

A shadow of glorious (though strange) good things to come¹

The Ranters and libertarian communism in the English civil war

Anarchist Federation

Summer 2010

¹ *The title is a quotation from Abiezer Coppe's Fiery Flying Rolle, cited on p. 334 of C. Hill's The World Turned Upside Down (Harmondsworth, 1975)*

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The English Civil War (1641–1651) was a time unprecedented in English history. Although it ended with the victory of the bourgeoisie under Oliver Cromwell and the first moves towards the establishment of capitalist society, Parliament needed to mobilise lower-class support in order to defeat the Royal forces, and the challenge to authority and existing social order that this involved granted radicals a space to argue for their own ideas. For a brief period, anything seemed possible, and, for perhaps the first time in English history, it was possible for movements to arise based around ideals that anarchists and communists today can recognise as being not so far from our own.

1649 was a high point for revolutionary unrest during this period: King Charles I was executed in January, and April and May saw mutinies by troops over both Leveller political demands and pay issues. At around the same time, a group of soldiers burst into a parish church in Walton-on-Thames in Surrey and declared that the Sabbath, tithes, ministers, magistrates and the Bible were all abolished. This act, which took place near to where the Diggers were setting up their first commune on St. George's Hill, shows how radical the questioning and rejection of established religion had become.

While the Levellers and the Diggers are both relatively well-known groups, the Ranters have attracted less attention, but they were perhaps the most radical of all the sects and groups existing in this period, and many of their ideas might still have some appeal for contemporary anarchists. Fans of Class War's style might find their approach to swearing attractive: the prominent Ranter Abiezer Coppe is said to have taken the pulpit in a church and sworn continuously for an hour. He himself declared that he'd rather hear "a mighty angel (in man) swearing" than hear an orthodox minister preach or pray, and one account says that "'twas usual with him to preach stark-naked many blasphemies and unheard of villainies". According to another pamphlet, they claimed that "God is so far from being offended at the... sins of drunkenness, swearing, blasphemy, adultery, etc, that he is well pleased... and that... it is the only way of serving him."

'The merriest of all devils'

The sexual radicalism of the Ranters certainly made an impressive contrast with the repressive society that created them. They saw Original Sin as being lifted, meaning that none of the repressive commandments laid down by the Church through the ages still applied. John Holland's anti-Ranter pamphlet *The Smoke of the Bottomless Pit* claims that "they say for one man to be tied to one woman, or one woman to be tied to one man, is a fruit of the curse; but they say, we are freed from the curse; therefore, it is our liberty to make use of whom we please." Another called them "the merriest of all devils, for... lascivious songs... downright bawdry and dancing", and claimed that the last two were commonly accompanied by orgies. Of course, it is important not to take this too uncritically: unless accompanied by a commitment to women's liberation, sexual liberation has frequently just been a way to extend male power. But the Ranters' relaxed and positive attitude to sexual pleasure still seems vastly preferable to the fear of our own bodies many Christians still promote today.

This attitude to sexuality and swearing was part of a larger challenge to the entire concept of sin and moral order. This wasn't just an abstract theological debate: the idea of sin was a vital tool for persuading the lower classes not to challenge social hierarchies and accept their role in life. An example of the political implications of sin can be seen in the writings of the Puritan theologian Richard Baxter, who supported a limited, constitutional monarchy because

he believed that “every man is by nature a rebel against heaven, so that ordinarily to plead for democracy is to plead that the sovereignty may be put into the hands of rebels.”

Mainstream Protestant theologians explained away all kinds of injustices by reference to God’s curse on humanity after the Fall, as when the Leveller William Walwyn was told that “a natural and complete freedom... was fit for man only before he had sinned, and not since”. In this context, the Ranters’ views had revolutionary implications. Coppe stated simply that “sin and transgression is finished... be no longer so horridly, hellishly, impudently, arrogantly wicked as to judge what is sin.” Other stories tell of Ranters looking for their sins with a candle, and concluding that none exist because none can be found, an indication of the way they were beginning to move away from faith in churches and preachers and more towards relying on their own powers of reason (some versions of this story end with female Ranters offering to inspect the contents of their male comrades’ cod-pieces, to see if they can find any sin in there.)

‘Howl, ye rich men’

The Ranters’ views didn’t stop at individual libertarianism: they were also firmly opposed to private property and class society. They emerged from an atmosphere of tense class conflict: one man in Northamptonshire in 1643 asked “what do you tell me of birth and descent? I hope within this year to see never a gentleman in England”, and Charles I himself had warned of the danger that “at last the common people” may “destroy all rights and properties, all distinctions of families.” Abiezer Coppe called the abolition of property “a most glorious design” and called for it to be replaced with “equality, community and universal love.” One description of their views states that “they taught that it was quite contrary to [nature] to appropriate anything to any man or woman; but that there ought to be a community of all things.”

This communism was accompanied by a vicious hatred of the rich: Coppe warned them that “your gold and silver, though you can’t see it, is cankered... and suddenly, suddenly, suddenly... shall eat your flesh as [if] it were fire... have all things common, or else the plague of God will rot and consume all you have” and declared “howl, howl, ye nobles... howl ye rich men for the miseries that are coming upon you. For our parts, we that hear the Apostle preach will also have all things in common; neither will we call anything that we have our own.” Many believed that all social inequality was about to end, as can be seen from the title-page of Laurence Clarkson’s *A Single Eye*, which declared that it was printed “in the year that the powers of heaven and earth... shall be shaken, yea damned, till they be no more.” These ideas seriously scared the ruling class: the clergyman Nathaniel Homes worried that the common people “much incline” to “a popular parity, a levelling anarchy”. (Homes was not the only writer of the period to describe radicals as demanding anarchy, as the Quaker Robert Barclay also published an attack on *The Anarchy of the Ranters and other Libertines*.)

‘The greatest curse that ever came into the world’

Along with the class conflict that formed the Ranters’ views, there was an especially strong opposition to the church hierarchy. As far back as 1589, Bishop Cooper had warned of “the loathsome contempt, hatred and disdain that the most part of men in these days bear... towards the ministers of the church of God.” Archbishop Sandys added that “the ministers of the world are

become contemptible in the eyes of the basest sort of people.” In 1634, a Joan Hoby from Buckinghamshire declared that “she did not care a pin nor a fart for my Lord’s Grace of Canterbury... and she did hope that she should live to see him hanged.”

Unsurprisingly, the Ranters also turned this hostility to the church up as far as it would go. Coppe denounced “the Ministers, fat parsons, Vicars, Lecturers, etc. who... have been the chief instruments of all those horrid abominations, hellish, cruel, devilish, persecutions, in this nation which cry for vengeance.” He urged the pious to give up their formal religion and declared that “the time is coming, that zealous, holy, devout, righteous religious men shall... die for their holiness and religion.”

This view was shared by numerous other preachers, such as Thomas Tany, who thought that all religion was “a lie, a cheat, a deceit, for there is but one truth, and that is love”, and publicly burnt the Bible “because people say that it is the Word of God, and it is not.” Holland said that “they call [the Bible] a bundle of contradictions... Another said it was the greatest curse that ever came into the world, for, said he, the Scripture hath been the cause of all our misery... and there would never be any peace in the world, till all the Bibles in the world were burned.”

The Ranters’ hostility to established religion combined aspects of anti-rational mysticism with the beginnings of what we can recognise as a rational, materialist worldview. Clarkson, a repentant ex-Ranter looking back on his past, wrote that “I conceived, as I knew not what I was before I came in my being, so for ever after I should know nothing after this my being was dissolved”, rejecting the entire idea of an afterlife (while still believing in some kind of God).

Holland explains that “they say there is no other God but what is in them... and that men ought to pray and seek to no other God but what is in them. The titles they give God are these: They call him The Being, the Fullness, the Great Motion, Reason, the Immensity.” When a religious group reaches the point of not recognising any God other than their own powers of reasoning, the practical conclusions of their doctrines come close to complete atheism. One young shoemaker in St. Martins used to laugh at any mention of God, and say that he believed “money, good clothes, good meat and drink, tobacco and merry company to be Gods.” Similarly, many denied that there was any Heaven other than earthly happiness, or any Hell other than feeling sad.

‘Such men and congregations should be suppressed... that we may have truth and peace and government again’

As you may have noticed, we haven’t been living in a stateless, classless, secular utopia for the last three and a half centuries. So what went wrong? First of all, the Ranters immediately (and unsurprisingly) attracted harsh repression. In August 1650 Parliament passed an Act for the Punishment of Atheistical, Blasphemous and Excerable Opinions, which made it illegal to say that “there is no such thing... as unrighteousness, unholiness or sin... or that there is neither Heaven nor Hell”, among a number of other heresies. This law was accompanied by harsh action: a W. Smith was hanged at York “for denying the Deity”, Jacob Bauthumley was burnt through the tongue as punishment for writing a Ranter tract called *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, and in 1656 Alexander Agnew, also known as Jock of Broad Scotland, was hung for denying the divinity of Christ, the effectiveness of prayer, and the existence of the Holy Ghost, souls, heaven, hell and sin.

The same year, the radical Quaker James Nayler rode a donkey into Bristol in imitation of Jesus and was condemned to be whipped through the streets of Bristol, then had the letter B branded on his forehead, his tongue pierced with a hot iron, and was given two years of hard labour. Faced with this kind of repression, it's not surprising that radical movements like the Ranters collapsed, especially since a worldview that celebrated pleasure and denied the existence of an afterlife offered little reward for martyrdom.

However, the collapse of the Ranters was not entirely due to state repression. A wide variety of other factors worked against them, such as the fact that they only rose to prominence after the failure of the less radical Leveller movement. While this defeat meant that many ex-Levellers became Ranters, it also meant that they faced a powerful, united state which had successfully put down the dissident elements in its army. They also had to compete with a wide variety of other sects, especially the Quakers: the Quaker Leader George Fox boasted about how a judge had admitted that if it wasn't for Quakerism "the nation [would have] been overspread with Ranterism and all the Justices in the nation could not stop it with their laws" (although this statement almost certainly shouldn't be taken at face value, since Fox would have had a definite interest in exaggerating his sect's importance, and the ruling class often get hysterical about any threat to their power).

In addition, the Christian elements that remained in Ranterism led many of them to a disastrous pacifism: Coppe famously stated that he was for levelling, but not in favour of "sword levelling, or digging levelling." Despite all the advances that they'd made towards an atheistic, materialist worldview, they still ultimately believed that they could wait for God to come along and destroy property and class society, rather than having to do it themselves. It's also possible that the Ranters were just ahead of their time: the anarchist and communist movements have been products of industrial capitalism and the working class it creates, and the Ranters existed in a period before capitalism had finished creating a class of dispossessed urban wage-labourers. Their tendencies towards rationalism would probably have been much more pronounced and appealing if the scientific knowledge needed to underpin a materialist understanding of the world had existed, and their championing of sexual liberty could have had disastrous consequences (especially for women) in a time before effective contraception was widely available.

So what can we take from the Ranters today? It's certainly true that they failed to turn the world upside down, but then who has? All the insurrections of the past have ultimately ended in failure, but they've also shown us a brief glimpse of what another world might look like. Perhaps the last words should go to the Quaker Edward Burrough, who told the restoration government that they could "destroy these vessels, yet our principles you can never extinguish, but they will live for ever, and enter into other bodies to live and speak and act." More than 350 years after the Ranters and their fellow radicals were crushed, their principles of liberty and community are still entering into new bodies, and our resistance still threatens to shake the powers of heaven and earth.

GLOSSARY

Anabaptists: Named after their practice of baptising adults instead of babies. The implications of this were more radical than might be immediately obvious, since while both Catholics and mainstream Protestants saw the Christian faith as a community that everyone had to be involved

in from birth, the Anabaptists believed that faith was something each believer had to come to individually, and so it couldn't be imposed from above. The German Anabaptists led by Thomas Müntzer launched a war against all existing authorities and attempted to establish a social order based on total equality and communal ownership of all property, but were harshly suppressed.

Antinomianism: Literally meaning "against law". Not a specific group, but a term used to cover all those who rejected external law in favour of their own personal moral code. Antinomian ideas spread widely during the period discussed in this article, and posed a radical challenge to social hierarchy and Christian moral order.

Diggers: Also known as True Levellers. Radical group led by Gerald Winstanley. Called for the abolition of private property and communal cultivation of land. They set up a series of communes, most famously on St. George's Hill in Surrey, but were driven away by landowners. Saw the monarch, clergy, lawyers, and buying and selling as all being linked: "If one truly fall, all must fall".

Levellers: Political movement aiming for equality and democracy. Less radical than the Diggers and Ranters, but still challenged the existing social order by calling for freedom of religion, equality for all under the law, and something close to universal male suffrage. Had a considerable base of support in the New Model Army, and troops supporting the Levellers challenged Cromwell's authority and launched several mutinies.

Ranters: Perhaps the most radical of all the groups existing in this period. As well as supporting communal ownership instead of private property, also denied moral law, the existence of sin, Heaven and Hell, and saw God as existing in all things, which often led to denying that an external God existed in any traditional sense. Almost unique in their championing of total sexual liberty during this period.

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Taken from issue 74 of *Organise!*, the Anarchist Federation's magazine.

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