Remembering the Diggers

BY

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Though often forgotten, the Diggers of the English Revolution were egalitarian radicals well before their time. No account of socialist history is complete without them.

In 1647, a colonel in the English New Model Army stood beneath the granite tower of Putney's Church of St Mary the Virgin, and declared in the heat of debate that "the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under." When Thomas Rainsborough made this statement of democratic principle, it would be two years until the king would find himself upon the scaffold, six years until Oliver Cromwell would betray the last vestiges of that revolutionary possibility, and thirteen years until the executed monarch's son would return to the throne in "Restoration."

For a brief period during those violent years — variously called the English Civil Wars or the English Revolution, depending on your political convictions — partisans of the so-called Leveller cause advocated for unheralded reforms. It was a time, as the Marxist historian Christopher Hill wrote, that saw "a great overturning, questioning, revaluing of everything in England."

From the late summer of 1647 until the early winter, Cromwell convened a gathering of officers from the New Model Army at Putney to debate the details of a proposed written English constitution known as "An Agreement of the People." A fundamentally conservative man (which is to say an authoritarian one), Cromwell organized the discussion in part to stave off a political threat from the Left.

England's Revolution (which erupted on August 22, 1642) is often overshadowed by subsequent revolutions, and the byzantine details of those years are particularly unfamiliar to American readers. For nonspecialists who might half-remember something about the "English Civil War," it's often recalled as a confusing mishmash involving Parliamentarians and Royalists, Roundheads and Cavaliers, Puritans and Presbyterians. That is, when it's thought of at all. As socialist Labour MP Tony Benn cheekily wrote, "Not everyone realizes that we had a revolution in England long before the French Revolution, the American Revolution, or the Russian Revolution."

For a nation that so often establishes its identity through the inanity of royal marriages and Windsor protocol, something seems positively un-English about the idea of revolution. Human rights barrister Geoffrey Robertson once quipped that "history that is taught with the indulged lives of kings and queens cannot cope with the reality of a British republic." But cope with it we should, for despite the relative invisibility of the English Revolution among nonspecialists, and even the lack of credit given to it among the contemporary left, there is a direct line between Putney in 1647 and Paris in 1789, or St Petersburg in 1917.

The Levellers and the Diggers

While past rebellions may have targeted the ruling classes, they did so in an intellectual framework that didn't fundamentally question the structure of their oppression, that still acknowledged royal prerogative and the divine right of kings.

Kings had been killed in battle, deposed by counselors, and murdered by rival aristocratic claimants. But never before had a monarch been tried and executed by a quasi-democratic tribunal that claimed to speak on behalf of the peoples' interests, so that as historian Frank McLynn writes in *The Road Not Taken: How Britain Narrowly Missed a Revolution, 1381–1922,* the English had "gone through the mental sound barrier and were now in uncharted territory." "Charles's execution on 30 January [1649]," he wrote, "seemed to open up an entirely new chapter in history."

What Braddick describes as "a decade of intense debate and spectacular intellectual creativity" saw the emergence of dozens of unconventional groups, counter-cultural sects with exotic names like Muggletonians, Grindletonians, Seekers, Adamites, Ranters, Levellers, and True Levellers (better known as "the Diggers").

Any account of the English Revolution's radicalism must take into account those last two groups. Interconnected, and by virtue of their similar names often confused with one another, the Levellers and True Levellers were examples of seventeenth-century liberal and left thought at their most organized and coherent.

The former group refers to a powerful faction of liberal reformers within the New Model Army — that is, Rainsborough's contingent — which made universal male suffrage a cornerstone of their political program. "Leveller" was a term they didn't necessarily associate with themselves; like a centrist Democrat derided as a "socialist" by a right-winger, the designation had certain contemporary connotations that weren't necessarily accurate. One seventeenth-century critic slurred "Leveller" figures like Rainsborough, Edward Sexby, and John Wildman as having a "most apt title for such a despicable and desperate knot to be known by, that endeavor to cast down and level the enclosures of the nobility, gentry and propriety, to make us even, so that every Jack shall view with a gentleman and every gentleman be made a Jack."

Their name had dual and related meanings; the first was in reference to the process of enclosure that had been going on for well over a century, whereby common grazing grounds were fenced off as private property, denying peasants their livelihood, so that a "Leveller" was one who levelled off the hedges that separated land parcels from one another, but also somebody who wished to "level off" the difference between the working and the ruling classes. Activist Tom Hazeldine explains that to "enclose land was to extinguish common rights over it, thus putting an end to all common grazing," the "business of hedging in land" having "created space under the landowner's absolute control."

By today's standards, the Levellers' proposals at the Putney Debates were relatively moderate. No doubt the Levellers held to a progressive policy of universal suffrage, and offered a model of representative democracy that anticipated the American Revolution by more than a century, but they wanted the world less turned on its side than nudged a bit at an angle (the radicalism of some individual members like Rainsborough notwithstanding).

By contrast, a genuine socialistic left — in fact, those whom Benn identifies as "the first true socialists" — were represented by a group that cheekily call themselves the "True Levellers," so as to distinguish itself from the faction in the New Model Army. To their critics, they were known simply as "the Diggers."

The name was derived from their most infamous act of political theater, when — as described by McLynn — "a shoemaker, a cloth-maker, a householder, a blacksmith, a malster, a baker and a baker's apprentice" occupied a spot of land named St George's Hill in Surrey and began to cultivate the earth. Their

manifesto, *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, printed the same month as the establishment of the St George's Hill commune explained: "The Work we are going about is this, To dig up Georges-Hill and the waste Ground thereabouts, and to Sow Corn, and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows." It was the first of several Digger communities.

The occupation of St George's Hill was short-lived. A misunderstanding among the local populace that the Diggers had the army's permission left them unmolested for a while, but they were eventually evicted.

Despite the apparent failure of their anarcho-socialist commune, it was the political writings of the Diggers that would establish them first as an object of mockery and then as an ideological threat. Their program was not one of moderation or half-measures, because as McLynn notes, the Diggers "grasped that 'equality of opportunity' must be a meaningless slogan if the parties concerned start from vastly different economic, social and financial bases." The Diggers' work," the author of *The True Leveller's Standard Advanced* noted, was to "make the Earth a Common Treasury," where the fundamental principle was to "*Work together, Eate Bread together, Declare this all abroad.*"

Winstanley and the Legacy of the Diggers

The Diggers' great theorist, and the author of *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, was a London tailor named Gerrard Winstanley. In language that harkens towards Marx, Winstanley directly attacked enclosure, writing that "owning property was brought into creation by your ancestors by the sword; which first did murder their fellow creatures … and plunder or steal way their land, and left this land successively to you … though you did not kill or thieve, yet you hold that cursed thing in your hand by the power of the sword" — as pithy an explanation of the capitalist state's power and violence as has ever been written.

Though long minimized as an eccentric, Winstanley's analysis and program were both coherent and trenchant, making him one of Britain's most astute political theorists during the century of Thomas Hobbes. He outshone John Locke, and produced some of the most radical writing in England until Marx would get his British Library reader's pass.

With the radical injunction of the biblical passage of Acts 4:32 in mind, Winstanley would write that the "earth should be made a common treasury of livelihood to all mankind, without respect of persons." From his understanding of the communism of apostolic Christianity — combined with the rhetoric of past peasant rebellions, the theology of the radical Reformation, Renaissance humanism, and a more exotic mélange of occult ideas — Winstanley would derive a recognizably modern socialist program whereby the "Earth [was] to be a Common Treasury," not in some distant future and because of the intercession of a supernatural agent, but in the present due to the labor of actual women and men.

As with all radicalism in the English Revolution, Winstanley's religious allegiances have at times proven uncomfortable to some Marxist historians who otherwise acknowledge him as a forerunner of left movements. McLynn writes that "vulgar Marxism has sometimes been too ready to conclude that religion must always be the opium of the people, or the fantasy of Man afflicted by his own inadequacy" so that the radical Protestantism of the Parliamentarians must be "a mere epiphenomenon."

Marxist though he may have been, Hill was far from "vulgar," and his contributions to the historiography of the period remain unsurpassed. Still, a discomfort with some of the scriptural rhetoric of Winstanley is obvious in Hill's study. He argues in *The World Turned Upside Down* that Winstanley simply "*illustrated* from the Bible conclusions at which they had arrived by rational means" and that both scripture and theology were "used to illustrate truths of which one was already convinced." As he would explain later in *The Century of Revolution,* such rhetoric was a muddled result of the "confusion between religion and politics at the time."

Except that there is a danger in imagining that Winstanley was simply a secular modern who happened to use religious language to get the more credulous *lumpenproletariat* on board with the Diggers' project — it's less that religion and politics were confused in the seventeenth century than that they happened to be the same thing. Even if the Diggers were socialists, or anarchists, or materialists, theirs was still a religious movement. As McLynn writes, for Winstanley a "true understanding of Christianity would lead to socialism." And any reckoning with the possibility of socialism must remember the soul of socialism.

Winstanley's program didn't lead to a common treasury of humanity, nor did the more moderate proposals of the Levellers lead to universal male enfranchisement. Yet as Benn reminds us, despite the fact that the "English revolution did not produce what its sponsors dreamed of," figures like Rainsborough and Winstanley "left us this language and these ideas to think over again and to see what they have to offer us now." Beyond the realm of practice, there is the issue of giving proper

deference to those theorists whose stead we operate in. His proclamation from *The New Law of Righteousness* that "No man shall have any more land, then he can labour himself, or have others to labour with him in love, working together, and eating bread together, as one" distinguished liberalism from the left in the seventeenth century as it does now, and it remains a potent reminder of what socialism is offering.

Hill conjures "another revolution which never happened," one that "established communal property, a far wider democracy … [and which] might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic." Winstanley's rhetoric supplies a vocabulary that allows us to imagine a better world, where Hill can "discern shadows of what this counter-culture might have been like." In the work of the Diggers and related groups, Hill sees a rejection of "private property for communism, religion for a rationalist … pantheism, the mechanical philosophy for dialectical science, asceticism for unashamed enjoyment … based on the fullest respect for the individual." As full an encapsulation of our worthy program four centuries ago as it is today.

Winstanley began work at St George's Hill, and we're digging still, still imagining radical possibilities. What might have been, still could be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Simon is a staff writer for the *Millions* and an editor at *Berfrois*. His book *Furnace of This World; or, 36 Observations about Goodness* is available from Zero Books, who will also be releasing his collection *Printed in Utopia: The Renaissance's Radicalism* in 2020.

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