

# Early Modern Communism

## The Diggers and Community of Goods

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Freedom is the man that will turn the world upside downe, therefore no wonder he hath enemies.

—Gerrard Winstanley, *A Watch-Word to the City of London and the Armie* (1649), preface

### I. Positioning the Diggers within a Communist Tradition

Since their rediscovery in the nineteenth century—first by Liberal, Socialist, and Marxist historians and then by Protestant nonconformists—the English Diggers of 1649–50 have been successively appropriated; their image refashioned in the service of new political doctrines that have sought legitimacy partly through emphasizing supposed ideological antecedents. In a previous article I demonstrated that recent attempts to incorporate the Diggers within a constructed Green heritage are unconvincing and that at worst these emerging “Green narratives” are insensitive to historical context.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, here I want to show how, either through lack of understanding the finer points of Protestant theology or deliberate distortion, most explanations of the Diggers’ implementation of the doctrine of community of goods have been misleading.

Although the term “Communism” is anachronistic in an early modern context—the Chartist Goodwyn Barmby apparently coined it in 1840—Friedrich Engels nonetheless used it in his study of *The Peasant War in Germany* (summer 1850). Engels, at that time a journalist and political activist with republican sympathies, linked the revolutionary struggle of the German people in 1848 with the defeated uprising of their forebears.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, since the 1890s a number of scholars writing in the wake of the emergence of British socialism and burgeoning trade union movement have used the word to describe an ideology that burst forth during the English Revolution. This recurring fascination with the antecedents of communism and concomitant positioning of the Diggers with a constructed if multifaceted communist tradition stretching continuously from the German Peasants’ War to the Russian Revolution—Gerrard Winstanley’s name appears eighth on a list of 19 European radicals commemorated on a twentieth-century obelisk known as the “Column of Revolution” erected in Alexander Garden, Moscow<sup>3</sup>—has, however, largely obscured an important theological aspect of the discussion. For although the Diggers’ radical activities are best understood as a practical response to the ravages of the English Civil Wars, widespread poverty, desperate food shortages, economic decay, and outbreaks of plague, their adoption of community of goods was based on a proscribed reading of a biblical text:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. (Acts 4:32)

Communal ownership of property and belongings had been a characteristic feature not only of several ancient Christian heresies but also of certain Protestant sects, all of whom envisaged themselves as communities imitating apostolic practice. Probably influenced by Baptist precedents,<sup>4</sup> and perhaps aware of the examples of a handful of separatist congregations and even some teachings espoused by members of the Family of Love (a heretical sect founded in the mid-sixteenth century), Winstanley, who like his fellow Digger William Everard had been a believer in adult baptism, envisaged his little group as both a spiritual and temporal community of love and righteousness, members of Christ’s mystical body living in the last days before the destruction of Babylon and coming of the Lord, the King of Righteousness, who would

remove the curse placed upon the Creation and make the earth a common treasury. Indeed, although the Diggers welcomed newcomers who would willingly submit to their communal precepts, Winstanley thought that only those who had undergone an illuminating spiritual transformation could willingly dispense with their possessions and have all things common. Yet Winstanley was also careful to stress that his notion of community did not extend to sharing women; a stigma that had attached itself to the Anabaptists after their forerunners had seized the town of Münster in 1534, proclaiming it the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2) and forcefully establishing polygamy. Accordingly, Winstanley distanced himself from the perceived sexual excesses of the “Ranters,” condemning their conduct as carnal rather than spiritual. This emphasis on morality links the Diggers with other religious groups who emerged during the English Revolution, notably the Behmenists and Quakers. Furthermore, since Winstanley is known to have died a Quaker, the suggestive parallels between his writings and those of various early Quaker leaders must be reexamined.

## II. A Bloodstained Land Scourged by Sword, Pestilence, and Famine

On the cold afternoon of 30 January 1649, England’s king was publicly beheaded, his blood spilled by one blow of an executioner’s axe that severed his fourth cervical vertebra. The “old World” had been turned upside down and was, in Winstanley’s words, “running up like parchment in the fire, and wearing away.”<sup>5</sup> That same afternoon the purged Rump of the House of Commons passed an act forbidding the proclamation of Charles Stuart’s successor. Days later the Commons resolved to abolish the monarchy and House of Lords. Winstanley welcomed the creation of an English republic, praising the “excellent and Righteous” Acts of Parliament that had “cast out Kingly power” (17 March) and made the country “a Free Common-wealth” (19 May).<sup>6</sup> Yet the new regime rested on insecure foundations, and during the course of that momentous year, Charles I’s eldest son and heir was proclaimed King of Great Britain and Ireland at Edinburgh, several Royalists were banished and their estates confiscated, and others were imprisoned, tried, and occasionally executed. In April troops of one army regiment mutinied following a dispute concerning arrears of pay. Their ringleader Robert Lockyer was court-martialled and shot in front of St. Paul’s cathedral.<sup>7</sup> In May a more

widespread if dispersed mutiny, regarded by some contemporary journalists and pamphleteers as a Leveller revolt, was suppressed at its centers—notably Bristol and Burford (Oxfordshire), where three soldiers were “shot to death” in the churchyard.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, incorrect reports identified the Digger William Everard as “one of the chiefest Ring leaders,” commanding about 500 cavalry, several newsbooks confusing him with an army agitator who shared the same surname.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Winstanley counselled England’s rulers not to be ashamed or afraid of the Levellers, to desist from laughing or jeering at these “true publike spirited” individuals. For he believed Jesus Christ, “the Saviour of all men” and “powerful Spirit of Love,” to be the “head *Leveller*,” “the greatest, first, and truest Leveller that ever was spoke of in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

In August Oliver Cromwell, recently appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, set sail from south Wales with an expeditionary force to subdue resistance to Parliamentary rule that was being continued by an alliance of Old English settlers loyal to the Stuart dynasty, supporters of a Royalist aristocrat, and Catholic confederates. Having landed close to Dublin he marched north to Drogheda where, partly in reprisal for an earlier massacre of Protestant settlers by Catholics, his troops slaughtered more than 2,500 of the 3,100-strong garrison, a few civilians, and all the Catholic clergy they could spot.<sup>11</sup> For Cromwell this signified “a righteous judgement of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood.”<sup>12</sup> On his return he invaded Scotland, triumphing at the battle of Dunbar (3 September 1650). Praising God for the English victory in an exultant letter to the Speaker of the House of Commons, Cromwell identified God’s chosen people with the “chariots and horsemen of Israel.” Using language akin to Winstanley, he also urged that measures be taken to “relieve the oppressed,” “hear the groans of poor prisoners,” and “reform the abuses of all professions”—doubtless an allusion to the clergy and lawyers. The following year Cromwell crushed the forces that had allied themselves with the dead king’s son at Worcester (3 September 1651), a “crowning mercy” to God’s “chosen nation” that brought the British Civil Wars to an end.<sup>13</sup> Two months later Winstanley dedicated *The Law of Freedom* to Cromwell, imploring him to reward the “oppressed Commoners of *England*” with the “free possession of the Land and Liberties”—a freedom purchased through their labors and blood.<sup>14</sup>

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England was a ravaged land in 1649. The harvests of the two preceding years had been poor, the early winter months, always difficult, had been particularly severe, and murrain (a virulent infectious disease of livestock) had taken sheep and cattle in many areas.<sup>15</sup> From the provinces came news of widespread famine, with stories of families “ready to starve for want of bread to put in their mouths.” In Westmorland, it was said, “no less then 16,000 Families have not bread to put in their Mouths, nor money to buy it.” From Ambleside, Kendal, and the adjoining region came a petition claiming that “many of the poorer sort are already starved, the richer reduced to such extremities, that eyther they must be supplied from other Parts, or perish.”<sup>16</sup> Similar tales of distress emanated from Winstanley’s native county of Lancashire, which was reportedly afflicted with a “three-corded scourge of Sword, Pestilence, and Famin.” Trade was “utterly decayed,” the inhabitants of Wigan and Ashton apparently reduced to eating “Carion, and other unwholsome food, to the destroying of themselves.”<sup>17</sup> In Somerset commodities were scarce and prices high, while dearth in Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire, had reduced wives and children to “go a begging from door to door.”<sup>18</sup> The Essex minister Ralph Josselin recorded that people were “pincht with want of food,” noting the “great scarcitie of all things.”<sup>19</sup> Nor did London fare better. It was observed that since “these unnaturall warres began, there are multitudes of poore lately sprung up, whose miseries are many.” The “wel-affected” women of the city and its suburbs petitioned the House of Commons, bemoaning their “poverty, misery, and famine,” unable to see their children “cry for bread.” Reports of “credit” spoke of some families that “in the extremity of hunger, have been constrained to feed upon beasts bloud, and Brewers grains boild together,” and a newsbook related that in Westminster a glover, his wife, and six children had fed upon cats and dogs.<sup>20</sup> The plight of these destitute masses had moved a pamphleteer to cry:

Oh that the cravings of our Stomacks could be heard by the Parliament and City! Oh that the Tears of our poor famishing Babes were botled! Oh that their tender Mothers Cryes for bread to feed them were ingraven in Brasse! Oh that our pined Carkasses were open to every pitifull Eye! Oh that it were known that we sell our Beds and Cloathes for Bread! Oh our Hearts faint, and we are ready to swoon in the top of every Street!<sup>21</sup>

Yet there were no grain riots in London, Kent, or Essex. Though it was maintained that never in England had there been “so many in want of relief as now,” food riots seem to have been confined to the clothing districts of the West Country.<sup>22</sup> Some of the poor survived by stealing food and fuel, others benefited from organized collections, abated rents, charitable bequests, and relief provided by their parish.<sup>23</sup> Several schemes were also advanced for putting them to work, and the Mayor of London passed a declaration empowering constables to whip idle beggars. In addition, measures were taken to alleviate distress.<sup>24</sup> Even so, as a timely reprint of three sermons on the curse befalling corn hoarders reminded, the “publike punishments” of “*Sword, Pestilence, and Famine*” were among “the most grievous Iudgements” inflicted by God upon “a sinfull Nation.”<sup>25</sup> Reporting a plague of vermin blighting crops and cattle in Essex, a Royalist newsbook editor issued a similar monition:

truly it is a wonder that the blood-surfeited earth produce not greater Plagues then these, when it hath been made drunke with the blood of Gods Saints; yea, the sacred blood of the Lords Anointed that cryeth louder then that of *Abels*, and will never leave roaring in the Earth, till it bring down heavier plagues upon this mournful Isle, then ever those lesse vengeance threatning sinnes brought downe on *Sodom* and *Gomorah*.<sup>26</sup>

Abiezer Coppe, a Baptist preacher later renowned as a “madd libertine,” also believed that the Lord was now coming “*to make inquisition for blood; for murder and pride, &c.*” and he warned:

It's not for nothing that such various strange kinds of worms, grubs, and caterpillars (my strong host, saith the Lord of Hosts) have been sent into some graine: Neither is in vain, that I the Lord sent the rot among so many sheep this last yeer; if they had been resign'd to me, and you had kept a true communion, they had not been given up to that plague.<sup>27</sup>

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Against this backdrop—Civil War in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland; the sinful shedding of “innocent” blood that was believed to be

a pollutant that defiled the land<sup>28</sup>; harvest failure, murrain, famine, destitution, outbreaks of plague in Berkshire, Chester, Liverpool, Wrexham, and Westminster; sick and maimed soldiers together with the widows and orphans of slain combatants in need of charity; as well as campaigns to release people imprisoned for debt, introduce liberty of conscience, initiate ecclesiastical, educational, electoral, legal, medical, and taxation reforms, abolish the maintenance of ministers by tithes, and promote free trade—scriptural obligations were ringing in the ears of the godly. For pure religion, with its exhortation to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22), was located in conduct. Words without action were the badge of hypocritical cheats; action was the “life of all.” Moreover, the time was approaching when, Winstanley believed, “men shall not talk of righteousness, but act righteousness.”<sup>29</sup>

Like his fellow Lancastrians, Winstanley understood the triple afflictions of “sword, pestilence, and famine” as the judgment of God (Ezekiel 6:11), who had commissioned his angels or “mighty powers” to “waste & destroy a rebellious people.”<sup>30</sup> Angered by rich hoarders who locked up the “treasures of the earth” in bags, chests, and barns, offering up neither gold nor silver nor corn to the “publike Treasury,” but instead hardened their hearts against the poor while their fellow Christians starved for want of bread, he accused them of committing the “greatest sinne against universall Love”—Achan’s “destroying” sin of covetousness (Joshua 7:1–24).<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, in similar fashion to the firebrand Coppe, the visionary George Foster, the heresiarch John Reeve, and William Finch (a disciple of the self-proclaimed High Priest and Recorder to the thirteen Tribes of the Jews, TheaurauJohn Tany), Winstanley took comfort in the New Testament verses foretelling misery to rich men, “bidding them *Howl and weep, for their gold and silver is cankered, and the rust thereof cries unto heaven for vengeance against them*” (James 5:1–3). Indeed, his conviction that this threat would be “materially fulfilled” led to his notion that wealth would be redistributed and that those once oppressed “shall inherit the land.”<sup>32</sup> In the same vein as Coppe, Foster, Tany, the vegetarian hermit Roger Crab, and Mary Gadbury (the alleged lover of a man pretending to be Christ), Winstanley also recalled Jesus Christ’s advice to the “selfe-conceited young man” bidding him “sell all that hee had, and give to the poore” (Matthew 19:21), adding that these words applied to all men.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, like the Levellers Richard Overton and William Walwyn, the Baptist Joseph Salmon, the physician Peter Chamberlen, the Quaker George

Fox, the army officer Francis Freeman, the Muggletonians John Reeve and Lawrence Clarkson, TheaurauJohn Tany, and Richard Coppin (who was charged with maintaining blasphemous opinions), Winstanley urged mankind to walk righteously, declaring that acts of love consisted in performing gospel injunctions: “feeding the hungry; cloathing the naked; relieving the oppressed; seeking the preservation of others” (Matthew 25:35–36).<sup>34</sup>

Among Winstanley’s favored designations for Christ was the “Sun of Righteousnesse.” Derived from the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible, an apocalyptic revelation granted to the prophet Malachi, this vision of Christ as the dreadful rising Sun, the bringer of justice to the wicked (Malachi 4:2), was partly echoed in the title of his millenarian manifesto *The New Law of Righteousnes* (1649). Punning on Sun with son, Winstanley linked God the King of righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6) with the dazzling and incendiary appearance of Christ the “son of righteousnesse” in sinful man. This “spreading power of light” was a “spiritual rising” in the heart; an “exaltation” of Christ’s spiritual power that had begun to “heal the earth,” treading down the power of darkness within disobedient flesh and conquering the “corruption” within the Creation. Sons and daughters were being taken out of their “imaginary earth,” under which they had lain buried, so that they could “enjoy the Father” and live “in the onenesse of that spirit that made all things.”<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, as Christ began to “rise and spread,” so those possessing gold and silver would be “taken into the onenesse of this Spirit,” willingly coming to offer up their treasures.<sup>36</sup> Henceforth united in a spiritual and temporal community of love and righteousness, these sons and daughters—members of Christ’s mystical body—resembled the Apostles and their brethren waiting, as the risen Christ commanded, at Jerusalem (Luke 24:49).<sup>37</sup> For these believers did not enslave one another, nor did the wealthy allow the destitute to starve:

But the rich sold their possessions, and gave equality to the poor, and no man said, that any thing that he possessed was his own, for they had all things common. (Acts 4:32)<sup>38</sup>

### III. Community of Goods

Community of goods was a controversial if ancient doctrine. Fragmentary evidence suggests that from about 529 BCE until the mid–fifth century,



Pythagoras of Samos's younger male followers, who lived in Greek cities in southern Italy such as Croton and Tarentum, may have held their property in common during a five-year initiatory period of silence.<sup>39</sup> Although Plato only mentioned a "Pythagorean way of life," it is noteworthy that he recommended—whether seriously or ironically is unresolved—that the Guardians of his republic should have no private property "beyond the barest essentials" and that they be prohibited from handling gold or silver. Moreover, these Guardians should be forbidden by law from living together in separate households and, in accordance with the proverb that friends share everything, "all the women should be common to all the men."<sup>40</sup> While acknowledging some advantages of having and using possessions communally, as well as pointing out that Spartans shared each other's slaves, horses, and dogs, Aristotle nonetheless raised a number of objections to abolishing private property. These were based upon the principle that everyone is motivated more by self-interest than by the common good and that common ownership precluded liberality. He also considered community of wives and children impracticable; an unsuitable arrangement for the city state's Guardians because it weakened bonds of kinship and love, dissolving the household and encouraging incestuous relationships.<sup>41</sup>

Both Plato's and Aristotle's points of view were expressed by characters in Thomas More's satirical dialogue *Utopia* (1516). Thus Raphael Hythloday sympathized with Plato, "wisest of men," who saw that the only path to the common good lay through "equality of possession." The figure of More, on the other hand, countered that a society where all things were held in common was a recipe for bloodshed, lawlessness, and turmoil.<sup>42</sup> This ominous prediction was to be fulfilled a year before More's execution. In February 1534, Anabaptists seized the town of Münster in Westphalia, proclaiming it the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2). Their watchword was "the word is become flesh" (John 1:14), and approving of Scripture alone, they burned books and manuscripts held in the cathedral library together with those they found in private possession. Under the leadership of a Haarlem baker named Jan Matthijs and then, after his violent death at the hands of a besieging mercenary army, their king Jan of Leiden, the Anabaptists did away with private ownership of money, celebrated public communal feasts, and citing the precedent of biblical patriarchs, brutally established polygamy.<sup>43</sup> According to a later hostile account, they taught that "in their Church all were holy," that none could be saved who refused to make their "private goods common," and that it was

“lawfull to have many wives.” This was justified because the time foretold by Christ had come when the “meeke shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). The Anabaptists’ messianic kingdom was eventually destroyed in June 1535, marking the end of an “Apostleship, that would have preached a Gospell of rebellion over all the world.”<sup>44</sup>

Münster became a byword for sectarian anarchy, and the principle of community of goods, despite scriptural sanction (Acts 2:44–45, 4:32), was condemned by the 38th of the 39 articles of the Church of England (1563) as a false boast of certain Anabaptists—notwithstanding that every Christian man ought to give alms liberally according to his ability.<sup>45</sup> Yet it was not only Anabaptists who were considered “*adversaries*” of the “*truth*.” The Essenes (second century BCE to first century CE),<sup>46</sup> Manichees (third to fourth century), Pelagians (fifth century), Apostles (thirteenth to fourteenth century), Fraticelli (mid-thirteenth to fourteenth century), and Hutterites (sixteenth century to present) all implemented, or were believed to have adopted, communal ownership of property and belongings.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Familists were accused of sharing goods among members of their religious community.<sup>48</sup>

Commonly called the Family of Love, this hierarchical organization had been founded in the 1540s by Henrick Niclaes, a merchant active in Amsterdam and Emden. English adherents of this “blasphemous and erroneous” sect were characterized as mistaken in their judgements, “distempered in their passions,” and disordered in their lives. Polemicists represented them as mystics who allegorized the Scriptures and stressed the immanence of Christ. Furthermore, they were rebuked for seeking to attain perfectibility on Earth; that is the process of spiritual regeneration whereby the believer returned to a prelapsarian state of oneness with God—or as it was known, of being “Godded with God.”<sup>49</sup> According to a “confession” taken at Guildford, Surrey, in 1561, before being received into the Familists’ congregation, a newly elected brother assented to having all his possessions held “in common” with the rest of his brethren. Though Familists were notoriously skillful at dissembling, this problematic evidence cannot be discounted since it resembles aspects of Niclaes’s message.<sup>50</sup> Niclaes taught that the good and penitent were now separating from the wicked and assembling as the Communitality of Love who, illumined by the true heavenly daylight of the “Sunne of Righteousnes,” would enter in the rest of the Lord and obtain everlasting godliness. Elsewhere, he described the New Jerusalem as a holy city of peace, a spiritual place of

“prefect righteousnes” and knowledge of God where no man claimed anything to be his own. For everyone’s good disposition negated the desire to obtain private possessions, so whatsoever was there was free. Nor did the inhabitants commit adultery, as they were honest, chaste, and of a pure heart.<sup>51</sup>

Besides the Anabaptists of Münster together with, allegedly, their brethren in the Swiss towns and villages of St. Gallen, Zollikon, and Zürich, the Hutterite communities established in Moravia, Hungary, and Transylvania, and Familists, possibly in Surrey and perhaps elsewhere, other Protestant sectaries imitated the apostolic practice of community of goods, hoping to witness its flourishing anew. Thus a nonconformist preacher cheerfully admitted that members of his separatist congregation at Norwich—afterwards relocated to Middelburg in Zeeland—helped one another’s wants to the best of their ability.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the Somerset-born separatist minister John Traske cited the verses in Acts as “blessed examples” required of the “*Subjects of Christs Kingdome*” amongst themselves. Traske’s early teaching emphasized Old Testament legalism, and though a Christian, he kept Jewish dietary laws and observed the Sabbath on Saturday. Little wonder that his follower Returne Hebdone declared in prison that it was “the judgement of the holy spirit, that whosoever is false in the common communion of goods, cannot hold the love in the holy communion of the body and blood of the Lord.”<sup>53</sup> Another English separatist, William Bradford, crossed the Atlantic Ocean on *The Mayflower* with fellow “pilgrims” and economic migrants, founding the Plymouth Colony (modern-day Plymouth, Massachusetts) in 1620. Bradford served as the colony’s governor intermittently for more than thirty years. Significantly, “Of Plimmoth Plantation,” his account of the colony’s history begun in 1630, recalls a failed experiment in communal living—even amongst “godly and sober men.” Writing from bitter experience, to the evident satisfaction of a future President of the United States and subsequent American anti-Communists, Bradford mocked:

the vanitie of that conceite of Platos & other ancients, applauded by some of later times;—that ye taking away of propertie, and bringing in com[m]unitie into a comone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser then God. For this com[m]unitie (so farr as it was) was found to breed much confusion & discontent, and retard much employe[n]t that would have been to their benefite and comforte.<sup>54</sup>

Even so, sharing property and possessions remained appealing to members of spiritual communities. About 1638, for example, an informant alleged that sectaries called “Familists of the mount” held that “all things are common.” Familists were later said to want not only goods and cattle in common, but also wives and children.<sup>55</sup> Adamites were accused of maintaining the same thing, and although probably existing in fantasy rather than reality, polemical representations of this supposed sect suggestively resemble certain features of anti-Baptist texts.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, among the intolerable Baptist doctrinal errors enumerated by heresiographers were the notions that a Christian man could not in good conscience have possessions but must make “all things common,” and that he was permitted to have “*many wives*.”<sup>57</sup> Worse still was the charge that these Saints, believing “all the earth” to be theirs, sought a “share in the Lands and Estates of Gentlemen, and rich men.”<sup>58</sup>

Mindful of hostility to egalitarian proposals, the Levellers attempted to assuage fears by including a clause in their large petition to the House of Commons (delivered 11 September 1648) that sought assurances that Parliament would not abolish ownership, level men’s estates, or make “all things common.”<sup>59</sup> Propagandists, however, intensified the anxious mood, using the foundation of the Digger plantation on St. George’s Hill in April 1649 to malign the recently imprisoned Leveller leaders. Accordingly, John Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince, and Richard Overton denied having intended to “Levell all mens estates,” eliminate social distinctions, and introduce anarchy. In addition, they stressed that among “primitive Christians” community of goods had not been compulsory but a voluntary act stemming from faith and charity.<sup>60</sup> Walwyn’s wife also rejected her husband’s implied approval of polygamy as an aspersion, and Lilburne disassociated himself from “*all the erronious tenents of the poor Diggers*.”<sup>61</sup> Yet the apostolic model of having all things common remained. Thus the anonymous author of *Tyranipocrit Discovered* (1649) condemned hypocritical, oppressive rulers who made the rich richer instead of bringing in “equality of goods and lands” so that the “young, strong and able” might labor while the old, weak, and impotent rested.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, before experiencing a “shaking fit,” George Foster beheld an apocalyptic vision of men and women singing and dancing, “giving away their money.” Likening it to “universal love” or the community of Saints mentioned in Acts, he was compelled to distribute the little money he had.<sup>63</sup> On 6 May 1650, information was provided concerning several “dangerous

& unsound” opinions allegedly maintained by Lieutenant William Jackson, primarily that he favored a “com[m]unity of all thinges” and that he ought to “enjoy another man’s wife.”<sup>64</sup> Another person accused of espousing “community as to goods” was Mary Pocock who, adopting the biblical name Rahab (breadth), lived together in “Community” with the Behmenist John Pordage and his “Family” at Bradfield, Berkshire.<sup>65</sup> In continental Europe, possibly Brandenburg, the former Baptist minister turned Saturday-Sabbatarian Thomas Tillam, who had escaped religious persecution in England after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, reportedly preached “circumcision; the 7th day Sabbaoth Jewish rites; community of goodes (& they say of wiues) but as many concubines as they please.”<sup>66</sup>

While imprisoned in Newgate jail, Abiezer Coppe too declared in a brief yet defiant pamphlet, written as an unrepentant response to an Act against blasphemy (9 August 1650), that he owned “none but that Apostolical, Saint-like Community spoken of in the Scriptures.”<sup>67</sup> Coppe believed that he was living in the “last daies” (James 5:3) when cankered gold and silver would rise up like fire in judgement against those that forbore from casting all into “the Treasury” (Mark 12:43). For only those who accounted nothing their own, who had “ALL THINGS common” (Acts 2:44) would escape the plague of God which threatened to “rot and consume” all possessions. He therefore exhorted:

*Come! give all to the poore and follow me, and you shall have treasure in heaven.*  
(Matthew 19:21)<sup>68</sup>

Coppe’s inflammatory beliefs and provocative behavior—enacting prophetic performances warning of impending divine judgement, falling down before the feet of cripples, beggars, and lepers, kissing their feet and giving them money, together with his justification of cursing and swearing – lead to him being called the “great Ranter.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, a memoir compiled after his death portrayed Coppe as a lascivious blasphemer, alleging that it was usual for him to preach “stark naked” by day and to lie drunk with a wench “stark naked” at night.<sup>70</sup> This association of nudity with sexual license is familiar from hostile accounts of adult baptism rituals. Hence the Presbyterian heresiographer Thomas Edwards observed that it was no wonder that many became rebaptizers “to dip young maids and young women naked,” adding

that it was an inducement to adultery.<sup>71</sup> Tainted by accusations that the Anabaptists of Münster held it lawful to have many wives, Baptists vindicated themselves from the charge that they believed in polygamy.<sup>72</sup> Yet it must be emphasized that Coppe, a former Baptist preacher who was shown “*a more excellent way*” (1 Corinthians 12:31), delighted in citing the scriptural precedent of the prophet Hosea, who was commanded by God to marry a whore (Hosea 1:2).<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Coppe’s supposed embrace of adultery—contrary to the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14)—resulted, by his own account, in an Act for suppressing the “abominable and crying sins of Incest, Adultery and Fornication, wherewith this Land is much defiled” (10 May 1650).<sup>74</sup> Consequently, in an effort to regain his liberty, he refuted “several blasphemous opinions,” catalogued several doctrinal errors, and casuistically asserted the contrary truths, disowning adultery, and fornication as sins and detesting the notion that “*Community of Wives is lawful.*” Instead, Coppe once more professed his belief in an “Apostolical, saint-like community” and his willingness to call nothing that he had his own.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the minister Richard Baxter’s incredulity that Coppe could have any followers and that men and women should “place their Religion in revelling, roaring, drinking, whoring” and “open full-mouthed swearing,” it appeared to unreceptive observers that a new, abominable sect of monsters was hatching. They were called “Ranters” and said to maintain community of women to satisfy their unclean lust.<sup>76</sup> In addition to affirming allegedly that “all Women ought to be in common,” these Ranters supposedly interpreted the passage “*All things are lawful*” (1 Corinthians 6:12) as giving them the freedom to commit all manner of wickedness. Therefore they seemingly deemed it acceptable to make use not only of a man’s wife, but also of his “Estate, Goods, and Chattels,” for “all things were common.”<sup>77</sup> Nor were these accusations without foundation, for the anonymous author of the “*Ranter Treatise*” *A Justification of the Mad Crew* (1650) upheld the principle of truly enjoying “*all things in common.*” Citing the scriptural precedent of those upon whom the “sprinklings of the spirit fell,” who were made to “see and act in this Communitie” (Acts 2:44), he denounced the hypocrisy of ownership, affirming the wisdom of obeying the Lord’s commands:

what is mine is every ones, and what is every ones is mine also: every woman  
is my wife, my joy and delight, the earth is mine, and the beasts on a thousand

hills are mine: they have brought all they have, and have laid all down at the Lords feet.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV. Puritans, Separatists, Baptists, and “Seekers”

It has been reckoned that during the mid-1640s there were nearly forty organized Baptist groups in England, including at least ten churches in London, with perhaps a few more dispersed around the country for which no evidence survives. By 1660 there were possibly as many as 250 Baptist churches in England and Wales with a combined total membership, despite marked variations in the size of congregations, generously estimated at 25,000 souls—that is about 0.47 percent of the population. The picture, however, was more fluid than these figures suggest. Congregations were voluntary associations, a gathered church of believers joined in fellowship as members of one body, who advocated either the mainstream principle of “closed communion” (membership restricted to those who had undergone believer’s baptism) or the hybrid of “mixed communion” (open to Baptists and non-Baptist separatists alike). Some congregations fragmented, others were probably short-lived; membership also fluctuated, swelling with conversions made by “emissaries” who obeyed the injunction to go teach and baptize all nations (Matthew 28:19), but dwindling when people either fell away from the faith or were excommunicated. Moreover, though Baptists agreed that there was no scriptural justification for infant baptism, they were divided on a number of important theological issues: whether Christ died for the sins of all mankind or only the elect were to be saved by God’s free grace and mercy (Romans 9:11–13), whether baptism should be for believers only (Mark 16:16), whether baptism should be administered by sprinkling or full immersion, whether church discipline should be imposed upon members, and whether it was necessary to lay hands upon elders at their ordination and anoint the sick with oil (James 5:14).<sup>79</sup>

Undoubtedly, the most serious cause of schism among Baptists was their disagreement over soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). Though denominational alignments did not harden until arguably autumn 1644, on the one hand were followers of Calvinist doctrine who believed in the “particular Election and Reprobation” of individuals (Particular Baptists),

and on the other were essentially maintainers of core Arminian or Remonstrant tenets who, while accepting particular election and denying free will, nevertheless taught the “*Universal Love of God to all*” and therefore the possibility of universal redemption (General Baptists).<sup>80</sup> The Calvinistic, or as they subsequently became known, Particular Baptists traced their origins to a split that occurred within an Independent congregation that had been formed in London in 1616. Repudiating the Church of England as a false church, several separatists established a splinter group in 1633 with some members “receiving a further Baptism.”<sup>81</sup> The so-called General Baptists by contrast were influenced, to a debatable degree, by the continental Anabaptist tradition, particularly through their founder’s association, while in exile, with the Waterlander Mennonite church in Amsterdam who practiced believer’s baptism. Yet this church too split over theological differences, a tiny remnant returning to England in 1612 where, despite their precarious position and a further split, they grew by 1626 to five congregations including the main one at London. Evidence of institutional continuity is lacking, but there was a successor church under the leadership of the Colchester soapboiler Thomas Lambe that, apparently together with members of perhaps two or even three other Baptist congregations from London and Southwark, met illegally at Whitechapel in January 1641, resulting in fighting, imprisonment, and legal proceedings. By late 1644, Lambe’s church had moved to Bell Alley, Coleman Street, later relocating to Spitalfields where a minority of members soon seceded. Comparatively less is known of another London church lead by Edward Barber, a cloth-drawer whose congregation sometimes met at a “great house” in Bishopsgate Street where, according to an informant, they ate a communal meal.<sup>82</sup>

Lambe was an energetic emissary, travelling during the Civil Wars to Essex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Kent, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Surrey, and Wiltshire. About the beginning of September 1645, accompanied by the Norwich weaver and Baptist convert Samuel Oates, Lambe reportedly preached at Guildford, Surrey, in a church and would have done the same at Godalming on a Sunday had the minister not denied him use of his pulpit. Lambe and Oates were heading to Portsmouth and, if they followed the road from London, would have passed en route through Cobham, where Winstanley had been living since autumn 1643. Another itinerant Baptist evangelist active in Surrey was Thomas Collier, a carter or husbandman who was said



to have preached to an Independent congregation in the meeting place at Guildford around the beginning of April 1646. This “mechanicall fellow” was afterwards imprisoned at Portsmouth for sowing the seeds of “Anabaptism, Anti-sabbatarianism, and some Arminianisme” in Guernsey.<sup>83</sup>

Over at Kingston-upon-Thames, roughly nine miles from Cobham, the chamberlains’ accounts for 1643–44 and a warrant made out on 15 August 1644 indicate that “Anabaptists” were probably arrested, taken to Westminster, and possibly brought before the Parliamentary Committee of Examinations for questioning. Further evidence comes from a pamphlet dated 7 April 1645 based on two sermons delivered at Kingston the preceding February by Richard Byfield, rector of Long Ditton. Condemning the denial of infant baptism as an infection that had led to the “diseasednesse of the Congregation of Kingston,” Byfield censured the heretical beliefs of antinomians, anti-Sabbatarians, Anabaptists, Arminians, Socinians, and Papists as pollutants that defiled the English church and Temple of God.<sup>84</sup> It is conceivable that Byfield’s “Temple-vermine” — “new disturbers” that allegedly boasted of “fals[e]” gifts such as scriptural interpretation and revelation (1 Corinthians 14:26), but significantly not glossolalia (Acts 2:4)—referred to a conventicle whose dozen or so members were seized with Bibles in their hands at the house of John Fielder, a Kingston miller, one January Sunday in 1645. Briefly imprisoned, upon their release they resumed meeting privately after Sabbath day divine service, “*praying and expounding the Scriptures*,” and were apprehended again in March. Fielder was additionally charged with Sabbath breaking and recusancy. Protracted legal proceedings ensued during which Fielder was advised by his solicitor Edward Barber, whose experience at the hands of the Court of High Commission for denying infant baptism and payment of tithes followed by 11 months imprisonment in Newgate and dealings with the Court of King’s Bench had well-equipped him to make the defendant’s case. On 17 February 1649, Fielder summoned two men who would shortly become Diggers to represent him in arbitration: Henry Bickerstaffe and Winstanley. Urian Worthington, a Kingston maltster and member of Fielder’s conventicle, also became a Digger, signing *A Declaration from the Poor oppressed People of England*. Fielder’s subsequent choice of the Leveller leader John Lilburne as legal counsel is equally striking, and the possibility that Winstanley and Lilburne conferred on Fielder’s case has been discussed. Certainly, Fielder, Worthington, Winstanley, and Lilburne all became Quakers.<sup>85</sup>

On 16 October 1648, Winstanley dated the preface to his tract *Truth Lifting up its head above scandals* (1649). The work was written partly as a vindication of William Everard, who had been accused of blasphemously denying God, Christ, Scriptures, and prayer, “slanderosly” branded a “deceiver” with other “filthy names,” and imprisoned by the bailiffs of Kingston after lodging a night in the town. Although a link between Everard and Fielder’s conventicle cannot be firmly established, Everard’s presence at Kingston in Winstanley’s company is suggestive. So too are Everard’s previous activities; hitherto he had apparently been implicated in a plot to kill Charles I, detained at Windsor in the Marshal-General’s custody, and sometime after 14 December 1647, cashiered from the army.<sup>86</sup> A Presbyterian minister of Reading later vilified him as “first a *separatist*, then a *scoffer* at ordinances, then a *curser*, then a *blasphemer*.”<sup>87</sup> Then there is Winstanley’s intriguing reference to Everard as “*Chamberlain the Redding man*.”<sup>88</sup> Chamberlain or Chamberlin, as the Baptist Samuel Fisher related, was the new supposedly God-given spiritual name Everard had adopted (Revelation 2:17) since he claimed to reside “in the secret chambers of the most high.” Fisher recalled that Everard had visited him at his house—probably in Lydd, Kent, sometime between December 1647 and March 1649—“pretending that he was immediately sent from God.” Fisher, who had recently renounced infant baptism and “received real baptism” was told by Everard, formerly a Baptist himself, to relinquish believer’s baptism as well. Yet Fisher remained unconvinced, mocking Everard’s “strange” ecstasies, “uncouth deportment,” “blasphemous pratings,” and presumptuousness, likening him to one of Satan’s archangels of darkness.<sup>89</sup>

Just over three or four weeks before digging began on St. George’s Hill in the parish of Walton-on-Thames, Everard was charged with interrupting a church service at Staines, Middlesex, in a threatening manner, shaking a hedging bill (a long-handled agricultural tool for cutting hedges) at the minister and shouting “come down thou sonne of perdition come down.” Two men stood bail for Everard, Henry Snelling of Walton and John Barker of Cobham, who became a Digger.<sup>90</sup> Everard may also have been involved in a dramatic incident at Walton about mid-February 1649, when six soldiers reportedly entered the church after evening service, one holding a lantern with a candle burning in it and four unlit candles. Prevented from going up into the pulpit and then speaking in the church, the lantern bearer went into the churchyard where he revealed to his auditors that he had received a

vision and divine command to deliver God's message. This consisted of five lights, corresponding to the five candles: that the Sabbath was abolished as an unnecessary Jewish ceremonial law; that tithes were abolished for the same reason; that ministers were abolished as "*Antichristian*" and now replaced by Christ's Saints, whom he enlightened with "*Revelations, and Inspirations*"; that magistrates were abolished, being redundant now that Christ had "*erected the Kingdom of Saints upon earth*"; and that the Old and New Testament were abolished because Christ had now arrived in glory, imparting "*a fuller measure of his Spirit to his Saints*" than the Scriptures. At which point he set fire to his little Bible.<sup>91</sup> If Everard had already been cashiered, then identifying him as this unnamed soldier is problematic, unless he retained his uniform. Even so, it must be emphasized that the abolition of the Sabbath, tithes, and ministers together with antiscriturism were all theological positions characteristically if not exclusively maintained, with varying degrees of subtlety, by several General Baptists—notably prominent members of Thomas Lamb's and Edward Barber's churches.<sup>92</sup> Everard had by this time, like the unnamed soldier, rejected gospel ordinances believing he had received the gift of revelation. Indeed, he called himself a prophet, justifying the Diggers' new communal experiment with a vision.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Everard may be the unidentified Digger who, before 20 April 1649, disrupted a church service at Walton by thrusting "*a great burden of thorns and bryers*" at the parson preaching in the pulpit. This gesture was both aggressive and symbolic because Winstanley understood thorns and briars to represent devilish "troublesome distempers" within the Creation that would be burned up at the restoration of mankind (Isaiah 5:6, 10:17).<sup>94</sup>

Clearly the Diggers did not emerge from nothing. Rather, despite the scattered, often brief yet predominantly hostile or derisive nature of the extant sources, patterns of contacts or social networks come into view. Early modern historians have long been familiar with these networks, highlighting the importance of gender, age, ethnicity, kinship, social status, neighborliness, mobility, economic interests, patronage, intellectual pursuits, religious affiliation, friendship, and love in connecting individuals and influencing the development of their beliefs and behavior. Of the 74 Surrey Diggers whose names are known, about a third were local inhabitants, the greatest number originating from Cobham. The social bonds of this Cobham group, so far as the evidence permits, can be traced outward from their homes in

Cobham's three administrative districts to neighboring Walton and other villages in the vicinity, beyond to Surrey's principal towns—Guildford in the southwest and Kingston in the northeast—and further still to London; all within a 17-mile radius of Cobham's church.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, gathered churches drew members from across parish boundaries, and a crucial element in creating and reinforcing ties between several future Diggers was their shared radical religious ideology. These doctrines largely shaped their identities and allegiances, ranging from separatist to Baptist and even beyond outward forms of observance. Among those who broke with the Church of England was Winstanley, who went "through the ordinance of dipping" as the letter of Scripture warranted.<sup>96</sup>

In *The New Law of Righteousnes* (preface dated 26 January 1649), Winstanley recounted that he had been a "good Christian" and "godly man," a strict if blind church goer who in his "zealous ignorance" heard sermons and accepted clerical teaching uncritically.<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere, Winstanley recalled that he had been proud, envious, and discontented, that his soul used to live in "sin and disobedience" under the sense of divine wrath. Deeply troubled, he sighed and mourned, praying, but to no effect as the "power of darkness" appeared within him like an "overflowing wave of wickedness." Unable to escape the "bondage of selfishness," he realized that he was a "wretched man, wrapped in misery." Winstanley continued in this state until God's "righteous law" shone upon him as a "fire of love" (Hebrews 12:29), scorching and burning the "enmity" of his nature (1 Corinthians 3:13), fashioning his human failings into the qualities of humility, love, and contentedness. Enduring these torments, his "poor" soul was purged of dross and refined like gold tried in the furnace (cf. Revelation 3:18).<sup>98</sup> These spiritual confessions resemble the testimonies of puritans remembering their conversion experiences when they turned to God (Acts 3:26), repented of their sins, and after a process involving humiliation, self-abnegation, and purification, became born again (John 3:3).<sup>99</sup> The impression that Winstanley was once deeply immersed in puritan modes of worship and instruction is strengthened by his reading of commentaries explaining the significance of 1,260 days in the coming Apocalypse (Daniel 7:25, Revelation 11:3, 12:6), as well as John Foxe's widely circulated Protestant history of the English Church, *Actes and Monuments of matters most speciall and memorable* (popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs*). Merging Foxe's account of the Marian persecution with the scheming counsellors that had

Daniel cast into the lions' den (Daniel 6:5), whom he interpreted as a type of priestly interference with the divinely ordained duties of magistrates (1 Peter 2:14, Romans 13:2), Winstanley denounced clerical authority as a usurped, oppressive force that was making war with God's Saints during its 42-month reign (Revelation 11:2). Consequently, this ecclesiastical power had hardened the bishops' hearts, troubled godly magistrates and ministers, made men fearful hypocrites, and persecuted the common people in the courts, punishing them with fines and imprisonment.<sup>100</sup> Although this does not appear to have been an autobiographical allusion, it does resonate with the sufferings of both Barber and Fielder.

When Winstanley composed the preface to what seems to have been his first publication, *The Breaking of the Day of God* (20 May 1648), he joyously addressed the "despised Sons and Daughters of Zion" scattered up and down England as "*Children of light*," informing them that God was now "*burning up*" the dross and casting down all corruption that the wicked serpent had built up in the Commonwealth and Churches. Salvation was to be obtained by faith alone, not through good works—that is, not through ceremonial, Jewish, and legal ways of worship such as outwardly observing the Sabbath, the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the maintenance of ministers by tithes, but through the indwelling Christ.<sup>101</sup> Afterwards Winstanley indicated that through divine instruction he had been liberated from the bondage of outward observance of ordinances (John 8:36).<sup>102</sup> In *Truth Lifting up its head above scandals* (preface dated 16 October 1648), he elaborated: outward forms and customs, including believer's baptism by full immersion in "material water," which he had himself gone through, were to cease and pass away. By this time Winstanley had therefore moved beyond outward gospel ordinances, and like his associate Everard, he too was accused of "horrid *blasphemy*"—a felony punishable by death according to Mosaic Law (Leviticus 24:16) and the provisions of an Ordinance of 2 May 1648.<sup>103</sup> While never widespread, the growing number of Independents and Baptists who had left their congregations questioning the legitimacy of church fellowship and validity of outward ordinances lead alarmist and self-serving heresiographers to categorize them as a new sect of "Seekers."<sup>104</sup> Although it would be crude to label Winstanley a Seeker during the spring, summer, and autumn of 1648, viewing his spiritual odyssey as progressing in parallel with those who had abandoned outward ceremonies to await a "*restoration of all things*" and

God's messenger come in "*visible glory*" is instructive.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the very fact that Winstanley's five earliest writings were not circulated in manuscript but through the medium of print confirms the point that Winstanley cannot be regarded as an isolated figure before he became a Digger.<sup>106</sup> As he declared in the preface to *The Saints Paradise* [1648], he had yielded, though "*partly unwilling*," to letting his "*few experiences come abroad*" so that others might be brought into "*community with the whole Globe*" through the "*spirit of righteousness*" within themselves.<sup>107</sup> Publication, moreover, was expensive, and given Winstanley's bankruptcy in 1643 and financially modest if settled existence as a Cobham householder and grazier thereafter,<sup>108</sup> it appears that only a benefactor, wealthy friends, or community treasury could have defrayed the substantial printing costs.<sup>109</sup>

The outlines, if not precise moments, of Winstanley's spiritual journey can therefore be reconstructed with confidence. Beginning in either childhood, adolescence, or at some point in adulthood, he was a puritan;<sup>110</sup> then perhaps a separatist; then, it can be inferred, a General Baptist; then he dispensed with the outward observance of gospel ordinances (analogous to a Seeker). Sometime between 16 October 1648 and 26 January 1649, Winstanley fell into a trance during which, by his own account, he received a vivid vision and heard God's words—possibly in his heart—three times. Obediently he declared by word of mouth, through his texts, and by action that the earth would be made a common treasury through righteous communal labor.<sup>111</sup> Though Winstanley's puritan and Baptist phases can only be gleaned from reminiscences, they nonetheless provide a valuable insight into the evolution of his thought. So much so, that while we can only speculate when, where, and by whom Winstanley was baptized—probably between autumn 1644 and spring 1648, perhaps in the River Thames at Kingston, or the River Neckinger at Rotherhithe, or the Tower of London moat,<sup>112</sup> possibly by a member of Lamb's or Barber's church—the imprint of distinctive General Baptist tenets in his first five publications is both unmistakable and crucial for understanding the development of his ideas. The influence of this branch of Baptist faith can be seen in Winstanley's beliefs about universal redemption, particular election, the Sabbath, tithes, ministers, magistrates, violence, the Scriptures, divine gifts, apostolic practice, emissaries, and community of goods.<sup>113</sup> It is to the last of these that we now return.

## V. Envisaging the Diggers as a Spiritual and Temporal Community of Love and Righteousness

We have seen that communal ownership of property was a controversial if ancient doctrine; that community of goods was associated with the Essenes and had scriptural sanction (Acts 2:44–45, 4:32); that it had been a distinguishing feature of some early and medieval Christian heresies; and that specific Protestant sects had envisaged themselves as communities imitating apostolic practice. Moreover, despite the variegated nature of early Anabaptism—ranging from pacifist adherents of the Schleithem Articles (1527), who believed that magistrates were forbidden from using the sword to enforce law and order to Balthasar Hubmaier, who argued that Christian government was a higher power set up by God for the punishment of evil doers—once Anabaptists seized Münster, abolishing private ownership of money and forcefully establishing community of goods and then polygamy, that place became synonymous with sectarian anarchy.<sup>114</sup> So much so that having all things common was condemned by sixteenth-century Protestant reformers like Heinrich Bullinger, Jean Calvin, and John Ponet as a foul doctrinal error maintained by “fantasticall spirits” who perverted scripture to serve their madness.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, rather than fading from collective memory, the stigma of Münster lingered, revived through print as a cautionary atrocity story. Published as warnings against introducing religious toleration in England, these pamphlets paralleled the infamous exploits of Thomas Müntzer—the Protestant reformer executed during the German Peasant’s War—and Jan of Leiden with contemporary events to highlight the threat to Church and State from Anabaptism, which was compared to a contagion, canker, or gangrene that had infected several limbs of the body politic and was spreading to its heart.<sup>116</sup> The danger of guilt by association was not lost on William Walwyn, nor on the General Baptist Richard Overton, who recognized the calumny that awaited if the struggle for liberty of conscience failed: “*for who writ the Histories of the Anabaptists but their Enemies?*”<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, following the linkage made by heresiographers between having all things common, polygamy, and the abolition of both private property and personal possessions, the Leveller leadership was forced to issue conciliatory public statements that communism had no place in their political program.

We have also seen that certain Protestant separatists regarded themselves as a community of believers; a spiritual and temporal community of Saints joined together in love, among whom all things should be held in common. The same was true of the Hutterites, a tightly disciplined Anabaptist splinter group under the leadership of Jakob Hutter, gathered together from emigrants that since 1526 had fled religious persecution in Tyrol and south Germany to Nikolsburg (modern day Mikulov) and elsewhere in Moravia. They believed that community (*gmainschaft*), “both spiritual and temporal,” was “a cornerstone and foundation of the entire Christian life” of believers, who being of one mind, heart, and soul were bound together through grace. Spiritual or “inner community,” attained through “true surrender” (*Gelassenheit*) of body and soul to God and Christ, was mirrored in outward actions, in seeking “not one’s own advantage but that of the many.” Adopting apostolic practice, all gifts and goods received from God were to be held in common, so that needy members of the church could be supported. Rejecting worldly splendor, Hutterites also opposed doing business with each other as well as buying property and possessions for themselves, but permitted purchasing housing for fellow believers.<sup>118</sup>

Given that mainstream puritanism had a tendency to fragment when internal conflicts could not be resolved; that the puritan cause disintegrated into a multitude of sects during the course of the English Revolution; that the history of English Baptist congregations was marked by multiple schisms; that Winstanley and Everard had been believers in adult baptism; that both men had rejected the outward observance of gospel ordinances; that during the spring, summer, and autumn of 1648, Winstanley appears to have been awaiting a divine message; that Everard believed he had received the gift of revelation; and that Winstanley and Everard claimed to have experienced visions with which they justified their new communal experiment, it is fruitful to consider the Diggers as an offshoot from the main branch of the General Baptists. Certainly Winstanley envisaged the Diggers as both a spiritual and a temporal community serving the Lord of Hosts in “community of spirit” and in “community of the earthly treasure.”<sup>119</sup> Living in community with one another under the righteous “Law of love,” these sons and daughters, who had lain buried under their “imaginary earth,” were being united and knitted together with Christ through the power of anointing, baptized into one mystical body (1 Corinthians 12:12–13).<sup>120</sup> Moreover, these believers were



living in the last days before the destruction of Babylon and coming of the Lord, the King of Righteousness. The 42 months—or time, time and a half time—during which the Beast would tread the holy City under foot and kill the two witnesses, were now “expiring” (Revelation 11:2–7, 12:14). For Christ was “arising and spreading himself again in the earth,” breaking forth in his glory to remove the curse placed upon the Creation (Genesis 3:17, Romans 8:22) so that members of this “community of love and righteousness” might all make use of the blessings of the earth as a common treasury. Living in peace under the law of righteousness as members of one household, every man and woman would look upon themselves as equal in the Creation. Through the sweat of their brows and righteous labor (cf. Proverbs 10:16, Genesis 3:19), they would live comfortably upon the fruits of the earth, taking from this common storehouse as they had need. Henceforth there would be no hiring for wages, no beggars or idleness, no enclosing or hedging, no working land greater in size than an individual could manage. Nor would there be any hoarding or stealing or buying or selling or fairs or markets. Only when this universal community was established would there be universal liberty, only then would Jerusalem become the praise of the whole earth. Thus these believers resembled the Apostles and their brethren waiting, as the risen Christ commanded, at Jerusalem (Luke 24:49). They did not enslave one another, nor did the wealthy allow the destitute to starve:

But the rich sold their possessions, and gave equality to the poor, and no man said, that any thing that he possessed was his own, for they had all things common. (Acts 4:32)<sup>121</sup>

This vision of spiritual and temporal community outlined in *The New Law of Righteousnes* would be taken up as a guiding principle in the Diggers’ first published manifesto, *The True Levellers Standard Advanced: Or, The State of Community opened, and Presented to the Sons of Men* (April 1649).<sup>122</sup> Winstanley returned to it in *A New-years Gift for the Parliament and Armie* (January 1650), explaining that if the Creation were ever to be restored, the way lay through this twofold “power.” First was “*Community of Mankind*” (spiritual community), comprised of the “unity of spirit of Love” or indwelling Christ; second “*Community of the Earth*” (temporal community), which consisted of peaceably obtaining food, clothing, and other necessities to sustain a “quiet

livelihood.” These two communities, or rather “one in two branches,” were the “true Levelling” that Christ would accomplish at his “glorious appearance.”<sup>123</sup> Community, defined as freeing the earth from exploitation by kings, manorial lords, and oppressive landlords—all of which had been brought in with the Norman Conquest—was also a keystone of Winstanley’s ideal republic. Thus his Commonwealth would contain public storehouses in the towns and countryside stocked with the fruits of the earth, as well as shops provisioned with goods made by artisans and with imports. As buying and selling were prohibited, every working family’s food would be freely provided from this common treasury, and they could take what they could not make from the shops: woollen cloth, linen, shoes, hats, gloves, stockings, and the like. Not everything, however, would be held in common since every man’s house was his own, as was the furniture and whatever the dwelling had been stocked with from the storehouses. Nor were spouses or children to be common property: it was not permitted to have “Community with all Women” since copulation satisfied bestial lusts and greedy appetites. Consequently, rape would be punished by death.<sup>124</sup>

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Like the Baptist churches, the Diggers sent out authorized emissaries in March 1650 to spread the good news that they had begun laying the foundations of universal freedom. Money to buy food and seed corn, however, was scarce, and as well as encouraging people to cultivate common land, these messengers solicited donations for a common treasury from among the “wel-affected” of the southern and midland counties of Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Middlesex, Northamptonshire, and Surrey. Although evidence survives for only one journey undertaken by two men encompassing thirty-three named stopping-places (the majority in Buckinghamshire), it appears that despite their meandering route, the Digger agents traveled through areas where they expected to be well received.<sup>125</sup> These included Fenstanton and Warboys in Huntingdonshire where Henry Denne had established General Baptist churches, and Bedford where about 1650 a separatist congregation was formed. Significantly, the Warboys church book records the Diggers’ activities and Winstanley’s prophecy that “Israel must go free,” noting that in 1650 the Baptist churches began listening too

much to the “errors” of the “Diggers, Levellers, and Ranters.”<sup>126</sup> Perhaps these controversial Digger doctrines referred to notions expounded in Winstanley’s *Fire in the Bush* (acquired on 19 March 1650 by the London bookseller George Thomason). This work was addressed to the Presbyterian and Independent churches together with other religious denominations, to whom Winstanley was “moved to send it” by supposed divine command. If, as seems likely, the Digger emissaries distributed copies of Winstanley’s *Fire in the Bush* to churches on their itinerary, then they anticipated the strategy of peripatetic Quaker missionaries who, in conjunction with preaching, disseminated books to sympathetic hearers.<sup>127</sup>

The emissaries did not cast their seed on stony ground as short-lived Digger communities were established at Iver (Buckinghamshire), Wellingborough (Northamptonshire), and other locations.<sup>128</sup> In addition, the Surrey Diggers had welcomed newcomers that would willingly “submit” to their communal precepts—especially the Golden rule “to do to others as we would be done unto” (Matthew 7:12).<sup>129</sup> This suggests that membership of this spiritual and temporal “Brave Community” was analogous to the hybrid “mixed communion” congregations open to Baptists and non-Baptist separatists alike.<sup>130</sup> With an influx of recruits, about two thirds of whom were not local inhabitants, Winstanley recognized—like the Baptist churches and separatist congregations—the need to exercise discipline among members of his community of love and righteousness. The ultimate sanction for gathered churches was excommunication or casting out,<sup>131</sup> and though Winstanley believed that “all are one in Christ” whether or not individuals were “Members in Church fellowship,” he nonetheless acknowledged that some Diggers may “fall off from their principles” as happened in all churches.<sup>132</sup>

Yet for all these similarities between Digger communities and nonconformist churches, together with their common roots, there were also important differences.<sup>133</sup> Thus unlike the Church of England (whose services Diggers were accused of failing to attend), Presbyterians, Independents, or Baptists, the Diggers along with the “Seekers” did not participate as a community of believers in outward forms of religious worship.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, in *Truth Lifting up its head above scandals*, Winstanley had condemned ten outward ordinances whose observation he considered unwarranted: church services conducted on specific days at particular times according to custom, rather than when ministers were filled with the power of prayer; preaching not from

inward experience but from knowledge gained through hearing, reading, and studying; praying with words spoken before and after sermons rather than in silence; expounding Scripture for financial gain; compelling people to attend church services by misusing the magistrates' power; enforcing parish boundaries and the provision of tithes; keeping the Sunday Sabbath; administering communion—a mere “table gesture”—to a “mixed company” of parishioners; infant baptism; preaching the Gospel and persecuting the “Spirit within” that had made Moses (a shepherd), Amos (a fruit gatherer), the Apostles (fishermen), and Christ (a carpenter) preachers.<sup>135</sup> Accordingly, Winstanley regarded separating from the Church of England and joining a gathered congregation as merely “going out of one form into another” rather than passing into the “unitie of the one Spirit.”<sup>136</sup> But if Winstanley progressed beyond outward forms, then it must also be emphasized that his teachings served as a bridge between the General Baptists and Quakers, since he later reportedly said that the Quakers were “sent to perfect that worke which fell” in the Diggers' hands.<sup>137</sup> Certainly the resemblances between his heterodox notions and “the very draughts and even Body of Quakerism” were, as several contemporaries remarked, startling.<sup>138</sup>

Early Quakers denied the validity of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as well as the Lord's Prayer. Denouncing university-trained preachers as hirelings and objecting to the forced maintenance of ministers by tithes, Quakers were steadfast in their opposition to clerical authority and church worship conducted in steeple-houses. Instead they attended largely silent meetings where they spoke as they were “moved by the holy Ghost,” and as the spirit gave them “utterance.”<sup>139</sup> Disregarding social distinctions between “high or low,” Quakers even refused to remove their hats in deference, asserting that there was no scriptural justification for honoring “mens persons” (Everard and Winstanley had done the same when interviewed by Lord General Thomas Fairfax at Whitehall on 20 April 1649).<sup>140</sup> Quakers also collected funds nationally for a common treasury that was variously disbursed to relieve prisoners and sufferers, buy clothing and books, and subsidize printing. Moreover, Winstanley believed that he had been given the gift of the manifest “light of Christ within.”<sup>141</sup> This belief in the revelation of Jesus Christ as an indwelling illuminating presence, the light within, became the battle cry of the early Quakers, who regarded themselves as the children of light called to fight the Lamb's War in the last days.<sup>142</sup> Nor was the Lamb's

War to be a bloody struggle since, in the mind of the Quaker leader George Fox, it was an inward conflict between flesh and spirit, Fox's refusal to bear arms echoing the pacifist principles of the Schleithem Articles and mirroring Winstanley's opposition to using weapons in self-defense.<sup>143</sup> Again, both Winstanley and Fox made frequent reference to the verse concerning enmity between the woman's and the serpent's seed and bruising the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15): Winstanley interpreting it as a prophecy of the killing of the flesh by the rising spirit or indwelling Christ, Fox understanding it to speak of Christ's coming within.<sup>144</sup> What is more, so pervasive was Winstanley's anticlericalism that he censured proud learned scholars as "enemies" to the "Spirit of truth" that had inspired the Prophets and Apostles (John 14:17). For by exercising a monopoly on preaching, they prevented humble fishermen, shepherds, husbandmen, and tradesmen—latter day Apostles—from speaking about their spiritual experiences and revealing "truths" they had "heard and seen from God" (Acts 4:20).<sup>145</sup> Fox too insisted that he was required to obey Christ's command and preach the everlasting gospel (Revelation 14:6), as the Apostles had done before him, because he was sent by God to turn people from darkness to light.<sup>146</sup> Finally, Winstanley and Fox saw "Ranters" in their midst, Fox rebuking them for their blasphemous expressions, drunkenness, swearing, and adultery. Forged in the heat of religious controversy, this vitriolic if largely one-sided exchange demonstrated Fox's evident concern to distinguish between the "Ranters" sinful behavior and the Quakers' conduct since polemicists tarred both "Ranters" and Quakers with the same brush.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, in a vindication of those who endeavored to make the earth a common treasury, or "Some Reasons given by them against . . . the excessive community of women, called Ranting" (February–March 1650), Winstanley disassociated the Diggers from the "Ranters."<sup>148</sup>

Winstanley's preoccupation with sexual morality preceded the foundation of the Digger plantation. Conceiving every man and woman to be a microcosm, "a perfect created world," he declared that "light" had "come into this world" (John 3:19). Though the "lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16) had proceeded from poisoned flesh, the indwelling Christ's spiritual rising was now beginning in the hearts of sons and daughters, transforming them through the "spirit of reason" into "reasonable" creatures capable of acting righteously.<sup>149</sup> Even so, Winstanley remained alert to the temptations of gluttony, drunkenness, and lust. In *The*

*New Law of Righteousnes*, he rejected the implication that having all things common meant that “mens wives would be common too” or that a man may practice polygamy.<sup>150</sup> In *A New-years Gift*, he was forced to rebut the allegation again, disowning the scandalous ways of some that had “come among the Diggers” and reaffirming his belief in monogamy. As for those who acted in “such an unrationall excesse of female communitie,” they would pay for their sins with tormented minds and diseased bodies.<sup>151</sup> All the same, before 20 February 1650, the Diggers’ spiritual and temporal community, with its open fluid membership, had clearly been infiltrated by “Ranters.” Winstanley defined the “Ranting Practise” as “a Kingdome without the man,” a corrupting carnal realm of the five senses that lay in the “outward enjoyment of meat, drinke, pleasures and women.” It was therefore not the spiritual kingdom of heaven—interpreted as Christ within (cf. Matthew 5:3, Luke 17:21)—but the devil’s kingdom of darkness, full of unreasonableness, madness, and confusion. Excessive copulation with women dissipated male “health and strength,” resulting in unwanted pregnancies and the destruction of harmony within the patriarchal household. “Ranting,” moreover, begat idleness, and this evil had to be prevented with righteous communal labour. Elsewhere, Winstanley warned women to beware of the “*ranting crew*,” refuting the accusation that “the Digging practises, leads to the *Ranting* principles.”<sup>152</sup> Significantly, his pamphlets contain the earliest known use of the words “Ranting” and “Ranter” in this sense.<sup>153</sup>

Winstanley’s condemnation of Ranting must also be examined in conjunction with several denunciations of Abiezer Coppe’s professed doctrines that appeared between January and March 1650, including a collective epistle from the London Particular Baptist churches censuring the abominations espoused by their former coreligionist and his associates.<sup>154</sup> We have seen Coppe’s desire for an apostolic saint-like community, his warning that only those who had all things common would escape the impending dreadful Day of Judgment, and his supposed delight in adultery. Although Coppe denied that either “sword-levelling” or “digging-levelling” were the indwelling God’s “principle,” it is noteworthy that he and Winstanley generally shared the same publisher, Giles Calvert.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, Coppe, Calvert, and it seems, Winstanley were acquainted with Lawrence Clarkson, an itinerant Baptist preacher who attained notoriety as “*Captain of the Rant*.” In his spiritual autobiography *The Lost Sheep Found* (1660), Clarkson recalled that he had

shown Winstanley that there was “a self-love and vain-glory nursed in his heart,” pointing out that digging up common land on St. George’s Hill had been undertaken to make Winstanley’s name famous among England’s poor commoners.<sup>156</sup> Although it would be wise not to take Clarkson’s account at face value, supporting evidence leaves little reason to doubt this encounter. Thus *Fire in the Bush* refers to a certain “speech” circulated among some of Winstanley’s audience—whether Diggers or church members is unclear. From allusions to “he that calls light darknesse, and darknesse light, good evill, and evill good” as well as “a single eye” (Matthew 6:22), it appears that Winstanley had either heard Clarkson preach or read Clarkson’s *A Single Eye All Light, no Darknesse* (whether in manuscript or as a printed text is again unclear).<sup>157</sup> This “impious and blasphemous” book, which Calvert was believed to have printed, was publicly burned by order of the House of Commons and its author imprisoned.<sup>158</sup> No wonder Winstanley, who likened Ranting to a golden, pleasing, and deceitful bait to ensnare the foolish, was stirred to defend the Diggers from being “slandered with the Ranting action.”<sup>159</sup>

One other religious group that emerged during the English Revolution must be mentioned briefly. This was the Behmenists, followers of the German mystic Jacob Boehme’s teachings—particularly John Pordage and his “Family” who lived together in “Community” at Bradfield, Berkshire.<sup>160</sup> One member of this spiritual community, Mary Pocock, was rumored to maintain community of goods. Another, Thomas Bromley, was reportedly “much against” ownership. Though the minister Richard Baxter alleged that they desired “that all things should be common, and none should own Propriety,” he nonetheless conceded that their tenets did not extend to community of women. Indeed, these Behmenists were said to abhor “flesh & carnal Relations” and, advocating chastity as an alternative, apparently objected to the lawfulness of marriage.<sup>161</sup> So in this context it must be stressed that among Pordage’s visitors at Bradfield were Coppe and Everard—who sometime between May and August 1649 appears to have deserted the Surrey Diggers.

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Most historical writing about radicalism and the English Revolution can be considered fabrication, in the sense of both manufacture and invention. Though there is no single, continuous English radical tradition, a number

of politically committed scholars influenced to debatable degrees at various times during their careers by broadly left-wing ideas have nonetheless been engaged in legitimating their doctrines by stressing supposed ideological antecedents.<sup>162</sup> Efforts to position the Diggers within a constructed communist tradition can therefore be seen as part of a larger project—namely the creation of histories about aspects of our shared radical heritage whose function is to reinforce connections between that past and our present. One consequence of this approach has been to argue that Winstanley either was or became a secular thinker. This view is wrong, but that should not diminish the political element in Winstanley's writing which became more pronounced from April 1649. At the same time, it is essential to relocate the Diggers within their original religious framework.

A “vertical” approach, which is characteristic of denominational histories concerned with traditions of religious dissent, situates the Diggers as an offshoot from the main branch of the English General Baptists, with roots going back to the so-called Radical Reformation.<sup>163</sup> Although the Diggers clearly had more in common with some Anabaptist groups (like the Hutterites) rather than others (such as the Mennonites, who abandoned community of goods in favor of mutual aid), providing them with such a genealogy has the benefit of enabling us to appreciate where many of their ideas came from as well as where they would lead. It runs the risk, however, of repeating the errors of heresiographers. These compilers attached labels—even when inappropriate—to facilitate categorization and purposefully blurred or ignored subtle doctrinal distinctions, sometimes failing to recognize novel beliefs because of their tendency to compare what they saw with early Christian heresies. A “horizontal” approach, by contrast, places the Diggers within their milieu. Here the emphasis is on what Winstanley and Everard had in common with their contemporaries, how the Diggers resembled yet also differed from gathered churches and other religious groups at that time, as well as why certain ideas that they espoused were radical at various moments during the English Revolution. Whereas the former approach calls for a thorough examination of Winstanley's older sources, the latter invites detailed comparison between the Diggers, Levellers, Baptists, Familists, “Ranters,” Quakers, and Behmenists, as well as “wel-affected” communities in Buckinghamshire and other southern and midland counties.<sup>164</sup>



## NOTES

A version of this paper was read at the London Socialist Historians Group conference on “1649 and the Execution of King Charles” held at the Institute of Historical Research, London (7 February 2009), and I would like to thank the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. In addition, I have profited from the advice of Richard Bell, Mario Caricchio, Lorenza Gianfrancesco, John Morrill, Éamonn Ó Ciardha, Arthur Versluis, and two anonymous readers. Though Winstanley and the Diggers sometimes glossed scriptural phrases they did not always provide sources for their biblical allusions. I have therefore supplied these references to the so-called Authorized Version of the Bible (1611) in brackets. I alone am responsible for any mistakes or shortcomings.

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