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“The Real rights of Man” : Thomas Spence, Paine and Chartism

Malcolm Chase

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 It will not have escaped your attention that back in September 2014 the future of the UK stood in the balance when a referendum was held in Scotland to decide whether it should become independent from the rest of Great Britain. Scottish nationalism is not, however, the mid-twentieth-century phenomenon it is often supposed to be. Home Rule for Scotland within the UK was the object of parliamentary bills on no-less than eight occasions between 1890 and 1914 : much of the credit for this was due to the Scottish Home Rule Association, founded in 1886 to agitate for national autonomy similar to that which Gladstone had recently proposed for Ireland. In an 1890 book promoted by the Association, *Scotia Rediviva*, Thomas Spence had a walk-on part in the agitation. Alongside Wallace, Robert Buchanan and Fletcher of Saltoun, Spence featured in it both as a great Scot (on account of his parentage) and as the political theorist who had done most to expose how ownership of the land had slipped from the grasp of the population at large. He was also the first to propose how this process could be reversed. “Truth is hard to kill”, the author of *Scotia Rediviva* declared, “and the cause of Spence and the Spenceans is again in the ascendant” (Davidson 1995).¹
- 2 Discovering this text recently set me thinking about the posthumous use of Spence. During the nineteenth century he was invoked with some frequency, conspicuously by campaigners for land nationalisation and by the followers of Henry George. But until Henry Hyndman, leader of the Social Democratic Federation, published his edition of

Spence's original 1775 lecture in 1882, Spence was more-often invoked than read.² Only a German, Karl Marx remarked, could be so insular not to have heard of Thomas More, the Levellers, Robert Owen, John Minter Morgan or Thomas Spence (Marx & Engels 460-461).³ But I know of no evidence that Marx had ever read Spence, and suspect that what he knew of him came second-hand from the Chartist George Julian Harney. This is a good example of a common trait, invoking Spence's name as part of a succession of fellow travellers from the past without any in-depth engagement with the substance of his thought. In an article on the socialist ideal in 1884, Hyndman himself name checked the leaders of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rebels, "Priestley and Cartwright, Spence and Owen" and the Chartist leaders Ernest Jones and Bronterre O'Brien: "a noble band indeed! How do courtly fuglemen [spokesmen] and ennobled sycophants look side by side with these?" (Bevir 121)⁴ At least Hyndman had brought one of Spence's key works to a late-Victorian readership, but the 1775 lecture remained all that was known of him, as its subsequent further republication by the English Land Restoration Society in 1896, and the Independent Labour Party in 1900, shows.⁵

- 3 But what evidence is there for Spence exercising specific influence, rather than commanding a warm but fuzzy respect? My contention is that in-depth engagement can be found, especially in the early Victorian Chartist movement. But it needs excavating. One of the things that interests me as a historian is the transmission of political ideas - not so much through the intellectual analysis of the influence of one great writer upon another, but rather at the "grassroots" level of day-to-day belief and conviction. Too often the lazy assumption has been that Thomas Paine dominated grassroots radicalism. Eloquent testimony to his importance in this way is to be found in the words of the almost apoplectic Attorney General at Paine's trial for seditious libel in 1792:

In all shapes and in all sizes, with an industry incredible, it [Paine's *Rights of Man* Part 2] was either totally or partially thrust into the hands of all persons in this country ... even children's sweetmeats were wrapped in parts, and delivered into their hands, in the hope that they would read it. (Keen 32)⁶

- 4 The conventional narrative of English radicalism is one in which Paine occupies an almost apostolic position. It is therefore significant that - in discussing landed property at least - Chartists nailed their political colours firmly to the mast not of Tom Paine but of Tom Spence. Harney, editor of Chartism's great newspaper *Northern Star*, even called for the statue of Earl Grey (architect of the 1832 Reform Act) to be removed from the famous monument in Newcastle upon Tyne and one of Spence placed there instead.⁷ For Harney and the Chartists, Spence (not Paine) was the benchmark figure in the evolution of ideas about land reform. In this the Chartists were deferring to a position that Spence himself first advanced in 1795, in *The End of Oppression*, his dialogue "between an old mechanic and a young one". It was a theme to which he would return several times, that Paine for all his manifest merits did not go far enough in prescribing what the future shape of society should be.

YOUNG MAN: I hear there is another RIGHTS OF MAN by Spence that goes farther than Paine's.

OLD MAN: Yet it goes no farther than it ought.

YOUNG MAN: I understand that it suffers no private property in land, but gives it all to the parishes.

OLD MAN : In doing so it does right, the earth was not made for individuals ...

YOUNG MAN : It is amazing that Paine and other democrats should level all their artillery at kings, without striking like Spence at this root of every abuse and of every grievance. (Spence 1795, 3)⁸

- 5 An uncritical deference to Paine's memory all-too-easily obscures the contribution of others among his contemporaries to radical political thought. Especially in the field of agrarian ideas, concerning the distribution and tenure of landed property, it was Spence not Paine whose influence was the more decisive. The latter's *Agrarian Justice* represents at most a fine-tuning of the secularisation of natural law arguments. It fails to fathom the true extent of the democratic deficit (either in terms of political power or economic wellbeing) that Spence developed. It is doubtful what impact – if any – in the nineteenth century *Agrarian Justice* had. It received little attention other than as a coda to its author's earlier and more significant works. Why this neglect? Great as his reputation as a democrat and polemicist was, Paine's *Agrarian Justice* is deficient as an argument for land reform. Its most eye-catching proposal, for old age pensions, simply repeats without much elaboration remarks he had made in the second part of *Rights of Man*. Its fiscal proposals, concentrating as they do on death duties, are arguably less radical in scope and intent than the progressive taxation Paine had earlier proposed in *Rights of Man*. After 1797 *Agrarian Justice* was not reprinted for two decades. It then lay dormant again until the 1830s. Even then it attracted little attention other than on account of its author.
- 6 It was Spence's agrarian thought that more commonly informed theory and practice in the early labour and radical movements. This is evident even in the writings of Paine's indefatigable disciple Richard Carlile. For example in 1822 Carlile, in an extensive essay on tax reform, rejected the argument that financial investments should alone be subject to taxation, thus creating an equitable tax that would avoid discriminating against the poor while taxing only those able to pay.⁹ Carlile was not opposed to a socially progressive tax regime; but he argued that to base a so-called "equitable tax" on investments would concede the legal and moral right to such property. Carlile opposed this: "land, and land only", he argued, was "the only tangible property". The only sensible, and morally defensible, equitable tax would be "the Spencean plan ... certainly the most simple and most equitable system of society and government that can be imagined".
- 7 The Spencean plan, Carlile continued, had been dismissed without proper examination. It was eminently suited to immediate adoption by the emerging republics of Latin America though it was futile "to urge it against the prejudices of those who have established properties in this country" given the economic make-up of the Houses of Parliament. However, a reformed parliament should pursue, Carlile argued, a single equitable tax on land as the most effective social and financial strategy for social reform. The owners of large estates, much of them unproductive parks or shooting land, would be forced either to give them up or turn them over to productive cultivation in order to meet the burden of the tax. This incentive to full cultivation was in turn a guarantor of greater employment, which would in turn increase demand for goods and agricultural produce that – because no longer taxed – would be more affordable.
- 8 Thereafter the "equitable tax" would be a recurrent feature of Carlile's political thinking. And whenever he returned to the land question, he would cite Thomas Spence as his prime authority, reiterating the merits of equitable taxation :

The sentiment of Thomas Spence, that THE LAND IS THE PEOPLE'S FARM, is incontrovertible by any other argument than that of the sword. The land cannot be equitably divided among the people ; but all rent raised from it may be made public revenue, and to save the people from taxation.¹⁰

- 9 The case against "[a]grarian monopoly and usury . . . the two master evils of society" was one of the few economic arguments that Richard Carlile consistently advocated across his long and turbulent career. Indeed, this was the economic policy that sat alongside his advocacy of Paineite republicanism in the political arena. Criticising the early Chartist movement's preoccupation with parliamentary reform, Carlile declared in 1839 that the Spencean agenda was "a subject worth thinking, worth talking, worth writing, worth printing ... Universal Suffrage, in the present state of mind, and church, and kings, and priests and lords, is all humbug and trickery compared to it". The Chartists should be "for getting the rent paid to the right landlord", and he concluded by repeating Spence's slogan "the Land is the people's farm".¹¹
- 10 This is an instructive moment in the history of radicalism. Richard Carlile, perhaps Paine's foremost disciple, was urging the nascent Chartist movement to draw back from universal suffrage in favour of Spencean land reform. Nor was he alone in arguing that "the Land is the people's farm". "My creed is - and Thomas Spence taught it to me", Harney declared, "that 'the Land is the people's farm' and that it belongs to the entire nation, not to individuals or classes".¹² The innovative thinking of Thomas Spence on land reform was a bench-mark to which subsequent radicals (and sometimes their opponents) often referred. Robert Owen recounted with pride in his autobiography how he was once mistaken for Spence (Owen 389).¹³ Among opponents, for example, Thomas Malthus singled out Spence for specific criticism in the extensively revised 1817 edition of his *Essay on Population*.¹⁴ Regency contemporaries also read earlier work by Malthus as targeting "Spence's plan".¹⁵ John Stuart Mill warned of the dangers of falling "into the vagaries of Spenceanism" (Mill 352).¹⁶
- 11 But it was within Chartism that Spence's influence was particularly felt. The Chartist movement was (as it remains) one of the high points in the history of British popular politics. It was in effect Britain's civil rights movement. Its foundation document, the People's Charter of 1838, concentrated upon the need to reform parliament, and universal male suffrage in particular. But this should not be allowed to obscure the deeper and more fundamental challenge that Chartism posed to the political establishment of early Victorian Britain. And that establishment, of course, was still overwhelmingly a landed one. Especially during the years after 1842, when Parliament rejected Chartism's greatest petition (mustered 3.3 million signatures), Chartists directed their energies to a broader social and economic reform agenda. It was here that Spence's ideas were particularly influential.
- 12 Throughout the years after Spence's death, former members of the Spencean Philanthropists were pivotal figures in London radical politics. For example, the London Democratic Association, the organisation that absorbed George Harney's earliest Chartist energies counted among its members several influential Spenceans, including Spence's biographer, the poet and socialist Allen Davenport, and the Brick Lane tailor turned radical bookseller Charles Hodgson Neesom (who, in 1847, would also become a founding member of Britain's first ever Vegetarian Society).¹⁷ The young Harney was profoundly influenced by the Spencean generation and in turn disseminated awareness of Spence through the *Northern Star*, especially promoting Davenport's writings about Spence.¹⁸

- 13 Studies of Chartist attitudes to landed property have overwhelmingly focused upon its Land Plan, a remarkable (but also remarkably flawed) initiative to settle its members on the land in cottage smallholdings. It speaks volumes for the extent of popular interest in agrarian reform that the Land Plan could mobilise well-over 70,000 subscribers in the teeth of the economic crisis of 1847-1848. However, the sheer scale of the Chartist Land Plan has obscured the extent to which agrarian ideas were central to other facets of the movement. Furthermore, historians have traditionally had difficulty reconciling the sturdy possessive individualism of the Land Plan with other arguments within Chartism for public ownership of the soil. Chartists advanced arguments for, variously, forcible re-appropriation, land and building societies, a free market in landed property, deeply radical taxation regimes and, from 1850, "the Charter and something more" (a social democratic programme with land nationalisation at its heart). "The Charter and something more", an adaptation of the traditional Chartist slogan "the charter and nothing less", was the basis on which the NCA adopted a social democratic programme in March 1851. Features of this programme included proposals to settle the unemployed on the land via
- the restoration of poor, common, church and crown lands to the people. Such lands to be divided among the poor in suitable proportions. Those located to be tenants of the State, paying a proportionate rent-charge for their holdings.
- 14 Nationalization of other land was to be achieved gradually through purchase. Taxation would be levied on land and accumulated wealth only.¹⁹
- 15 Four common elements underpinned all the Chartist positions on landed property. First was a fundamental belief that smallholder cultivation maximised the productivity of the soil. Second was an outright hostility to *large* accumulations of landed property, irrespective of the legal form in which they might be held. Thirdly, therefore, Chartism was suspicious of central government as the putative owner or manager of the national estate. And fourthly, the reform of land holding was part of a broader assault upon the citadel of economic and political power. These four elements also encapsulate the essence of Spence's thinking and this article will now briefly consider each in turn.
- 16 Firstly. At the heart of what we might term agrarian fundamentalism lay the conviction that smallholding maximised the productivity return from labour on the soil. This in turn would alleviate poverty both by widening employment opportunities and increasing food production, countering the Malthusian spectre used to justify the draconian 1834 reform of the poor law. "When I see a man with his foot upon his spade", declared O'Connor in his seminal *Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms*, "I think I recognise the image of his God, and him in that character which even the Malthusian deigns to assign him – A MAN STANDING ON HIS OWN RESOURCES" (O'Connor 40).²⁰
- 17 This is an eloquent illustration of contemporary idealization of spade husbandry (just about the only principle held consistently and unanimously by three greatest figures of early nineteenth-century radicalism, William Cobbett, Robert Owen and Feargus O'Connor). But more pertinently for our purposes it also underlines that Spence's assumption that the state of nature, in which the right of every individual to an equable share of the soil was absolute had been an historical reality (until very recently among North America's indigenous peoples) – that the idea of the state of nature had an immediate and vivid appeal and was far from hypothetical or conjectural. To some extent Paine also worked with the idea of the reality of the state of nature. "Poverty is a thing created by that which is called civilised life", he argued in *Agrarian Justice*, "it exists not in

the natural state" (Paine 5).²¹ But Paine of course did not countenance the real yet figurative state of nature that Spence sought to restore. On the contrary, he held that, "it is never possible to go from the civilised to the natural state", because the latter was incapable of supporting the level of population that, through manufactures and commerce, it could in civilisation (Paine 5).²² The problem as Paine perceived it was therefore not really agrarian at all : it was one of poverty. "I am", he declared, "a friend to riches because they are capable of doing good. I care not how affluent some may be, provided that none be miserable in consequence of it". Thus it was that he posited in *Agrarian Justice* that all landowners should pay "to the community a ground-rent", to be accumulated in a national fund. From the latter every person reaching the age of 21 would receive a bounty of "Fifteen Pounds Sterling" and all persons aged fifty and over an annual pension of £ 10. Having made this postulation, virtually the bulk of *Agrarian Justice* was devoted to the arithmetic of the proposal. Paine's calculations were no more or less spurious than those which feature in the writings of other reformers, for example Cobbett arguing that the population of early nineteenth-century England was declining, or Robert Owen arguing that ploughs should be abandoned in favour of spades (Paine 11, 13).²³

- 18 But Paine had nothing particular to say about what constituted an acceptable acreage for land holding. As long as each landowner pays ground rent into the national fund, the land is theirs and theirs alone to use, bequeath, augment or sell as they wish. This brings me to the second and third themes that characterise Chartist thinking about the land : hostility to large accumulations of landed property and suspicion of centralised government. The development of arguments favouring large-scale collective farming was an ideological Rubicon that no Chartist ever crossed. Land nationalists and Land Planners alike favoured small-scale cultivation. Support for land nationalization certainly did not equate with any interest in the collectivization of agriculture. For example, the principal leader of Chartism in its final phase in the 1850s, Ernest Jones, consistently espoused small holdings, even as he abandoned the tenets of the Land Plan in favour of land nationalization, Hostility against centralization, a consistent trope in O'Connor's argument for the Land Plan, featured prominently in Jones' case for nationalization of the land. "By the state retaining for ever as national property the land once purchased, the centralisation of the land in the hands of a few rich individuals becomes impossible ... the occupiers of the land are to be *tenants*" (Jones 103-114).²⁴ Jones was only echoing here arguments made with customary *brio* by O'Connor :

Patronage, which is a consequence of, and springs from, the Large Farm System, *withholds the land from you* ; while the law of primogeniture, and the barbarous law of settlement and entail, prevents such as are able from buying small allotments of land. To break through these barriers is easy and simple, and should be the great national object. By its accomplishment alone can you now set up the principle of individualism against that of centralisation ... [T]he land of a country belongs to society ; and ... society, according to its wants has the same right to impose fresh conditions on the lessees, that the landlord has to impose fresh conditions upon a tenant at the expiration of his tenure. Society is the landlord : and as society never dies, the existing government are the trustees ... Society looks on the performance of all requisite duties as the only condition on which its lessees can make good that title.²⁵

- 19 For the Chartists, suspicion of centralizing state power was a *leitmotif*. This, like the promotion of the smallholding ideal, was one of the elements that bound together supporters of the Land Plan with its critics in the movement. And it was an element

which acted to curtail enthusiasm for land nationalization, because the mechanism needed to administer the national estate was essentially incompatible with the Chartist concept of light government nationally and significant local autonomy. The London Working Men's Association's journal, *The Charter*, argued control should be vested in democratically elected local commissioners.²⁶ Bronterre O'Brien argued (much as Thomas Spence had done at the turn of the eighteenth century) in favour of parochial control: "I am for new property laws – not laws to abolish private or individual property, but to place it upon a just and righteous foundation" (O'Brien 219-220).²⁷ *Lloyds' Weekly London Newspaper* even alleged that O'Brien "was the most distinguished ... plagiarist" of Spence.²⁸ Although the concept of the parish as the primary mechanism for both government and regulation of property carried diminished conviction in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society, Spence nonetheless remained an authority to whom Chartists favouring outright public ownership continued to appeal.²⁹ For O'Brien, Spence was a pioneering political thinker:

Twenty years ago the doctrine of making land public property would subject the man who held it to the imputation of either being a fool or a rogue; and even Cobbett could find no better excuse for poor Spence than that he was half-cracked. But now, thank god, the doctrine had ceased to be considered either knavish or ridiculous.³⁰

- 20 Doubtless O'Brien believed that his own 1836 translation of Buonarroti's history of Babeuf's conspiracy had contributed to growing acceptance of radical agrarian reform.³¹ However, evidence for British interest in Babouvism beyond O'Brien's circle is very limited.³² However, for Chartists of every persuasion, the first duties of a reformed parliament would include land reform:

Monopoly of land is the source of every social and political evil ... every law which "grinds the face of the poor" has emanated from time to time from this anomalous monopoly ... our national debt, our standing army, our luscious law church, our large police force, our necessity for "pauper" rates, our dead weight, our civil list, our glorious rag money, our unjust laws, our game laws, our impure magistracy, our prejudiced jury system, our pampered court, and the pampered menials thereunto belonging, are one and all so many fences thrown round the people's inheritance.³³

- 21 The Land Plan's presiding genius and Chartism's greatest leader, Feargus O'Connor, specifically interweaved mechanisation into this catalogue of injustice:

What is the loud demand of the working people for a plain, simple, and efficient PLAN for practical operations on THE LAND, but the effort of man to regain his natural position, from which he has been dislodged by the combined operations of high-taxation, paper-money, and an unduly-hot-bed-forced amount of manufacturing machinery?³⁴

- 22 This abiding perception of history as a continuing decline in the people's fortunes echoes both Spence and William Cobbett and it had an important impact on Chartist ideology. It meant that even within the deepening economic problems of the 1840s, an agrarian analysis of contemporary problems – and an agrarian prescription for them – was not redundant. The key social problem that Chartists perceived was not so much a society that was rapidly industrialising, but a society that was increasingly divided (politically, socially and economically) between rich and poor. Therefore all Chartists agreed land reform must be a political, economic and social imperative for a reformed parliament. There was virtual unanimity that the basis on which land should be held for cultivation must be that of smallholdings and small farms. The emergence of arguments in favour of

land nationalization was attenuated by a suspicion of the State and its centralizing tendencies, as well as by a continued disposition in favour of small-scale ownership (which in time meant ex-Chartists contributed significantly to the emergence of building societies).

- 23 The agrarian thrust within Chartist ideology was emphatically neither utopian nor nostalgic. In 1849, for example, William Linton called for the confiscation of that year's harvest. This, he argued, should then be re-allocated to paupers, the unemployed and to the labourers who had produced it, as the first instalment of what Linton termed a "national rent". Linton's national rent would have been almost identical to the single tax of later Georgeite land reformers : levied at the rate of 20 shillings per acre it would encourage the maximization of agricultural production, render unnecessary all other forms of taxation, and along the way assist the formation of a national estate since the property of defaulting landowners would be surrendered to the State (Linton 6).³⁵
- 24 Linton's argument crystallizes the fourth of the core strands underpinning Chartism's neo-Spenceanism, namely that it was a practical and moral imperative, not only to maximize agricultural production and alleviate poverty but also to deploy land reform as a means to right a political injustice and bring down the citadel of economic and political power. The moral argument can be traced to radical opposition to Malthusianism and, beyond that, to the common eighteenth-century view that parks and landscaped gardens were a facet of effeminizing luxury, a physical manifestation of corruption that constituted the ultimate affront to the poor. "Why are huge forests still allowed to stretch with idle pomp and all the opulence of eastern grandeur?" Mary Wollstonecraft had demanded in 1792. "Why does the brown waste meet the travellers view when men want work?" (Wollstonecraft 60-1)³⁶ This theme had particularly been developed during the Regency years by the Spencean Philanthropists (Chase 45-120).³⁷ "If there were no parks, and no pleasure grounds", Allen Davenport claimed in 1822, "the whole face of the country would present to the eye cornfields, meadows, gardens, plantations of all kinds of fruit trees, etc., all in the highest state of cultivation."
- 25 Chartism's neo-Spencean ideology was also a sharp riposte to middle-class liberal reformers call for free trade in land. This was especially important after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 led Cobden, Bright and the nascent Liberal Party to embrace the repeal of primogeniture, strict settlement and entail as a key policy objective. Such a repeal would be no reform at all, argued Harney :

The people are promised wonderful felicity by the repeal of the laws of primogeniture and entail, bringing the land to the public market. Mr. Bright and others desire to have the land as free to traffic in as labour is now. What would be the effect of such a "reform" ? Those who had the money to buy land would become landlords, and every landlord, whether lord of five or of fifty-thousand acres, would be a conservative – the sworn enemy to further change. Moreover, monopolising the soil, and commanding the sources of toil in the manufacturing districts, the new aristocracy would possess a power over the lives of both agricultural and manufacturing workers unexampled in the world's history.

The proletarians need another sort of reform. The feudal aristocracy being doomed to expire, care should be taken that no new aristocracy be allowed to take their place. With that view THE LAND MUST BE MADE NATIONAL PROPERTY.³⁸

Conclusions

- 26 Was there a single defining feature of the various Chartist positions on land reform ? There was and it can be described as neo-Spencean. The ostensibly Janus-headed stance of the Chartists, at once critical of private ownership of the soil and yet zealous in promoting smallholdings, ceases to be problematic once we register that the key issue for all Chartist land reformers was access to – rather than direct ownership of – the land. All Chartist conceptions of land reform shared a “way of seeing” land that was shaped by ideas of shared access, usage and control rather than by possessive individualism.
- 27 Concluding a lengthy account (spread over three weeks) of Spence’s life and trial, *Northern Star* commented : “As yet no stone or other memorial marks the spot where this persecuted friend of mankind at length found rest. When will the gratitude of the working classes raise a fitting monument to commemorate the virtues, and martyr-like sacrifices, of this model man of their ‘order’ ?”³⁹ Thomas Spence mattered to Chartism. When Spence spoke of “the real rights”, or “the whole rights” of man, he was signalling that the radical political agenda for which Paine argued had to become more radical still. Republicanism, even accompanied by progressive taxation, would not alone suffice to restore humanity to the natural state Spence believed necessary and possible. In Chartism’s emphatic drive for radical parliamentary reform, we can see the working out of Paineite thinking. And in the same movement’s impulse towards agrarian reform, we can see the working out of Spencean thinking.

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NOTES

1. J. M. Davidson, *Scotia Rediviva* (London, 1890), p. 95.
2. H. M. Hyndman, *Nationalisation of the Land in 1775 and 1882* (London, 1882).
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30. *Northern Star* 8 December 1849.
31. See his interpolations as translator in Bronterre, *Buonarroti's History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality*, p. 69 (agrarian law) and pp. 213-22 and 433-48 (similarities between Babouvism and the socialism of Robert Owen)
32. For example, apart from advertisements for O'Brien's translation of *Buonarroti*, Babeuf was mentioned in *Northern Star* only three times in its 15 year history: 26 October 1844, 26 September 1846, 21 October 1848.
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ABSTRACTS

A deep engagement with Spence's ideas can be found in the Chartist movement. In its drive for radical parliamentary reform, we can see the working out of Paineite thinking. And in Chartism's impulse towards agrarian reform, we can see the working out of Spencean thinking. Uncritical

deference to Paine's memory has often obscured the contribution of others among his contemporaries to radical political thought. In the field of agrarian ideas, it was Spence not Paine whose influence was the more decisive. This is evident even in the writings of Paine's indefatigable disciple Richard Carlile. Four elements underpinned all Chartist thinking on landed property and they also encapsulated the essence of Spence's ideas. 1] A fundamental belief that smallholder cultivation maximised the productivity of the soil. 2] Hostility to *large* holdings of landed property, irrespective of their legal form. 3] A suspicion of central government as a potential owner or manager of the national estate. 4] Land holding was part of a broader assault upon the citadel of economic and political power. This article will now briefly consider each in turn.

Le mouvement Chartiste s'enracine dans la pensée de Thomas Spence. Si la quête de réforme parlementaire radicale des Chartistes s'inscrit dans leur interprétation de l'œuvre de Paine, c'est chez Spence qu'il convient de rechercher la source de leur projet de réforme agraire. Paine a souvent suscité une déférence sans nuance qui a tendu à rejeter dans l'ombre certains de ses contemporains pourtant également influents en matière de pensée politique radicale. En matière de réforme agraire, c'est l'influence de Spence, et non celle de Paine, qui s'est avérée la plus pertinente. Cela se manifeste même dans les écrits de Richard Carlile, le disciple le plus zélé de Paine. Quatre éléments sous-tendaient la pensée Chartiste en matière de propriété foncière— quatre éléments également au cœur des idées de Spence. 1] La conviction que la petite propriété foncière permettait de maximiser la production du sol. 2] L'hostilité aux grands domaines de propriété foncière, quelle qu'en soit la forme légale. 3] La défiance envers le gouvernement en tant que propriétaire ou gestionnaire potentiel du domaine national. 4] La propriété foncière s'inscrivait dans une attaque plus large des citadelles du pouvoir économique et politique. Cet article se propose d'étudier chacun de ces quatre aspects.

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