

In Defence of Thomas Paine
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Congratulations to L.S. Andersen for his essay “Thomas Paine and Agrarian Justice” (*Land&Liberty*, Issue 1233, Winter 2014, pp. 6-12) reminding Georgists of the prescience of one of Henry George’s most important precursors. As the late Julien Gross suggested, a statue of Paine deserves to occupy the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square as a counterweight to the effigies of the military heroes that top the other three plinths now.

Like George, Paine was appalled by the co-existence of “both the immense affluence and the abject poverty that he saw around him”. Like George, Paine thought that the most effective – and the fairest – way to end poverty without undermining affluence was to use the value of land as *a* (if not *the*) source of public revenue. Paine said so in his great book *Agrarian Justice* (1797).

But (apparently unlike George), Paine was “well aware” of “the puzzle...of how to distinguish...between the value of the land and the value of its improvements”. Perhaps George solved that problem. But the present-day Georgists I have approached have so far failed to reveal that solution – though there are signs that some of them (such as Fred Harrison and Mark Wadsworth) are at length striving to deal with the dilemma.

Whereas Paine did two things that George and most of his latter-day disciples have not done. First, he did his sums. Then he proposed what to do with them. He calculated (naïvely or not) that collecting the value of land would yield enough money to “create a National Fund” that would provide everyone from 21 to 50 with £15 a year and eventually everyone 50 or older with £25 a year. Not bad for 1797 !

Thomas Paine, a practical politician if ever there was one, understood better than Henry George that to attract supporters you must be specific in your recommendations rather than airy-fairy general, concrete rather than abstract. In particular, by offering to the people a Guaranteed Annual Income financed by collecting the Value of Land, he presented to us the vision of a society in which (as another social critic put it memorably) “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”.