Communism, George hill and the mir: was Marx a nineteenth-century Winstanleyan?
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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Despite the recent academic vogue of a "three kingdoms" theory of the English Civil War and culturalist theories of early modern nation formation, it is harder to find comparatist analyses of English radicalism now than it was twenty or fifty or a hundred years ago. G.P. Gooch begins his English Democratic Ideas of the Seventeenth Century (1898) with a chapter on the continental Reformation.\(^1\) So does Lewis H. Berens, in The Digger Movement in the Days of the Commonwealth (1906), which also includes "The Twelve Articles of the German Peasantry" of 1525 as an appendix.\(^2\) And in Winstanley: Socialisme et Christianisme sous Cromwell (1976), as in so much of his work, Olivier Lutaud emphasizes the international dimensions of the English Revolution – in itself, and in its reception.\(^3\) He concludes with some of the ways in which Winstanley has been remembered and forgotten, tracing the rebirth of modern interest in Winstanley to Russia, where the liberal historian M.M. Kovalevskii discussed Winstanley in his Precursors of English Radicalism (1892) even before Gooch’s discussion or Eduard Bernstein’s.\(^4\)

Why this precocious Russian interest? The liberal Kovalevskii, like his radical Narodnik countrywomen and men, had been roused by the precarious revolutionary potentials set free when the serfs gained nominal emancipation in 1861. This was the epoch, says Lutaud,

> when young enthusiasts, despite brutal repression, began ‘to go to the people’; when one becomes conscious of a strange similarity between the problems of old England and of Alexander II’s Russia: the problem of government and the struggle against absolutism, the problem of religion and the critique of clerical orthodoxy, and above all the problem of society and the real emancipation of a peasantry eager for land. The commune of Surrey encounters the mir.\(^5\)

As a proper noun, mir does indeed name the accident-prone Russian space station. But as an improper noun, it means earth, universe, peace and the Russian peasant commune, an institution that survived into the twentieth century. Where mere traces of communal agriculture survived in Britain and Western Europe, these Russian communes held three-fifths of the arable land
in European Russia in the 1870s. Though under a sustained capitalist assault comparable to that experienced by smallholding peasants in early modern England, they continued to manage land, government and social welfare services collectively, and their members held most of their lands and worked some of them in common.

These multiple meanings put me in mind of Gerrard Winstanley, the great communist prose poet of English improper nouns. In *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1648), Winstanley seems to be thinking of the *mir* when he says, “by earth, I understand mankind; all sects and nations, as they are considered one flesh, or one earth; of which all of us are made even one created humanity”. In *A New-Yeers Gift to the Arminie*, he speaks of “two Earths, in which the Spirit of Love declares himself. ... the Living Earth, called *Mankinde*”, and “the great Body of Earth in which all creatures subsist”. When Winstanley and the Diggers desanctified St George’s Hill as George Hill, they also resanctified it by unhorsing George, changing him from a knight to a farmer working the earth – a *georgos* tilling *gea*. That one word *mir*, in fact, contains my thesis in this paper: in the commune of European Russia or Winstanley’s Surrey, the people freely intermix with the earth and each other; in communist utopia, the immediate producers will associate freely and peacefully because they jointly control the means of production.

By moving between Surrey in the 1640s, Russia in the 1870s and (implicitly) the present and future, I may already have set off some warning bells. Anglophone literary critics are paying more attention to Winstanley as one of the great English visionary writers, but historical materialists who also want to understand him as a theorist of communism have a tougher row to hoe. Richard Schlatter says that Winstanley was “not a proto-Marxist or a creator of humanistic utopias” but a “religious mystic”. Paul Elmen dismisses marxist readings of Winstanley, then observes that “far from being a secular program, Winstanley’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth was not unlike John’s on Patmos” – an observation presumably meant to etherealize Winstanley, not remind us of John’s curses at the merchants of Babylon. David Mulder finds even Elmen too much of a modernizer, and accuses him of foisting onto Winstanley an anachronistic Salvation Army ethic.” John R. Knott, Jr. argues that, while digging “may look like striking progressive social theory, anticipating some of the central concerns of marxism”, it “can better be understood as a profound nostalgia for an idealized life of perfect simplicity and ‘plain-heartedness’”. In “The Economic and Social Thought of Gerrard Winstanley: Was He a Seventeenth-Century Marxist?” Winthrop Hudson answers, predictably, “no”, then adds, dumbfoundingingly, that the Diggers “did not conceive of their venture as a means of effecting social change or as a way of gaining desired ends”.

Was Marx a Nineteenth-Century Winstanleyan?

The examples could be multiplied. Such caveats are always offered up as a fresh and cheeky response to the dogmas of some cloth-eared communist orthodoxy, even though they are always pretty much the same, and even though it is hard to find anyone who has uttered the much-refuted phrase. So in order to breathe some fitful life into this battered red straw man, I shall say the words:

Winstanley was almost a seventeenth-century marxist. After throwing off the religious mystifications of his earlier writings, he began to develop a crude but workable materialist theory of English society. If only he had lived long enough to work out the dialectic of production that governs all historical development - or even to read Marx! But in the meantime, we can strip off the religious husk of his prophecies and get to their materialist kernel.

Now that is a stupid thing to say - not completely stupid, but stupid enough, and I do not intend to spend any time at all celebrating how close Winstanley came to being a marxist, or lamenting his failure to make it all the way.

But what is a marxist? Anti-communists who try to enclose Winstanley in a distant past are a little too quick to assume the simplicity of the answer to that question, as if the marxist tradition were a non-contradictory whole unified by choral reverence towards its founding prophet. But Marx himself once sounded a dissonant note when he told his Franco-Cuban son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, "One thing for sure - I'm no marxist". So if Winstanley was not a marxist, and Marx was not a marxist, maybe they were similar sorts of non-marxist?

That is what I want to suggest. Because I am not only a marxist interpreting Winstanley, but a winstanleyan interpreting Marx, I sometimes find myself itching to say this:

Marx was almost a nineteenth-century winstanleyan. After throwing off the Smithian mode-of-production narrative that governed his earlier theory of history, he began to develop a rough but fascinating theory of a transition from the peasant commune to democratic communism that would skip the stage of proletarian destitution. If only he had lived long enough to synthesize his studies of the mir - or even to read Winstanley!

That, too, is not completely stupid, but it is not quite right, either. What I really want to say is something more like this: Marx and Winstanley were not marxists, or even winstanleyans, but communists - a term eminently worth cancelling and preserving. They grounded their vision of society in the concept of the mode of production, their vision of history in class
struggle, and their vision of utopia in the vernacular traditions of peasant communism criticized and transformed by a programme of communist improvement. I shall talk first about Marx as a nineteenth-century winstanleyan (emphasizing his “regressive” interest in peasant communism), then about Winstanley as a seventeenth-century marxist (emphasizing his “progressive” interest in communist improvement), then about the problems of anachronism that these awkward expressions conjure up. This will lead me into a few concluding words about the surprising but rather strong affinities among, on the one hand, stagist dialectical materialism, capitalist modernization theory, and the anticommunist history of ideas that tries to enclose Winstanley in a distant past; and on the other, Winstanley’s agrarian communism, Marx’s vernacular communism, and the liberation theology that struggles to break down these historicist enclosures.

So, to begin with, was Marx a nineteenth-century winstanleyan? That is to say, did he ever suggest that pre-capitalist social forms (such as smallholding and the peasant commune) might become something other than fetters on progress and human liberation? Could they become the basis for an advanced communism, allowing pre-capitalist peoples to skip the phase of proletarian expropriation and misery? John Gray voices the anticommunist received wisdom: “In fact, along with many other nineteenth-century thinkers, Marx despised the social and technological immobility of peasant societies. He viewed the abolition of peasant farming as an indispensable prerequisite of economic progress and regarded the capitalist factory as the model on which farming should in the future be based”. And indeed, in much of Marx’s work, and even more of Engels’, we find the stagist modernization narrative that they inherited from Adam Smith. This narrative describes a fixed sequence of productive modes, stretching from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism to capitalism to advanced communism, and driven forward by the self-developing forces of production, or by homo economicus’ natural-born inclination to truck and barter. In this narrative, capitalism creates itself by reaching into its own past and using some “proto-capitalist” agent (markets, merchants, cities, technology) to break the pre-capitalist “fetters” keeping it from being born. The most one can do is accelerate or retard this inevitable sequence, so class struggle must be relentlessly forward, and any attempt to hold onto pre-capitalist social forms (like a common, or peasant smallholdings) would retard the predestined process of global proletarianization that must precede the communist utopia.

This philosophy of history frequently entails a certain contempt for the country and the witless yokels inhabiting it – as if the country were somehow “past”, the city “present”. In The Conditions of the Working-Class in England (1845), Engels describes pre-industrial peasants and artisans much as Hegel described dispirited Egypt and Asia:
They were comfortable in their silent vegetation, and but for the industrial revolution they would never have emerged from this existence, which, cosily romantic as it was, was nevertheless not worthy of human beings. In truth, they were not human beings; they were merely toiling machines in the service of the few aristocrats who had guided history down to that time.¹⁸

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels condemn capitalism for creating the suffering of the proletarian city, but they also emphasize its modernizing and progressive quality, which made “barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West” and “rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life”.¹⁹ “Idiocy” may retain the relatively neutral Greek sense of “private, personal, separate”, but that does not eliminate the condescension. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), Marx depicts smallholding French peasants as a “sack of potatoes” without class-consciousness, and he blames the survival of Louis Napoleon’s regime on their sullen reluctance to part with their smallholdings.²⁰ Even as late as the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Marx quotes without revision a passage from *The Communist Manifesto* which depicts the holders of small property (“the lower middle-classes, the small manufacturers, the shopkeepers, the artisan, the peasant”) as reactionary fetters who “try to roll back the wheel of history”, which will inevitably break free and crush them, however tragically.²¹

Raymond Williams traced this kind of city-centred modernization narrative to what he mordantly called an “urban idiocy – the idea that food grows in shops”.²² But it has been subject to a powerful critique by contemporary “political marxists” like Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood.²³ And in his later writings, Marx himself abandoned it for a theory of historical transition emphasizing the relations of production rather than the autonomously developing forces, historically particular class struggles rather than the universal and inevitable unfolding of a developmental sequence. In *The Grundrisse* (1857–58), Marx mocks this Smithian modernization theory and, implicitly, his younger self: “Production, as distinct from distribution, etc., is to be presented as governed by eternal natural laws independent of history, and then bourgeois relations are quietly substituted as irrefutable natural laws of society in abstracto. This is the more or less conscious purpose of the whole procedure”.²⁴ Marx’s new theory of history brought along with it a new respect for, even fascination with, peasant smallholders who retain the means of production. *The Grundrisse* contains a striking, lyrical meditation on small production that synthesizes English social history and German dialectics in a fashion recalling and developing the communist phenomenology of the 1844 Manuscripts. Marx argues that man is originally socialized as a “species
being, a tribal being, a herd animal — though by no means as a zoön politikon in the political sense". Before capitalism, both primitive communists and individual smallholders were collective individuals:

individuals related not as workers but as proprietors ... The individual is placed in such conditions of gaining his life as to make not the acquiring of wealth his object, but self-sustenance, his own reproduction as a member of the community; the reproduction of himself as proprietor of the parcel of ground and, in that quality, as a member of the commune.25

The same utopian relationship inheres in the more individualized peasant, yeoman or “free working petty landowner or tenant”, and in the guildsman, whose “labour itself is still half the expression of artistic creation, half an end-in-itself”, and whose very mastery implies ownership of the means of production.26 Through the laws and customs of the guild, even the subordinate apprentice or journeyman enjoys a certain “co-possession” of the means of production.27 In such pre-capitalist modes of production, the laborer does not appear for Marx “merely as a working individual in this abstraction”, but has

an objective mode of existence in his ownership of the land, an existence which is presupposed to his activity and not a mere result of it, and which is as much a precondition of his activity as his skin, his sense organs, which, though he also reproduces and develops these in his life process, are nevertheless presupposed to this reproduction process — this relation is instantly mediated by the naturally evolved and more or less historically developed and modified being of the individual as a member of a community — his naturally evolved being as part of a tribe, etc.

When capitalist primitive accumulation dissolves these communal relationships, this Marx of the Grundrisse emphasizes not the natural or economistic inevitability of the change, but its political violence, which produces a truly isolated “idiot” in the form, not of the peasant, but of the capitalist wage labourer: “The individual here can never appear so thoroughly isolated as he does as mere free worker.”28

Marx developed these thoughts in his late studies of the primitive commune among the Iroquois and in Ireland, North Africa, South Asia and particularly in Russia.29 He taught himself Russian by reading statistical reports and the works of Russian historians, political theorists and radicals. He read Kovalevskii’s Communal Landownership and the Causes, Course and Consequences of its Disintegration (1879) in Russian, and the two met frequently in London, where Kovalevskii was conducting his research.30 He
studied intensively and with admiration the works of N.G. Chernyshevskii, then in internal exile. In his *Critique of Philosophical Prejudices against Communal Ownership*, Chernyshevskii had invoked Hegel and Schelling to argue that “In its form, the higher stage of development resembles the source from which it proceeds” – that is, that advanced communism might preserve and develop the traditional communism of the *mir*, not extirpate it: “Thus communal ownership is necessary not only for the well-being of the agricultural class, but also for the progress of agriculture itself. It appears the only full and rational way of combining the farmer’s gain with improvement of the land, and productive methods with conscientious execution of work.” Indeed, Chernyshevskii thought that the remnants of communal agriculture in the Urals might make it possible for peasants there to adopt large-scale mechanized agriculture, and avoid the impoverishment incumbent on parcellized individual holdings. Marx wrote to Engels that *The Situation of the Working Class in Russia* by Flerovskii (V.V. Bervi) was “the first work to tell the truth about Russian economic conditions”, and calls it “the most important book published since your work on the *Condition of the Working-Class*. He admires the absence of “mysticism about the land” and “nihilistic extravagance”, and the willingness to present “the family life of the Russian peasants ... the awful beating-to-eath of their wives, the drinking, and the concubines”. In their studies, Marx and Engels were equally contemptuous of Russian liberals heralding capitalist “progress” as Russia’s salvation, and of Slavophile ethnic chauvinists celebrating the *mir* as a timeless emanation of the Russian world-soul. They reminded the former of the rigours of primitive accumulation in the West, the latter of the global ubiquity of the ancient commune. But they also saw a possible third way among socialist Narodniks (including Chernyshevskii and the People’s Will party), whose anti-Tsarist violence and vision of a progressive peasant communism formed an early “Third Worldist” socialism.

When using Marx to consider the Russian situation in the 1870s, Russian radicals and liberals drew on Marx’s earlier vision of Smithian modernization theory in the first volume of *Capital*. In 1877, writing in the journal *Otechestvenye Zapiski*, N.K. Mikhailovskii responded to an earlier Russian review of *Capital*, and claimed that Marx had prophesied that Russia would have to undergo the process of primitive capitalist accumulation that had savaged Europe, and particularly England. This was not an altogether unreasonable reading, given that the Narodnik Marx was known only to his correspondents. But the next year, Marx responded that “The chapter on primitive accumulation does not pretend to do more than trace the road by which in Western Europe the capitalist economic order emerged from the entrails of the feudal economic order”. He attacked Mikhailovskii for transforming “my historical sketch of the genesis of
capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed". He rejected any impulse to employ such a theory apart from a discussion of particular political circumstances. Comparing the expropriation of peasants in early modern Europe and in ancient Rome, he notes that the former became proletarians, the latter slaves:

Thus events strikingly analogous, but occurring in different historical milieux, led to quite disparate results. By studying each of these evolutions on its own, and then comparing them, one will easily discover the key to the phenomenon, but it will never be arrived at by employing the all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical.35

In February 1881, Marx received a letter from the Narodnik V.I. Zasulich, who had attempted to assassinate the Tsarist Governor of St Petersburg, and who was then exiled in Zurich.36 She asked Marx his opinion of those marxists who invoked his authority against the mir, calling it "an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism, and, in short, everything above debate". Marx eventually sent her a short letter in which he called the mir "the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia" – a bold enough statement. But in three long drafts for this letter, he went even further, calling arguments for the necessary destruction of the mir an attempt by Russian liberals to "naturalise capitalist production in their own country and, consistent with themselves, transform the great mass of peasants into simple wage-earners".37 Such arguments merely repeat the ideological apologies of other imperialist and capitalist powers. "Sir Henry Maine", Marx says, "who was a keen collaborator of the British Government in carrying out the violent destruction of the Indian communes, hypocritically assures us that all the government's noble efforts to support the communes were thwarted by the spontaneous forces of economic laws!"38 These comments significantly revise Marx's pronouncements of the 1850s, notorious among postcolonial critics, about the progressive and modernizing force of British rule in India. While he does not explicitly reject that earlier view, he now finds that the suppression of communal land ownership in India "was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards".39

What threatens the commune – in India or Russia – is "neither historical inevitability nor a theory; it is the oppression by the State and exploitation by capitalist intruders":

A certain kind of capitalism, nourished at the expense of the peasants through the agency of the State, has risen up in opposition to the commune; it is in its interest to crush the commune. It is also in the
interest of the landed proprietors to set up the more or less well-off peasants as an intermediate agrarian class, and to turn the poor peasants – that is to say the majority – into simple wage-earners. This will mean cheap labour! And how would a commune be able to resist, crushed by the extortions of the State, robbed by business, exploited by the landowners, undermined from within by usury?  

The remnants of the communal structure in fact helped the state wring taxes from the emancipated serfs, and the “combination of destructive influences, unless smashed by a powerful reaction, is bound to lead to the death of the rural commune”. As the English agrarian “middling sort” split between yeoman freeholders and capitalist tenant farmers on the one hand, distressed copyholders and wage labourers on the other, so Russian peasants were splitting between wealthy kulaks and expropriated agrarian wage laborers. 

But Marx was hopeful about the possibility of a reaction. The “rural idiocy” of French peasants reappears as the “isolation of rural communes, the lack of connexion between the life of one and the life of another”, which leads to “a central despotism over and above the communes”. But whereas Marx earlier proposed the political dispossession of French peasants and their submission to the necessities of stagist history, he now proposes the political reorganization of the Russian communes. The peasants who were previously “fetters” on the development of productive forces are now the victims of “government shackles”. But it would be an “easy matter” to replace the top-down governmental volost administration with “an assembly of peasants elected by the communes themselves, serving as the economic and administrative organ for their interests” – a bottom-up reorganization reminiscent of Winstanley’s The Law of Freedom. A revolutionary project could reverse primitive accumulation and restore wealth for communal development. Marx takes a classic “stagist” bit of evidence and reverses its force: the near-extirpation of the commune elsewhere does not mean that events must follow the same course in Russia. Rather, because of the mir’s “contemporaneity with western production”, it may “appropriate the latter’s positive acquisitions without experiencing all its frightful misfortunes”. The communes could then form the basis for large-scale mechanized agriculture. As late as the introduction to the second Russian edition of The Communist Manifesto (1882), Marx and Engels suggested that “the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development” if a Russian revolution ignites “a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other”. In his Preface to the third volume of Capital (1894), Engels said that Russia “was to play the same role in the part dealing with ground rent that England played in Book I in connection with industrial wage labour”, though Marx died too early to synthesize his work.
These letters and drafts sit uneasily inside Marx's canon. Both Plekhanov and Lenin knew the letter to Otechestvenye Zapiski, sided strongly with Marx, and savaged Mikhailovskii in later quarrels, but both thought that a capitalist dynamic had begun irreversibly to eat away at the commune from within, making it useless as a utopian model for future society.\textsuperscript{47} In his writings on the Narodniki and the agrarian question, Lenin distinguished between the "old Narodniki" of Chernyshevskii's generation, who "went among the people" espousing a "well-knit doctrine evolved in a period when capitalism was still very feebly developed in Russia", and contemporary Narodniki, whom he saw combining a reactionary Slavophile mystification of the commune with a liberal programme of reform that would accelerate its capitalist destruction.\textsuperscript{48} David Ryazanov, the first editor and publisher of the letter and drafts to Zasulich, found them sceptical about any transition from the commune to advanced communism.\textsuperscript{49} Christopher Hill describes the mir with sympathy but fundamentally follows Lenin's analysis.\textsuperscript{50} Eric Hobsbawm observes flatly that Marx's idea of an alternate Russian road to socialism was unmarxist in itself, rejected by Russian marxists, and discredited in any case by the destruction of the communes.\textsuperscript{51} Raymond Williams's interviewers in Politics and Letters insist that "Any revolution initially based on a peasantry has to pass through a proletarianization to create the conditions for a democratic socialism thereafter".\textsuperscript{52} Dorothy Atkinson sees the Gemeinschaft of the communes fated to replacement by the Gesellschaft of rational, Soviet modernization.\textsuperscript{53}

But others have convincingly challenged this sort of teleology. Perplexingly, Williams' interviewers add that Marx thought the communes capable of "a direct growth into socialism", and that "Modern research on the immediate post-revolutionary years in Russia tends to uphold him".\textsuperscript{54} Richard N. Hunt says: "When combined with the theory of Oriental despotism and the Grundrisse's flexibility concerning variant roads out of the primitive tribal community, it seems to leave in ruins the picture of Marxism as a rigid unilinear schema obliging all peoples to tread the same stepping stones."\textsuperscript{55} Teodor Shanin ranks Russian revolutionary populism as an influence on Marx with Engels' more familiar triad of German dialectical philosophy, French utopian socialism, and English political economy.\textsuperscript{56} Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan take a more reserved view, but still acknowledge the importance of the mir in Marx's thought.\textsuperscript{57} Jean-Paul Sartre, that ferocious critic of stagist dialectical materialism, denounces as "Marxist formalism" and even "Terror" the Stalinist impulse to reduce the movement of history to an unwitting pursuit of a predetermined goal. The letter to Mikhailovskii "clearly shows that, for Marx, the history of the noncapitalist and pre-capitalist societies of the past is not over and done with" – a temporally paradoxical phrase with both a retrospective meaning (these societies are not finished), and a prospective one (neither is their history).\textsuperscript{58}
Despite Hobsbawm’s argument, Marx’s late interest in this “regressive” social form found striking historical confirmation in the twentieth-century communist revolutions. Though the commune was eventually destroyed or disappeared into the collective farm, it played a crucial role in the outbreak of the first communist revolution. On 23 April 1885, Engels wrote to Zasulich that Russia’s revolutionary potential lay partly in its combination of various modes of production, “from the primitive commune to modern big industry and high finance, and where all these contradictions are forcibly pent up by an unheard-of despotism”. 59 We could trace this argument forward to the “law of uneven and combined development” which Trotsky believed solved the “fundamental riddle of the Russian Revolution”: “In order to realize the Soviet state, there was required a drawing together and mutual penetration of two factors belonging to completely different historical species: a peasant war – that is a movement characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development – and a proletarian insurrection, the movement signalizing its decline. That is the essence of 1917.” 60 Shanin says that Marx’s contact with Russian populism allowed him to break free of a social Darwinist model of teleological social evolution, and to connect with the revolutionary traditions of the twentieth-century Third World, which have drawn from residual, pre-capitalist social formations in struggling to create a post-capitalist democracy of direct producers: “It has been the integration of marxism with the indigenous political traditions which has underlain all known cases of internally generated and politically effective revolutionary transformation of society by socialists”. 61 Isaac Deutscher asks, “Even if the Marxists were right in Russia, are the Narodniks not vindicated in China?” Mao’s communists were defeated in the cities, then withdrew into the countryside, where they had a much stronger base among the peasantry than did the Narodniks, and eventually proved victorious. And the Soviet Union actually played the role in China’s revolution that Marx hoped Western Europe would play in Russia’s: a political ally and repository of technological knowledge that would make it possible for a mainly peasant nation largely to bypass some of the horrors of primitive accumulation. 62 In 1973, Raymond Williams commented, “The ‘rural idiots’ and the ‘barbarians and semi-barbarians’ have been, for the last forty years, the main revolutionary force in the world”. 63 On 1 January 1994, the day when NAFTA came squalling into the world to celebrate the completion of the west wing of the global capitalist New Jerusalem, the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, launched something that looked for all the world like a peasant rebellion in defense of agrarian use rights, articulating their anti-capitalist project in a series of ideologically self-conscious manifestos reminiscent of those produced by sixteenth-century German peasants. Ça ira.
Was Winstanley a seventeenth-century marxist? That is to say, did he ever move significantly beyond a nostalgic and traditionalist critique of the depredations worked by capitalist enclosure, to a progressive and communist critique? Like Marx, Winstanley reveals a nostalgic sense of *something lost* through his very critique of expropriation and alienation. But also like Marx, Winstanley fused that nostalgia with a vision of progressive improvement in a communist project that denies the modernizing inevitability of the capitalist present. Any form of social and cultural history genuinely opposed to the teleological false binaries of modernization theory should be alive to the existence of "third ways", even if they suffered defeat. Just as Marx imagined a revolutionary communist Narodism as a third way beyond Slavophile paternalism and capitalist liberalism, so Winstanley imagined communist Digging as a third way beyond feudal paternalism and capitalist improvement. Like Sartre's Marx, Winstanley believed that the history of the non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies of the past was not yet over and done with. He saw the pre-capitalist common as the material and existential foundation for a post-capitalist society that would incorporate the genuine achievements of capitalist improvement without its oppressions.

I want to emphasize four aspects of Winstanley's progressive communism. First, he grounded his theory of society and history in a concept of the mode of production and class struggle. This terminology may seem anachronistic at first, but I believe it will seem more appropriate when we contrast Winstanley's theory of society with some contemporary alternatives. First, he is not much of an anti-papist — he spends remarkably little time bashing Rome. Nor is he much interested in the difference between king and parliament, for a post-regicidal parliamentarian landlord or evicting soldier exercises "kingly power", which "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". He has no particular interest in status designations or subdivisions: old gentry, new gentry and yeoman freeholder alike are all exploiters. His anti-normanism remains quite metaphoric, and never degenerates into credulous philo-saxonism. He is not a traditionalist, for he has little interest in *restoring* an earlier paternalist social order, actual or imagined. Neither is he a Harringtonian republican, for he does not share in Harrington's economistic vision of revolution as the adjustment of the political "superstructures" to the relatively fixed economic "foundations". No less than Hartlibian schemes of capitalist improvement, Harrington's republicanism would leave existing relations of production largely untouched.

One might choose to characterize Winstanley as the proponent of a traditional "moral economy" — one who emphasizes its binary, *moral* dimensions (the rich exploiting the poor), rather than its structurally specific
economic dimensions. There is some truth here, for Winstanley’s work comprises an entire poetics of metaphorical ethical binaries: the struggle of Jacob and Esau, common preservation and self-preservation, carnal imagination and godly Reason, common field and enclosure, power of love and kingly power. Carlo Ginzburg says that such binary classifications reveal the “totally dichotomous view of the class structure, typical of a peasant society”. And of course, it is hard these days to view any binary with anything other than condescension, since so much anti-communist social theory, from deconstruction to historical revisionism, has pilloried the very idea of the binary, with all its conceptual kin (opposition, struggle, contradiction, conflict).

But perhaps such rustic dichotomies are not only typical of peasants, but also, in important ways, true. They reveal a particular form of situated practical and theoretical consciousness appropriate to the daily life and the class project of the Diggers and of surplus producers throughout the world and throughout history. Moreover, those ideologists who struggle to complicate and problematize such binary relationships out of existence are to be found, with striking regularity, among the ruling class appropriators of surplus, or their apologists among the professional-managerial class. We would also do well to remember that Marx’s most mature “structural” conception of the mode of production, which he works out in the third volume of Capital, incorporates a binary moral economy: “The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element.” For Winstanley as for Marx, the mode of production is the historically specific relationship, both structural and ethical/political, between an exploiting class of surplus extractors (including kings, lords of manors, capitalist tenants, wealthy freeholders, lawyers, Councils of State and tithing clergy) and an exploited class of surplus producers (including distressed copyholders, wage labourers, small tradesmen and the poor). For Winstanley as for Marx, this relationship is both powerful and mutable: “And all the strivings that is in mankind, is for the earth, who shall have it; whether some particular persons shall have it, and the rest have none, or whether the earth shall be a common treasury to all without respect of persons.” For Winstanley as for Marx, the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the pitched battle between the lamb and the dragon.

Second, Winstanley develops a dialectical psychology that insists on the value of moving through a phase of alienation. In Fire in the Bush, he goes beyond mere moral denunciation of the “imaginary power” of acquisition by tracing three stages of consciousness. First comes the “plain-hearted state”, which is peaceful but malleable, unstable and infantile: “you need
not look back six thousand years to find it; for every single man and woman passes through it.” This time is “the image of God, but not the strength and life of God; it is wise, but not wisdom itself”. He associates it with the strength of Peter and Nathanael, which “proved weakness”, and calls it “the first time of the Beast, or self, which is full of peace, while a man is in it; but it is a state like wax, flexible and easy to take any impression”. Next comes the “time of the curse” implied by the immoderate use of “the creatures” (material objects) – a time which forms the “second estate of mankind”. Here, the acquisitive Adam fears where no fear is: he rises up to destroy others, for fear, lest others destroy him: he will oppress others, lest others oppress him; and he fears he shall be in want hereafter; therefore he takes by violence, that which others have labored for. ... For Imagination begins to tell the soul; if thou enjoyest not fullness of all objects, thou wilt want and starve for food, and so presently fear of poverty takes the throne and reigns; and fear bids thee go, get what thou canst, by hook or by crook, lest thou want, and perish, and die miserably.

This sympathetic account, which suggests Sartre’s analysis of seriality, is all the more remarkable given its publication in March 1650, when sustained attacks from without threatened the Cobham commune, and when Winstanley’s words may have described defecting Diggers. Finally comes the “third estate of mankind ... the day of Christ, or the rising up”, and restoration from this state of bondage. This is more than the restoration of the first stage: “Now no man hath, or can have true peace, till he be able to see this clear distinction within himself; he that sees nothing but one power, nor never saw any other but one power in him, that man as yet is a slave to the Devil.” In his focus on the weakness and underdevelopment of the original, “unfallen” state, and the necessity for a progress through the others, he insists so strongly on the happiness of the felix culpa that it becomes no fault at all – a Pelagian progress, or perhaps a Romantic phenomenology of consciousness in the mode of Hegel or Wordsworth, or Chernyshevskii’s belief that advanced communism would cancel and preserve the primitive commune.

Third, Winstanley formulates a progressive dialectical theory of enclosure and depopulation which is structurally quite distinct from that of reactionary neo-feudal paternalists. Where the latter see the tumults produced by primitive accumulation and sectarian ferment as the signs of a Babel-like confusion, or a violated moral economy, Winstanley sees them as signs of an imminent emancipation: “Before you live you must die, and before you be bound up into one universal body, all your particular bodies and societies must be torn to pieces.” This dialectical optimism, which sees the positive revolutionary potential in the breakdown of a unified church
and a traditional social order, brings Winstanley surprisingly close to the ideologists of capitalist improvement. But finally, he is a communist improver. He sees the commons themselves expanding as a result of the people’s victory in the Revolution. As Marx envisions the mir redeemed through a primitive accumulation in reverse, so Winstanley imagines the expansion of the commons when the common people regain those crown, deans, bishops, chapter and forest lands that they helped to liberate during the war. And a programme of labour withdrawal will extend this liberation by turning all enclosures into commons. Distressed copyholders and wage labourers will continue leaving the land being taken from them and inhabit the commons. When enough of them leave, agrarian capitalist rentiers and farmers would have to work their own fields, and the distinctions among landlord, tenant and labourer – among enclosure, small-holding and common field – will disappear. A quantitative increase in anti-paternalist depopulation will lead dialectically to a qualitative change in forms of land tenure. The God of the commons will safeguard the strike fund underwriting an agrarian general strike.

Fourth, and finally, Winstanley offers a progressive theory of improvement, which distinguishes oppressive capitalist relations of production from the potentially emancipatory forces of production that arise within them. One of the most striking things about Winstanley’s utopian vision, particularly in The Law of Freedom, is how far it is from anything like a version of simplifying pastoral. Winstanley’s utopia certainly promises no withering away of politics. With its vision of a complex governmental structure, its reformed system of education, and its coordinated programme of practical scientific research and development, it suggests not so much the utopian pastoralism of Morris’s News from Nowhere as Raymond Williams’ critique of that pastoralism for its radical “discontinuity” from Morris’s England: “Because what the representation of discontinuity typically produces is a notion of social simplicity which is untenable. The extent to which the idea of socialism is attached to that simplicity is counter-productive. It seems to me that the break towards socialism can only be towards an unimaginably greater complexity.” Winstanley’s utopia intimately engaged the most advanced scientific work of his day – notably, the Hartlibian enlightenment that provided a millenarian prelude to the culture of capitalist improvement that would define so much of England’s future. Nigel Smith says that, in The Law of Freedom, Winstanley is “nothing more than a neo-Hartlibian projector”.

But if Winstanley is indeed a Hartlibian projector, he is also something more. True enough, Winstanley sounds awfully like Bacon or Hartlib or Plattenes or Child when he proclaims that “To know the secrets of nature, is to know the works of God”, or when he describes utopian tree science as
“the right ordering of woods and timber trees, for planting, dressing, felling, framing of timber for all uses, for building houses or ships. And here all carpenters, joiners, throsters, plow-makers, instrument makers for music, and all who work in wood and timber, may find out the secret of nature, to make trees more plentiful and thriving in their growth, and profitable for use”. At first, this passage sounds as though it could come straight from The New Atlantis. But Bacon’s idea of “profitable for use” entails a new force of technocratic domination in Salomon’s House, leaving material production as invisible, unmentionable and declassé as in any courtly pastoral, while Digger improvement mixes research and artisanry. Winstanley forbids a new priesthood of “traditional knowledge” or contemplation: “he that only contemplates and talks of what he reads and hears, and doth not employ his talent in some bodily action, for the increase of fruitfulness, freedom, and peace in the earth, is an unprofitable son.” For researchers and improvers as well as lawyers and clerics, “he is a monster who is all tongue and no hand”. Fire in the Bush attacks the secrecy and class privilege that reappears inside the Hartlibian Enlightenment: “For this is the vine that shall overspread the Earth, and shall be confined no longer within a college, or private university chamber, or under a covetous, proud, black gown, that would always be speaking words: but fall off when people begin to act their words.” Like Bacon, Winstanley proposes “deserved honor” for “every one who finds out a new invention”; but he also sees communism, not Bacon’s kingly subsidies and patronage, calling forth a host of mute inglorious Bacons through a fourierist liberation of the (vocational) passions: “And certainly when men are sure of food and raiment, their reason will be ripe, and ready to dive into the secrets of the Creation, that they may learn to see and know God (the spirit of the whole creation) in all his works; for fear of want, and care to pay rent to taskmasters, hath hindered many rare inventions.” In The Law of Freedom, Winstanley was a communist improver. As Marx imagines a mir that will appropriate the positive achievements of capitalist production without undergoing its “frightful misfortunes”, so Winstanley imagines a commune that will appropriate the achievements of Baconian and Hartlibian improvement without submitting to its capitalist will to power.

Could such a thing have been possible? Perhaps not, though we should be a little nervous about our own Whiggish and mechanical-materialist stagism, which identifies improvement itself with a particular regime of exploitation:

Whether small-scale agricultural production was incapable of innovation is a matter for debate not only among historians but also among those concerned with surviving modern (especially Third World) peasantries. One might suggest that the question is not
necessarily blocked by the fact that England, pioneer of industrial capitalism, did happen to develop, to begin with, an agrarian capitalism based on the destruction of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{89}

Both Chernyshevskii and Marx believed that the Russian peasant commune could incorporate mechanized agriculture and other technologies of improvement. And any sincere critic of the Whig theory of history should be very nervous about the leap from saying “the state and the gentry crushed the Diggers” to saying “the Diggers couldn’t have succeeded”.

Now of course, all this comparison of Winstanley and Marx may raise suspicions that I suffer from what the revisionist historian Kevin Sharpe calls “that most dangerous of historical ailments, anachronism; from, that is, the translation into early Stuart England of the ideas and politics of a later age”.\textsuperscript{90} Conversely, Lotte Mulligan and Judith Richards warn those who would turn to Gerrard Winstanley for help in understanding poverty today that they fall into “not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error”.\textsuperscript{91} In response, I would hasten to emphasize that there are significant differences between the two. Winstanley chronically underestimated the need for armed struggle in effecting a communist revolution, while Marx and many of his followers chronically underestimated the importance of religion as a revolutionary ideology.\textsuperscript{92} And a detailed structural comparison of Digger and Narodnik communism would certainly reveal a host of significant differences. But such a study would not and should not override the remarkable resonances of these two moments – resonances which are intelligible, not miraculous. Both projects grew from the experience of peasant small production – a remarkably widespread and resilient form of production. Both arose in a revolutionary moment which unleashed a sustained capitalist assault on pre-capitalist peasant holdings. In this regard, seventeenth-century England resembles seventeenth-century Russia considerably less than it does nineteenth-century Russia – and late twentieth-century Chiapas. And both writers were constitutively inorganic intellectuals who addressed the resulting conflict in part out of their own experience of migration and dislocation: Winstanley’s from small-town Lancashire to metropolitan London to rural Surrey; Marx’s from small-town Trier to revolutionary Paris to capitalist Victorian London.

The worst sort of anachronism, the worst sort of teleological or Whig history, is not that which uses present day ideas to understand the past, or vice versa; indeed, I doubt that any moderately ambitious project in historical writing could avoid either. Much worse is that form of teleology that claims that certain persons, peoples, and cultures were extirpated because of a natural and inevitable process of modernization. In this essay, I have suggested that we should refrain from identifying this sort of
modernization narrative with the marxist theory of history as class struggle. The identification frequently depends on a strategic slippage among three quite distinct statements:

1. A theory of history as inevitable modernization accompanies some marxist theories of history as class struggle.
2. A theory of history as inevitable modernization accompanies all marxist theories of history as class struggle.
3. A marxist theory of history as class struggle accompanies all theories of history as inevitable modernization. So anticommunist opponents of the former are automatically innocent of the latter.

I take the first statement to be demonstrably true and unlikely to be challenged by anyone who sees communist utopia as the place where workers control the means of production, and associate freely and creatively on the basis of that control. Democratic communists in particular should shudder at the thought of some misty-eyed but stiff-lipped emissary of Stalin or the Shining Path hurrying on the "inevitable" modernization of tribal peoples, peasants, and other small producers who maintain some immediate, non-market access to the means of production, and their reintegration, if they survive, inside an authoritarian state capitalism. In a horrifying irony, such small producers are to be evicted from a place that strangely resembles the communist utopia, and transferred to a place that strangely resembles the capitalist dystopia. Like the history of capitalist primitive accumulation, that of Stalinist agrarian collectivization was "written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire".

As my discussion of Marx on the mir indicates, I take the second statement to be demonstrably false, but all too familiar. In a recent essay, the brilliant post-revisionist historian Peter Lake groups marxism and Christopher Hill with capitalist modernization theorists lauding the "benefits of modernity, the controllability of the historical process, the benign capacity of the state to intervene and shape the economic and social development of the nation" – a staggering distortion of Hill’s work, with its elegiac and sympathetic attention to the lived experience of a series of lost causes, and its scholarly but bone-deep hatred of the capitalist state. In his Preface to Liberty Against the Law, Hill declares, “My aim is – with the help of ballads and other forms of popular literature, to rescue the landless ex-peasantry from posterity’s enormous silence” – and the rest of his massive oeuvre bears eloquent witness. Hill echoes E.P. Thompson’s Preface to The Making of the English Working Class, which criticizes the reformist socialism that ransacks the past for forerunners of the welfare state:

It reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose
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aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten. I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.96

Indeed, from Rodney Hilton on the Peasant Rising of 1381 to Hill on the Diggers to J.M. Neeson on early nineteenth-century commoners, the “British” marxist historians (they seem to be increasingly North American) have focused on the creative practical consciousness of peoples not yet modernized and proletarianized, defending them from the enormous condescension of modernizing history, whether capitalist or dialectical materialist.

I take the third statement to be neither true in itself, nor properly derivable from the second statement, but still implicit in a good deal of writing by anti-communist historians. The problem is that, however fervently they spurn Whig teleology on the level of politics or popular self-determination, they tend to embrace it on the level of economy, whether they simply take the contemporary capitalist world system for granted, or actively reproduce some version of Smithian modernization theory. Like Tory landlords in the Restoration happily availing themselves of the latest techniques in enclosure and agricultural improvement, revisionist historians who denounce the Whig theory of political history happily avail themselves of an implicitly Whiggish theory of capitalist improvement – one that suggests a certain contempt for the (urban and rural) yokels who resist it. Anthony Fletcher, for instance, traces the English Revolution to sheer, cross-class cultural stupidity: the Puritan fear of popery clashed with the monarchist fear of parity in an “abnegation of reason” and a “curious mixture of folly and idealism”, which derives in turn from “the imaginative poverty of the seventeenth century”, when “people were made scapegoats for processes, which lacked the capacity to conceive of and weigh in the balance alternative political systems, which took a highly traditional view of the world as a place of ‘limited good’ where no one can prosper save at someone else’s expense”.97 John Walter and Keith Wrightson trace early modern dearth and famine not to exploiting middlemen (the favourite enemy of the misrecognizing poor), but to “a marketing system as yet insufficiently developed to iron out regional inequalities of distribution” – an argument Irish revisionist historians have also found handy when working up a blame-free account of the Famine. Mark Kishlansky complains that Christopher Hill’s history from below focuses on “cranks, crackpots, screwballs and fanatics, the nutters and kooks who appear in the wake of every genuine movement for social reform and who become the principal barrier to lasting change”.98 Kevin Sharpe, too,
laments the “tired old marxist preoccupation with nascent popular movements” such as the Diggers, and worries that a “vast scholarly industry” has wasted “too many pages … on endeavors to find meaning in the writings of the civil war’s madmen”, on “minor sects and crackpots”. Winstanley’s partisans have overlooked the benefits of enclosure, “which were not merely the invention of Tory apologists”. At its absolute worst, modernizing Whiggery turns peasant suffering into capitalist necessity and a sort of brisk eugenics.

But there is one last objection to comparing Winstanley and Marx: is not Winstanley a fundamentally religious thinker, and Marx a fundamentally secular one? Here, we run into a “secularization” controversy with remarkable parallels to that over “modernization”. Once again, there are admittedly some “secularizers” on the left. George Juretic has argued for Winstanley’s progress out of a self-mystifying religious ideology into revolutionary, secular rationality. Though himself critical of Juretic, Christopher Hill does say that Winstanley’s communism became “less theological and more materialist”, and that he changed “from a religious to a social and political thinker”. These arguments have been effectively answered by Andrew Bradstock, who has shown their unstated (and untenable) assumption that millenarianism and socialism are mutually exclusive.

But surprisingly enough, just as we find that opponents of “Whiggish” social or political history turn out to be fervent Whigs when it comes to economic history, so we find that some defenders of the “essentially religious” quality of seventeenth-century writers like Winstanley work from an implicit version of the secularization model. Conrad Russell says that in the normal seventeenth-century structure of authority, it was normal to find religion and politics as closely intertwined as economics and politics are today … It does not help that the word ‘religion’ has slowly changed its meaning with the retreat of the State from religious enforcement, and that what takes place outside the South African Embassy may sometimes be nearer to seventeenth-century meanings of ‘religion’ than what takes place inside St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

This feels reasonable and humane at first, but less so later. For just as economy formed part of the twist back then (as a tithe-hating Baptist, or Milton, or Winstanley, would zealously insist), so too did religion in 1990 (as the anti-racist nun outside the embassy would gladly have asserted).

Jonathan Clark accuses new leftists (“the Class of ’68”) of utterly ignoring “one auxiliary discipline which the revisionists were to find of immense importance in the understanding of early-modern England: theology. … The undervaluation of … ecclesiastical phenomena is a
reflection of modern assumptions that religion is a small, specialized and insulated area of national life. He celebrates history’s "renewed attention to religion as religion rather than as a sublimation of something else." But can one imagine any phrase more alien to William Laud, or William Prynne, or William Walwyn, or any other seventeenth-century person, than "religion as religion"? It suggests the turf-consciousness of a shrinking orthodoxy in a modern state or an unpopular university department – indeed, precisely a "small, specialized and insulated area of national life" – not that totalizing and world-transforming immanent force of seventeenth-century English society. The generally meagre revisionist account of early modern religion as religion recalls a lesson learned by at least some literary critics, with a painful sense of years wasted in celebrating poem as poem or text as text: the reflexive noun intended to ring in an autonomous academic discipline more frequently sounds its death-knell, or a tinkling announcement of its retirement into ineffectual private life.

In his essay "The Religious Context of the English Civil War", John Morrill argues that "The English civil war was not the first European revolution: it was the last of the Wars of Religion". This statement is troublesome not because it brings religion up, but because it shuts religion down. In separating religion and revolution, religion and modernity, Morrill implicitly denies the social and political vision driving such religious revolutionaries as the fourth-century Donatists and Circumcellions in Augustine’s North Africa, the fourteenth-century peasants in John Ball’s England, and the seventeenth-century poor in Winstanley’s Surrey. At the same time, it muffles the ideology of religious transcendence driving many “modern” revolutionary movements, whether we view that transcendence as superhuman or superindividual. Here, think of those righteous radical Dissenters in London and Belfast during the 1790s, John Brown’s abolitionists and Hung Hsiu-Ch’ün’s Taipings during the 1850s and 1860s, Antonio Conselheiro’s millenarian communist cowboys in the Bafa of the 1890s, and the liberation theologians of pan-Africa, from Nat Turner to Desmond Tutu to Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The peasant rebellion – the most globally widespread and important form of social revolution in both the modern and the pre-modern world, and almost always fired by religious ideology – also muddies up Morrill and Russell’s binary history. Ernst Bloch – that committed communist prophet of the continuing history of pre-capitalist forms – even finds “a constant, unwritten essence of Joachim of Fiore” in Bolshevik Russia:

Several great peculiarities were thus able to spring up in Christo-romantic fashion on Bolshevist soil; the indisputable Bolshevik and equally indisputable chiliast Alexander Blok gave an indication of
this, thoroughly in the Joachite spirit. When in Blok's hymn, the 'March of the Twelve', that is, of the twelve Red Army soldiers, a pale Christ precedes the revolution and leads it, this kind of presence of the Spirit is just as remote from the western Church-combines as it finds the eastern Church at least theologically open to it.\textsuperscript{108}

The idea of some fundamental divide between pre-modern wars of religion and modern secular revolutions appears only inside a feebly credent or a feebly non-credent version of the history of ideas supplementing capitalist modernization theory, and it threatens to suck the life out of both sides of the divide.

If we wish to assert that Winstanley is a "fundamentally religious thinker", we need to be clear about what we mean by "religious", and resist the temptation to allow all visions of religion to collapse into each other. Lotte Mulligan, John K. Graham and Judith Richards criticize Hill and others for scanting Winstanley's religious language, for "minimizing the part theology played in his theories of social and moral change", for failing to see that Winstanley's God is transcendent as well as immanent, and for ignoring his belief that the world would be transformed not by the action of people but by a literal second coming.\textsuperscript{109} Christopher Hill has answered this argument rather effectively, pointing out the widespread seventeenth-century belief that Christ might return not in person but in the collective persons of his revolutionary sons and daughters.\textsuperscript{110} It is not all that clear that Winstanley believed in any conventional first coming, much less a second: "And here you may see the deceit of imagination and fleshly wisdom and learning; it teaches you to look altogether upon a history without you, of things that were done 6000 years ago, and of things that were done 1649 years ago."\textsuperscript{111} "Theology" is a troublesome ally, particularly if one intends the formal university discipline of that name, for Winstanley refers to the "City Divinity" as "that great City Babylon" and proposes to execute professional ministers.\textsuperscript{112} Too often, abstract claims for the fundamentally theological quality of Winstanley's writing smooth over the ferocity of his religious anti-clericalism.

But even if we mean an internally coherent religious idea system existing prior to social change, significant problems remain: only a desiccated version of the history of ideas can set an absolute opposition between "religion" and "society". Any sociologist of religion, whether theist, agnostic or atheist, would find that nonsensical – analogous to a rigorous opposition between apples and fruit (or fruit and apples), and particularly unhelpful for Winstanley, for whom "community of ownership in the earth and the resurrection of Christ are interchangeable concepts", while "True religion, and undefiled, is to let every one quietly have earth to manure, that they may live in freedom by their labors".\textsuperscript{113} In the Preface to
Several Pieces, his 1649 reissue of his first five works, all of them dating from before the Digger commune, he insists on both the spiritual origin of his Digger revelation, and its distance from his early works: “And therefore though some have said I had done well if I had left writing when I had finished The Saints Paradice: surely such men know little of the spirit’s inward workings; and truly what I have writ since or before that time, I was carried forth in the work by the same power, delivering it to others as I received it, and I received it not from books nor study.” As Lutaud has pointed out, Winstanley’s failure to revert to a quietist waiting upon God in The Law of Freedom, after the repression of the Digger commune, is a phenomenon worth remarking.

We can see an alternative approach to political theology in superb recent work on Winstanley by Andrew Bradstock, Lewis Daly and Christopher Rowland – all of whom contextualize him with religious struggles for social justice in Reformation Europe on the one hand, contemporary Latin America on the other. All of them, therefore, fall into that “moral error” diagnosed by Mulligan and Richards. So does Christopher Hill when he concludes The English Bible with “A Note on Liberation Theology” and brief discussions of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff. No doubt, atheist historical materialists who take the sociology of religion seriously and theist liberation theologians who take political theology seriously will continue to disagree about the ultimate context for understanding Winstanley’s project. While the former will see “religion” as an important subset of the totality of “society”, the latter may well see “society” as an important subset of “religion”. But they come together in their resolute resistance to seeing “society” and “religion” as separate spheres, whether the separation is structural (“theology” vs. “society”) or temporal (“a religious epoch” vs. “a secular epoch”). And they are both teleological, in the sense that anyone imagining a future distinct from the present, less savaged by suffering and oppression, is teleological. But their teleology (Marx’s too, and Winstanley’s) is the teleology of hope and struggle, not of Whig complacency, not of modernizing certitude. For both groups focus on class struggle, whether they see that struggle as Christ rising in sons and daughters, or the political struggle of the direct producers, or both.

Indeed, we may need to trace this liberation theology back past Boff, Winstanley and Christ to the Ancient Near East, making use of the discipline of “theology” that Jonathan Clark invokes but leaves in the lurch. Contemporary seminaries, departments of religion and departments of theology have little use for any absolute distinction between “religion” and “society” – neither in pastoral training nor in historical and academic study, where the concepts of “the sociology of religion” and “liberation theology” provoke controversy but not anathemas. Building on the work of George
Mendenhall, Norman Gottwald has argued that a theology of liberation and a Canaanite peasant rebellion underlie the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. He has built up a complex argument, thoroughly grounded in Ancient Near Eastern philology and archaeology, that the events recounted in Exodus, Joshua and Judges began as a peasant and slave revolt led by hapiru outcasts (the word may be cognate with "Hebrew"). Later, the court of King David redacted accounts of this rebellion through a sort of monarchical Whig historiography, producing the account we have today of an ethnic migration culminating in imperial conquest and nation formation. If Gottwald is right – if Yahwism is the liberation theology of Canaanite peasants – then Gerrard Winstanley may be something more than a peasant allegorist who boldly conflated the kingdom of God and the communal ownership of the earth. We face the arresting possibility that he produced the least allegorical reading of the Hebrew Scriptures in seventeenth-century England. We will have to consider for its truth value, and not just for its imaginative power, his claim that "The glory of Israel’s Commonwealth is this, they had no beggar among them".

NOTES


5. Lutaud, Winstanley, p.467, translation mine.
8. Works, p.375. I will quote most of Winstanley’s works from this edition, modernizing spelling and capitalization.
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18. *MECW* 4.309. Thanks for this reference to Ed White of Scipio Center, New York.
24. *MECW* 28.25. This passage precedes Marx's more stagist discussions in *Capital I* – we are dealing with continuing "moments" in Marx's thought, not an easy development between early and late Marx.
28. *MECW* 28.409. Here Marx indulges a favourite, sardonic pun: because the ex-peasant is "free" of all property, he or she is constrained to enter into the "free" wage contract (*MECW* 28.430; 35.177-9, 705). Both Marx and Engels later applied the pun to the serfs "freed" by Alexander II in 1861 (*MECW* 27.38; 36.31).
32. *MECW* 27.423.
33. *MECW* 43.423-4.
34. Shanin, *Late Marx*, pp.8-9. Marx recollects traces of the ancient commune "right in my own neighbourhood, on the Hunsrück, the old Germanic system survived until the last few years. I now remember my father talking about it to me from a lawyer's point of view" (*MECW* 42.557-8). For an English variant, see H.N. Brailsford's moving recollection of his visit to Laxton, with the last remaining open fields in England, and of his "talks in India with old men in the Pathan borderland, and in central Russian with peasants round Vladimir, who were familiar in their younger days with the village community of the one and the mir of the other" (*The Levellers and the English Revolution* [1961; rpt. Nottingham: Spokesman, 1976], p.422).
35. *MECW* 24.196-201, 199, 200. Haruki Wada dates the letter to late 1878 (Shanin, *Late Marx*, pp.56-60). Marx did not send the letter, but it circulated widely in Russia after his death.
38. MECW 24.359. Like Maine, to whom he dedicated *Modern Customs and Ancient Laws of Russia, Being the Ilchester Lectures for 1889–90* (1891; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), the liberal Kovalevskii stressed the inevitability of the commune’s dissolution (p.118).


42. *MECW* 24.363, 353.

43. *MECW* 24.349.


46. *MECW* 37.10.


57. Shanin, *Late Marx*, p.78.


59. *MECW* 47.281.


68. See Lutaud’s discussion of theses, antitheses, and myths in Winstanley’s thought (*Winstanley*, pp.387–441).


70. *MECW* 37.777–8. This passage occurs in a discussion of the transition between feudal and capitalist forms of land tenure and ground rent.


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73. Works, pp.482, 479-80.
74. Works, pp.482-3.
75. Works, pp.456-7, 460-61.
77. Works, pp.484-6.
81. Works, p.190.
84. Works, p.565.
85. Works, pp.577, 579, 567.
86. Works, p.475.
92. Winstanley repeatedly denied any intent to liberate property through violence, but neither did he naïvely hope, as John Morrill suggests, that his prophecies would persuade the rich to surrender their superfluous property ("The Impact on Society", in Morrill (ed.), Revolution and Restoration: England in the 1650s [London 1992], p.97). Rather, his naïvety (or hopeful innocence) lay in thinking the English ruling class would refrain from crushing him as soon as he showed English agrarian workers how to reclaim the means of production.
94. MECW 35.706.