

Winstanley & The Diggers

**The Spiritual and Political Story
of a Seventeenth Century Communist Movement**

By David Spritzler

"The World Turned Upside Down"
By Leon Rosselson

In 1649
To St. George's Hill,
A ragged band they called the Diggers
Came to show the people's will
They defied the landlords
They defied the laws
They were the dispossessed reclaiming what was theirs

We come in peace they said
To dig and sow
We come to work the lands in common
And to make the waste ground grow
This earth divided
We will make whole
So it will be
A common treasury for all

The sin of property
We do disdain
No man has any right to buy and sell
The earth for private gain
By theft and murder
They took our land
Now everywhere the walls
Spring up at their command

They make the laws
To chain us well
The clergy dazzle us with heaven
Or they damn us into hell
We will not worship
The God they serve
The God of greed who feeds the rich
While poor folk starve

We work we eat together
We need no swords
We will not bow to the masters
Or pay rent to the lords

Still we are free
Though we are poor
You Diggers all stand up for glory
Stand up now

From the men of property
The orders came
They sent the hired men and troopers
To wipe out the Diggers' claim
Tear down their cottages
Destroy their corn
They were dispersed
But still the vision lingers on

You poor take courage
You rich take care
This earth was made a common treasury
For everyone to share
All things in common
All people one
We come in peace
The orders came to cut them down.

Introduction

This paper tells the story of the seventeenth century British theological and political philosopher Gerrard Winstanley, and the egalitarian community with which he attempted to change the world. By telling Winstanley's story, I hope to show that resistance to the Hobbesian ideas that rule our lives today is as old as those ideas themselves. In his introduction to Thomas Hobbes's most well known work, Leviathan, Crawford Brough Macpherson asks "Why, in the second half of the twentieth century, do we still read Hobbes, who wrote three centuries ago?" I might pose the related question: Why, in the second half of the twentieth century, do we not read Winstanley, who was by all accounts at least as brilliant as his contemporary, Hobbes? My question, I must admit, is a rhetorical one. The answer is that it is Hobbes, not Winstanley whose views became the basis of our society.

That history is written by the victors is an almost entirely accurate truism (as Winstanley demonstrates, the victors are not always the only ones capable of recording the events of their time.) But, the degree to which different versions of history are emphasized lies entirely within the control of those who find themselves in power after these events are concluded. Such is the case with the respective representation today of Winstanley and Hobbes.

Hobbes's basic assumption, upon which he bases the entirety of his political views, is that men are necessarily locked into a struggle for power over one another:

So that in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onley in Death. And the cause of this, is not alwayes that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more. (Hobbes 161)

This assumption is also the basis of the most powerful political forces at work in the world today. Both modern capitalism, and modern communism maintain that it is necessary for a paternalistic government to control the populace, to protect it from its self. Indeed this assumption has been at the heart of public policy in the Western world and its dominion as far back as Hobbes's time.¹

And so, it is not surprising that it is Hobbes who is still widely read in the twentieth century, and not Winstanley. For the world of the twentieth century is a world in which those in power base their policies upon Hobbes's basic assumptions that good and bad are subjective, and that humans' ability to control their desires is non-existent; not Winstanley's conviction that there is an objectively good force inherent in every person, and that this force will ultimately prevail over selfishness. Thus, it makes perfect sense that the expression of conflicting views should be kept at a minimum. It is not even necessary to believe in a covert conspiracy; those responsible have no reason to cover their trails. After all, Hobbes's assumption is considered by them to be as unquestionable as his contemporary, Galileo's discovery that all objects fall at the same rate. Any who disagree are branded idealists, and informed that they are ignorant of the true nature of people, and the true nature of the world. History is painted in Hobbesian terms, and thus there is never a shortage of historical examples to support the Hobbesian's claim.

My main interest in Winstanley is that he, and many of his contemporaries, are representative of a great number of historical examples that defy this dominant paradigm. Yet (or perhaps, thus,) Winstanley's views are consistently glossed over by historians. If we read on in Macpherson's introduction, we learn that: "As soon as [Hobbes] had demonstrated the need for a single sovereign power, no one, from the Levellers, to Harrington, to Locke, disputed it. All they disputed was whether it need be a self perpetuating sovereign body." This, as we shall see, is simply not true: Winstanley disputed the right of any person to rule another at the same time that Hobbes claimed it was necessary for the survival of humanity.

And so, it soon becomes apparent that Winstanley is also representative of the countless resisters of oppression whose stories and opinions have been suppressed. Lisa Lowe comments that the emphasized version of history is, "as [Walter] Benjamin suggests, a narrative that has 'empathy with the victor,'..."² If this is so, she writes, then "the material memory of the unvictorious is not simply repressed by that narrative," but it returns to "pressure and restructure" the very

¹ "Hobbes was a potent influence right through, from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth." (Macpherson 24)

² Here Lowe quotes from Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," found "in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969)."

systems that seek to repress it. (Lowe 127-127)³ By offering an alternative narrative, one which illuminates "the material memory of the unvictorious," I hope to aid this memory's return, and thus demonstrate that the powers that rule today have been challenged since their very beginnings. Without knowledge of Winstanley's struggle, and many others, it may seem that we as people struggling against oppression today are isolated. Oppressive elites, ruling on the basis of Hobbes's assumptions control much of what we see of the world. This paper emphasizes a point of view that runs contrary to the views emphasized by these elites, and should thus help to level, so to speak,⁴ the score between them and the rest of us, Winstanley included, who do not believe that humans can not help but do each other harm.

The Diggers' story is important because it shows us that despite vastly different worldviews, despite the fact that it was a totally different time, oppression is always wrong, and gets the same sort of reactions. Hobbes is wrong, Winstanley & Freire are right.

Background

On Sunday, April 1st, 1649, a plot of "wasteland" near Walton-on-Thames, known as St. George's Hill, was the site of one of England's earliest communist uprisings. Led by discharged New Model Army soldier William Everard, and former cloth-merchant Gerrard Winstanley, a dozen landless men and their families invoked their God given right to till the earth, and began digging, and fertilizing the common. In an age when land and its products were the primary form of wealth, the actions of these "Diggers," and others like them throughout England posed a serious challenge to the ruling elites of their day. If the poor began taking the matter of famine into their own hands, establishing their own communities, free of the social, religious, economic, and legal constraints that kept the aristocracy in power, the aristocracy's demise would surely be imminent.

At the time of the Diggers' takeover of St. George's Hill, King Charles had been without his head since the 19th of January of that year, when a High Court of Justice, established by the Long Parliament, had seen fit to deprive him of it. This dramatic action was the crowning of the long conflict between Parliament and the King dating back to the beginnings of the Stuart period, causing nearly a decade of war. In the time following the king's execution, England found its self at a crossroads. The end of the monarchy was perceived in a variety of ways. Many saw it as indicative of a new age for England, while others saw it as only a phase, and felt that it was only a matter of time before a monarchy of some sort would be established.

After the Wars

³ Lowe's original words are: "If historical narrative is, as Benjamin suggests, a narrative that has 'empathy with the victor,' the material memory of the unvictorious is not simply repressed by that narrative; it dialectically returns, to pressure and restructure precisely the regimes of uniformity that seek to contain it as representation." It is sad and rather ironic that such an important idea concerning the repression of 'unvictorious' cultures' viewpoints should be written in the dense theoretical language of the victorious culture's academia, and thus made unintelligible to many readers. I have, therefor, attempted to translate Lowe's ideas into words which I hope will be easier to grasp.

⁴ In seventeenth century England, communists were known as "levellers," in reference to their desire to "level" the ratio of wealth to population.

Having eliminated their primary competition for the rule of England, the men of Parliament, led by "Lord Protector" Oliver Cromwell,⁵ turned their attention to their newly won responsibilities. The England they took control of was entering the worst part of a period that has become known as "economically among the most terrible in English history," (Hill 17)⁶, and they were being blamed. Besides the added economic insecurity that was the inevitable legacy of the wars, the 1640s were a decade of bad harvests, and famine was an increasingly common, and therefore dangerous problem as the poor began organizing in a variety of ways to ensure their survival.⁷

While Parliament's victory over the monarchy amounted to a major shift in power, the implementation of power in post-revolutionary England differed little from the England of the King. Parliament was, after all, made up of men who had agreed with most of the King's laws, and disagreed with him primarily about his foreign policy, taxation, religion, and, most importantly, his methods of, and rights to rule.⁸ While these differences of opinion were enough to lead the men of Parliament to behead the King, it is important to realize that for Parliament, the wars were more about who should (or would) rule than about how they should do so. Thus when Parliament took control of the nation, it altered only those policies that its members disagreed with, leaving the bulk of the laws intact.

Others, however, had different interpretations of the war and its significance. In its military efforts against the King, it was necessary for Parliament to enlist the help of everyone from landholders to the peasantry. While the landholders gave their support financially, the peasants gave theirs in blood; and where the landholders quickly saw compensation for their efforts in the form of an increase in their political power,⁹ the peasants waited for the change they had assumed would follow the end of what, under Parliament's influence, they saw as a tyrannical monarchy. This hope was based not only upon what they must have been told by Parliament,¹⁰ but on the

⁵ Cromwell, an MP and General in the New Model Army, rose to power between and during the Civil Wars. Playing the moderate in disputes between the Presbyterian Parliament and the Episcopalian Army, he positioned himself as the lesser of two evils in both factions' eyes, and thus ensured his power following the war. Rejecting the title of King, which Parliament offered him, he instead seized power under the euphemism "Lord Protector," under which he ruled dictatorially until his death.

⁶ Here Hill cites Professor Bowden as published "In Joan Thirsk (Ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, (1500-1640) (Cambridge U.P., 1967) pp 620-1."

⁷ "'The poor,' Wildman tells us in January 1648, 'did gather in troops of ten, twenty, thirty, in the roads and seized upon corn as it was carrying to market, and divided it among themselves before the owners' faces, telling them they could not starve.' 'Necessity dissolves all laws and government, and hunger will break through stone walls,' *The Mournfull Cries of Many Tradesmen* warned Parliament and the Army in the same month." (Hill 86., citing "Wolfe, pp 71, 278"; no other information is given.)

⁸ Charles believed that the King should have total power, as had his predecessor, the first Stuart monarch, James I. Parliament, which had shared power with the Tudor monarchs, disagreed.

⁹ Which is not to say that after the war the Parliamentary landholders celebrated their victory and commenced enjoying their new security. Hill notes that "the early months of 1649 had been a terrifying time for men of property. . . . As late as November 1649 Ralph Josselin tells us that men feared to travel because of danger from robbers, and the rich even felt insecure in their own houses." (Hill 88, citing Josselin: "Ed. E. Hockliffe, *The Diary of the Rev. Ralph Josselin, 1616-1683*, (Camden Soc., XV, 1908) p 70. ")

¹⁰ "...Parliament promised, if we would pay taxes, and give free quarter and adventure our lives against *Charls* and his party, whom they called the Common enemy, they would make us a free people." (Winstanley 276)

common belief in the theory of the Norman Yoke.

The Norman Yoke

The theory of the Norman Yoke, "a historical fantasy the Levellers¹¹ had developed..." (Mulder 74) held that King Charles' regime was directly descended from the government of William the Conqueror of Normandy. As William was a foreign invader who had forcefully taken over England, England's native inhabitants were perfectly justified in their opposition to him and his laws, which were "arbitrary and tyrannical...depriving the English of their native liberties." (Mulder 75) It followed, then, that if Charles and his government's claim to power was inheritance of this tyrannical and unjustifiable government, that their rule was also tyrannical and unjustifiable, and could be opposed by the people with equal justification. Mulder cites the Leveller newssheet, *The Moderate*¹² as saying that since the time of William's conquest, the English had been "yet slaves, by and from the Conquest," continuing that "all the Laws of this Land" were "Tyrannical and Arbitrary, being made and maintained by the sword." The article concluded that "The Laws and Government of this Land, being Tirannous and Arbitrary, and destructive to the freedom of the people, may be lawfully taken away by the people, being unlawfully imposed upon them by the Conqueror." Sabine writes that:

This identification of tyranny with the Norman Power was a common form of Leveller argument...It had been fully developed by Overton in his *Remonstrance* in 1646 and by John Hare in several pamphlets published in 1647. In fact it was merely one phase of an argument that was common to all the anti-royalist parties and not to the Levellers alone: the mythical presumption that there had once been a free constitution in England which it was the purpose of the Civil War to restore. (Sabine 56)

Modern historians of all political persuasions tend to agree that the Norman Yoke hypothesis is not an accurate approximation of the truth. However, in the seventeenth century, it was widely believed. Indeed, Berens notes that:

¹¹ The Levellers, a London based political group that predated the Diggers by a number of years, and greatly outnumbered them, were a significant influence on the political events of their time. They "developed perhaps the first genuine libertarian political program in the English speaking world. . . ." (Mulder 30), advancing a platform that was extremely radical for its day, calling for manhood suffrage, the dissolution of Parliament, and absolute religious freedom. The group primarily represented the interests of the middle class tradesmen, craftsmen, printers, and other skilled workers, who were in favor of the abolishment of the aristocracy's control of their trades. In place of feudalism and state imposed religion (be it Catholicism by the King or Presbyterianism by the Parliament) the Levellers sought free trade and religious tolerance. They were not, however, the communists their name implies they were (this name was likely given to them as an insult by the King). "Unlike the Diggers, the Levellers were not communists and when they spoke of tyrannical laws and customs, they usually meant legal restrictions on personal liberty as they interpreted that concept." (Mulder 76) For more information on the Levellers refer to Fenner Brockway's book, [Britain's First Socialists](#).

¹² Cited in Mulder's notes as: "BM E470(12), Thomason, *The Moderate*, no. 17 (October 31 to November 7, 1648), p. 137."

Though we may now believe that, save that he placed Norman in the place of Saxon Lords, William the Conqueror introduced but few innovations into the laws and institutions of the country, the very opposite was the accepted opinion in the days of Winstanley and his associates. (Berens 38)

Thus, the value of the theory in mobilizing anti-royal sentiments at the time cannot be underestimated.

Gerrard Winstanley, one of the leaders of the St. George's Hill commune, and the Diggers' most vocal member, was a firm believer in the theory's authenticity as well. Like the Levellers and other such groups at the time, he used it as justification for his argument that the evils done under Norman rule should be undone now that the King was dead. However, Winstanley expanded the theory, casting the Norman Conquest as the root of feudalism in England, and proposing that the system should rightfully be abolished with the monarchy.

Gerrard Winstanley

Born in the Lancashire county town of Wigan in October 1609¹³, Winstanley was the son of a prosperous cloth merchant.¹⁴ He had a grammar school education, but was barred from attending the university due to his family's strict sectarianism.¹⁵ Instead, he was, on April 10th, 1630, apprenticed to Sarah Gater of Cornhill, a Merchant Taylor's widow. Seven years later, at age twenty-seven, on February 21st, 1637, he was received into the Merchant Taylors Company, and obtained London citizenship. (Hayes 3) In London, he received and sold the cloth made under his father's supervision in his childhood home, until his father's death late in 1639. Nine months later, on September 28th, 1640, he married Susan King, the daughter of Cobham landholder William King. The strained economic conditions during the first Civil War forced him into bankruptcy (1643). This led him to relocate to the country, where he worked as a laborer.¹⁶

Winstanley's Spirituality

Throughout his life, Winstanley remained a very religious man, though the form his religion took underwent many changes. During the first part of his life, he was a church going Protestant, but later, probably after he left London, he came to believe in a more generalized form of Christianity.

¹³ The only recorded date available is that of his baptism on the 10th of October, 1609.

¹⁴ The elder Winstanley's profession is also referred to by the British term, "mercier," of the same meaning.

¹⁵ Hayes notes that "Like most local gentry," the Winstanleys "opposed the official state church as administered by the bishops under the Archbishop of Canterbury." (3) Their dissidence resulted in their appearance in the courts in 1605 to answer charges that they held conventicles.

¹⁶ Accounts vary as to where exactly Winstanley relocated. Berens claims it was to Colnbrook in Buckinghamshire (Berens 79), however, Petegorsky could find no evidence to support the claim, and favored Cobham in Surrey, or its immediate vicinity. (Petegorsky 124) A year later, Sabine's book stated that he accepted the hospitality of friends in Surrey. (Sabine 6) More recently, Brockway has said that he took a job tending the cattle of his future enemy, Francis Drake. (Brockway 126)

Much like the Quakers,¹⁷ whose numbers were at that time greatly increasing, Winstanley believed that God was within each person.¹⁸ This belief was not at all uncommon at the time. Sabine notes that "Such [religious] experiences existed far and wide in seventeenth century England. They were spread largely by sermons, either heard or read, and by conversation and discussion." (Sabine 11) Petegorsky contends that "To search for the sources of [Winstanley's] theological conceptions would be as futile as to attempt to identify the streams that have contributed to the bucket of water one has drawn from the sea." (Petegorsky 124)

During his years as a laborer, Winstanley broke from organized religion on the grounds that under its influence he had "known nothing but what I received by tradition," and had "worshipped God, not knowing who He was or where He was..." (Winstanley 93) Winstanley became a Seeker, a term then applied to those who ceased attending church and began "seeking" "a new revelation from above, either a new disciple gifted like the disciples of Christ to found a new church, or more often a new discipleship spiritually revealed in the inner experience of every believer." (Sabine 9) Winstanley found such an inner experience in the form of a trance.

What exactly Winstanley experienced continues to be the subject of debate. It is fairly clear, however, that such visions were not uncommon at the time. Interpretations of Winstanley's description of his experience in his pamphlet *The New Law of Righteousness* range from Mulder's description of "auricular hallucinations" (Mulder 37) to those that consider such occurrences merely the seventeenth century way of describing moments of intellectual clarity following long periods of thought. According to the latter, the only supernatural aspect of a trance was that it was considered by whoever experienced it to have been put into their head by God. While Winstanley's trance was likely the culmination of his meditations on political and religious issues, his view that it was given him by God is not insignificant, and indeed, if we turn to his own account of the experience, it is obvious that Mulder's terminology is accurate:

As I was in a trance not long since....I heard these words, *Worke together. Eat bread together*; declare this all abroad....After I was raised up, I was made to remember very fresh what I had seen and heard, & did declare al things to them that were with me, and I was filled with abundance of quiet peace and secret joy. And since that time those words have been like very fruitfull seed, that have brought

¹⁷ Max Radin, in his introduction to the California State Library's July 1939 reprint of Winstanley's "The Law Of Freedom In a Platform," calls Winstanley not only a "worshipful brother of the Company of Saints," but also "one of the reputed founders of the Quakers." I have seen some accounts suggesting that Winstanley joined the Society of Friends in his later years (Mulder notes that "At the time of his death he was known as a...Quaker." (329)) However, Sabine contends (forty-nine years before Mulder) that "The statement that in his later life Winstanley became a Quaker has no evidence to support it," and states that "The best Quaker historians find no evidence of any external relationship or interchange between Winstanley and the Quakers, despite the close similarity of his religious experience to that of George Fox and the first generation of the Friends." (Sabine 11) As for Winstanley's involvement in the founding of the faith, Radin's mention is the only I have encountered.

¹⁸ In his writings, Winstanley refers to this concept in a variety of ways. Sometimes he speaks of an inner light, sometimes of Christ, sometimes the Law of Righteousness, or the law of universal love. All are spoken of as being good qualities within every person, and are understood to be synonymous.

forth increase in my heart, which I am much prest in spirit to declare abroad.
(Winstanley 190)¹⁹

Regardless of how we in the twentieth century would interpret similar experiences, it is clear that Winstanley interpreted his trance as a transformational experience given him directly by God, the implications of which required direct action in the world.

Winstanley's Politics

Contrary to "evolutionary socialist theory" founder Eduard Bernstein's interpretation,²⁰ Winstanley's political views were intricately intertwined with his spiritual views, so much that:

There can be no doubt that Winstanley quite sincerely regarded his communism as a revelation of spiritual truth, whose very existence vouched for its validity and authority. In the course of his movement he presented an argument in several guises, rational or Scriptural,²¹ but in his own mind his communism had its inception in what he took to be a direct revelation. For him it neither had nor needed any other support. (Sabine10)

Sabine sums up the political level of Winstanley's revelation as the realization that "the fundamental fact of social ethics is not individual enterprise and self preservation but rather the preservation of community and the responsibility of the strong for the weak," and notes that such a realization of what Winstanley called "the law of universal love" is "in all but words. . .the formula

¹⁹ In some literature, Everard is said to have been the person to whom the trance occurred. As there is no evidence to support this, and a multitude of evidence to support Winstanley's claim, I am inclined to believe the latter. It is probable that in interpretations of various Digger tracts, some of which declare that "this work to make the Earth a Common Treasury, was shewed us by Voice in Trance" (Winstanley 261) Winstanley was confused with Everard.

²⁰ In his book Cromwell and Communism, Bernstein, as Marxists are wont to do when interpreting Winstanley, belittles the importance of religion in the Diggers' platform, claiming that the religious language was important only as "a cloak to conceal the revolutionary designs of the authors." (Bernstein 107) This interpretation, as I am certainly not the first to point out, is ridiculous, specifically because the Diggers' revolutionary agenda was never a secret, and generally in its attempt to turn seventeenth century revolutionary thought, into twentieth-century Marxist dogma. Such an approach degrades not only the complicated and important ideas expressed by Winstanley and his associates; it degrades modern historians' efforts to understand them on their own terms. Certainly there can be few more obvious signs that a historian lacks integrity than when he attempts to rewrite history. In taking the stance that Winstanley's spirituality was merely a disguise for his radicalism, rather than the inspiration from which this radicalism sprung, Bernstein does nothing less.

To be fair, capitalist interpretations, though harder to come by, are equally ugly. Such is the case with Mulder's book, in which, after giving excellent historical and contextual information, he claims that Winstanley's political action amounts to nothing more than a private grudge against capitalism dating back to his shame at the failure of his business. Had either men put aside their political biases and actually paid attention to the words of the man to whom they devoted considerable time researching, perhaps they would have seen Winstanley for what he was: a spiritual and political revolutionary and visionary, who's love of life and commitment to its preservation knew no bounds.

²¹ By "Scriptural," Sabine refers to the Bible, regarded in Winstanley's time as God's, and thus the final word.

of all the utopian socialisms: From each according to his powers; to each according to his needs." (ibid. 49-50)

Winstanley's spiritual understanding of the universe was the framework through which he viewed the world around him. As he surveyed this world's political landscape, he saw it in terms of the Genesis story of Adam and the fall of man. Once, he believed, people had lived as God had intended; had worked together, and eaten bread together, sharing the earth as a "common treasury." He writes: "In the beginning of time the whole Creation lived in man, and man lived in his Maker, the spirit of Righteousnesse and peace, for every creature walked evenly with man, and delighted in man, and was ruled by him...there was an evennes between man and all the Spirit." (Winstanley 155) "But," he continues:

when man began to fall out of his Maker, and to leave his joy and rest which he had in the spirit of Righteousnesse, and sought content from creatures and outward objects, then he lost his dominion, and the creature fell out of him, and became enemies and opposers of him, and then rise up mountaines, and valleys, and hills, and all unevennesse, both in mans heart, and in mans actions. And as the man is become selfish; so are all the beasts and creatures become selfish; and man and beast act like each other, by pushing with their horns of power, and devouring one another to preserve self. (ibid. 156)²²

Further reinterpreting the myth, Winstanley describes two Adams. The first is the personification of greed, pride, envy, power, vanity, and all other negative, destructive human qualities; the instigator of the fall. The second is "the spirit of Love, Patience, Humility, and Righteousnesse," (ibid. 427) and all other positive human qualities.²³ In this story, Winstanley saw an explanation of the oppressive world in which he lived.

Once, he believed, the people of England had lived as God intended, sharing the land in peace. But then came the Norman Yoke,²⁴ seen by Winstanley as only the "the last enslaving Conquest

²² Thus Winstanley puts his own spin on Hobbes's "state of nature," whereby such a state did, and does exist, but is not the true stance of humanity. Rather, it is a perversion of humanity's true purpose. Paulo Freire speaks of the effects of oppression as "dehumanization," which he defines as "a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human." This is a concept that I think Winstanley would agree with, and certainly Freire keeps with Winstanley's views when he states that "This distortion occurs within history; but it is not an historical vocation." (Freire 26) By this he means that while such examples of selfishness and oppression do occur, they are not, as Hobbes would have us believe, definitive of the nature of human beings in the universe.

Hobbes was not the only one at that time preaching a negative view of human nature. I would argue that such a view is essential to any governments that rules as a sovereign power. As both King Charles' and Oliver Cromwell's governments did so, they perpetuated this notion, primarily through the Church, in which it was taught that selfish qualities were necessarily dominant in all people ever since the fall of the first Adam. Winstanley argued that the preachers of this theology "have cheated the whole world, by telling us of a single man, called Adam, that killed us al by eating a single fruit, called an Apple." (Winstanley 203) Rather, he argued, each person's life was in that person's hands, and it was for that person alone to decide whether to do good or ill.

²³ Winstanley also refers to the two Adams as Cain (the first) and Abel, as well as referring to the later as Jesus Christ.

²⁴ It might be suggested that since the Norman Yoke theory, upon which Winstanley's political argument would seem to rest was in fact not true, then his entire political argument must therefor be unfounded. However, while it is not true that the Norman Invasion introduced the concept of land-ownership into

which the Enemy," meaning the evil force of greed and covetousness ushered in by the first Adam "got over Israel," meaning the Kingdom of God, representative of all that is good. (Winstanley 259) It is plain that Winstanley borrowed the theory, which was widely circulated by the Levellers and others. But, as with the Scriptures, he radically interpreted it to defend his cause. Whereas the Levellers used the theory to justify opposition to a monarch who had traditionally ruled by divine right, Winstanley used it to justify his opposition to land ownership, saying that this concept was introduced by the Normans, as were the structures of law and religion which held it in place. These structures he referred to as "Kingly Power," though, as with his understanding of Adam (of which the concept of Kingly power is but another form), he saw the concept as having a positive and a negative side. The first is "The Kingly power of righteousness, and this is the power of Almighty God, ruling the whole creation in peace, and keeping it together. And this is the power of universal love, leading people into all truth, teaching every one to do as he would be done unto..." (ibid. 354) The second is:

the power of unrighteousness, which indeed is the Devil...This Kingly power is covetousness in his branches, or the power of self-love, ruling in one or in many men over others, and enslaving those who in the Creation are their equals; nay, who are in the strictness of equity rather their Masters: And this Kingly power is usually set in the Chair of Government... (ibid. 354)

In *A New-Years Gift to the Parliament and Armie*, Winstanley explains the later form of Kingly power as he saw it manifested in England:

First here is the King, the Head of the murdering power...

Then there are Lords of Mannors, who have the greatest circuit of Land, because the next in Power to the Head.

Then there are Free-holders, they took the particular Inclosures which they found in a Land when they Conquered it, and had turned out those that had bestowed labour upon it, by force of the Sword. (ibid. 386-387)

He then explains the systems by which this power maintains its self: "The Kingly power sets up a Preaching Clergy to draw the People by insinuating words to conform hereunto...next after this, the Kingly power sets up a Law and Rule of Government to walk by: and here Justice is pretended, but the full strength of the law is to uphold the conquering Sword..." (ibid. 387-388) The Church, whether Catholic or Protestant, was dependant upon the state power for its supremacy and for its funding, which was collected from the populace as tithes. As such, it was at the beck and call of

England, this is irrelevant. At some point in English history, the concept was indeed introduced. Even if the concept arrived with the first human inhabitants of the island, Winstanley's argument holds. For his argument is not based upon the exact date that inequality became the dominant force in the world, merely that it did, and that before it did, equality reigned. As such, it is not a historical argument, but a spiritual one, as is true of most of Winstanley's arguments. Though he gave historical, political, and Biblical evidence for his claims, he maintained that the question of whether "the earth was made to be a common Treasury of livelihood for all, *without respect of persons*, and was not made to be bought and sold" was "not to be answered by any text," but by the goodness "in mans heart." (Winstanley 289)

the state power, and was used to theologically justify that power's methods of and rights to rule. Laws were largely written in French and Latin, and were therefor restricted to learned men. Furthermore, laws could be manipulated by any one who could afford a lawyer.²⁵ Winstanley saw that the execution of the king, the beheading of the "Head of the murdering power" had not brought about the end of the other forms of Kingly power, and their institutions. He writes on the first page of *A New Yeers Gift*, taking England's most powerful men into his confidence:

Now Sirs, wheresoever we spie out Kingly power, no man I hope shall be troubled to declare it, nor afraid to cast it out, having both Act of Parliament, the Souldiers Oath, and the common peoples consent on his side; for Kingly power is like a great spread tree, if you lop the head or top-bow, and let the other Branches and root stand, it will grow again and recover fresher strength. (ibid. 353)

Winstanley begins his letter in a tone that suggests that his goals and Parliament's are the same; namely, to abolish Kingly power, and in the words of the Solemn League and Covenant, a 1643 oath taken by people and Parliament, "to amend our lives and each one to go before another in the example of a real reformation". (Sabine 54) As Sabine notes:

[Winstanley's] interpretation of the Covenant had nothing whatever to do with the actual political purposes of that document when it was framed. He took it as creating nothing less than a solemn personal obligation on every subscriber to effect a real reformation in England, with all that was implied by that expression. To Winstanley's mind it meant nothing less than an effort to realize "the pure law of righteousness'." (ibid. 54)

However, Winstanley soon makes it clear that Parliament is indeed the perpetuator of this power; having cut off the top, it has nurtured the root. His appeal then becomes apparent. He is not writing specifically to petition Parliament to abolish its unjust institutions, establish all land as a common treasury, and help to usher in the new age (though he makes it plain that this is his long term hope, and that this is what Parliament would do if it desired righteousness.) He has faith enough to believe that the new age will come regardless of Parliament's actions, and understanding enough of the nature of Parliament to know that its members are not likely to forsake their ways, and join him... not yet, at least. Rather, his request concerns a more urgent matter, one smaller in scope, that he feels could possibly be granted even without a change in the unrighteous hearts of the powerful. This is merely that Parliament fulfill its promise made before the war to some small degree, and give the impoverished commoners the common land to farm, that *they* at least may walk in the path of righteousness.

Winstanley's hope was that by spreading word of his trance, and living in accordance with "the law of universal love," he could help speed the coming of the new age of his vision, which he believed to be unquestionably righteous. With the coming of this new age, good will would spread

²⁵ See page 311 of [The Works of Gerrard Winstanley](#) for a Digger explanation of laws which they believed were introduced by William the Conqueror.

across the land, eventually even to the lords, who would then willfully give up their land and embrace a community of equality.

When this universall law of equity rises up in every man and woman, then none shall lay claim to any creature, and say, *This is mine, and that is yours, This is my work, that is yours*; but every one shall put to their hands to till the earth, and bring up cattle, and the blessing of the earth shall be common to all...There shall be no buying nor selling...but the whole earth shall be a common treasury... (Winstanley 184)

This community, Winstanley's ultimate goal, was the realization of the "creation right" of all human beings to work together, and share equally in the fruits of their labor; the downfall of tyranny and oppression.

He based his communism upon the difference between two types of society, the monarchy and the commonwealth. In substance this amounted to the contrast between an individualist, acquisitive, competitive society and a cooperative society. Reduced to a single sentence Winstanley's argument is simply that the latter is morally superior because it grows from the better impulses of human nature. It is not built upon individual enterprise, but upon mutual aid and protection. (Sabine 54)

Winstanley's Digger Commune

In January 1649, Winstanley published a small book entitled *The New Law of Righteousnes*, in which he related his trance and stated his intention to put its instructions into practice:

when the Lord doth show unto me the place and manner, how he will have us that are called common people to manure and work upon the common lands, I will go forth and declare it in my action, to eat my bread with the sweat of my brows, without giving or taking hire, looking upon the land as freely mine as another. (Brockway 129)²⁶

In the following months, Winstanley met often with an acquaintance, William Everard. Everard, a former soldier in the Parliament's New Model Army who had been dismissed, probably for his radicalism, now resided near Winstanley in Walton-on-Thames. The two men had probably discussed both religion and politics in the past, but following Winstanley's vision, they began planning the formation of a commune by which the command "work together, eat bread together" might be obeyed. The place and date were set as nearby St. George's Hill, on the first day of April (notably a Sunday). On this day, Everard, and several other poor men from the area climbed the hill and began to dig, joined three days later by Winstanley.

²⁶ Here Brockway quotes Winstanley, almost certainly from "The New Law of Righteousnes," from which Sabine quotes a shorter version of the same sentence (Sabine 12). However, neither historian cites the specific page or chapter of the book where the quote occurs, and so I was unable to locate it in its original form.

The hill was designated a commons, but was used primarily for the grazing of neighboring landowners' cattle. (ibid. 132) At the time, three fifths of England was estimated to be unenclosed "common land." Under the monarchy, this land had been considered the King's. As with St. George's Hill, much of it became pasture for rich men's cattle, and during the upheavals of recent years unscrupulous landholders had by a combination of legal manipulation, bribery, and force, greatly increased their estates. Brockway writes that between the years of the First Civil War and the Cromwell Protectorate, "there was a greater seizure of land by the privileged Establishment-politicians, generals, merchants, priests, lawyers- than at any time since the confiscation of monastic properties a century earlier." (Brockway 124) As stated above, poverty following the wars was rampant. Plans to combine the poor with the land for the eradication of poverty existed before and after the Diggers, but most (though not all) of these were plots by ruling powers to quell rebellion by the poor. As Buchanan Sharp writes of the plots of the 1650s, such plans often "saw the poor as objects to be disciplined and reformed, not as fellow citizens with viewpoints that needed examination let alone advocacy." (Sharp 299)

The Diggers' plan, of course, differed greatly in both its guiding ideology, and its implementation. Rather than a project forced upon them by a hostile government, Digger communes were the creation of people affected by poverty, and were an active attempt on their part to feed themselves. Brockway quotes the Wellingborough Diggers' Declaration at length, in which they state that:

we have spent all we have, our trading is decayed, our wives and children cry for bread, our lives are a burden to us...we cannot get bread for...them by our labor; rich men's hearts are hardened, they will not give us if we beg at their doors; if we steal, the law will end our lives, divers of the poor are starved to death already, and it were better for us that are living to die by the Sword than by the Famine: And now we consider that Earth is our Mother, and that God hath given it to the children of men, and that the common and waste Grounds belong to the poor, and that we have a right to the common ground both from the law of the Land, Reason, and Scriptures; and therefor we have begun to bestow our righteous labor, resolving not to dig up any man's propriety, until they freely give us. (Brockway 131)

Brockway gives no date for the Declaration, but it is probable that it followed the St. George's Hill occupation, and that its authors were familiar with Winstanley's writings. Regardless of its place in the chronology of Digger history, it makes clear the fact that Diggers were drawn to do what they did out of both religion and necessity. Indeed witnessing such economic murder must have served to support Winstanley's belief in the evil of the present system, and the truth of his vision. Politically, Winstanley and Everard declared that once the land had belonged to all its inhabitants in common, but that it had been enclosed by William the Conqueror, and given to his lords to rule. As the Norman reign was (supposedly) ended, the land should rightfully be returned to the inhabitants of England. Thus the Diggers "took back" the land, of St. George's hill, and invited all to join them in tilling the earth, and sharing its bounty. Their numbers quickly grew. Within a short time they had built several wooden huts that they might be joined by women and children, eventually growing to one-hundred occupants. Brockway writes:

The Diggers' settlement was much more than an occupation of the land. It was an equalitarian commune, everyone sharing in the work, sharing good times, sharing misfortune and want. Winstanley was their inspiration, addressing them each morning in biblical terms before they began their labours, strengthening them against the Philistines who sought to destroy them. Before the end of the spring they had eleven acres of growing grain, a vegetable garden, and had built six houses. (Brockway 132-133)

It did not take long for their activities to attract attention. Almost immediately, various Diggers were taken by their neighbors and "shut up in the church at Walton until they were released by the Justice of the Peace, and on another occasion a crowd of a hundred men carried them to Kingston, where they were again released. On April 16th, an informer of the Council of State (recently appointed to administer the public affairs of England) reported the Diggers activities, saying that:

They invite all to come in and help them, and promise them meat, drink, and clothes. They do threaten to pull down and level all park pales, and lay open, and intend to plant there very shortly. They give out they will be four or five thousand within ten days and threaten the neighbouring people there, that they will make them all come up to the hills and work: and forewarn them suffering their cattle to come near the plantation; if they do, they will cut their legs off. It is feared they have some design in hand. (Berens 35)²⁷

Fearing "a greater mischief," the Council forwarded the letter immediately to "Lord General of the armed forces of the Commonwealth," airfax, requesting that he send some force of horse to the hill to disperse the "tulumtuous sort of people assembling themselves together" there. (ibid. 35)²⁸ This Fairfax did, receiving a few days later a report from the captain in whose hands he had put the matter. The captain stated that there could not have been more than twenty persons on the site since the commune's inception, and concluded that he would attempt to persuade these to leave. In closing, he stated that "the business is not worth the writing nor yet taking notice of: I wonder the Council of State should be so abused with informations..." (ibid. 36)²⁹

In his letter, the Captain also informed Fairfax that "Mr. Winstanlie and Mr. Everard (which are the chief men that have persuaded these people to do what they have done)" had agreed to meet with to meet with the general. Lord Bulstrode Whitelocke, a member of the Council of State "whom we must classify here as a hostile and hence biased witness," (Brockway 133) gave an account of the meeting, setting it down "more largely because it was the beginning of the appearance of this opinion; and that we might the better understand and avoid these weak persuasions." (Berens 38)³⁰ He tells us that the two Diggers stood before the General "with their

²⁷ Here Berens quotes from "Information of Henry Sanders of Walton upon Thames," a letter dated 16 April, 1649, which he cites as "*Clarke Papers* vol. ii. p. 209," noting that "Bulstrode Whitelocke, then already a member of the Council of the State, in his *Memorial of English Affairs* (p. 306), under date April 17th, 1649, has an entry referring to and summarising this letter."

²⁸ From: "The Council of State to Lord Fairfax," cited by Berens as "*Loc. cit.* vol. ii. p. 210."

²⁹ From: "Captain John Gladman to Lord Fairfax," cited in Berens as "*Loc. cit.* vol. ii. pp. 211-212."

³⁰ From: "Bulstrode Whitelocke's *Memorial of English Affairs*: P. 397."

hats on ; and being demanded the reason thereof, they said, 'Because he was but their fellow-creature.'" Despite their insolence, Fairfax allowed them to speak their claims. These were a brief summary of the ideas discussed in *The New Law of Righteousnes*: That they were of the people of God, and had lived under tyranny since the Norman invasion; but that the "time of deliverance was at hand," and that having received a vision bidding them to dig the earth, they had begun the work on St. George's Hill. This was followed by a statement of their intent:

to restore the Creation to its former condition. That as God had promised to make the barren land fruitful, so now what they did was to restore the ancient community of enjoying the fruits of the Earth, and to distribute the benefits thereof to the poor and needy, and to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked.

They made clear that they had no intention of interfering "with any man's property...but only to meddle with what was common and untilled, and to make fruitful for the use of man."; and predicted that the time was near when all would willingly join them. "And for all those that will come in and work they should have meat, drink, and clothes, which is all that is necessary to the life of man ; and that for money, there was not any need of it, nor of clothes more than to cover nakedness." A vow of non-violence was also made: "that they will not defend themselves by arms, but will submit unto authority, and wait till the promised opportunity be offered, which they conceive to be at hand." Fairfax was apparently impressed enough with their claims that he agreed to leave the colony alone for the time being. Having spent nearly the last decade of his life at war, the general was "loath to bring the Army into a matter which he rightly regarded as belonging to the civil authorities." (Sabine 16)

The same day that Winstanley and Everard met with Fairfax, their first publication was issued. *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* was a statement of the group's views, reasons for their controversial actions, and intent. Probably the most concise and beautifully written expression of Winstanley and the Diggers' often repeated ideas, the pamphlet stated:

In the beginning of Time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Man, the lord that was to govern this Creation; for Man had Domination given to him over the Beasts, Birds, and Fishes; *but not one word was spoken in the beginning, That one branch of mankind should rule over another.*

And the Reason is this, *Every single man, Male and Female, is a perfect Creature of himself*; and the same Spirit that made the Globe, dwells in man to govern the Globe; so that the flesh of man being subject to Reason, his Maker, hath him to be his Teacher and Ruler within himself, therefore needs not run abroad after any Teacher and Ruler without him. (Winstanley 251, emphasis added)

This may be the clearest statement of Digger philosophy, outlining in two short paragraphs their spiritual and political conviction that the concept of the equality of all human beings is essential to the creation and structure of the universe.

The document goes on to explain their interpretation of the fall:

But since humane flesh... began to delight himself in the objects of Creation, more then in the Spirit of Reason and Righteousness,...then he fell into blindness of mind and weakness of heart, and runs abroad for a Teacher and Ruler: And so selfish imagination... ruling as King in the room of Reason...and working with Covetousnesse, did set up one man to teach and rule over another; and thereby the Spirit was killed, and man was brought into bondage, and became a greater Slave to such of his own then the Beasts of the field were to him. (256)

But, it continues, a time would soon come when the Earth would become a Common Treasury again, and then "this Enmity in all Lands will cease, for none shall dare to seek a Dominion over others." Nor would any kill another desire more of the Earth than another, for to do so "walks contrary to the rule or righteousness: (*Do, as you would have others do to you; and love your Enemies, not in words, but in actions*)."

In explanation of their actions, the Diggers gave yet another elegant testimony that, though lengthy, I feel is of such quality that it deserves here to be quoted in full:

And the First Reason is this, That we may work in righteousness, and lay the Foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for All, both Rich and Poor, That every one that is born in the Land, may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth, according to the Reason that rules in the Creation. Not Inclosing any part into any particular hand, but all as one man, working together, and feeding together as Sons of one Father, members of one Family; not one Lording over another, but all looking upon each other, as equals in the Creation; so that our Maker may be glorified in the work of his own hands, and that every one may see, he is no respecter of Persons, but equally loves his whole Creation, and hates nothing but the Serpent, which is Covetousness, branching forth into selvisch Imagination, Pride, Envie, Hypocrisie, Vncleanness; all seeking the ease and honor of flesh, and fighting against the Spirit Reason that made the Creation; for that is the Corruption, the Curse the Devil, the Father of Lies; Death and Bondage that Serpent and Dragon that the Creation is to be delivered from. (257)

Promising not to use violence- "we abhorre it," they put their faith in God, and warned any would be attackers that "if some of you will not dare to shed your bloud, to maintain Tyranny and Oppression upon the Creation, know this, That our Bloud and Life shall not be unwilling to be delivered up in meekness to maintain universal Liberty, that so the Curse on our part may be taken off Creation." Thus, they said to the "Great Councel" and the "Great Army of the Land of *England*," they had made known their aims, offering "that you may joyn with us in this Work, and so find Peace. Or else, if you do oppose us, we have peace in our Work, and in declaring this Report: And you shall be left without excuse." (257)

Shortly thereafter, Everard left the settlement entirely in Winstanley's hands. Winstanley's first trial as leader was to inspire the group to start their work again after unfriendly neighbors trampled

their crops. (Sabine 16)³¹ Not long after this the colony received the first of many brutal attacks, most provably, and all probably instigated by angered lords. As this first attack was made by a group of soldiers stationed nearby, Winstanley wrote of it in a letter to General Fairfax, who had since their first meeting amicably visited them while en route to London, and whom Winstanley then considered somewhat of an ally. "Some of your foot souldiers," Winstanley told Fairfax, "did...go up to George-hill, where was onely one man and one boy of our company of the diggers. And at their first coming, divers of your souldiers, before any word of provocation was spoken to them, fell upon those two, beating the boy,...beating and wounding the man very dangerously, and fired our house." (Winstanley 284-285) The Diggers' vow "that our Bloud and Life shall not be unwilling to be delivered up in meekness to maintain universal Liberty" was further tested two days later, when freeholders William Star and John Taylor rode up to the hill followed by "some men in womens apparell on foot, with every one a staffe or club." The men immediately "fell furiously upon [the Diggers], beating them to the ground, breaking their heads, and sore bruising their bodies, wherof one is so sore bruised, that it is feared he will not escape with life." (Winstanley 295) Mulder states, citing "membership records," that after these brutalities "a large percentage of the Diggers deserted the colony." (Mulder 119) Brockway, however, paints a very different picture. He states that following the raid, in which he says crops were destroyed, permanent dwellings demolished, and tools confiscated, "the indomitable Diggers carried on. Somehow, with bare fingers, the women working by the side of the men, they cleared the ground." (Brockway 135)

Whether their numbers were growing or shrinking, organized attacks, followed by legal harassment³² finally drove the Diggers to move their commune to a new site. Their new home, located in Cobham Manor, was the property of West Horsley rector John Platt (or possibly his wife), who then became Winstanley's main opponent (Sabine 18), travelling to London in order to petition Fairfax to destroy the commune. (Sabine 19)

Meanwhile, the ever industrious Diggers had enthusiastically set upon the task of making up for their losses, bent on making the following spring, their first anniversary, the first achievement of their new society. "Writing in April Winstanley says that they had eleven acres of grain growing and had built six or seven houses. On the whole it seems pretty clear that, as a consequence of Winstanley's determination and enthusiasm, the communist society at Cobham accomplished more than the historians have usually implied." (Sabine 20)³³

³¹ Despite this injustice, Winstanley noted that "many of the Countrey-people that were offended at first, begin now to be moderate, and to see righteousnesse in our work, and to own it...." (Winstanley 282) This was not the only case of support offered by neighbors of Digger colonies. Brockway notes that, despite Leveller leader John Lillburne's denouncement of the Diggers' direct action, "there was considerable sympathy with the Diggers among the Levellers," the Aylesbury chapter of which stated in May of 1649: "We shall help to aid and assist the poor to the regaining of their rights,...And likewise will further and help [them] to manure, dig, etc., the said Commons and to fell those woods growing thereon." Brockway speculates that the Aylesbury Levellers referred to the nearby Iver Diggers. (Brockway 130) The Wellingsborough Diggers too received the aid of neighbors, both wealthy cattle owners who freely shared the common, and 'divers country farmers' who saved seed for them. (ibid. 132)

³² Sabine gives a detailed account of the legal action against the Diggers on pages 18-19 of his introduction.

³³ Here Sabine cites "S. R. Gardiner, *The Commonwealth and Protectorate*, London, 1894, Vol. I, pp. 48 f."

Nonetheless, one week before Easter, 1650, Platt and his henchmen began the campaign of unrelenting violence that was the final blow. Winstanley tells the tale in *An Humble Request to the Ministers of Both Universities and to all Lawyers in Every Inns-a-Court*. He states that Platt came with his associate Sutton to the settlement, accompanied by "divers men, whom they hired to pull down a poor mans house, that was built upon the Commons, and kikt and struck the poor mans wife, so that she miscarried of her Child, and by the blowes and abuses they gave her, she kept her bed a week." (Winstanley 433) Winstanley says that at this time he went to Platt, who told him that if he could prove his case for the commune by the Scriptures, Platt would "never trouble us more, but let us build and plant: Nay he said, he would cast in all his estate, and become one with the diggers." (ibid.)

Whether this intended as sarcasm, or a statement of Platt's faith that such a proof could not be made is unclear. Winstanley seems to have taken him literally, and thus brought Platt his proof the next week "and upon our discourse, he was very moderate, and promised me to read it over, and to give me an Answer: moreover he promised me, that if the diggers would not cut the wood upon the Common,³⁴ he would not pull down their houses." In the interest of peace, the Diggers consented to leave the trees alone "till people did understand their freedom a little more." Yet at the end of the week, Platt again appeared upon the common, accompanied this time by approximately fifty men. "Thereupon at the Command of this Parson *Plat*, they set fire to six houses, and burned them down, and burned likewise some of their householdstuffe...throwing [it]... up and down the Common, not pitying the cries of many little Children, and their frightened Mothers." Winstanley notes that some of the henchman were "newly come into the Parish: and so were bewitched by the covetous make-bate Priests, to do this heathenish...act." (ibid. 434)

Later that night, "while the diggers were quiet, and some of them in bed," some men came to them and said, as Winstanley tells it, "we have Authority from our Master, that is Mr. *Plat*, to kill you, and burn the rest of your goods, if you do not be gone: thereupon...[one of the men] struck at one, and cut some...Goods to peeces, frightening the women and Children again." The Diggers did not strike back except to ask why they were being so cruelly treated. To this the men answered: "because you do not know God, nor will not come to Church." The Diggers responded that they had no interest in attending a church where such violence was taught, but were unable to persuade their antagonists. (ibid.) Platt hired three men to watch the site day and night, and to continue harassing the colonizers. Winstanley protested to General Fairfax, "but the legal process against the Diggers was nearing completion, and the general now had no option but to obey a mandatory order of the council to dispatch troops 'to close the trespassers on the hill'." (Brockway 137) Thus ended Winstanley's Digger community.

And now they cry out the Diggers are routed, and they rang bells for joy; but stay Gentlemen, your selves are routed, and you have lost your Crown, and the poor Diggers have won the Crown of glory.

For first you have not routed them by Law, for you durst not suffer the Diggers plead their own cause, so that it never came to any tryal; and you have no Law to

³⁴ The harvesting of trees upon the common had long been a bone of contention between Diggers and Lords, the latter viewing it as a far more serious statement of ownership than mere occupation.

warrant your Lordly power in beating of the Diggers, but the will of Kingly swordly power, which is self-will, and Club-law.

Secondly, You have not routed the Diggers by dispute; for your impatient, covetous, and proud swelling heart, would not suffer you to plead rationally with them.

Neither thirdly, have you routed them by Scriptures; but the Diggers have routed you by your own Law; by reason, by Scriptures, and patient suffering all your abuses; and now your name shall rot, and your own power shall destroy you.

(Winstanley 436)

The Tip of the Iceberg

Winstanley is sometimes portrayed as having been somewhat of an anomaly in his time, but a look at some of his contemporaries shows that this is not the case. His group of Diggers was only one of many active at the time, exceptional only in having such a prolific writer as Winstanley among them to set down their history for posterity. As Brockway points out, laborers and peasants had been resisting landlord tyranny since the beginning of the seventeenth century, but "it was not until the later 1640s that the resistance gained significant proportions by the setting up of Digger colonies on common lands in a number of counties." (Brockway 125)

The Digger's revolt is known almost exclusively by what happened at St. George's Hill [with Winstanley's group], but this isolation does its extent some injustice. In several other parts of the country, labourers and peasants took over the common lands. Unfortunately, there are no detailed records such as Winstanley wrote from St. George's Hill, but there is some evidence of Digger activity in ten counties. (ibid. 130)

Sabine notes that, having moved to Cobham, Winstanley's group was encouraged by similar efforts in Northamptonshire and Kent. (Sabine 20) Hill concurs, stating: "We should see the Digger colony on St George's Hill as merely one particularly well documented example of a trend which was repeated in many other places." (Hill 95) Hill goes on to give a substantial array of historical evidence that "would seem to support [the] suggestion that the Diggers on St. George's Hill were only the visible tip of the iceberg of True Levellerism...." (ibid. 97)

Much of Winstanley's thought was a continuation of the ideas set forth by other radicals of his day, most notably the Levellers. Sabine speaks of Winstanley setting out a formal outline of his argument for communism using a threefold proof. This involves 1) direct revelation, 2) citation of Scriptures, and 3) reason. The third line of this proof, "that based upon reason and equity," Sabine says Winstanley borrowed from "the pattern of argumentation built up for the Levellers by writers such as Lilburne, Overton, and Walwyn." (Sabine 51) In 1644, the most radical of these, Richard Overton published Man's Mortallitie, in which he heretically suggested that Heaven and Hell were fictitious, and went on, as Winstanley later would, to equate God with reason. Two years later, from his cell in Newgate,³⁵ Overton published An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny, in which

³⁵ Overton was imprisoned in Newgate for his support of fellow Leveller leader John Lilburne, who had been imprisoned there following his continued agitation against the Presbyterian Parliament's lack of religious

he stated his belief that:

It is nature's instinct to preserve itself...and this in nature is granted of all to be most reasonable, equal and just...from this fountain of root, all just human powers take their original; not immediately from God...but mediately by the hand of nature...Every man by nature being a King, Priest and Prophet in his own natural circuit. (Hayes 96)³⁶

In the context of the prevalent attitudes of the day, what Mulder calls "the fundamental elements of the early-modern world view," such ideas were indeed highly radical. Mulder notes that men of Winstanley's day had inherited from the middle ages a cosmology that "taught that any challenge to the political and social order also was a radical challenge to the divine order of the universe," resulting in the possibility of horrendous consequences for mankind and for the universe. (Mulder 48) Thus, Overton's declaration that equality should reign was certainly ample cause for alarm among the ruling elite and others supporters of the status quo. But no less so was the conclusion Overton drew from his beliefs: that parliament might be justly opposed by the people if its laws did not reflect "common *equity* and right *reason* which ought to be the Forme and Life of every Government." (Hayes 96³⁷)

The presence of the Levellers and others, whose views, while varying greatly, shared a common theme of radicalism and a desire to fundamentally change society indicate that Winstanley wasn't an anomalous radical, but one of many thinkers who were actively challenging the status quo. It was the presence of such philosophers, with whom Hayes includes Bacon and Milton to some extent, that enabled Winstanley to break through the "early-modern world view," and to forge and act upon his own world view. As Hayes puts it:

Such precedents enabled Winstanley to cut through the bewildering array of theories surrounding right reason and natural law, and to establish a workable synthesis that cannot be labeled either mystical or materialistic. Asserting that God, reason and natural law are virtually synonymous, he eschews all forms, customs, and dogmas, and adopts the mantle of the biblical prophets. Having shed the cloak of humanistic learning identified with the universities, he freely associates his teaching with his vatic ancestors: Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, John the Baptist and John the Apostle. This prophetic tradition, revived in the twelfth century by Joachim of Fiore, kept alive the possibility of establishing a heavenly kingdom on earth. (Hayes 97)

This shift is of particular importance in that Winstanley is able to base his beliefs on his personal interpretation of the folk wisdom of the Bible, rather than on Church's or University's institutionalized and politically biased understanding of the world.

Significance of The Diggers

tolerance. (Brockway 28-29)

³⁶ Here Hayes cites Overton, "*Leveller Manifestoes*, p. 158."

³⁷ Here Hayes cites Overton, "*Leveller Manifestoes*, p. 158."

This paper tells the story of the seventeenth century British theological and political philosopher Gerrard Winstanley, and the egalitarian community with which he attempted to change the world. By telling Winstanley's story, I hope to show that resistance to the Hobbesian ideas that rule our lives today is as old as those ideas themselves.

Often when we think of "European culture," we think of a culture steeped in patriarchy, imperialism, and oppression. European and American history is, after all, a history of Kings and presidents. History books, the officially condoned representations of the past that are thrust upon our children, are filled with the stories of these elite heroes and their triumphs. But the version of history found in books written from the perspective of modern ruling elites, whose interests lie in subjugating their subjects, is not the only one. For in Europe, indeed even in the time and place that many of the patriarchal, imperialist, and oppressive forces that now plague us were first taking root, there was an entire social movement with an articulated denunciation of these concepts struggling to be heard. That the Digger movement did not last more than a few years should not be read as evidence that it was built upon a faulty foundation. Rather it should show us the degree to which the ruling elite of its day, unhampered by moral scruples as it was, felt compelled to stop it. Shulman writes that following the demise of Winstanley's colony:

Winstanley's concerns, language, and alternatives were buried then and still are discredited by the institutions and discourse whose emergence he opposed. His radicalism therefore marks a direction that might have been chosen but was not, a road not taken. Since Winstanley was present at one of the major turning points in the movement toward modernity, his theory reveals the roots of ideas and institutions that now dominate our world. Even more important, the road not taken still exists, in certain dimensions, as a set of concerns and commitments that remain fugitive unless given voice, that remain haunting ghosts unless acknowledged. (Shulman 2)

Winstanley's days as a Digger hardly lasted more than a year, and other colonies soon suffered similar fates. Yet though the new age that they believed to be at hand still has not come, their efforts were not in vain. For they show us that the struggle against oppression is a human struggle that has a long history. Despite what modern historians and economists might say, capitalism is not the only way in which people can live. Also, it did not come about naturally, evolving into what it is today: rather it was born of violence and oppression, and by these methods it suppressed its opponents, as it still does today.

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