

Down and Out in Early America
edited by Billy G. Smith

Relieving Poverty and Controlling the Poor

If indigence was increasing and its causes growing more complex, how did legislators, town and county officials, and public leaders address what was becoming one of the eighteenth century's thorniest social issues? David Rothman provided an incomplete answer more than thirty years ago in his influential *The Discovery of the Asylum*, where he posited a change from a familial to an impersonal institutional system of poor relief that he believed occurred with the rise of industrializing cities in the early nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Since then, historians have shown that the eighteenth century was a long period of experimentation, shifting attitudes, and sharp divisions among poor relief officials—anything but a smooth transition to institutionalizing the poor and a transition that began long before the advent of swollen cities and mechanized factories. Inherited attitudes toward the poor, greatly fortified in Puritan New England, stressed the biblical notion that poverty was the unalterable lot of the many. “’Tis the Lord,” counseled Cotton Mather to his parishioners in Boston in 1712, “who has Taken away from you what He has Given to others.”⁶⁵ In his essay in this book, Richard Olivas has traced ministerial pronouncements on Boston's impacted poverty in the eighteenth century. Still, there is little evidence that the poor themselves listened to advice that their poverty was divinely commissioned or that they should blame themselves.

Elsewhere, magistrates and poor relief officials did not blame God but began blaming the poor themselves. Such a view appears to have surfaced first in 1707 in New York City, when local officials required patches of cloth with the letters N:Y sewn on their shirts or blouses. Badging the destitute in this way attached a social stigma to poverty, forcing the poor to advertise their penniless condition as a kind of self-inflicted wound. Other cities followed this

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practice—Philadelphia in 1718 and Charleston somewhat later—initiating a long, slow trend toward isolating the indigent socially and treating them more as outcast than as neighbor.

In every seaport, the poor had to be relieved and managed in one way or another, regardless of who was to blame for their condition. In Boston, the city with the most severe mid-eighteenth-century poverty problem, town leaders launched the first “workfare” experiment by erecting a large linen manufactory where they urged the city’s poor women, frequently war widows with small children, to work in order to drive down the cost of poor relief.⁶⁶ The failure of this venture did not deter city leaders, intent on cutting the costs of what was thought to be unacceptably expensive outrelief, from erecting large workhouses and almshouses in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.⁶⁷ Along with imposing structures, which physically and socially isolated the poor, came stricter supervision of the incarcerated—a set of shifting strategies devised by employers, magistrates, poor relief officials, and legislators to “manage” the poor or “render them submissive.” Backing up the attempt to cope with spiraling poor relief costs, town officials in many places imposed harsher legal penalties against the poor (such as raising the amount of property necessary to establish town residence and thus limiting the obligation to provide for the poor); increased the registration period for establishing residence; and criminalized the taking of fish from streams, ponds, and bays by any “stranger” not resident in a town—a restriction that cut off one of the few free nutritional sources available to the poor.⁶⁸

Wherever poor relief officials innovated, they faced formidable obstacles, the greatest of which was inadequate resources. Almost everywhere they resorted to the equivalent of modern medical triage. For the “respectable” poor, family, friends, and churches were the first line of defense. For those not so fortunately situated, small outrelief payments—in wood allotments,

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food, stockings, blankets, and cash—allowed both able-bodied and incapacitated people to take shelter with a friend, family member, or neighbor.

Finally, for the hopelessly indigent, sick, deranged, criminal, intemperate, or disabled, the workhouse and almshouse were the prescribed remedy. In the most fully studied case, in Philadelphia, the attempt to drive down the cost of poor relief through ending outdoor relief and forcing people into workhouses has been shown to have tested the resolve—and the capital resources—of the most dedicated urban leaders. Spurred by spiraling numbers of the indigent, a small almshouse bursting at the seams, and escalating poor taxes, a private corporation in Philadelphia, led mostly by Quaker merchants, convinced the legislature to turn poor relief over to them in 1766 and to facilitate the erection of the largest building yet constructed in the American colonies.⁶⁹

Soon after the managers of the new Bettering House opened its doors, they vowed to end outrelief, compelling any pauper seeking public aid to take up residence in the workhouse where they were expected to labor picking oakum, weaving, and spinning. Understanding that rescinding outrelief struck hard at poor women with family responsibilities, Philadelphia's Overseers of the Poor strongly resisted the policy as cruel and misguided. Whereas fifteen years before Philadelphia's leaders had created the Hospital for Sick Poor to get laboring men back on their feet (while also ministering to the needs of women in medical need), the Bettering House managers demanded that the poor abandon familial settings. After seven years of trying to reform the poor by driving them to the Bettering House, the institution's managers confessed that the system had failed.

The building of the Bettering House in Philadelphia provides a clear picture of the changing ideological edifice of the wealthy. Although generally regarded by historians as a

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monument to the philanthropic impulse—a concern for relieving the needs of the rapidly growing number of the destitute—the institution was also a towering symbol of the spreading notion that the ranks of the poor were swelling because more and more people owed their poverty to intemperance or were becoming content to live the life of the idler, the profligate, or the street beggar rather than pursue an honest trade. Philadelphia’s leather-aproned hero, Benjamin Franklin, was a good barometer of this attitudinal sea change. No stranger to hunger growing up in a large family of Boston artisans, Franklin had sympathy for the poor he found in Philadelphia after arriving there in 1723 in the middle of a recession. But his spectacular success as a printer changed his mind by the time he reached his forties. As early as 1753, he expressed the view that nothing was more responsible for creating poverty than poor relief itself. He was probably fortified in this point of view by what he saw and heard in London, where he lived from 1759 to 1765 and 1768 to 1775. There municipal leaders, abandoning the earlier view that economic recession and depressed wages were the main causes of indigence, began to blame the poor themselves for their plight. In 1765, soon after returning to London, Franklin wrote in anger after the London poor mobbed grain wagons in order to prevent wheat exports at a time when bread was scarce. “The more public provisions were made for the poor,” he sputtered, “the less they provided for themselves and of course became poorer. And, on the contrary, the less was done for them, the more they did for themselves, and became richer.”⁷⁰ Because England led the world in caring for the poor, scoffed Franklin, that country also led the world in the creation of poverty. Repeal the poor laws, Franklin advised, and the poor would go back to work, abandoning the new national holidays they had proclaimed—St. Monday and St. Tuesday.

The emerging view of the poor that animated these comments—that the “best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of

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it”—became the main rationale behind the Bettering House, its name itself betokening the blurring of the line between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and the growing tendency to regard the needy as flawed members of society who needed to be reformed rather than relieved.⁷¹ Although the Quaker managers of the Bettering House were intimately familiar with unprecedented economic dislocation in the mid-1760s that created widespread unemployment and a subsistence crisis for laboring people, they focused on the burden the poor were creating for taxpaying citizens rather than on the burden of being destitute. The almshouse wing of the Bettering House would care for those who could not work, but the workhouse wing would rehabilitate the able-bodied poor who would not work.

Such a view of self-created poverty triggered an argument over the causes of indigence that continued through the American Revolution, into the nineteenth century, and down to the present day. In Philadelphia, while Franklin and others ignored the blighting effects of recession, others pointed to exactly this cause of the spiraling poor lists. “It is said that our poor are indolent, and will not work,” one newspaper correspondent wrote. “[But] give the poor a sufficient compensation for their work; let the demand for their exertions be constant and steady, . . . and it will soon be found that the charge of indolence, is a calumny on the most destitute part of our fellow-citizens.”⁷² Historians have shown in recent years that this struggle over institutionalizing the poor and subjecting them to strict discipline waxed and waned for more than half a century before the major cities moved in the 1820s from a mixed system of poor relief to a decisive end to small payments in cash, food, and fuel to outrelievers.

It is clear that the champions of almshouses had greater success in the commercial urban centers than in the less commercialized countryside, giving little support to the notion of Thomas Haskell that the spread of a capitalist ethos, centered in the cities, created more humane

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sensibilities toward the unfortunate.⁷³ To the contrary, the values of the unfettered marketplace “infiltrated the basic structure of public charity, while it often relegated poor people to items in a ledger.”⁷⁴

Strategies of the Poor

One of the most valuable contributions of recent historians, paralleling the efforts of historians of women and African Americans, is in putting a human face on poverty by illuminating the experiences and strategies of the poor. This is part of the larger effort to recapture the plebeian lives and popular culture of the underclass while giving subordinate groups some measure of agency. American historians are behind their English counterparts in this regard, yet they have explored the networks of authority that surrounded the poor and rescued dozens of individual stories from tax lists, city directories, vagrancy dockets, almshouse admission interviews, trial records, pension applications, and other frustratingly incomplete but often revealing records.⁷⁵ In “Up From the Bottom in Franklin’s Philadelphia,” I charted the course of the poor silversmith Caesar Ghisilin to contrast the downward mobility of his family with that of another silversmith who made his way up the ladder of Philadelphia society. Billy Smith has constructed many vignettes of working men and women and followed two late eighteenth-century Philadelphians on a graphic tour of the city that shatters the myth that labor scarcity in early America almost always translated into high wages for anyone with an appetite for work and shows how the poor tried to stay afloat.⁷⁶ Timothy Breen has reconstructed the precarious life of a Taunton, Massachusetts, slave from his “dying speech” in 1767.⁷⁷ In the most ingeniously constructed portrait of a down-and-out American of the revolutionary generation, Alfred F. Young has unearthed the life of the picaresque Boston shoemaker, George Robert Twelves Hewes, who lived for almost a century but never escaped poverty.⁷⁸

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A distinguishing mark of all these studies is their effort to set these vignettes of impoverished individuals within economic, social, and legal contexts that show how precarious were the lives of a great portion of early American society. Hampered by elusive sources, they are less successful in the difficult process of understanding how the poor experienced the authority of those attempting to control them and devised strategies for gaining some semblance of control over their lives while, simultaneously, they were often obliged to depend on institutional relief in times of great distress.

Yet a picture, though still murky, has begun to emerge of how the officially powerless poor contended with officially powerful town officials in several important ways. One was to resist the pressure to surrender their children to the magistrates, who often bound them out for years of uncompensated labor. This was not only an emotional assault on the poor, but it also deprived them of the labor value of their children. Only the strongest impoverished parents could refuse to hand over their sons and daughters; more typically, they implored magistrates to intervene when their children were physically misused or denied at least minimal training in a useful occupation.⁷⁹

Taking to the road was a second way of avoiding institutionalization. Ruth Herndon's essay in this book shows that while casting aside all that was familiar and familial, women tramped from place to place in late eighteenth century New England, all the while knowing that they would be "warned out" of any town they approached and thus would be ineligible for poor relief. In an earlier study, she shows how transient Rhode Island women, representing about half of all itinerants in that colony, "tried to manipulate the system of warning out to their own advantage." Mostly young, mostly shorn of husbands, mostly with dependent children, these women frustrated town officials by hiding, darting from town when the municipal sergeant

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approached to interview them, or telling town fathers such heartrending stories that they permitted a newcomer to gain residence—and thus access to poor relief.⁸⁰ The poor also made the life of almshouse and poorhouse managers miserable by defying codes of conduct and in some cases instituting rules of their own. Doubtless, much of the chaos and defiance of discipline in the urban almshouses of the revolutionary era and beyond can be charged to intemperance, insanity, and personality dysfunction. But not all of it. Sometimes the poor had their own rules and used them to frustrate their keepers thoroughly. For example, in the workhouse wing of the Philadelphia Bettering House, women rarely met the spinning quotas imposed, and if they could earn a bit of money by exceeding them, they promptly fled the house.⁸¹ In another case, Jane Bickerdite, nurse in the Philadelphia almshouse in 1789, was on the losing end of the venereal women she attempted to govern and treat. “They quarreled with and abused her very much—and now when she was going away they mobbed her severely and raised a bawling clamorous noise and—with beating and rattling, frying pans, shovels tongs, etc., [went] after her, all of which together they called the whores march, and of which they are competent judges, as every step they have taken for several years hath been altogether in that line and true to the beat—Thus those hardened insolent husseys go on despising all rule and order here.”⁸²

This example of rough music—charivari—tells us of the attempts to administer primitive justice by largely Irish and English women who held up to scorn and abuse a German woman who, it seems, offended their sense of what had brought them to their impoverished and diseased condition. Other women, and sometimes men, simply refused to enter institutions built to serve the poor, even if they starved or died of hypothermia. In Boston, the resistance of women with small children to leave their homes to weave and spin in the heatless linen manufactory scotched this experiment, though it would be revived many years later with an emphasis on single rather

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than married women. In Philadelphia, leaving their pitiful digs to enter the newly completed Bettering House was so anathema to the able-bodied poor whose sin was unemployment that “when urged to go in for relief, [they] declared in solemn manner that they would rather perish through want than go in.”⁸³ What for poorhouse officials was often an asylum was for the poor a penitentiary.

More broadly, the poor resisted the change in attitude from those above them that turned “deserving objects of charity” into undeserving drains on the community. Such statements as “a man may be suspected of being deficient in industry, temperance, or honesty . . . who is not possessed after a certain number of years, of a moderate share of property” were taken for what they were: contempt of the laboring poor and callousness toward how, during economic downturns, those who lived closest to the line were the first to go beneath it.⁸⁴ The laboring poor insisted they were part of the community, not a drain on it. In the transition decades when outrelief was phased out and institutionalizing the poor became the economical way of servicing them, they refused to accept responsibility for their poverty; denied they created their own plight by shunning the economic opportunity theoretically available to everyone; rejected the argument that poverty was the fate of those who drank their wages away; argued instead that unemployment and poverty drove people to intemperance (a reverse causation finally adopted by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in 1886); and maintained they were entitled to relief, not as a charitable dole but as a social right in disordered societies, and had customary rights to medical care, fuel, bread, and shelter.⁸⁵

Insisting that they had no wish to be parasites, the poor drifted in and out of American cities in search of work, avoided the workhouse whenever they could, disobeyed rules, did as little labor as possible when they were committed to these institutions, and in general resisted

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poor relief measures that offended their sense of what was just. Abhorring almshouses and workhouses as prisons, they took refuge there usually only as a last resort—a lying-in hospital for a woman in the final stages of pregnancy, a hospital for someone in a medical crisis, and a soup kitchen for those in a state of near starvation. Like poor relief officials, the most abjectly poor practiced their own form of triage. For many, the first remedy was moving in or out of the city in search of work; many pursued a second strategy of begging alms or appropriating food, clothes, and cash through theft; the final resort was entering the almshouse in winter when jobs were difficult to find, then fleeing in the spring when work was more readily available.⁸⁶

In rural almshouses, which by the early nineteenth century were becoming the dominant vehicle of pastoral poor relief, inmates probably had greater leverage in shaping the terms of institutionalized existence than in the large, less personal cities. Monique Bourque's essay in this book describes how mid-Atlantic poor relief administrators in small towns were always involved in a shifting negotiation with inmates, hammering out informal contracts "which included the understanding that both aid and authority had its limits." In ways that made the lives of almshouse inmates something different than the policies intended by the county magistrates, paupers had considerable latitude to "manipulate their admission, their tasks within the institution, and their discharge." If further studies confirm these findings, the struggles of the working poor to cope with the shift from a commercial to a manufacturing economy bear some resemblance to the efforts of slaves to negotiate the terms of their labor with slave masters in the South.

Poverty and Politics

Having discovered poverty in the land of milk and honey, historians have asked what role the poor may have played on the public scene, either by direct action themselves, as in labor

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organizing and crowd activity, or indirectly by convincing others that poverty was something more than self-failure at the bottom of society, thereby requiring the rethinking of fundamental social, economic, and political arrangements. Historians have provided tentative answers in recent years, but much more needs to be known. Complicating the matter is the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of treating the poor as a discrete and unchanging group with separate motives and separate agendas. Clearly this is not a fruitful way to proceed. But if it can be assumed that the poor were something more than part of “the mindless mobs,” so roundly dismissed at the time for their inability to act except out of passion, then it behooves us to inquire into how the impoverished responded in political ways to the conditions of their lives. At the same time, it is reasonable to presume that the most desperately poor—the impaired, aged, and chronically sick—played virtually no role in the coming of the American Revolution and its prosecution.⁸⁷

From early in the eighteenth century, the working poor had mingled with those a step or two above them to secure protection against privation. From city to city, county to county, and decade to decade, they loomed large in the food riots (as in Boston in the 1710s and 1720s), in public market sabotage in Boston in the 1730s, in land riots (as in New Jersey and New York in the 1730s and 1740s and in North Carolina and South Carolina in the 1760s), in election riots in Philadelphia in 1742, and impressment riots in Boston in 1747. Rarely were they leaders of the crowd actions before the 1760s, but always they were present, as the essay in this book by Thomas Humphrey makes plain. They can never be sorted out from ordinary working men and women (who themselves were usually only a work accident, a crippling disease, or brief unemployment away from poverty), but the upper-class leaders who deplored crowd actions knew the poor bulked large when they labeled the gathered crowds the “canaille,” “sinister army,” “tagrags,” “rabble,” “swinish multitude,” “villainous rubbish,” or “low-bred illiterates.”

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The term most commonly applied was “the lower sort,” which certainly included the poor along with those who had known destitution, had scratched their way into “the middling sort,” and, in many instances, would revisit poverty.

In addition to specific grievances, nearly all of which involved basic issues of sustaining life, what has been called the “bread-nexus,” the poor responded (in consort with many of those who were a rung or two above them) to the growing separation between want and wealth. The notion that poverty marred a society and rebuked its success was not an idea homegrown in America. At mid-century, a titled Englishman, whose advice was republished in Boston, pronounced that “Every Nation has the Reputation of being rich or poor from the Condition of the lowest Class of its Inhabitants.”⁸⁸ Consonant with this notion, many colonial newspapers and pamphlets bristled with anger about growing social distance, almost always in times of recession and widespread unemployment. Can we doubt that the poor thickly populated the crowd that gathered outside Thomas Hutchinson’s sumptuous house in 1749 when it mysteriously caught fire and the people shouted, “Let it burn! Let it burn!”⁸⁹ One year later a Boston pamphleteer stormed that “Poverty and discontent appear in every Face (except the Countenances of the Rich)” and explicitly connected the enrichment of merchants who had fattened themselves on war contracts and their manipulation of the unstable money market with the plight of job-starved fellow citizens.⁹⁰

A decade later, the rise of radical leaders in Boston, such as James Otis and Samuel Adams, cannot be separated from the years of economic difficulty, spreading poverty, and the limited chances for advancement that so many Bostonians experienced. When a conservative writer attacked Otis and his colleagues in 1763 as “the darling idols of a dirty, very dirty, witless rabble commonly called the little vulgar,” he was animated by Otis’s prior attacks on Bostonians

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who “grind the faces of the poor without remorse, eat the bread of oppression without fear, and wax fat upon the spoils of the people.”⁹¹ When the Stamp Act riots erupted, it was entirely appropriate from the perspective of the poor and the artisans scrambling for subsistence that their initial targets should be the luxuriously appointed homes of Andrew Oliver, Benjamin Hallowell, and Thomas Hutchinson, the latter detested by the lower class since the late 1740s as the architect of a merciless deflationary policy that was seen as primarily beneficial to the rich. Governor Francis Bernard thus understood the Stamp Act riots in Boston not only as a political response to new imperial regulations but also as “a war of plunder, of general levelling, and taking away the distinction of rich and poor.”⁹²

In other cities, voices from below challenged the notion that the destitute bore the primary responsibility for their plight. Was it equitable, asked a New York writer in 1765, “that 99, rather 999, should suffer for the Extravagance or Grandeur of one? Especially when it is considered that Men frequently owe their Wealth to the impoverishment of their Neighbours?” Writing four years later, a New Yorker reminded his audience that “it is [to] the meaner Class of Mankind, the industrious Poor, that so many of us are indebted for those goodly Dwellings we inhabit, for that comfortable Substance we enjoy, while others are languishing under the disagreeable Sensations of Penury and Want.”⁹³ In these statements we have evidence that the accumulation of capital that fueled consumer culture also heightened political consciousness among poorly paid workers, such as mariners and dockworkers, who made consumption of overseas products possible but shared in this consumption hardly at all.

With the advent of the American Revolution, the poor appeared on the public stage as never before. In the tumultuous decade leading up to open rebellion and in the long war that followed, the poor were omnipresent—not part of a plebeian revolution but of a revolution with

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“a powerful plebeian current within it.”⁹⁴ Often leagued with artisans, shopkeepers, teachers, and even doctors, who usually became their spokesmen, they insisted that the public recognize their impoverishment as a disfigurement of colonial society, not their own moral deformities. Not everywhere, but in many places, they also insisted that if a cleansed new republican society was to be formed, they must be included as part of the social contract.

Within this plebeian current swam those who before the Revolution had fallen in and out of work and in and out of poverty—such men as George Robert Twelves Hewes, whose modern biographer portrays a case study of the man who was born poor, lived poor, and died poor while playing his role on the public stage.⁹⁵ Indeed, the Revolutionary War, like many American wars that followed it, turned into a poor man’s fight after the rage militaire wore off and the better sorts looked to indentured servants, freed slaves, and the poor to shoulder the guns and don the boots for a prolonged battle of attrition. As every general knew, it was not possible to fight the war of independence successfully without the poor. “Long Bill” Scott, vividly portrayed by John Shy, was probably the typical revolutionary soldier—a man who joined the fray as an opportunity to escape poverty (in his case on the New Hampshire frontier), who returned to poverty after the war was won, and who farmed out his youngest children to his oldest son in order to set off begging a pension or job from the government. Nine times wounded during the war, he spent another decade surveying in the West before dying of “lake fever.” He died a poor man, never finding the economic security that he quested for in joining the revolutionary movement.⁹⁶ His black counterpart, aptly named Salem Poor, left his hardscrabble farm in Andover, Massachusetts, to fight at Bunker Hill, White Plains, and Valley Forge.

On the home front, the Revolution was profoundly dislocating. Disruptions of supply; unpatriotic mercantile behavior in the form of forestalling and monopolizing; the creation of an

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army of widows, mostly needy; and rampant inflation imposed burdens differentially—and rarely to the advantage of the poor.⁹⁷ It is unsurprising, given these dislocations and the revolutionary rhetoric about equality, that the poor were involved in the more than thirty food and price riots that occurred between 1776 and 1779.⁹⁸ To be sure, these plebeian actions to seize food or force hoarding and speculating merchants to lower prices probably were as much middle as lower class in character, although no historian has found a way to dissect the exact social composition of the crowds. It is evident that women figured importantly in the protest movements.

These demonstrations of what E. P. Thompson memorably called “the moral economy of the poor” lay so close to the primary interest of the poor—the interest in staying alive—that it is not necessary to prove that they were more than participants in the mob actions.⁹⁹ Along with those above them, who lived in a floating zone where plentitude was an aspiration but penury always cast a menacing shadow, they stood at the center of “the long-term development of capitalist social relationships in America” and represented “an immediate experience of economic distress and articulate popular ideas about economic exchange, its meaning, and the crucial issues of who might claim jurisdiction over it and through what political forms.”¹⁰⁰ The main student of the revolutionary food riots avers that in the later years of the war the price riots had leaders from the lower classes and “became more urban and, correspondingly, more expressive of the beliefs and grievances of the cities’ lower classes.”¹⁰¹ This was certainly true in Philadelphia, a classic case of the poor taking to the streets during a year of hyperinflation that nearly put bread out of reach for poor families whose main breadwinner was on the battlefields. In 1779, “A Fair Dealer” (perhaps Paine) warned that price increases had torn at the meager pocketbooks of ordinary people so severely as “to make the Poor almost clamerous.” “Mobility”

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warned forestallers that “hunger will break through stone walls and the resentment executed by it may end in your destruction.”¹⁰² The Fort Wilson riot that ensued, pitting revolutionist against revolutionist along class lines, is well known. Invoking the moral economy, the crowd threatened to use force to stop Robert Morris’s ships from transporting grain out of Philadelphia to distant markets where he could make fatter profits. While the shipwrights who built the ship made no “claim in the property of the vessel,” they insisted that “the service of it is the right of the community collectively with the owners,” because the way the vessel was used “constituted a considerable part of the advantage they hoped to derive from their labours.”¹⁰³

The grievances of the poor and their lower-class compatriots also surfaced in the weighty matter of constructing state constitutions. Although these constitutions varied in important ways, all were inspired by a strain of classical republicanism that emphasized the organic connection between economic and political power and the certainty that concentrated economic power would find its equivalent in concentrated political power. “Where there is inequality of estates there must be inequality of power,” wrote the late seventeenth-century English writers James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, much quoted in the American revolutionary era, for “there is no maxim more infallible and holding in any science, than this in politics; that empire is founded in property.” John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*, quoted widely in colonial newspapers, punctuated the point in the 1740s: “A free people are kept so by no other means but an equal distribution of property. . . . As Liberty can never subsist without Equality, nor Equality be long preserved without an Agrarian law, or something like it; so when Mens Riches are become immeasurably or surprizingly great, a People, who regard their own Security, ought to make a strict Enquiry how they came by them, and oblige them to take down their own Size, for fear of terrifying the Community, or mastering it.”¹⁰⁴

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Nobody, even the most radical revolutionist, sought a perfect equality. But men as conservative as John Adams believed that “we should preserve not an Absolute Equality—this is unnecessary, but preserve all from extreme Poverty, and all others from extravagant Riches.” In Philadelphia, the convention architects of a state constitution had read Harrington, Sidney, Trenchard, and Gordon carefully. If this did not convince them that in a republican society it was necessary to “discourage the Possession [of an] enormous Proportion of Property” in the hands of a “few,” they had firsthand knowledge that “great and overgrown rich Men” had become oppressive and, if left to accumulate great riches, would become “an Aristocracy, or Government of the Great.”¹⁰⁵ In North Carolina, rural citizens advised the constitution makers to “oppose everything that leans to aristocracy or power in the hands of the rich and chief men exercised to the oppression of the poor.”¹⁰⁶

The egalitarian thrust of the American Revolution has been observed almost from the time of the event, though historians have assigned different weights to its importance.¹⁰⁷ Fiercely decried by conservative revolutionaries, the leveling tendency had its source not simply in the increasing social distance between top and bottom. Absent poverty, a growing gap would not have aroused much attention. What did attract fervent attention, as noted above, was the perceived causal connection between poverty and grandiose wealth. In the aftermath of the Revolution, some of the problems associated with colonial status were theoretically solved to the benefit of the poor by opening up the land-rich trans-Appalachian West. Yet this escape valve, while attracting thousands of the down-and-out in search of better opportunities (as yet measured only casually), seems to have shifted the scene of poverty for many while it solved it for others. The backcountry unrest of the 1780s and 1790s involved the land-nexus—disturbances originating in people losing land as much as the difficulties of gaining land and in the frustrations

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of those thwarted in attempts at securing self-sufficiency. It is hard to imagine any of the agrarian unrest of this era—Ely’s Rebellion, Shays’s Rebellion, the Fries Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the disturbances on the frontiers of New York, Pennsylvania, and Maine—without rural poverty and stunted ambition.[108](#)

The Revolution also hastened the advent of a market economy and industrial development, both of which cut several ways, pleasing many while discouraging others. The rosy view of what unfettered economic activity would do for all ranks of society—all boats rising on an incoming tide—needs to be balanced by an understanding of how waged labor, replacing artisanal labor, undermined the artisan’s control of his labor value and how the politics of the 1790s, both from the top and bottom of society, involved a growing concern that commercialism and the free market were not abolishing poverty but entrenching it.[109](#)

Recent work on three self-educated men of very ordinary means—one in Massachusetts, one in New Jersey, and another in Delaware—offer windows into the new considerations of poverty in the emerging republican order. New Jersey’s Abraham Clark, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, championed the struggling husbandmen and artisans—the laboring poor—and contrasted them to the moneyed men who lived “by the labour of the honest farmer and mechanic” and “riot[ed] in luxury by means of oppression.” Holding a legislature seat in the 1780s and 1790s, he urged the lawmakers to devise policies to avoid “that inequality of property which is detrimental in a republican government” and to hobble avaricious “moneyed men not yet satisfied” who looked for new opportunities to “grind the face of the needy.”[110](#) William Manning of rural Massachusetts joined Clark in seeing moneyed men as parasites who lived off the labor of the industrious poor rather than economic innovators. Likewise, he believed that the impoverishment of those with limited access to property, or who had lost it as in the dark

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Shaysite days, would undermine the citizenry's independence, lead toward a passive servility, and in the end doom republicanism. Writing in 1790, this autodidact opposed Hamilton's financial plans for funding and assuming the revolutionary debt, arguing that the scheme was calculated to benefit the few at the expense of the many and thus would further concentrate property in the hands of the wealthy while submerging industrious farmers and workers whose "labor is the sole parent of all property."¹¹¹ In his later "Key to Liberty," Manning made proposals for giving the laboring majority the access to knowledge that he believed the elite so jealously guarded in order to keep in check the industrious poor.

Going much farther than Clark and Manning was Robert Coram, a Revolutionary War veteran, schoolteacher, antislavery activist, and newspaper editor in Wilmington, Delaware. Coram had little faith in laissez-faire commercial development and the purported unsurpassed advantages of "civilization." "Look around your cities," he wrote, "ye who boast of having established the civilization and happiness of man, see at every corner of your streets some wretched object with tattered garments, squalid look, and hopeless eye. . . . Civilization, thy benefits are not sufficiently solid, numerous, nor splendid; we everywhere perceive that degradation and distress which thy daughter poverty has entailed upon our race." Through his *Political Inquiries, to which is Added a Plan for the Establishment of Schools Throughout the United States* (1791),¹¹² Coram joined the circle of Anglo-American radicals who "became increasingly skeptical about the capacity for the unregulated workings of the free market to ensure justice for every member of society." Not classical republicans attacking commerce, but deeply skeptical about the benevolence of a self-regulating, "natural" free market system, they looked for political ways to harness commerce in the interest of a more just economic order. This brought Coram close to the emerging economic and political thought of Thomas Paine, who in

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Agrarian Justice (1795) addressed the problem of a “hereditary” poverty that was the offspring of commercial society. Paine’s search for political mechanisms that would ensure a more equitable distribution of what commercial society admittedly produced in abundance became the search of many disturbed by the poverty that the American Revolution could never cure. “When it shall be said,” wrote Paine in Rights of Man in 1791–92, “in any country in the world, ‘My poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive’ . . . —when these things can be said, then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.”¹¹³

The Painite radicals of the 1790s would not carry the day, and the poor would not find political voice or political allies strong enough to change the commercialization of society or meliorate its tendencies to concentrate wealth and engender poverty. Looming on the horizon, though it could not be known, was a depression following the War of 1812 so severe that its unemployment rate of 25 percent or higher would shake American cities to the core. This in turn would raise new questions about the sources of poverty and its remedies; and always the arguments arising out of the severe depression of 1819 to 1822 were conditioned by the history of poverty and poor relief in the eighteenth century, the history of which we have only in recent decades rediscovered.

⁶⁴. David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

⁶⁵. Cotton Mather, *Some Seasonable Advice unto the Poor* (Boston, 1712).

⁶⁶. Gary B. Nash, “The Failure of Female Factory Labor in Colonial Boston,” *Labor History* 20 (1979), 165–88; and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Sheep in the Parlor, Wheels on the Common: Pastoralism and Poverty in Eighteenth-Century Boston,” in Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger, eds., *Inequality in Early America* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), 182–200.

[67](#). In addition to the studies cited earlier, see Stephen E. Wiberly Jr., “Four Cities: Public Poor Relief in Urban America, 1700–1775” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1975); Nash, “Poverty and Poor Relief in Pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia”; Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty in Pre-Revolutionary America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1976): 545–84; and Nash, “Up From the Bottom in Franklin’s Philadelphia.”

[68](#). The fullest studies of changing poor relief strategies in the eighteenth century, in addition to the essays in this book, are Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*; Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief*; Bellows, *Benevolence Among Slaveholders . . . in Charleston*; and Clement, *Welfare and the Poor . . . in Philadelphia*.

[69](#). This has been studied by Nash, “Poverty and Poor Relief,” 13–30, and most fully in Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, chaps. 5–6.

[70](#). Quoted in Nash, “Poverty and Poor Relief,” 18.

[71](#). The quoted phrase is from Leonard Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 35 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–), 13:515.

[72](#). (Philadelphia) *Independent Gazetteer*, May 21, 1791, quoted in Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 14.

[73](#). The “Haskell thesis,” which originated in his response to David Brion Davis’s characterization of abolitionist motives and values, has not been applied to changing attitudes about poverty. For the Haskell-Davis-Ashworth debate, see Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

[74](#). Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief*, 102. Cray shows that in towns outside New York City, municipal officials began switching from institutionalized relief to “pauper auctions and other kinds of public charity” in the early nineteenth century while the metropolis was moving toward a complete reliance on workhouses. Rural communities would later fall into line. For Philadelphia, see Clement, *Welfare and the Poor*.

[75](#). For an illuminating set of essays, see Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe, eds., *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

[76](#). Smith, “Lower Sort,” 92–93; Smith, “The Vicissitudes of Fortune: The Careers of Laboring Men in Philadelphia, 1750–1800,” in Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America*, 221–22; Smith’s “Walking the Streets,” the first chapter of his “Lower Sort,” is a unique view of the “intensely insecure environment” in which most urban working people lived.

[77](#). Timothy Breen, “Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal*

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Identity in Early America, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 77–92.

[78.](#) Young, Shoemaker and the Tea Party. This book is an extension and revision of Young’s earlier “George Robert Twelves Hewes, 1742–1840,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 38 (1981): 561–623.

[79.](#) For the New York City case, see Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief*, and “White Welfare and Black Strategies: The Dynamics of Race and Poor Relief in Early New York, 1700–1825,” *Slavery and Abolition* 7 (1986): 273–89]; for the situation in Pennsylvania and Virginia, see Brewer, “Constructing Consent,” chap. 6.

[80.](#) The best study of transient women and their strategies is Herndon, “Women of ‘No Particular Home,’” 269–89. See also Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans*. A forthcoming book by Cornelia Dayton and Sharon Salinger traces the struggles of warned-out women in Boston.

[81.](#) Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 98.

[82.](#) Daily Occurrence Docket, December 22, 1789, Philadelphia Almshouse Records, Philadelphia City Archives.

[83.](#) Minutes of the [Philadelphia] Overseers of the Poor, 1768–74, June 15, 1769, quoted in Nash, “Poverty and Poor Relief,” 26.

[84.](#) “Elector” in *Pennsylvania Journal*, October 3, 1781, quoted in Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 51.

[85.](#) For those who read Thomas Paine, or heard him read, they must have taken comfort in his *Agrarian Justice*, published in 1795–96, where he pled the case of the dispossessed, for whom “it is a right, and not a charity” to receive the assistance of those who paid too little for the labor of the poor and monopolized the society’s resources. Philip Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1:612, 618–20.

[86.](#) For vivid examples of the various strategies employed by the poor in Philadelphia, see Cynthia J. Shelton and Billy G. Smith, “The Daily Occurrence Docket of the Philadelphia Almshouse, 1800,” *Pennsylvania History* 52 (1985): 86–116.

[87.](#) The beginning of historical consideration of the agency of the poor and lowly begins with Staughton Lynd, “Who Should Rule at Home? Dutchess County, New York, in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 18 (1961): 330–59; and Jesse Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 19 (1962), 201–19.

[88.](#) A Letter from Sir Richard Cox, Bart. To Thomas Prior, Esq.: Shewing from Experience a sure Method to establish the Linnen-Manufacture (Boston, 1750), 10.

[89.](#) Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 226.

[90.](#) Vincent Centinel (pseud.), *Massachusetts in Agony; or, Important Hints to the Inhabitants of the Province: Calling aloud for Justice to be done to the Oppressed* (Boston, 1750), 3–5, 8, 12–13.

[91.](#) The attack on Otis is in *Boston Evening Post*, March 14, 1763; Otis's prior attack on the wealthy is in *Boston Gazette*, January 11, 1762, Supplement.

[92.](#) Bernard to Board of Trade, Aug. 31, 1765, in William Cobbett, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England* (London, 1813), 16:129–31. For the role of the humble in the street politics in Boston, see Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765–1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

[93.](#) *New-York Gazette*, July 11, 1765; November 13, 1769. For a fuller analysis of distrust of the wealthy in the cities, going back to the early eighteenth century, and the crescendo of attacks on the wealthy in the years leading up to the American Revolution, see Gary B. Nash, "Social Change and the Growth of Pre-Revolutionary Urban Radicalism," in Young, ed., *The American Revolution*, 4–36. The New York case is examined by Paul Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), chaps. 1–3.

[94.](#) Young, *Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 205.

[95.](#) *Ibid.* For a recent treatment of underclass involvement in the revolutionary movement in Virginia see Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[96.](#) John Shy, "Hearts and Minds in the American Revolution: The Case of 'Long Bill' Scott and Peterborough, New Hampshire," in Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 163–80. In the large literature on the composition of the militia and Continental army and navy, agreement is general that as the war proceeded, the manpower was drawn from the lowest echelons of colonial society. See, e.g., Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); and Lawrence Delbert Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

[97.](#) The most deeply researched case study of this is Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" during the American Revolution* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). For a broader look at attempts from below to cope with the revolutionary and postrevolutionary dislocations, see Ruth Bogin, "Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post-Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 45 (1988): 391–425.

[98.](#) Barbara Clark Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 51 (1994): 3–38.

[99.](#) E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–131. The ballooning literature on the “moral economy” is cited in Smith, “Food Rioters,” 4–5, notes 3–5.

[100.](#) Smith, “Food Rioters,” 3–4. For earlier food riots and controversies in Boston that disrupted the city for several decades, see Smith, “Markets, Streets, and Stores: Contested Terrain in Pre-Industrial Boston,” in Elise Marienstras and Barbara Karsky, eds., *Autre Temps, Autre Espace—An Other Time, An Other Space: Etudes sur l’Amerique pre-industrielle* (Nancy, Fr., 1986), 181–97. For petitions on behalf of “the Poorer sort of People” in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, from 1772 to 1778, see Bogin, “Petitioning and the New Moral Economy,” 399–400.

[101.](#) Smith, “Food Rioters,” 17.

[102.](#) For a close examination of the Philadelphia food and price riots, see Steven Rosswurm, “‘As a Lyen out of His Den’: Philadelphia’s Popular Movement, 1776–80,” in Margaret Jacob and James Jacob, eds., *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 300–323. The quoted passages are on p. 308.

[103.](#) Quoted in *ibid.*, 311.

[104.](#) Charles Blitzer, ed., *The Political Writings of James Harrington* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 98; [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon], *Cato’s Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious*, 6th ed. (London, 1755), 2:16; 3:207–8. When the antiadministration group organized by Samuel Adams launched the *Independent Advertiser* in Boston in 1748, this passage from *Cato’s Letters* ornamented the first issue. Adams added another sentence that asked: “But some will say, is it a Crime to be rich? Yes, certainly, At the Publick Expense.”

[105.](#) The statement by John Adams was written in the draft of his *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, published in 1765, but it was extinguished in the final version. See Robert J. Taylor, ed., *The Papers of John Adams*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 106–7n. The clause in the draft of the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776, also deleted in the final version, is quoted in Rosswurm, “Philadelphia’s Popular Movement,” 306–7.

[106.](#) Quoted in Michael Merrill and Sean Wilentz, ed., *The Key of Liberty: The Life and Democratic Writings of William Manning, “A Laborer,” 1747–1814* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5.

[107.](#) For a searching discussion of this, from J. Franklin Jameson’s initial formulation to the present, see Alfred F. Young, “American Historians Confront ‘The Transforming Hand of 36 down and out in early america Revolution,’” in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 346–494; and the essays in that volume by Marcus Rediker, “A Motley Crew of Rebels: Sailors, Slaves, and the Coming of the

American Revolution,” 155–98; Billy G. Smith, “Runaway Slaves in the Mid-Atlantic Region during the Revolutionary Era,” 199–230; and Alan Taylor, “‘To Man Their Rights’: The Frontier Revolution,” 231–57. For other key post-Progressive statements of the egalitarian thrust, see Jesse Lemisch, “The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up,” in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Random House, 1967), 5–45; Merrill Jensen, *The American Revolution within America* (New York: New York University Press, 1974); Richard B. Morris, “A Cautiously Transforming Egalitarianism,” chap. 7 in Morris, *Forging of the Union, 1781–1789* (New York, Harper and Row, 1987); Morris, “‘We the People of the United States’: The Bicentennial of a People’s Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 82 (1977): 1–19; and Allan Kulikoff, *The Rise and Destruction of the American Yeoman Classes* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). For all its celebration of the idea of equality in revolutionary America, Gordon Wood’s *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) says little about inequality and the agency of the laboring poor in challenging the growing gap in wealth and the conservative resurgence in the 1790s. For critiques of the book and Wood’s response, see essays by Joyce Appleby, Barbara Clark Smith, Michael Zuckerman, and Gordon Wood in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 51 (1994): 679–716. Equality is “the single most powerful and radical ideological force in all of American history” (p. 200), Wood writes, but his book barely notices those at the bottom of society— seamen, laborers, indentured servants, slaves, landless farmers, and lower-end artisans.

[108.](#) Peter Levine, “The Fries Rebellion: Social Violence and the Politics of the New Nation,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 60 (1973): 241–58; Richard Maxwell Brown, “Back Country Rebellions and the Homestead Ethic in America, 1740–1799,” in Brown and Don E. Fehrenbacher, eds., *Tradition, Conflict, and Modernization: Perspectives on the American Revolution* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 73–99; David P. Szatmary, *Shays’s Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Robert A. Gross, *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[109.](#) The literature on the transition to capitalism and the difficulties of the lower classes trying to negotiate the transition from agricultural to industrial labor is immense. For a discussion of the literature on this, which cites most of the relevant work, see Michael Merrill, “Putting ‘Capitalism’ in Its Place: A Review of Recent Literature,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 52 (1995): 315–26. For a case study with documents, see Paul A. Gilje and Howard B. Rock, eds., *Keepers of the Revolution: New Yorkers at Work in the Early Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[110.](#) The quoted passages are from Clark’s 1786 pamphlet “The True Policy of New-Jersey, Defined,” quoted in Ruth Bogin, “New Jersey’s True Policy: The Radical Republican Vision of Abraham Clark,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 35 (1978), 100–109.

[111.](#) Manning’s “Some Proposals for Making Restitution to the Original Creditors of Government,” in Merrill and Wilentz, *Key to Liberty*, 60.

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[112](#). Seth Cotlar, “Radical Conceptions of Property Rights and Economic Equality in the Early American Republic: The Trans-Atlantic Dimension,” *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4 (2000): 191–219, quoting Coram, *Political Inquiries*.

[113](#). Foner, *Writings of Paine*, 1:446.
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