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December 27, 2011

"The French Revolution was nothing but a precursor of another revolution, one that will be bigger, more solemn, and which will be the last."

-Gracchus Babeuf and Sylvain Maréchal
Manifesto Of The Equals [1796]

I.

Every generation rescues Tom Paine from the forces of reaction. Now it is our turn.

Paine's last major redemption came in 1983, four years after the arch-reactionary Ronald Reagan quoted from Paine's *Common Sense* to announce his bid for the presidency. Reagan said, "When Washington's men were freezing at Valley Forge, Tom Paine told his fellow Americans: 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.' We still have that power. ... [Americans] want someone who believes they can 'begin the world over again.' A leader who will unleash their great strength and remove the roadblocks government has put in their way."[1] Note that Paine said that *we* have the power; Reagan claimed that Americans wanted a leader who would "unleash" this power. A shifted pronoun is sometimes all it takes to turn revolutionary theory into a counter-revolutionary mantra. Reagan cynically enlisted Paine in a project to beat down American workers (he later fired 90% of air-traffic controllers in the country for exercising their right to strike) and to humiliate people of color (Reagan coined the term "welfare queen" during his 1976 presidential campaign). Paine once remarked, "But equality is often misunderstood, often misapplied, and often violated"—and he might as well have been speaking straight to Reagan.[2] The comment was actually directed to the French Executive Directory, the bourgeois oligarchy that had by 1796 consolidated power in revolutionary Paris, purging the sans-culottes from political life.

But Paine couldn't be used to oppress and impoverish for long. In 1983, on a 12-inch single called *Renegades of Funk*, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force roared back, "No matter how hard you try you can't stop this now," foregrounding in revolutionary certainty one of the most radical interpretations of Paine ever recorded:

Nothing stays the same,
There were always renegades,
Like Chief Sitting Bull, Tom Paine,
Like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X![3]

Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force rescued Paine's rebel spirit, seeing in him shades of Black and indigenous organizers who stared down American racism and campaigns of extermination. This was not a spurious linkage; Paine hailed the Haitian Revolution in an 1805 letter to his terrified slave-owning friend, President Thomas Jefferson. While Paine's Black freedom and pro-indigenous credentials have sometimes been overstated, the Soul Sonic Force's interpretation—renegade—was far closer than Reagan's to the reality of Paine's life, and

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[1] Ronald Reagan, "Official Announcement of Candidacy for President," (New York: November 13, 1979). http://reagan2020.us/speeches/candidacy_announcement.asp.

[2] Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, http://www.ssa.gov/history/paine4.html.

[3] Afrika Bambaataa, Arthur Baker, John Miller, and John Robie. "Renegades of Funk," *Afrika Bambaataa & Soul Sonic Force: Renegades of Funk* [12" Single] (New York: Tommy Boy/Warner Brothers Records, 1983).

especially his death: "Only five people followed the coffin to the grave—[including] two negroes who had travelled 25 miles on foot to honour the man who had fought so long for the rights of everyman..."[4]

The man's transnational pursuit of revolution, his hatred of monarchy and his ferocious defense of freedom of speech, his deism and critique of the divinity of Christ, and his heterodox natural-rights theory earned him the scorn of British monarchs and ministers (William Pitt particularly despised him, eventually having him tried for sedition and thrown out of Britain), French royalists, Edmund Burke, Robespierre (who condemned him to a French prison in 1793), English agrarian radicals like Thomas Spence (who thought he didn't go nearly far enough in fighting for the poor and the landless), and virtually the entire John Adams administration.

For centuries, everyone has had an opinion. Theodore Roosevelt called him a "filthy little atheist."

As early as 1826, just seventeen years after Paine's death, an anonymous editor in Springfield, Massachusetts implored Americans and "every sincere friend of liberty" to "rescue the name of Paine from the odium which has been so unjustly attached to it by his enemies."[5] People threw rocks at Paine's carriage when he was an old man in New Rochelle, New York; he had retired from the American and French Revolutions and was unable, after decades of trying, to inspire a Second English Revolution. Mark O. Kistler noted that German refugees to the United States from the failed 1848 Revolution helped to reintroduce Americans to Paine in the middle of the nineteenth century; in German-American communities in the middle of the nineteenth century, Paine's birthday was a public festival.[6] Ian Dyck emphasized Paine's cosmopolitanism and his border-crossing, but massively overstated his attachment to laissez-faire economics, and somehow imagined that Paine was a snob: "[H]e valued the countryside only in so far as it was to finance his welfare programme. Rural people, in Paine's estimation, were inescapably backward in their politics and culture…"[7] Eric Foner, under the sway of the linguistic turn historiography of the Seventies, departed from his father's and uncles' readings of Paine as a social(ist) revolutionary and political freedom fighter, advancing instead an argument about Paine as a literary revolutionary: "What made Paine unique was that he forged a new political language. He did not simply change the meanings of words, he created a literary style designed to bring his message to widest possible audience. …his arguments were rooted in the common experiences of a mass readership. Paine helped to extend political discussion beyond the narrow confines of the eighteenth century's 'political nation' (the classes actively involved in politics, to whom most previous political writing had been addressed). Through this new language, he communicated a new vision—a utopian image of egalitarian republican society."[8] The Tom Paine literature is vast, the interpretations innumerable, and it's not difficult to understand why.

In this essay, I trace changing interpretations of Tom Paine's theories of class and social revolution over two centuries of scholarship, with particular attention to what many scholars have called his last great pamphlet, *Agrarian*

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4 David Powell, *Tom Paine: The Greatest Exile* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 263.

5 Anon., "Biographical Sketch," *The Political Works of Thomas Paine* (Springfield, MA: Peter Raynolds, Tannatt & Co. Printers, 1826), xxix.

6 Mark O. Kistler, "German-American Liberalism and Thomas Paine," *American Quarterly* 14 (1) (Spring 1962), 84.

7 Ian Dyck, "Local Attachments, National Identities and World Citizenship in the Thought of Tom Paine," *History Workshop Journal* (35) (Spring 1993), 123.

8 Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), xvi.

Justice. Paine wrote it in France in the winter of 1795 and 1796, in the wake of the French bourgeoisie's counter-revolution—the Thermidorian Reaction—and after the massacres of the Jacobins and sans-culottes. I argue that *Agrarian Justice* was the product of Paine's natural-rights liberalism transformed by a new revolutionary consciousness: the experience of sans-culottes in the streets of Paris, and particularly, the writings and attempted revolution of history's first communists—Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals.

II.

The full text of *Agrarian Justice* is reproduced on the Social Security Administration's website, and not for nothing: in 1796, Paine called for the creation of a national fund to guarantee an income to "the blind, the lame, and the aged poor" in addition to a grant to every citizen upon reaching the age of 21—all to be funded by a tax on the inheritance of land. Paine's reasoning and prose was, as always, simple and clear: "…the earth, in its natural uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, the *common property of the human race*; that in that state, every person would have been born to property; and that the system of landed property, by its inseparable connection with cultivation, and with what is called civilized life, has absorbed the property of all those whom it dispossessed, without providing, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss."[9] The state would redistribute this long-lost landed wealth to all of the people in the form of old-age pensions and a guaranteed grant upon reaching their majority. By virtue of its appearance on the Social Security Administration's website, Paine's *Agrarian Justice* is the early precedent for the New Deal in the official historiography of the American State; it is the bridge between natural-rights liberalism and social democracy. In 1943, the political scientist Howard Penniman made this argument in the clearest possible terms:

> ...[Paine] acted like some present-day reformers who attempt to persuade business men that it is to their own interest to have trade unions organized in their industries. The argument, whether valid or invalid, is not made out of any desire to aid business men but to aid labor. ... To argue that Paine and Hamilton believed in the same sort of economic organization has no more meaning than to argue that President Roosevelt and Henry Ford both believe in capitalism.[10]

In fact, Paine went much further than many moderate New Dealers would have gone: "…the accumulation of personal property is, in many instances, the effect of paying too little for the labor that produced it; the consequence of which is that the working hand perishes in old age, and the employer abounds in affluence."[11] This is not only the labor theory of value; this is a theory of exploitation.

The idea has not ceased to be controversial, even decades after Social Security became the law of the land. In an otherwise progressive 1990 article calling for greater inheritance taxes, Mark L. Ascher described Paine's proposal in *Agrarian Justice* as nothing short of "staggering death taxes."[12] In 1826, more than a hundred years before the New Deal,

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[9] Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, http://www.ssa.gov/history/paine4.html.

[10] Howard Penniman, "Thomas Paine – Democrat," *The American Political Science Review* 37 (2) (April 1943), 251-252.

[11] Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, http://www.ssa.gov/history/paine4.html.

[12] Mark L. Ascher, "Curtailing Inherited Wealth," *Michigan Law Review* 89 (1) (October 1990), 94.

Paine's redistributive politics were simply too astonishing to fully grasp. An anonymous American compiler of Paine's writings remarked simply, "In 1797, he published a tract, entitled Agrarian Justice, which abounded in enlightened and liberal views on the subject of civil government and social order."[13] This editor's choice of the words *enlightened* and *liberal* was telling; this was the only lexicon available in the early Republic to describe secular progressive thought.

But in *Agrarian Justice*, Paine's old-school John Locke conception of natural rights was joined by the newfound social science of *justice*. "France," Paine wrote, "has had the honor of adding to the word Liberty that of Equality," and what's more, "the rights of man are a new *study* in this world."[14] Here, unlike other passages in *Agrarian Justice*, the language verges on the social-scientific; it is not moral, it is not religious, and it does not fall back on natural-rights tautologies. In writing this pamphlet, Paine seemed to have developed a reflexive theory of history, situating his own discovery of new rights in his experiences during the unfolding French Revolution: "In advocating the case of the persons thus dispossessed, it is a right, and not a charity, that I am pleading for. But it is that kind of right which, being neglected at first, could not be brought forward afterwards till heaven had opened the way by a revolution in the system of government."[15] Paine is arguing that certain rights are discovered or indeed *created* at certain junctures in history; that while natural-rights may exist forever, some of them can only be known after a real social revolution in the streets has created a new, revolutionary consciousness:

> Considering, then, the plan on the ground of justice, it ought to be the act of the whole growing spontaneously out of the principles of the revolution, and the reputation of it ought to be national and not individual. A plan upon this principle would benefit the revolution by the energy that springs from the consciousness of justice.[16]

It is for this reason that intellectual history can never exist separate from the history of social movements. And it is passages like these which led C.E. Merriam Jr. to comment in 1899 that, "'The rights of man' are turned with equal ease to the support of either scientific anarchy or a socialistic system. Paine, it is true, was neither a socialist nor an anarchist; but there was nothing in his fundamental theory to hinder him from becoming the one or the other."[17]

Paine's appeal to the Old Left was immense, particularly during the period of the Popular Front, when the Communist Party of the United States worked with the broadest possible coalition in order to fight fascism and its appeal to the working class. The emphasis was thus on the virtues of American democracy, pluralism, freedom of speech, and in pushing the New Deal's social-democratic programs and vague civil rights commitments as far as they would go. In this moment, Paine was a Popular Front hero. As a legacy of this Popular Front love affair with Paine, two generations of Foners have devoted books to the man: before Eric Foner, there was his unabashedly Marxist uncle Philip S. Foner. The elder Foner had already been blacklisted from the academy for four years when the CP-linked Citadel Press published his two-volume anthology *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* in 1945. *Agrarian Justice* figured centrally in Philip

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[13] Anon., "Biographical Sketch," *The Political Works of Thomas Paine* (Springfield, MA: Peter Raynolds, Tannatt & Co. Printers, 1826), xxi.

[14] Paine, emphasis mine, *Agrarian Justice*, http://www.ssa.gov/history/paine4.html.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] C.E. Merriam Jr., "Tom Paine's Political Theories," *Political Science Quarterly* 14 (3) (September 1899), 401. Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

Foner's analysis of Paine. And of course it was the elder Foner who traced Paine's newfound social-democratic thought to its origins in the communism of Gracchus Babeuf, the first person to transform the communitarian impulse into action. Foner writes of the first, impossible attempt at armed communist revolution during the winter of the bourgeois reaction:

> …a movement was initiated by the Directory to crush the remnants of the radical forces among the masses to pave the way for the unchallenged rule of the upper classes. In an effort to overthrow the counter-revolution and to seize power and wield it against the upper classes, the radical forces, led by Babeuf, made preparations for a coup d'etat. … This was the situation when Paine's *Agrarian Justice* was published. He did not go as far as Babeuf, although he approved of the objective of the insurrection in aiming to remove social inequalities in property.[18]

As Claeys and others have noted, Philip Foner's enthusiasm slightly obscured Paine's politics here. *Agrarian Justice* is built on the separation of "natural property" (earth, air, and water) from "artificial" or "acquired" property (that is to say, property created by human beings in society). Paine considered equality in "artificial" property impossible, and only used the *theoretical* equality in "natural" property to build the theoretical underpinnings for a mild, bureaucratic redistribution of wealth. Paine was never a revolutionary socialist—not because he didn't have the critique, but because he didn't want to follow it through to its logical conclusion. In his assessment, Philip Foner was only mostly right: correct in locating the communist origins of Paine's critique, but failing to emphasize that Paine was offering a moderate social-democratic alternative to it. To underscore the moderation of his proposal, Paine was at pains to differentiate his proposal for "agrarian justice" from the old demand of "agrarian law": total land reform and the redistribution of all estates to the landless:

> Nothing could be more unjust than agrarian law in a country improved by cultivation; for though every man, as an inhabitant of the earth, is a joint proprietor of it in its natural state, it does not follow that he is a joint proprietor of cultivated earth. The additional value made by cultivation, after the system was admitted, became the property of those who did it, or who inherited it from them, or who purchased it. It had originally no owner. While, therefore, I advocate the right, and interest myself in the hard case of all those who have been thrown out of their natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property, I equally defend the right of the possessor to the part which is his.[19]

But while Foner's argument—that Paine approved of the redistributive goal of the Conspiracy of Equals—was slightly overstated, it's very clear that in *Agrarian Justice,* Paine transcended Lockean ideas of labor and property: ideas which saw property as the necessary consequence of individual labor mixed with the earth. Paine took this line in parts of the pamphlet, but in moments, other voices and a different critique are clearly the dominant substrate of Paine's argument. Apparently forgetting that he had claimed equality in "artificial" or socially-produced property was impossible, Paine wrote toward the conclusion of *Agrarian Justice*, "All accumulation, therefore, of personal property, beyond what a man's own hands produce, is derived to him by living in society; and he owes on every principle of justice, of gratitude, and of civilization, a part of that accumulation back again to society from whence the whole came." This social understanding of production is the basis of all socialist thought—but Paine refused to follow it to its logical conclusion.

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[18] Philip Sheldon Foner, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine, Volume Ihttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEZ-e6tBigY* (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), xxxix.

[19] Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, http://www.ssa.gov/history/paine4.html.

In response, Thomas Spence, the English agrarian radical who called for the socialization of all land, commented with alacrity in his *The Rights of Infants* [1796], "But may we not ask who improved the land? Did the proprietors alone work and toil at this improvement? And did we labourers and our forefathers stand, like Indians and Hottentots, idle spectators of so much public-spirited industry? I suppose not. Nay, on the contrary, it is evident to the most superficial enquirer that the labouring classes ought principally to be thanked for every improvement."[20] Paine pretended that the dispossession of the rural poor and the creation of private property happened in the deep past, when agriculture was invented – when, in fact, the enclosure of common lands was within the living memory of many Britons into Paine's day. Thomas Spence's writing bears witness to the seizure of the commons, and Spence's radical critique calls for social ownership of the land as the necessary response: "O, you bloody landed interest! you band of robbers! Why do you call yourselves ladies and gentlemen? Why do you assume soft names, you beasts of prey? Too well do your emblazoned arms and escutcheons witness the ferocity of your bloody and barbarous origin! … Well then, since you have compelled, since you have driven us, through your cruel bondage, to emancipate ourselves, we will even try to do without you…"[21]

Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals went still further, to the logical conclusion of this line of thought. Babeuf too had a critique of the agrarian law, but instead of redistribution of land, or even the socialization of all land, the Babeuvists wanted common ownership of all land *and the products of all labor*—in short, total communism. Babeuf's comrade Sylvain Maréchal wrote in the 1796 *Manifesto of the Equals*:

> The Agrarian law, or the partitioning of land, was the spontaneous demand of some unprincipled soldiers, of some towns moved more by their instinct than by reason. We reach for something more sublime and more just: *the common good* or the *community of goods!* No more individual property in land: *the land belongs to no one.*
>
> We demand, we want, the common enjoyment of the fruits of the land: *the fruits belong to all.*
>
> We declare that we can no longer put up with the fact that the great majority work and sweat for the smallest of minorities.
>
> Long enough, and for too long, less than a million individuals have disposed of that which belongs to 20 million of their like, their equals.
>
> Let it at last end, this great scandal that our descendants will never believe existed! Disappear at last, revolting distinctions between rich and poor, great and small, masters and servants, *rulers* and *ruled.*[22]

The spectre of communism haunted Paine's work—and as we shall see, he acknowledged it.

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[20] Thomas Spence, *The Rights of Infants; Or, the Imprescriptable Right of Mothers to Such A Share of the Elements as Is Sufficient to Enable Them to Suckle and Bring up Their Young in A Dialogue between the Aristocracy and A Mother of Children. To Which Are Added, by Way of Preface and Appendix, Strictures on Paine's Agrarian Justice* (London: 1796).

[21] Ibid.

[22] Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals, *The Manifesto of the Equals* (Paris: 1796), http://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1796/manifesto.htm.

IV.

Agrarian Justice did not appear out of thin air; it had precedent even in Paine's own work. Paine published *The Rights of Man Part II* in 1792 when he was one of the most radical people in England (after he was the chief propagandist of the American Revolution, but before he was—simply by comparison with the sans-culottes, Robespierre, and Babeuf—one of the most moderate revolutionaries in France). In this seminal work, Paine proposed an elaborate system of social welfare to replace England's antiquated poor laws. The scope of the welfare state he imagined was breathtaking—some of it was never realized, not even in Sweden or on the Israeli kibbutzim—but his proposal was motivated by sympathy for the poor, not an economic analysis of their exploitation as workers or their dispossession from communal land. These benefits were to be funded by a progressive tax on wealth, but Paine could not yet claim that justice and reason required the redistribution of wealth—he could only make pragmatic arguments about the utility of a more equitable society. In 1928, the economic historian Alfred Plummer summarized Paine's vision in the *Rights of Man Part II*:

> In addition to assistance for poor families and pensions for the aged, Paine proposed that the State should provide maternity donations, marriage gifts, and allowances to cover "the funeral expenses of persons, who, travelling for work, may die at a distance from their friends."[23]

Plummer situated both the *Rights of Man Part II* and *Agrarian Justice* in the history of English poor relief, juxtaposing both texts with various Parliamentary proposals from the mid-eighteenth century to the 1820s. The historiography of early-modern relief may well fit the *Rights of Man*, but even a passing glance at *Agrarian Justice* reveals a qualitatively different Paine:

> On one side, the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other, he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness; both of which it has erected. The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilized.
> …
>
> The thing, therefore, now to be done is to remedy the evils and preserve the benefits that have arisen to society by passing from the natural to that which is called the civilized state. In taking the matter upon this ground, the first principle of civilization ought to have been, and ought still to be, that the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period.[24]

How did Paine come to such a radical critique only four years after he'd advanced a philanthropic welfare state?

Very few scholars have given Paine's first preface to *Agrarian Justice* ample attention; he dedicated the piece to the Legislature and, acidly, to the Executive Directory of the French Republic. In this preface, omitted from the first English-language printings of the pamphlet and still occasionally absent from reprints, Paine makes totally clear the intellectual origins of his discovery of the right to redistributed wealth. Writing in the winter of 1795 and 1796, Paine positioned himself to the left of the bourgeois Executive Directory and "some obscure personages who decorate themselves with the despicable name of 'royalists,'" and to the right of the first "communists," though the word didn't exist yet. (Anachronisms be damned; I will use it because that is what Babeuf was; at the very least, Marx and Engels claimed him as the first communist in *The Holy Family*.) Paine's

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[23] Alfred Plummer, "Some Aspects of the History and Theory of Social Insurance," *Economica* (20) (June 1927): 203-223.

[24] Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, http://www.ssa.gov/history/paine4.html.

triangulation was deft and it was pithy, as always. He began by excoriating the bourgeois Directory's poll tax and property requirements for voting, calling this narrow suffrage a "defect."[25] In lashing the French right, Paine acknowledged his intellectual debt to and political distance from Gracchus Babeuf:

> The defect in principle of the Constitution was the origin of Babeuf's conspiracy. He availed himself of the resentment caused by this flaw, and instead of seeking a remedy by legitimate and constitutional means, or proposing some measure useful to society, the conspirators did their best to renew disorder and confusion, and constituted themselves personally into a Directory, which is formally destructive of election and representation. They were, in fine, extravagant enough to suppose that society, occupied with its domestic affairs, would blindly yield to them a directorship usurped by violence.[26]

The message was clear: democracy or communism. This was Paine, under pressure from the new communist Left, inventing a soft social democracy. It is an astonishing historical parallel: at the very origins of socialist thought, there was European Communism and an "American" response to it. Babeuf's "Conspiracy of Equals" forced an innovation in liberalism: Paine's agrarian welfare state. This is a perfect parallel to the implementation of socialism centuries later: with capitalism in crisis, the Soviet alternative compelled the US to build a welfare state in the Thirties—the New Deal and Social Security.

V.

The question is not, as Werner Sombart and Eric Foner after him have asked: "Why is there no socialism in the United States?"[27] Research that begins from this point ends in self-fulfilling prophecy. The question focuses attention on the historical obstacles to socialism in the United States instead of the many instances of workers' and people's struggle in our past; the result is not a usable past, but history as fatalism. "Look," it says, "we've always been this way—and we always will be." When historians say that rugged individualism, racial and ethnic strife, and strategic errors on the Left have doomed American socialism, it becomes that much harder to imagine a struggle to replace capitalism with a democratically-controlled economy. In this way, "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" is perfect capitalist ideology, and even Eric Foner's 1984 essay critiquing the question ended in fatalism: "Only time will tell whether the United States has been behind Europe in the development of socialism, or ahead of it, in socialism's decline."[28]

We need a new question. The autumn of Occupy Wall Street recedes into a winter of planning, strategy, and research.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" History Workshop Journal 17(1) (1984), 57-80.

Let us put aside for the moment the fact that the premise of the question is totally false; there was and there is socialism in the United States. Artisans and mechanics founded the first labor party in the world, the Working Men's Party, in Philadelphia in 1829; the colossal general strikes of 1886 and the Haymarket riots in Chicago gave the world May Day; as Foner notes, the American Socialist Party held fast to its opposition to the imperialist Great War when the European Second International parties caved; members of the socialist group Solidarity, members of the Industrial Workers of the World, and a dozen other socialist factions have played a pivotal role in this year's Verizon strike, the occupation of the Wisconsin State Capitol, Bloombergville, Occupy Wall Street, and so on.

[28] Ibid 76.

Hobsbawm argued that the French Revolution was a "landmark in all countries," a fundamental eradication of the old order, the revolution of its time; its "direct influence radiated as far as Bengal."[29] He also regarded the American Revolution as the "most important immediate precursor and stimulator" to what he calls the "dual-revolution:" the social and political one, in France, and the industrial one, in Britain.[30] But these were far from the only ruptures at the end of the eighteenth century; Hobsbawm noted an entire constellation of popular revolutions:

> The later eighteenth century…was an age of crisis for the old regimes of Europe and their economic systems, and its last decades were filled with political agitations sometimes reaching the point of revolt, of colonial movements for autonomy sometimes reaching that of secession: not only in the USA (1776-1783), but also in Ireland (1782-4), in Belgium and Liège (1787-1790), in Holland (1783-1787), in Geneva, even —it has been argued—in England (1779). So striking is this clustering of political unrest that some recent historians have spoken of an 'age of democratic revolution' of which the French was only one, though the most dramatic and far-reaching.[31]

The pattern bears more than a passing resemblance to this year's revolutions and revolts: in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen; to the Wisconsin workers' resistance to austerity and the obliteration of the right to organize a union; to the global proliferation of Occupy Wall Street; to the mass-mobilizations in Russia and Israel—and to the Siege of Wukan, China, where the people momentarily chased away their pseudo-Communist rulers to stop the transfer of communal land to a real-estate developer.

The price of a loaf of bread, the enclosure of common lands, and the declining wages of moribund economic systems overseen by corrupt figureheads will always be deep-structural reasons for revolution. While this year's revolutions and uprisings have been manifestations of cross-class populism, not socialism, most of them have had economic demands. Very few of them, however, have been consistently led by the working class. Next year will be better: the earliest phases of the Egyptian Revolution and the sustained struggle of labor unions in Wisconsin (almost to the point of a general strike, before the Democratic Party and top union brass called it off) should serve as models.

VI.

I am calling for a usable past without resort to a Whiggish or Stalinist historiography. We cannot assume a glorious future for socialism in the United States—necessarily one front in an international struggle—by assuming that the most recent attempt will always be the best, or by ignoring very real difficulties in the movement's American past. So I submit a more practical question: "Why is there socialism in the United States, despite the obstacles?"

To begin to answer this question, we need to go back to basics—to the moment when the chief propagandist of the American Revolution and the first revolutionary socialist crossed paths in France, in the reactionary winter of 1795 to 1796. As Paine the internationalist realized, revolutionary theory is rewritten every time there are sans-culottes in the streets. History, too.

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[29] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996, orig. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), 54.

[30] Ibid. 2.

[31] Ibid. 54.