation by which the few violently claimed illegitimate private ownership of the soil, dispossessing the many; this possession of landed monopolies had enabled landlords to acquire and retain social and political power over the landless. This condition of injustice and inequality would only be overcome when the ‘whole people in some country’ assembled, unanimously decided to abolish private ownership of land (but not of moveable goods, which would be privately held), and established a parochial system of common landownership. As the parishes, corresponding to the old territorial districts developing around each parish church, were the ‘corporations’ in which the population found itself already organized locally, Spence assigned them the crucial role of landlords. Being the common proprietors of their respective fields, this ensured that ‘[there] are no more nor other landlords in the whole country than the parishes; and each of them is sovereign landlord of its own territories.’⁴ As the administrative units responsible for the allocation and

redistribution of plots of land to parishioners, the parishes would be able to rent the soil out in portions but not ‘alienate the least morsel’ of it, that is sell it.⁵ In Spence’s system, as private landownership would be abolished, the plots of land could never be privately owned but only privately cultivated within a system of common property. This system ruled out the existence of small freeholders who, being proprietors of the soil, could have individually sold or bought their plots, leading to new inequalities in a short span of time. As Spence’s system would no longer involve landlords apart from the parishes, everyone, without exception, would pay rent for use of the land in proportion to the size and quality of the plot received in usufruct; this payment was needed to prevent landed accumulation. The rent would be paid in place of all other taxes, tithes, customs, and duties formerly collected and would be used by the parishes for many purposes such as to remunerate public servants, support parochial and central administration, and fund the ordinary maintenance of the urban landscape and local social services (including schools and poor relief). ‘In a word, in doing whatever the people think proper’. Despite the many services that needed to be funded, rent would be affordable for each parishioner, as corruption and waste would be eliminated. Taken together, the parishes would constitute a sort of confederation, with each retaining marked political autonomy from the central government. The parishioners, thanks to universal male suffrage (‘each man has a vote’) and the secret ballot, would enjoy full political liberty, and social justice would be guaranteed by common landownership; as ‘freedom to any thing whatever cannot there be bought’, social and political hierarchies would be totally eradicated. The spread of the Plan, starting from a single parish, was described by Spence as a domino effect: ‘The whole earth shall at last be happy, and live like brethren’.⁶

While these foundational features of Spence’s Plan remained unchanged, its post-1775 versions were updated as a result of the author’s intellectual evolution due to both his personal experiences and the changing social and political context in which he lived.⁷ The first and most important change in the Plan dated back to the ballad ‘The Rights of Man’ of 1783, where Spence first mentioned the redistribution of what he called ‘dividends’.⁸ The Plan was, in fact, a scheme for the redistribution not of land but of rent, as the soil would be not reapportioned but rather held in common. Spence anticipated that, after everyone had paid rent to their respective parishes and all the expenses for public administration and social services had been covered, two-thirds of the total amount of the rent would be left over. These remainders would constitute the dividends, namely, shares of money to be redistributed according to a quarterly schedule ‘among all the living souls in the parish, whether male or female; married or single; legitimate or illegitimate; from a day old to the extremest age’.⁹ This idea was probably inspired by Gilbert’s Act of 1782, which encouraged wage supplementation for poor workers. Interestingly,

the most complete accounts of Spence's system of dividends can be found in his pamphlets *The Meridian Sun of Liberty, or the Whole Rights of Man* (1796) and *The Rights of Infants* (1797), which followed the establishment of the system of wage subsidies introduced by the Berkshire parish of Speenhamland in 1795, guaranteeing poor workers a minimum income dependent on the price of bread.¹⁰ Spence's Plan was also strongly affected by the revolutions of his age. In 1782, influenced by North American developments (and by his reading of Daniel Defoe), he referred to his confederation of parishes as the 'United Parishes of Crusonia'.¹¹ In 1793, inspired by the terminology of the constitution of the United States, he adopted the terms 'Senate' and 'Congress', alongside the more common 'Parliament', to describe the central institutions of the Spencean parishes.¹² But the second, most significant change in Spence's thought, which concerned the method by which his Plan might be implemented, dated back to 1795 and was directly connected to the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution. While in former writings, the Spencean system rested upon a unanimous and peaceful collective decision, the pamphlet *The End of Oppression* (1795) contained Spence's first explicit theorization of violent revolution as the method for destroying private landownership and establishing the parish system.¹³ The American and the French Revolutions also inspired the two constitutional versions of Spence's Plan: *The Constitution of a Perfect Commonwealth* (1798), which borrowed from the Jacobin Constitution of 1793, and *The Constitution of Spensonia* (1803), which, as Chapter 3 will show, reflected Spence's increasing distance from French revolutionary developments.¹⁴ These Revolutions also influenced Spence's religious attitudes. While the 1775 edition of his first lecture mentioned a parochial 'established religion' professed by the majority of the population, the 1793 edition, reprinted with the new title *The Rights of Man* and imbued with the ideas of the 'Atlantic Enlightenment', declared that 'toleration would be allowed to every religion or opinion not repugnant to the Rights of Man'.¹⁵ Here, Spence implicitly took a stance in relation to the contemporary parliamentary debates concerning the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which had made the holding of any public office conditional on being a member of the Church of England.¹⁶ The Plan also reflected, in fact, Spence's engagement with contemporary British debates. Since the publication of his periodical *Pigs' Meat* in 1793, he had referred to his political interlocutors as 'the swinish multitude', thereby parodying the expression coined by Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 1795, Spence reprinted another version of his 1775 lecture, whose most significant novelty was in fact its title, which, to stress the limitations of Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–2), became *The Real Rights of Man*.¹⁸ Spence's dispute with Paine did not end there, for, in 1797, he wrote *The Rights of Infants*, where the Plan was spelled out by a woman, who vindicated the rights of mothers and children alongside

those of men. The pamphlet also contained an appendix which demolished Paine's social proposal in *Agrarian Justice* (1797) and presented the Spencean system of dividends as a radical alternative.¹⁹ Over the years, Spence's Plan was also formulated in reference to different geographical locations. As Chapter 4 will detail, Spence lived in an age of maritime voyages, white conquests, and anticolonial struggle and appeared to be directly influenced by those events. In *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe, Being the History of Crusonia* (1782), the Plan was implemented in Crusonia, the Pacific island conquered by Robinson Crusoe in Defoe's famous novel.²⁰ Crusonia was Spence's first utopia and was in all likelihood inspired by James Cook's expeditions to Oceania between 1768 and 1771; interestingly, one of the ships which carried Cook in his first voyage, HMS Endeavour, had been previously used as a collier in the North East of England.²¹ In 1794, probably struck by the news about the mutiny on the Royal vessel *Bounty*, whose crew had bundled their captain William Bligh into a small boat in 1789 and had themselves settled on Tahiti and other islands in the South Pacific (before being arrested, brought back to England, and court-martialled), Spence wrote both *The Marine Republic*, where the Plan was put into practice aboard a sailing ship, and *A Further Account of Spensonia*, which presented the first description of his second utopia, the island of Spensonia in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.²² In 1796, following new encroachments on native lands by the new-born government of the United States, Spence published *The Reign of Felicity* in which he explicitly proposed a colonial adoption of the Plan among Native Americans.²³ Therefore, as it was deeply influenced by revolutions, social and territorial developments, and intellectual debates both within and beyond Britain during those years, the Plan can be viewed as an up-to-date, open field of reflection, which mirrored Spence's times and the transformations he witnessed.

Newcastle and the Town Moor affair

Spence was born in 1750 to poor Scottish parents and raised alongside eighteen siblings in Newcastle upon Tyne, which provided the backdrop to his political education.²⁴ The impoverished milieu in which Spence grew up pushed him, from his earliest years, to reflect upon the division of society between the rich and the poor. The important role played by his familial experience in his early intellectual development was acknowledged by Spence himself, retrospectively, in 1793:

The feelings occasioned by beholding the struggles of temperance, frugality, and industry, after an honest livelihood, which ought to be easily attainable by every one, have always been sufficiently powerful to enable me to despise them. Yet, those sympathetic feelings were impressed deep on my heart, being first excited by the many