

Civil War -II

The ending of the war did not put an end to divisions within Parliament, for several groups continued in existence, albeit under different names. The peace party, became known as the '**Presbyterians**', wanted a settlement with the king. They believed in the National Church and their political views were conservative. There was a second party known as the **Presbyterian Independents** led by John Pym. Finally there were the adherents of the former war party now known as the 'Independents', since they drew their main strength from the religious **Independents** in the two Houses and their sympathisers among the army officers. The Independents initially drew support from the army. However during 1647, **the Army** began to emerge as a political force in its own right, promoting a programme of constitutional reforms inspired by the Levellers. The new model army as it was to declare proudly in June 1647 where no mercenary army it was the **common people in uniform** closer to their views than to those of the gentry or the parliament.

There had never been anything like a new model army before. Not all were volunteers but there were cavalry officers and represented as many claimed a cross section of the English population. Thanks to the **freedom of organisation and discussion**, the army became the hothouse of political ideas. In the enforced leisure after the war was won, the thinking of the rank and file developed apace. The chaplains in the New army preached to the civilian congregation as well as to the soldiers. As time progressed an increasing number of civilian soldiers took upon themselves preaching functions. We look at the ideas of several such independent groups; the Levellers, the True Levellers, the Ranters, the Seekers, the fifth monarchists so on who talked about a changing society in this period.

Parliament and Presbyterians were worried by the state of affairs in the army and were furious with the chaplains who seemed to be inflaming the lower classes. In the spring of 1647 the parliament tried to **disband part of the Army without paying arrears of wages and send the rest of to conquer Ireland**. It had not even passed a **legal indemnity** for their acts during the war. Faced with this provocation the rank and file took matters into their hands at the end of march 1647. On 5 June 1647, the **Army Council** was set up and committed themselves not to disband nor divide without a satisfaction and security that their demands had been met. The Army began to advance on London. It had entered into a course of decisive political action, and though led by Cromwell, Fairfax , **the initiative for this action had come from rank and file in close association with the London Levellers**, a group of radical thinkers with their beliefs in democracy.

The **Levellers** of the civil war and interregnum were political radical initially associated with John Lilburn, Richard Overton and William Walwyn. They had no special name for themselves; the term Leveller was coined by their enemies to imply that they favoured the abolition of property rights and equalization of wealth which they always denied.

The Levellers in London aspired to put themselves at the head of 'meaner sort of men.' Leveller William Walwyn wrote, 'The great things that have been done for the Parliament have been done by the 'meaner sort of men,' In the spring of 1647 they established close ties with the Agitators.

At this stage some of them believed that if they were to be politically effective they must **capture control of the Army**. Overtone for instance said in July 1647, the Army, 'is the only formal and visible head that is left unto the people for protection and deliverance.'

The Levellers thought that the state had broken down in the course of the civil war; until it was legitimately refounded, a state of nature existed in which the sword was the only remaining authority. But military force could justly be used only to hand power back to the people. This was the purpose of the **Agreement of the People**, the Leveller's new social contract refounding the state which was submitted to the Army Council in October 1647.

The **Agreement of the People** was the **principal constitutional manifesto** associated with the Levellers. It was intended to be **written constitution** that would define the form and powers of government and would also set **limits** on those powers by **reserving a set of inalienable rights to the people**. It would take the form of a **contract** between the electorate and the representative, to be renewed at each election. The Agreement developed several versions between October 1647 and May 1649. They became the chief issues in the **Putney debates** of 1647. The Putney debates were a series of **discussions between factions** of the New Model Army and the Levellers concerning a new Constitution for England, The debates were held at the Church of St. Mary the virgin, Putney Surrey in October-November 1647.

- The Agreement of the People demanded a radically decentralized state.
- Their key aim was, rather, to define and limit the power of the House of Commons and secure certain individual rights against arbitrary government.
- This overall aim was designed to prevent the corruption of state power by 'great men.' The **first Agreement** had prescribed limiting parliamentary terms to two years, although the second omitted any reference to the length of terms. In the petition of January 1648 this provision was extended to **local magistrates** and was reduced to only one year, with judges' terms limited to a maximum of three years.
- Another important feature of the Levellers' constitutional proposal was their **insistence on the right of the Representatives to remove executive office-holders who had betrayed the constitution**.
- The Agreement proposed among other things freedom of worship, equality for all men under the law, the right to vote for all men aged 21 and over, except servants beggars, Royalists and they asked for abolition of death penalty for murder.

The Levellers were never a united disciplined party or movement.

It has been suggested that Lilburn and John Wildman led a moderate constitutional wing of the Levellers and the more radical wing in the army and among the London Populace was sympathised by Walwyn and Overtone. The latter wing was less concerned with constitutional issues. More with economics with defending the rights of the poor against the rich, the common people against the great men-which

Thomas Rainborough and Edward Sexby made **demands for man hood suffrage** which seem to conflict with the more moderate proposals of the civilian Levellers, Wildman who had excluded paupers and servants from the vote. **The radical wing of the Levellers flourished not only in London and the Army but also in the county districts where**

traditions of popular revolts still survived. In 1648 before Winstanley announced his communism a local group of levellers produced a pamphlet called *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* which called for the **equality of property**. All men being alike privileged by birth so all men were to enjoy the creatures alike without property one more than the other. The sequel to this pamphlet, *More Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, appeared on 30 March, two days before the digging on St George's Hill.

On Sunday 1 April 1649, a group of poor men collected on St. Georges Hill and began to dig waste land there. **It was a symbolic assumption of ownership of the common lands.** The Diggers as they came to be known called themselves True Levellers. They were keen on a **fundamental restructuring of land ownership**. The overthrow of the monarchy and the declaration of a free Common Wealth in 1649 **was seen as a first step towards the abolition of private property rights in favour of the communal ownership of lands.**

Among its outstanding leaders were Gerrard Winstanley. GW came to London in 1630 and set himself up for himself in 1637. By 1643 he had been beaten out of estate and trade. He herded cows and wrote religious pamphlets until he had a vision to publish them.

Winstanley's first Digger manifesto was entitled the *True Levellers Standard Advanced.*' The True Leveller thought and action went a good deal further than the constitutionalist leaders and raised the property issues in ways that the latter found embarrassing.

While the Leveller petition of 11 September 1648 **repudiated any idea of abolishing property**, levelling estates or making all common, though it declared in favour of enclosing lands chiefly for the poor. **Winstanley spoke** for those of whom the constitutional Levellers would have disenfranchised-**servants, labourers, the paupers, the economically unfree.** Winstanley described himself as the servant though many of the Diggers were householders, born in the parish.

Hill (If we see the New Model Army as the short lived school of political democracy, commons waste and forests were longer lasting though less intensive schools in economic democracy.)

Winstanley wrote, 'The earth should be made a common treasury of livelihood to whole mankind, without respect of persons.' This programme which Winstanley conceived in 1648-9, seemed to him so novel that he attributed it to a divine command. The vision he had in trance told him to declare the message 'Work together; eat together.'" He that works for another ...making the earth a common treasury, doth join hands with Christ to lift up the creation from bondage and restores all things from the curse.' For Winstanley, Jesus Christ was the Head Leveller.

After declaring this message Winstanley decided he must 'go forth and declare it in actions' by organising 'us that are called common people **to manure and work upon the common lands.**' Winstanley's conclusion, that **communal cultivation of the commons** was the crucial question, the **starting point** from which common people all over England could build up as **equal community.**' The **Digger poet, Robert Coster**, wrote that an increase in cultivated area would bring down the price of land and therewith the cost of living.

The idea of the Diggers were a the culmination of a century of unauthorised encroachment upon forests and wastes by squatters and local commoners pushed on by land shortage and pressures of population.

In the years 1649-50 Winstanley issued a series of pamphlets appealing to various sections of the population and some bore fruits. **Other Digger colonies** appeared at Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, Cox Hill in Kent, Iwer in Buckinghamshire, Barnet in Herford shire..

After the collapse of the Digger colony at Cobham, Winstanley published The Law of Freedom in a Platform, a draft constitution for a communist commonwealth. 'All men have stood for freedom, and now that the common enemy is gone you are like men in a mist seeking for freedom and know not where it is.' The Law of Freedom seems to have been intended as a possibilist document dedicated to Oliver Cromwell in the hope that he would implement it.

This was also the period when allegorical writings came up which were harmless enough in times of social peace, though the ecclesiastical authorities were never happy about it. But it became dangerous in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1640s when some of the lower classes began to take it literally. If God be father, and we are the brethren, it is a levelling word, declared Sibbes.

It was a movement among lower-class people numbering several thousand- widely distributed in London and rural England. In describing this phenomenon as a movement, however, one must be cautious since this was not a movement towards a goal: it was a movement of repulsion away from English society as represented by the Puritans. It implied a **rejection of the Puritan Establishment-its ethics, its values, and its goals.** The literate in London were **startled** by some of the pamphlets that were on sale. They were decorated with crude pictures of naked people indulging in erotic dances or else putting their babies to sword. There is no doubt that the contents were astonishing. They concerned a people who had been given the name of **Ranters** of whom remarkable rumours were in circulation and against whom no less than three acts of Parliament were passed.

Ranters were said to regard themselves as God, and to be free of all ordinary restraints of a decent human society. Smoking and drunkenness were common to them and they were reputed to practice adultery freely and in public,- and all this in Puritan England. There was a **Ranter doctrine that a man could not be free from sin until he had committed it in the belief that it was not sinful, and that, in order to be perfect, it was necessary to have committed every sin!**

Ranter leaders were not men of intellect or of any great education, and they were moved more **by feeling** than by logic. The only religious tradition that they had known was Christianity, hence their language constantly employs Christian terminology though what they want to say is far removed from that established Christian tradition. **Further it is not at all clear that all Ranters believed the same things in the same way.** Ranters reached their greatest notoriety between 1645 and 1655.

Seeker, member of any of numerous small groups of separatist Puritans in 16th-century England who sought new prophets to reveal God's true church. Ultra separatists Roger Williams, having undergone rebaptism, quickly embraced the opinion that there was no true church on earth and thus withdrew from ordinances. Returning to London in 1643, he

became the leader for those similarly inclined; William appears to have invented or at least popularised the new nomenclature for this posture, adopting a badge Seekers of Christ. This was not a sect -the seeker pose was at one level antithetical to the whole notion of a church or sect, standing as a negation of all church forms. William Erbery was described as the champion of the seekers. As an army chaplain he led other ranks in criticism of the Presbyterian ministers tithes and persecution. He preached universal redemption, denied the divinity of Christ and as well as declaring that any layman may preach.

Millenarian beliefs became increasingly prevalent throughout the civil wars of the 1640s. While many believed that the second coming would be a spiritual revelation, the Fifth monarchists expected a physical return in which Jesus would reign as a king. It would be preceded by the establishment of a godly government on earth (the rule of the saints). For the saints to prevail the old order should be overthrown, by violence if necessary. Fifth Monarchists regarded the civil wars and the beheading of King Charles I in 1649 as a vital prelude to the Millennium.

The beginning of the Fifth Monarchist movement is usually dated to December 1651 when the radical preachers Christopher Feake, John Simpson and Henry Jessey held a meeting at the church of Allhallows the Great off Thames Street in London. Disillusioned by the failure of the Rump Parliament to further the godly revolution, and with some radicals already questioning Oliver Cromwell's commitment to the cause, they prayed for a new representative and agreed to a series of measures to promote their objectives. Their claim that the current government should be brought down because it was impeding the establishment of Christ's kingdom provoked immediate hostility from MPs, army Grandees and leading Independents. However, the Fifth Monarchists continued to hold weekly meetings at Allhallows and at other churches and meeting houses, notably at London House, Greyfriars, and St Anne's church, Blackfriars.

The movement was centred on London and spread through southern England during the early 1650s, with a few congregations appearing in East Anglia, Devon and Cornwall. There were also centres of Fifth Monarchism in north Wales resulting from the ministries of the millenarian preachers Vavasor Powell and Morgan Llwyd. In general, the movement did not spread to northern England during the 1650s, with the exception of isolated congregations at Hull, Sheffield, Liverpool and Manchester.

The sect drew its support mainly from urban tradesmen and craftsmen, with a high proportion of cloth worker, whose trade was adversely affected by the civil wars. Journeymen and apprentice were often found among the most volatile congregation. Several fifth monarchist ministers had served as officers or army chaplains and many soldiers of the new model army were attracted to the movement, with major Harrison as their leader. The abrupt dissolution of the Nominated assembly and the establishment of Cromwell's protectorate in December 1653 was seen as a betrayal by the fifth monarchist. Most of the leaders were imprisoned or dismissed. But the sect continued to agitate against the Protectorate with pamphlets and petitions throughout the 1650s.

These were thus some of the more radical offshoots of Puritanism and the Interregnum as Hill shows in *The World Turned Upside Down*. People who were inclined to push Protestant Individualism to extremes that rejected order, discipline and even private property and sin. But if we take the whole of Hill's work together it is clear that he regards Puritanism as being at the heart of the matter. Puritans, he suggests, were people with a vision which could not be

accommodated within the political assumptions of Stuart kingship and Laudian episcopacy. The Puritan moral crusade, blocked by the crown, combined with other grievances gave Parliament man-power to win the civil war and subsequently, to the distress of most of Parliament's original leaders, released forces that temporarily turned a large part of their world upside down.

In *The World Turned Upside Down* he recognises (implicitly but not explicitly) that both the radicals who made the revolution and those who wished to carry it further were a small minority of the total population, as indeed revolutionaries usually are.

According to David Underwood, If we read Hill critically- as we should- we may regret his inability to enter into the minds of the conservative majority of the population of Stuart England. If we read him with an open mind- we must be grateful for his insights into the mentalities of human beings who changed or tried to change their worlds.

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