

John Ball – Primitivist: The Peasants' Revolt and the State of Nature

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Contents

No Poll Tax: The Peasants' Revolt	3
The Coming Millennium	6
The State of Nature	7

No Poll Tax: The Peasants' Revolt

When a third poll tax in five years was levied to fund the failing war in France, the peasants of the hundred of Barnstaple, Essex, were first to rise up on 29th May 1381. Soon the peasantry were on the march through the Kent countryside too under Wat Tyler, sacking the manors of unpopular landlords, burning court rolls, breaking open prisons and forcing all they met to swear allegiance to 'King and Commons'. They took Rochester Castle with hardly a fight on 6th June, Canterbury on the 10th and Maidstone the next day as they began their march on London. In Canterbury they barged into the cathedral during a service, threatening to have Archbishop Sudbury, who they deemed 'traitor' for misadvising Richard II on the French War. He was in London at the time, but ultimately found no refuge there.

Excommunicate John Ball, 'the mad priest of Kent', enters this story on 11th June, when he was broken out of ecclesiastical custody in Maidstone. He'd been banged up there for unsanctioned preaching in April. By his own account, he began preaching in York, then Colchester (where Wat Tyler came from), then spent 20 years tramping round Kent, spreading his unorthodox gospel, being imprisoned twice for it. After releasing him once, Archbishop of Canterbury Simon Sudbury complained:

"He had slunk back to our diocese like a fox that evades the hunter, and feared not to preach and argue both in churches and churchyards (without the leave or against the will of the parochial authorities) and also in markets and other profane places, there beguiling the ears of the laity by his invectives, and putting about scandals concerning our own person, and those of other prelates and clergy, and (what is worse) using concerning the Holy Father himself dreadful language such as shocked the ears of good Christians."¹

What with the Church's heavy embroilment in secular affairs — to the point of its leader in England approving the poll tax, and the Papacy divided between Rome and Avignon and at war with itself due to the Great Schism, it is no surprise such criticisms were voiced in England decades before Wycliffe.

Ball distinguished himself when the peasant armies of Kent and Essex rallied on Blackheath on 13th June. According to hostile church chronicler Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*, Ball began his sermon:

"When Adam dalf (dug), and Eve span Who was thanne a gentilman?"

"He then explained that From the beginning all men were created equal by nature, and that servitude had been introduced by the unjust and evil oppression of men, against the will of God, who, if it had pleased Him to create serfs, surely in the beginning of the world would have appointed who should be a serf and who a lord"

and ended by recommending

"uprooting the tares that are accustomed to destroy the grain; first killing the great lords of the realm, then slaying the lawyers, justices and jurors, and finally rooting out everyone whom they knew to be harmful to the community in future."²

Walsingham concluded by noting the rebels' rapturous approval of John Ball. They said only he was fit to assume the Chancellor Archbishop's office when they'd found and beheaded the present incumbent.

¹ Charles Oman 'The Great Revolt of 1381' Greenwood, New York, 1906, p42.

² R B Dobson 'The Peasants revolt of 1381' Pitman, Bath, 1970, pp373-375

This is probably not what he intended (see below) but following the king's failure to negotiate, the insurgents went on to destroy Marshalsea prison, Lambeth Palace, and the homes of the Treasurer and the Mayor of London before entering the city proper unopposed on 13th June. Historians argue whether the London mob or guild factions hostile to the Mayor opened the gates, though the former certainly participated in the extraordinary scenes that followed. After crossing London Bridge, they broke open Fleet Prison, destroyed all property of the Knights of St John (treasurer of Hales' Order) and sent the lawyers and professional perjurers fleeing from the Temple and made a bonfire of all the legal records and law books they could find to delighted cries of 'Away with the learning of the clerks' A chronicler described the scene:

"It was marvellous sere how the most aged and infirm of them (lawyers) scrambled off, with the agility of rats or evil spirits."³

Then they turned their attentions to the Savoy, Palace of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and military leader during the war in France. The Anonimale Chronicle gives a particularly lively account:

"at last they came before the Savoy, broke open the gates, entered the palace and came to the wardrobe. They took all the torches they could find, and lighted them, and burned all the cloths, coverlets and beds, as well as the very valuable head-boards ... All the napery and other goods they could discover they carried into the hall and set on fire with their torches ... It is said that they found three barrels of gunpowder, and thinking it was gold or silver, they threw them into the fire so that the powder exploded and set the hall in a greater blaze than before, to the great loss and damage to the Duke of Lancaster."⁴

The emphasis was on destruction rather than looting, or punishing 'traitors' One rebel was killed by the others for taking a single silver cup from the Savoy.⁵

Their first day's destruction in London done, the peasants camped beneath the tower where the young king, advisors and retinue including Sudbury and Hales had taken refuge. Unable to escape, Richard II agreed to hear his 'most loyal subjects' demands at Mile End the next day. There Wat Tyler demanded the abolition of serfdom and all feudal dues, a general amnesty, the abolition of monopolies and a 4d per acre rent for all free tenants. The king said he agreed to all this and handed out dozens of charters saying as much. If he'd been sincere, Richard's actions would have destroyed the feudal nobility as a class that day, the realisation of peasant aspirations since before the Black Death, but the charters later proved not worth the vellum they were written on.

One demand Tyler did win, through direct action rather than relying on the king's word, was an end to the 'traitorous' architects of the poll tax. Whilst the king was still at Mile End, Tyler led a few hundred supporters into the Tower and beheaded Archbishop Sudbury, treasurer Hales and a couple of hangers on. The threats made in Canterbury only four days previously had been made good. The guard did nothing to stop them being dragged from their apartments, fearing this would put the king in jeopardy amidst the mob at Mile End.

Many peasants were conned into returning home with their worthless charters, leaving London to 'the demagogues and the criminals and the fanatics'⁶ who exploited Authority's palpable weakness to the max. Tyler's lieutenant Jack Straw — a man of quite different character to the

³ Oman op cit p 59.

⁴ Dobson, op cit p 157

⁵ Not all were as scrupulous or as unlucky. In 1382 a small group of Rochester men were indicted for sneaking the Duke's strong-box over the Thames to Southwark, making themselves £1,000 the richer. Oman, op cit, p 58

⁶ Oman, op cit, p 68

current Home Secretary! — torched the Priory of St John's Manor in Highbury, while looting swept the city. The warden of Marshalsea was dragged from the sanctuary of Westminster Abbey and beheaded, and blocks were set at every major street corner where all who would not affirm support for 'King and Commons' met the same fate — surprisingly, only a few hundred.⁷

The occupation of London culminated in a second meeting between Tyler and Richard II at Smithfield Market. The king was treated most disrespectfully (by a commoner, no less) and it was later claimed he intended to seize the monarch there to use him as a puppet and hostage throughout England. Tyler's second set of demands were even more radical than the first, and John Ball had considerable input. They included the abolition of outlawry and all law except that of Winchester⁸, of all nobility except the king, and of all bishoprics save one; and the distribution of all church estates amongst the laity. With some political astuteness, the king tried to disarm Tyler's demands by saying he would 'grant all that was in (my) power to grant' — which sounded good but meant fuck all, as the sovereign couldn't grant any of this without Parliamentary approval and the nobles there were hardly likely to agree their own abolition. The negotiation closed when Tyler tried to pick a fight with one of the king's retinue, but was run through repeatedly by the Mayor of London. Richard II could have gone down to the mob at this point — Oman notes the presence of 'John Ball and other wild extremists ... in the press.'⁹ but conned them to follow him through Aldersgate while his underling, mercenary Sir Robert Knolles, rallied the propertied classes of London to surround and disperse the rebels. At this time, the king granted mercy, but he later revoked the charters he'd granted two days earlier and ordered the rebels hunted down.

When London fell to the rebels, peasants also rose in Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire (the university being a particular target in the latter county) and trouble eventually spread as far as Bridgewater, Somerset, and Beverley and Scarborough in Yorkshire. This was all put down quickly enough when the king regained control of the capital, the only pitched battles being at Billericay and North Walsham, 26-28th June, the rebels being chased from behind their ditch and cart defences on the first charge. John Ball escaped the debacle of Smithfield, but was captured hiding in Coventry in July 1381 and taken for trial in St Albans. Working in conjunction with Jack Straw and the other London rebels during the rising, William Grindcobbe had humiliated the abbot, Thomas de la Mare, for keeping the town to feudal exactions over a century behind the rest of England. He was adjudged a 'traitor' alongside John Ball, and also hung, drawn and quartered on 17th July.

⁷ One of the more regrettable excesses of this third day was the massacre of 160 Flemings, some because they were trading as prostitutes under Hales' licence, but many simply because they were commercial rivals to those guildmen who'd sided with the rebels.

⁸ Dobson, op cit, p 164n, suggests the 'law of Winchester' was about converting the punishment for some offences from death to blinding or mutilation. This trivial demand hardly goes with 'the rebels [attempt to] wipe out the whole legal system' (Hilton p 227.) I think Tyler instead demanded a return to pre-Norman law, once seated at Winchester. That serfs would cite the *Doomsday Book* as proof of no serfdom in their areas immediately following the Norman Conquest suggests a lively mythology of a golden age of liberty before the 'Norman Yoke' was common currency as early as the 14th Century, an attitude reinforced by all legal proceedings still being conducted in Norman French during this period.

⁹ Oman, op cit p 77.

The Coming Millennium

What were John Ball's 'ravings'¹⁰ so furiously denounced by Walsingham, which led to Ball's persecution in life and ultimately violent death?

Church chroniclers put much effort into smearing Ball as a Wycliffite, conveniently forgetting Ball's preachings preceded Wycliffe's by over a decade. More to the point, though both call for radical reform of the church, Wycliffe counsels obedience to those secular authorities he thought could realise his vision whilst Ball more radically dismisses them as 'tares'. Also, Ball nowhere shows the materialist contempt for the Host that Wycliffe was so renowned for. I'm inclined to support Oman's view that:

"His inspiring idea was the 'evangelical poverty which had been preached by the Franciscans in the previous century'¹¹ to the point of even calling for the exemption of the friars (great enemies of Wycliffe, incidentally) from the general purge of clergy on occasion, but I would add to this that this does nothing to refute the accusations of heresy Ball's contemporaries made against him."

Dismayed at this degeneration of the monasteries into worldliness and affirming the poverty of Christ, St Francis rejected virtually all poverty and possessions. In 1211, canny Pope Innocent III decided it'd be better to have St Francis 'inside the church pissing out, than outside pissing in'. By allowing advocates of Christian poverty within the church, he made possible counter-attacks against the heretics like the Cathars outside it living lives of poverty and attacking the church for its worldliness. This — and wanton massacre at the hands of crusaders — proved pretty effective in countering Catharism, but St Francis rather mucked things up by leaving a personal testimony trying to hold his followers to his extreme personal example and so stop his order degenerating into worldliness too after his death. When this degeneration inevitably set in, friars under Peter John Olivi of Narbonne stuck with St Francis's testimony and formed a 'Spiritual' party which was denounced as heretical at the end of the 13th century. Fired up by the millenarian weltanschauung of Joachim of Fiore, the persecuted Spirituals argued they were the true inheritors of Christ and the church that ejected them were imposters of Anti-Christ. They got quite violent about it.¹²

The Spiritual Franciscan tradition never made it to England en masse and the last noteworthy incursion of heresy had been a smattering of Pastereux crusaders in the previous century, who were quickly seen off. This doesn't mean that the odd friar couldn't have worked it out from first principles and passed the word to Ball — or that Ball might have thought things through for himself, hence the heterodox 'hedge' nature of his vernacular preaching. Norman Cohn argues strongly that Ball's reference to the 'tares' was millenarian in content.

"By proclaiming that this prophecy is now on the point of fulfilment, that the harvest time appointed by God has come at last, the sermon in effect summons the common people, as children of the Kingdom, to carry out the annihilation of the demonic powers which was to usher in the Millennium."¹³

¹⁰ Dobson, op cit p 42.

¹¹ Oman, op cit, p 375.

¹² Malcolm Lambert 'Medieval Heresy', Blackwells, Oxford, 1994 chapter 11.

¹³ Norman Cohn, 'The Pursuit of the Millennium', Random, London, 1970, p 203.

He also cites one of Ball's letters, arguing 'God gives redress, for now is time' as indicative of the imminence of the Second coming. Rodney Hilton also spots apocalyptic content in Ball's couplet

"John the Mullere hath yground smal,
smal, smal
The kynges son of hevene (Christ)
schal pay for al."¹⁴

and suggests this mentality suffused the revolting peasantry rather than being idiosyncratic to Ball himself. The strange general forbearance from looting at the Savoy and wholesale massacre of 'tares' in London support this view, reminiscent as they are of the Biblical example of Joshua's storming of Jericho¹⁵ Moderate historians like Oman argue:

"There were no attacks on the clergy qua clergy (though plenty of assaults on them in their capacity of landlords) no religious outrages, not setting forth of doctrinal grievances, no iconoclasm, singularly little church breaking."¹⁶

To dismiss religious elements in the revolt and to present the rebels as moderates with purely economic grievances. We've seen already that most millenarian movements are provoked by the worldliness and carnality of the church ('in their capacity of landlords') and Tyler's demands for the smashing of the church at Smithfield. Certainly the 'wild extremists' still remaining in London that phrased these demands wanted more than the revocation of a few feudal dues. A curiously anti-egalitarian anomaly – applied by the peasant mob to Ball himself after his great sermon on Blackheath – was the retention of one representative of nobility and clergy when all others were to be swept away. Hilton suggests

"Was this illusion or a practical recognition of the ultimate need for power in the state to reside somewhere? ... They seem to have envisaged a people's monarchy (or monarchies) in which there would be no intermediary between the king and his people, that is, no class of landowning nobles and gentry controlling law and administration. Similarly, there would be a people's church whose basic unit would be the parish, again with no intermediate hierarchy between Christians and the single bishop or archbishop who, as head of the church was the ecclesiastical equivalent of the people's king. Somehow the people would make the law and administer justice."¹⁷

That the insurgents argued for restructuring their whole society rather than just suggesting new counsellors replace the 'traitors' shows how far from cap-doffing petitioners they were. They certainly went further than the 'revolutionary' Levellers two centuries later – though, of course, they could have gone even further.

The State of Nature

However, my purpose here is not to establish the millenarian credentials of John Ball and his revolting peasants, but to draw out the primitivist content of his gospel. Strangely Hilton leads in here by noting

¹⁴ Rodney Hilton, 'Bond Men Made Free', Routledge, London 1988, p 223.

¹⁵ Joshua, vi, 18–24.

¹⁶ Oman, op cit, p 19.

¹⁷ Hilton, op cit, p p 225, 229.

“Sermons in denunciation of the rich ... were not exclusive to heretics or other conscious rebels against ecclesiastical or secular authority. They were a common-place of clerical moralists who selected the characteristic crimes of every estate in the social order for castigation ... Walsingham was no doubt right in attributing to John Ball the sermon text ‘When Adam dalf and Eve span, who was than a gentilman’ but it was already a commonplace in this or similar forms, as is shown in an early fourteenth century religious poem.¹⁸

“When Adam delf and Eve span
Whare was than the pride of man?”

Why the medieval church was beset by endless eruptions of egalitarian heresy is because egalitarianism was an intrinsic – if awkward – part of their own ideology. The very basis of monasticism and the mendicant orders that followed them was Acts IV, which describes how the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem

“had all things common ... and distribution was made unto every man according to his need.”

Looking back to Eden – and the Stoics – St Ambrose (no less) said:

“The Lord God specially wanted this earth to be the common possession of all, and to provide fruits for all; but avarice produced the rights of property.”¹⁹

Nor was he alone in this opinion, through a route too unlikely to go into here²⁰, a passage glorifying the communistic state of Nature – even free love – was included in the basic Canon Law text, Gratian’s *Decretum*. (!)

There appears to be nothing between the sentiments of St Ambrose and John Ball (or Gerrard Winstanley, for that matter), but in fact the Church fathers did create a distinction. In his *City of God*, sourpuss St Augustine argued

“inequality, slavery, coercive government and even private property had no part in the original intention of God and had come into being only as a result of the Fall. Once the Fall had taken place, on the other hand, a development began which made such institutions indispensable. Corrupted by Original Sin, human nature demanded restraints which would not be found in an egalitarian order; inequalities of wealth, status and power were thus not only consequences of but also remedies for sin.”²¹

Just as Ball took conventional Church doctrine on the Millennium and radicalised it by making it imminent, so he took church doctrine on the communitarian state of Nature and radicalised it by rejecting the Fall and Original Sin²². There were those in the Spiritual Franciscan tradition that had – perhaps – come to the same conclusion²³ but this is more typical of the antinomian tradition beginning in the early 13th Century with the Brethren of the Free Spirit.²⁴

In looking to the origins of his society – albeit mythical ones – in order to explain and challenge the present, John Ball was a primitivist. In advocating equality in an abundant Nature,

¹⁸ *ibid.* p 211.

¹⁹ Cohn, *op cit*, p 193.

²⁰ *ibid.* pp 193 – 195.

²¹ *ibid.* p 192

²² Hilton, *op cit*, makes this point eloquently, pp 222–223.

²³ I’m thinking here of Fra Dolcino and his followers at Monte Rebellio, 1307, extreme even by Spiritual Franciscan standards, and strictly speaking not of that order. Damian Thompson, ‘The End of Time’, Random House, London, 1999, pp 67–71.

²⁴ Cohn, *op cit*, chaps 8–9. The best known examples of this tradition are the Ranters of the English Civil War period. See A L Morton, ‘The World of The Ranters’, Lawrence and Wishart London 1970. Lambert, *op cit*, p 130 refers to Cathar bishops that may have thought themselves above sin to have sex (usually taboo) as early as the 12th century.

Ball came close to anarcho-primitivism, though we've already shown the residue of hierarchical thinking in his world view.; and in the earliest communities, people gathered the fruits of the earth rather than dug them up...

Looking for a utopian element in the Peasants' revolt, Fredy Perlman also looked to Eden.

"The poor priests .. read aloud about a place called Eden where there were no priests or lords or merchants, where human beings were kin and shared all things in common."²⁵

Also noting Ball's:

"Good folk, things cannot go well in England nor shall until all things are in common and there is neither villein nor noble, but all of us are of one condition."²⁶

Perlman places himself firmly in the millennarian, primitivist camp, arguing this is about the supercession of class society, utopia, not workerism.

"The English insurgents announce the end of the Leviathanic world, not its completion. The condition the insurgents want is not universal villeinage but universal freedom; it is the condition of communities of free human beings in the state of nature, unencumbered by Leviathanic separations and usurpations. The rebels say common people can cast off their yoke if they will; they can all gather the wheat and burn the tares. The wheat is Eden. The tares are priests and lords, lawyers and judges, masters and merchants."²⁷

If John Ball has passed any lesson for us down through the annals of history, this one — and none less — is still worth hearing. Not of moderation, of putting limited demands for financial improvement, but of the revolutionary desire for authenticity and true human community that underlay them, of the courage to fight for ourselves and our visions.

²⁵ Fredy Perlman, 'Against History, Against Leviathan!' Black and Red, Detroit, 1983, p 212.

²⁶ Dobson, op cit, p 375.

²⁷ Perlman, op cit, p 213.

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