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PROPERTY OWNERSHIP IN THE WRITINGS OF THE SECTARIES

1640 - 1660

by

Arthur R. Clarke

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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KEY TO TITLES OF WORKS FREQUENTLY REFERRED TO

- Haller Haller, William (ed.), Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution, 1638-1647. 3 vols.;
- Haller and Davies Haller, Wm. and Davies, Godfrey (ed.), The Leveller Tracts, 1647-1653. New York: 1944.
- Orwell Orwell, George and Reynolds, Reginald (eds.), British Pamphleteers. 2 vols.; London: 1948. Vol. I: From the XVIth Century to the French Revolution.
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- Woodhouse Woodhouse, A. S. P. (ed.), Puritanism and Liberty. London: 1938.

INTRODUCTION

During the period of one generation in the seventeenth century, from 1640 to 1660, the structure of English social and political life was shaken, and for twenty years, in the absence of effective censorship by church or state, men raised in print fundamental questions of the entire religious, political, economic and legal goals of society, questions scarcely raised again in England for nearly two centuries.

In the words of the Puritan minister Henry Burton, the calling of the Long Parliament "opened many mouths."¹ The abolition of the prerogative Court of High Commission brought about a consequent freedom of religious discussion divorced from authoritarian control. Sectarian theories of religious belief multiplied on every side. Freedom to preach and practice their doctrines openly was gained, not only by the more formal Presbyterian and Independent (Congregational) churches, but also by a vast array of small Sectarian groups with widely varying beliefs on both religious and social questions. Although the Presbyterian and later Independent majority in Parliament looked askance at these groups, and sporadically attempted to eliminate them and suppress their writings and preaching, this vigorous expression of ideas continued through the reimposition of censorship by the

¹H. Burton, Englands Bondage and Hope of Deliverance (London: 1641), 14.

Cromwell regime in 1649, and did not cease altogether until the Restoration of 1660 brought the severities of the established church to bear against the expression of non-conformity.

Orwell, in his introduction to a collection of British political pamphlets,² remarks that the lengthy polemical tract, as opposed to the simple propaganda broadside, depends on two conditions for its existence. Writers must be protesting against what, at least to them, is a tyrannical government; and this "tyranny" must be inefficient in its measures of suppression. The tyranny provides the stimulus to protest; the inefficiency provides the opportunity to publish with the reasonable assurance that the tracts will not be immediately seized and the printing press destroyed. These conditions were eminently the case during the English Civil War period, and they remained valid even under Cromwell, in the general absence of an effective national police force.

At the beginning of the Civil Wars, there was in existence a native English strain of belief in exclusive bodies of those of the elect, covenanting together to advance the true religion. This belief was descended from the Lollards of the time of John Wycliffe at the end of the fourteenth century, and had received reinforcements from continental religious sects from the time of John Huss onwards. Small Lollard and Anabaptist colonies were scattered over many parts of England, particularly among the artisan class. During the century preceding the Civil

²G. Orwell and R. Reynolds (eds.), British Pamphleteers (2 vols.; London: 1948), Vol. I, Introduction.

War the religious and social ideas of the Moravian and German Anabaptists had entered England from Holland, whose economic connections and social influence on England were very great in the early seventeenth century.

The ordinary Puritan of this time, whether Presbyterian or Independent, had little interest in politics except insofar as it concerned religion or church government.³ However, in the thoughts of the Sectaries the ideas of freedom, equality and brotherhood gained from the introspective habits of a personally revealed religion came to seem increasingly at odds with the material condition of England, after more than a century of enclosures which were gradually alienating the peasantry from the land, and adding unemployed laborers to the urban population.

There had long been in peasant thought a strain of mystical and utopian ideas of common ownership of all property, but in the fire of the Civil Wars these largely unformed ideas became fused with a new belief that concrete actions to ease man's lot on earth were not only desirable but possible. Against an attitude on the part of many that the world's condition was the will of God, these new theories anticipated by almost a century Giambattista Vico's statement that "the social world is the work of man,"⁴ not a blind-chance, natural phenomenon, but one which can be shaped by man's conscious will.

³J. W. Allen, English Political Thought, 1603-1660 (London: 1938), I, 302.

⁴The New Science of Giambattista Vico, tr. Bergin & Fisch (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co.; 1940).

The political and economic writings of the English Sectarian movements known as the Levellers and the Diggers from the end of the first Civil War to the establishment of the Protectorate in 1653 foreshadow concepts and slogans of two centuries later. Hear Richard Overton, one of the chief Leveller writers: "By naturall birth, all men are equally and alike borne to like propriety, liberty and freedome,"⁵ a clear anticipation of the "inalienable rights" of the American Declaration of Independence. In other passages one can see statements previewing ideas of the class struggle in history, the labor theory of value, religion as the opiate of the people and the idea of property as theft, as will appear later in this paper.

Can we say that the economic and political ideas of the Levellers and others did not take root because at this time their hour had not yet struck? The late distinguished historian H. N. Brailsford censured this approach as a doctrinaire liberal idea of a preordained progress, but he admitted that for all the advanced ideas of these writers, the revolution that really happened brought the land, not back to the peasant, but into the hands of the new capitalist classes.⁶

In the last twenty-five years there has been an enormous increase in scholarly interest in the Leveller movement in particular, and the political writers of the English Civil War period in general. A considerable amount of historical writing on this

⁵R. Overton, An Arrow Against all Tyrants (1648), 3.

⁶H. N. Brailsford, The Levellers and the English Revolution (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press; 1961), 452.

subject has been an effort to portray the Levellers as the ancestors of the modern British Parliamentary Labour Party. Their economic ideas in particular are supposed to have been the first expression in English political life of the various doctrines espoused by the Labour Party with reference to state planning of the national economy, and public ownership and control of the means of production. It is my purpose in this essay to trace briefly the development of Sectarian economic thought; to illustrate the chief Leveller economic doctrines; to examine the Digger movement, and its relationship to the Levellers; and to give some illustrations of other theorists regarding the ownership of property and related questions during the period up to the Restoration.

This essay will be concerned almost entirely with the economic aspects of these movements and writers, and will offer some conclusions regarding the failure of all their programs. The Levellers in particular had many politically advanced ideas regarding religious toleration, the franchise, Parliamentary and legal reform, civil rights--practically the entire catalogue of liberal virtues. In these fields as well the Sectaries anticipated eighteenth and nineteenth century writers, but their specific writings on economic proposals and the ownership of property are a large enough field for this study.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECTARIAN ECONOMIC THEORY

Among the many currents of religious opinion which permeated Northern Europe in the years after the Protestant Reformation, the sect called the Family of Love, established in Holland by Hendrick Niclaes about 1541, was distinguished by its idealistic social criticism and its sympathy for the poor and the oppressed. The Familists held that the evils suffered by man were due to remediable causes, to the ignorance and error in which men were kept by a church imposed by tyrants, and that the one escape lay in the mystical experience of divine love.⁷ By 1580 the Familists had established themselves in England, where they joined the small but tenacious groups of Baptists in resisting all efforts of the Elizabethan government to destroy them. The Baptists, followers of John Smyth, who had formed an early English Baptist church at Amsterdam in 1606, led by Smyth's successors Thomas Helwyss and John Murton, were present in and around London about 1612. Significantly, both John Everard and John Eaton, closely connected with the Digger movement, were members of the Family of Love.⁸

⁷F. Nippold, "Heinrich Niclaes und das Haus der Liebe," Zeitschrift fur historische Theologie, XXXII (1862), cited in Haller, I, 43-4.

⁸Wm. Haller, Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1955), 167.

It was a feature of this and similar sects that they held state churches, Catholic or Protestant, to be in error. Caspar Schwenkfeld (died 1561) wrote that Lutheranism was in error for "forming a church by the power and command of the magistrate, and did not attempt to gather a church which was first formed by Christ's Spirit."⁹ Many of Schwenkfeld's followers fled to England during the Thirty Years' War, and there they had great influence on the Quakers and other sects. English translations of the works of the Schwenkfeldian writer Jacob Bohme were issued by the same publisher, Giles Calvert, who published most of the Leveller pamphlets and Quaker sermons.

Another early influence from Holland was the work of the Calvinist writer Althusius, whose Politica methodice Digesta emphasized the concept of the ultimate sovereignty of the people, and the idea of government as a social contract among men. Althusius proposed the doctrine of a separation of powers within a republican framework of government. He was really talking of the rule of an aristocracy of the wealthy and influential, but his teachings passed into English political thought without this qualification.¹⁰

In the thinking of these groups, a connection was forming between their history of mystical experience and newly-evolving ideas of democracy. The vivid awareness of God's direct presence

⁹R. Barclay, The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth (London: 1876), 233.

¹⁰G. P. Gooch, English Democratic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century (2nd. ed.; Cambridge: 1927), 43.

in a Pentecostal fashion was prevalent among the sects, and not unusual among the more orthodox Puritans. This thought is exemplified by the exhortations of the Sectarian preacher John Saltmarsh: "the Lord make ye hearken to one another, from the highest to the meanest, that the voice of God, wheresoever it speaks, may not be despised."¹¹ The superiority of this intuitive experience over the limitations of revealed knowledge, felt by the Sectarian writers, gave an anti-intellectual tone to their expressions. The preacher John Spencer, condemned by the Presbyterian heresy-hunter Thomas Edwards as a horse-rubber, declared, "The Scriptures doth plainly affirme, that the true understanding of Scripture comes not by humane learning, by arts and tongues, but by the spirit of God."¹²

Much of the thinking of the developing Sectarian religious groups in England in the years just prior to the Civil War was concerned with the relations and differences between the Law of God, the Law of Nature and the Law of the Land. As an example of the difference between the natural law of all nations, and the divine positive law of one people, the Puritan Congregationalist minister William Ames wrote in 1639 that property or "a division of things" is by the law of nations, but "almost all possessions" may be in common if such be desired "by common consent."¹³

¹¹J. Saltmarsh, Letter to the Council of War (Oct. 28, 1647), cited in Woodhouse, 438.

¹²[J. Spencer], A Short Treatise Concerning the Lawfulness of Every Mans Exercising His Gift as God Shall Call Him Thereunto (1641), 5.

¹³Wm. Ames, Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof (1639), cited in Woodhouse, 188.

Ideas of individual worth and responsibility, of the necessity of saints and true believers to combine into effective organizations to effect reforms in church and state, could as easily be used by Separatists and Sectaries as by orthodox Calvinists, for all the suspicion and even hatred felt by the Presbyterians in Parliament and the City of London for these groups.¹⁴ Calvinist Protestantism had postulated the idea of the fundamental value of each individual. This not only was a mortal blow to the old interdependent order of medieval agrarian society, but it also led to the Sectarian idea of the individual as all-important, with his conscience as the sole judge and arbiter of all his actions.¹⁵ This thought did not necessarily lead to ideas of common property, but did easily lead to ideas of equal opportunity, to the "pursuit of happiness" of Locke, and of similar later writers. Studying the Bible, which was the indispensable, if often the only, book in every English home, the "middle sort" of the English people--the tenants of the Lord of the Manor and the artisans and small traders of the towns--gained the idea of the equality of all men before God,¹⁶ and if before God, why not among men? This idea was elaborated in the religious sphere by

¹⁴The term "Sectary" in this paper is used to describe those separatist Protestant religious groups which belonged to neither the Established Church nor to Calvinist Protestantism. There were dozens of such groups in the 1640's, most importantly the Brownists, Familists, Baptists and Quakers.

¹⁵M. A. Gibb, John Lilburne, the Leveller: A Christian Democrat (London: 1947), 12, 111.

¹⁶W. Notestein, The English People on the Eve of Colonization, 1603-1630 (New York: 1954), 168.

the Sectaries, in the political sphere by the Levellers, and in the economic sphere by the Diggers and others. The congregational life of Calvinist Puritanism was a likely training ground for self-government and democratic participation. The Levellers, for example, may well have had their beginning in the debates that preceded the elections of ministers, and the often ensuing recriminations.¹⁷

The spread of Sectarian thought, already scattered thinly in the countryside by the Anabaptist groups mentioned above, was further advanced by "mechanick preachers," workers who spread out from London to other parts of England, taking with them ideas of personal revelation in religion, and belief in a natural or fundamental law, according to which the people were the source of all just power in the nation. One John Trendall, a London freemason, was arrested and examined in July of 1639 on charges of holding Sectarian conventicles in Dover.¹⁸ There were other powerful speakers among these men, like John Saltmarsh, who preached of that fraternity of the spirit, which alone heals divisions and concludes debates.¹⁹

The first fundamental difference between the Presbyterians and the Sectaries was in their attitude toward salvation. The Presbyterians, and with them the Independents, held to a rigid

¹⁷C. Hill, Economic Problems of the Church (Oxford: 1956), 298 et seq.

¹⁸Calendar of State Papers, Domestic (Charles I), CCCCXXXII, 27, i, ii, iii (July 27, 1639).

¹⁹Haller, I, 85.

doctrine of predestination, derived from Calvinism and a strong belief in Old Testament prophecy. Inherent in Puritanism, of either the Presbyterian or Independent variety, was a tendency toward a radically undemocratic type of theocracy, the stern rule of the Church of the Covenant, or of the Parliament of Saints.²⁰ The Sectaries held to the doctrine of personal revelation as the key to salvation, from the belief that the message of the New Testament had supplanted that of the Old, and that all men, not just a limited elect, could be saved by this means.²¹

A second difference between the Presbyterians and the Sectaries was in their concept of religious order. The Presbyterians held, as the Anglicans did also and as the Independents agreed, at least in principle, to the idea of an all-embracing church, to which all the nation should belong, and to whose doctrines all should conform. The concept held by the Sectaries on the other hand, and inherent in their very name, was that each religious group was a circle of believers, separate from all those who did not share their degree of illumination.²² This concept necessarily implied a need for toleration of all religious opinions, at least those not considered treasonable to the state. The early Separatist leader Robert Browne had written in 1582 that secular rulers had no ecclesiastical authority, but had not

²⁰ Allen, 303.

²¹ D. W. Petegorsky, Left-wing Democracy in the English Civil War (London: 1940), 65.

²² W. Schenk, The Concern for Social Justice in the Puritan Revolution (London: 1948), 10.

taught the separation of church and state; once the proper ideas were broadcast, he expected everyone to accept them.²³ The Levellers, a socio-economic group growing out of religious Sectarianism, were the first who advocated complete separation of church and state.²⁴

There were by 1647 three groups of Puritans which had evolved in the years of Civil War and the breakdown of Anglican control: the English Presbyterians, conservative in both religion and politics; the Independents, "centrist" in politics, tolerationist in religion, wishing liberty from both Crown and Parliament; and the Sectaries, descended from both the Separatists and the Anabaptists of earlier years, divided between the essentially secular Levellers, and the religious doctrinaires of the Fifth Monarchy men.²⁵

A fourth group of those opposed to the previous church order were those whose outlook was Erastian, a secular and anti-clerical view of religion as only important insofar as it could be used as a measure of state control. "All is as the state likes," stated the Erastian author John Selden,²⁶ and went on to postulate a church having no authority independent of the state, and no right of action not derived from the civil magistrate.

²³M. Knappen, Tudor Puritanism (Chicago: 1939), 307.

²⁴H. Weingarten, Die Revolutionskirchen Englands (Leipzig: 1868), 299.

²⁵Woodhouse, 14 et seq.

²⁶J. Selden, Table Talk, ed. Reynolds, No. 8, 26, cited in Allen, 341.

One problem of the historian in the interpretation of the past is how to discover what ideas and attitudes were taken for granted in a specific period. Although there was much religious pamphleteering by the Sectaries and the Independents during the years of the Civil War and Commonwealth, there is little evidence of religious interest among the members of the Long Parliament. These men, mostly country gentlemen, rich merchants and prominent lawyers, had probably absorbed the secularizing tendencies of this century. Many of the gentry, near-gentry and at least a good part of their dependents were not motivated by positive religious feelings. What feelings they had were often negative ones of "anti-Popery" or suspicion of religious zealots as fanatics. Positive religion as a basis for social reform appeared more prevalent among part of the artisan and yeoman class.²⁷

Arguments for the toleration of the Sectaries, as well as for the more moderate Independents, were forthcoming early in this period from men of good will. Robert Greville, Lord Brooke, published in 1641 an appeal considered responsible for the first general toleration of the Sectaries, up to their persecution by the Presbyterians in 1646.²⁸ Another moving plea for toleration of the sects was made by William Walwyn in 1643.²⁹

The toleration sought by the Sectaries as indispensable

²⁷Schenk, Social Justice, 9. Cf. Allen, 437.

²⁸R. Greville, A discourse opening the nature of that Episcopacie which is exercised in England (November, 1641), cited in Haller, I, 21.

²⁹W. Walwyn, The Power of Love (1643), quoted in Haller, I, 36-7.

for their own existence became, in the hands of many sympathizers of the period, bound up with pleas for freedom of all to trade and the abolition of monopolies, and for a form of laissez-faire liberalism. Henry Robinson combined a plea for liberty of conscience with an attack on the physicians of his day:

May, why are not all Arts and Sciences thus manacled, if Divinity may be so much improved thereby? . . . Why are Physicians permitted to make experiments, and kill men after what fashion they please?³⁰

Robinson went on in this work to state that "in Civill Affaires we see by experience that every man most commonly understands best his owne businesse." The Leveller leader William Walwyn, writing a year later, echoed the plea that "in things wherein every man ought to be fully persuaded in his particular minde of the lawfulnessse or unlawfulnessse thereof; there to leave every man to the guidance of his owne judgement."³¹

Against these pleas, the Puritan majority in the House of Commons and the Council of the Army saw, or professed to see, in toleration the seeds of anarchy and common ownership of property. One fiery Puritan preacher, Thomas Case, asserted in early 1647, "Liberty of conscience (falsely so called) may in time improve itself into liberty of estates and . . . houses and . . . wives. . . ."³² The Puritan divines worried about the levelling tendencies of the Sectaries may not have been aware of a more far-

³⁰H. Robinson, Liberty of Conscience (Mar. 24, 1644), 39.

³¹W. Walwyn, A Helpe to the Right Understanding of a Discourse Concerning Independency [Feb. 6, 1645], 7.

³²T. Case, Spiritual Whoredom Discovered . . . (May 26, 1647), 34, cited in Woodhouse, [51], n. 2.

reaching effect of the campaign for toleration. A little-recognized characteristic of Puritan thought most prevalent among those groups of the left most concerned with liberty of conscience was a tendency to distinguish sharply between religion and the rest of life, a distinction with momentous consequences for the life of the world in later years.³³

As the events of 1640-1642 drove the King and the Parliament into open war, the concepts of the natural law, and the idea of a social contract as the basis of government, derived from the writings of Portescue and Hooker, were employed by such writers as Henry Parker in justifying Parliament in taking up arms against a King who was portrayed as subversive of such a law and such a contract.³⁴ These concepts and ideas were given a revolutionary aspect, appealing to the lower classes and the "middle sort" against the usurpations of the wealthy classes, by John Goodwin, who railed at the Cavalier party as "a Lordly, insolent, domineering and tyranizing spirit, sporting themselves in their cruelties, and delighting to ride over the heads of men, that they can get under them."³⁵

While the Puritan grandees and the Presbyterian members of Parliament may have been fighting only for the abolition of the prelates and for the oligarchic rule of the gentry, in the ranks of the Parliamentary army other spirits were stirring.

³³Cf. Woodhouse, [57-8].

³⁴H. Parker, Observations upon some of his Majesties late answers and expresses (1642), cited in Haller, I, 24.

³⁵J. Goodwin, Anti-Cavalierisme [Oct. 21, 1642], 39.

There were early expressions of a belief that private property does not necessarily arise from the natural law; that indeed it is alien to it, and arises from the man-made law of nations.³⁶ In Chelmsford in 1643, a royalist reported, it was preached that there were no grounds "neither in nature nor in Scripture . . . that one man should have £1,000 a year, another not £1; . . . therefore it is now fit that the nobility and gentry should . . . work for their own maintenance; and if they will not work, they ought not to eat."³⁷

The leadership and the urban core of the Leveller movement were to come from the class of small tradesmen in and near London, who in Professor Haller's phrase were "in varying states of distress."³⁸ They held that natural and divine law constituted a protection of property,³⁹ and in general were more conservative than some of their critics could be aware of.⁴⁰ In the mass of poor agricultural laborers, and those of the rural yeoman class who had suffered most from the economic dislocations, the enclosures and the inflation of the previous century, far more radical views of the natural basis of private property were hidden in the language of religious enthusiasm. A great amount of social discontent had arisen among the agricultural and urban

³⁶[S. Rutherford], Lex, Rex (1644), quoted in Woodhouse, 208.

³⁷[Bruno Ryves], Angliae Ruina (1643), 26-7.

³⁸Haller & Davies, 37.

³⁹Woodhouse, 59, 80.

⁴⁰D. B. Robertson, The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy (New York: King's Crown Press, 1951), 89.

laboring classes by 1647, due to the extremely poor economic situation of England in that decade. There had been a serious depression in the early 1620's, and there was widespread disorganization and depression in industry and agriculture from 1640 to 1660.⁴¹ In addition to the miseries of the war, there had been a succession of poor harvests due to bad weather, causing very high wheat prices after 1646. There was a general decay of trade during the entire Civil War period.⁴²

While their religious ideas were influenced by Anabaptist and Sectarian thought, the attitude of the small-holder class toward the land still contained much of a medieval conception of stewardship as the essence of property--a concept of property rights as limited by communal responsibility. The rural masses, unable to voice their protest against the bewildering and impoverishing economic changes of that day in concrete terms, used the language and forms of religious expression. The religious mysticism of the Sectarians was the first form of what would later be practical demands for social reform.⁴³

The social and economic position of the "middle sort" of men, the lower middle class of this era, has been a matter of some argument among historians. One modern study, while noting the economic disadvantages of this class in contrast to the gentry, emphasizes the superiority of their economic status to the

⁴¹M. James, Social Problems and Policy during the Puritan Revolution, 1640-1660 (London: 1930), vii.

⁴²Schenk, Social Justice, 65, 79, nn. 8, 10.

⁴³Petegorsky, 63-4.

roughly one half of England's population who made up the class below them.⁴⁴ An economic manifesto of the period, however, seems to other authors to indicate that the greatest dividing line ran between the upper classes on the one hand, and the middle and lower classes on the other. The difference between these last two have been described as inconsiderable.⁴⁵

The economic ideas of the Sectaries were a mixture of earlier ideas of "common property," new ideas of individual rights, and a natural conservative hunger to restore what to the small landholder must have seemed the good old days of the early sixteenth century. During this period, before the process of enclosure became troublesome, the gradual inflation in agricultural values had benefitted the tenant by making his tenure payments nominal.

The process of enclosure was very gradual, lasting from the fifteenth century well into the nineteenth. As late as 1685 it was estimated that three fifths of England was unenclosed.⁴⁶ It should be kept in mind, however, that the stationary rural society of England at the end of the Tudor period might be severely disturbed by agrarian changes which, in later eras of accepted rural emigration, would be too small to be recorded.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Wolfe, 106.

⁴⁵A Declaration of the Wel-Affected in the County of Buckinghamshire (May 10, 1649), 3, cited in Schenk, Social Justice, 67. Cf. Tawney, The Agrarian Problem in the XVth Century (London: 1912), 207-8.

⁴⁶Brailsford, 420.

⁴⁷Tawney, Agrarian Problem, 402.

The largest number of enclosures, particularly those which changed land use from arable to pastoral, took place, moreover, in a relatively concentrated area in the Midlands and East Anglia. By changes from fixed to variable copyhold fines, and conversions of copyholds to leases for a term of years, the fruits of economic progress went no longer to the peasantry but to the great landed proprietors.⁴⁸ The enclosures of 1550 to 1650 were generally not for agricultural progress, but were made in order to shift the land from arable to pasture and back, depending on the price of wool.⁴⁹

The opposition to new capitalistic practices was vocal. Complaints of the new rents fill the literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Enclosures could be to the advantage of the yeoman in the practice of farming itself, in the form where individual holdings were consolidated, but most often grievances arose in the treatment by the manorial lord of the common lands, waste lands and woodlands.⁵⁰ Legislation existed against land enclosure, in the form of acts both of Parliament and of the Privy Council; but these proved difficult if not impossible to enforce, as the Justices of the Peace, the local officials charged with enforcement, were drawn from the very classes who offended the most against such laws. What punishment there was for enclosures was by Star Chamber and other prerogative

⁴⁸Tawney, Agrarian Problem, 403-4.

⁴⁹Tawney, Agrarian Problem, 184.

⁵⁰Notestein, 72-3.

courts.⁵¹ Where these courts were active, a number of fines for enclosure were levied, and orders would be given that the enclosures were to be restored. The fines imposed on the enclosing landlords were a welcome source of revenue for the Crown, but the landlords did not restore the common fields they had taken.⁵² There was much mob action against enclosures during these years, with large numbers of the peasantry taking part. In the Durham incidents of 1642, three or four hundred persons had joined together in tearing up the fences and hedges of the enclosers.⁵³

The agrarian disturbances of this century showed the beginning of class opposition resulting from differing economic interests.⁵⁴ As early as 1607, risings of peasants who were styled Levellers had occurred in Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire. Groups of from 1,000 up to 5,000 countrymen cut down hedges, filled up ditches and laid open enclosures, aided by the nearby inhabitants. One leader, John Reynolds, a peddler or tinker, when questioned after his capture, swore he had been sent and directed in his actions by the King of Heaven.⁵⁵

The period of King Charles I's personal rule, 1629-1640, was a period of government intervention in all transactions where it was possible for private interest to run counter to the general

⁵¹James, 79.

⁵²Brailsford, 426.

⁵³Commons Journals, II, 471, cited in James.

⁵⁴Tawney, Agrarian Problem, 322.

⁵⁵G. B. Harrison, A Second Jacobean Journal, 1607-1610 (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1958), 28, 30-1, 34-5, 43, 54.

good. A thorough administration of the poor relief laws earned the approval of the peasants and town laborers. The concern of the regime for the welfare of the poor and the protection of the less fortunate seems to have been genuine.⁵⁶

With the assumption of power by the predominantly Puritan and indeed Presbyterian Long Parliament during the years from 1640 to 1647, there was a change in attitude to a somewhat more cold-blooded treatment of the lower classes. The new Puritan grandees felt not only a justification of their own wealth from the maxims of Calvinism, but an attitude of disdain for the presumed sloth of the poorer classes. The poor laws were administered with great severity. In the eyes of the merchants and landowners the poverty of the most unfortunate became an indication of their moral failure.⁵⁷ A Puritan earlier in the century, William Perkins, regarded it to be the first duty of any man to maintain his own good estate and condition. In matters of charity, in first place stood one's own family and kindred, next other "Christians," then people living nearby and lastly strangers.⁵⁸ There is evidence to support the idea that although all English Puritans had originally been committed to opposition to sharp capitalist practices, many of them, through alliance with the legal and merchant class, and through no real enthusiasm for social battle, had immersed themselves in oblivion to social

⁵⁶James, 2-3; also Petegorsky, 37.

⁵⁷R. H. Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (London: 1926), 253-73. Cf. Petegorsky, 24.

⁵⁸W. Perkins, Works (3 vols.; London: 1616-18), II, 128-45.

problems.⁵⁹

Professor W. K. Jordan's valuable work on the philanthropy of the Puritan gentry⁶⁰ has shown the extent of the charity of which they were capable, but it should be remembered that, administered privately, outside the traditional channels, Puritan philanthropy was deliberately discriminating. It was directed less toward the relief of beggars than toward the transformation of a selected number of religious paupers into self-sufficient and self-disciplined men.⁶¹ The victims of that poverty besetting thousands of unemployed countrymen displaced into the city were almost invariably described by Puritan ministers with hatred and dread: "As they are in condition, so they are in disposition."⁶²

Most men's vision of political and social developments of the past and present was still very much one of a necessary condition, the result of God's, or fate's, command. The idea of a strictly human causation, and therefore the possibility of change by human action, was only very dimly beginning to be perceived. In an atmosphere of religious justification of economic inequality, ideas about everyone's right to property had to be preceded in the Sectaries' thoughts by ideas of the supremacy of reason, and

⁵⁹Knappen, Tudor Puritanism, 421.

⁶⁰W. K. Jordan, Philanthropy in England, 1480-1660 (London: 1959).

⁶¹M. Walzer, The Revolution of the Saints (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), 217.

⁶²R. Sibbes, Works, VI, 238, cited in Walzer, 218.

by the necessity for equity in law.⁶³

I have mentioned the enclosure problem above. In a different but comparable situation, Parliament had been zealous in supporting the traditional rights of the large landowners against the pleas of the yeomanry and peasantry for moderation of leasehold and copyhold extortions. However, in the case of those Companies of Adventurers who undertook to drain the fens, in consideration of large land grants, Parliament was not disposed to grant equal weight to the traditional rights of the fens' inhabitants to the use of those lands.⁶⁴

In the next section I will examine the specific economic ideas and aims of the Levellers, but before doing so, it is worth looking at the Company of Merchant Adventurers of London, singled out in almost every Sectarian petition or manifesto for abolition. The small traders and artisans, but most of all the rural cottagers, who wove a small quantity of woollen cloth to raise money to purchase those necessities which they could not produce themselves, were all heavily oppressed by the monopoly of this woollen cloth trade with Holland, the chief market, held by the Merchant Adventurers. This company had been the object of heavy investment by the large landowners among the gentry, and the enmity felt by the poor leaseholder for the landlord found further aggravation here. Earlier, in 1613, James I had forced the Company to give up its charter to a new Company of the King's Merchant Adventurers.

⁶³Cf. Petegorsky, 75.

⁶⁴James, 126-8.

formed by certain of his favorites, who attempted to export finished cloth to Holland instead of undyed cloth as previously done. The attempt was a failure, the inferior finished product being rejected by the Dutch as not up to their own standards, and by the time the original Company had regained its charter in 1617, the cloth trade was for the moment ruined. Though the trade recovered, the situation was soon aggravated by the dislocations of the Thirty Years' War.⁶⁵ During the first Civil War, the House of Commons had become much indebted to the Merchant Adventurers for loans. In September, 1643, the Commons confirmed the Adventurers' cloth export monopoly, and their right to administer an oath of fidelity to their members.⁶⁶ The Leveller leader John Lilburne devoted much of one tract to tracing the dire results to be expected, if this monopoly were permitted to continue.⁶⁷ He further commented sarcastically on this and similar monopolies, such as that of the Stationers' Company, "the next monopoly it is to be feared will be upon Bread and Beere, for as justly may there be a Monopoly upon them, as upon the former."⁶⁸

⁶⁵Notestein, 261-2.

⁶⁶T. C. Pease, The Leveller Movement (Washington, D. C.: 1916), 118-9.

⁶⁷J. Lilburne, Innocency and Truth Justified (Jan. 6, 1645), cited in Pease, 119.

⁶⁸Lilburne, Englands Birth-right Justified [Oct. 10, 1645], 11.

II. THE LEVELLERS

The term "Leveller" like most political epithets in English history had a derogatory origin. Those rebellious peasants who wished to reopen the enclosed fields earlier in the century had been termed Levellers, from their desire to level the hedges and fences which marked the new enclosures. Because of this history, and the fears of the landed classes of uprisings by the rural peasantry, those men who preached the political and economic liberty of the "middle sort" of men were soon branded with the description of "levellers" of men's estates, who wished all property held in common. The Levellers themselves clearly disliked the name:

. . . the word Leveller was framed and cast upon all those in the Army (or elsewhere) who are against any kind of Tyranny, whether in King, Parliament, Army Counsel of State &c.⁶⁹

The Levellers emerged as an independent political force at the close of the first Civil War in 1646. They were largely drawn from the lower middle class, the artisans, small farmers and lesser merchants. John Lilburne spoke of them as "the laborious and industrious people in England,"⁷⁰ although their followers ranged from well-to-do merchants to weavers and lead

⁶⁹[Lilburne], The Second Part of Englands New-chaines Discovered (London: 1649), 7.

⁷⁰Lilburne, The Upright Mans Vindication (Longon: 1653), 15, cited in Brailsford, 10.

miners. By their stand for complete religious freedom, they won the support of most of the Army's rank and file, and many of its junior officers.

The overwhelming majority of the English people were political, if not actual, illiterates, neutral in the Civil War and understanding or caring nothing of the issues. The republican leader Arthur Haslerig observed, "They care not what government they live under, so as they may plough and go to market."⁷¹ On the level of those who were concerned, one chief issue of the Civil War was the ownership of England's land. The Parliamentary leaders stated at the start that the loans of their supporters towards the war's cost would be repaid by the estates of anyone whom they proclaimed "delinquent, malignant or disaffected." A similar stand was taken on the Royalist side. Charles I conferred on the turncoat Sir Richard Grenville the estates of the Earl of Bedford and Sir Francis Drake in Devon, and other properties in Cornwall.⁷²

The Leveller movement was principally the product of two men, John Lilburne and William Walwyn. "Freeborn John" has been extensively treated in several works.⁷³ Disputatious and contentious from his first to his last appearance on the stage of history, he seems to have provided the force of agitation and

⁷¹Quoted in Brailsford, 13.

⁷²Clarendon, History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England (1888 ed.), IV, 66, cited in Brailsford, 11.

⁷³See, in particular, M. A. Gibb, John Lilburne, The Leveller (London: 1947).

propaganda to the movement. The organization of the Leveller movement was in the first instance the work of William Walwyn, always claiming to be simply a devotee of love and reason.

William Walwyn has well been described as an enigmatic figure.⁷⁴ He was born in 1600, the younger son of a Worcestershire gentleman, and the grandson of a bishop of Hereford. Worcestershire may have been an area of well-established Leveller followers. A group of Levellers is mentioned in the Victoria County History for Worcestershire as existing into the 1670's.⁷⁵ By 1640 he had become a silk merchant, a member of that very Company of Merchant Adventurers attacked so constantly in Leveller writings; and at that time he lived with his family in a house in Moorfields. It was here, in his garden and library, that he liked to entertain friends and discuss the social and religious questions of the day in an atmosphere of humanism and reason.

He was extremely well read in English authors, and in those foreign ones he could obtain in translation--an outstanding example of Protestantism on the vernacular level. It is significant that the strong influence of Montaigne is evident in Walwyn's rationalist habits of thought. His writings, too, show a translation of Christian symbology into romantic revolutionary images. Walwyn was accused of deriving his power over men from his use of the Socratic method, and of using it to subvert the established

⁷⁴Schenk, Social Justice, 41. Chapter III of this work gives an excellent summary of what is presently known of Walwyn's life.

⁷⁵Schenk, "A Seventeenth Century Radical," Econ. Hist. Rev., XIV (1944-5), 75, n. 6.

order, and indeed he followed this method in compelling his listeners to think out for themselves questions of public policy.⁷⁶

After the Leveller party had been driven underground by the Commonwealth, and its physical organization dispersed, Walwyn returned to business life. When open political speculation became possible again for a short time after the death of Cromwell, in 1659, he was included by James Harrington in a committee suggested to discuss Harrington's proposed Commonwealth. Presumably refused readmission to the Merchant Adventurers, who could hardly have forgiven his calls for their suppression, he seems to have taken up the apothecary trade, possibly by 1665. He died fifteen years later, in 1680.⁷⁷

Walwyn was no "twice born soul" or Puritan saint, but a man of common sense and seemingly unfailing good will, with an inquiring mind and an independent but equable temper. He had solved his own spiritual problem by embracing the belief that all men share equally in the grace of God, and are free to accept it or reject it as they choose.⁷⁸ His outstanding teaching was the importance of "practical Christianity"--the necessity to manifest God's love and goodness by practical help to others in such terms as poor relief and other concrete measures.⁷⁹ Although accused of advocating common ownership of property, his only published statement on the subject held that having all things in common

⁷⁶Pease, 243-4.

⁷⁷Schenk, "Seventeenth Century Radical," 75.

⁷⁸Haller, Liberty and Reformation, 165, 284.

⁷⁹[Walwyn], The Power of Love (London: 1643), Preface.

could only come about by the "universall assent thereunto from all and every one of the people."⁸⁰ His son-in-law Dr. Brooke admitted that Walwyn had at times advocated common property ownership in "the heat of Discourse."⁸¹ He was strongly opposed to inequality of wealth, specifically condemning usury⁸² and enclosures.⁸³

Walwyn's ideas came both from Christian primitivism and that of Seneca, Lucian and Montaigne. He held to a classic concept of an innocent state of nature.⁸⁴ To Walwyn, reason was a remnant of man's original unfallen state, not the result of progressive development. He believed that the means of economic self-sufficiency were within the reach of all, given a proper social organization, for "it plainly appeares that God ever intendeth unto man a pleasant and comfortable life."⁸⁵

In Walwyn's eyes, the best way to further desirable changes in England's social and economic structure was to rescue the revolutionary spirit abroad in the ranks of the army and the small-holder class from mysticism and sectarianism, by converting it to rational and secular purposes. He wished a return to nature

⁸⁰[Walwyn], A Manifestation of . . . those unjustly styled Levellers (London: 1649), cited by Schenk, "Seventeenth Century Radical," 77, n. 8.

⁸¹Brooke, The Charity of Churchmen (London: 1649), 2.

⁸²[Walwyn], The Vanitie of the Present Churches (1649), 25; also The Fountaine of Slaunder Discovered (1649), 5.

⁸³[John Price], Walwyns Wiles (1649), 16.

⁸⁴[Walwyn], The Power of Love, 3.

⁸⁵[Walwyn], The Power of Love, 2.

and antique republicanism, as he conceived them to be.⁸⁶ He held a poor opinion of mere liberal reform based on extension of the principles of Magna Charta, deriding:

Hough with one consent [the people] cry out for Magna Carta (like great is Diana of the Ephesians) calling that mess of pottage the birthright, the great inheritance of the people, the great Charter of England.⁸⁷

Walwyn seems to have held elements of Millenarian thought with many of the Sectaries, but he expected not a Second Coming but the rule of practical Christianity. In this he shared in the social Christianity of other writers of the period, based on the social teachings of the medieval church, emphasizing the relief of poverty in one's good works. He considered common ownership of property a desirable aim, but one not within the reality of contemporary politics.⁸⁸ He held it to be unjust that the wealthy should be the only sharers in the benefits of the Puritan Revolution, and that the lower middle classes, the artisans, small merchants and yeomanry should receive no benefits.⁸⁹ In one long passage he held forth on the various abuses of the holders of offices at all levels of government, listing all the ways by which they had enriched themselves at the expense of the public treasury.⁹⁰

⁸⁶Cf. Haller, I, 44-5.

⁸⁷[Walwyn], Englands Lamentable Slaverie (October 11, 1645), 4.

⁸⁸Brooke, Charity of Churchmen, 2, cited in Schenk, 49.

⁸⁹Schenk, "Seventeenth Century Radical," 81, 83.

⁹⁰Walwyn, Fountain of Slauder, 22.

The Levellers had their origin in opposition, rather than presenting any particular positive platform or program. They were equally opposed to payment of tithes, monopolies on trade, unequal taxation, imprisonment for debt and exorbitant legal fees and delays. They were on the extreme "left" of the middle-class democratic movement, but were not of themselves a working-class movement.⁹¹ The Levellers were not in an organized form until the second half of 1647. The party took shape as a political force based on the idea that the existing social contract between the government and the people had been broken by the war. The Leveller's theory, as expressed in the Putney debates between the officers of the Army council and the agents elected by the men of each regiment, held that the failure of the House of Commons to free the nation from "tyranny" had cancelled its mandate to be a government. The realm thus being in a state of nature, every honest man was at liberty to promote the general welfare by the best means possible. If the Army professed such an end, through the Agreement of the People and other Leveller writings, it had the right to pursue it.⁹² They did not, at least at first, include any of the landless peasantry or unemployed urban workers, and shared none of the latter's occasional sentiments for communal property. The Levellers saw the small, independent enterpriser as in a wholly different class from servants and alms-takers. To assert the rights of the former did not involve

⁹¹Eduard Bernstein, Cromwell and Communism (London: 1930), 170.

⁹²Pease, 179.

asserting the same rights for the latter.⁹³

The Levellers held a concept of "property" as a natural right, from the fundamental postulate that every man is by natural law the proprietor of his own person.⁹⁴ This concept of property in one's person, in turn, required for its expression freedom from arbitrary imprisonment and the right to due process of law. It further required freedom of speech, publication and religion. From this basic politico-economic right to an individual property there followed, in the Leveller's view, freedom to buy, sell, produce and trade, without license, monopoly, arbitrary regulation or taxation.⁹⁵

They believed that property in one's labor was an alienable commodity, one that might be lost by a man's becoming the servant or alms-taker of another. Their criterion of full freedom was the retention of property in one's labor, and the condition for such retention was the possession of material property as well.⁹⁶ The Levellers held that the very power of accumulation inherent in the privileges and monopolies of the nobility and gentry was destructive not only of liberty but also of property--the property of the small merchants and small landholder class.⁹⁷

⁹³Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1962), 120-1.

⁹⁴Lilburne, The Free-mans Freedom Vindicated (June, 1646), Postscript, quoted in Woodhouse, 317-8.

⁹⁵Macpherson, 139-43.

⁹⁶Macpherson, 153.

⁹⁷Petition of January, 1648, quoted in Haller & Davies, 111, Wolfe, 268.

Walwyn and the third major Leveller leader Richard Overton early expressed the sense of oppression and injustices felt by the lower middle classes at the wide inequality of wealth between them and the Puritan magnates:

Ye are rich, and abound in goods, and have need of nothing; but the afflictions of the poore; your hunger-starved brethren, ye have no compassion of.⁹⁸

The Levellers also expressed the sense of betrayal of the legal and political aims of the revolution, the benefits of which the lower middle class felt had been denied to them, by the Puritan majority, first in Parliament and then in the leadership of the army:

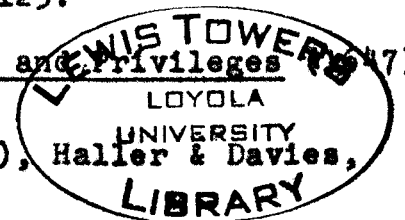
After the grand and superlative Apostacie of so tall a Caedar as Lieut. Gen. Cromwell pretended to be. . . . I shall never hereafter in state affaires (for his sake) trust either my father, brother, or any other relations I have in the world. . . . whosoever means to settle good lawes, must proceed in them with a sinister opinion of all mankind, and suppose that whosoever is not wicked, it is for want only of the opportunity.⁹⁹

One characteristic of Leveller propaganda was an historical view of serfdom and manorialism as the result of foreign conquest by the Normans. The Leveller appeals, both to Parliament and to the English people, for redress of political or economic grievances was made interchangeably to Scripture and to the Saxon tradition.¹⁰⁰ By claiming an unEnglish origin for the manorial system, and calling for its abolition at the same time

⁹⁸[Overton and Walwyn], A remonstrance of many thousand citizens (July 7, 1646), printed in Wolfe, 125.

⁹⁹Lilburne, The Peoples Prerogative and Privileges (1647), Proeme, cited in Robertson, 102, n. 45.

¹⁰⁰[?Henry Marten], Vox Plebis (1646), Haller & Davies, 47. Cf. Pease, 155.



as the "Norman" monarchy, they coupled an appeal to class-consciousness with the emotional force of nationalism. Through the skillful use of propaganda the Levellers were for a time in 1649 the largest political party among the people of London, although certainly not in the country. In a London population of perhaps 450,000, they secured in that year 100,000 signatures to one of their most inflammatory petitions.¹⁰¹

In the Remonstrance of July, 1646, one of the earliest of the Leveller petitions, there are pleas to remove the trade monopolies of the Merchant Adventurers and the Levant Company; to bring the laws of the land into agreement with equity and right reason, to remove the oppression of the "trade of Judges and Lawyers," and to abolish imprisonment for debt.¹⁰² In Certaine Articles for the good of the Commonwealth, published in July of 1647, Overton listed a number of economic demands. Courts were to be set up in every hundred, to enable all men to conduct legal business without recourse to the quarter sessions at Westminster. As part of a program of complete prison reform, imprisonment for debt and death sentences for theft were to be abolished. Trade should be freed from all monopolies. Tithes were to be abolished, and all glebe lands used for the maintenance of hospitals. All enclosures should be voided and laid open, and especially, "to the free and common use and benefit of the poore."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹The Remonstrance of many Thousands of the Free People of England (Sept. 21, 1649), cited in Brailsford, 13 and 573.

¹⁰²A Remonstrance of many Thousand Citizens ([July 1], 1646), 15.

¹⁰³Certaine Articles (London: [July 1], 1647), Wolfe, 189-95.

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The "Large Petition" of the Levellers was first presented to the House of Commons in March of 1647, although not printed until September of 1648. Among many proposals for political, legal and religious freedom, various economic proposals were offered: the Merchant Adventurers to be dissolved; laws (in English) to be "reduced to the nearest agreement with Christianity;" tithes to be abolished, with ministers paid by their own congregations. Relief was to be given in cases of imprisonment for debt, those who were penniless being permitted to declare bankruptcy, and those with estates being compelled to settle accounts to the limit of their ability. Finally, "some powerfull meanes" were to be found "to keepe men, women and children from begging and wickednesse."¹⁰⁴

The Heads of the Proposals of August, 1647, gave the demands of the Leveller party in the ranks of the Army which were made to that Council set up by Parliament to negotiate with the King. Among the grievances listed were demands for the removal of excise taxes, easement of the forest laws, abolition of monopolies, equal rates of taxation on all land, tithes to be abolished or "some remedy applied," and no further imprisonment for debt.¹⁰⁵

John Wildman, the well-known conspirator who was briefly part of the Leveller movement, drew up a more complete list of

¹⁰⁴[Walwyn], To the Right Honorable . . . Commons in Parliament Assembled (1647, published Sept. 19, 1648), Woodhouse, 321-2.

¹⁰⁵The Heads of the Proposals (London: Printed for M. Simmons; [Aug. 1], 1647), Woodhouse, 425.

economic demands in the pamphlet introducing the Levellers' first constitutional proposal. The excise was to be abolished, and an equal rate of taxation set on all property. The forest and church lands should be reserved for the Army's pay, and the sale of such lands was to be at full value, for cash, to prevent abuses by the wealthy buyers. Monopolies, tithes and imprisonment for debt were to be abolished, and the enclosed commons were to be restored to public use.¹⁰⁶

In January, 1648, the Levellers petitioned for the laws (in English) to be administered by salaried courts, so that no legal fees need be paid by litigants; for monopolies to be abolished; for excise taxes to be ended and equal tax rates to be set, "according to the proportion of mens estates;" for government fiscal responsibility to be secured through a common treasury account, audited and published monthly; and for poor relief by restoration of previous stocks and houses, improvement of waste lands, and an increase of trade and manufactures.¹⁰⁷

Walwyn summarized all these early Leveller demands in August of 1648: an end to the excise; free trade; abolition of tithes, and "that work and necessaries be provided for all kind of poor people."¹⁰⁸ The Levellers' petition of September, 1648, reiterated their demands for abolition of monopolies, excise taxes,

¹⁰⁶ [Wildman], The Case of the Armie Truly Stated (London: [Oct. 15], 1647), Wolfe, 196-222.

¹⁰⁷ The Earnest Petition of many Free-born People ([January], 1648), Wolfe, 259-272.

¹⁰⁸ [Walwyn], The Bloody Project (August, 1648), 13.

tithes and imprisonment for debt. Enclosures were only to be permitted where they had been made for poor relief.¹⁰⁹

The list of demands to be handled by a new Parliament elected under the Levellers' second proposed constitution of December, 1648, included freedom of trade, abolition of excise taxes, an equal tax on all property, with a £30 exemption, abolition of tithes and of imprisonment for debt, the alleviation of beggary, prohibition of interest on loans above six per cent, courts held in English in every hundred, county registers of all wills and deeds, and abolition of all "base tenures" of copyhold, leasehold and the like, and their conversion into freehold.¹¹⁰ In a petition regarding this second Agreement of the People, issued in January, 1649, the Levellers stressed the necessity for all laws to apply without partiality to everyone, high or low.¹¹¹

I have described previously the feeling of the small tradesmen and the cottage wool-spinners that they were deprived of their just return by the Merchant Adventurers' monopoly. In the various and sometimes vague Leveller economic proposals, the demand for this monopoly's abolition is always the most prominent, probably because it presented a clear target for feelings of frustration with the economic and social system of the day.

¹⁰⁹[Lilburne], The Humble Petition of Divers Wel-affected Persons [Sept. 11, 1648], 5-6.

¹¹⁰Foundations of Freedom (London: [Dec. 15], 1648), Wolfe, 300-1.

¹¹¹A Petition . . . Concerning . . . An Agreement of the People (London: Jan. 20, 1649), Wolfe, 348-9.

The motives behind the abolition of tithes were obvious. These Sectaries, making up most of the Leveller party, did not wish to contribute once to an established church and once more for the support of their own pastor. Additionally, the specific tithes on certain lands had often been preempted by lay impropietors, who had succeeded to the lands confiscated from the church in the sixteenth century. In these cases the tithes no longer had any religious sanction whatever. The landowning class, however, could see clearly what the Levellers perceived perhaps only dimly, or perhaps wished not to proclaim openly, that the abolition of tithes, if agreed to, could equally justify the abolition of all manorial rents without compensation, and the conversion of all leaseholds and copyholds into freeholds--in other words, the extinction of the land holdings of the gentry.

The savagery of debtors' prisons in the seventeenth century, and the opportunities for jailers and wardens to extort the last penny from their prisoners if the prisoner wished to survive physically, have been described by many writers.¹¹² The Leveller proposals on this topic are an anticipation of modern bankruptcy laws. Their proposal with regard to measures of poor relief, was to rely for its effectiveness on the use of all those enclosed commons and pasture lands, which were to be used for the support of the landless agrarian classes. Not much thought had been given to poor relief for the urban laboring class. Lilburne's petition of 1648 advanced a proposal:

¹¹²See, for example, Brailsford.

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That the poor be enabled to choose their Trustees, to discover all Stocks, Houses, Lands etc. which of right belong to them and their use, that they may speedily receive the benefit thereof; and that some good improvement may be made of waste Grounds for their use.¹¹³

This seems to be a proposal to have overseers, chosen by the landless and laboring classes themselves, who would administer a system of poor relief from the proceeds of all common and waste lands in England.

Excise taxes, as regressive and falling heaviest upon the lowest income groups, were stigmatized as oppressions, and subsidies, in theory at least a flat rate on all property, were advocated as "the old and only just way of England."¹¹⁴ Another petition of the same year amplified this point, specifying that "all moneys be raised by equal Rates, according to the proportion of mens estates."¹¹⁵

No point is more repeated in Leveller petitions and manifestoes than that dealing with reopening of enclosures. It occurs in Overton's tract of July 17, 1647,¹¹⁶ in Wildman's one contribution to Leveller propaganda,¹¹⁷ in Lilburne's petition of September 11, 1648,¹¹⁸ and in almost all of the other Leveller appeals from 1647 to 1653. It shows clearly the essentially conservative

¹¹³[Lilburne], Earnest Petition ([January], 1648), 32.

¹¹⁴[Lilburne], Humble Petition (Sept. 11, 1648).

¹¹⁵Earnest Petition (1648), 32.

¹¹⁶Overton, An Appeale from the Degenerate Representative (July 17, 1647), printed in Wolfe, 194.

¹¹⁷Wildman, The Case of the Armie, 19.

¹¹⁸Humble Petition (1648), 5.

nature of the Levellers' professed aim to return to earlier conditions, but no point was more studiously ignored by Parliament and the landed gentry of England. After more than a century of half-hearted protest against the enclosing landlord, the watershed of Parliamentary attitude was reached in 1656. Colonel Whalley, one of Cromwell's officers in the Army, and later one of the Major-Generals of the military rule of the Protectorate, in that year introduced a bill into Parliament to prohibit enclosures. It was thrown out on the first reading. Thereafter Parliament passed no laws on the subject until those of the next century, encouraging and facilitating the practice.¹¹⁹

The proposal advanced for a ceiling on loan interest at six per cent a year reflected the desires of the small tradesmen of London, burdened as they were with much higher rates from the Goldsmiths' Guild and other moneylenders for the advances of money necessary to keep their businesses solvent. The Levellers' belief in grass-roots democracy and their mistrust of the lawyers led to the call for the establishment in every county of a public register of all property conveyances, bills and bonds, to be kept in English and not in the indecipherable Latin and Norman French of the Court lawyers, so that every man might see and understand all actions relating to property.¹²⁰

The Leveller movement had originated, in its basic political aspect, in the cities, and its leaders were city-oriented.

¹¹⁹Brailsford, 430-1.

¹²⁰The Agreement of the People (Dec. 10, 1648), printed in Woodhouse, 364-7.

Only after the movement had obtained wide support in the Army, among the soldiers, many with rural backgrounds, did it turn its attention to agrarian problems. I have noted above the proposals raised concerning enclosures. The two positive ideas produced with regard to the agrarian question were the conversion of base tenures into freehold, and the enclosure and improvement of the waste or previously uncultivated lands for the benefit of the poor.

In the Levellers' New Engagement or Manifesto of May, 1648, the proposal for the abolition of all base tenures, that is the conversion of all agrarian tenures to freehold, made its first appearance. As first proposed, this was to be accomplished by setting a rate on every leasehold, copyhold and tenancy at will, according to which the land involved could be purchased from the Lord of the Manor for an amount equal to a fixed number of years' profits. For those unable to raise the large sum necessary, and among the peasantry that would have been the majority, a fixed rent would be set on their lands, not to be changed at the will of the landlord. This proposal, if it had been adopted, would have made England a nation of independent small-holders.¹²¹

In order to render the abolition of base tenures more acceptable, John Jubbes, a Lieutenant Colonel of the Army and an Independent with Leveller leanings, proposed that all tenures of this nature should be bought in at a rate not to exceed twenty years' profits of the land, as calculated according to the income received during the reign of James I. In the same pamphlet he

¹²¹Brailsford, 440-2.

urged that the deans' and chapter lands of the church be sold to pay the public debt, and proposed a division of all the waste and common land in England into four parts, the profits, rents or produce thereof to be applied, respectively, to the maintenance of the clergy, to the relief of the poor, and to the arrears in pay of the officers and soldiers of the Army.¹²²

The idea of the use of England's unimproved land for poor relief was elaborated upon by the physician and writer on philanthropy, Peter Chamberlen, who proposed a public treasury of all confiscated lands, common and waste lands, and church collections (among other sources) for poor relief. A system of hospitals, schools and nurseries, and houses of labor was to be instituted for the relief of both the poor and prisoners. He proposed the establishment of a public bank, similar to those on the Continent, and a system of customs taxes on exports of raw materials, food and ammunition, and on imports of manufactured goods, to make England self-sufficient.¹²³

The second Agreement of the People of December, 1648, proposed the abolition of base tenures only in an appendix, a list by Lilburne of measures desirable to the Levellers but felt to be too extreme by their Independent allies. There may have been a loss of interest in this question among the Leveller leaders as they became further embroiled in their political challenge to the

¹²²J. Jubbes, Several Proposals for Peace and Freedom (Dec. 22, 1648), printed in Wolfe, 318-9.

¹²³Chamberlen, The Poor Mans Advocate (London: 1650), in Orwell, I, 118-9.

Cromwellian government. The third Agreement of the People of May, 1649, ignores the agrarian question and does not mention base tenures. It seems to retreat more to an earlier position, listing only demands for abolition of monopolies, excise taxes, imprisonment for debt, tithes, and a plea for "special care to preserve all sorts of people from wickedness, misery and beggary."¹²⁴

Later, when the Leveller party had been driven underground, the younger leaders sounded a far more radical note: "All servile tenures of land, as by copyhold and the like, to be abolished and holden for naught."¹²⁵ As a revolutionary slogan designed for agitation, expropriation without compensation is a more effective technique than pleas for reasoned financial settlements.

Just how radical were the Levellers? Certainly, when their hopes and expectations of reform through petitions to Parliament were disillusioned, they made a straight class appeal to the city apprentices in London against the rich merchants and governmental officials, hoping to move their adherents in the Army to overthrow Parliament. This inflammatory tract of January, 1648, whose language suggests Overton's authorship, asked angrily regarding the whole struggle between King and Parliament, "Is not all the Controversie whose Slaves the poor shall be?"¹²⁶

They were accused by their enemies of presuming to

¹²⁴An Agreement of the Free People of England (London: May 1, 1649), Wolfe, 405.

¹²⁵The Fundamental Laws (July 9, 1653), quoted in Brailsford, 449.

¹²⁶The Mournfull Cryes of many Thousand [Jan. 22, 1648], Wolfe, 276.

overturn the natural social order, and of proclaiming that the time had come when the nobility and gentry should "serve their servants, or at least work for their own maintenance, and if they will not worke, they ought not to eate."¹²⁷ Although the Leveller leaders denied it, there was among their followers an actual or potential greater radicalism than their public manifestoes revealed on the question of property.¹²⁸ In the Putney debates between the officers of the Army council and the agitators chosen by the troops, the Leveller Petty boasted, "when I shall see God going about to throw down King and Lords and property, then I shall be contented."¹²⁹

Did they really wish the abolition or equalization of property? The agitator Rainsborough's remark to Ireton in the Putney debates, "Sir, I see that it is impossible to have liberty but that all property must be taken away," is often taken as a partial proof of this tendency. It is the writer's belief that his remark was ironic, as he goes on, sarcastically, to say, "If it be laid down for a rule, and if you will say it, it must be so!"¹³⁰ The most that the Levellers seem to have thought on this question is that an equality of property could only come about in

¹²⁷Mercurius Rusticus, or the Countries Complaint of the barbarous outrages committed by the sectaries of this late flourishing kingdom (1646).

¹²⁸Schenk, Social Justice, 78. Gibb, 228, remarks, "Lilburne's program went much further than he or his associates were ever willing to admit."

¹²⁹Woodhouse, 61.

¹³⁰Woodhouse, 71.

an atmosphere of free, universal assent of all the people.¹³¹ Richard Overton, the third major Leveller leader and author of the more fiery Leveller tracts and petitions, defended the movement as wishing, not to "level all mens estates" but only "to reduce all conditions of men to a certainty," in opposition to arbitrary power.¹³² He had already stated in the same year that "by naturall birth, all men are equally and alike borne to like propriety, liberty and freedome."¹³³

Walwyn, the thinker of the movement, was accused by his enemies of saying that "it would never be well untill all things were in common." This accusation is from a work bitterly opposed to the Leveller party, and Walwyn may with equal justice, or lack of it, stand accused of blaming the world's miseries on the education of children, another charge made in the same work.¹³⁴ That which he actually said, in a criticism of University graduates in the regular clergy was:

As for learning, as learning goes now adades, what can any judicious man make of it, but as an Art to deceive and abuse the understandings of men, and to mislead them to their ruine?¹³⁵

In his protest against the imprisonment of the other Leveller leaders and himself in 1649, Walwyn stressed the voluntary

¹³¹[Walwyn], A Manifestation (1649), 4.

¹³²[Overton & Walwyn], Remonstrance (1646), 8.

¹³³Overton, An Arrow against all Tyrants (1646), 3.

¹³⁴[J. Price], Walwyns Wiles, 13-4.

¹³⁵Walwyn, Power of Love, 44.

character of the communism of the early Christians.¹³⁶ Walwyn did stand for an early version of the right to work, a government guarantee of employment. He wrote, "I do think it one main end of government, to provide, that those who refuse not labor, should eat comfortably."¹³⁷ This question of a right to work was raised by another Leveller manifesto of 1649 proposing "that every free commoner shall be put into a way, and enabled with means for his natural subsistence."¹³⁸

Cromwell seems to have viewed the Levellers, not as sincerely wishing an equality of property, but only as using this principle to gain property for themselves in an opportunistic way:

What was the designe, but to make the tennant as liberall a fortune as the landlord? . . . The men of that principle, after they had served their own turnes, would have cried up Interest and Property then fast enough.¹³⁹

A member of the landed gentry himself, and related to a large number of that class, he perhaps could not believe that any group of men would be so unacquisitive as to abstain from acquiring estates when they might be in a position to do so.

The three chief Leveller proposals, abolition of tithes, complete toleration of worship, and abolition of manorial tenures, were resisted fiercely by all the upper classes. Both the clergy and the gentry were solidly against the abolition of tithes;

¹³⁶ [Walwyn], Manifestation (1649), in Wolfe, 390.

¹³⁷ Walwyn, Walwyns Just Defense (1649), 24.

¹³⁸ Remonstrance of many Thousands (1649).

¹³⁹ Cromwell, Speech of September 4, 1654.

complete toleration was utterly opposed by the Presbyterians, and conceived by the Independents as extending only to the moderate Puritan congregations; and all "upper ranks" joined forces to defeat the aim of independence for the peasantry. Within a few generations the landholding peasantry ceased to exist in England.¹⁴⁰

This one brief period when English institutions were malleable enough for the Levellers' theories to have resulted in any positive reform passed with the consolidation of Cromwell's rule. Between the general ignorance of the rural villagers, and the determined opposition of the Puritan gentry, any implementation of their ideas was made impossible. Thereafter, blocked from the use of sword or pen, the followers of the Levellers' sea-green banner sought personal salvation in subjective religion, although upon the suppression of the movement after the mutiny at Burford in the spring of 1649, some last fiery blasts were fired at the Parliament and the Council of State, charging that "if we ask them a fish, they give us a scorpion, if bread, they give us a stone."¹⁴¹

The increasing concern of the Levellers with economic reform can be described, not as a case of abandoning religion, but of developing a broader understanding of the implications of their religious faith. A vision of human society as the ultimate good, of the ultimate value of living together in harmony, is scattered

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Brailsford, 10-2.

¹⁴¹ The Levellers . . . Vindicated [London: 1649], 11.

through Leveller writings.¹⁴² However, they did not see all the implications of their concept of property in one's person, nor did they then realize that a harmonious community of fully competing economic enterprisers is a contradiction in terms.¹⁴³

The Levellers' ideas were destructive to the dominant economic and political interests of the landed Anglicans, the Puritan businessmen and the Independent intellectuals. The saints of the congregations looked upon the Levellers as enemies of religion; Cromwell suppressed them as enemies of the state. Even under the Levellers' ideas, the revolution could only have been maintained by the power of the sword. This fact Cromwell knew well enough, but the Levellers did not want to admit.¹⁴⁴ The Levellers have been generally regarded as radical democrats in politics. They should rather be considered radical liberals. The ideas they expressed pointed the way, unwittingly, to the later theories of Locke, and the subsequent Whig tradition. Their concept of property in one's own person made it easy for Locke to confuse the equal right to property with the right to unlimited property, and through resultant laissez-faire liberalism to arrive at a justification of that very inequality which they so vehemently opposed.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴²Lilburne, Londons Liberty (1648), 17, quoted Woodhouse, 317; also [Walwyn], A Manifestation (1649), in Wolfe, 388.

¹⁴³Macpherson, 157.

¹⁴⁴Cf. Wolfe, 106, 356; Haller, I, 87.

¹⁴⁵Cf. Macpherson, 158-9.

The Leveller program postulated a social system based on an era of universal small-householder production in town and country, a system, moreover, which would stay fixed in such a mold for the foreseeable future. To the extent that this social and economic situation was historically inaccurate, and was already inevitably subject to rapid change, the Leveller program was as unrealistic as any such reforms which look only toward constitutional mechanisms for their effect, and ignore a realistic analysis of social power and its historical development.

III. THE DIGGERS

The careers of two merchants illustrate vividly the turns of fortune brought about by the English Civil War, and the resulting differences of outlook. William Walwyn was a London merchant who, although remaining in the merchant class, found that his intellectual sympathies lay with the Levellers, and in his humanistic, urbane and somewhat disinterested way furthered their cause, particularly with the organizational aspect of the party. Gerrard Winstanley was a London merchant who lost his business in the cataclysm of the Civil War, and who, finding himself reduced to sheepherding for the family connections who had given him a place to live in the country, poured his emotional and religious enthusiasm into a new approach to the problem of the economic and social order.

Winstanley was born in 1609 at Wigan, Lancashire, the son of a mercer and burgess of the town. He was made a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company of London in 1637, and three years later he was married, in 1640. By 1642, in the economic dislocation of the Civil War, he was "beaten out both of estate and trade, and forced to accept of the goodwill of friends crediting of me, to lead a country life."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶Winstanley, A Watchword to the City of London, Introd., in L. Hamilton (ed.), Gerrard Winstanley, Selections from his Works (London: 1944), 66.

There had been a revival of mystical and Sectarian religious enthusiasm in England after 1648, following the overthrow of the Presbyterian majority in Parliament, and the resultant increased freedom of all Sects from official persecution. Many new forms of religious expression became prominent, among them those of the Quakers, "Seekers," "Ranters," and others. Winstanley's early writings were full of mystical religious expression, but he moved in a very short span of time to a position of exalting his idea of pure reason, which he conceived to be both an absolute moral imperative, and a principle of mutual consideration, a basis for social ethics. In his view, reason operated in society as a principle of order for common preservation. His ideals were thus those of mutual aid and cooperation as the highest social good, in opposition to those ideas of acquisition and competition which were now dominant among the mercantile and capitalist landlord classes. Winstanley's "new commandment," which he claimed had been revealed to him in a dream, was to "work together, eat bread together."¹⁴⁷

Winstanley viewed all organized religion as a means of suppression by the rich and powerful of any attempt on the part of the poor to better their lot:

If any poor enslaved man that dares not steal, begins to mourn under that bondage and saith, We that work most have least comfort in the earth and they that work not at all enjoy all contrary to the Scripture which saith the poor and the meek shall inherit the earth. Presently the tithing priest stops his mouth with a slam and tels him that is meant of the inward satisfaction of mind which the poor shall have, though

¹⁴⁷Winstanley, The New Law of Righteousness (1649).

they enjoy nothing at all.¹⁴⁸

Winstanley's theories of communal ownership are generally typical of those which appear during every major middle-class revolution. His economic views are described in great detail by D. W. Petegorsky, to whom I am indebted for the following survey. All private property, Winstanley held, is the result of theft by the rich who possess it. The poor are kept in their miserable condition by trading, that is, the buying and selling of goods, which is the art of thievery. Men are divided into antagonistic classes and warring factions by the institution of private ownership. The institution of common property will unite men in bonds of mutual affection. "Pride and envy likewise is killed thereby for everyone shall look upon each other as an equal in creation."¹⁴⁹

Winstanley believed that every man had a common right to land, a right, in his view, proved by various passages in Scripture. Common ownership would restore a natural order wherein each man derived his livelihood from his own share of the common land, and would by this means abolish poverty. Winstanley derived from the rule of reason the right of each person to his own means of maintenance as a contributing member of society. He felt that it would be sufficient if the waste and open lands of England were held in common for the use of all landless persons, and he was willing to leave the present landowners in private possession

¹⁴⁸Winstanley, A New Yeers Gift for the Parliament and Armie (1650).

¹⁴⁹Winstanley, New Law, 7.

of those lands already under cultivation.¹⁵⁰

Winstanley shared with many Leveller and other writers the conviction that there was available in England enough uncultivated land to afford a living to all the landless population of the realm, if it were made arable by their labor. Whatever his views on common property ownership, Winstanley's practical concern was to alleviate the poor, and endow them with the vast acreage of unimproved land in England, which they would be able to cultivate for themselves, if they ceased to work in servile positions for the wealthy classes:

Divide England into three parts, scarce one is manured; so that here is land enough to maintain all her children, and many die for want. . . . And this misery the poor people have brought upon themselves by lifting up particular interest by their labors.¹⁵¹

In Winstanley's ideal commonwealth there would be laws prohibiting the buying and selling of goods. In addition, all wage earning, as a servile dependence upon another, was to be abolished. In a somewhat startling passage he proposed slavery as a penalty for unlawful acts committed against his ideal state. This punishment would be different from ordinary penal servitude, in that the wrongdoers would work, during the term of their sentence, directly for those whom they had wronged, or for society.

Winstanley viewed all human history as the record of continual conflict between the rich and the poor. His demand for common ownership of property substantially echoed similar demands,

¹⁵⁰Petegorsky, 147.

¹⁵¹Winstanley, New Law, quoted in Hamilton, 24.

often only vaguely expressed, from the lowest classes which had characterized all popular revolts and similar movements of the medieval period. These demands, and the ideas in back of them, were essentially based on an emotional conception of brotherhood, and not derived from any reasoned examination of social or historical forces.

Winstanley's followers were drawn mostly from the class of landless laborers, excluded from the ownership of the soil, and subsisting only by the sale of their labor. For this reason among others the Diggers' social doctrine has been called by one author a wholly proletarian ideology,¹⁵² even though another believes that their idealistic socialism had more in common with William Morris than with Karl Marx.¹⁵³ Their political affinity was not with the Levellers, who stood for the liberty of the individual, but with the Millenarian Sects, who stood for positive social projects to bring about the Second Coming. They were working for an economic millenium, and were no more concerned with individual liberty than were those who hoped to usher in the rule of Christ and His saints.

Winstanley was certainly acquainted with the writings of Overton and Walwyn, and was influenced by Leveller concepts in economic thought. His thoughts had probably turned from a purely mystical religious direction to a political one through his

¹⁵²Petegorsky, 13.

¹⁵³Woodhouse, 99.

contact with the radical Leveller William Everard.¹⁵⁴ There was a definite interaction between Winstanley and a group of peasant Levellers in Buckinghamshire, who had adopted Leveller political theories of equality to fit their problems with regard to enclosures. They advocated a rule of complete equality, economic and political. "If all work alike, is it not fit for all to eat alike, have alike and enjoy alike privileges and freedom." ¹⁵⁵

While the Levellers as a party did not propose the abolition of private property, many of their followers looked upon it as an unfortunate relic of the sinful past, which in time would wither away as men grew more enlightened. The Leveller newspaper, The Moderate, contains references to "a cursed propriety, the ground of all Civil Offenses between party and party." ¹⁵⁶ In the same publication, property was called the cause of the loss of men's lives, by robbery. It was expected that:

Though they cannot expect it [abolition of private property] in few years, by reason of the multiplicity of the gentry; . . . yet they doubt not, but in time, the people will herein discern their own blindness, and folly. ¹⁵⁷

In the countryside outside London Leveller economic views shaded off, sometimes, into those more radical. Millenarianism caused many in the party to regard their program as but a half-way house, and to believe that the promised Kingdom would bring complete

¹⁵⁴Winstanley, Truth Lifting up its Head above Scandals (1648), in Sabine, 103.

¹⁵⁵Light Shining in Buckinghamshire (1648), in Sabine, 615-6.

¹⁵⁶The Moderate, No. 61 (September 4-11, 1649).

¹⁵⁷The Moderate, No. 56 (July 31-August 7, 1649).

The authors of Light Shining in Buckinghamshire were a little apart from both the main Leveller party and Winstanley's Diggers in their ideas. Their announced goals were a just portion for each man to live on, a just rule for each man to live by, equal rights for all, and a government of "elders" elected by the people. They envisioned a commonwealth set up on a Biblical, indeed Old Testament patriarchal pattern. Their ideas clearly asserted the necessity for abolition or drastic revision of the existing conditions of ownership of landed property. The authors of this radical manifesto demanded that all the bishops', forest and crown lands be used for poor relief, and that lawyers, crown officials and all corporations be abolished.¹⁵⁹

Winstanley addressed one of his tracts to the nation in the name of these radical Levellers of Buckinghamshire, in May, 1649. In it he protested against arbitrary courts, patents, monopolies, tithes, tolls and customs. He appealed to everyone to aid the poor in recovering their due, to permit them to farm the waste and common lands, and to observe the "golden rule of equity."¹⁶⁰

Winstanley's first major work was The New Law of

¹⁵⁸A Letter from the North (September 19, 1653), cited in Schenk, Social Justice, 73-4.

¹⁵⁹Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, in Orwell, I, 75
et seq.

¹⁶⁰Winstanley, A Declaration of the Wel-affected in the County of Buckinghamshire (May 10, 1649), in Sabine, 646-7.

Righteousness in 1649. His thesis in this work held that in the early and uncorrupted era of man's existence, men owned the whole earth in common. It was only with the coming into power of certain sinful, grasping men who enslaved and dominated others that the institution of private property came about.¹⁶¹ He urged an immediate return to the previous order of things, but his communism here was purely of the religious variety. He preached that men were not to take their neighbor's goods by violence or robbery, but when "Christ is spread in all men's minds," all would give their consent to confirm this law of righteousness, that is, to hold all property in common.

In particular, Winstanley viewed the earth as the great common storehouse for all men. "The earth is a common livelihood for them," he said in one passage, and again, "The whole earth shall be a common treasury."¹⁶² Anyone who attempted to amass private property after the new order was in force would be punished by forced labor.¹⁶³ Any form of buying, selling or trading in goods in any way was utterly wrong and would be abolished.¹⁶⁴ Winstanley's ideas of communal ownership did not extend to men's personal possessions, taken from the public stores for use or consumption by his family. These were to be considered allowable

¹⁶¹Winstanley, New Law, 37.

¹⁶²Winstanley, New Law, 38-9.

¹⁶³Winstanley, New Law, 41.

¹⁶⁴Winstanley, New Law, 45.

private property.¹⁶⁵

The story of the overt actions by Winstanley and his followers in the spring of 1649 occupies but a brief place in history. In April of that year they commenced to till the soil of the common land at St. George's Hill in Surrey. They were viewed with disfavor by the government, harrassed and persecuted by officers acting for the gentry who owned the land, and within a year they were forcibly removed from there, and one other place where they started a similar experiment, by mobs incited by the surrounding landowners.

Winstanley as well as the Levellers used the appeal to a Saxon tradition. In a plea to the House of Commons for aid in his program, he listed what he regarded as four abuses derived from the Norman conquest: through the introduction of manorialism the common land had been taken from the people; because the laws had been written in Norman French, a class of lawyers had arisen from those appointed to expound them; the hundred-courts had been abolished, and Westminster terms set in their place; and tithes had been instituted.¹⁶⁶

After the suppression of Winstanley's experiment, and a few others in imitation, all by April of 1650, there is no further record of his activities until the appearance of his book,

¹⁶⁵Winstanley, New Law, 13.

¹⁶⁶Winstanley, An Appeal to the House of Commons (July 11, 1649), in Sabine, 649.

The Law of Freedom, in 1652.¹⁶⁷ In this work he attempted to set down concrete proposals for the regulation of his communist commonwealth. He dedicated the book to Oliver Cromwell, praying the future Lord Protector to make these ideas the rules of the new dispensation. He repeated his basic idea of an original state of common ownership of all land. This state came to an end when the acquisitive members of society started using force to overmaster others, and so to introduce private property. One class was reduced to serving the other in order to maintain its own existence. The wealth of the rich landowners had been created solely by other men's efforts, and this wealth belonged to those who did the actual labor.¹⁶⁸

He again asserted that the true freedom of the commonwealth lay in the free enjoyment of the earth.¹⁶⁹ To provide the minimum amount of guidance he considered necessary for men to work at their chosen occupations, he proposed a system of overseers for each trade.¹⁷⁰ There was to be no buying or selling of the land, or of any of its produce. Storehouses were to be built in each village and town, and those would contain the "common stock" of goods, from which each man would receive his food, clothing and other goods. All men were to labor at their chosen work, and all were to have free access to the public storehouse for the

¹⁶⁷Winstanley, The Law of Freedom in a Platform (1652).

¹⁶⁸Winstanley, Law of Freedom, 12.

¹⁶⁹Winstanley, Law of Freedom, 17.

¹⁷⁰Winstanley, Law of Freedom, 43.

necessities of life, on the principle of from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs, with the definite proviso that any such needs were to be simple and lacking in any vanity or covetousness.¹⁷¹ Winstanley's proposed ideal state was a Spartan one, as he considered that men's wants should be simple in the extreme. "When a man hath meat, and drink, and clothes, he hath enough."¹⁷²

With all his impractical ideas, and even considering the negligible effect of either his theories or his actions upon the course of English history, Winstanley understood readily the importance of economic power as the avenue to political domination. His object in claiming the common lands for the poor of England was to give them a political voice, as well as an economic livelihood.¹⁷³

The negligible effect of Winstanley's writings and actions may be generally attributed to the fact that no powerful group took up his ideas, which remained only representative of the unvoiced and half-formed thoughts of the lowest income group of the populace. The most urgent demands of the Levellers were based in part on the economic disadvantages of the lower middle classes, and their disregard of Winstanley's Digger ideas was due in part to the superiority of their economic status over the poorest one half of the population.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹Winstanley, Law of Freedom, 73.

¹⁷²Winstanley, New Law (1649), in Hamilton, 20.

¹⁷³Winstanley, The True Levellers Standard Advanced (1649).

¹⁷⁴Wolfe, 106.

IV. OTHER THEORISTS

There are a number of other writers and preachers of the Civil War and Commonwealth periods whose views on property and related economic questions are worth at least a brief examination. Some of them paralleled the views put forth by the Levellers; some go in quite different directions.

With the effective suppression of the Leveller movement by the Cromwellian government, which had taken place by early 1650, many of its adherents appear to have sublimated their passion for civil and religious freedom in the Quaker movement. This religious sect derived its basic doctrines from the teachings of Casper Schwenkfeld.¹⁷⁵ These doctrines contained three main ideas. Each true believer had within himself an inward light of spiritual grace. Each individual's personal salvation was accomplished by an immediate revelation of God's nature and purposes. The believer's new birth into the ranks of the blessed was manifested by a conscious acceptance of one's calling. These teachings had come from Schwenkfeld to England through followers of the Mennonite church, the origin of both the Quakers and the Baptists. As an illustration of the close connection of these last two churches, after the foundation of the Quakers, the English General Baptists

¹⁷⁵See Barclay, Inner Life, Chapter I.

went over almost in a body to the new sect.¹⁷⁶

The early Quaker movement had also inherited the radical social views of the Continental Anabaptists.¹⁷⁷ The movement's founder George Fox had preached, like the Mennonites, "Keep out of the powers of the Earth." However, many early Quakers, often veterans of the Ironsides, Cromwell's Civil War army, had hopes of realizing their social ideals by political methods--hopes not entirely given up until the Restoration.¹⁷⁸ Certainly the Quakers' opponents pictured them as radical socialists, and traced their origin to the communistic Anabaptists of Munster. One modern author, however, has described the Quakers' social aspirations as being limited to poor relief, although they preached vigorously against social injustices and inequalities.¹⁷⁹

Most Leveller demands, in particular the demand for abolition of servile tenures and copyholds, and for the extension of the franchise, were put forth in numerous Quaker tracts of the 1650's. Their intention, however, was at that time not to militate for political action, but only to propagandize by religious persuasion. Their religious quietism held them to a pacifist attitude, with no attempt at any deeds in support of these demands.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶Gooch, 229.

¹⁷⁷There are discussions of the original revolutionary character of Quakerism both in Gooch, 232-8 and in H. Weingarten, Die Revolutionskirchen Englands.

¹⁷⁸Bernstein, 229.

¹⁷⁹Gibb, 333-4.

¹⁸⁰Schenk, Social Justice, 125-7.

Throughout the Commonwealth period radical economic doctrines were preached by some Quakers. Quakers are described as teaching, in speeches made in Zeeland and Rotterdam in 1657, that all goods should be held in common.¹⁸¹ The Quaker James Naylor has been taken to represent the extreme political wing of the movement. His overly savage treatment after his reenactment at Bristol of Christ's entry into Jerusalem seems, at least to one author, to be due to more than just religious causes.¹⁸²

The anonymous work Tyranipocrit, which appeared in 1649, expressed the extreme egalitarianism of which the Levellers complained that they were falsely accused. It preached not the abolition of private property sought by the Diggers, but a rigid equalization of property to be maintained by law:

To give unto every man with discretion so neere as may bee, an equall share of earthly goods, in consonant to the law of God and nature, and agreeable to the rule of Christ.¹⁸³

To this end, the author advised the authorities of his proposed commonwealth:

Once in a year, or oftener, thou must examine every mans estate, to see if they have not made their goods uneven, and if they have, then thou must make it even againe.¹⁸⁴

He did not look for an improvement of the social order through the betterment of the lot of the lower classes, but sought

¹⁸¹O. Pringsheim, Beitrage zur wirtschaftlichen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Vereinigten Niederlande im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert (Leipzig: 1890).

¹⁸²Bernstein, 242.

¹⁸³Tyranipocrit ("Rotterdam" [London]: 1649), 84.

¹⁸⁴Tyranipocrit, 107.

only the abolition of any inequality of wealth, regardless of the immense difficulties of enforcing such a proposal. Castigating those who maintained the existing order of society, he told them that "their sinne is not so much, in that some men are too poore, as it is in that some are too rich."¹⁸⁵

As noted earlier in Chapter Two, Leveller theories on land ownership had been limited to a concern for enclosures and a call for an end to base tenures. In the later years of the Protectorate a debate took place on the economic interpretation of history and theories of land ownership advanced by James Harrington. Harrington was the first English writer to examine the effect on history of changes in land holding. In his view, the alienation of many of the Crown's properties by Henry VII and Henry VIII to raise money had destroyed the Crown's absolutism by making it impossible for the King to live of his own. As a result, economic power had become divorced from political power, and Civil War between the Crown and those given power by their increased land holdings had been made inevitable.¹⁸⁶ Harrington considered real property, that is, landed estates, to be the political center of gravity, and in his Oceana he proposed a republic with a wide electorate of property owners. To insure that property ownership remained widely distributed, he called for an agrarian law which would limit individual holdings of land to that amount not

¹⁸⁵Tyranipocrit, 107.

¹⁸⁶M. Ashley, John Wildman, Plotter and Postmaster (London: 1947), 134.

yielding more than £2,000 per year income.¹⁸⁷

Harrington further urged the abolition of primogeniture. By this measure, not only would natural limits be set on the concentration of property, but a moral wrong would be rectified. He held it to be hateful,

That we should use our Children as we do our Puppys, take one, lay it on the lap, feed it with every good bit, and drown five; nay, yet worse; forasmuch as the Puppys are necessarily drowned; whereas the Children are left perpetually drowning.¹⁸⁸

A number of anonymous authors of the 1650's echoed Harrington's sentiments. One writer spoke of "the most unreasonable descent of inheritance to the eldest sonne only."¹⁸⁹ Another one described primogeniture as "this great monopoly so silently remaining among us."¹⁹⁰

At the close of the Interregnum, William Sprigge attempted a synthesis of Leveller ideas with those of Harrington and others who believed in the theory of a "balance" of property. He proposed conversion of all copyholds, leaseholds and tenancies at will, "at a reasonable composition," into unrestricted freeholds for all landholders. He urged, not the complete abolition of primogeniture, but that it be "abated and moderated." In order to preserve a landowning gentry class, which he considered essential for social stability, he would have allowed the eldest son

¹⁸⁷Bernstein, 201.

¹⁸⁸Harrington, Oceana (ed. S. B. Ljefgren, 1924), 94.

¹⁸⁹The only right rule for regulating the laws and liberties of the people of England (1652).

¹⁹⁰The Younger Brothers Advocate (1655).

in each family either a double portion of the estate, or the inheritance of his father's personal fortune, in addition to his portion of the real estate.¹⁹¹ He also proposed that no one be allowed to own more land than a certain fixed amount, to be set by the state. This limit was to be enforced by high taxation on any excess holdings, or their confiscation at the death of the owner.¹⁹²

Sprigge stigmatized merchants as not as fit as the landed class for governing the nation. In this he was possibly following Harrington, who had remarked that "Industry of all things is the most accumulative, and Accumulation of all things hates Leveling."¹⁹³ This may be taken to indicate Harrington's belief that the acquisitive merchant class would never agree to the idea of a balance of property, even if he were able to persuade the landed interests toward such a step. Sprigge also referred to the natural supremacy of the landowner as head of society.¹⁹⁴

Sprigge did not envision the use of the common lands for the benefit of the poor. He did, however, propose the use of glebe or tithe lands to support workhouses for them. He strongly criticized the attitude of the dominant mercantile and gentry classes of his day toward the poor, whose condition he called

¹⁹¹Sprigge, A Modest Plea for a Commonwealth (1659), 73-5.

¹⁹²Sprigge, Modest Plea, 112.

¹⁹³Harrington, A System of Politics, quoted in Bernstein, 206.

¹⁹⁴Sprigge, Modest Plea, 119.

"one of England's greatest crimes, and black reproach."¹⁹⁵ Taking aim at those forces which were so soon to triumph at the Restoration, he called for the abolition of the lawyers, the regular clergy and the hereditary nobility, as all irreconcilable antagonists of a free commonwealth.¹⁹⁶

Certain Leveller principles and proposals turned up in the writing of a number of miscellaneous authors until the Restoration. One James Frese, in 1647, echoed the Leveller demands regarding imprisonment for debt. He envisioned three classes of debtors. Those with no estates were to be freed from prison as bankrupts. Those with some property should be required to pay their creditors proportionately. Those with the means to pay, who preferred a comfortable existence purchased from their jailer rather than pay their creditors, were to have their estates sequestered and sold to satisfy their debts.¹⁹⁷ Frese repeated his complaint of "the bodies of men and women still detained in cruell Prisons for debt" two years later, in a defense of the Leveller party.¹⁹⁸

One Thomas Collier listed several complaints similar to the Levellers in 1647, among them tyrannical laws in an unknown tongue, arbitrary acts of those in power, tithes and the free

¹⁹⁵Sprigge, Modest Plea, 54, 56.

¹⁹⁶Sprigge, Modest Plea, 104.

¹⁹⁷J. Frese, Times Present Mercy and Englands Western Justice (1647).

¹⁹⁸Frese, The Levellers Vindication (London: 1949), 3.

quartering of soldiers on the citizenry.¹⁹⁹ Another tract of the time, probably written by a Catholic apologist, in addition to a plea for abolition of tithes to support the regular clergy, used arguments similar to the Levellers' strictures against the lawyers to demand regulation of excessive doctors' fees.²⁰⁰

Sir Harry Vane, a staunch republican, or as such a one was contemporaneously called, Commonwealthsman, opposed both the wide democracy advocated by the Levellers and the military dictatorship of Cromwell. He nevertheless expounded the same view as the Levellers of a social contract as the origin of government, the necessity of an agreement between the interest of the nation (in his view, the landowners) and their representatives.²⁰¹

Others besides the Levellers maintained a concern for the enclosure problem. One J. Moore, in at least two tracts of the period, commented on the acquisitive individualism of the new capitalist landlords, in criticizing the self-seeking principles of enclosure as being against the tenets of Christian morality.²⁰²

Among English agricultural writers, not otherwise concerned with the question of land ownership, one mentioned that the system of base tenures contributed to keeping the land from being

¹⁹⁹T. Collier, A Discovery of the New Creation (Sept. 29, 1947), Woodhouse, 395.

²⁰⁰[?John Austin], No Papist nor Presbyterian (Dec. 21, 1648), Wolfe, 308.

²⁰¹H. Vane, A Healing Question (1656).

²⁰²J. Moore, A scripture word against enclosures (1656); The crying sin of England is Not Caring for the poor (dated 1653 by R. H. Tawney, Agrarian Problem, 322, n. 44).

properly improved, and increasing its yield:

If a tenant be at never so great pains or loss for the improvement of his land, he doth thereby but occasion a greater Rack upon himself.

The author suggested a law that would require each landlord to compensate his tenants for any improvements made, upon renewal or termination of a lease, or to give a sufficiently long tenure for the tenant to recover the value of his improvements in the yield of his acres.²⁰³

In the brief period of polemical pamphleteering at the end of the Commonwealth period, a tract by William Cole illustrates the survival of several Leveller ideas. The "illegitimate" Normans were the origin of oppressive laws. Magna Charta was not a basis for commoners' liberty, but only a charter for the nobility. The gentry and lawyers in the House of Commons were a pack of greedy wolves. Laws should be made "according to the mind of God." Hundred-courts should be revived, and local registers of wills and deeds established.²⁰⁴ The economic steam seemed to be going out of these writers. One exposition of Leveller doctrine in 1659 avoids any mention of economic reform or property questions, listing only political and religious reforms to be hoped for.²⁰⁵

²⁰³W. Blith, The English Improver (1649).

²⁰⁴W. Cole, A Rod for the Lawyers (London: 1659), in Harleian Miscellany (London: 1809), IV, 319-26.

²⁰⁵The Leveller (London: Printed for Thos. Brewster; 1659), in Harl. Misc., IV, 543-50.

CONCLUSION

The Levellers, Diggers and other Sectarian groups filled the Interregnum period with a wealth of proposals for change and reform in English life, but the men in control of the military and governmental power were not moved. The Puritan landed gentry and the Presbyterian merchant class desired religious and political reform, but opposed any alteration of the economic order. Both groups wished to be able to acquire land, to enclose and improve it for their own benefit, and, as the owners of the land, to receive a remunerative rent from their tenants. Trade was to be orderly, and to the benefit of the large entrepreneur.

The lower middle class of artisans, small merchants and manorial tenants desired reforms in each case going well beyond those of the upper classes. Religious reform was not just to allow a Presbyterian state church, or a semi-official Congregationalism, but was to permit the unrestrained expression of views and practices by all sects. Political reform was not just to give the gentry in the Commons the deciding voice over King and Lords, but was to give the franchise to every free born Englishman who was not a servant or an alms-taker. In economic matters, however, the Leveller party seems to have wished for a return to a system where the communal welfare was the main concern of those in authority, and where the land would be a source of individual livelihood for every man. Their proposals on trade, moreover,

assumed the continued viability of small-scale production and commerce.

The more radical members of the party, and the followers of Gerrard Winstanley, looked far beyond these ideas to a true commonwealth of communal property, but in their rejection of the mechanism of trade committed themselves to a forced return to a primitive agricultural and pastoral society, founded on their belief in an innocent state of nature. Here again, their concept was essentially backward-looking, not to a real past order of things, but to an idealized antiquity existing in their religious beliefs.

Up through the end of the Civil Wars, the religious division of England was the paramount fact of social and political life, regardless of the other political and economic factors which led to the conflict. After its culmination in Cromwell's regime, and its collapse at the Restoration, sectarian religious belief quickly subsided as a political force, surviving as a personal factor in individual life.²⁰⁶

The vanquished party in the English Civil War was the landowning peasantry. Within a century they had largely disappeared from the English countryside.²⁰⁷ The landed gentry remained triumphant down to the end of the nineteenth century. Only the Levellers represented the one serious attempt at obtaining political power by a group whose solutions to the economic

²⁰⁶Brailsford, 9.

²⁰⁷Brailsford, 452.

problems of the period were quite contrary to the interests of the landed gentry. They failed to make a sufficient analysis of the agrarian question and the problems inherent in a rising urban and commercial civilization, and so did not carry with them enough of the English people to enable them to exert a real influence on the organization of English society. They were groping toward such an analysis and thoughts of a possible solution, with their idea of enclosing and improving all common lands for the benefit of all the landless classes, and their demand, although not strongly held by their leaders, for the conversion of all tenures into freehold. They did enough for the tenant's cause to provoke the lords of the manor, but not enough to mobilize the villages.²⁰⁸

The Diggers represented a solution of a sort to the agrarian problem, but one of a mystical and unrealistic nature, attributes which they shared with the other Millenarian sects of the day. After the Restoration, economic argument on land holding in England died out for more than a century. Many men may have thought about the question during this interval, but they wrote little, and could do less.

The later theorists of the Protectorate era seem to have regarded their debates on the question of the ownership of property as an interesting intellectual exercise, of no immediate practical consequence, and certainly not one to be pursued politically. The loss of religious fervor and the increasingly

²⁰⁸Brailsford, 450.

secular view of these questions may have contributed to this feeling.

I have attempted to show that the views of most Sectarian writers on property, or at least on land ownership, were basically conservative, or more exactly, reactionary, in a wish to restore a previous state of society when all had enjoyed the land. Much of Sectarian thought looked for a reform of social abuses by the restoration of an older harmony of interests of all classes of society, which they believe had prevailed in medieval times. Under the new conditions of capitalist economy and increasing secularism, their limited adaptation of their ideas to these new concepts did not, perhaps could not, provide the spark to fire a real change in the social order.

It may well be said of the Sectaries that far from being too radical in their economic views, they were too conservative. Their views, although in some ways analogous to those of the modern welfare state, were in reality the last expression of ideas of the medieval era. Their basic wish for a restoration of a communal view of the responsibility of those in authority for the welfare of all was flatly opposed by the gentry and mercantile classes, in the name of progress toward the new capitalist order. Their legacy to the future lay mainly in their vision of human society as the ultimate good, and the fundamental value of a society living together in harmony through the efforts and rewards of all.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Arthur C. Clarke has been read and approved by three members of the Department of History.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

June 16, 1966
Date

William F. Smith
Signature of Adviser