

Kinder Institute Summer Teachers Academy, 2019  
Intro and readings for “The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America”  
Daniel Mandell, Professor of History, Truman State University

Today the United States of America has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. As a result of recent judicial decisions, the spending of corporate and individual money to influence elections and policy is afforded the same protection as speech, and corporations are granted extraordinary powers. While Americans cherish political and social equality, at least rhetorically, most oppose efforts to limit the concentration of corporate power and wealth and demonstrate hostility to progressive taxes that would redistribute wealth and services downward. They view the individual accumulation of great wealth as evidence of talent and hard work and one of the most cherished freedoms guaranteed by the Founding Fathers. But in fact, the United States was shaped in part by a radical tradition of economic equality, and the notion that the health and stability of a commonwealth depended on relative economic equality without extremes of terrible poverty or great wealth. The common corollary was that an elected republican government had the duty and power to maintain that happy condition. Our session will explore evolving tradition in America of economic equality, from the Revolution through Reconstruction.

For centuries, Europeans had assumed that all power (political, social, and economic) was connected, as reflected in feudalism and the emergence of absolute monarchs. But when the contest between king and Parliament exploded into the English Civil War in the 1640s, some radicals (inspired by radical Protestantism reflecting the Biblical Jubilee) called for all Englishmen to share land and wealth as well as political power. While these Diggers were soon suppressed, their ideals continued to have power through writings like James Harrington’s famous novel *Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). Those radical ideas about equality and republican government approached reality in the America colonies, particularly New England, thanks largely to the land and other resources “provided” by indigenous peoples.

As the imperial conflict between Parliament and its American provinces developed in the late 1760s, “patriot” propagandists urged other Americans to preserve their “liberty” and “republican virtue” by (as “Brutus” wrote in 1769) avoiding “the temptations of ease and luxury”—i.e., to put the needs of their community ahead of their personal fortune. Benjamin Trumbull’s 1773 election day sermon in Connecticut (document A) reflects those concerns. When the War for Independence erupted, there were widespread efforts to control prices and greed at the local, state, regional, and national level, reflecting traditional concepts of the “just price” and more radical egalitarian republican ideals; see document B. But at about the same time, some Americans began to argue that the rules restraining free market pricing violated the Revolution’s natural principles of liberty and property; see document C.

- A. Benjamin Trumbull, *A Discourse, Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting of the Freemen of the Town of New-Haven, April 12, 1773* (New-Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1773), pp. cover, 1<sup>st</sup> page of text (6?), 30-33.
- B. Plymouth County meeting of committees of safety and their resolve, *Boston Gazette*, June 16, 1777.
- C. Connecticut Courant column defending liberal ideal of property, “To Mr. Watson,” *Connecticut Courant*, May 12, 1777, p. 1

After winning independence, Americans generally embraced equality instead of regarding it as dreaded anarchy and saw their new country as the most egalitarian nation on earth. But at the same time, they began to view capital as a source of affluence, vehemently opposed the creation of corporations as a source of privileged power, were increasingly concerned that an aristocracy of

wealth could corrupt the republic and called for measures to ensure future economic equality. A few even advocated legal limits on individual property; at least one state legislator even called for the Biblical Jubilee.

D. "In the House of Representatives," Connecticut *Courant*, June 11, 1787, p. 1

There is no question that the new liberal ideas of individual property rights became dominant, especially at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that Americans became increasingly willing to accept social hierarchies and the inequalities of wealth that accompanied the explosive growth of cities and the rise of mass production and wage labor. That acceptance came easier as new state constitutions severed the traditional connections between property ownership and political participation. But the older tradition remained and during bad times grew stronger, as in the wake of the Panic of 1819, the first great depression in the country's history. Laborers and artisans in northeastern cities organized workingmen's parties to push for reforms, and some became part of the nascent socialist movement. In New York, a mass meeting in October 1829 adopted the following manifesto:

E. "The Report and Resolutions of the Committee of Fifty," in John R. Commons, ed., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, 10 vols. (1910-1911), 5: 149-151, <https://archive.org/details/documentaryhist05comm/page/149>.

This labor movement was by the Panic of 1837, but soon new egalitarian efforts with similar ideas took their place. This included the new interest in communitarian living, from the religious Shaker villages to the Fourier phalanxes that included the Transcendentalist Brook Farm near Boston. More significant was the National Reform Association, organized in 1844 by former "Workies" in New York City, which renewed and popularized Digger agrarian ideals in supporting radical land reform in their own state, and calling for a national law reserving free homesteads on federal land for actual settlers, a limitation (160 acres) on the amount of such land any person could hold, and a ten-hour work day for laborers.

F. NRA manifesto in *Young America*, August 1845.

G. *The Jubilee*, "Plan for Restoring the Land of New York to the People."

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**A discourse, delivered at the anniversary meeting of the freemen of the town of New-Haven, April 12, 1773. By Benjamin Trumbull, A.M. Pastor of the church in North-Haven.**

Trumbull, Benjamin, 1735-1820.

[Table of contents](#) | [Add to bookbag](#)

[<< Previous section](#)   [Next section >>](#)

Page [unnumbered]

DISCOURSE, DELIVERED AT THE ANNIVERSARY MEETING OF THE  
FREEMEN OF THE TOWN OF NEW-HAVEN, APRIL 12, 1773.

By BENJAMIN TRUMBULL, A. M. PASTOR OF THE CHURCH IN NORTH-  
HAVEN.

NEW-HAVEN: PRINTED BY THOMAS AND SAMUEL GREEN.  
M,DCC,LXXIII.

[<< Previous section](#)   [Next section >>](#)



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[Table of contents](#) | [Add to bookbag](#)

<< Previous section    Next section >>

Page [unnumbered]

**EXODUS I.8. NOW THERE AROSE UP A NEW KING OVER EGYPT, WHICH KNEW NOT JOSEPH.**

\_IT will be thought strange, no doubt, at least at first view, that the preacher should make choice of a Text like this, upon such an occasion as the present. The audience will say,

What relation can the story of Joseph, and the history of the Egyptian kings, have to the important business on which we are assembled? What remarks can be made on Pharaoh's ignorance of Joseph, on his cruel oppression of the Hebrews, or on his despotic government of his Egyptian subjects, which can afford instruction or entertainment suited to the circumstances of this free meeting?

However if we view the words more accurately, and enter fully into the story of which they are a part, we may, perhaps, judge, that none could have been more proper: That no topick could have given a finer lead to such sentiments, as are pelcularly adapted to an occasion like the present.

THE Egyptians seem to have been particularly haplpy, in along succession of native kings, from the reign of Misraim or Menes, the founder of the kingdom of Egypt, to the reign of Concharis or Timaeus, the twenty fifth king of Tanis or of the lower division of

Page 6

Egypt, for the term of about six centuries and a half\*. During this long period the Egyptians, (as did most nations in these early times,) enjoyed great freedom, noble immunities and privileges. Especially, was this the case, until the latter part of the reign of Thusilmars, the twentieth king of Tanis or of the lower division of Egypt. About the thirteenth year of his reign Joseph the Hebrew was advanced to the office of prime minister in the court of Pharaoh. Near thirteen years after his advancement, towards the close of that remarkable famine, which then prevailed over Egypt, and all the neighbouring kingdoms, he bought the Egyptians themselves, as he had their

lands and cattle before. From this time they became the servants and tenants of Pharaoh, and their former privileges suffered a great eclipse. They now held their lands of the crown, tilled them for Pharaoh, and gave a fifth of their increase, as an annual acknowledgement and tribute to their prince.

JOSEPH, who had been a father to Pharaoh, and to his subjects, seemeth to have supported his character, not only during the reign of Thusimares, but also during the three succeeding reigns: and to have been prime minister, in the courts of four princes succeslively, for the term of about eighty years.

THE government under his administration, seemeth to have been wise and gentle: and the people, though abridged of some, yet had many privileges left them.

THE great abilities and integrity of Joseph, with the eminent services he had done in Egypt, rendered

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Page 7

his name and memory dear, both to the princes whom he had served, and to the people whose saviour, as well as ruler he had been. He had advanced the crown of Egypt to a state of grandeur and opulence, which, before this time, had been unknown in that, and, perhaps, in every other kingdom.

LONG, no doubt, had the memory of Joseph and of his services been precious, and his name been honoured by the Egyptian princes and their subjects, had a succession of native kings continued to hold the sceptre. Long, no doubt, the children of Jacob would, not only, have continued to flourish, but would, for his sake, have obtained protection.

BUT about fifty years after his death, the kingdom was transferred to a foreigner.

Now there arose up a new King over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.

That is, a king of another family and nation\*. This new or foreign king, is supposed to have been Salatis, the first of the Shepherd kings, as they are commonly called. He, about the fifth year of the reign of Conlcharis or Timaeus, led a numerous army of foreigners, (probably the ancient Horites, whom the children of Esau, about this time, expelled from Mount Seir,) against Egypt. They marked their way with terrible slaughter and devastation. The inhabitants were slain, their cities and houses laid in ashes, and the country, unable to resist the fury and valour of these bloody invaders, soon made its submission. The conquerors, advanced Salatis, their principal leader, to the throne. HE knew not JOSEPH. He was a stranger to his person and services. He had no particular connections

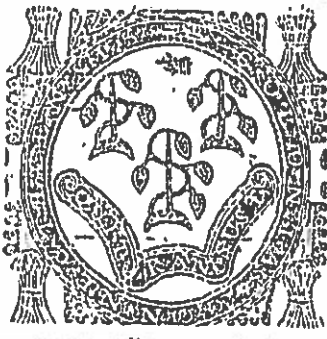
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Page 8

with the Egyptians or Hebrews. He had contracted no particular friendship or regard for either. How dear soever the benefactors and saviours of their country were to the native inhabitants, it little affected him Their good services to a country, for whose welfare, he cared nothing, could have little influence indeed with him. To maintain himself upon the throne, to which he had waded through blood and slaughter, to reward his friends, and fix



CONNECTICUT  
AND  
WEEKLY



COURANT,  
HARTFORD  
INTELLIGENCER.

Containing the Freshest ADVICES,  
Both FOREIGN and DOMESTIC.

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY EBENEZER WATSON, NEAR THE GREAT BRIDGE.

*Printing Office, Hartford, April 28, 1777.*  
The reasonable price of the necessities of life has  
been the Printer's into an unhappy dilemma. He  
is obliged to stop his business and leave his family  
without the wages of his work, and the price  
of the Paper, and other work. He has hitherto  
adhered to his former price, by which means  
he has suffered in his business, especially for  
the last month, while with indignation and fer-  
vency he beholds the power of avarice, and the infat-  
uation of the times. But what can be done? He has  
tried against the torrent of oppression till his  
resources are exhausted, and must either rise in his de-  
mand, or be reduced to beggary. And it is right to  
use the means of safety, and work as it were for  
nothing, when every necessary of life is purchased at the  
exorbitant price! No; the horrors of poverty,  
which of him like an armed force forbid it; the  
remaining wants of his family, the irresistible  
power of avarice and the great law of self-preservation,  
will prevail. As the people will not break the fatal in-  
terdict, by reducing the price of things, he is com-  
pelled to raise the price of his work. *For the Shilling*  
of the News Paper, for the News Paper, and other work  
of the same nature, is as low as he can possibly afford it, as  
it is at present. (After which the paper will  
be sold at a price of six pence on the continent.)  
This price is consistent with the regulating act, so  
that he always has, so he means still to adhere,  
should, or more universally violated, he thinks  
it reasonable in the step he has taken, and that  
he will have just cause of complaint. Those  
persons who are unwilling to comply with the above  
price are desired to send their names to the Printer  
before these weeks from this date, (at which time the  
alteration will take place) that their papers  
may stop, otherwise they will be continued to them  
in the humble terms, E. WATSON.  
Those persons who find their names to the  
Printer, that their papers may be discontinued in  
consequence of the above advertisement, are requested  
to send the money for these they have al-  
ready paid.

Things in general were raised in their prices about 50  
per cent by the Regulating Act.

*For the benefit of the PUBLIC,*  
It is requested that such riders as carry the Con-  
necticut Courant, and others, on public business  
within town for the future call at the Post Office, that  
they may receive for persons adjacent may  
be ready convenience. THOS. HILLDAVE.  
Hartford, May 6, 1777.

WINE S.  
LAGA, LISBON, TENERIFFE & RED-PORT,  
To be Sold  
By EBENEZER BERNARD, jun.  
in Hartford.

Advertisement of INDIGO, of the best kind, to  
be sold by MATHER and SMITH, in Christ-  
church, near John Pomeroy's, Suffield.

REPORTED from Capt John Bernard's company,  
Col. Wylie's regiment from time to time, Michael  
24 years of age, 4 feet 4 inches high, dark  
brown hair, dark complexion, Jacob Evans,  
25 years of age, 5 feet 8 inches high, light hair, grey  
light complexion. Thomas Gardner, 5 feet 10  
inches high, 27 years of age, has had the small pox,  
which he took up either of his right eye. Whoever  
takes up him or either of them, and returns them  
to the regiment, shall have five dollars reward for each,  
and necessary charges paid, by  
THOMAS WOODBRIDGE, Lieut.  
Hartford, April 28, 1777.

LOST by the subscriber, a brown HORSE, ab-  
out a year old, no way perfect, near hind feet  
a little white spot on his nose, no brand. Said  
horse found in the subscribers pasture. The owner  
is desired to pay charges and take him and keep  
him safe.  
KELIAN WOOLWORTH.

LOST, May 3, 1777.  
If you please to insert the following observations in your  
official paper, perhaps they will be of some service to the  
public, and oblige many of your readers. A B.  
It is with pain I have heard a great deal of talk  
about the depreciation of our paper currency.  
The arguments commonly made usual, are; the high

**Connecticut Insurance-Office:**  
THE public are hereby informed, that there is  
kept by the subscriber at his house in Witham-  
field, next door to the meeting-house, an INSURANCE  
OFFICE—The underwriters are MESSRS SAMUEL  
BROOKS, JOHN BROOKS, JEREMIAH PLATT and  
JOSEPH WEND. Any gentleman that want to have  
insurance made, may apply to any of the above gen-  
tlemen, or to  
BARNABAS DRABE.  
April 28, 1777.

Just published, and to be sold by the Printer hereof,  
PRICE ONE SHILLING,  
**The Reasons and Design of public Punishments;**  
**A SERMON,**  
Delivered before the People who were called to the  
EXECUTION

of  
**MOSES DUNBAR,**  
Who was condemned for HIGH TREASON against  
the STATE of CONNECTICUT, and executed  
March 19th, A. D. 1777.

By NATHAN STRONG,  
Pastor of the first Church in Hartford.

*Bleed and destitute Men shall not live out half their Days.*  
ALL persons indebted to the subscriber are desired to  
make immediate payment, as he designs soon to go  
abroad, and is uncertain when he shall return, and  
stands in need of his money to subsist upon.  
JESSE ROOT.  
Hartford, May 3, 1777.

STRAYED or stolen from the subscriber at  
New-Lehanon, in Albany county, on the 18th of  
April last, a MARE and two COLTS, the mare of a  
dun colour, two years old, paces and trot, the colts 2  
years old this spring, one a dark coloured bay, the  
other a more light bay, a white streak in his forehead;  
both of them brags, colls, paces and trot. Whoever  
will take up and send them to me at New-Lehanon,  
or secure them and send me word, or advertise them  
in the Hartford paper so that I may find them, shall  
have 5 dollars reward and all necessary charges paid,  
by  
ANSEL KING.  
New-Lehanon, May 3, 1777.

RAN AWAY from the subscriber, living in Coventry,  
about the first of April last, an apprentice EOY  
named Samuel Evans, jun. he is about 5 feet 7 or 8  
inches high, something slender built large blue eyes,  
a very wide mouth, broad fore teeth, talks much but  
little sense, had on and took with him a buttoned  
coloured coat and waistcoat; leather breeches, check'd  
flannel shirt, mix'd coloured stockings, black basket-  
chief, a white hunting shirt. Whoever takes up said  
boy and returns him to me the subscriber, shall have  
two copper lawful money reward, no charges paid,  
by  
STEPHEN RICHARDSON.

All persons are forbid harbouring said boy.

RAN AWAY from the subscriber in the night of  
the 16 h of April, a Negro boy named LIVER-  
POOL; had on a brown jacket, a blue cap, blue  
stockings and red vest; is a short thick fellow, about  
15 years of age. Whoever will take up and secure  
said Negro to his master may have him, shall have  
FIVE DOLLARS reward, and all reasonable charges  
paid by me his master, living near Salisbury Fer-  
race on the Oblong in Dutchess County.  
JOSEPH DAKINS.

April 26, 1777.

ALL persons that have any accounts with the estate  
of ELIZABETH NASH, late of Granby, deceased, are  
requested to bring the same to WID. PHOENIX NASH, now  
of Granby, Administrator to said estate; all indebted  
to said estate are desired to make immediate pay-  
ment to said PHOENIX.  
MAY 3, 1777.

Mr. WATSON,  
If you please to insert the following observations in your  
official paper, perhaps they will be of some service to the  
public, and oblige many of your readers. A B.  
It is with pain I have heard a great deal of talk  
about the depreciation of our paper currency.  
The arguments commonly made usual, are; the high

prices of goods and labour, and the preference which  
too many people give to a payment in silver, goods, or  
provisions, to one in paper money. These reflections  
proceed from heads and well-meaning persons, who  
know not and are ill-informed, and sometimes from our  
secret and lurking enemies, who, knowing the impor-  
tance of our paper currency at this important crisis,  
try and do every thing in their power to depreciate it.  
If I can instruct and enlighten the blind, and since the  
last, by a few arguments drawn from the nature of  
things, and founded on experience, I shall think I  
have done the public some service.

There are two causes for the depreciation of bills  
or a paper currency. First, a want of credit or means  
of redemption in the emitters. Second, a flood or  
great number of bills emitted. The first admits of no  
remedy, and must necessarily not only depreciate, but  
annihilate a current, so ill supported. The last is so  
more incident to a paper than to a gold or silver cur-  
rency. Every man versed in history, knows, that  
since the discovery of South America, and her mines,  
the value of gold and silver has sunk in Europe above  
a thousand per cent, and the price of labour and goods  
&c. rose in the same proportion. It is agreeable to  
the course of nature, that every thing should be valued  
in proportion to its scarcity or plenty. This holds as  
well with respect to gold, or silver, and precious stones,  
as every thing else.

That the first cause of depreciation, is not, nor can  
hardly ever be the case with America, while we conquer,  
and are subjected to a foreign power, must be evi-  
dent to every man of sense.

When we consider the immense resources of this  
extensive continent, viz. the tide and soil rents of  
an almost infinite quantity of new lands, its duties ar-  
ising from our extensive and free trade with every  
part of the world, and the most moderate rates or taxes  
from a numerous and almost infinitely increasing peo-  
ple. What amazing sums of paper currency, may  
not these States redeem, not only without opposition,  
but even with ease to the subject.

I have heard it said by some, whom I have always  
disputed for the assertion, that in their opinion, it was  
pretty much the same, whether we were taxed by  
Britain or our own assemblies, for the payment of an-  
cient debts; but if these gentlemen are not led to  
reason and common sense, they must acknowledge a  
very great difference betwixt the taxation of a foreign  
power, whose interest it is to tax and oppress us for  
the payment of a debt, in the contracting of which  
we have had no voice; and a taxation enacted for the  
payment of our own debts, by an assembly of repre-  
sentatives, whose interests are naturally blended with  
that of their constituents, and who must bear a pro-  
portionable share in their burdens.

I know that the notion of a depreciation has taken  
its rise from the high prices of goods, occasioned by  
their scarcity and the ridiculous charge of imposing  
them; but whenever the taxes are removed, and  
goods become plenty, they will of course sink in their  
value; especially when we consider that the abun-  
dances of money in every body's hands, occasioned by  
these copious emissions, was to carry on and sup-  
port the war, being leached out in trade, money will  
then become more rare, and rise in estimation in pro-  
portion to its scarcity.

As to the scheme of supporting the money and re-  
gulating the prices of things by penal statutes, it al-  
ways has and ever will be impracticable in a free coun-  
try, because no law can be framed to limit a man in  
the purchase or disposal of property, but what must  
infringe those principles of liberty, for which we are  
gloriously fighting. I am very sensible of the hardship  
of these high wages are fixed by law, for to hinder  
their falling to us, which is the case of the army,  
but let us not remedy that inconvenience by a greater,  
the infringement of fundamental principles. Cer-  
tainly it is in the power of the respective legislatures,  
at the expense of the community, to support the firm-  
ness of the soldiery, during the war, at a price propor-  
tioned to their wages, and at the end of the war, they  
will have an equal chance with their fellow subjects.  
This will remedy the chief inconvenience arising from  
a scarcity of goods and a plenty of money, without re-  
cruiting upon those natural and consistent principles  
of liberty and property, which ought always to be se-  
cured and inviolable in a free country.

JOSEPH COIT.

# Connecticut Courant,

AND

WEEKLY INTELLIGENCER.

HARTFORD: PRINTED BY HUDSON AND GOODWIN, NEAR THE BRIDGE.

STATE OF CONNECTICUT,  
In the House of Representatives,  
FRIDAY, May 25.

MR. Hopkins, at an early day of the session, moved for leave to bring in a bill for exempting the land of inhabitants of this state from being sold for the payment of taxes. Leave being given, when the bill came before the house, many objections were raised against the form and provisions of the bill. Upon this, Mr. Hopkins moved for leave to take back the bill, and that a committee might be appointed to draft a bill more agreeable to the sense of the house. The motion was granted—a committee appointed—and a new bill brought in. The subject was debated at several times; the principal objections against it were, that it would greatly impede, and in many cases defeat, the collection of taxes; and that it would afford no substantial relief, because the hardship of being imprisoned for taxes, is quite as great as that of having one's land sold. When the bill was put to vote, scarce a hand was lifted up in its favour.

WEDNESDAY May 30.

Mr. Peter Bulkley of Colchester, moved for leave to bring in a bill for a tendency, &c.—leave was given and the bill laid in. Upon its being proposed to have this bill considered at the same time, with one which Mr. Gillet of Stratton, was to bring in for an emission of paper-money;

Col. Hiaman wished to have this bill read now; for, to have both read at once would give so great a shock, that the house would not be able to bear it.

Maj. C. Phelps seconded the motion of having it read, and moved that it might be assigned for consideration in the afternoon.

Mr. Davenport mentioned that the bill had been long in agitation, and had been landed round to the members of the house, so that they were in general acquainted with it; he therefore moved the house to take it into consideration immediately.

Mr. Taylor thought that, as the two bills were twins, the attempt should be made to bring them both into the world at once; but he perceived they would be still born.

Col. Wadsworth hoped they might be so marked, that the house would know them a part.

Mr. Davenport's motion being seconded by several gentlemen and the motion for assigning being withdrawn, the house proceeded to the consideration of the bill.

Mr. Peter Bulkley said that the bill ought to be treated seriously and not laughed out of the house; that the states round us had made such laws to secure their inhabitants; that the people of these states could ill collect their debts of us; that when a man offers up all to his creditors, it is wrong to imprison him; that the bill ought to be fairly treated; that, if there were mistakes in the bill, they ought to be altered; that people abroad did expect, they should do something of this nature; and that he wished the yeas and nays might be taken.

Mr. Webb was in favour of the bill; because it put it out of the power of creditors to torment poor debtors.

Mr. Welton, Mr. Speaker, I rise with dilidence on the present subject. I am sensible I shall have to meet all the learning and eloquence of this house. There will be against me; yet I propose to launch out into an unlearned road. I trust the importance of the subject will lead the house to hear me with patience. I shall consider this subject in the first place as it respects our constitution and laws; and secondly, as it relates to the reason of the people. The great legislator of the universe gave his ancient people not only a system of moral law, but also of civil and political law. That plan of government was popular or democratical. Although the government was the institution of God himself; yet the continuance of it was to be by the people. For this purpose an equal distribution of property was necessary. We may as well think to repeal the great laws of attraction and gravitation; as to think of continuing a popular government without a good degree of equality among the people as to their property. By these laws established by infinite wisdom, usury was prohibited, and lands were to revert to their former owners at the end of every fifty years. When the people broke over these regulations, and added field to field; the prophets preached repentance—they exhorted the people to undo the heavy burdens—to loose the bands of the prisoners—to break every yoke—and to let the oppressed go free. Now let us take up our collecting laws, and see whether they agree with these precepts. I need not dictate to the members of this house what these laws are; they are well known. The creditor wants to get judgment; judgment is given for him; and no notice is taken of the bankrupt in which the debt arose; whether

from an honest bargain, from inevitable providence, or from idleness and bad husbandry. When execution comes out, the debtor is obliged to turn out his personal estate to be sold on execution. Men, or feeling avoid the sale; it is to them a painful sight. The goods are sold low; part of the debt is collected; and the rest is paid. The debtor is willing to turn out his other estate at its just value. But the creditor will not take it. The debtor must be torn from his family and dearest friends, and carried to goal, there to be kept till he has paid the uttermost farthing. He must sell his land. Avaricious men stand round. They know the horrors of a prison; and, that rather than hear them, a man will do any thing. The land must be sold for very little; and then the debtor may sweat out of goal. If we would only divest ourselves of our prejudices, we should see the unreasonableness of these things.

I know that arguments will be used on the other side. They will say that contracts are sacred, and must not be violated; that credit is important, and must be maintained. On the other hand, I say, justice and righteousness without goodness, is but the tyranny. But the beneficial effects of goodness and mercy are unlimited; we all stand in need of these. I have gone over some of the arguments on this subject; I will proceed further; and consider the bill in a retrospective view. Its operation upon past contracts is the greatest objection against it. But I would ask, what can a man do more than resign up all that he has? The law of justice and kindness requires no more. As to the operation of such a law upon future contracts, I think it would be beneficial. It would put a check upon trading and living extravagantly; it would establish private credit; because a man must either pay down, or establish a character of performing his contracts honourably. It would establish public credit; because public and private credit depend upon each other.

Mr. Cleveland. One of the gentlemen who spoke first on the bill, wished it should be treated seriously. I join with him in this wish; but upon serious principles, I am against the bill. Contracts are serious things; and moral honesty requires a specific performance of them. Let us consider the case of two individuals, who enter into a contract. They know what their agreement is; they know that the law enforces it; and each of them voluntarily subject himself to the consequences of his inability to perform. It is true, there are disadvantages in our present system of laws. Nor can we ever expect they will be perfect, so long as human nature continues the same. As to the idea of an equal division of property, it never can be reduced to practice. We, however, come as near to it as can be expected. There is a free circulation of property; when the owner of an estate dies, it is divided among his children; when the profuse and extravagant spend their estates, the industrious acquire them. In this way and by such means, there is a sufficient equality among the people of this state. But this bill would not answer any such purpose. The state has no right to interfere with past contracts; and take away one man's money, and give it to another, because he stands in need of it. This bill would be attended with the disadvantages of raising the price of articles. Suppose a man has stock which he would sell; he does not know what property would be put to him in payment; he must demand a higher price. When that property is appraised off to him in payment, if the appraisers mean to keep strictly to the agreement, or if they undertake to arbitrate, it will produce nothing but confusion. As to the lessening of law suits, this bill would be so far from it, that it would increase them. Those persons who would feel the inconveniences of this law, would contrive some way to elude it. They would keep out of the way so that a tender could not be made; or perhaps the tender would be made in the wrong place. This would occasion a dispute. The cause must be tried in the county court, and then, if large enough, in the superior court. There would be the cost of attorney's witnesses, and fees. Further, this bill would destroy private credit. Those who lend money are generally neither farmers nor traders; they are not in a capacity to take in the various articles which might be tendered to them. They see what disadvantages the law subjects them to; and lock up their money in their chests, a free circulation of cash is exceedingly beneficial. Only one dollar constantly circulated, would in a short time pay off debts to the amount of a hundred pounds. But this bill would prevent the benefits of a free circulation; it would put a stop to all industry; it would be ruinous to the state. There is no such stimulus to industry as what we commonly call a medium, which is hard money.

Mr. Peter Bulkley, spoke, and repeated much of

what he had said before; which gave rise to a discussion relative to the rules of the house.

Col. Seymour. In considering this subject; Mr. Speaker, it is of importance; that the bill be clearly understood. I will attempt to discriminate the contents of it, so as to make it intelligible. The first clause of the bill makes all real and personal estates receivable in payment of executions. If the debtor offers it in payment, it is to be appraised off to the creditors, and all collecting officers; meaning sheriffs and constables, are to proceed accordingly. By the second clause, a tender of real or personal estate shall stop the interest on all contracts. After the debtor has made an inventory of all his estate, and tendered it to his creditors, he is not liable to imprisonment. All rates or taxes, whether due to the state, or town, society, &c. are excepted; and the person who owes, is liable as heretofore. I am seriously and concernedly opposed to this bill.

I conceive it, Mr. Speaker, to be fraught with ruin. I highly respect that gentleman (Mr. Welton) for the ingenuity and solemnity, with which he treated this subject. But I do not despair of convincing him, that his sentiments are not right, and converting him to this side of the question. If he should not be convinced, I wish him to rise, and state his objections. This bill I would consider in a moral point of view; it relates to past contracts. Can the members of this house lay their hands upon their breasts, and say, that they will step in, and nullify past contracts. I cannot believe they will do it. If they should, it would be, to use the words of a great writer, a *sin finis*. It would be impious. I will not follow the gentleman through the Jewish history. But when was the law, which he mentions, promulgated? Was it not, while they were travelling through the wilderness? It was a law before they had bought or sold, or even acquired their lands. It was a law at first; there was notice, that there would be a jubilee once in fifty years; and they contracted accordingly. Is not Mr. Welton mistaken in this? He must be convinced that the instance from the Jewish law does not justify us in interfering with contracts after they are made. This bill, Mr. Speaker, would dry up every spring of industry and common honesty. It would destroy our commerce. Is not our commerce now decaying? I would ask the farmers, what shall we do with the produce, when all nature is blooming around us; and we have our cattle (as I said the other day) upon a thousand hills, what shall we do with the produce of our farms, if the merchant is unable to receive it. Some are for discouraging commerce. Cut it all up; say they. Is not the merchant the agent, the factor, the servant of the farmer? Let us see the operation of this bill. Suppose that I owe Maj. Phelps a large sum of money; and that he has no farm, but a store of goods. In the fall of the year, when he cannot take them, I go, and tender him a number of cattle and harts. It is more just to cut off at one stroke one half or three fourths of his debt. The neighbouring states, who have tried such acts; are now under the clouds of ruin. New-Hampshire has made the trial. The inhabitants of that state cannot now gain credit for the smallest articles with us. They are despised. Business is stopped. Ruin follows the bill. I would rather cast my bread upon the waters, than make such a law as this. I dare not do it. It would destroy like the devouring insect.

Maj. C. Phelps. It is an important maxim, that the legislature should not make laws, unless there be a necessity for them. It is proper for us to enquire, what would be the operation of this bill; whether it would do good or hurt? One of the gentlemen says, it would prevent law-suits. But I observe, Mr. Speaker, that there is a blank left in this bill, for a certain number of years to be inserted; it is to exist only for a limited time. It might prevent people from demanding their dues for a time. But it would be like damming up a stream; which would cause it to rise, and swell, and sweep all before it. This bill is unnecessary. The people in this state are not so much crouded with suits and executions now as they were in the year 1774. Hence I infer, they are not so much in debt. Is it not then, from the inconsistency of republican governments, that some are for such an alteration. This bill would take away all confidence in dealing between man and man. We never can depend upon any thing, if private contracts are liable to be altered by the legislature. It would encourage idleness and prodigality. My debtor may be careless and prodigal. This law would prevent my calling upon him until he had spent the greater part of his estate. It would take the whole to pay me, and he would be ruined. Whereas a more reasonable hint, from his creditors would have awaked him from his idle dreams, and shown him the necessity



Econ. H.  
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# A Documentary History of American Industrial Society

Edited by John R. Commons  
Ulrich B. Phillips, Eugene A. Gilmore  
Helen L. Sumner, and John B. Andrews

Prepared under the auspices of the American Bureau of  
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With preface by Richard T. Ely  
and introduction by John B. Clark

Volume V  
Labor Movement



Cleveland, Ohio  
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## 2. THE AGRARIAN PARTY

### (a) THE REPORT AND RESOLUTIONS OF THE COMMITTEE OF FIFTY

*Working Man's Advocate* (New York), Oct. 31, 1829, p. 1, col. 2. This report was presented at a meeting on October 19, 1829. Though handed in by J. C. Stanley, chairman of the committee, it was written by Thomas Skidmore. Its adoption, according to Robert Dale Owen, one of the secretaries of the meeting, was without due consideration.

. . . Your committee, therefore, feel that all human society, our own as well as every other, is constructed radically wrong; that in the first foundation of government in this state the division of the soil should have been equal, at least, among families; and that provision should have been made (if property must descend in a family line) that it should descend in an equal manner, instead of having been placed at the disposal of the caprice of testators. They even go farther, and say, as their opinion, that inasmuch as the people resident on the soil, at the first formation of our government, had equal right thereto, as individuals, not as members of families, so also had their immediate successors the same right. But this has never been accorded to them; nay, even the families themselves of the first settlers, as we have seen, had nothing of equality existing between them; and, as a certain and natural result, we see thousands of our people of the present day in deep distress and poverty, dependent for their daily subsistence upon a few among us whom the unnatural operation of our own free and republican institutions, as we are pleased to call them, has thus arbitrarily and barbarously made enormously rich.

But though, as your committee believe, it is to this unnatural and unequal organization of society that we

are to look for the prime source of all our oppressions; of that which places over us task masters, with power to require unreasonable toil; with power to withhold an adequate recompense; with power to deny employment altogether; and thus inflict upon us untold suffering; still your committee are sensible that this fountain of your distresses is not to be dried up but by a revolution; a civil revolution, it is true, since three hundred thousand freemen in this state have the power, through their votes at the ballot boxes, to bring it about, without resorting, as most other countries must do, to the use of the bayonet.

But although your committee are sensible that, until a revolution take place, such as shall leave behind it no trace of that government which has denied to every human being an equal amount of property on arriving at the age of maturity, and previous thereto, equal food, clothing, and instruction at the public expense, nothing can save the great mass of the community from the evils under which they now suffer; still they are also sensible, approaching as we are the eve of one of our annual elections, that there is an opportunity offered us of abating, of assuaging, of preventing the aggravation of our calamities, by resorting to the polls, and there electing, if we can, men who, from their own sufferings, know how to feel for ours, and who, from consanguinity of feeling, will be disposed to do all they can to afford a remedy. . . .

[*Omitted*: a lengthy argument against banking institutions "as being next to the original unequal appropriation and transmission to posterity of the soil of the State, the greatest cause of your present unhappy Condition;" an argument against the auction system; and brief arguments against the Brooklyn Ferry Companies, the New York Gas Light Company, imprisonment for

debt, and the general ticket system of electing presidential electors; also a short argument in favor of a single municipal legislative chamber, and in favor of direct election of officials for short terms of service.]

With this observation your committee beg leave to offer the following resolutions.

RESOLVED, that it has become the duty of the people to enquire into the causes of their distresses, and to express their opinions in relation thereto.

RESOLVED, in the opinion of this meeting, that the first and unequal appropriation of the soil of the state to private and exclusive possession, was eminently and barbarously unjust.

RESOLVED, that it was substantially feudal in its character, inasmuch as those who received enormous, because they were unequal, possessions, were lords, and those who received little or nothing, were vassals.

RESOLVED, that hereditary transmission of wealth on the one hand, and poverty on the other, has brought down to the present generation all the evils of the feudal system, and that this, in our opinion, is the prime source of all our calamities.

RESOLVED, that these calamities have been greatly aggravated and increased by a legislation which has employed all its energy to create and sustain exclusive privileges; and that among the objects of such privileges, banking institutions stand most conspicuous.

RESOLVED, that these institutions, as it regards our own state, stand constantly indebted to the public, according to the best of our information, in the sum of thirty or thirty-five millions of dollars.

RESOLVED, if they are to be suffered to remain among us, that they ought no less to pay interest on the debt they owe to the community, than that the community itself should pay interest on any debt it may owe them.

**72**

**MONITOR**

**ORGAN OF THE NATIONAL REFORM ASSOCIATION.**

**NEW YORK, SATURDAY, AUGUST 4, 1843.**

**NEW YORK, SATURDAY, AUGUST 4, 1843.**

**U. S.**

Land Monopoly causes national crimes and evils, creating inordinate desire for territorial acquisition, leading to wars and violence, wealthy speculators corrupting the government, the landless poor being ready instruments for a war, and traders and military aspirants urging it on. It leads to aggressions on the rights of the Indian tribes, who use the land in common, and tends to prevent their progress to a better state of society. It perverts enterprise to the accumulation of acres instead of the improvement of the soil. The uncertainty and constant avarice it engenders, prevent association for mutual advantages not to be enjoyed in isolation. It causes office-seekers, and elevates unsuitable men to the important trusts. It causes litigation, mobs, riots, retaliatory violence, bloodshed, and insurrections. It weakens Republics, and gives strength to Monarchies. By the uncertainty of shelter and subsistence which it occasions, it stimulates avarice to the highest pitch, and greatly weakens the social virtues. It causes those curses upon industry, rents and mortgages, or interest upon land. It leads to interest upon money, by which wealth is obtained from the producer without equivalent. It generates Paper Money and various other contrivances and monopolies which transfer the products of labor without compensation to those who are privileged to deal in them. It produces the monstrous anomaly of poverty among the producing classes in proportion to the increase of national wealth.

We, therefore, Representatives of Men of Progress and of Equal Rights, in Convention assembled, appealing to the highest power for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name and by the authority of that portion of the people whom we represent, solemnly publish and declare, that the time has arrived when a system of measures ought to be commenced, that will specially restore the soil to the people, and place every human being in this country in possession of every inalienable right. For which purpose we will proceed, by every means in our power, to organize in one body all who are in favor of this reform, and to concentrate their energies by an INDUSTRIAL CONGRESS. And for the support of such a Congress in all its behests, so far as they are directed to carry out these principles, to the extent of our ability, we mutually pledge ourselves to each other.

[“YOUNG AMERICA,” EXTRA. Read and Circulate.]



“I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self-evident, that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living.” — *Jefferson*.

“There should be SOME LIMIT to the right of any human being to monopolize the soil which God has made.” — *W. V. Webber*.

“The most unwise thing in the limits of Duke’s land, had still a man in the land. His ruin could not be final, perhaps could extend but a few years; in the last extremity he could not be regarded as one whose burthen was extinguished.” — *Crabbe on the Justice*.

“Land shall not be sold forever.”

# THE JUBILEE

A PLAN FOR RESTORING THE LAND OF NEW-YORK OR (INCIDENTALLY) OF ANY OTHER STATE TO THE PEOPLE.

(Taken from *Young America*, a weekly paper, devoted to Human Rights and Social Improvement. Organ of the National Reform Association, who advocate the Freedom of the Public Lands.)

PLAN FOR RESTORING THE LAND OF NEW YORK TO THE PEOPLE.

To secure to every farmer a farm.

1. No one hereafter shall, under any circumstances, become possessed of more than 160 acres of land in this State. (1)

To secure to every mechanic or professional man a lot.

2. No one hereafter shall, under any circumstances, become possessed of more than one lot in a city or village, (the size of which may be regulated by the city or town authorities.) (2)

To abolish at once the Feudal Tenures.

3. There shall be a special Court or Commission, composed of Land-holders and (poor) Landless proportioned to the numbers of their respective classes in the State, who shall, in all cases where land is held by a twenty years’ or more, a life, or a perpetual lease, determining, on principles of equity, (without regard to legal wrongs,) what (or whether any) compensation shall be paid to the claimant in full extinguishment of his claim. (3)

To abolish Mortgages.

4. The Homestead Lot or Farm shall be inalienable, except at the will of the occupant, and then only transferable to a landless person.

To abolish monopolies by never dying bodies without souls.

5. Every Corporation of whatever name or nature, now holding land, shall be allowed five years to dispose of the same to landless persons, under the above restrictions, excepting the lots and buildings occupied for their business.

To provide for Associations or Communities.

6. Associations of persons may hold their Freeholds in common, or in joint occupancy.