

Edith Saurer Fonds

Towards a global conceptual history from below: The political thought of Thomas Spence (1750–1814)

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Description of the project

My project focuses on the political thought of the English radical thinker Thomas Spence (1750–1814), active between Newcastle and London between the 1770s and the 1810s. I studied Spence for my Master’s thesis (2015), and I am now undertaking a book project on him. The intended outcome of my work will be a monograph which develops the most relevant features of Spence’s political reflection and systematizes the original archival materials I collected over the last years in several libraries and archives across the UK. The Edith Saurer Research Grant will help me pursue this project.

Spence lived in the so-called “Age of Revolution”, the time span between the late 18th and the mid-19th centuries characterised by recurring revolutionary waves throughout the Atlantic – in British North America, France, Haiti, Latin America, and Europe at large. But this was not only an age of independence movements and rise of constitutional government against absolutism. These were also the years of emergence and strengthening of global capitalism and its interrelated processes: the enclosures of the commons and the pauperization of the commoners, the rise of industrialism and the exploitation of wage labourers, the expropriation and extirpation of colonial natives, and the enslavement of African captives. Borrowing Eric Hobsbawm’s terminology in his celebrated trilogy on the long 19th century, the “Age of Revolution” was at the same time also an “Age of Capital” and an “Age of Empire”: capitalism and imperialism unfolded together on a global scale, gaining momentum in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries.¹ This process was neither smooth nor unresisted but had to respond to the counter-strategies and counter-narratives of the expropriated and the enslaved on both sides of the Ocean.

Thomas Spence was one of the forgotten spokesmen of these counter-narratives of resistance. Spence is renowned for his “Plan”, a proposal for the abolition of the private property of the land and its common enjoyment, which implied a reorganization of social and political relations on a larger scale: the land, once held in common, would be leased out for cultivation, and the rents paid for the plots of land (the “dividends”) would be redistributed quarterly among the inhabitants; moreover, the state apparatus

¹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848*. London: Phoenix Press, 1962; Id., *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975; Id., *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987.

would be destroyed and replaced with a decentralized parish system. Spence saw the private property of the land as the foundation of social inequalities and political hierarchies and considered the state as allied with the oligarchy of the landlords against the poor and the landless: for this reason, the abolition of private landownership would entail a dismantlement of state apparatus. This social and political transformation would be accomplished by the revolutionary struggle of the “swinish multitude”. This expression was coined by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) to contemptuously refer to the poor and dispossessed fourth estate who jeopardized the stability of the propertied establishment, and was recovered by Spence as his privileged political actor and interlocutor.² In Spence’s view, this struggle would not be confined to Britain, but would spread worldwide: the Plan would involve a complete reshaping of modern social order both at home and in the colonies overseas.

Spence was born in Newcastle in 1750 to a poor family. After being expelled from the local Philosophical Society for proposing his Plan of abolition of private landownership, he moved to London in the early 1790s, where he soon engaged in radical thinking, writing, and publishing: he joined the working-class organization London Corresponding Society and opened a bookstall in Chancery Lane, and later a bookshop in Holborn, where he sold banned treatises by other thinkers, minted subversive tokens, and printed his radical pamphlets, songbooks, and periodicals (included the anthology *Pigs’ Meat*, in which he cheaply reprinted excerpts from classic political authors). Spence’s name was well known to state authorities: during his London years, he was beaten, threatened, hindered in his activity of author and bookseller, arrested without trial, and imprisoned several times. Interestingly, Spence’s problems with justice were not due to his practical political activism, but to his intellectual work: what was most alarming to the authorities was the propagation of Spence’s Plan in the cheapest formats available among the members of the “swinish multitude”.

Thomas Spence is a neglected figure in the history of political thought. As he claimed for the commons while England was undergoing industrialization, he has traditionally been considered as an eccentric and anachronistic radical. Even if, over the last years, some historians of the Age of Revolution have been reassessing his importance for radical history and Atlantic history, Spence’s stature as an all-accomplished political thinker still has to be fully appreciated. In fact, Spence esteemed himself a scholar, an educator, and a philosopher. At his trial at the Court of King’s Bench in 1801, he proudly vindicated his dignity as a political theorist: “I stand here Gentlemen [...] not as a mere bookseller vending the works of others [...], but as an original legislator for having formed the most compact system of society on the immovable basis of nature and justice”.³ He considered himself as the main inventor of the “chief of sciences: the

² E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. by L.G. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 79.

³ T. Spence, *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence* (1803), in *The Political Works of Thomas Spence*, ed. by H.T. Dickinson. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Averro, 1982, 92-104, 94.

science of the Rights of Man”.⁴ Thanks to his radical and original political reflection, Spence was able to gather several disciples around him, the self-proclaimed “Spenceans”, who after the death of their mentor in 1814 founded the Society of Spencean Philanthropists in London.

Although almost unknown today, Spence was famous – and notorious – in his own days, and not only among radicals: also the advocates of the established order were aware of the political and theoretical relevance of his Plan. State authorities considered Spence as a serious political thinker and organizer, as his recurrent arrests, detentions, and trials demonstrate. His followers were deemed no less dangerous. The Spenceans became the indefatigable orators and agitators of the radical London underground through the 1810s. They contributed to the enduring vitality of Spence’s Plan after 1814, by chalking subversive messages on the walls throughout London: the pamphleteer and Member of Parliament William Cobbett reported in his *Weekly Political Register* in 1816 that “we have all seen, for years past, written on the walls, in and near London, these words, ‘SPENCE’S PLAN’”.⁵ Between 1816 and 1817, the Spenceans organized three riots at Spa Fields, while in February 1820 they plotted the Cato Street Conspiracy, an attempt to murder the whole British Cabinet during a ministerial dinner in London. In 1817, an Act of Parliament banned all political clubs that referred to Thomas Spence, making Spenceanism the only political ideology to have ever been outlawed by the British Parliament.⁶

The fame of Thomas Spence and the Spenceans was confirmed by the prominent German romanticist Adam Müller. In an short pamphlet titled *Spences philanthropischer Plan, Bibelgesellschaften und Gemeinschaft der Güter* (1816), Müller remarked that the Spencean doctrine had been made “extremely popular under the pressure of misery” across the British Isles, and almost unwillingly acknowledged that Spence was no less sophisticated than other modern “political philosophers”: those philosophers “are stronger on the practical side, while Master Spence is more consistent on the theoretical side; they are more fashionable, but he is ultimately superior”.⁷ Remarkably, also Karl Marx was acquainted with Spence’s thought: he mentioned him with admiration in *Theories of Surplus-Value* (1863) as the “deadly enemy of private property in land”.⁸ With my project, I want to explore the path suggested by Adam Müller: I am going to provide Thomas Spence with a new theoretical centrality, by treating him as a “political philosopher” worthy of the name.

I do not only intend to bring back to light a neglected but important representative of the history of British political thought. I also want to demonstrate the relevance of Spence’s Plan, by dismantling the

⁴ T. Spence, *The Constitution of a Perfect Commonwealth* (1798), in *The Political Works of Thomas Spence*, 54-69, 58.

⁵ W. Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*. London: 14 December 1816, vol. 41, 749.

⁶ K. Armstrong and A. Bonnett (eds.), *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary*. London: Breviary Stuff, 2014, 2.

⁷ A. Müller, “Spences philanthropischer Plan, Bibelgesellschaften und Gemeinschaft der Güter”. *Deutsche Staatsanzeigen*, Leipzig, Voss 1816-1818, Bd. 2 (1817), 347-366, 355, 359 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek – Münchener Digitalisierungszentrum).

⁸ K. Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value* (1863). Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968, 314.

two most common assumptions about him: that his reflection was confined to a narrow local context, and that he was anachronistic and unable to understand the transformations of his age. First, I will project his Plan in the Atlantic and global context of the Age of Revolution. In fact, Spence, was widely known not only across but also beyond the British Isles between the late 18th and the early 19th centuries. While his tokens were circulating across Britain, Ireland, and France, the Plan also managed to land on the other side of the Atlantic: in 1817, the *Address of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists* was reprinted in the *Jamaican Royal Gazette*, and in 1818 the *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Assembly* of Barbados blamed the Spencean Philanthropists for instigating the great slave revolt of 1816.⁹ Second, I will project Spence beyond his times, showing that the Plan was not an obsolete political scheme, but it is rather able to speak to our own age.

My monograph will be structured in four main parts. In the first section, I will provide the historical context of Spence's thought, by illustrating his intellectual development in relation to his personal experiences and the transformations of his epoch. The conceiving of the Plan was inspired by the struggle of the Newcastle commoners against the attempts to privatize their common, the "Town Moor", in 1771, but grew rich of new topics in the 1790s, when Spence moved to London. Here, he was influenced by French Jacobinism as it was popularized by the members of the London Corresponding Society: adopting the French Revolution as a role model, Spence presented the establishment of his Plan as a revolutionary, violent, and armed action. This section will also survey Spence's posthumous legacy in Britain: the Plan was first assumed as a guideline by the Spenceans and then became a source of inspiration for the social reformer Robert Owen, who divested it of its socially radical and revolutionary purposes. In the 1840s, a section of the Chartist movement recovered Spence's Plan as a source of inspiration for outlining the Chartist Land Plan.

The second part of the book will demonstrate that Spence was a modern thinker. This part will feature two sections, aimed to survey Spence's acquaintance and engagement with past and coeval political philosophers. Since the 1770s, Spence developed an intellectual debt with the currents of thought of the First English Revolution: the Diggers or True Levellers and the classical republicanism of James Harrington. From them, he recovered a radical critique of the correlation between the private property of the land and political power. Spence also engaged with modern contractualism: like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, he questioned the origins and legitimacy of political order in terms of the opposition between the state of nature and the social compact. But his engagement with contractualism – especially with Locke – was controversial: on the one hand, Locke had rightly stated that "God hath given the earth

⁹ *Address of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists to All Mankind*, in *Supplement to the Royal Gazette*, in *Royal Gazette*, vol. XXXIX, no. 12 (Saturday March 15–Saturday March 22), 1817, 9 (The British Library, MFM.MC384); *The Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly, Appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Causes, and Progress, of the Late Insurrection*. Barbados: Printed (by Order of the Legislature) by W. Walker, 1818, 23.

to the children of men in common”; on the other, however, he had justified the establishment of private landownership and imagined the covenant as the means to protect private possessions in the transition from nature to the state. Spence rejected the logic which underlay contractualism, namely, the idea that men should forfeit a proportion of their natural freedom (included their original common right to the land) in the progression from savagery to civility. Spence recuperated Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s alternative idea of the contract as the means to rectify the harmful emergence from nature prescribed by Hobbes and Locke and establish a political system consistent with the integrity of men’s natural rights.

The second section of this part will survey the impact of French and British Jacobinism on Spence’s thought. Spence deeply engaged with the writings of his contemporary Thomas Paine. Paine stood for Spence at the same time as an intellectual landmark (being the most advanced democratic thinker of his time, and a supporter of the American and the French Revolutions) and a polemical target. Indeed, Spence saw Paine as an ally of the proprietary and bourgeois establishment. It was against the author of the *Rights of Man* that Spence polemically redefined his *Real Rights of Man* (the title of his most important pamphlet): he not only claimed for the natural and imprescriptible right of all to the common enjoyment of the land, but also originally equated the rights of women and children to those of men, emerging as a vanguard thinker in the claims for women’s and children’s emancipation. Spence also enthusiastically supported the French Revolution: from the French Jacobins, he drew the idea of a violent overthrow of the established order and a provisional revolutionary government. However, from the late 1790s, he became critical of the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, which he understood as an intrinsically political phenomenon, not committed to social transformation. Spence thereby distanced himself from the bourgeois and liberal limitations of French Jacobinism and emerged as a “red” Jacobin.

The third part of the book will redefine the spatial theatre of Spence’s thought, by focusing on the transatlantic scope of his Plan. It will shed light on an apparent paradox: while Spence had an *idée fixe* about the land, he often used the sea as a reservoir of radical images to convey his revolutionary proposal. He also imagined the establishment of the Plan aboard the sailing ship “Marine Republic” and on oceanic islands. Influenced by the radical struggles at sea of his time, such as the great mutinies at Nore and Spithead of 1797, and by the English maritime utopian tradition (Thomas More, James Harrington, and Daniel Defoe), Spence rejected the “terracentrism” characterising Western political thought, namely, the assumption that history only unfolded on terrestrial spaces.¹⁰ This section will also survey Spence’s sharp critique of colonialism. For him, colonialism replicated overseas the same dynamics of enclosure and dispossession which landlordism had already produced in Europe. As the social and political dominion of the landlords over the landless extended on both sides of the Atlantic, the colonies needed the same decolonizing revolution as England. In fact, Spence wished his Plan was established in the “Republic of

¹⁰ M. Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic. Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail*. Boston: Beacon, 2014, 8.

the Incas” (the Viceroyalty of Peru, recently agitated by the rebellion of Túpac Amaru II) and adopted as the new constitution of revolutionary Haiti.¹¹ This section will finally illustrate Spence’s hitherto unknown legacy in the British West Indies, especially in Barbados, where, according to the official documents of the local House of Assembly, the Plan was implicated in Bussa’s Rebellion of 1816, the largest slave revolt in the history of the island.

The last part of the book will expand the time frame of Spence’s Plan, by showing its relevance for contemporary political debates on common property. These debates conceive common property as either the commons (the lands, the waters, and the “fruits of nature”) or the commonwealth (the social wealth and “fruits of labour” commonly produced by society). The first interpretation is represented by the works of Peter Linebaugh and Silvia Federici, the second by *Commonwealth* by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.¹² Both groups of scholars use the notion of common property to suggest the existence of a third sphere of politics, which goes beyond the modern dichotomy between the private and the public domains. Spence embodied the two souls of current debates, by devising the Plan as a scheme for the reappropriation of both the commons and the commonwealth. The abolition of private landownership and the establishment of a parochial management of the soil were the means he proposed for the reappropriation of the commons, while the perpetual and generalized redistribution of the “dividends” would accomplish the reappropriation of the commonwealth. As their sharing would ensure the basic means of subsistence to everyone without the requirement of work, the dividends can be interpreted as the early version of the universal basic income, or basic income guarantee, that radical movements are vindicating today. Spence conceived also intellectual property as a commonwealth: he envisaged the current notion of “copyleft”, by proposing the compulsory and systematic propagation of useful inventions and the abolition of patents.

The summary of the sections of my book project shows the complexity and sophistication of Spence’s political thought. Spence can undoubtedly be described as “the poorest and most determined militant in English history, an unassailable icon of revolutionary integrity”.¹³ But he was also much more than this: he was an unconventional reader of classic political authors; a translator of modern political theory into an intelligible discourse for the “swinish multitude”; a critic of colonialism and a theorist of global emancipation; and a forerunner of contemporary intellectual developments.

¹¹ T. Spence, *The Constitution of Spensonia* (1803), in *Pigs’ Meat. Selected Writings of Thomas Spence*, ed. by G.I. Gallop. Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982, 166-185, 185.

¹² P. Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto. Liberties and Commons for All*; Id., *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press, 2014; S. Federici, *Re-enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland: PM Press, 2019; M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Commonwealth*. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

¹³ A. Bonnett, *Spence and the Politics of Nostalgia*, in *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary*, 75-88, 78.

Methodology

I argue that Thomas Spence fell victim to misinterpretation, due to the language he used to convey his Plan and the means he employed to spread it. Having as his privileged political interlocutors the penniless and often illiterate members of the “swinish multitude”, Spence had to translate his political themes into an accessible language to his working and popular audience. Moreover, by adopting a multimedia attitude, he publicized his Plan by means not of treatises, but of what E.P. Thompson called “the methods of the underground” – short pamphlets, chapbooks, minting of tokens, chalk graffiti, and songbooks.¹⁴ In so doing, Spence adapted the complexity of modern political theory for the benefit of the lower orders. In one of his pamphlets, he distanced from “those gentlemen, who, with their aristocracy of power, titles, [and] wealth, [...] conceive that they possess also an aristocracy of understanding. For these great men I write not”.¹⁵

From a methodological perspective, my research is a historical-conceptual analysis of Thomas Spence as a political thinker; more precisely, it is a conceptual history from below of his political thought. I intend to reveal the popular *camouflage* of Spence’s Plan, by decoding its subtle complexity and re-translating it into the “official” language of conceptual historians. I am going to interpret Spence’s unconventional means of propaganda not as rough products of an eccentric radical, but as original sources for a new history of political thought from below. The novelty of this research lies thereby not only in the original stature of the political thinker taken into analysis, but also in the methodology used to study his reflection: by re-reading Spence’s humorous ballads, subversive tokens, and half-penny pamphlets from a conceptual perspective, my research is aimed to expand the boundaries of the history of political thought, as a discipline which usually focuses on published political treatises by recognized philosophers.

I adopt the methodological approach of German *Begriffsgeschichte*. I intend to follow Reinhart Koselleck’s proposal to understand political concepts as markers of social conditions and historical and political transformations. By disavowing the idea that modern political concepts were crafted at the abstract level, and insisting on their material relation to specific contexts and conflicts, in the introduction to *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1972), Koselleck suggested to historians of political thought not to confine themselves to *corpora* of published texts, but rather seek for archival sources, judicial proceedings, correspondences, and newspaper articles.¹⁶ This kind of perspective implies a close contiguity between the history of political thought and social history. As Koselleck wrote in *Futures Past* (1979), the history of political concepts so understood can be defined as a “methodologically independent part of

¹⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage, 1963, 162.

¹⁵ T. Spence, *Dedication to the Swinish Multitude*, in T. Paine et. al., *Tom Paine’s Jests*. London: Printed for T. Spence, 1794, iii.

¹⁶ R. Koselleck, “Introduction and Prefaces to *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*” (1972), trans. by M. Richter. *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, 1 (2011): 1-37.

sociohistorical research”.¹⁷ By applying an original view from below to Koselleck’s lesson, this research will demonstrate that Spence’s Plan was a timely intellectual product of the Age of Revolution. I intend to analyse Spence’s thought not only by linking it to other political thinkers and traditions of thought, but also by contextualizing it within the broader historical and social developments of his age: the private and state-driven enclosures of the commons and the organized resistance against privatization; the American and the French Revolutions and the British war against France; the birth of the factory system and the debate on the poor laws; the commercial transition from mercantilism to free trade; the rise of the abolitionist movement and the Haitian Revolution.

Preliminary studies

Despite being well-known among the lower orders and intensively feared by state authorities in his own days, Spence’s thought underwent misinterpretation and neglect since the second half of the 19th century. In 1886, the leader of the Social Democratic Federation Henry Hyndman inaccurately presented Spence as the pioneer of state socialism, even if Spence was a resolute opponent of any socialist nationalization of the land and resulting strengthening of central power;¹⁸ instead, the commonality in the soil he vindicated would coincide with the establishment of a decentralized parish system. In more recent years, historians Olive Rudkin and Terry Mitchell Parssinen have supported Hyndman’s misleading interpretation.¹⁹ Other scholars saw Spence as the forerunner of even later ideological developments, such as the Marxist scholar Mary Kemp-Ashraf, who stated that, “from the point of view of the historical development of political thought, Spence may be said to have brought egalitarian democracy to the threshold of communism”.²⁰ Kemp-Ashraf’s interpretation, together with Hyndman’s, prove that Spence found it difficult to make himself understood by posterity: his political thought was too unconventional to conform to the labels of either a pioneer of state socialism or a proto-communist, but at the price of becoming inconsistent with its own presuppositions.

In his masterpiece *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), E.P. Thompson defined Spence as the inventor of “peripheral panaceas” to social evils, which made him “a little more than a crank”.²¹ Spence lived in the age when capital detached itself from the land, becoming financial and commercial, and when capitalist command on the laborers was no longer founded on immovable landed possessions, but

¹⁷ R. Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichte and Social History*, in *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979). Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1975, 73-91, 88.

¹⁸ H.M. Hyndman, *The Nationalization of the Land in 1775 and 1882, Being a Lecture Delivered at Newcastle-upon-Tyne by Thomas Spence*. London: E.W. Allen, 1882, 1-7.

¹⁹ O. Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and his Connections*. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1927, 170; T.M. Parssinen, “Thomas Spence and the Origins of English Land Nationalization”. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34, 1 (1973): 135-141.

²⁰ M. Kemp-Ashraf, *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Frank Graham, 1983, 26.

²¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 161, 806.

acquired the movable form of money and wages. It is thereby not surprising that Spence's Plan sounded "peripheral" and his claims anachronistic to historians interested in the new configuration of the English working class during the First Industrial Revolution. However, with my book project I intend to demonstrate that Spence was not blind to the transformations of his age. He realized that the expulsion of the commoners from the lands in early modernity and the birth of agrarian capitalism were the precondition of the rise commercial, financial, and industrial capital. Seeing the origins of social command in the privatization of the lands implemented during the early modern process that Marx would later call "primitive accumulation" of capital, Spence turned back to the lands as he looked for solutions to the problems of the new-born industrial society.

Recently, some scholars have been turning to Spence a growing interest. In 1982, when new waves of privatization were initiating the neoliberal era, Geoff I. Gallop and Harry T. Dickinson edited the two main contemporary editions of Spence's writings. Other historians, such as Malcolm Chase, Robert Franklin, and Joan Beal, have been shedding light on the importance of Spence's thought within the history of British radicalism, his polemical engagement with Thomas Paine, his enduring legacy in the Chartist movement, and his proposal of reform of the English language (aimed at producing a coincidence between pronunciation and spelling) as a constitutive part of his political Plan.²² Other scholars have undertaken the project of systematizing all recent scholarship on Spence: in 2014, Alastair Bonnett and Keith Armstrong edited the collection of essays *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man's Revolutionary* and the international symposium "Bicentennial Perspectives on Thomas Spence: Radical Reformer in the Age of Revolution" was convened at the Université de Toulouse Jean Jaurès; the papers presented at the conference were later collected in the special issue of the interdisciplinary French journal *Miranda* on *Thomas Spence and His Legacy: Bicentennial Perspectives*.²³

Other scholars have shown the relevance of Spence's thought in the radical debates about the commons on a transatlantic scale. In *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker surveyed the transatlantic vicissitude of the Jamaican Spencean Robert Wedderburn, and presented Spenceanism as one of the "heads" of the proletarian and enslaved "hydra" who suffered dispossession and devised strategies of resistance against capitalism on both sides of the Atlantic in the modern age.²⁴ More recently, in *Red Round Globe Hot Burning* (2019), Linebaugh included Spence in the intricate net of vindications of

²² M. Chase, *The People's Farm. English Radical Agrarianism, 1775–1840*. London: Breviary Stuff, 2010; R. Franklin, "The Political Ideas of Thomas Spence". *Journal of Local Studies* 2, 1 (1982): 21-40; J. Beal, *English Pronunciation in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Spence's "Grand Repository of the English Language"*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

²³ K. Armstrong and A. Bonnett (eds.), *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man's Revolutionary*. London: Breviary Stuff, 2014; R. Rogers and A. Sippel (eds.), *Thomas Spence and His Legacy: Bicentennial Perspectives*, special issue *Miranda* 13 (2016) (<https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8985>).

²⁴ P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra. Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon, 2000, 287-326.

commonality which crisscrossed the Atlantic region during the 18th and 19th centuries.²⁵ Following Linebaugh, I argue that it is precisely by assessing the role played by Spence's thought within a wider Atlantic and imperial context that it is possible to fully appreciate its relevance. As Spence wrote in the preface to his *Real Rights of Man*: "I beg to be understood as laying down a system of government for the free-born, unshackled minds of the North American and African savages."²⁶ In fact, his insistence on the necessity of dismantling private landownership was a glaring matter of common sense to the Native Americans dispossessed of their hunting grounds and the African American slaves exploited in the plantations overseas. This book thereby follows an opposite trajectory to the one taken by most of existing scholarship on Spence: while other scholars have investigated the local influences of the Plan, as well as Spence's connections with the radical environment of Newcastle and London, I argue that his thought can be fully understood not by provincializing, but rather globalizing his politics.

This project also follows those scholars who have highlighted Spence's ability to communicate something beyond his epoch. Robert Franklin interestingly defined Spence as a "link-man", an intellectual bridge connecting the struggles against the enclosures of the 17th century to the vindications of the working class in the 19th century.²⁷ This was due to the privileged chronological position occupied by Spence: he lived in the second half of the 18th century, when the persistence of early-modern institutions and pre-industrial manufactures coexisted with brand-new production processes. Spence was a transitional thinker living in transitional years and, with his own biographical experience, linked the old radical tradition of the First English Revolution to the Chartist movement. But, I argue, Spence's foresight and relevance can be projected even beyond the 19th century, as the Plan can be assumed as the genealogical forefather of contemporary radical debates on common property.

The rediscovery of Spence's Plan over the last few years and the scholarly efforts to rethink it from a transatlantic perspective have paved the way for a historical-conceptual analysis of his political thought. While Spence has often been studied within a narrow local context, I aim to deprovincialize him; while he has been considered as anachronistic, I aim to project his thought beyond his own times and show his implications for today.

²⁵ P. Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning. A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons & Closure, of Love & Terror, of Race & Class, and of Kate & Ned Despard*. Oakland: The University of California Press, 2019, 265-269.

²⁶ T. Spence, *The Rights of Man, as Exhibited in a Lecture, Read at the Philosophical Society, in Newcastle*. London: Printed for the Author, 1793, iii-iv.

²⁷ R. Franklin, "The Political Ideas of Thomas Spence", 42.