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# John Gurney

## GERRARD WINSTANLEY AND THE CONTEXT OF PLACE

*This paper explores the development of Winstanley's ideas in terms of the context of place. Although the influence on Winstanley of his early experiences in Wigan and London is difficult to determine, in Surrey we can see a clear connection between locality and the shaping of his ideas. Winstanley moved to the Surrey parish of Cobham in late 1643, and his observations and experiences of tensions and conflicts within the local community there can be seen to have fed directly into his Digger program of 1649–1650. This program drew on local traditions of social conflict, but it would seem that Winstanley departed significantly from these traditions in his outright hostility to custom and in his adoption of Norman Yoke theories. Custom had long been invoked in conflicts between tenants and lords of manors, and was a crucial weapon in the defense of popular rights, but for Winstanley it always formed part of the armory of the oppressor. His rejection of custom did not, however, prevent him from gaining significant support for the Digger venture from among local inhabitants.*

**Keywords** Gerrard Winstanley; Diggers; English Revolution; locality; Norman Yoke; St George's Hill; Surrey

Of all the writers and activists who came to prominence in the English Revolution, Gerrard Winstanley is, it seems, the one whose ideas can most closely be associated with a particular locality. Sunderland may lay claim to the Leveller John Lilburne, and “John Lilburne’s boots” now hold pride of place in Sunderland’s Museum and Winter Gardens, but our uncertainty as to when and where he was born means that both Greenwich and the tiny County Durham township of Thickey Punchardon have equally strong claims.<sup>1</sup> Lilburne’s later career, after his London apprenticeship, was to take him all over England and into exile on the continent, and he remained in few places for any length of time. The Quaker George Fox was undoubtedly influenced by his early experiences in the Leicestershire parish of Fenny Drayton, but he very soon took off on his travels; his itinerant career, periods of imprisonment, and frequent stays in London continued even after his marriage to Margaret Fell and the prospect of a settled home at Swarthmoor.<sup>2</sup> Countless places can claim some connection with Fox, but few can claim to have significantly influenced his ideas. Winstanley’s experiences were very different.

Wigan, London, Surrey: Gerrard Winstanley had connections with each of these places, and his experiences in each can be said to have helped shape his ideas to a greater or lesser degree. Winstanley’s Wigan origins were not discovered until the twentieth century, but his Lancashire connections had been known about since he first

came to public attention, for he dedicated his early work *The Mysterie of God* (1648) to his “beloved Countrey-men of the County of Lancaster” (Winstanley, *CWGW* I, 255). Even before he was identified as the Gerrard Winstanley who was born in Wigan in 1609, Lancashire local historians were proud to identify him as one of their county’s worthies.<sup>3</sup> Winstanley spent his early years in a town that had experienced long-term conflict between lords and tenants, and between rectors and their parishioners, while members of his immediate family played an active part in local affairs.<sup>4</sup> Winstanley is now commemorated impressively in Wigan’s annual Diggers Festival, but the precise nature of the town’s influence over him remains difficult to determine. James Alsop has cautioned against exaggerating the impact on Winstanley of his early experiences in Wigan, though the editors of the *Complete Works* have suggested that Bishop Bridgeman’s conflicts with the townspeople may have helped prompt Winstanley’s “later association between rapacious landlordism and oppressive clerical power” (Winstanley, *CWGW* I, 2, 18; Alsop, “What do we know?” 22). Derek Winstanley has, more recently, begun to argue that Winstanley’s Wigan experiences were crucial in making him a radical (Winstanley, D).

We are on surer ground with London. It was here that Winstanley lived as an apprentice in the household of Sarah Gater, kinswoman of Isaac Walton and Henry Mason, and the owner of a substantial book collection, and here that he began attending sermons and came – as he was later to recall – to be “counted by some of the Priests, a Good Christian, and a godly man” (Winstanley, *CWGW* I, 567).<sup>5</sup> It was here too that Winstanley set up in business as a cloth merchant and became active in the politics of his parish, and that he experienced the bankruptcy that would have such a decisive influence over his intellectual development.<sup>6</sup> No one today would claim that Winstanley’s radicalization came directly from his London business failure, yet when he spoke out against the “theeving art of buying and selling,” and complained that trading had “generally become the neat art of thieving and oppressing fellow-creatures,” there seems to be little doubt that he had his London experiences in mind.<sup>7</sup>

But it is in Surrey, and particularly the area around St George’s Hill, where we can see a clear and demonstrable connection between locality and the shaping of his ideas. St George’s Hill remains forever linked with his Digger experiment. From 1653, when the Cobham astrologer John Coulton listed the occupation of the hill by “the common people” as one of the 34 most memorable incidents to have occurred since the world began, to the sporadic trespasses and occupations by land campaigners in recent decades, the hill has come to stand as a symbol of popular resistance to poverty and oppression.<sup>8</sup> When A. Stewart Gray, the Edinburgh lawyer and campaigner on behalf of the unemployed, led a small band of his Manchester hunger marchers to St George’s Hill in February 1908, he made it clear that they were there to commemorate Winstanley’s exploits and to acknowledge that Winstanley was responsible for “the highest thought reached in Cromwell’s time” (*Manchester Guardian*, 11 February 1908; Gurney, *Winstanley*, 113–15). The many activists who have made the hill a site of pilgrimage since then have shared Gray’s enthusiasm and appreciation of the hill’s significance and, in the case of the “new Diggers” of 1999, even succeeded where Gray failed in setting up a monument to Winstanley and his fellow Diggers.<sup>9</sup>

The importance to Winstanley of St George’s Hill and the surrounding area is twofold. First, this was of course the site to which Winstanley was drawn when he

determined upon his Digger experiment. It was to “George-hill” that he took his spade in April 1649 and broke the ground, “thereby declaring freedome to the Creation, and that the earth must be set free from intanglements of Lords and Landlords, and that it shall be a common Treasury to all, as it was first made and given to the sonnes of men” (CWGW II, 13–4, 80).

Much of what he wrote in the ensuing months revolved around his and the Diggers’ experiences on the hill: their attempts at digging and sowing on the challenging soils of Walton Heath, the frequent attacks by local inhabitants, the appearance of a large group of supporters at the end of May, the visit by Lord Fairfax on his return from defeating the Leveller mutineers at Burford, and the legal actions which were to drive the Diggers off the hill and lead them to regroup on Cobham’s Little Heath.<sup>10</sup> In all these writings, we gain a clear sense both of local topography and of Winstanley’s determination to understand, and come to terms with, the varying responses of local inhabitants to the Diggers’ presence on their commons. In seeking to defend and justify the Diggers’ activities in print, Winstanley was immediately forced to take account of intense popular hostility toward the Diggers. He would always remain quite open about the high levels of local opposition in Walton, and we know as much from his writings as we do from hostile newsbook accounts of the many ways in which the Diggers’ work on St George’s Hill was disrupted. Much of the detail of attacks by locals comes from Winstanley’s writings: the early assault on “divers of the diggers” who were carried to Walton and locked in the church, where some were struck “by the bitter Professors and rude multitude”; the large-scale attack soon afterwards by “above a hundred rude people”; the ambushes and horse maiming that took place when the Diggers tried to fetch wood from nearby commons; and the pulling down of Digger houses and destruction of their tools and implements (Winstanley, CWGW II, 47, 146–47; Gurney, *Brave Community*, 153–54). On 11 June, there took place the well-known attack by “divers men in womens apparel,” led by two Walton freeholders, John Taylor and William Starr, which left four Diggers badly beaten; Winstanley devoted a whole pamphlet to this incident (Winstanley, CWGW II, 59–64; Kendrick 217–21). The last few weeks on St George’s Hill were marked by legal actions against the Diggers and by the seizure by bailiffs (and the rescue by “strangers”) of the cattle that Winstanley tended; once more, the colorful and dramatic detail of these events comes through clearly in Winstanley’s writings (Winstanley, CWGW II, 82–4, 90–101).

Although Winstanley had anticipated in *The New Law of Righteousnes* that some would need time before they could be persuaded to join in making the earth a common treasury, it is unlikely that he had anticipated the intensity of the popular opposition that the Diggers encountered when they set to work (Winstanley, CWGW I, 508, 514–15, 520). In *The New Law of Righteousnes* and *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, the essential division in rural society was always taken to be between landowners and the rest. Although Winstanley made passing reference in *The True Levellers Standard* to “the violent bitter people that are Freeholders,” it was only in his subsequent Digger tracts that he came to incorporate them into a more nuanced analysis of social relations, largely it seems in response to the patterns of opposition faced by the Diggers (Winstanley, CWGW II, 12). In the first few months of the Digger experiment, opposition was not led principally by the gentry, as it would be after the Diggers’ move

to Cobham; large numbers of people were involved in the assaults and riots, and their leaders came from among the middling sorts and from among those who were dependent for their livelihood on customary access to the commons and wastes of Walton Heath.<sup>11</sup> “Freeholders,” as Winstanley described the yeomen and artisans who were the Diggers’ most implacable opponents in Walton, came to acquire a much more significant role than previously in Winstanley’s accounts of social divisions after the Fall; no longer was it merely the landowning gentry who were seen to keep the poor in bondage. Freeholders were listed among those who “know not what freedom is,” and were placed firmly in the Norman Camp, as the Conqueror’s inferior officers and soldiers whose lands had been acquired and held on to “by murder, violence, and theft” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 48, 61, 90–98). Along with the gentry, they were guilty of overstocking the commons with sheep and cattle, making “the most profit of the Commons,” while “the poor that have the name to own the Commons have the least share therein” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 35). Part of the Diggers’ task, Winstanley acknowledged, was to persuade these enemies that the poor should have freedom in the commons just as they “claime a quietnesse and freedom in their inclosures, as it is fit they should have”; only then might “elder and younger brother . . . live quietly and in peace” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 89). In the works he produced while the Diggers were active on St George’s Hill, Winstanley placed much greater emphasis than before on the need to find some compromise with local landholders – both small and large – so that all “may live free and quiet one by, and with another, not burthening one another in this land of our Nativity” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 69).<sup>12</sup>

Winstanley’s changing understanding of the role of the local middling sorts, and his obvious sensitivity to tensions within the community and to the complexities of local social relations, serves to remind us just how much his Digger program owed to observation and experience and must be seen to be rooted in the context of place. The Digger movement was of course as much about religion as about social protest, and concerned as much with challenging religious forms and customs as with ridding the earth of private property.<sup>13</sup> But what distinguished Winstanley’s vision from that of so many other religious radicals was his insistence on linking radical religious change with wholesale transformation of the social order; the one could not succeed without the other (Winstanley, *CWGW* I, 523–24).<sup>14</sup> The second reason, therefore, for the importance to Winstanley of the St George’s Hill area is that it was here, after his move from London to Cobham in December 1643, that he first witnessed the realities of rural social relations and of an increasingly fragmented customary economy. The social aspects of the Digger program, as first set out by Winstanley in January 1649, and as developed by him in response to the challenges faced by the Diggers throughout 1649 and early 1650, were very much the product of his observations of social tensions in a small corner of mid Surrey. His ability to attract local support for the Digger venture bears this out, and demonstrates his ability to appeal to rural inhabitants long used to conflictual relations with their wealthier neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

Cobham, Walton, and the surrounding parishes are well served by surviving manorial documents, legal documents, and parish records from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. All the evidence points to a rising population, to mounting pressures over access to increasingly scarce resources, and to frequent and often complex conflicts among parishioners, between inhabitants of neighboring parishes and

between settled parishioners and incomers. In Walton in 1610 and Cobham in 1611, the manorial courts issued orders to restrict incomers, and presentments were made against those who took in inmates without first providing sureties to the churchwardens and overseers of the poor. The pain – or fine – for breaching these orders was raised from £2 to £10 in Cobham in 1615, with half the money to go to the overseers and half to the lord of the manor (SHC [K44/1/7](#); [K44/1/8](#); 442, f. 42b).

Restrictive stinting on the commons was also imposed more rigorously than before, with presentments being made regularly in both Cobham and Walton against those who attempted to encroach on the commons or who brought in beasts from other manors.<sup>16</sup> Walton manor's regulation of its extensive commons had traditionally been quite lax, and as late as the 1580s and 1590s it had been possible for the occupiers of new-built cottages and other “mere” inhabitants, together with inhabitants of neighboring parishes, to put animals on the commons without any restriction. The tightening of regulations appears to have been prompted less by fears of an influx of poor cottagers than by the need to rein in neighboring large landowners, some of whom had sought to take advantage of the lax regulations to make use of Walton's commons for large-scale stock rearing (TNA [E134/29and30Eliz/Mich17](#); [E134/32Eliz/East14](#); cf. Thompson 132–33). Outside pressures placed strains on the workings of a traditional customary economy, upsetting the delicate balance that had hitherto enabled the marginal poor as well as established tenants to make use of the commons.

The legal disputes between two Walton inhabitants, Robert Bickerstaffe and James Starr, which dragged on for a 10-year period from 1611, are usually remembered for one witness's vivid description of the physical assault by Bickerstaffe, the father of a prominent Digger, on Starr, the father of the Diggers' assailant William Starr ([Gurney](#), “Furious Divells” 77). The surviving depositions are, however, also revealing for what they tell us about intra-communal conflicts in the vicinity of St George's Hill, and the ways in which competition over resources might easily lead to the sort of violence inflicted by Bickerstaffe on Starr, and later by Starr's son on the Diggers. Starr and Bickerstaffe both farmed in the southern parts of Walton, close to the extensive commons that bordered St George's Hill and close to the boundary between the parishes of Walton and Cobham. Elderly deponents in a case brought by Bickerstaffe in 1611 recalled how Lakefield, a common field and one of the fields in dispute, had once lain open, but had been divided up and enclosed by “mutuall consent” several years before to limit the “quarrelles and bralles” that had often broken out among the keepers of cattle there. Complex undertakings must then have been made between Starr's grandfather and tenants, and Bickerstaffe's predecessors as farmers of Painshill, over access to the resources of Lakefield and neighboring fields. A 64-year-old deponent remembered in 1611 how in the 1560s the landholders' servants and “divers other poor people” had been hired to gather up acorns from Hale Hill and divide them among the respective owners, while another recalled how the landholders and their tenants had continued by agreement after the division of the lands to top, lop, shred, and cut down trees as they had done before the lands were divided (TNA [E134/9Jas1/Hil7](#)).

By 1621, relations between Starr and Bickerstaffe had worsened significantly, despite attempts at arbitration. Bickerstaffe had begun to encroach upon Starr's land, removing a hedge in Bushy Brook and fencing in some 10, 15, or 20 feet of his neighbor's land. A well-established footway leading from Starr's dwelling house to his

enclosed lands in Lakefield was blocked when Bickerstaffe ordered his servants to dig a trench across it, and another footway used by Starr in Law Close was ploughed up. Bickerstaffe cut down bushes on land he leased from Starr, and Starr allowed his cattle to stray into a field that had been sown by Bickerstaffe with oats; each was said to have impounded the other's cattle several times. It was when Starr attempted to prevent Bickerstaffe from crossing his land with a cartload of wood that the latter's servants assaulted Starr, knocking him down and beating him with stones so that "he colde not rise againe till he was holpe upp" (TNA, [E134/19Jas1/Trin2](#)). The dispute between Starr and Bickerstaffe was perhaps unusual in its intensity, but in other respects it highlighted the ways in which customary norms and practices could so often be placed under strain by competition for land and resources.

Appeals to custom were very much in evidence in the protracted disputes which took place between the Gavells, lords of the manor of Cobham, and their copyhold tenants, and which lasted from the 1560s until the early decades of the seventeenth century. Andy Wood, in his outstanding recent survey of custom and popular memory in early modern England, has reminded us of the ubiquity of custom: it was "one of the fundamental, organising concepts in early modern culture," and, "based as it was in shared memories and senses of place, it structured the mental worlds of ordinary people" (Wood, *Memory of the People* 94, 111). When William Wrenn, a prominent Cobham copyholder, took Robert Gavell to court in 1566, the case revolved partly around how much customary rent should be paid by copyholders and whether tenants had the right to sublet their estates without leave of the lord of the manor. Gavell was later accused of felling several trees on Wrenn's lands, contrary – so Wrenn claimed – to the customs of the manor, and of departing from past practice in the payment of fifteenths, thereby laying "a hevy burden upon the poorer tenants contrarye to the ancient usage, equitie and consciens" (TNA, [E41/123](#); [REQ2/34/23](#); [REQ2/159/192](#); [REQ2/157/503](#); [E133/10/1626](#)). Detailed depositions taken in 1594, in an action brought against the Gavells by several of their leading copyhold tenants, again reveal sharply contrasting interpretations of the customs of the manor. The plaintiffs insisted that entry fines should be no higher than two years' customary rent, that copyhold tenants enjoyed the right to take timber growing on their estates – both for repairs and new building – and that they could demise their tenements for a fixed annual fine of 4*d.* The Gavells insisted that entry fines and fines to demise were now uncertain, and they rejected the tenants' claims to timber rights. Elderly witnesses recalled how manorial administration had been organized under the Gavells' predecessors, the Bigleys, who had acquired the manor in the mid-1550s "after Wyatt's field." Much of the evidence presented by deponents was open to differing interpretations, and some of it appeared to support the Gavells' claim that higher fines had occasionally been paid and that many of the customs claimed by the tenants were "surmised and new found." It was unclear whether tenants had ever enjoyed the right to take timber to new build, or whether some of them had simply managed to get away with taking timber for such purposes without being presented "for a supposed breache of their custome." Evidence provided by the lawyer John Derrick of Guildford, the Gavells' manorial steward, showed that Anthony Bickerstaffe, one of the plaintiffs in the case, had in 1572 agreed to pay the Gavells for license to take elms growing upon his copyhold for building on his freehold lands; other named copyholders had apparently been prepared to pay much more than the 4*d. per annum* rate for demising

their copyholds. Derrick was careful not to deny that *4d. per annum* was the accepted “olde rate”; what was crucial was that some of the old customs had on occasion been allowed to lapse (TNA, SP46/19/212; REQ2/159/13; SP15/33/74; SHC, K44/1/5).<sup>17</sup> Soon the Gavells had brought in the experienced surveyor Ralph Agas to draw up a detailed survey of the manor of Cobham, no doubt in the hope that their claims against their tenants would be upheld and the disputes concluded to their satisfaction. As Agas ominously reminded the tenants, they were obliged under their grants of land to “maintaine, keape, & uphoulde, as well the right of the Lorde, as your owne, in perfect & commendable maner accordinge unto your aunycnt customes” (Ratcliff 104–5).<sup>18</sup>

When Winstanley settled in Cobham in December 1643 after the failure of his London business venture, he found himself thrown into the complex and uncertain world of Cobham’s customary economy. Winstanley was first recorded as an inhabitant of the tithing of Street Cobham, but by 1647 he was living in the tithing of Church Cobham, where he was engaged in farming; chiefly it seems in grazing and dairying. The tenement he occupied in Church Cobham was, or soon became, a copyhold possession of his wife’s parents, Susan and William King, who remained resident in London. Although Winstanley would become a manorial tenant in the 1650s, he was not one at this stage.<sup>19</sup> Mere inhabitants or residents had no certain rights of common, a position that had been reinforced by the highly influential ruling in *Smith v Gateward* in 1607 (Coke 374–77).<sup>20</sup> But even if Winstanley had already become a manorial tenant by the 1640s, his rights of common pasture in Cobham would still have been restricted, since the Kings’ copyhold estate was held of the manor of Ham, a small manor made up of scattered holdings in Cobham, Chertsey, and other parishes, rather than of the manor of Cobham. Only those tenants of Ham manor who – unlike the Kings – also held property of Cobham manor would, it seems, have enjoyed equal rights of access to Cobham’s commons with other Cobham manorial tenants. William and Susan King were unusual among Cobham landholders in holding property only of Ham manor; perhaps, they regarded their estate principally as an occasional rural retreat from London rather than as a viable agricultural concern.<sup>21</sup> Winstanley was therefore to remain very much an outsider in Cobham in his pre-Digger years, an aspirant grazier who would have had only limited rights of grazing over the extensive commons and wastes that surrounded his holding.

As a householder, Winstanley would have been liable to attend Cobham’s view of frankpledge or court leet, which normally met once a year, but as a non tenant he could have had no active involvement in the business of the court baron of the manor of Cobham; any infringement on his part of Cobham’s manorial customs would, however, have brought him to the attention of the manor court.<sup>22</sup> This is what happened in 1646, soon after Cobham’s manorial court began sitting again regularly after a three-year interruption during the Civil War. It was at a court baron held in April 1646 that three Cobham inhabitants were each fined 10s. for digging and carrying turves away from Cobham’s commons and five, including Winstanley, were each fined 10s. for digging peat (SHC 4398/1/9).<sup>23</sup> Significantly, none of those who were presented and fined was a Cobham manorial tenant. None was from among the poorest sections of local society, though most of them were relatively young and had young families. Richard Jenman and Elizabeth Perrier were both innholders, Gowen Mills was



a glazier, and his brother Edward a clothier; Susan Whitrow had recently been widowed, having moved to Cobham in the 1630s with her husband and mother, and she was for many years involved in a bitter legal dispute with her brother, the royalist Sir Robert Jason, over the terms of their father's will.<sup>24</sup>

The numbers of inhabitants involved in the peat and turf digging incidents are unusually high. It is rare to find so many presentments and fines for one type of offense in the Cobham court rolls. The involvement of so many inhabitants may reflect the pressures of war in a parish badly hit by the costs of free quarter and other wartime exactions: we know, for instance, that a number of Cobham householders were said to have been forced to “forsake there habitations not being able to continue,” and Winstanley was later to make much of the effects on the common people (and himself) of the high costs of contributions to the parliamentary war effort (Gurney, *Brave Community*, 44–45, 52, 73, 126–27, 131, 163, 191). Yet, it seems more likely that the targeting of illicit peat and turf diggers was part of a move to tighten control of manorial rights in Cobham. Anthony Wrenn, a future Digger, had been fined for digging and selling turf from the manorial waste in 1642, and in January 1646, when meetings of the court baron resumed, three cottagers were presented for the illegal erection of dwellings on the commons. By 1646, the manor of Cobham was under the control of the minister of West Horsley, John Platt, who had married Margaret, widow of Vincent Gavell. Platt, who was to emerge as the Diggers' most tenacious opponent after they moved from St George's Hill to Cobham's Little Heath, and who was to be the target of some of Winstanley's most colorful prose, seems to have been determined to protect the rights of the manorial lords. In this, he was ably assisted by experienced manorial stewards, notably the Clifford's Inn attorney and Surrey landowner George Duncombe, who presided at the court baron of April 1646, and Henry Baldwin, another Clifford's Inn lawyer and three-time mayor of Guildford, who was to name his “loving friend” John Platt as overseer of his will (Gurney, *Brave Community*, 8, 24, 50; TNA Prob11/353, ff. 270-70v). Platt's enthusiasm for upholding the interests of Cobham's manorial lords was such that he would later be accused in court, with Baldwin, of fraudulently passing freehold land off as copyhold for profit, and there is evidence that in another case he withheld manorial documents which he falsely suggested had been lost “in the late troubles” (TNA, C10/22/86; C10/468/162; Gurney, *Brave Community*, 219).

The work of Andy Wood and others has served to modify somewhat E.P. Thompson's portrayal of custom as essentially a weapon of the plebeian against the patrician. Custom – and particularly manorial custom – could just as often be used by village elites to control or exclude the local poor and outsiders.<sup>25</sup> Winstanley was well aware from his Surrey experience of the ways in which existing manorial and parochial organization could work against the interests of the poor. Gentry and freeholders were accused not only of overstocking the commons, but also of checking the poor “if they cut Wood, Heath, Turf, or Furseys, in places about the Common, where you disallow” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 35). As late as 1651, in the epistle dedicatory to *The Law of Freedom*, Winstanley would repeat his claim that freeholders and “the new (more covetous) Gentry” were guilty of using their power to “over-stock the Commons with Sheep and Cattle; so that inferior Tenants and poor Labourers can hardly keep a Cow, but half starve her” – “the poor are kept poor still, and the Common Freedom of the

Earth is kept from them” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 284). To this he would add observations about the ways in which in many parishes “two or three great ones” had long been able to influence the local distribution of assessments and free quarter, “to ease themselves, and over-burden the weaker sort.” In all this, one can sense Winstanley’s own experience driving him on: was he, as one might suspect, one of those “inferior people” who questioned the local assessors, or who complained about the unfairness of assessments to justices or the county committee, only to be “weariet out by delays and waiting” or to see “the offence . . . smothered up?” (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 284)

Wood, like Thompson before him, sees custom very much as a “discourse within which oppositional ideas could legitimately be developed” and, like Thompson, he argues persuasively for the continued vitality of custom, despite significant changes to the way it operated and was understood, well into the eighteenth century (Wood, *Memory of the People*, 11, 41–2, 289). Alternative discourses, such as Norman Yoke theory or the idea of an ancient constitution, are seen to have had only limited influence below the level of the urban middling sort (96–97). Winstanley, however, despite his frequent and very astute allusions to traditional languages of popular protest, and his frequent use of arguments drawn from necessity and reciprocity, had little time for the discourse of custom (Gurney, “Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement,” 801–2). We can see this particularly after the Diggers moved from St George’s Hill to Cobham, where opposition to their activities took on a markedly different character from the large-scale popular assaults witnessed in Walton. On Little Heath, unlike in Walton, opposition to the Diggers was largely gentry led, and Winstanley was able once more to write in terms of the binary oppositions between gentry and poor that had characterized his social analysis in *The New Law of Righteousnes* and *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*.<sup>26</sup> It was while the Diggers were in Cobham that Winstanley could vividly describe John Platt and Sir Anthony Vincent sitting on horseback or in their coaches, watching while their “fearfull tenants” and hired men pulled down Digger houses and attempted to drive them from the commons; and it was Platt and Vincent who led the final assault on the Digger colony in April 1650, enabling Winstanley to claim that those who joined them did so only under duress, being threatened with eviction if they failed to appear (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 122, 268–70).

Although the Norman Yoke would never be as significant for Winstanley as the Fall, he began to show an interest in Norman Yoke theory from *The True Levellers Standard* onwards, influenced perhaps by the anonymous *More Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, which had appeared in March (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 12–3). He made no mention of the Norman Yoke in his pre-Digger writings. From late 1649, after the Diggers’ move to Cobham, there appears to have been a noticeable shift in the ways Winstanley applied arguments derived from Norman Yoke theory.<sup>27</sup> Although he had, in his St George’s Hill pamphlets, already come to accept that the gentry were the successors to the Conqueror’s officers, and that they maintained their power by virtue of the Conquest, he had been prepared to envisage the survival of two quite separate forms of landholding and land use, with the poor working the wastes in common while the gentry and freeholders retained their enclosures unmolested (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 70; cf. Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 126). The gentry had been freed from bondage by the abolition of the Court of Wards, but the common people had yet to be set free from paying homage to lords of manors; this could be achieved by letting them dig and plant

the commons independently of gentry control (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 73). In later pamphlets, and particularly those written in the early months of 1650, when prospects for the survival of the Little Heath colony had become more bleak, Winstanley was much more explicit about the need to root out all vestiges of the “Norman” manorial system. In *An Appeale to All Englishmen*, the most confrontational of Digger pamphlets, Winstanley declared bluntly that with victory over the King, and with Parliament’s subsequent acts, oaths, and declarations, “the Title of Lords of Mannours to the Land as Conquerors is lost” and copyholders were freed from all obedience to manorial lords. No longer should they attend manorial courts, sit as jurors at court barons or “take an Oath to be true to them,” “nor to pay fines, Heriots, quit-rent, nor any homage, as formerly”; indeed if they were to do so they would be in breach of the Engagement and the laws of the land and would be liable to be declared traitors to the Commonwealth (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 245–47).<sup>28</sup>

Winstanley was not alone in denouncing the iniquities of manorial customs, and in demanding that they should be jettisoned like the Court of Wards (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 87). The authors of the *Light Shining* pamphlets railed against the enslavement of tenants by their manorial lords, those “petty Tyrants and Kings” who “hold all from a supreme Lord, who was none of Gods setting up.”<sup>29</sup> Robert Coster too called for an end to “slavish payments” to lords of manors (Coster 2–3). The author of the anonymous *A Prospective Glasse* of 1649 criticized the continuance of entry fines and heriots after the abolition of the “great bondage” of the Court of Wards: “what righteousness is in such a law or custome, I finde very little or none at all; but against righteousness, justnes and equitie, to practise such arbitrary tyrannous customes, grievous for the people to bear.” The author did not deny that such practices were according to law or custom “that now is in England,” but judged by the law of equity they could have no moral justification (15–8). Not all of these writers would, like Winstanley and Coster, have advocated the complete collapse of the existing manorial system, but each went further than those who, more typically, complained rather of excessive and uncertain entry fines and heriots.<sup>30</sup>

Custom, for Winstanley, had always been part of the armory of the oppressor, and he appears to have been blind to the positive role it might play in defense of popular rights. In his early, pre-Digger pamphlets Winstanley had spoken of custom almost exclusively in a religious sense, when he denounced those false forms and customs that would give way to true worship in the latter days.<sup>31</sup> It is perhaps inevitable that in his Digger writings he would begin to use the word differently, and to argue that the power of manorial lords over the commons was shored up by custom. The lords of manors’ “ancient Custom, and oppressing power over the Common-people” was, for Winstanley, tied up with Norman laws and practice; the Diggers’ work on the commons could be classed as trespass only by “ancient custome, bred in the strength of Kingly Prerogative,” which no longer had any force. He rejected any notion that “the ould Lawes and Customes of the Land” still stood (Winstanley, *CWGW* II, 67, 71, 74–75, 84–85, 87, 89, 247).<sup>32</sup> Winstanley was associating custom here chiefly with the powers of lords of manors, but the stripping away of these powers would lead inevitably to the destruction of the manorial system and the customary practices by which manors were regulated. The very act of occupying the commons represented a rejection of manorial custom, and, as Brian Manning pointed out, a direct,

if unintended challenge to the interests of small tenants whose livelihood was dependent on regulated access to the commons (33–58).

It should be no surprise to find Winstanley, that most radical of English Revolution thinkers, taking this path, particularly in the light of his own Cobham experiences and in the light of the months he spent defending the Cobham Digger colony against Platt, Vincent, and their gentry allies. The failings of the customary economy were, it seems, as plain to him as they would have been to any humanist thinker or commercially minded improver. What is more surprising is that in taking this path he was still able to attract and retain considerable support from local inhabitants, many of whom would have been well versed in traditional languages of customary rights and entitlements and experienced in the traditional, customary regulation of their communities. While that should not, perhaps, lead us to question the long-term resilience and utility of languages of custom, it does serve to remind us just how revolutionary the two decades from 1640 to 1660 were, and how much had changed, at a local as well as national level, since before 1642.

## Notes

1. See [Gregg](#) 11–6, 19–20, 21–32. The boots, first recorded in 1825 as “Col. Lilburne’s boots,” are more likely to have belonged to Robert than to John Lilburne.
2. See Ingle on George Fox.
3. For example, [Abram](#) and [Axon](#). For a more critical account of this “Lancashire Socialist,” see *The Burnley Gazette*, 17 July 1895.
4. See [Alsop](#), “Winstanley’s Youth,” 11–24.
5. See [Alsop](#), “What Do We Know?” 22–5; [Winstanley](#), *CWGW* I, 51–3.
6. See also [Alsop](#), “Ethics in the Marketplace,” 97–119; [Alsop](#), “What Do We Know?” 25–7; Gurney, *Winstanley*, 12, 15–8.
7. See [Alsop](#), “Ethics in the Marketplace,” 115–16; [Winstanley](#), *CWGW* I, 510–11; *CWGW* II, 80. Cf. I, 444.
8. [Coulton](#). For recent occupations, see Andrew Bradstock, “Introduction,” in [Bradstock](#), *Winstanley and the Diggers* 1–2; [Gurney](#), *Winstanley*, 111–13.
9. The monument has since been moved away from the gated community of St George’s Hill’s to a more accessible site.
10. This is recounted in, for example, [Winstanley](#), *CWGW* II, 1, 10, 13–4, 39, 43–5, 59–62, 66–76, 82–4, 90–9.
11. Patterns of opposition are explored in [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 153–209.
12. Cf. [Davis](#) 183–84.
13. See [Bradstock](#), *Faith in the Revolution*, 71–133; [Hessayon](#) 87–112.
14. See also [Bradstock](#), *Faith in the Revolution*, 105–6; [Holstun](#) 376.
15. Levels of local support for the Digger venture are assessed in [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 128–34.
16. TNA, [WARD2/26/93/20](#); SHC, [2610/11/8/33](#), 36–7, 41–3; [4398/1/6](#); [442](#), ff. [50–50b](#), [53b](#); [4398/1/13](#). On the absence of stints in Walton before 1600, see [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 138–39, 156.
17. Derrick’s evidence regarding Bickerstaffe is supported by surviving court rolls: SHC, [K44/1/5](#).
18. Agas’s survey was completed in 1598: SHC, [2610/29/3](#).

19. For Winstanley's move to Cobham, see [Alsop](#), "What Do We Know?" 27–8; [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 71–4; [Winstanley](#), *CWGW I*, 10–1.
20. Cf. [Thompson](#) 130–35.
21. Comparisons between Ham and Cobham manorial documents confirm that most Cobham inhabitants who were Ham manor copyholders were also tenants of the manor of Cobham. Some intercommoning had historically been allowed, but this was limited.
22. Manorial organization in Cobham is discussed in [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 2–3, 7–8, 49–50.
23. The incident is discussed by [Taylor](#), who discovered and rescued the relevant documents, in his "Winstanley at Cobham," 39; [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 50–2; [Winstanley](#), *CWGW I*, 11.
24. [Gurney](#), *Brave Community*, 50–1, 60; "Notes on the Family of Jason of Broad Somerford," 181–84, 241–45, 291–98, 361–65.
25. See [Thompson](#) 5–12, 97–184; [Wood](#), *Memory of the People*, 31, 41, 127, 170–71, 178, 184; [Wood](#), "Place of Custom in Plebeian Political Culture," 50–51. [Thompson](#), of course, never denied that custom could be used by middling farmers against their poorer neighbors ([Thompson](#) 102, 132, 148).
26. See [Gurney](#), "Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement," 777–81, 785–88 for contrasts between opposition in Walton and Cobham.
27. See especially *More Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*; [Winstanley](#), *CWGW II*, 49–51, 68–9, 72, 75–6, 245, 247. For Winstanley's assessment of the relative importance of the Norman Yoke and the Fall, see [Winstanley](#), *CWGW II*, 55.
28. Cf. *The Diggers Mirth* 9–10; [Hill](#) 89–90.
29. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*; *More Light*.
30. See, for instance, *Severall Proposals for Generall Good of Commonwealth* 8–9; *Copy-holders Plea*.
31. For example, [Winstanley](#), *CWGW I*, 156, 161, 163, 176–78, 278, 485–86, 512, 532, 550, 553, 556, 564.
32. Cf. [Thomas](#) 62, for the Iver Diggers' description of the effects of "time, custome and usurping Lawes" in creating "particular Interests for some, and not for all."

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# Ariel Hessayon

## WINSTANLEY AND BAPTIST THOUGHT

*Of all the enigmas about Gerrard Winstanley, perhaps the greatest is how did a man of unremarkable origins come to articulate one of the most penetrating and damning critiques of his own society in such powerful and crafted prose? The answer to this question has as much to do with Winstanley's spiritual progress and broadening intellectual horizons as with his increased engagement in local and national politics, which became more pronounced after the establishment of the Digger plantation. Accordingly, this essay focuses on an aspect of Winstanley's development, namely his interpretation, adaptation, and articulation of teachings characteristically – albeit not always exclusively – maintained by certain prominent Baptists and their followers. I have suggested elsewhere that the outlines, if not the precise moments, of Winstanley's spiritual journey can be reconstructed with confidence. Beginning in either childhood, adolescence, or some point in adulthood, he was a puritan; 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”) before falling into a trance. Here, I want to build on my own work together with John Gurney's important recent studies by locating Winstanley within a milieu that makes his beliefs and subsequent practices explicable. For it appears that despite his undoubted gift for original thought, Winstanley did not always give credit where it was due.*

**Keywords** Gerrard Winstanley; Diggers; Baptists; Thomas Lambe

### Introduction

Of all the enigmas about Gerrard Winstanley, perhaps the greatest is how did a man of unremarkable origins come to articulate one of the most penetrating and damning critiques of his own society in such powerful and crafted prose? The answer to this question has as much to do with Winstanley's spiritual progress and broadening intellectual horizons as with his increased engagement in local and national politics, which became more pronounced after the establishment of the Digger plantation. Accordingly, I want to focus here on an aspect of Winstanley's development, namely his interpretation, adaptation, and articulation of teachings characteristically – albeit not always exclusively – maintained by certain prominent Baptists and their followers.

It is well known that Winstanley had once been a believer in adult baptism. He says so himself in *Truth Lifting Up Its Head above Scandals* (1649), and there seems little reason to doubt his word: “for Baptism, I have gon through the ordinance of dipping, which the letter of the Scripture doth warrant, yet I doe not presse any one thereunto” (CWGW I: 449).<sup>1</sup> Yet until recently the significance of Winstanley's statement had not been given sufficient attention. John Gurney, however, has noted the presence of



Baptist emissaries in Surrey during the mid-1640s (Gurney, *Brave Community* 41, 95–6). Thus, about the beginning of September 1645 and accompanied by the Norwich weaver Samuel Oates, the Colchester soapboiler Thomas Lambe reportedly preached in a church at Guildford; apparently, he would have done the same a few days later at Godalming on a Sunday had the minister not denied him the use of his pulpit. Murray Tolmie has deservedly called Lambe’s church, which then met at a house in Bell Alley, Coleman Street but would shortly relocate to Spitalfields, the “most notorious sectarian church in London during the English civil war.” Lambe himself was an energetic emissary who traveled extensively through several counties during the war. He and Oates were heading to Portsmouth and if they followed the road from London would have first passed *en route* through Kingston-upon-Thames, Esher, and Cobham, where Winstanley had been living since autumn 1643 (Edwards I: 92–5, 146; Tolmie, “Thomas Lambe, soapboiler” 7).

Another itinerant Baptist evangelist active in Surrey was Thomas Collier. The Presbyterian heresiographer and author of *Gangraena*, Thomas Edwards, called him a “great Sectary,” relating how about the beginning of April 1646 this “mechanicall fellow” preached in the meeting place at Guildford to an Independent congregation swelled by people thronging from nearby towns come to hear this “rare man.” Described as a husbandman or carter (possibly because, like his fellow Baptist Henry Denne, he subscribed to the belief that ministers should work with their hands), Collier was banished from Guernsey and afterwards imprisoned at Portsmouth for sowing the seeds of “Anabaptism, Anti-sabbatarianism, and some Arminianisme” (Edwards, II: 148; III: 27, 41, 51–2). Important research by Gurney has now drawn attention to “distinct echoes” of Collier’s works in Winstanley’s earliest texts, and even allowing for important theological differences Gurney thinks it “hard to believe that Winstanley never read Collier or heard him preach, or that Collier was wholly unfamiliar with Winstanley’s writings” (Gurney, *Gerrard Winstanley* 22, 24–26, 27–28, 29, 39–40, 42–43).

While Guildford lay about 11 miles southwest of Cobham on the London-Portsmouth road, Kingston was roughly 8 miles to the northeast. Chamberlains’ accounts for 1643–1644 together with a warrant made out on 15 August 1644 indicate that “Anabaptists” were probably arrested here, 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 in February that year by Richard Byfield, rector of Long Ditton, Surrey. 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 (Gurney, *Brave Community* 41–2; Byfield, “Epistle Dedicatory” 20–1).

It is conceivable that Byfield’s “Temple-vermine,” the “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 Sunday January 1645 (Byfield 33–4). Briefly imprisoned, upon their release they resumed meeting privately after Sabbath day divine service 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, a London cloth-drawer whose Baptist church sometimes met at a “great house” in Bishopsgate Street. Barber’s own 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 well-equipped him to make the defendant’s case (Edwards, I: 96–7, 104–5; Barber, *Certain Queries* 14; Wright, “Edward Barber” 355–70). Suggestively, Winstanley and the future Digger Henry Bickerstaffe were to represent Fielder in arbitration in February 1649, with the Leveller leader John Lilburne serving as part of Fielder’s legal team (Fielder 2, 4–6; Gurney, *Brave Community* 42, 76–8, 131, 132–3, 134).

I have suggested elsewhere that the outlines, if not the precise moments, of Winstanley’s spiritual journey can be reconstructed with confidence. Beginning in either childhood, adolescence, or some point in adulthood, he was a puritan; 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”) before falling into a trance sometime between 16 October 1648 and 26 January 1649. Although Winstanley’s puritan and Baptist phases can only be gleaned from reminiscences, they still provide a valuable insight into the evolution of his thought. 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, possibly by a member of Lambe’s or Barber’s church – the imprint of distinctive General Baptist tenets, especially in his first five publications, is both unmistakable and crucial for understanding the development of his ideas. The influence of Baptist precedents can be seen, for example, in Winstanley’s understanding of apostolic practice and implementation of the doctrine of community of goods (Acts 4: 32), with its striking resemblance to sixteenth-century Hutterite practice in Moravia (Hessayon, “Early Modern Communism” 1–50). It is present in the Diggers’ use of emissaries to spread the good news that they had begun laying the foundations of universal freedom (Matthew 28: 19). And it can also be seen in Winstanley’s beliefs about universal redemption and particular election, not to mention his attitude toward Scripture, divine gifts, Jewish law, ordinances, the Saturday and Sunday Sabbath, tithes, ministers, magistrates, religious toleration, and nonresistance. Taken as a whole it largely positions his early teachings as budding forth from fertile General Baptist soil. Indeed, it is fruitful in some respects to consider the Diggers as an offshoot from the main branch of the General Baptists, with roots going back to the Radical Reformation (Hessayon, “Gerrard Winstanley, Radical Reformer” 87–112).

In this essay I want to build on Gurney’s work as well as my own by locating Winstanley within a milieu that makes his beliefs and subsequent practices explicable. Much of the evidence is circumstantial and necessarily selective. Thus, Winstanley’s onetime companion and fellow Digger William Everard had been a Baptist. Like Winstanley, Everard eventually moved beyond this doctrinal position when he rejected believer’s baptism, gospel ordinances, and the efficacy of prayer. In mid-October 1648 Winstanley defended him in print from accusations of blasphemy following Everard’s imprisonment by the bailiffs of Kingston. Moreover, just before digging began on St George’s Hill, Everard was charged with interrupting a church service at Staines, Middlesex, in a threatening manner, shaking an agricultural tool at the minister and calling

him a son of perdition (2 Thessalonians 2: 3; Hessayon, “Everard, William”). Everard may also have been involved in a dramatic incident at Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, about mid-February 1649 when six soldiers reportedly entered the church after evening service, one claiming to have received a divine command to deliver God’s message. This consisted of five points: 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 Testaments were abolished because Christ had now arrived in glory. At this point he set fire to a little Bible (Walker II: 152–3). Significantly, abolition of the Sabbath, tithes, and ministers together with antiscripturism were all theological positions characteristically if not exclusively maintained, with varying degrees of sophistication, by several General Baptists – notably members of Lambe’s and Barber’s churches.

Then there is Winstanley’s indirect association with Barber through Fielder. It may be noteworthy that Barber, Everard, and Winstanley, along with the Baptist Edmund Chillenden and the Leveller printer William Larnier, had all been apprenticed into the Merchant Taylors – although each to different masters over a period of 20 years in what was a very large London livery company.<sup>2</sup> Another indirect connection worth mentioning may have been with the physician Peter Chamberlen, who had adopted believer’s baptism about 1648 and was acquainted with Barber (Chamberlen, *Master Bakewells Sea of Absurdities* 3). Chamberlen was also author of *The Poore Mans Advocate* (prefaced 3 April 1649), a work acquired by the London bookseller George Thomason the day before he dated his copy of the Diggers’ first published manifesto, *The True Levellers Standard Advanced: Or, the State of Community Opened, and Presented to the Sons of Men* (prefaced 20 April 1649). Chamberlen’s proposals, which were to be discussed by a committee appointed by the Council of State, included – once the State had been satisfactorily recompensed for its losses from Crown and Church estates – granting the poor cultivation and usage of the commons, wasteland, forests, chases, heaths, and moors. Mario Caricchio has discovered that Chamberlen’s scheme was publicized through a broadsheet intended as a petition to be read in parish churches and public places. Signatures were to be deposited with the bookseller Giles Calvert, who was also Chamberlen’s and Winstanley’s publisher. They would be collected by Richard Maidley – assumed, although the evidence is not conclusive, to be the Surrey Digger of that name (Chamberlen, *The Poore Mans Advocate* 47–9; *The Humble Petition of Officers and Souldiers*, brs; Caricchio, “*News from New Jerusalem*” 69–70; CWGW II: 450).

Chamberlen’s solution to England and Wales’ critical agrarian problem somewhat resembles another petition, circulated in London and its surroundings in mid-February 1649 and subsequently presented to the House of Commons, calling for opening up common land to the poor that had been “wrongfully enclosed.”<sup>3</sup> It has also been compared with John Jubbess’ scheme of December 1648 to prevent famine and provide for the poor by enclosing marshes, fens, and common pastures, apportioning a quarter to the indigent of those parishes in which such land was situated (Jubbess, *Several Proposals* 9; Jubbess, *An Apology* 13; *The Moderate* 42 (24 April–1 May 1649): 481; Brailsford 433–4). A Norfolk-bred Parliamentarian army officer influenced by the preaching of John Saltmarsh (Sir Thomas Fairfax’s recently deceased chaplain), Jubbess’ proposal formed part of a modified version of the *Agreement of the People* issued with the support of the Lord Mayor, Aldermen,

and Common Council of London and later summarized in *The Moderate*. Although not a Leveller himself, Jubbes had spoken at the Putney debates (28 October–11 November 1647) (Jubbes, *An Apology* 2, 7, 19; Brailsford 304, 357–8; Baker and Vernon, *Agreements of the People* 6–7.). So too did some soldiers who were already or subsequently became Baptists – William Allen, Chillenden, Richard Deane, Robert Everard, and perhaps also John Rede,<sup>4</sup> while Collier had preached a sermon taken from Isaiah 65: 17 on *A Discovery of the New Creation* at army headquarters, Putney, on 29 September 1647. Indeed, historians have rightly emphasized support among Baptists and future Baptists – mainly General rather than Particular Baptists – for various versions of the *Agreement of the People* with its demands for religious toleration and the abolition of tithes; notably by Barber, Collier, Henry Danvers, Robert Everard, Jeremiah Ives, Lambe, Oates, Richard Overton, and John Vernon (Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints* 170–1; Wright, *The Early English Baptists* 203, 204, 207, 210–1). In addition, Denne was associated with the army mutiny of May 1649 (considered a Leveller revolt by several contemporaries), infamously renouncing his former principles to save his life, while Rede was likewise charged with assisting the Levellers’ cause at this dangerous time (Denne, *The Levellers Designe*; Bayley 344–5). Given this widespread Baptist involvement in political agitation it would be interesting to speculate on the role played by individual Baptists in promoting the published declarations circulated on behalf of the “well-affected” of London, Southwark, and several counties – especially in light of the well-known affinities between three pamphlets emanating from Buckinghamshire and the Diggers’ declaration of April 1649.

Besides Winstanley’s social network and the Baptist background more generally, the Diggers imitated the Baptist churches in March 1650 through their use of authorized emissaries. As well as encouraging people to cultivate common land, these messengers solicited donations for a common treasury from among the “well-affected” of the southern and midland counties. Although evidence survives for only one journey undertaken by two men encompassing 34 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. These included at least nine towns and villages with either an existing Baptist presence or else Baptist churches that would be established during the 1650s.<sup>5</sup> Among them were Bedford, where about 1650 an open membership separatist congregation was formed, and Fenstanton and Warboys, where Denne had founded General Baptist churches. The Warboys church book even records the Diggers’ activities on the “commons and heath-grounds” together with Winstanley’s prophecy that “Israel must go free,” recalling that in 1650 the Baptist churches began listening too much to the “errors” of “Diggers, Levellers, and Ranters . . . insomuch that several churches were so shaken that most of our Christian assemblies were neglected or broken up” (Underhill 269–70).

Perhaps even more compelling than this circumstantial evidence, however, are the marked similarities between a number of Winstanley’s ideas and corresponding features of Baptist thought. It is to these we now turn.

## Community of goods

Communal ownership of property and belongings was a controversial if ancient doctrine that subsequently became a distinguishing feature of some early and medieval Christian

heresies as well as specific Protestant sects, who envisaged themselves as communities imitating apostolic practice. Yet once Anabaptists seized the town of Münster in 1534, proclaiming it the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21: 2), abolishing private ownership of money, forcefully establishing community of goods and then polygamy, that place became synonymous with community of all things – not to mention sectarian anarchy. In consequence, 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 fantastical spirits who perverted scripture to serve their madness. Consequently, 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. Indeed, among the intolerable Baptist doctrinal errors consistently 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*” (Pagitt 13, 24).

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 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. The danger of guilt by association was not lost 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?*” (Overton, *Araignment of Mr. Persecution* 20). 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.

Perhaps aware of this dark history and the danger of guilt by association Winstanley 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, while the Diggers welcomed newcomers that 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. Accordingly, he 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.

### **Universal redemption and particular election**

While Baptists agreed that there was no scriptural justification for infant baptism, they remained divided on several important theological questions – especially the

schismatic issue of whether Christ died for the sins of all mankind or whether only the elect were to be saved by God's free grace and mercy (Romans 9: 11–13). Although denominational alignments did not harden until arguably autumn 1644, there were on the one hand followers of Calvinist doctrine who believed in the “particular Election and Reprobation” of individuals (Particular Baptists), and on the other essentially maintainers of core Arminian or Remonstrant tenets who, while usually accepting particular election and denying free will, nonetheless taught the “Universal Love of God to all” and thus the possibility of universal redemption (General Baptists) (Howard, *A Looking-Glass for Baptists* 5–6; Crosby, *History of English Baptists* I: 173–4).

If Winstanley was referred to at all by the beginning of the eighteenth century then it was not only as a claimed forerunner of Quakerism, but also as a believer in universal salvation. Accordingly, Winstanley's *The Myserie of God, Concerning the Whole Creation, Mankinde* (1648) was cited by Richard Roach, rector of St Augustine, Hackney, as an example of a Universalist tradition that stretched back to Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa (Roach, “Preface”; Apetrei 228). The London bookseller John Denis the elder, whose son and namesake owned a copy of Winstanley's *Law of Freedom*, added works by Theaurau John Tany, Richard Coppin, and William Erbery to this catalogue of authors who had written in apparent support of the doctrine of universal restoration (Denis's *catalogue* 36, no. 885; Denis, “Preface” to *Restoration of All Things xxxiii–iv*). Even so, Winstanley's views were more complex than posthumous inclusion in this list suggested. For in *The Myserie of God* he actually advocated a heterodox marriage of universal redemption with particular election. Acknowledging potential contradictions with this seemingly irreconcilable combination, Winstanley explained that sinners would endure a finite period of punishment – but certainly not Purgatory as taught by the Catholic Church – before their ultimate salvation (CWGW I: 266, 269–70, 286–8, 289; cf. Rabisha 30).

Winstanley's belief in universal redemption, it must be emphasized, was considered a doctrinal error, one that from 2 May 1648 was punishable by imprisonment if disseminated – which may explain why the first edition of *The Myserie of God* has an undated preface and bears no publisher's imprint (Firth and Rait I: 1135). Furthermore, and crucially, Winstanley was not unique in simultaneously maintaining universal redemption and particular election. On the contrary, as the eighteenth-century Baptist historian Thomas Crosby was to observe, Lambe had previously endeavored at “*the reconciling of particular election, with universal redemption*” in *A Treatise of Particular Predestination* (1642) (Crosby III: 56–7). Here, Lambe declared that “*Christs dying for all, and particular Election*” stood together; “*there is no contradiction betwixt these two, but a sweet concord*”. Beginning with a defense of particular predestination, he proceeded with a response to several objections by suggesting that election was an additional means of making some believe in Christ besides redemption (Lambe, *A Treatise of Particular Predestination* A2v, Bv–B2, B2v). Lambe returned to this subject about three years later in a defense of his London church entitled *The Fountaine of Free Grace opened* (1645; 2nd ed., 1648), denying that the “*doctrine of Christs dying for all*” was contradicted by God's election of “*some persons before the world began*” (Lambe, *The Fountaine* 21–2).<sup>6</sup> This published vindication of his congregation from the “scandalous aspersions of holding *free-will*, and denying a free *Election by Grace*” was issued shortly after Lambe had reportedly preached the “Arminian” doctrine of “universal Grace” before a “mighty great” audience at St Benet Gracechurch. It did not, however, prevent

Edwards from subsequently attacking Lambe's church. (Lambe, *The Fountain* title page; Edwards I: 92).

In *Gangraena* (1646) Edwards raged that all members of Lambe's congregation preached "universal Redemption" (Edwards I: 92). Denne, a "great Antinomian" and "desperate Arminian," allegedly often preached the doctrine that the everlasting Gospel (Revelation 14: 6) was to believe that Christ died for all, for Judas as well as for Peter, even for Muslims and pagans; "and that all the sins of men committed against the Moral law, were actually forgiven and pardoned when Jesus Christ shed his blood" (Edwards I: 26, 49 [mispaginated], 76–7, 181–2). Similarly, Oates preached against the doctrine of "Gods eternal Election and Predestination" and was later charged with perverting Scripture to support his contention that "Christ dyed for all and ev<sup>r</sup>y man" (Edwards I: 92–4; II: 10; Betteridge 208).

Then there was Mrs Attaway, said to be a lace woman. She too reportedly preached "many dangerous and false" doctrines, including that because God was good he would not damn his own creatures eternally, that "there shall be a generall Restauration, wherein all men shall be reconciled and saved," and that "Christ died for all." Moreover, even through Edwards's hostile filter there is a striking anticipation of Winstanley in Attaway's apparent belief that "there was *Esaus* world and *Jacobs* world; this was *Esaus* world, but *Jacobs* world was comming shortly, wherein all creatures shall be saved." For Winstanley envisaged Jacob and Esau as types. Esau's dominion was supported by university-trained clergymen and public preachers, "false Teachers" and betrayers of Christ. Conversely, Jacob would sweep away "all the refuge of lies, and all oppressions" to "make the earth a common treasury." Indeed, Attaway again preceded Winstanley in declaring that a prophet would:

come forth to preach this new Doctrine of generall Restauration and Salvation of all; and though all should be saved, yet there should be degrees of glory between those that have been Saints (they should be more glorious) and those who were the wicked, though now restored. (Edwards I: 87; III: 26–7; cf. *CWGW* I: 501–2, 511–2, 550, 564)

Given the physical proximity before mid-February 1646 of Lambe's church to John Goodwin's gathered congregation (the former was then located in Bell Alley, off Coleman Street, the latter in nearby St Stephen's church on Coleman Street), it is unsurprising to learn of a member of Goodwin's church attending out of curiosity a Sunday evening meeting at Lambe's where he "reasoned the possibility of men to be saved who are not Elected." Meanwhile at Bishopsgate Street, the question of "whether Christ died for all men" was hotly debated late into the night on 12 November 1645 by about 80 Baptists including members of Barber's church (Edwards I: 94, 104). Mention should also be made here of William Erbery pleading for "universall Redemption," as well as two treatises which may no longer be extant: Timothy Batte's *A True Vindication of the Generall Redemption of the Second Adam* (1645) and Jubbes's *The Water of Life or the True Way to General Salvation* (1652) (Edwards I: 35; III: 90; *Bibliotheca Uffenbachiana* I: 861, no. 51(4)).

While it is possible, of course, that Winstanley's heterodox conjunction of universal redemption with particular election had been developed independently, it is far more likely that it evolved through a process of listening to a member of Lambe's

church (perhaps Lambe himself when evangelizing in Guildford or elsewhere in Surrey on the London-Portsmouth road), reflection, discussion, and literary expression. And since Winstanley only cited scripture in support of this doctrine (as was his usual practice), this reinforces the impression of hearing rather than reading.

## Scripture

In an address to the scholars of Oxford and Cambridge and all those calling themselves ministers of the Gospel at the front of *Truth Lifting Up Its Head above Scandals* Winstanley declared that regardless of their ability to render Hebrew and Greek into English, scholars and clergymen did not possess the original Scriptures as written by the Prophets and Apostles – merely copies of questionable accuracy. Consequently, their contradictory translations, inferences, conjectures, and doctrines were akin to a savage beast ripping asunder the Gospel, whose inner truth could not be apprehended through corrupt flesh but be judged only by the Spirit of the risen Christ, which was now spreading through his sons and daughters (*CWGW* I: 409-10). Within the main text Winstanley adopted a catechetical format, explaining that the Gospel was God the Father himself whereas the Scriptures contained only testimonies of his appearance to comfort believers. And in these “latter” days when God was manifesting himself to rule in the flesh of his saints, the writings of the Prophets and Apostles would cease, their validity being superseded by the everlasting Gospel: the Lord himself (*CWGW* I: 429-36).

I argue in a forthcoming essay that during the English Revolution initial objections to an unquestioning adherence to the outward letter of Scripture together with doubts about its salvific potential were, on the whole, reinforced by several interlinked doctrinal positions: the supremacy of the interior spirit over exterior flesh; the supersession of ordinances such as Baptism; seeking and awaiting a return to the primitive Christianity of the Apostles; and belief in the imminent second coming of Christ (*Hessayon*, “Not the Word of God”). It is also significant for our purposes that all the individuals named by Edwards in *Gangraena* whose publicly expressed beliefs included notions consonant with antiscriturism had, with the important exception of William Erbery, voluntarily undergone believer’s baptism.

Thus, many members of Lambe’s congregation were accused of slighting the Scriptures (*Edwards* I: 94). Oates, for instance, was charged with asserting that “y<sup>e</sup> old Testam[en]<sup>t</sup> is nul’d, and they y<sup>t</sup> preach it or alleadg it, are Moses disciples, not Ch[ris]ts” (*LJ*, ix: 571; *Betteridge* 208). Collier, who had likewise been active in Surrey, maintained that the Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible was undoubtedly corrupt since Papists had preserved and transmitted copies of the original. Given that the Papacy had probably perverted the earliest version and that several Greek copies contradicted each other in particular places, he advised his fellow self-regarding saints to place their faith in God, through whom Scripture’s glorious inner truth would be revealed to their spirit (*Collier*, *A General Epistle* 30–9). Then there was Thomas Webbe, who reportedly said that the Scriptures were the “golden-Calf and brazen-Serpent” that had set the King and Parliament at variance. Only when these idolatrous objects had been dashed to pieces would the divisions that had rent the kingdom asunder be healed. Furthermore, Webbe allegedly claimed that the Scriptures were nothing but a man-made tradition, whose authority was purposefully sustained by a parasitic clergy that derived their livelihood



from the monopoly they exercised over its interpretation. (*LJ*, vii: 71, 80–1; *Edwards I*: 54, 74–5; *II*: 138).

Equally heinous were the teachings disseminated in print by Lawrence Clarkson. His first pamphlet, *The Pilgrimage of Saints* (1646), contained several inflammatory passages “highly derogatory to the Scriptures.” These included Clarkson’s apparent assertion that the Bible was not the word of God but a human invention. Accordingly, regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the original manuscript or indeed the English translation’s accuracy, the Scriptures had no authority as a guide to Christian conduct (*Edwards I*: 18, 19, 29, 73, 127; *II*: 7, 165–6). In the same vein, surgeon John Boggis was accused of wishing “he had not known so much of the Bible” which was only paper (*Edwards II*: “To the Christian Reader,” 161–3). A final example is Clement Wrighter, whom Edwards denounced as an arch heretic, fearful apostate, antiscripturist, skeptic, and atheist. Wrighter had been an Independent, General Baptist and associate of Lambe. According to Edwards, he asserted that there was no Gospel, no ministry, nor faith unless anyone could demonstrate that they had been called to the ministry in the manner of the Apostles. Wrighter, moreover, was said to have affirmed in conversation that:

the Scriptures are not the Word of God, neither in the Translation, not yet in the Original tongues, so as to be an infallible foundation of Faith; that the Scriptures are writings only probably to be believed as the Story of *Henry* the Eighth. (*Edwards I*:81–3; *III*: 136)

## The Saturday and Sunday Sabbath

Profanation of the Sabbath was a serious matter during the English Revolution. Indeed, the “Book of Sports” – a royal initiative encouraging traditional Sunday pastimes outside the hours of divine service – was publicly burned on 10 May 1643 at Cheapside. What is more, according to the provisions of an Ordinance of 8 April 1644 traveling and laboring on the Sabbath were punishable by 10 and 5 shilling fines, respectively (*Firth and Rait I*: 420–2).

Unlike some prominent separatist and Baptist Judaizers (Christians who adopted selected Jewish customs and religious rites), and despite himself exhibiting Judaizing tendencies, Winstanley was no defender of the Saturday Sabbath. But whereas he regarded the Jewish Sabbath as a type, as an outward observance practiced one day in seven by Jews that prefigured what Christians would “perform in the substance,” he insisted that keeping Sunday holy had not been achieved by force. Rather, it was a “voluntary act of love” among the Apostles who had tasted the “day of Christ.” Consequently, Winstanley rebuked ministers for enforcing observance of the Sunday Sabbath with the magistrates’ power, endeavoring to compel people “to keep that day after the manner of the Jewish tipe.” With this context in mind, the actions of five Diggers who began cultivating the earth on St George’s Hill one April Sunday takes on extra significance since this appears to have been a confrontational gesture. Certainly, this unashamed Sabbath breach echoes Jesus’ teaching that it was lawful to do good on Sabbath days (Luke 6: 5–10), and chimes with Winstanley’s conviction that Saints

filled with the indwelling Christ were not bound by outmoded forms of Jewish worship but liberated from weekly Sabbath observance (*CWGW* I: 161, 288–89, 449, 451). Moreover, there are suggestive antecedents and parallels.

Thus, in 1627 the supposed Familist and one-time Putney resident John Etherington was publicly humiliated and pressured to recant certain blasphemous opinions, including that the Sabbath day “was of no force” since the Apostles’ time and that every day “is a Sabbath as much as that which we call the Sabbath day” ([Denison 33–4](#)). More recently Byfield had denounced anti-Sabbatarians from a Kingston pulpit, accusing them of perverting the fourth commandment by teaching the Sabbath to be a ceremonial rather than moral law ([Byfield 20](#)). Similarly, one of the numerous doctrinal errors enumerated by Edwards was anti-Sabbatarian, namely that all days “are alike to Christians under the new Testament, and they are bound no more to the observation of the Lords day, or first day of the week then to any other” ([Edwards I: 30](#)). Among Lambe’s church were three women who worked as “gold and silver wyre drawers” who regularly practiced their craft on Sundays, reportedly claiming they recognized no Sabbath since “every day was alike to them” ([Edwards I: appendix, 124](#)). Oates too was charged with maintaining that “there is no Saboath to be observed, but all dayes are alike,” while Collier went so far as to deny the “Morality of the Sabbath” in conference with Edwards ([LJ, ix: 572](#); [Betteridge 208](#); [Edwards III: 29, 41](#)). In the same vein, on New Year’s Day 1645 an unidentified army surgeon – perhaps Timothy Batte – preaching on Colossians 2: 16–17 in the West Country declared the Sabbath was “not to be observed.” Privately he allegedly asserted in conference with a minister that “there is no Sabbath to be kept since Christs fulfilling the Law, since no command for it in the Gospel” ([Edwards II: 152–3](#)).

## Tithes and anticlericalism

With the outbreak of Civil War in England, removal of church courts and sequestrations, resistance to the collection of tithes, hitherto sporadic, became widespread. On 8 November 1644, Parliament issued an Ordinance authorizing Justices of the Peace in certain circumstances to commit defaulters to goal. Opposition to the forced maintenance of ministers, however, grew fiercer. Thus, Lilburne, then a member of Edmund Rozier’s Independent congregation, asserted that tithes were a Jewish ceremonial law that had been abolished with Christ’s death on the cross ([Lilburne, \*Englands Birth Right Justified\* 13](#)). At the same time Overton denounced ministers as a covetous, “ravening greedy generation,” contrasting them unfavorably with primitive Christians who provided for the poor. Accordingly, he publicized the “abundance of Poore, Fatherlesse, Widdowes, & c.” starving in every parish, urging voluntary contributions as an alternative ([\[Overton\], \*Ordinance for Tythes\* 22](#)). Overton’s *Ordinance for Tythes Dismounted* (1645) was shortly denounced by Edwards together with other works fulminating against tithes as “Antichristian, Jewish, Diabolical, the root and support of Popery.” Indeed, Edwards counted as doctrinal errors the beliefs that tithes were “unlawfull, Jewish and Antichristian” and that ministers of the gospel “ought to work with their hands.” He also provided several examples of those preaching against tithes, including Denne, William Dell, and a famous but unnamed Baptist of Coventry ([Edwards I: 30, 76](#); [II: 12, 22](#); [III: 21, 32, 38, 46, 69, 81, 96, 98, 175, 219](#)). To these can be added William Walwyn, Clarkson, Oates, Collier, Chamberlen, and Barber

(Walwyn 178–9; Clarkson, *A Generall Charge* 9; *LJ*, ix: 573; Betteridge 209; Collier, *A Brief Discovery* 4–9; Chamberlen, *The Poore Mans Advocate* 6; Barber, *The Storming and Totall Routing of Tithes*). Against this backdrop, petitions were organized and presented to the Lord Mayor of London and House of Commons urging the removal of burdensome tithes, arguing they were a Jewish ceremonial law abrogated with the coming of Christ.

Winstanley too reproved the clergy for enforcing the collection of tithes through the magistrates' power, despite lacking justification in either "Reason" or "Scripture." (*CWGW*I: 161, 176, 438, 451; II: 195). Condemning the "selfish tyth-taking" preachers and all others that preached for hire, he compared their covetousness to Judas, betrayer of Christ (*CWGW*I: 517, 528, 557). This hostility to tithes was, moreover, of a piece with the anticlericalism that pervades Winstanley's writings. Criticizing the clergy's unwarranted monopoly on preaching together with those proud scholars who were preventing humble fishermen, shepherds, husbandmen, and tradesmen – latter-day Apostles – from speaking about their spiritual experiences and revealing divine truths, Winstanley denounced preaching as a trade (*CWGW*I: 174–75, 180, 183–84, 317–18, 324–5). Subsequently, he condemned 10 outward ordinances whose observation he considered unwarranted, including preaching not from inward experience but knowledge gained through hearing, reading, and studying; expounding Scripture for financial gain; compelling people to attend church services through misusing the magistrates' power; and persecuting the "Spirit within" that had made Moses (a shepherd), Amos (a fruit gatherer), the Apostles (fishermen), and Christ (a carpenter) preachers (*CWGW*I: 437–38, 446, 449–52).

Once again there are significant antecedents and parallels. For example, in the wake of a Parliamentary Ordinance against lay preaching (26 April 1645), Clarkson justified the practice by highlighting the lowly occupations of Christ and his disciples, comparing a carpenter, fishermen, and tentmakers with humble tradesmen (*Firth and Rait*I: 677; Clarkson, *Truth Released from Prison* B4<sup>r-2</sup>, B4<sup>r-3</sup>). Similarly, in a justification of *Preaching without Ordination*, prefaced at Kingston on 20 August 1647, Chillenden declared that God was no respecter of rank. He disposed the free gift of his spirit to whom he pleased, upon a cobbler, tinker, chimneysweep, ploughman, or any other tradesman as much as "to the greatest learnedst Doctors in the world" (*Chillenden* 6). Collier too invoked the carpenter, fisherman, and tentmaker, excoriating those clergymen who arrogantly dismissed the scriptural interpretations of laborers as men of no breeding and little learning; "when poor tradesmen, Cobblers, Taylers, Tinkers, Plow men, Carpenters, all sorts of men shall preach the everlasting Gospel, with so much light, life, and power," who then would buy the wares of clergymen? (*Collier, A Brief Discovery* 11, 19). For Wrighter there was no ministry because the clergy could not demonstrate their calling, as had the Apostles. Consequently, ministers laid false claim to authority and orthodoxy, publicly charging those that dissented from them "in doctrine or practice to be Heterodox, erroneous persons, Sectaries, Schismaticks, Blasphemers, or Hereticks" (*Edwards*I: 82; *Wrighter* 27–9). Oates went further: ministers were "Anti Christian Preists, periured p[er]sons" (*Betteridge* 208).

## Nonresistance

During the sixteenth century certain Anabaptist individuals and groups (notably Menno Simons, some Swiss Brethren, and Hutterites), along with the Polish Brethren and

English Familists, became notorious as advocates of nonresistance. Accordingly, nonresistance was implicitly rejected by the 37th of the 39 Articles and denounced as a foolish Anabaptist misinterpretation of scripture. English heresiographers and controversialists, moreover, long sustained the association between Anabaptism, pacifism, and nonresistance – although these same critics admittedly gave greater attention to Anabaptist acts of violence. Indeed, for all their doctrinal disputes the majority of English Baptists were not pacifists, a number serving as soldiers and chaplains in Parliament’s armies during the Civil Wars.

Against this backdrop Winstanley’s feelings about using violence – it is noteworthy that he did not fight in the Civil War – stand out. Disapproving of weapons which would destroy yet “never build up” and peacefully expecting the fulfillment of the prophecy that “*swords shall be beaten into plough irons*” and “*spears into pruning hooks*” (Micah 4: 3), he informed readers of *The New Law of Righteousnes* that “all these wars,” “killing one another,” and “destroying Armies” were but “the rising up of the curse” under whose burden the Creation groaned (Romans 8: 22) (CWGW I: 505, 526–27, 545).

Afterwards, in *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, the Diggers lamented the maintenance of tyrannical oppression by death and destruction. Instead, they declared their willingness to accept martyrdom, to offer their blood, and, unarmed, sacrifice their lives to promote “universal Liberty,” trusting the Lord of Hosts to deliver them from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 6: 5–6), “*not by Sword or Weapon*” but by his “*Spirit*.” (CWGW II: 2, 6, 9–10, 20). Accounts of their activities confirm that these were not hypocritical empty words since the Diggers would neither fight nor defend themselves by force of arms, submitting meekly to authority. Furthermore, there were several instances when they responded to violence with nonresistance. Indeed, despite enduring “*Remarkable Sufferings*” brought about by the “*great red Dragons power*” (Revelation 12: 3), Winstanley remained unbowed (CWGW II: 146–47). Victories obtained by the sword were victories of the murderer, of the kind one slave got over another. But now there was striving in England against “the Lamb, the Dove, the meek Spirit” and “the power of love.” And though his enemies still fought with weapons like the “Sword of Iron,” Winstanley warned that they would perish with them. For armed with the “Sword of the Spirit which is love,” he regarded himself as a soldier of Christ engaged in a spiritual battle: “Dragon against the Lamb,” “the power of love against the power of covetousnesse” (CWGW II: 61–62, 91, 97–98, 132–33).

This examination of the Baptist context is not meant to provide a universal explanation. By focusing on the Baptist aspects of Winstanley’s social network, on Baptist forerunners and analogues, as well as the distinctive hallmark of Baptist thought in his writings and activities, it necessarily excludes other personalities and influences. Moreover, appreciating the Baptist background alone does not account for Winstanley’s subsequent trajectory. But if it does not enable us to predict where he was heading, it at least affords us a glimpse of where he was coming from.

Some unanswered questions remain. First, why is there so little surviving evidence concerning Winstanley’s Baptist phase; second, why does he refer only fleetingly to having been a Baptist; third, why does he not quote from, or apparently allude to, the writings of his former coreligionists? The first may simply be chance. Had Edwards written a fourth part of *Gangraena*, had he more Surrey-based informants, then a few

more fragments might have been added. The second is perhaps because Winstanley had moved beyond observance of outward ordinances when he began writing, so may have considered it unnecessary to dwell on his past beliefs. The third, however, requires some discussion.

In *The New Law of Righteousnes* Winstanley declared that what he had spoken of had not been “received from books, nor study” but had instead been “freely” received. At first glance it might be tempting to take Winstanley’s meaning as an artless assertion that everything he had proclaimed thus far had been by direction of the Holy Spirit. Yet that would be a mistake. For in the same work he relates how during a trance he had heard the words “*Worke together. Eat bread together.*” The impression that he was referring here specifically to digging as a divinely inspired venture is reinforced by his powerful preface to *Several pieces gathered into one volume* (20 December 1649), where he insisted “all that I have writ concerning the matter of digging, I never read it in any book, nor received it from any mouth.” Indeed, in *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1648) Winstanley stated that his scriptural exegesis derived from reading books, notably John Foxe’s widely circulated Protestant history of the English Church, *Actes and Monuments of matters most special and memorable* (popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs*). Elsewhere he cited the legal commentaries of Sir Edward Coke, adopted and developed the notion of a “Norman Yoke” in his Digger writings, used the phrase Machiavellian cheats, quoted proverbs, and perhaps invented some of his own. Winstanley may also have been familiar with an edition of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, with Francis Bacon or popularizations of his philosophy, and with Anthony Ascham’s *Of the Confusions and Revolutions of Government* (1649). In addition, Winstanley may have had some medical knowledge, perhaps derived from conversations with his mistress and father-in-law, or by consulting their anatomical, herbal, physic, surgery, and natural history books. There are even a few unacknowledged quotations in his writings; one ultimately indebted to a passage in the Essex clergyman John Smith’s posthumously published *An Exposition of the Creed* (1632); another from the second part of Coke’s *Institutes of the Lawes of England* (1642) (CWGW I: 98–99, 104, 137, 185, 513, 567; II: 80; [Hessayon, “Gerrard Winstanley and Jacob Boehme” 8, 17–18, 28](#)). All of which suggests that, despite his undoubted gift for original thought, Winstanley did not always give credit where it was due.

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## Notes

1. All references to Winstanley’s works follow *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, eds. T.N. Corns, A. Hughes, and D. Loewenstein, cited in the text as *CWGW*.
2. [Barber](#) was apprenticed to Thomas Rephall or Rephald of St Benet Fink on 1 July 1611 (freed 16 August 1620); Everard to Robert Miller of Barbican on 14 August 1616;

- Larner in February 1630 (freed October 1637); Winstanley to Sarah Gater of St Michael, Cornhill, on 25 March 1630 (freed 21 February 1638); and Chillenden to George Kendall, button seller of Canon Street on 6 February 1631 (freed 7 March 1637).
3. Subscriptions were to be sent to William Wallis, a hosier dwelling at “The Gun” in Aldgate. See *To the Commons of England*, brs; *The Humble Petition of divers Inhabitants of London*.
  4. “Lieutenant-Colonel Reade” is usually identified as Thomas Reade but Lieutenant-Colonel John Rede was commissioned governor of Poole by Fairfax on 11 November 1647, the concluding day of the debates.
  5. The Digger agents’ itinerary arranged alphabetically by county, with locations of Baptist churches during the 1650s highlighted in bold: **Bedford**, Cranfield, Dunstable, **Dunton**, Kempston (Bedfordshire); Wickham, Windsor (Berkshire); Barton, Colnbrook, North Crawley, Mursley, **Newport Pagnell**, **Stony Stratford**, Wendover, Weedon, **Winslow** (Buckinghamshire); Redbourn, **Royston**, **Watford**, Welwyn (Hertfordshire); **Fenstanton**, Godmanchester, Kimbolton, St Neots, **Warboys** (Huntingdonshire); London; Hanworth, Harrow, Hounslow, Whetstone (Middlesex); Wellingborough (Northamptonshire); Cobham, Putney (Surrey); and “Mine,” possibly a mining camp in Hertfordshire. See Whitley, “Baptist Churches till 1660” 236–54; Gurney, *Brave Community*, 184–5.
  6. This work was attributed to Lambe by Crosby, whose source was one of Lambe’s descendants.

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# Andrew Bradstock

## THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF WINSTANLEY'S WRITINGS

*By engaging directly with Winstanley's writings this essay explores the main contours of the Diggers' theology, insofar as a distinctly "theological" dimension to his thinking can be discerned. A central belief for Winstanley was that, as in biblical times, God still speaks to ordinary men and women. Men and women may also experience the "indwelling" of God's Spirit, once the selfish desires of the flesh, which struggle for power within them, have been overcome by Christ. This tension between "flesh" and "Spirit" is also at work within society, Winstanley argued, but will be resolved as people throw off the bondage to which the present system subjects them and reclaim the freedom they knew before the Fall. The practice of buying and selling the land, something originally given by the Creator as a "common treasury" for all to enjoy, lies at the root of the present bondage. Winstanley's schema leads him to offer highly creative interpretations of Christian doctrines such as the Fall, and Resurrection and Second Coming of Christ; and his preferred name for God, "Reason," further marks his theology out as different from that of the beneficed clergy who, he argued, had much to gain in material terms from espousing the views they did. The chapter reflects upon Winstanley's millenarianism, his employment of apocalyptic imagery from Scripture, and his emphasis on the importance of action – on reclaiming the common land by digging.*

**Keywords** Gerrard Winstanley; Diggers; God; spirit of reason; Christ; freedom; land; righteousness

### Flesh and spirit

Winstanley's treatise *The New Law of Righteousnes*, published only weeks before he began to dig on St. George's Hill, is the first of his writings to mention his proposed course of action. "As I was in a trance not long since," Winstanley explains, "I heard these words, Worke together. Eat bread together; declare this all abroad" (*The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*[CWGW] I: 513). It was a "command of the Spirit" requiring a response by speech, writing, and action; and having already spoken and written, he now needed the Lord to show him the "place and manner, how he wil have us that are called common people, to manure and work upon the common Lands," in order that he could declare his vision by action (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 517).

However we interpret Winstanley's "trance," he himself was in no doubt that the Spirit still communicated with men and women, as in Biblical times. In an earlier work, *The Saints Paradise*, he spoke of God speaking "inwardly" to men and women "by voice, vision, dream, or revelation" (*The Saints Paradise*, CWGW I: 354). In *Truth Lifting Up His*

*Head above Scandals*, probably published between *The Saints Paradise* and *The New Law of Righteousnes*, Winstanley takes his intended readers – the scholars of Oxford and Cambridge – to task for suggesting that “visions and revelations are ceased” (CWGW I: 410). For Winstanley the Spirit not only speaks to women and men but also dwells within them: “this Spirit of Reason” (Reason being his preferred name for God) “is not without a man, but within every man, to tell him, or teach him, for this spirit is his maker, he dwels in him” (*The Saints Paradise*, CWGW I: 375). Those persons who have the Spirit within them find that they have no need to seek instruction from other humans, for the Spirit teaches them “all things” (*The Saints Paradise*, CWGW I: 314). This includes how to interpret the Scriptures, for, since the original writers wrote “from experience, and teachings of the Father”, and not what they imagined or were told by others, so

we are taught thereby to waite upon the Father with a meek and obedient spirit, till he teach us, and feed us with sincere milk, as he taught them, that wrote these Scriptures. (*Truth Lifting Up His Head*, CWGW I: 435; cf. CWGW II: 200)

A conviction that every man and woman should be indwelt by the Spirit was central to Winstanley’s theology. As he affirms in the opening lines of *The New Law of Righteousnes*,

There is nothing more sweet and satisfactory to a man, then this: to know and feel that spirituall power of righteousnesse to rule in him, which he cals God. For while the flesh through hasty and violent lusts, doth rebell against the spirit, it hath no true peace, but is still pulling misery upon himself. But when the created flesh is made subject to the law of righteousnesse, and walks uprightly in the Creation, in the light of that spirit, then it lies down in rest. (CWGW I: 478)

Sweet and satisfactory though it may be to experience the “new law of righteousness,” such satisfaction can only occur once the desires of the flesh are overcome by the power of the Spirit. Winstanley discerned there to be two powers within each person struggling for supremacy over his or her will: the power of “flesh,” defined as a “particular, confining, selfish power, which is the Devil” and the “universall spreading power, that delights in the liberty of the whole Creation, which is Christ in you.” And the “chiefest knowledge” of a person is to be able to distinguish between “these two powers which strives for government in him” (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 495–6).

In an extended discussion in *The New Law of Righteousnes*, which builds upon passages in his earlier writings, Winstanley expounds this teaching using the metaphor of “two Adams.” Drawing upon St. Paul’s argument in Romans 5.19 that “by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous,” Winstanley shows how the “first Adam” manifests himself when pride triumphs over humility, “covetousness over contentednesse, envy over love, lust before chastity” and so on; and how, when “Christ the spirit of truth” arises, then “humility rises above pride, love above envy, a meek and quiet spirit above hasty rash anger, chastity above unclean lusts, and light above darknesse” (CWGW I: 496). In keeping with his conviction that the Bible should be “experienced” and not read purely as an account of past events, Winstanley sees Adam both as a figure who once lived

upon earth and who also is to be seen “every day walking up and down the street” in the form of those who live “upon the objects of the creation, and not in and upon that spirit that made the creation.” The first Adam delights in possessing created objects, while the second acknowledges the “mighty power that made the creation.” And these two powers are at war in every creature (*Truth Lifting Up His Head*, CWGW I: 427).

Winstanley lays much stress on the need for individual transformation: he himself has experienced the second Adam, Christ, making his body “the kingdom,” or “a new heaven, and a new earth, wherein dwells Righteousness” (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 496–7), and the need for all to know that for themselves is at the heart of his message. Yet this change is not an end in itself, but also has profound social and economic consequences. Winstanley wants to affirm, with equal force, that the way the world is ordered, particularly insofar as the land is treated as private property and kept from the poor by rich landlords, is an outworking of the covetousness and greed characterized by those in whom the first Adam holds sway. Just as individuals are subject to both Adams, struggling for power within them, so within society one finds a tension between the rule of Adam and the rule of Christ.

Demonstrating a remarkable degree of coherence, Winstanley argues that both at the individual and at the “structural” level, the rule of Christ must overcome the rule of Adam in order for all to enjoy true freedom and peace and justice to reign. While the “man of flesh” considers it right that some should be rich, however they got their wealth, and should rule over the poor and make them their slaves,

the spiritual man, which is Christ, doth judge according to the light of equity and reason, That al man-kinde ought to have a quiet substance and freedome, to live upon the earth; and that there shal be no bond-man nor begger in all his holy mountain. (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 502)

The creation narrative in Genesis Chapter 1 makes it clear that people were not made to live under bondage but under freedom, Winstanley asserts. The present system, which allows some to be oppressing tyrants and others to live in poverty, thus dishonours the Maker; but although

the powers and wisdom of the flesh hath filled the earth with injustice, oppression and complainings, by [moving] the earth into the hands of a few covetous, unrighteous men, who assumes a lordship over others . . . when the spreading power of wisdom and truth, fils the earth man-kinde, hee wil take off that bondage, and gives a universall liberty, and there shal be no more complainings against oppression, poverty, or injustice. (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 503)

“True Religion, and undefiled,” as Winstanley wrote in the last month of the digging, is thus

To make restitution of the Earth, which hath been taken and held from the Common people, by the power of Conquests formerly, and so set the oppressed free. . . . I affirm, [the land] was made for all; and true religion is to let every one enjoy it. (*A New-yeers Gift for the Parliament and Armie*, CWGW II: 128)

## The fall

Winstanley is clear how the state of affairs he witnessed came about and how it will be transformed; and central to this dynamic are two theological concepts, the Fall of humankind from grace and the Second Coming of Christ.

Winstanley is in no doubt that the earth and its fruits were originally created for all to share. “In the beginning of time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a common Treasury,” he writes in the Diggers’ first “manifesto,” *A Declaration to the Powers of England* (sometimes known as *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*). The Creator gave humankind dominion over the beasts, birds, and fishes, “but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another” (*A Declaration to the Powers of England*, CWGW II: 4).

Nor was the concept of private ownership intended by the Creator: “the whole Earth was common to all without exception,” with the stronger and more physically able helping the weaker by undertaking tasks on their behalf. The “singleness and simplicity” of this arrangement became corrupted, however, once “the stronger, or elder brother” realized what could be gained if they gave up working for the weaker and trying to maintain an “equality” between them; and, in a rather unorthodox move, Winstanley argues that this attraction to “outward objects of pleasure, riches and honour for one to be above another” constituted “the first step of the fall”: “When Mankind began to buy and sell, then did he fall from his Innocency” (*The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, CWGW II: 289). This was then followed by the second step, the “outward action” of dividing up of the land into private enclosures (*Fire in the Bush*, CWGW II: 215–6; cf. *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 505). “The elder brother moves him to set about, to inclose parcellis of the Earth into severall divisions”, Winstanley writes,

and calls those inclosures proper or peculiar to himself, and that the younger, or weaker brother should lay no claime to it, and the younger brother lets it goe so . . . (*Fire in the Bush*, CWGW II: 216)

Winstanley’s employment of the terms “younger and elder brother” reflects his conviction that the biblical narrative continues to be lived out in the ongoing struggle between the rich and powerful and the poor and weak: Cain is still murdering Abel, Esau still hankering after Jacob’s birthright, Ishmael still at odds with Isaac. Always his concern is to emphasize the present application of a text rather than its historical reference, to assert his right – and that of all humble folk – to interpret Scripture as led by the Spirit in the light of their experience, and not accept the teaching of those who learn everything from books. In the case of Jacob and Esau, Winstanley sees these as types of the two powers within humankind, synonyms for the two Adams (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 496): Esau, like Adam, is the “first power that appears to act and rule in every man” and gets the birthright which, “by the Law of equity” more properly belonged to Jacob (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 499). But in the end the younger brother prevails over the older, just as the “first Adam” that rules in each person is overcome by the rising of the “second Adam,” the power of Christ.

## The second coming and resurrection of Christ

If Winstanley was unconventional in arguing that oppressive behavior constituted rather than resulted from the Fall, so his understanding of the return of Christ set him apart from orthodox teaching. While many expected Christ to appear on earth to reign in person or through his “elect,” Winstanley saw the Second Coming in terms of Christ “rising up” in men and women and leading them to embrace that spirit of community lost since the Fall. Christ is not “a single man at a distance from you,” he tells his readers in *The Saints Paradise*; rather he is “the wisdom and power of the Father, who spirits the whole creation, dwelling and ruling King of righteousness in your very flesh” (*The Saints Paradise*, CWGW I: 372). “Christ is not to be understood as separate from the Saints, his body and spirituall house,” he had earlier written (*The Breaking of the Day of God*, CWGW I: 128). “Christ in his first and second coming in flesh . . . is Justice and Jugment ruling in man” (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 527). Winstanley’s “immanentist” understanding of Christ enables him to equate the Second Coming with the gradual transformation of humanity.

In another unorthodox twist Winstanley sees Christ’s resurrection as still a future event, and conflated with his second coming. To expect Christ to “come in one single person” is to mistake the resurrection of Christ, he writes in *The Saints Paradise*: rather

you must know, that the spirit within the flesh is Jesus Christ, and you must see, feel and know from himself his own resurrection within you, if you expect life and peace by him. (*The Saints Paradise*, CWGW I: 356)

Christ “is now rising and spreading himself in these his sons and daughters, and so rising from one to many persons, till he enlighten the whole creation” (*The Saints Paradise*, CWGW I: 356). “[U]pon the rising up of Christ in sons and daughters, which is his second coming, the ministration of Christ in one single person is to be silent and draw back” (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 485). Winstanley’s conviction was that society would be changed, not in the wake of a sudden return of Christ “in person,” but as men and women were transformed by Christ rising up within them. And the effect would be the restoration of true community or communism:

when [Christ] hath spread himself abroad amongst his Sons and daughters, the members of his mystical body, then this community of love and righteousness, making all to use the blessings of the earth as a common Treasurie amongst them, shal break forth again in his glory, and fil the earth, and shal be no more suppress: And none shal say, this is mine, but every one shal preserve each other in love. (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 527)

Thus, the inner transformation of each individual as Christ rises within them, overcoming the power of the first Adam, brings freedom from oppression in both the personal and communal sense. While

unrighteous Adam . . . dammed up the water springs of universall liberty, and brought the Creation under the curse of bondage, sorrow and tears . . . when the

earth becomes a common treasury as it was in the beginning, and the King of righteousness comes to rule in every ones heart, then he kills the first Adam; for covetousness thereby is killed. A man shall have meat, and drinke and clothes by his labour in freedome, and what can be desired more in earth. Pride and envy likewise is killed thereby, for every one shall look upon each other as equall in Creation; every man indeed being a perfect Creation of himself. (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 482)

That Christ still remains “buried” means that the earth has an almost sacred quality for Winstanley. Although since the Fall human beings have served to “poyson and corrupt” it, Christ works for good within it while awaiting the opportunity to rise in his sons and daughters. “The body of Christ is where the Father is, in the earth, purifying the earth,” Winstanley writes in *Truth Lifting Up His Head* (CWGW I: 421). The land is the very source and sustainer of life, our “Mother . . . that brought us all forth” and who “as a true Mother, loves all her Children” and wants to give “all her children suck . . . that they starve not” – something she is hindered from doing all the while the land is enclosed (*A Declaration to the Powers*, CWGW II: 18–19).

## Reason and imagination

Though aspects of Winstanley’s theology were undoubtedly unorthodox, he himself was clear that his was “no new Gospel, but the old one.” It was “the same report that the Pen-men of Scriptures gave” (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 492), with whom he claimed to share an experimental knowledge of its truth. As [Ariel Hessayon](#) suggests in this volume (“Early Modern Communism”) and elsewhere (“Gerrard Winstanley, Radical Reformer”), some of Winstanley’s ideas may be traceable to his earlier Baptist connections, and his realized eschatology has distinct echoes of Familist thinking; yet he himself acknowledges no other source for his ideas than Scripture itself: “What I have spoken, I have not received from books, nor study” he affirms (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 526).

Winstanley consciously distanced himself from the teaching of the established Church of his day, and not simply on account of doctrinal differences. He saw the Church’s teaching as oppressive for the ordinary people to whom it was preached, and for that reason rejected it wholesale. For one thing the clergy encouraged belief in a “God beyond the Creation,” which although Winstanley rejected on the grounds that such knowledge was “beyond the line, or capacity of man to attain to while he lives in his compounded body” (*The Law of Freedom*, CWGW II: 343), he did the more so because he saw how the clergy contrived to make God appear punitive and capricious, one who approved the unfair distribution of the earth originally given as a common treasury, and “who appointed the people to pay Tythes to the Clergy” (*The Law of Freedom*, CWGW II: 309). The version of God preached by the clergyman behind the violent overthrow of the Diggers’ community at Cobham, John Platt, taught and encouraged “cruel deedes” (*An Humble Request to the Minister of both Universities, and to All Lawyers in Every Inns-a-Court*, CWGW II: 269). Both God and Christ, Winstanley considered, were held by the priests “at-a-distance” so that they could then be mediated to the people only through them.

In addition, the clergy fostered “Imagination” in their hearers to maintain their control over them. Imagination was a sense of incompleteness, fear, and uncertainty, and by emphasizing an individual’s sinfulness and their need to reclaim their identity by relating to the God- and Christ-at-a-distance, so the clergy made them even more dependent upon themselves. With the addition of a heaven in the next life as reward for their subservience to them, or hell as a punishment for insubordination, the system by which the clergy reinforced their authority and power over the people was, for Winstanley, complete: “by this divined Hell after death,” he wrote in *The Law of Freedom*, “they preach to keep both King and people in aw to them, to uphold their trade of Tythes” (*The Law of Freedom*, CWGW II: 298). The clergy persuaded the people to think

[t]hat true Freedom lay in hearing them preach, and to enjoy that Heaven, which they say, every man who beleeves their doctrine, shall enjoy after he is dead: And so tell us of a Heaven and Hell after death, which neither they nor we know what wil be. (*The Law of Freedom*, CWGW II: 298)

Their message upheld the present iniquitous system and discouraged ordinary people from seeking to change it. “O ye hear-say Preachers, deceive not the people any longer, by telling them that this glory shal not be known and seen, til the body is laid in the dust,” he appeals in *The New Law of Righteousnes* (CWGW I: 493).

In place of the clergy’s alienating form of religion, Winstanley stressed the immanence of God, who could be known by all without the “aid” of the professional benefited clergy. Humankind need not be bowed down by imagination: “Every single Man, Male, and Female, is a perfect Creature of himself” and has the Creator dwelling in him “to be his Teacher and Ruler within himself,” he writes (*A Declaration to the Powers*, CWGW II: 4). Each person can therefore judge all things by experience, which is more important than the whole edifice of doctrine and church government built up on biblical texts and drawn from “book-learning.” Whatever else heaven and hell may be, they are *present* states: heaven is humankind, and hell describes the conditions men and women have created for themselves on earth.

Winstanley’s use of the term “Reason” for God emphasizes God’s immanence and contrasts sharply with that “Imagination” from which God would redeem his sons and daughters as Christ rises in them and brings them together again into community. “I am made to change the name from God to Reason,” he wrote in *Truth Lifting Up His Head*, “because I have been held under darknesse by that word as I see many people are” (CWGW I: 414). The term “Reason” not only removes the “otherness” that the clergy have invested in the concept of God, but also emphasizes that God must be known, like Christ, as spirit, indwelling and transforming the individual and leading him or her to act aright. To walk “in the sight of Reason” is to engage in “feeding the hungry, cloathing the naked, relieving the oppressed” and other “acts of love . . . that the Creation may be upheld and kept together by the spirit of love” (*Truth Lifting Up His Head*, CWGW I: 418).

There is no question of any antithesis between immanence and transcendence in Winstanley’s theology: Reason is the Creator who made the earth a common treasury, the spirit that indwells a person, and the power by which the creation may be lifted out its bondage (*A Declaration to the Powers*, CWGW II: 4, 10):

[T]he Spirit Reason, which I call God, the Maker and Ruler of all things, is that spirituall power, that guides all mens reasoning in right order. . . for the Spirit Reason, doth not preserve one creature and destroy another . . . but it hath a regard to the whole creation; and knits every creature together into a onenesse; making every creature to be an upholder of his fellow, and so every one is an assistant to preserve the whole. (*Truth Lifting Up His Head*, CWGW I: 413)

“[T]he same Spirit that made the Globe” he was later to write, “dwells in man to govern the Globe” and “manifests himself to be the indweller in the five Sences of Hearing, Seeing, Tasting, Smelling, Feeling.” (*A Declaration to the Powers*, CWGW II: 4)

## Millenarianism and apocalypticism

Winstanley’s conviction that Christ’s return would involve the transformation and perfection of the earth, that the “kingdom” was not to be known only in a postmortem “heaven,” places him within the millenarian tradition rooted in the Revelation of St. John, and associated with the “radical” Reformers, the twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore and early Church figures like Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr. References to the denouement of history as described in Revelation, and to the fulfilment “here” of biblical prophecies concerning the last days, appear throughout Winstanley’s writings, suggesting this hope sustained him before and during the Digging project.

Originally Winstanley linked his millenarian hopes to a “dispensationalist” understanding of history, as suggested by the title of his 1648 publication *The Myserie of God, Concerning the Whole Creation, Mankinde, Made Known to Every Man and Woman, after Seaven Dispensations and Seasons of Time are Passed Over . . .* According to this schema, biblical prophecies concerning the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth will be fulfilled “in length of time, by degrees,” God having been pleased to provide “dispensations or discoveries of himself . . . which he will have the creature to passe through before he finish his work, to cast the Serpent, Death, and Hell, into the Lake, and before he himself appeare” to redeem humanity (*The Myserie of God, Concerning the Whole Creation, Mankinde*, CWGW I: 274–5). These dispensations are periods of history, each marked at their beginning and end by an event of great religious significance, and each symbolic of the progressing and deepening relationship between God and God’s creation.

The first dispensation, Winstanley tells us, is marked by the introduction of the law given by God to Adam and the first man’s disobedience, and the second spans the troubled years from Adam to Abraham. This latter period is characterized by “that first promise, or manifestation of love to the Creature, and curse to the Serpent,” a text that Winstanley uses often: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman [Eve], & between thy seed & her seed, he shall break thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heele” (Genesis 3.15).

The third dispensation covers the period from Abraham to Moses, having as its central theme God’s promise that through the former’s seed “all nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 18.18); and the fourth stretches from Moses to Christ, a time during which “God did more manifestly set forth his love to his creature and his wrath to the Serpent” by the institution of sacrifices as a “type” or “shadow” of “Christ the Lamb, the substance of all those sacrifices.” The fifth “is from the time that God was manifested



in flesh” through the Virgin’s son, to his appearance “in the flesh and person of his Saints likewise”; this is the dispensation during which God’s promise to break the Serpent’s head is fulfilled and humanity is drawn to “Jesus Christ . . . the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” The sixth covers the time from God’s appearance in the flesh of his Saints “till the gathering up of the Elect, which is called the Resurrection Day, or the great day of Judgement” (*The Myserie of God*, CWGW I: 270–6).

Winstanley discerns himself, like all millenarians, to be living in the sixth dispensation, the penultimate phase of history, during which the elect “are to be gathered into one City and perfected” (*The Myserie of God*, CWGW I: 278). But he is also assured that the seventh is not far off, when the whole creation will be “redeemed from the bondage of death,” both those who are in the “elect” and those whom God subsequently delivers in his mercy from hell, the “sorrowes and paines that follow sin” (*The Myserie of God*, CWGW I: 288). In Winstanley’s schema the final Judgment is a three-stage process comprising: a general resurrection, the rewarding of every person according to their deeds, and the healing of the nations or liberation of the whole creation from death and the curse (*The Myserie of God*, CWGW I: 285). Thus, all humankind will ultimately be saved and “the Spirit . . . sent into whole man-kind” (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 484), with only the Serpent destined, as foretold, to endure the fires of hell for eternity. Hell, for Winstanley, is a place from which redemption is possible through the mercy of God (*The Myserie of God*, CWGW I: 287–8).

Winstanley’s later writings suggest his interest in dispensationalism waned over time,<sup>1</sup> though the apocalyptic literature of the Bible continued to provide him with a key to understanding the signs of the times. The imagery of the Beast or Serpent, representing those who oppose the work of the people of God, remained central to his thinking, and biblical prophecies concerning his ultimate defeat – in particular Genesis 3.15 – continued to reassure him that his hope was not in vain. “And now is the coole of the day,” he writes in 1650,

And the heate of opposition betweene flesh and Spirit begins to decline . . . now the Seed begins to worke, to bruise the Serpents head, and the man begins to looke upward, toward the life of the Spirit within, which he sees now is a life above the life of Earthly objects. (*Fire in the Bush*, CWGW II: 185)

In *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England*, the Diggers’ second tract from St. George’s Hill, Winstanley interprets the enigmatic number of the Beast “666” to argue that he is living under “the last Tyrannical power that shall raigin” before “people shall live freely in the enjoyment of the Earth” (CWGW II: 33), and in a subsequent tract he castigates the Lord of the Manor of Cobham, Parson John Platt, and other violent opponents of the Diggers, as men who “do so powerfully act the Image of the Beast.” These men bring about, by their actions, fulfilment of the prophecy that, in the last days, “no man might buy or sell, save he had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name” (Revelation 13.17) (*An Humble Request*, CWGW II: 270).

In *Fire in the Bush*, Winstanley employs apocalyptic imagery from the Old Testament to identify the institutions of authority of his day with “the foure Beasts which Daniel saw rise out of the Sea (Daniel 7.3, etc.)” (CWGW II: 190–1). These are “Kingly power,” “selfish Lawes,” “the thieving Art of buying and selling, the Earth,” and “the Imaginary Clergy-Power,” who together comprise a nexus of power to keep the

poor in subjection. These each appear to flourish for a time, oppressing and burdening the creation, but upon Christ's return they will "run into the Sea againe, and be swallowed up in those waters; that is, into Mankinde, who shall be abundantly inlightened" (*CWGW II*: 192). "[The] rage of the Serpent increases, because his time grows short," he had earlier asserted (*The Myserie of God, CWGW I*: 281).

Winstanley finds further pointers to the imminence of the new age in biblical allusions to a figurative period of "a time, times, and dividing of time" during which "the Lord he gives this Beast a toleration to rule" (*The New Law of Righteousnes, CWGW I*: 527). References to this period, which is mentioned both in Daniel (7.25 and 12.7) and Revelation (11.2,3 and 12.14), appear in a number of Winstanley's writings. In Winstanley's day this period was generally understood to signify a period of three and a half "years" (a year, two years, and half a year), each consisting of 360 "prophetical days" or ordinary years, such that the combined period of three and a half prophetical years was equal to a total of 42 months or 1,260 days (or years), the period, according to Revelation 13.5, granted to the Beast to exercise his power.

This schema encouraged some of Winstanley's contemporaries to argue that the downfall of the Beast must be imminent, assuming (as most Protestants did) that he was a representation of the Pope whose rise to power could be dated to around 390–396 AD. Winstanley himself avoided setting any precise dates, though he was in no doubt that he was living in the penultimate age or dispensation and that the Diggers' work of remaking the earth a common treasury was a sign of Christ's return – "all the prophecies of Scripture and Reason are Circled here in this Community" (*A Declaration to the Powers, CWGW II*: 7–8). In *A New-Years Gift for the Parliament and Armie* he argues that the Diggers' work "shall rule King of righteousnesse in the creation now in these later dayes, and cast out the other Serpent" (*CWGW II*: 120). "[T]he world is now come to the half day," he had written a few months earlier (*A Declaration to the Powers, CWGW II*: 14). While some commentators have suggested that Winstanley came to discard the religious impulses that originally inspired his action, even in his last tract *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, published some two years after the digging project was disbanded (though possibly drafted during it), Winstanley suggests that the work of building the Commonwealth must go on lest we "shew our Government to be gone no further but to the half day of the Beast, or to the dividing of Time, of which there must be an over-turn" (*The Law of Freedom, CWGW II*: 312).

### **"Words performed in action"**

There was a further reason why Winstanley rejected the God preached up by the clergy, and that was the hypocrisy of those who worshipped and followed him. Parson Platt, for example, exhorted his hearers to "live in peace with all men, and love your enemies," yet in practice treated his enemies with anything but love: "it is a true badge of an hypocrite," Winstanley affirms, "to say, and not to do" (*The Law of Freedom, CWGW II*: 269). Action consistent with belief was an article of faith for Winstanley, though he was also distressed by *inaction*, as witnessed by his impatience with those who learned their theology from books but failed to live out its truth. "The manifestation of a righteous heart shall be known, not by his words, but by his actions," he writes in *The New Law of Righteousnes*: "[T]he time is now coming on, that men shall not talk of righteousnesse, but act righteousnesse" (*CWGW I*: 508); "as words without action are a

cheat, and kills the comfort of a righteousness spirit, so words performed in action does comfort and nourish the life thereof" (*A New-years Gift*, CWGW II: 108).

As Winstanley tells us in his first tract from St. George's Hill, his concern following his trance was to declare its message not just "by word of mouth" and "by writing" but "by action in digging up the common land" (*A Declaration to the Powers*, CWGW II: 14–15). "My mind was not at rest, because nothing was acted," he tells us in *A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Armie*, "and thoughts run in me, that words and writing were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing" (CWGW II:80). For Winstanley (as for the New Testament writer James), theology must be proved by life: he challenges his opponents, "Let every Mans action be tried, and see who serves God" (*An Humble Request*, CWGW II:269).

"[T]alking of love is no love, it is acting of love in righteousness, which the Spirit Reason, our Father delights in," Winstanley writes, "[a]nd this is to relieve the oppressed, to let goe the prisoner, to open bags and barns that the earth may be a common treasury to preserve all" (*The New Law of Righteousnes*, CWGW I: 516). For Winstanley, theory and practice were indivisible, and were both about the restoration of the Earth.

## Note

1. Though it is important to remember that *The Myserie of God* was reissued in December 1649, both separately and in the collection *Several Pieces Gathered into One Volume* for which Winstanley wrote a special introduction. There are echoes of dispensational thinking in, for example, *The New Law of Righteousnes* (CWGW I:484) and *A Declaration to the Powers* (CWGW II: 7–8).

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## Thomas N. Corns

# “I HAVE WRIT, I HAVE ACTED, I HAVE PEACE”: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN THE WRITING OF WINSTANLEY AND SOME CONTEMPORARIES

*Mid-seventeenth-century radical writers often produced a polemically crafted representation of themselves and their actions as a component of their controversial prose, shaping those images to meet the exigencies of debate or to match the stereotypes of radical martyrology. Winstanley steps outside those common paradigms to engage the more challenging task of exemplifying his radical and heretical theological system from the experiences of the Diggers and of illuminating those experiences by demonstrating their alignment with his theological system and its delineation of the battle between the old red Dragon and the Lamb.*

**Keywords** Gerrard Winstanley; John Milton; John Lilburne; John Bunyan; George Fox; Diggers; Levellers; Quakers

Notions of self-fashioning and the manner in which early-modern writers construct purposeful images of themselves pervade recent literary criticism. Much, however, remains to be learned from a now largely forgotten classic, Joan Webber's *The Eloquent "I": Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (1968), which anticipated more recent concerns with self-representation. If we contextualize how Winstanley intrudes himself into his text, however, we find both innocence and, ultimately, an extraordinary rhetorical power that distinguish him from the easier autobiographical strategies of other mid-seventeenth-century polemicists.

What John Milton has to say about himself in *The Reason of Church-Government* and in the *Defensio Secunda* is replete with information carefully shaped by the particular hole he found himself in. If his enemies' representations of him in the early 1640s or the early 1650s are analyzed to set a context, it straightforwardly emerges how the self-image is crafted to meet those attacks.<sup>1</sup> The information presented in the major autobiographical digressions in those tracts is not wholly invalidated for the purposes of the modern biographer; however, it needs treating carefully, with some recognition that Milton might well not be disclosing a window into his soul. Quite what Milton felt, rather than what he said he felt, on any particular occasion remains elusive, once one recognizes how polemical exigencies have shaped seemingly transparent observations on his personal history or his immediate circumstances. Would Milton

have invested quite so much time in figuring himself as a reluctant prose writer, had he not faced accusations of careerist opportunism? Or as formerly a scholarly schoolboy, ruining his eyesight in nocturnal study, had his enemies not attributed his blindness to God's punishment for regicide?

Winstanley, of course, lived in the golden age of English radical thought, writing, and, indeed, action, the interconnectness of which he often demanded or asserted. What of his great and quite great contemporaries, Abiezer Coppe or John Lilburne or George Fox or John Bunyan? Personal anecdote abounds in the writing of them all, though in their self-dramatization all seem to have more in common with each other than with Winstanley's own practices.

Coppe is perhaps the crudest but also the most engaging:<sup>2</sup>

[subheading:] The Authors strange and lofty carriage towards great ones . . .

Wherefore waving my charging so many Coaches, so many hundreds of men and women of the greater rank, in the open streets, with my hand stretched out, my hat cock't up, staring on them as if I would look through them, gnashing with my teeth at some of them, and with a great voice proclaiming the day of the Lord throughout London and Southwark . . . (105)

Perhaps he did, perhaps he did not; perhaps the various kissings and huggings of Gypsies and others (105), duly and exuberantly told over, marked a very public private life, though his most recent biographer exercises a due skepticism about his "apparent autobiographical allusions" (Hessayon). The image is all, and the image is of the unbridled power of an internalized spirit that cannot be constrained by conventional morality and conduct. Coppe offers himself as one engaged in an enactment of such spiritual potency.

John Lilburne's earliest polemical writing is autobiographical, his accounts of his sufferings at the hands of the Star Chamber,<sup>3</sup> and a strong autobiographical element continues till his final tracts after his adoption of Quakerism. From the outset Lilburne fashions from the account of his conduct a heroic narrative, at once disclosing the evil of his enemies and celebrating his own (at best pyrrhic) victories over them. As Webber noted (68–79), Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* figures in his earliest work as a powerful influence – though it remains uncertain whether the influence is primarily on his conduct (how to endure persecution on a Foxean paradigm) or on how he relates it; perhaps it is both. Later, Lilburne emerges as a singular agent with a distinctive, sometimes ludic, personality, rather than a figure merely cloned from a Marian martyr. This is from his account of his interrogation with other Leveller leaders by the Council of State:

. . . after we were all come out, and all foure in a roome close by them, all alone, I laid my eare to the dore, and heard *Lieutenant General Cromwel* (I am sure of it) very loud, thumping his fist upon the *Council Table*, til it rang again, and heard him speak in these very words, or to this effect; *I tel you Sir, you have no other way to deale with these men but to break them in pieces*; and thumping upon the *Council Table* again, he said *Sir, let me tel you that which is true, if you do not breake them, they will break you . . .* (Lilburne et al. 14–15)

The quotation from Cromwell seems richly to characterize both the man and the tyranny of the regime; but it comes mediated by the ingenuity of [Lilburne](#), whose presence of mind and irreverence to the mighty, on his own account, bring his ear to the door and the story to an oppressed people.

[Lilburne's](#) anecdotes are mostly self-vindicating, a studied defense of his conduct. [Fox's Journal](#), though much more chaotic, shares some common ground. Assiduously edited *post mortem* by William Penn and Thomas Ellwood and first published in 1694, the manuscript reveals the tensions between the uncontrollable impulse that fired the sensational events of his life and the tendency to represent those events advantageously. Perhaps the most spectacular episode, his barefooted denunciation of the “bloody city of Lichfeilde,” shows a studied effort at rationalization, though it is subverted by the reader’s puzzlement at quite why anyone would behave in a way so contrary to commonsense and personal interest (27). If one is to walk the streets of a hostile city declaiming its sinfulness, why compound the danger with discomfort? Yet there is also a sustained rehearsal of another shaping principle of radical anecdote, divine providence, which in [Fox's](#) case is usually vengeful. Long after the outrage perpetrated on Fox and other Quakers, [Fox](#) completes the reckoning. Thus, he recalls cautioning the hostile Colonel Francis Hacker, a regicide, about his conduct toward Quakers, bidding him “when ye day of his misery & tryall should come upon him” to “remember what I saide to him.” [Fox](#) relates the visit of Margaret Fell to Hacker in the condemned cell, to confirm the point (160, 162).

[Bunyan's](#) most elaborate autobiographical account, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, first published in 1666 and subsequently considerably revised over five further lifetime editions, has its share of self-justification, sometimes tailored toward a tacit demonstration of aspects of his Protestant orthodoxy. The fifth edition sees his assertion of the centrality of Bible study and a restatement of a Calvinist soteriology, in the context of renewed anxiety about distinguishing his relatively staid version of dissent from that of Quakers who privilege the spirit within over the revealed word of God and who offer their rather different notion of the extent of free grace (39, 47–8). The polemical strategy resembles that of the Milton examples considered above. Without acknowledging the attack he seeks to neutralize, Bunyan assembles a counter-narrative designed to stimulate a sympathetic perspective on his own life and views. The process is most transparent in the material added to meet the charges of impropriety relating to his dealings with Agnes Beaumont, his alleged mistress (92–5). Hence, his seemingly gratuitous asseveration that “I know not whether be such a things as a woman breathing under the Copes of the whole Heaven but by their apparel, their Children, or by common Fame, except my Wife” (94). The whole tract, from its earliest edition, functions by assembling selected autobiographical incidents – some of them vivid and suggestive of a deep, interior anxiety – into a paradigm of spiritual rebirth. There arises, however, something of a conflict between the vividness with which his spiritual angst is described and the mechanics of Calvinist soteriology. Indeed, Bunyan is too powerful a writer for the text to be that simple, as [John Stachniewski](#) so eloquently demonstrated,<sup>4</sup> as the fear of reprobation seems more strongly realized than the comforts of a perceived providence safeguarding a personal grace. But the didactic intention is unmistakable.

How does Winstanley’s writing about himself fit into this landscape? The problem he faces is quite distinctive. In the case of Coppe or Bunyan, they can act out a

role – the ranting revolutionary or the puritan saint. For Lilburne and Milton, the narrative is tied into a carefully developed polemical strategy. Milton and Bunyan marshal personal anecdote to neutralize or preempt the strategies of adversaries. For Winstanley, the issues are more challenging, in that his oeuvre, his theology, and his political philosophy are founded on a dialectic, on the one hand of personal experience and on the other of a radical and challenging biblical hermeneutics. Tying the theory to the practice is both imaginatively and expositionally demanding.

I take my title “I have Writ, I have Acted, I have Peace” from a phrase in *A New-Years Gift*:

And here I end, having put my Arm as far as my strength will go to advance Righteousness: I have Writ, I have Acted, I have Peace: and now I must wait to see the Spirit do his own work in the hearts of others, and whether *England* shall be the first Land, or some other, wherein Truth shall sit down in triumph. (*CWGW* II: 149)<sup>5</sup>

For Winstanley, the dynamic is a familiar one, the assertion of that praxis in which the theory in his writing is enacted in political action, with the comfort that comes from knowing that as much has been done as possible. Yet even in miniature we see how the personal recollection, that summation of what has been done, what has been achieved, slides away from the personal to the universal, and returns to the realm of the spiritual, not only to the balm that descends upon the author, but also to the spiritual transformation of England.

Among Winstanley’s most sustained references to personal experience is the epistle he prefixed to *Several Pieces Gathered into One Volume*, and particularly that account, unique in my experience in seventeenth-century literature, in which he describes the physical act of writing those tracts that now fill our first volume:

I was so filled with that love and delight in the life within, that I have sat writing whole winter-daies from morning til night & the cold never offended me, though when I have risen, I was so starke with cold that I was forced to rise by degrees and hold by the table, till strength and heat came into my legges, and I have been secretly sorry when night came, which forced me to rise. The joy of that sweet Anointing was so precious and satisfactory within my spirit . . . (*CWGW* I: 98)

The sheer discomfort of writing in winter, in a cold room, has a precision of reference, an engagement with external reality, scarcely found in Milton or Lilburne or even Bunyan. In its vividness, the description seems almost naïve; the author appears ingenuously vulnerable, both to cold and to criticism. Yet as soon as it is established, the dynamic of the argument runs quite counter, away from the materially personal to the larger spiritual dimension (albeit that spirituality in Winstanley has unusually material characteristics). The anecdote dissolves in the celebration of the spirit within.

Perhaps Winstanley does not play the game because he does not know the game. As he remarks a little later in the epistle, “And all that I have writ concerning the matter of Digging, I never read it in any book, nor received it from any mouth” (*CWGW* II: 99). If the careful *defensio pro se* of Milton and the gleeful self-representation of Lilburne are

missing, perhaps it is because he retains an unfamiliarity with those tropes and stratagems which the others so readily use.

Perhaps, also, he speaks so little of himself in the earliest phase of the tracts of 1649 because he tries to assemble in the Digger polemic a kind of collective voice. *A Declaration from the Oppressed People*, which concludes with multiple signatures, speaks only the language of “we” and “us.” But even here a similar dialectic sometimes emerges. *A Letter to Lord Fairfax*, “By Jerrard Winstanly, in behalf of those who have begun to dig,” starts collectively, though ends in Winstanley’s own dangerously naïve statement, inviting a hostile reader’s savage endorsement – “I am called fool, mad man, and have many slanderous reports cast upon me,” before slipping once more into the celebration of the power of love (*CWGW* II: 54). *A Declaration of the Bloudie and Unchristian Acting of William Star and John Taylor* starts in what seems to be [Lilburne](#) territory, a precise account of an atrocity “UPon the 11. day of June 1649”:

four men only being fitting and preparing the ground for a winter season, upon that Common called George-hill, there came to them, *William Starr of Walton*, and *John Taylor*, two free-holders, being on horseback, having at their heels some men in womens apparel on foot, with every one a staffe or club . . . (*CWGW* II: 59–60)

There follows a long sentence on their beating and a paragraph on their wounds (*CWGW* II: 61). But three pages on Winstanley is back to the larger arguments developed in the pre-Digger tracts. The Diggers remain nameless, as do most of their assailants, and the immediate circumstances of the struggle – who said what to whom – are subsumed in a typological flourish which sees the triumph of the free-holders as a manifestation of “the joy of *Caine*, when he had killed his brother *Abel*” (*CWGW* II: 61).

It seems remarkable now that Christopher [Hill](#)’s masterful account the religion of Winstanley occasioned so fierce a controversy over the relationship between his early and his Digger writing, for the Digger tracts revert to the tracts of *Several Pieces* as surely as each of those five works builds on its predecessor.<sup>6</sup> In Winstanley, the political is always deeply spiritual and theorized in terms of his radical millenarianism.

Winstanley’s life-records, despite the heroic efforts of those who have labored to find and interpret them, are still tiny compared with other major writers of the mid-seventeenth century. As [Alsop](#), who has worked so assiduous to address the deficit, remarked, he is “the most obscure Englishman currently assigned any reasonable degree of historical significance throughout the entire post-medieval period” (11).<sup>7</sup> One item, however, demonstrates in a surprising context his recurrent movement from the personal and the specific to the universal and spiritual. In 1650 Winstanley and a group of former Diggers found employment on the estate of the self-styled prophetess Lady Eleanor Douglas. The relationship proved unsatisfactory on both sides – Lady Eleanor had an aristocratic aversion actually to paying people what she owed them; as Diane [Watt](#), her recent biographer observes, “Throughout her life [she] seems to have made enemies easily.” We have a letter to Lady Eleanor, from Winstanley, endorsed with her own response, now held in the Huntington Library (MS HA13814). It is, I think, the longest Winstanley holograph, and it gives evidence of the amusing problems Winstanley’s manuscripts probably posed for his printers. It starts with a detailed discussion of the work done, the quantities threshed, dung spread, horses dressed, sheaves bundled, and accounts rendered. Then suddenly Winstanley’s sails



catch a spiritual wind: if she were, as she claimed, a prophet in the tradition of Melchisedec, she would not behave thus, “for a proud loftie spirit advanceing it self above all, is Satan the divell” “you shall feele the power of inward distemper rule as a king in you: & that inward power shall chaine you up in darknes, tell [till] Reason, w[hi]ch you have trampled under foott, come to set you fre” (CWGW II: 425). Winstanley shifts to the symbolic universe of *Several Pieces*. Lady Eleanor’s materialism, her niggardliness, is equated with Satan. But the oppressor is also a victim, in the bondage of spiritual darkness, till Reason, conceptualized in unique fashion in Winstanley’s theology, sets her free.

This perhaps seems a curious idiom in which to discuss a matter that would now be settled in the small claims court. But in the right place, particularly in the longer Digger tracts, this dialectic produces prose of an extraordinary power. Consider the example of *A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Armie*. The tract opens with an epistle, *incipit*, “Thou City of London, I am one of thy sons by freedome, and I do truly love thy peace.” However, any expectation that this is a rare attempt at a *captatio benevolentiae* scarcely last 10 lines, evaporating in a bitter anecdote of personal loss at the hands of “thy cheating sons in the theeving art of buying and selling,” which loops back to the immediate and specific, the malpractices of “the old Norman Prerogative Lord of that Mannour M Drake,” before taking off unremittingly into a theoretical exposition, of the covenant between government and governed, of the unholiness of priests, lawyers and other, and of the true nature of freedom, which “lies in the community in spirit, and community in the earthly treasury” (CWGW II: 80–2).

The “Watch-word” itself opens with an exposition of recent events that is both detailed and collective, as Winstanley speaks not only for himself but also for Henry Bickerstaffe and Thomas Star, writing in the language of “we” and “us,” and it shifts to that old favorite of Leveller polemic, a survey of laws and charters, going on to cite Sir Edward Coke on “the 29. chap, of *Magna Charta*.” Such argumentation sits uncomfortably with Winstanley’s larger contention about the superstructural and repressive nature of the English legal system, and the phrase “your own laws” (CWGW II: 84) betrays the uneasiness; he turns from it to rehearse some familiar themes, the common treasury and digging, “covetousness” and the fall of man, the sufferings of the younger brother, before returning to the local grievances over tax and free quarter. Finally, he returns to the Mr Drake’s assault on the Diggers, with a vivid anecdote of his own experience:

Then they came privately by day to *Gerrard Winstanleys* home, and drove away foure Cowes; I not knowing of it and some the Lords Tenants rode to the next Town shouting the diggers were conquered, the diggers were conquered. Truly it is an easie thing to beat a man, and cry conquest over him after his hands are tied, as they tyed ours. (CWGW II: 90)

An extraordinary passage reconstructs his mental anguish as he walks along to try and get the cows back – “I would feed upon bread, milk and cheese; and if they take the Cowes... then Ile feed upon bread and beere” – an anguish almost immediately resolved in the assurance that “the King of righteousness” will “clear up my innocency (91); actually, this time, he does not. The spiritual perspective gives ways to minatory prophecy of the dangers posed to civil liberty and well-being by the likes of Drake.

Then we return to Surrey on 24 August 1649, when the diggers' enemies met at the White Lion at Cobham. The four cows and the larger arguments are interbraided for several pages till the voice of transcendent spirituality carries the tract to its conclusion:

I tell thee thou *England*, thy battells now are all spirituall. Dragon against the Lamb, and the power of love against the power of covetousnesse; therefore all that will be Souldiers for Christ, the Law of righteousnesse joyn to the Lamb. He that takes the iron sword now shall perish with it, and would you be a strong Land and flourish in beauty, then fight the Lambs battels, and his strength shall be thy walls and bulwarks. (*CWGW* II: 98)

“[T]hy battells now are all spirituall”: yet the immediate battles are courtroom dramas of the kind [Lilburne](#) well understood, and rough treatment dealt out by clubmen in the marginal lands of Surrey. But the dialectic of “A Watch-Word” precisely mirrors the extraordinary agenda Winstanley sets for the Digger project. It stands both in the immediate and tangible, related in anecdote, while persistently engaging with the larger arguments and the larger symbolic structures, and that dichotomy is resolved in a transcendent spirituality – much as Diggerism allows Winstanley to break the ground on a bleak heath and simultaneously fight the battles of the Lamb, with the confidence that he is aligning himself with an irresistible and overwhelming progress through England of the spirit of righteousness. But, imaginatively, it is a difficult connection to maintain. To those who do not share that larger vision, and who cannot see beyond a handful of bemired men in a muddy field, there persists an obvious tendency to view the Diggers, in the words of one newsbook writer, “a company of crack-brains, which are digging out their own ruines.”<sup>8</sup>

Winstanley's last and perhaps best exercise in biblical hermeneutics functions as a sort of mirror image to the dialectic of the more substantial of his Digger pamphlets. “*Fire in the Bush*” was published in March 1650, appearing after most but not all of his Digger writings.<sup>9</sup> It shows an effective stiffening of the elaborate system developed over the five theological tracts with an admixture of clear allusion to immediate experience, in which the disasters of the agrarian experiments and subsequent prosecutions function as ectypes of the archetypal “great Battell of God Almighty, between *Michael* the Seed of Life, and the great red Dragon, the Curse fought within the Spirit of Man,” as the title page puts it (*CWGW* II: 171).

Like “*A Watch-Word to the City of London*,” it begins with a curiously abortive epistle, seemingly designed to secure the benevolence of a powerful body, though in short order reverting to an aggressive engagement. Thus, he hails the Presbyterians and Independents as “Brethren, and fellow-members of Mankinde,” to whom his heart is “panting with love.” Five pages on, those faith groups are roundly censured as “strangers to the Sonne of righteousnesse,” worshippers of a “darke power,” who are characterized by a “snappish bitterness against those that differs from you” (*CWGW* II: 170, 172). What follows, however, adopts the idiom of the earliest tracts, but now with an evident subtext alluding to the pulpit denunciations of the Diggers and their various brushes with the legal system. The beasts of the apocalypse are succinctly listed in their immediately experienced manifestations: they are the army (“your trade upholds the murderer, or the Devill”), and “the other three Beasts; who, are Clergy, Law, and Buying and Selling.” Lawyers receive the most sustained censure:

[the Law] is a mighty Beast with great teeth, and is a mighty devourer of men; he eates up all, that comes within his power; for this Proverb is true, goe to Law, and none shall get but the Lawyer. The Law is the Fox, poore men are the geese; he pulls of their feathers, and feeds upon them. (*CWGW* II: 193)

Winstanley moves from the sublimity of his exegesis to the mundane proverbialism of the anti-lawyer sentiment and the brutal image that reduces the apocalyptic beast to the perpetrator of a farmyard massacre.

“*The New Law of Righteousnes*,” the last of the pre-Digger tracts, had pointed unequivocally to the direct action that would shortly follow: “let the poor work together by themselves . . . upon their Commons, saying *This is ours*, the earth and fruits are common” (*CWGW* I: 519). “*Fire in the Bush*” closes the loop between theory and practice, tying his theology firmly to his experience in the course of the intervening months, albeit in a spirit at some remove from the vernal optimism of that earlier tract. Winstanley had learnt, too painfully and too late, the power of the old red dragon.

## Notes

1. See [Corns](#) (75–90).
2. See [Coppe](#). Though the two tracts have separate title pages and discontinuous signatures, the contents page of the second one is printed in the first, coming between the contents page for the first and the body of the text (84–5).
3. See [Lilburne](#), *The Christian Mans Triall* and *A Worke of the Beast*, *passim*.
4. See [Stachniewski](#), Chapter 3.
5. [Gerrard Winstanley](#), *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*; hereafter *CWGW*.
6. See [Hill](#), *passim*; [Mulligan, Graham, and Richards](#), *passim*; [Hill et al.](#), *passim*.
7. For a synthesis of what is currently known, see *CWGW* I: 1–42.
8. See *Englands Moderate Messenger* (28 May–4 June 1649, 44). On newsbook reports of the Digger project, see *CWGW* II: 29–32.
9. On the once controversial dating see Thomas, and Winstanley, *CWGW* I: 88–9.

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# Sarah Apetrei

## “THE EVILL MASCULINE POWERS”: GENDER IN THE THOUGHT OF GERRARD WINSTANLEY

*This essay suggests that the revolutionary message of Gerrard Winstanley contains at its heart a confrontation with and rejection of traditional patriarchy, which he calls “masculine powers” or “kingly rule.” While some commentators have characterized as essentially “patriarchal” his program for the reformation of magistracy, I argue that Winstanley seeks to reimagine masculinity, in such a way that it becomes divorced from the ruling instinct (identified with Adam, or the flesh), and associated instead with the humility of Christ in whom the masculine and the feminine are brought into harmony. Although apparently enigmatic and ambiguous in the values he assigns to the genders, Winstanley’s thought assumes a coherence in view of the complex relationship between gendered metaphor and sexual differences.*

**Keywords** Gerrard Winstanley; gender; English revolution; masculinity; radical religion; patriarchy; Diggers; women

When the Diggers enumerated the humiliations and sufferings inflicted upon four of their number at George Hill on 11 June 1649, they recalled that they had been set upon not only by the ringleaders of the mob on horseback, William Starr and John Taylor, but also by

some men in womens apparell on foot, with every one a staffe or club, and as soon as they came to the diggers, would not speak like men, but like brut beasts that have no understanding, they fell furiously upon them, beating and striking those foure naked men, beating them to the ground, breaking their heads, and sore bruising their bodies, whereof one is so sore bruised, that it is feared he will not escape with life. (*CWGW II*: 60)

The detail about the clothing of the assailants was considered sufficiently significant that it was repeated later in the account, and in another report produced in *A New-yeer’s Gift* (*CWGW II*: 146). As David Cressy has noted, “Men dressed as women sometimes during enclosure riots or other public disorders, linking social protest to traditions of festive inversion,” possibly to disguise their identity, but also, perhaps, as a gesture of contempt (Cressy 109). In the Diggers’ defense, the adoption of a false, female appearance by the savage mob stands as a powerful contrast to the “naked” and innocent victims: “love suffers under thy hypocrisie” (*CWGW II*: 62). The affront caused by the

cross-dressing mob was probably not caused by any shock at gender transgression, but rather by outrage at the scornful dishonesty that it implied. As in the popular Protestant critique of popery, and the radicals' apprehension of all ecclesiastical power, tyranny went hand in hand with hypocrisy, fraud, and illusion. Nonetheless, there is a hint in this brutal little episode of a concern, organic to Winstanley's thought (especially early on), about the corrupting misappropriation of gendered characteristics. It has been said that he is ambiguous in assigning "morally positive and negative values to the feminine" (Gibbons 130), as well as to the masculine, and it is true that gendered categories are sometimes applied enigmatically. But they are not confused, and should be regarded as absolutely central to his thinking. Although ultimately undeveloped, Winstanley's discussion of gender relations (both metaphorical and literal) points in a direction that is as interesting, and as radical, as anything conceived in the seventeenth century.

### Losing the breeches

The status of women as a sex, as Elaine Hobby has observed, "is never given focused attention" in the Digger pamphlets; and Winstanley's editors have observed that his writings were "ambiguous about women: the patriarchal vision of *The Law of Freedom* is qualified by his sensitivity to the drawbacks of a 'ranterish' unchastity for women, and by his insistence in 1649 that Christ was rising in daughters and in sons" (Hobby 65; *CWGW I*: 25). Certainly, Digger writings often strike a remarkably inclusive note. Perhaps the pithiest expression of their doctrine of universal human dignity is the statement, frequently repeated, that "every particular man and woman is a perfect creation, or a world of him, or her self" (*CWGW I*: 373; *II*: 10; *I*: 482). A politicized notion that the macrocosm of the created world is contained, perfectly, within each individual whether male or female, grounds a high view indeed of the dignity of the individual and as such has the capacity to underpin a far-reaching reforming agenda. At times, however, Winstanley's anthropology as well as his practical program for social renovation follows conventional patterns. In *The New Law of Righteousnes*, published in the revolutionary year 1649, Winstanley remarked upon "the state of the world" as he saw it:

That in times past and times present, the branches of man-kind have acted like the beast or swine; And though they have called one another, men and women, yet they have been but the shadows of men and women. As the Moone is the shadow of the Sun, in regard they have been led by the powers of the curse in flesh, which is the *Feminine* part; not by the power of the righteous Spirit which is Christ, the *Masculine* power. (*CWGW I*: 479–80)

The standard, Aristotelian and Augustinian association of the feminine with flesh and the masculine with spirit and/or reason in this passage perhaps deflects attention away from what is the more fundamental point. Men and women alike have been corrupted by the "powers of the curse," becoming like shadows of their true selves so that they act "like the beast or swine." If, some months later, the bestial mob which persecuted the Diggers would take on women's clothing, their abandonment of a masculine for a feminine appearance might be construed as a symbolic reenactment of the Fall, of mankind's deviation from the rule of Christ to the rule of the flesh.

Nonetheless, the relationship between gendered metaphor and physical sex was complex and indirect. Another rather startling application of the analogy appears in Winstanley's letter to the eccentric visionary Lady Eleanor Douglas dated December 1650, in which he complains of her exploitation and nonpayment of workers; in the autumn of that year, Winstanley and several companions had been working on Lady Eleanor's land at Pirton in Hertfordshire ([Gurney 210–1](#)). His tone is confrontational and lacks any hint of deference; he rejects rather scornfully her claim to be inhabited by the spirit of the king and High Priest Melchizedek, and plays on her adoption of male personae. "Surely you have lost the breeches," he writes, "w[hi]ch is indeed true Reason the strength of A man":

And this shall be your marke that you have lost the breeches yo[u]r Reason: by the inward boyling vexacon of yo[u]r spirit upon the hearing hereof though you may moderate yo[u]r wordes before others; yett you shall feele the power of inward distemper rule as a king in you: & that inward power shall chaine you up in darknes, tell Reason, w[hi]ch you have trampled under foott, come to set you fre . . .

Lady Eleanor, whose visionary identities were often borrowed from male biblical prophets (not only Melchizedek, but also Daniel), is said to have lost her breeches – undoubtedly a symbol of the masculine powers of Reason – in the way that a cuckolded or henpecked husband might ([Cope xi–xxiii](#)). What usurps the rule of reason in her is an "inward distemper," despotic as a tyrant king, keeping her captive in bitterness and "vexacon" of spirit ([CWGW II: 425](#)).

As well as being disengaged from physical sexual difference in Winstanley's treatment, the contrast between masculine reason and feminine flesh was also not as absolute nor as morally straightforward as these references suggest. [Hayes](#) has even suggested that, for Winstanley, it is rather the "masculine side of human nature" that "corrupts the feminine and holds it in bondage" (69). The basis for this conclusion is a single work, one of Winstanley's earliest publications, *The Saints Paradise* (1648). In it, he sets out a spiritualist, experimental pathway to the recovery of the lost order and true knowledge of God (to whom he famously gives the new name, "Reason"). Uniquely, he also links the corruption of humanity to the domination of "the masculine powers that rule the soul," namely "envy, hypocrisie, pride, anger, self-seeking, subtilty, and such like" ([CWGW I: 351](#)). Where the writings of contemporary Platonists like Henry More followed the ancients in describing the masculine powers and faculties in the soul as the nobler, more rational part, Winstanley characterized them in no uncertain terms as "evil" (See, for example, [More 40, 67–8](#)). In his commentary on John 3.19, "the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil," Winstanley offers the following interpretation:

*But men love darkness rather then light; men here spoken of, are the evill masculine powers of created man in his poysoned estate, as man pride, man covetousness, man hypocrisie, man self-love, and King imagination, that rules over all, and in all these; and this, or these, is the wicked man, spoken of in scripture; these I say, are called men, because they rule over the created flesh, which is the feminine part, and leads it captive in unrighteousness, and will not suffer it to obey the King of righteousness, which is called conscience likewise in the creation, man. ([CWGW I: 352](#))*

The feminine flesh here seems morally neutral; it is masculine spiritual powers, the violent instincts and temptations of self-love and imagination, which usurp the gentle promptings of conscience. Men and women without distinction are subject to these impulses but, Winstanley notes encouragingly,

No man or woman needs to be trobled at this, for let every man cleanse himself of these wicked masculine powers that rule in him, and there will speedily be a harmony of love in the great creation, even among all creatures. (*CWGW I: 353*)

### The kingly power

It is only in *The Saints Paradise* that Winstanley characterizes the selfishness of humankind as masculine, but the critique of a militant model of masculinity echoes elsewhere, in his writings on the evils of war, feudalism, and oppressive government, bearing in mind Christopher Hill's point that Winstanley was by no means an "absolute pacifist" (*Hill 41*). The dominion of men over women is, as Hobby notes, implicitly linked to the "kingly power" that rose up in humanity and destroyed the perfect primordial "equality of love," creating conflict and hierarchy (*Hobby 65–6*). As he puts it in *A New-years Gift* (1650):

Well, you see how Covetousnesse would have all the Earth to himself, though he let it lie waste: he stirs up Divisions among men, and makes parties fight against parties; and all is but for this, Who shall enjoy the Earth, and live in honour and case and rule over others: and the stronger party alwayes rules over the weaker party. (*CWGW II: 138*)

The "weaker party," oppressed by the kingly rule, is represented perhaps most obviously by abused women. In a telling and pointed little anecdote, Winstanley manifests his distaste for partisanship which is destructive of compassion, and illustrates his sympathy for the weaker, "feminine" party:

the Kingly power swims in fulness, and laughs at the others miserie; as a poor Cavalier Gentlewoman presented a Paper to the Generall in my sight, who looked upon the woman with a tender countenance; but a brisk little man and two or three more Colonels puld back the Paper not suffering the Generall to receive it, and laught at the woman who answered them again, I thought said she, you had not sate in the seat of the scornfull; this was done in *Whitehall* upon the 12. of *December* 1649. (*CWGW II: 143*)

The strongly apocalyptic hope articulated by Winstanley is that the "masculine" spirit of covetousness, pride, partisanship, division, and war would be replaced by a "spirit of Love, Patience, Humility, and Righteousnesse," bringing "mankind into a moderate, meeke, Loving, and seasonable condition: It is the restoring spirit, teaching all men to doe as they would be done by." He goes on: "This is the spirit of poverty, that hath been a servant in the world a long time, but now is appearing and rising up to draw all men



after him" (*An Humble Request*, *CWGW II*: 262). The second birth of Christ, in the hearts and bodies of the saints, would be manifest through this spiritual poverty; elsewhere called "this plaineheartednesse without envie or guile" or "Virgine-state of Mankinde" (the perfect image of the divine) in which "the Sonne of righteousnesse will arise, and take the man into union with himselfe; he rules as King, and Mankinde, the living souleis freely subject with delight" (*Fire in the Bush*, *CWGW II*: 206–7). Here, we have the key to the apparent inconsistency in Winstanley's use of the metaphor of masculinity. Human appropriations of masculine or kingly power, in the strongholds of political, ecclesiastical, economic, and intellectual authority, are usurpations of the true head, Christ. In a revolution, even an inversion of the worldly order, the ultimate human in whom all authority resides reveals himself to be the spirit and source of love and humility. "Masculinity" is not what we thought it was. The lamb wrestles triumphantly with the dragon; innocency struggles against violence. Male and female alike must fight against the "evill masculine powers" which, like idols in the heart, take the place of Christ's rule.

The symbolism of the Fall, as we have seen, naturally provides the framework for this analysis of the essential sinfulness in human nature. Although this is before all else a spiritual diagnosis of the human condition, it clearly has the far-reaching social and political implications for which Winstanley is better known. Whereas *The Saints Paradise* employs the terminology of "masculine powers," *The New Law of Righteousnes* fixes on the mythological figure of Adam as its primary metaphor for the tyrannizing self. Winstanley's radical rejection of worldly hierarchies, as corrupting by their very nature, is stated nowhere as baldly as in the following passage:

*Adam* appears first in every man and woman; but he sits down in the chair of Magistracy, in some above others; for though this climbing power of self-love be in all, yet it rises not to its height in all; but every one that gets an authority into his hands, tyrannizes over others; as many husbands, parents, masters, magistrates, that lives after the flesh, doe carry themselves like oppressing Lords over such as are under them; not knowing that their wives, children, servants, subjects are their fellow creatures, and hath an equall priviledge to share with them in the blessing of liberty . . . (*CWGW I*: 481)

The fact that husbands together with magistrates are held accountable for behaving like "oppressing Lords" over their wives suggests that Winstanley was not oblivious to the analogy (or symbiosis) between political and domestic tyranny. He shows a sensitivity to the possibility of abuse and oppression in the household that goes beyond the common sensibilities of most seventeenth-century Protestant commentators on marriage, and this is certainly linked to his critique of Adamite masculinity.

It is often said that Winstanley's proposals for reform, especially in his last and perhaps most famous work, *The Law of Freedom*, "supported a traditional, patriarchal family structure" (see, for example, Jendrysik 41–2; Murray 91; Schochet 161–3; Boesky 107) upholding the correspondence between the father of a family and magisterial rule. For example, he asserts that "the Father . . . is the first link of the chain [of] Magistracy," and that "from the Father in a Family was the first rise of Magisterial Government" (*Law of Freedom*, *CWGW II*: 315, 313). However, Ng has very reasonably called attention to the anti-elitist thrust of Winstanley's supposed "patriarchalism," and remarks that he "should not be

conflated with conservative patriarchalists like Filmer" (108). For Winstanley, the magisterial office of the patriarch, in society or the family, is authorized "by joynt consent, and not otherwise"; it is a nurturing, peaceable role, designed to protect the "weakest" (*CWGW II*: 315, 321, 334). Significantly, it is never suggested that the father should discipline or govern the mother. Indeed, the draconian penalties he proposes for those who "do force or abuse women in folly, pleading Community", or who "lie with a woman forcibly" committing "robbery of a womans bodily Freedom", and the reciprocal enjoyment and consent he envisages for men and women in marriage suggests a benign variety of patriarchalism indeed (*CWGW II*: 293, 303, 377). Winstanley clearly emphasizes the aggressive male over the treacherous female offence, unlike the notorious Adultery Act of 1650 which imposed the death penalty for adulterous wives and their partners, but defined men's transgressions as "fornication," punishable only by three months' imprisonment (*Firth and Rait II*: 387–9).<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding this distinctive hostility to sexual exploitation by men, it is true that the figure of Adam, the symbol of a tyrannous and covetous spirit, stands for the masculine powers in both male and female. The lapse into "pride and envy, lifting up himself above others, and seeking revenge upon all that crosses his selfish honours" and then into "hypocrisie, subtilty, lying imagination, self-love" is "the first Adam, lying, ruling and dwelling within man-kinde. And this is he within every man and woman, which makes whole man-kinde, being a prisoner to him, to wander after the beast, which is no other but self" (*New Law, CWGW I*: 481). As Hobby suggests, "Digger writings are free from the practice of blaming women for the Fall, and from insisting on their consequent subordination" (67). Eve does make an appearance, in the role of the "imagination" arising from the "covetous power" of Adam; "these two, Covetousnesse and Imagination, the man and the woman of sin, or Adam, and his Eve, or Ivie, does beget fruit or children, like both Father and Mother; as pride, and envy, hypocrisie, crueltie, and all unclean lusts pleasing the flesh" (*CWGW I*: 525). These figurative accounts of the Fall are precisely not historical, of course: "herein you may see, how the publique Preachers have cheated the whole world, by telling us of a single man, called Adam, that kiled us al by eating a single fruit, called an Apple" (*CWGW I*: 526).

But despite his denial that a single, historical man named Adam existed in the literal sense, Winstanley's anthropology depended on a vision of the original singularity or unity of humankind, male, and female. Here, he hints at the primordial androgyny of created humanity, in the sense that the Behmenists would later expound it, although this is never fully developed or explicitly stated. He does, however, suggest that "every man and woman in the world . . . are but branches of the first man; and then put them all together into one lump, and they make up still, but the first man perfect" (*Truth Lifting Up His Head, CWGW I*: 425). The first man, Adam, and the second man, Christ, unite both sexes as one flesh, in one common humanity.

## All in all

It is entirely in keeping with such a vision that the rising of Christ's spirit, previously kept in servitude, is made manifest in both sexes, and the Digger pamphlets are insistently inclusive in accepting the witnesses of the new dispensation (perhaps reflected in the Diggers' willingness to work for Lady Eleanor Douglas). Winstanley's

apocalyptic language is capacious: the “light and wisdom of the Spirit of Truth . . . shall rise up out of the Sea of mankind likewise, appearing in sonnes and daughters of righteousness, in the latter days” (*Fire in the Bush*, [CWGW II: 195](#)). Christ “is now rising in Husbandmen, Shepherds, Fishermen,” and in order to “discover his appearance in sonnes and daughters, in a fuller measure, the poore despised ones shall be honoured first in the worke”; it is through such as these that “the imaginary learned Scholars [who] by their studies have defiled the Scriptures of old” will be exposed as frauds ([CWGW II: 201](#)). This “second witness” of Christ “is not to be restrained to Magistrates, Ministers, particular men or women; but to all the body, consisting of learned, unlearned, poor and rich, men and women, in whom the spirit of the Son dwells” (*Breaking of the Day of God*, [CWGW I: 121](#)) The “mysterie of God” is to be unveiled before “every man and Woman,” for

*Gods works are not like mens, he doth not alwaies take the wise, the learned, the rich of the world to manifest himself in, and through them to others, but he chuseth the despised, the unlearned, the poor, the nothings of the world . . .*  
(*The Mysterie of God*, [CWGW I: 255](#))

Just as the “Scriptures of the Bible were written by the experimentall hand of Shepherds, Husbandmen, Fishermen, and such inferiour men of the world,” so the new revelation will be received experimentally by the humble, “the true Penmen in whom the Spirit dwells” (*Fire in the Bush*, [CWGW II: 200](#)). Winstanley places “experiences” in the foreground (sometimes he speaks of illuminations received himself while in ecstasy), for this was the time in which “every son and daughter” was called to “declare their particular experiences, when the Spirit doth rise up in them, and manifests himself to them” (*New Law*, [CWGW I: 484](#)).<sup>2</sup>

Not only will men and women alike testify to the new manifestation, but also they will themselves be incarnate with it. Just as God inhabited the human flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, so also ultimately “he will dwell in the whole Creation, that is, every man and woman without exception, as he did dwell in that one branch, Jesus Christ, who is the pledge, or first fruits” (*Mysterie of God*, [CWGW I: 262–3](#)). These rather startling claims about the intimacy between Christ himself and the saints were explained in the terms even of physical identification:

Every declaration of Christ in the Scriptures, shal be seen and known in the clear experience of every sonne and daughter (when this mystery is finished) for Christ, who indeed is the anointing, shall fill all, and all shall be the fulnesse of the anointing: So that whatsoever a condition a man is in, it is one or other condition that the childe Jesus was in, growing upwards towards man-hood; there is child hood, youth and old age in the anointing. (*New Law*, [CWGW I: 489](#))

Christ would “spread himself in multiplicities of bodies, making them all of one heart and one mind” ([CWGW I: 505](#)). The universal reach of this new dispensation would extend not only to humankind, but to also “all other creatures, of all kinde according to their severall degrees, shall be filled with this one spirit” ([CWGW I: 492](#)). Such early appearances of Christ represent, according to Winstanley, the sixth dispensation in salvation history, before the perfect seventh age of the final resurrection ([CWGW I: 501](#)).

Similar, though not identical, dispensationalist teachings about the manifestation of Christ in the saints can be found in the sermons of army preachers, especially William Erbery, and in the apocalyptic theology of spiritualists variously labeled "Ranter," "Quaker," and "Fifth Monarchist": Richard Coppin, Robert Rich, Henry Vane. Such ideas were regarded by contemporaries as being familist in origin, though the realized eschatology of the radicals translated the figurative aspects of familist thought into literal applications.<sup>3</sup> In the *New Law of Righteousnes*, Winstanley's excitement at the transformations through which he is living is palpable, and he proclaims the advent of a new king and a new law (indulging in a wordplay on "David" and "divide"):

This new Law of righteousnesse and peace, which is rising up, is *David* your King, which you have been seeking a long time, and now shall find him coming again the second time in the personall appearance of sons and daughters; he will be a true *Dauider* indeed, between flesh and spirit, between bondage and libertie, between oppressours and the oppressed; he is and will be the righteous Judge; he will lead your captivitie captive, and set you down in peace. (*CWGW I: 473*, "To the twelve Tribes of *Israel*")

The opposition that matters is that of flesh and spirit, between a state of bondage and a state of freedom, not between male and female.

The repeated and careful coupling of "sons and daughters," "male and female," "men and women" drives home the point that this second coming is a universal "ministration of Christ," recognizing no distinction of persons. Any "man or woman is able to make a Sermon, because they can speak by experience of the light and power of Christ within them" (*New Law, CWGW I: 533*). It was not just legitimate but also essential that individuals of all sexes should come forward to teach one another with their own insights and illuminations:

when I look into that record of experimentall testimony, and finde a sutable agreement betweene them, and the feeling of light within my own soule, now my joy is fulfilled. And every man and woman may declare what they have received, and so become preachers one to another . . . For the Scriptures doth but declare the sending down of the spirit and how he shall rule in the earth in the latter dayes: but they doe not declare every particular measure and beame of the spirits ruling, for this the sons and daughters are to declare, by their particular experiences, as they are drawn up. (*Truth Lifting up his Head, CWGW I: 435*)

By means of this exchange, the particular would become one with the universal, and the scattered lights of the saints would be joined together in one bright radiance. The time had come for such experiences to supersede the old writings, "the books in your Universitie, that tels you what hath been formerly"; instead, the scholars are enjoined to "read in your own book your heart," like

these single hearted ones [who] are made to look into themselves, wherein they can read the work of the whole Creation, and see that History seated within themselves; they can see the mystery of Righteousnesse, and are acquainted every one according to his measure. (*New Law, CWGW I: 536*)

This internalization of the history of Scripture and of Christ sounds suspiciously familist, though Ariel Hessayon has recently sought to temper the enthusiasm of historians seeking to situate Winstanley and other radicals (as contemporary heresiographers did) within the familist tradition (Hessayon 90–93). It may seem that this jubilant disavowal of old forms of learning in favor of a wholly democratic way of knowing focused on pure experience might be liberating not only for female readers but also for those excluded from the traditional elite institutions. Mack has pointed out that the enfranchisement of women and men as prophets was not, of course, an emancipation or empowerment in a secular sense: the goal was self-transcendence, renunciation of the self, and worldly honor (127–64). For Winstanley, in order to feel Christ’s rising in the heart and the consummating but dissolving experience of “community with the whole globe” (*The Saints Paradise*, *CWGW I*: 315, “To my beloved friends”), it was necessary “to be silent and draw back, and set the spreading power of Righteousnesse and wisdom in the chair”:

And now the Son delivers up the Kingdom unto the Father; And he that is the spreading power, not one single person, become all in all in every person; that is, the one King of Righteousnesse in every one. (*New Law*, *CWGW I*: 485)

Even while testimony and mutual preaching may be valuable for a time, the new harmony enjoyed by all of creation would ensure that “mens words shal grow fewer and fewer,” quietening the clamor of controversy and propaganda in favor of the visible fruits of righteousness (*New Law*, *CWGW I*: 531). Silence would be the “forerunner of pure language,” the recovery of an original common speech (*CWGW I*: 547). As well as being broadly “mystical” in orientation, however, Winstanley’s thought was intensely and rigorously practical. The theme of ultimate resignation was one that required “every one to wait” rather than to “take their neighbors goods by violence,” but renunciation was required above all by those governed by their own covetousness in positions of power (*CWGW I*: 505). Then, the “universall law of equity” would rise up

in every man and woman, then none shall lay claim to any creature, and say, *This is mine, and that is yours, This is my work, that is yours*; but every one shall put to their hands to till the earth, and bring up cattle, and the blessing of the earth shall be common to all. (*CWGW I*: 506)

## Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that an incipient critique of traditional patriarchy, variously expressed in terms of “masculine powers” or “kingly rule,” lies at the heart of Winstanley’s reformism. He is not as ambiguous or as inconsistent on this point as he might appear, and while the language of benign paternalism in *The Law of Freedom* might be problematic for modern feminists, it is an essential pathway for Winstanley to the *reconstruction* and reconception of fatherhood and of masculinity and, ultimately, of magistracy. There is, of course, no radically reforming agenda for women in society outlined in detail in the Digger tracts. This should not, however, blind us to the rich possibilities of the universalizing political anthropology expounded in these texts. The

opposition which structures his thought, framing the revolution envisaged, stands between the first man (comprehending both male and female), that is, Adam: the "selfish power" (*New Law*, *CWGW I*: 480), the flesh, and the second man (also comprehending both male and female), Christ: the spirit of universal love. Driving forward and underpinning the political doctrine of communalism is an apocalyptic Christology, the expectation that this second man, Christ, would "dwel and rule in the flesh of his Saints" (*Breaking of the Day of God*, *CWGW I*: 130). The final communion of the saints, indwelt and consumed by Christ, would dissolve the distinction between persons and, it is implied, the sexes. Winstanley described the "Men that are wholly taken up into God," as well as primitive humanity in its first creation as having the nature of the "Angels" of heaven: traditionally, of course, angels are sexless (*Saints Paradise*, *CWGW I*: 348). In his own time and place, Winstanley observed the descent of Zion and the prospect of the consummation to come:

the spreading of this one spirit in every sonne and daughter, and the lifting up the earth to be a common treasury, wil make *Jerusalem a praise in the whole earth*. (*New Law*, *CWGW I*: 514)

## Notes

1. Its full title is: "An Act for suppressing the detestable sins of Incest, Adultery and Fornication" (May 1650).
2. Compare the title page of *The Saints Paradise* which advertises its contents, "Wherein Many Experiences Are Recorded"; for, "The inward testimony is the souls strength" (*CWGW I*: 313).
3. Smith writes of the "collapse of the literal and the metaphorical" in the writings of these men (24).

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# Ann Hughes

## GERRARD WINSTANLEY, NEWS CULTURE, AND LAW REFORM IN THE EARLY 1650S

*This article identifies the reprintings, without attribution, of extracts from Gerrard Winstanley's last publication, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652) in a variety of news-books and topical pamphlets. It explores the domestication and misrepresentations of Winstanley's views as editors and publishers cut and paraphrased his texts and juxtaposed them with more conventional proposals for law reform. The crucial context for the excerpting of *The Law of Freedom* was the broad movement for law reform associated with radical and army pressure on the Rump parliament in 1651–1652. Winstanley texts were associated with the working of the Hale commission set up by the parliament to discuss law reform and modified to present the army and Cromwell in a positive and optimistic light. Winstanley's social and spiritual vision was underplayed. *The Law of Freedom* was clearly read by news publishers and some of his proposals were made available to a wide readership, but in a muted form. Finally the article considers what these uses of the passages from *The Law of Freedom* suggest about the Winstanley's place within radical parliamentarianism, identifying themes shared with other radicals, as well as his distinctive positions.*

**Keywords** Winstanley; news culture; Cromwell; law reform; radicalism; parliamentarianism

In the Preface to his August 1649 pamphlet, *A Watch-word to the Citie of London and the Armie*, Winstanley declared, “Words and writings were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing” (CWGW II: 80).<sup>1</sup> These words serve as inspiration for some scholars and activists, while for skeptics like Mark Kishlansky (196) they stand in ironic counterpoint to an assumption that neither Winstanley's words nor his actions made much difference to developments in mid-seventeenth-century England. A more nuanced understanding of Winstanley's contemporary reputation can be sought through an analysis of his treatment in the news-books and news pamphlets of the late 1640s and 1650s. In recent decades, discussions of news culture have been one of the most promising approaches to English political history, broadly conceived (as in the work of Jason Peacey). Both Winstanley's actions, as one of the Surrey Diggers, and many of his words featured regularly in the news-books and news pamphlets of the 1640s and early 1650s, although in unpredictable and misunderstood ways (Gurney; CWGW I: 28–31). Associated or confused with Levellers, and often dismissed as “crack-brains,” the Diggers at Walton were widely reported in the news-books for April and May 1649. The printer Robert Wood, who produced several of the 1652 tracts to be discussed later, gave headline billing to the encounter between the Diggers and Lord Fairfax, commander of the



commonwealth's army at St George's Hill on 30 May 1649; indeed he seems to have changed the title of his regular news-book, *Englands Moderate Messenger* to *The Speeches of the Lord Generall Fairfax, And the Officers of the Armie to the Diggers at St Georges Hill*.<sup>2</sup> Winstanley's *A Letter to the Lord Fairfax, and his Councill of War*, obtained by the bookseller and collector George Thomason on 13 June 1649, was rapidly excerpted and paraphrased in news pamphlets of mid-June, many again associated with Wood. In these the material was described variously as from Mr Winstanley, "the chief Ruler of the Diggers at Georges Hill in Surrey" (*Englands Moderate Messenger*, 12–19 June 1649); as the "Levellers New Declaration" (*The Levellers New Remonstrance*) and as "Propositions proposed to the presbyterian party" that were "Signed in the name of all those who account themselves Seekers &c." (*The King of Scots Declaration*).<sup>3</sup> Besides these reprintings of Digger writings, in one case a (presumably genuine) Digger manuscript is known only through its print publication. "A letter taken at Wellingborough," printed in *A Perfect Diurnall* for April 1649, was included straightforwardly by George Sabine in his edition as a Winstanley Digger tract, but recent editors have been more squeamish (See Sabine; CWGW II: 430: "Writings by Winstanley appearing in other publications").

There is thus a prehistory to the appropriations of Winstanley that are the focus of this article, the several passages of Winstanley's last tract, *The Law of Freedom*, that were reproduced in at least 13 news-books and news pamphlets between February and April 1652. These excerpts were never attributed and seven probably appeared before Winstanley's own tract, suggesting that his manuscript or a partially printed text circulated among London printers and publishers, perhaps at the initiative of its publisher Giles Calvert. David W. Petegorsky and Austin Woolrych noted this long ago, and there is a very valuable brief discussion by John Gurney (214–6), but the phenomenon repays detailed, if necessarily selective analysis. The *Preface* (to Cromwell) in *The Law of Freedom* was dated 5 November 1651, but the tract was apparently not published until February 1652, with George Thomason dating his copy February 20, and characteristically altering the year 1652–1651 (B.L. E 655(8)). This anonymous material was incorporated within the general campaign for political and legal reform, associated with broader radical and army groups, and Winstanley's writings were in effect domesticated within these general contexts. News-books relied for copy on the letters and declarations produced by parliament, diplomats, and political activists, but it is relatively rare for a substantial tract to be plundered in this selective and anonymized fashion. That his texts could be used in these ways indicates some of the complexities of Winstanley's ideas and inspirations, as well as highlighting the potential for varieties of radical speculation and mobilization within the broad parliamentary coalition. A detailed analysis of the main passages in *The Law of Freedom* that caught the attention of editors and publishers suggests some of the ways in which Winstanley can be comprehended both within and outside the parliamentary mainstream.<sup>4</sup>

*The Law of Freedom* was published at a time of sustained pressure on the Rump Parliament for reform; after the victory over the Scots at Dunbar on 3 September 1650, the parliament had ordered that the laws be written in English "in an ordinary legible hand," and promised general reform "for the better ease and benefit of the people" (*Journals of the House of Commons* 25, 22 October 1650). The Rump's resistance to thorough-going reform is well known, but the rhetorical claims to serve the people

that accompanied all measures, however limited, added edge to the campaigns for change. After the decisive victory at Worcester in September 1651, the Army became the focus for reformers' hopes. Winstanley's own epistle to Cromwell associated his work with these broader pressures, writing that his tract was "intended for your [Cromwell's] view above two years ago, but the disorder of the Times caused me to lay it aside." He had now heard of other proposals for reform, particularly that that "Mr Peters and some others Propounded this request, That the Word of God might be consulted with to finde out a healing Government, which I liked well," and "therefore I was stirred up to give it a resurrection" (CWGW II: 287). Despite Colin Davis' (*Utopia and the Ideal Society* 171n) skeptical comment that Winstanley's claim that he had been writing it for two years "should not be taken too seriously," the many echoes of his earlier writings make it plausible. Hugh Peter was among the 21 members of the Hale Commission on law reform, appointed by the Rump in December 1651 (between the preface to Cromwell and the publication of *The Law of Freedom*). The Commission began work in January 1652 but the reformers' hopes were to be disappointed, with many scholars arguing that the main purpose of the commission was to head off more radical reform by offering a few token measures. Nonetheless this fleeting and precarious optimism is an important context for Winstanley's last tract and the appropriations of it (as discussed by Cotterell; Veall; Worden 106–18).

The news publishers were struck by particular passages in *The Law of Freedom* with the same sections reused in versions that varied from creative juxtapositions of striking phrases and sentences to extended verbatim reproduction. Some of these passages summed up general proposals for reform, while others focused on specific issues, particularly the role of Cromwell and the army and the demand for annual elections of officers in the commonwealth and for the laws to be "pithy and short." Most reprintings were in pamphlets published by George Horton and in news-books edited by Daniel Border and printed by Robert Wood. Horton had an eclectic and presumably commercially driven interest in lively news-books and pamphlets, as well as a specialism in publishing material directed against, but exploiting the notoriety of, groups like the Ranters and, later, the Quakers. In the same weeks as he was ransacking *The Law of Freedom* for his publications, Horton underwrote a series of pamphlets (such as *We Have Brought Our Hogs to a Fair Market*) on the misdeeds of the famous highwayman, James Hind. Daniel Border's news-books, *The French Intelligencer* and *The Faithful Scout*, were closely linked to army opinion; he reported on the Hale commission in great detail and seems to have been ideologically committed to law reform, and like Winstanley he was consistently hostile to the legal profession (Worden 275; Peacey 246).<sup>5</sup> One news-book produced by the experienced Bernard Alsop and one by the penitent royalist John Crouch also included extracts from *The Law of Freedom*.

Three news pamphlets produced by Horton consisted almost entirely of material from *The Law of Freedom*; the first (obtained by Thomason on 1 February) presented Winstanley's prose as *The Levellers Remonstrance* with different material used two weeks later as *A Declaration of the Commoners of England to His Excellency the Lord Cromwell* and new and old material rearranged as *Articles of High Treason*, a pamphlet Thomason found on 21 February. Two other pamphlets included briefer extracts with titles that would have given no clue to readers of their contents: *Bloudy Newes from the Barbadaes* and *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*.

The earliest pamphlet to use Winstanley's work demonstrates Horton's methods. Plagiarism began with the title page, which borrowed enthusiastically from Winstanley's address to Cromwell:

The Levellers Remonstrance sent in a Letter to his Excellency the Lord Gen: Cromwell Concerning the Government of this Commonwealth, his wearing of the Crown of Honour and preservation of the Lawes, Liberties, and Priviledges thereof. Together with their Propositions and Desires, in the Name of all the Commoners of England; And a strange Prophesie, foretelling the great and wonderfull things that will befall the Rulers of this Nation, in case they set not the Law free to the poor Oppressed People.

Only two pages of this work are not from *The Law of Freedom* but cutting and juxtaposing Winstanley's passages in novel ways inevitably modified their meaning.<sup>6</sup> Horton's extracts from Winstanley's preface to Cromwell stressed the Lord General's potential as a supporter of law reform:

God has honored you with the highest Honor of any man since Moses time to be the Head of a people who have cast out an Oppressing Pharaoh. . . God hath made you a successful instrument to cast out that Conqueror, and to recover our Land and Liberties again by your Victories, out of that Norman hand. (*Levellers Remonstrance* 3–4; *Law of Freedom* 3–4, *CWGW* II: 278–9).

Horton did use the sections where Winstanley insisted that Cromwell's "wisdom and honour" would be "blasted for ever" if he only removed "the Conquerors power out of the Kingly hand into other mens, maintaining the old Laws still" for "it is no Crown of Honor, till Promises and Engagements, made by you, be performed to your friends." But Horton blunted Winstanley's spiritual edge, and despite the promise of the title page he did not use the most trenchant threats to Cromwell, omitting three paragraphs by Winstanley that included:

The Spirit of the whole Creation (who is God) is about the Reformation of the World, and he will go forward in his work: For if he would not spare Kings, who have sat so long at his right hand, governing the World, neither will he regard you, unless your ways be found more righteous then the Kings. (*Levellers Remonstrance* 5; cf. *Law of Freedom* 4, *CWGW*: 279–80)

Horton had clearly read *The Law of Freedom*, perhaps quickly, and a common technique, more creative than that adopted by editors of the news-books proper, was to weave striking sentences from a series of Winstanley's paragraphs into a different framework. One example is the last page of this first tract, inserted also (in the same setting, with the same errors) in *Articles of High Treason*. This is Horton's version:

As for the Common-wealths Government, it is the Restorer of ancient Peace, and long-lost Freedoms (if it be right in power, as well as in name) and so becomes the joy of all Nations, and the blessing of the whole Earth. Therefore all you, who professe Religion and spiritual things, now look to it, and see what spirit you do

professe, for your profession is brought to tryal. If once Commonwealths [Go]vernment be set upon the Throne, then no Tyranny or Oppression can look him in the face and live.

O ENGLAND, ENGLAND, wouldst thou have thy Government sound and healthful? then cast about, and see, and search diligently to find out all those burthens that came in by Kings, and remove them; and then will thy Government arise from under the clods, under which as yet it is buried and covered with deformity. (*Levellers Remonstrance* 8; *Articles of High Treason* 5)

Winstanley's original passage covered five paragraphs over two pages:

Commonwealths Government governs the Earth without buying and selling, and thereby becomes a man of peace, and the Restorer of ancient Peace and Freedom: he makes provision for the oppressed, the weak and the simple, as well as for the rich, the wise and the strong: He beats swords and spears into pruning hooks and plows; he makes both elder and younger brother Free-men in the Earth. (*Micah* 4.3.4 *Isai.* 33. 1. &c 65. 17 to 25)

All Slaveries and Oppressions, which have been brought upon Mankinde by Kings, Lords of Manors, Lawyers, and Landlords, and the Divining Clergy, are all cast out again by this Government, if it be right in power as well as in name.

For this Government is the true Restorer of all long lost Freedoms, and so becomes the joy of all Nations, and the Blessing of the whole Earth: for this takes off the Kingly Curse, and makes *Jerusalem* a praise in the Earth. Therefore all you, who profess Religion and spiritual things, now look to it, and see what spirit you do profess, for your profession is brought to tryal.

If once Commonwealths Government be set upon the Throne, then no Tyranny or Oppression can look him in the face and live.

For where Oppression lies upon brethren by brethren, that is no Commonwealths Government, but the Kingly Government still; and the mystery of Iniquity hath taken that peace-makers name to be a cloke to hide his subtil covetousness, pride and oppression under.

O *England, England*, wouldst thou have thy Government sound and healthful? then cast about, and see and search diligently to finde out all those burdens that came in by Kings, and remove them: and then will thy Commonwealths Government arise from under the clods, under which as yet it is buried and covered with deformity. (*Law of Freedom* 29–30; *CWGW* II: 309–10)

Although Horton decided to print this last paragraph in full, he did not continue with the next in which Winstanley insisted that “true Commonwealths Freedom lie in the free Enjoyment of the Earth”; in general his version avoided Winstanley's attacks on

lords of the manor, lawyers, and landlords, and, again, he watered down the spiritual inspiration evident in Winstanley's prose.

The news-books tended to be less creative, presenting verbatim or near-verbatim extracts from *The Law of Freedom* where they took their place among other dramatic events of these weeks: the death of Ireton, the banishment of Lilburne, England's successes in Barbadoes and Scotland, and the political upheavals in France. The earliest news-book to use Winstanley's text, still more than a week before Thomason obtained *Law of Freedom*, was Border's *The French Intelligencer* for 4–11 February (87). The extract from Winstanley's tract was close to accounts of parliamentary proceedings and "A declaration by the Committee [the Hale commission] for consideration of the inconveniences in the Law." Readers might well have assumed that "Propositions for such a Method of Laws, whereby a Commonwealth may be governed" were also connected to the activities of the Hale commission. Under this heading the news-book presented 7 propositions out of the first 9 of Winstanley's 14 general "Propositions for such a Method of Laws whereby a Commonwealth may be governed." Numbers 6 and 8 in Winstanley's list were omitted and minor revisions were made to some others, including cutting "and bear all the sway" for Winstanley's "when Mony must buy and sell Justice, and bear all the sway" in number 3. This extract proved popular with Horton's *Articles of High Treason* (8) taking most of it from *The French Intelligencer's* version but adding Winstanley's number 10 to make up 8 propositions. The original is Winstanley's *Law of Freedom* 80–1 (*CWGW* II: 369–70), which reads as follows:

What may be those particular Laws, or such a method of Laws, whereby a Commonwealth may be governed.

1. The bare letter of the Law established by act of Parliament shall be the Rule for Officer and People, and the chief Judg of all Actions.
2. He or they who add or diminish from the Law, excepting in the Court of Parliament, shall be cashiered his Office, and never bear Office more.
3. No man shall administer the Law for Mony or Reward; he that doth shall dye as a Traytor to the Commonwealth: for when Mony must buy and sell Justice, and bear all the sway, there is nothing but Oppression to be expected.
4. The Laws shall be read by the Minister to the people four times in the year, viz every quarter, that every one may know whereunto they are to yeeld Obedience; then none may dye for want of knowledg.
5. No accusation shall be taken against any man, unless it be proved by two or three witnesses, or his own confession.
6. No man shall suffer any punishment, but for matter of fact, or Reviling words: but no man shall be troubled for his judgment or practise in the things of his God, so he live quiet in the Land.
7. The accuser and accused shall always appear face to face before any Officer, that both sides may be heard, and no wrong to either party.
8. If any Judg or Officer execute his own Will contrary to the Law, or which there is no Law to warrant him in, he shall be cashiered, and never bear Office more.

9. He who raises an accusation against any man, and cannot prove it, shall suffer the same punishment the other should, if proved. An Accusation is when one man complains of another to an Officer: all other accusations the Law takes no notice of.
10. He who strikes his Neighbor, shall be struck himself by the Executioners blow for blow, and shall lose eye for eye, tooth for tooth, limb for limb, life for life: and the reason is, that men may be tender of one anothers bodies, doing as they would be done by.

Two news-book versions deployed the same sections in misleading or optimistic contexts. Released from successive periods of imprisonment, the royalist John Crouch, a long-standing writer of satirical news, produced a pro-army news-book in early 1652 (see [McElligott](#)). *Mercurius Bellonius* (9–16 February, 11–12) included two passages drawn from *The Law of Freedom*. A freely adapted version of the list of proposals directly attributed them to the Hale commission and to Parliament:

The committee appointed to consider of the inconveniences in the Law, makes good prosecution in reference thereunto, which will satisfie the longing desires of many thousands; as for example.

Resolved upon the Question. 1. That the bare letter of the Law is to be chiefe Judge of all actions, and whosoever diminisheth the Lawes, except in a Court of Parliament, shall be cashiered of all Offices whatsoever, yea, he that diminisheth the Law for money or reward, is to die the death of a Traytor, for the Lawes are to be read four times a year by the Ministers to the people, by which they be made capable of the Law and shun transgression.

In a late reprinting, Daniel Border returned to this passage in April 1652, adding Winstanley's conventional demand for short and pithy laws from the previous page of *The Law of Freedom* (*The Faithful Scout* 16–23 April 1652, 518–9):

*The Several Propositions have been presented to his Excellency the Lord General Cromwel, for the better regulating of the Law; a breviate whereof take as followeth:*

That the Laws of the Commonwealth of *England*, may be erected, enacted and established, in like manner and form, as the Laws of the Commonwealth of Israel was, viz, few, short and pithy. 2 That no man shall administer the Law for Money or Reward; he that doth shall die as a Traytor to the Commonwealth. . .

Border also claimed the proposals had been presented to Cromwell himself and generously received:

These Proposals being seriously weighed and considered by the Generall, his Excellency declared, That it was his ardent affection and desire, that the Law might be so regulated, wherein true and impartial Justice may be freely administered, & that he was resolved to the utmost of his power to promote and propagate the same.

Perhaps this did happen but it is at least as likely that editor Daniel Border was seeking to constrain Cromwell's freedom of action through praising him for things he hesitated to do (Gurney 216).

The other Winstanley extract in Crouch's *Mercurius Bellonius*, arguing for the annual election of officers, was probably taken from Border's *The Faithful Scout* (6–13 February) published a few days earlier, but Crouch seems to have been inspired to check Winstanley's text for his minor departures from Border's version are often closer to the original. Border included his extracts under the date Wednesday 12 February (was this the day Winstanley's tract was published?) and the heading "Produced a paper of singular consequence, containing certain proposals for Liberty and Freedom, the particulars whereof take as followeth," in place of Winstanley's plainer, "All Officers in a Commonwealth are to be chosen new ones every year." Border was reasonably faithful to Winstanley's text, although he made increasingly drastic cuts, probably to save space, although they tended to soften the stress on exploitation and oppression. Crouch presented the proposals as "Propositions sent to his Excellency the Lord Generall Cromwell, by the oppressed Commons of England, concerning the Government of the Common-wealth of England &c," another indication that he had used the original work. (*The Faithful Scout* 6–13 February, 438–9, *Mercurius Bellonius* 6–7, *Law of Freedom* 36–7, *CWGW* II: 317–18).<sup>7</sup> The demand for annual election of office-holders was a staple of radical programs of law reform, and these pages from *The Law of Freedom* were used again in Border's other news-book, *The French Intelligencer* (11–18 February); in *A Perfect Account* (11–18 February), edited by Bernard Alsop; and in Horton's *New Way to Pay Old Debts*.

One final brief example of the excerpting of *The Law of Freedom*, used by both Border and Horton, is a passage where Winstanley insists on the responsibility of the army to deliver on their promises to the people:

if an Army be raised to cast out Kingly Oppression, and if the Heads of that Army promise a Commonwealths Freedom to the oppressed people, if in case they will assist with person and purse, and if the people do assist, and prevail over the Tyrant, those Officers are bound by the Law of Justice (who is God) to make good their Engagements.

The reprintings offer a strenuous but ultimately optimistic view of the army's responsibilities toward reform in contrast to Winstanley's more skeptical tone, as seen in their contrasting headings. Winstanley's is "An Army may be Murderers and unlawful" whereas Border's *The French Intelligencer* and *The Faithful Scout* have the passage as "A Declaration for Freedom" (*Law of Freedom* 66–7; *CWGW* II: 352–3; *Declaration of the Commoners* 4–5; *The French Intelligencer* 17–24 February, 102–3; *Bloudy Newes from the Barbadoes* 6–7; *The Faithful Scout* 20–27 February, 454–5). All the reprintings cut Winstanley's vividly personal passage bemoaning the theft of the land from its true possessors (theft in which the army was implicated given the soldiers purchase of land confiscated from the crown):

And now my health and estate is decayed, and I grow in age, I must either beg or work for day wages, which I was never brought up to, for another, when as the

Earth is as freely my Inheritance and birthright, as his whom I must work for.  
(*CWGW* II: 352–3)

*The Law of Freedom* was thus used between February and April 1652 as if it was a straightforward program of law reform, with a familiar list of demands (annual elections, short and pithy laws, an end to fees and corruption) and as if it shared a common optimism in these months about the reforming aspirations of Cromwell and the Army. Winstanley's name, his civilian inspiration, his overall social and economic vision, and his spiritual framework were all missing. Through highlighting specific demands and associating them with more general proposals, editors and publishers constructed a coherent movement for reform, out of more disparate and inchoate impulses for change, grounded on very different basic principles.

The meanings of these reprintings are complex and elusive. On the one hand, there is evidence that *The Law of Freedom* was read by contemporaries, and that some of its messages were transmitted, albeit in truncated and domesticated forms, to broader audiences. On the other, it is striking that Winstanley's work could be assimilated to broader parliamentary reforming impulses, and that the subversive bite of his writings could be blunted in this fashion whereas the reverse happened with the writings of some other radicals, particularly the Ranters and the Quakers. The threat from men like Abiezer Coppe was exaggerated and sensationalized in order to provoke alarm and disgust in readers of second-hand versions of their ideas. And of course, among the agents of this sensationalization was the publisher George Horton, one of the main reproducers of extracts from *The Law of Freedom* (Davis, *Fear, Myth and History* 190–4; Peters 113). Bernard Alsop also published sensationalist Ranter material.

The ease with which *The Law of Freedom* was excerpted suggests something of the complexity and elusiveness of Winstanley's writing and thought: his distinctive vision of the earth as a common treasury and the spirit of righteousness rising in sons and daughters overlapped in his writings with more familiar parliamentary modes of argument. The most important is his burning sense of injustice, shared most obviously with the Levellers, that after all the sacrifices of civil war little had changed. In the *Law of Freedom* as in his Digger writings, Winstanley's proposals and demands were presented as the just rewards for the blood and treasure spilt in the war (Webb):

We have parted with our Estates, we have lost our Friends in the Wars, which we willingly gave up, because *Freedom* was promised us; and now in the end we have new Task-masters, and our old burdens increased: and though all sorts of people have taken an Engagement to cast out Kingly Power, yet Kingly Power remains in power still in the hands of those who have no more right to the Earth then ourselves. (*CWGW* II: 285)

As this passage suggests, Winstanley, again like the Levellers, founded his claims to represent the true parliamentary cause on a close engagement with parliament's own texts, its promises, declarations, and legislation. A favorite paradoxical reference was to the Presbyterian shibboleth, the Solemn League, and Covenant of September 1643 (Wallance 151–3) while Winstanley also appealed frequently to the laws passed in the first months of the Commonwealth regime to abolish kingship and to establish a free commonwealth. It was now time to make good on the promises in this legislation and



overthrow kingly power — a concept more far-reaching than simple monarchical rule, for “the main Work of Reformation lies in this, to reform the Clergy, Lawyers, and Law; for all the Complaints of the Land are wrapped up within them three, not in the person of a King.” A complete legal transformation was thus essential:

if we look upon the Customs of the Law it self, it is the same as it was in the Kings days, only the name is altered; as if the Commoners of England paid their Taxes, Free-quarter, and shed their blood, not to reform, but to baptize the Law into a new name, from *Kingly Law* to *State Law*. (*CWGW* II: 283)

Some of these passages were reproduced by Horton (*Declaration of the Commoners; Articles of High Treason*), but Winstanley’s dismissal of one of the few legal reforms that was to be achieved was ignored: “if those Laws should be wrote in English, yet if the same Kingly principles remain in them, the English language would not advantage us any thing, but rather increase our sorrow, by our knowledge of our bondage” (*CWGW* II: 364).

The removal of the old law was intertwined with an end to other fundamental structures of oppression, the established church, and an exploitative society: as there would be no working for hire, and no buying and selling, there would be no lawyers in Winstanley’s new society, especially as his short and pithy laws would not require explanation: “the bare letter of the Law shall be both Judg and Lawyer” (*CWGW* II: 290). In these respects Winstanley is as far as it is possible to be from the legalistic version of parliamentarianism represented in the Rump, even though it had passed the legislation to which Winstanley looked for legitimation ([Cromartie 58–60](#); see also Cotterell).

The elusiveness of Winstanley’s life and thought remains remarkable although biographical and intellectual approaches to Winstanley have sometimes eschewed complexity, preferring more straightforward definitions and explanations. Consider, for instance, the events in Cobham on 16 March 1650, when the Diggers lined up with many of their enemies to take the engagement of loyalty to the Commonwealth ([Gurney 174–5](#)). Transgressive action to cultivate the common land — to make the earth a common treasury for all — was combined with public if conditional support for an oligarchic republic, and a solid status in Cobham. A remarkable and distinctive vision of universal social and spiritual transformation drew on, or interacted with, more widespread currents within radical parliamentarianism.

Other aspects of the proposals in *The Law of Freedom* reinforce this sense of Winstanley’s complex relationship with broader radical currents in the early 1650s. Winstanley, like other radical reformers, addresses Cromwell as Moses: “God has honored you with the highest Honor of any man to be the Head of a People, who have cast out an Oppressing Pharoah” (*CWGW* II: 279). This was not a merely conventional compliment; the historical parallels (as Winstanley understood them) with the commonwealth established following the victories of the Old Testament tribes of Israel in Canaan are fundamental to the structure and proposals of *The Law of Freedom*. Aspects of this comparison were again familiar within parliamentarian rhetoric and some of the passages in which Winstanley founded his proposals on his vision of ancient Israel attracted Horton’s attention: “This Commonwealth’s Government unites all people in a Land, into one heart and mind: And it was this Government which made Moses to

call Abrahams seed, one house of Israel, though they were many Tribes and many Families” (CWGW II: 293; *Declaration of the Commoners of England; Articles of High Treason*). The laws of Israel’s Commonwealth were few, short and pithy, and they were often read to the people as Winstanley proposed should happen in his new commonwealth, and “The People did talk of them when they lay down, and when they rose up, and as they walked by the way” so they became “an understanding people” (CWGW II: 368–9; widely reproduced). Crucially for Winstanley, the Israelites had founded their righteous, commonwealth following a God-given victory over their enemies and an equitable division of the conquered land among the tribes, a distribution that was fair to civilians as well as soldiers through what he termed “David’s Law.” The land was used as a “common treasury” with provision for every tribe, and not for common soldiers only, but for men like Winstanley himself and the “laborers who staid at home to provide Victuals and Free-quarter” (CWGW II: 280; 296–7).<sup>8</sup> The comparison with ancient Israel enabled Winstanley to criticize the parliament’s army for unlike the leaders of that army, the Israelite commanders had kept all their promises and engagements, and thus there were no beggars in Israel and the “younger brother as well as elder brother, he who wrought at home to provide food, as well as he that went to War” was provided for (CWGW II: 300–1). In contrast the victorious English army had harassed the Diggers, and the soldiers had been seduced into buying the land conquered in the civil war, land that was properly due to the commonwealth as a whole.

The “Mosaic” framework might seem to align Winstanley with the increasingly strident millenarian “Fifth Monarchist” pressure on the Rump in 1651–1652, and with all those zealots who looked to the example of Israel as an inspiration for reform of the law (Woolrych 271–3). In his specific proposals Winstanley clearly drew on Mosaic law: “He who strikes his neighbour . . . shall lose eye for eye, tooth for tooth, limb for limb, life for life” (CWGW II: 370), but much more important was his overall narrative of social transformation following conquest and expropriation of tyrannical enemies. And of course, Winstanley gave a radically distinctive and egalitarian account of what ancient Israel was actually like, and his commitment to general redemption makes it misleading to place *The Law of Freedom* straightforwardly alongside Fifth monarchist pressure for the rule of the Saints.

In the Preface to *A Watch-word to the City of London*, Winstanley urged readers:

if thou wouldst know what true freedome is, read over this and other my writings, and thou shalt see it lies in the community in spirit, and community in the earthly treasury, and this is Christ the true manchild spread abroad in the Creation, restoring all things into himselfe. (CWGW II: 82)

Contemporary readers who relied on the rewritten, cut, and pasted extracts in the news pamphlets of spring 1652 would not have known they derived from Winstanley, and they would not have apprehended the nature of his ideal commonwealth or its foundation in community. But for modern readers, the misunderstandings, omissions, and misrepresentations within the news culture of the early 1650s may help us understand the complex ways in which Winstanley engages with but always transcends more conventional currents of thought within radical parliamentarianism.

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## Notes

1. All references to Winstanley's works are quoted from *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, cited in text as *CWGW*.
2. The pagination of this pamphlet followed on from edition 4 of *Englands Moderate Messenger*; there is no edition 5 in the collection of George Thomason.
3. The extracts are from pages 4, 6–7, 9–11, 13 of Winstanley, *A Letter to Lord Fairfax, and his Councill of War* (*CWGW* II, 46–55).
4. Details of the passages identified in pamphlets and news-books are given (in chronological order of publication) in the Appendix. There may, of course, be others to find.
5. When the Rump cracked down on news-books in December 1652, the excesses of the *Scout* were singled out for condemnation.
6. The two pages comprised an unconnected declaration titled "The Freemans Appeal" used in another composite pamphlet published by Horton later in February as *A Declaration of the Armie Concerning Lieut. Collonel John Lilburne* (1652), BL E 654 (11), Thomason date 14 February.
7. Where Winstanley begins with "When publique Officers remain long in place of Judicature, they will regenerate from the bounds of humility, honest, and tender care of brethren" (*CWGW* II: 317), *The Faithful Scout* has them degenerating "from the principles both of humility and honesty" (438), but *Mercurius Bellonius* (6) continues to use "bounds."
8. For "David's Law" see also Winstanley's *An Appeale to All Englishmen* (16 March 1651, *CWGW* II: 246). The biblical reference is 1 Sam. 30: 24–5.

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## Appendix: Appropriations of *The Law of Freedom*

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- The French Intelligencer*. Tuesday 4 February (recte 3) to Wednesday 11 February 1652, Thomason E654 (7): *Law of Freedom*, 81–82 [CWGW, II, 369–70].
- The Faithful Scout*. Friday 6 to Friday 13 February 1652. Printed for Robert Wood. Thomason E793 (27): *Law of Freedom*, 36–37 [CWGW, II, 317–18].
- A Declaration of the Commoners of England To His Excellency the Lord General Cromwel*. London: printed for George Horton. Thomason E654 (10), 13 February: *Law of Freedom*, 16, 7, 66–7, 66 [CWGW, II, 293, 283, 352–3, 351].

- Mercurius Bellonius*. Monday 9 February to Monday 16 February 1652, Thomason E654 (14): *Law of Freedom*, 81–2, 36–37 [CWGW, II, 369–70, 317–8].
- The French Intelligencer*. Tuesday February 11 to Tuesday 18 February 1652, Thomason E655 (2): *Law of Freedom*, 36–37 [CWGW, II, 317–8].
- A Perfect Account*. Wednesday 11 February to Wednesday 18 February 1652. London, printed by Bernard Alsop. Thomason E655 (4): *Law of Freedom*, 36–7 [CWGW, II, 317–8].
- Articles of High Treason Drawn up in the Name of all the Commoners of England*. London: printed for George Horton, 1652. Thomason E 655 (10), 21 February: *Law of Freedom*, 16, 7, 6, 81, 29–30, 3–4, 14, 81–2 [CWGW, II, 293, 283, 282, 369, 309–10, 279–80, 291, 369–70].
- The French Intelligencer*. Tuesday 17 February to Tuesday 24 February 1652, Thomason E655 (12): *Law of Freedom*, 66–7, 66 [CWGW, II, 352–3, 351].
- Bloudy Newes from the Barbadaes*. London: printed for G. Horton. Thomason E655 (16), 25 February: *Law of Freedom*, 66–7, 66 [CWGW, II, 352–3, 351].
- The Faithful Scout*. From Friday 20 February to Friday 27 February 1652, Thomason E793 (35): *Law of Freedom*, 66–7, 66 [CWGW, II, 352–3, 351].
- A New Way to Pay Old Debts or the Law and Freedom of the People Established*. London, for George Horton, 1652. Thomason E 659 (23), 13 April: *Law of Freedom*, 36–7, 38–9 [CWGW, II, 317–8, 320].
- The Faithful Scout*. From Friday 16 April to Friday 23 April 1652. London: printed by Robert Wood. Thomason E 794 (26), *Law of Freedom*, 80–1 [CWGW, II, 368–9].

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# Christopher Rowland

## GERRARD WINSTANLEY: MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

*This article explores the character and legacy of Gerrard Winstanley and particularly his contribution to the understanding of Christian radicalism, to the elucidation of the character of which Winstanley's writings make a signal contribution. It examines themes with affinities with late twentieth-century theology of liberation. Christopher Hill in *The English Bible* (1993) had already noted affinities and his brief treatment of it is critically considered, particularly the differing understanding of "action/praxis" in the Winstanley's work as compared with liberation theology and the similarities in biblical hermeneutics.*

**Keywords** Gerrard Winstanley; the Radical Reformation; liberation theology; action/praxis; social justice; the Bible; prophecy; Christopher Hill

The history of Christian radicalism still needs to be written. If it were, the writings of Gerrard Winstanley would have a central position, not least with regard to his interpretation of the Bible, as I have argued in my essay "Gerrard Winstanley: Radical Interpreter of the Bible" (cf. Rowland "To See the Great Deceit"). The reason for this is that much of his writing career occupied but a few years of his life, and most of his extant writings are linked with his active involvement in the reclamation of the common land for the ordinary people. While his views were crystallizing before this experiment began, in the wake of the execution of Charles Stuart in January 1649, the subject matter of his writing is given a rationale by this involvement. Central to his theology is his daring and compelling interpretation of the story in Genesis 2–3, the story of "The Fall" in Christian tradition, which is a subtle analysis of the dialectic between desire and political oppression. Winstanley was not the first to find in the words of the Bible inspiration for a protest against injustice and oppression. Even the father of Christian theology, Augustine of Hippo, found, in the aftermath of Adam and Eve's ejection from Paradise in the story of Cain, the seeds of the oppression and violence which characterize life in the earthly city: "the founder of the earthly city was a fratricide" (*De Civitate Dei* xv.5). Indeed, already in the writings of the first-century Jewish historian and apologist Flavius Josephus' version of the Cain and Abel story (Josephus *Antiquities* i.60), Cain had become an example of one who loved "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and property" (to quote 1 John 2:16) in his desire for property, manifested in "enclosing" land and building cities. Indeed, according to 1 John 3:18, the person who has property and sees his brother in need and shuts his heart against him does not have God's love in him. Figures like John Ball (d. 1381) and Thomas Muentzer, who died in the German Peasants' Revolt in 1525 ([Bradstock and Rowland](#) 75–80), like Winstanley, echo Acts 2:44; 4:34–5, as is evident in Ball's

famous words, “My good people, things cannot go well in England, nor ever shall, till everything be made common, and there are neither villeins nor gentlemen, but we shall all be united together, and the lords shall be no greater masters than ourselves” (Bradstock and Rowland 40). Winstanley shares a similar perspective on issues such as common ownership, anticlericalism, and the ability of ordinary people to read and interpret Scripture through the indwelling Spirit, and on the breakdown of social and economic inequalities.

There is something typical about Winstanley’s Christian radical hermeneutics in that it encapsulates features which are analogous to modern political movements like liberation theology, though this essay is not an attempt to make Winstanley into a seventeenth-century liberation theologian, even if the similarities between him and later (and indeed earlier figures) deserve to be brought out, as Christopher Hill (447–51) recognized. Such contextual theology is encapsulated in Blake’s memorable phrase “Eternity is in love with the productions of time” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [hereafter MHH] 7, E36) and nothing better exemplifies it than the writings of Gerrard Winstanley. Ronald Paulson wrote that:

while establishment Christianity, founded on the Bible of the Church Fathers, was content with an ordered status quo in this life, revolutionary Christianity, which harked back to the ‘true’ reading of the New Testament – called for change . . . the desire was always discernible to such conservatives as Burke; and it was always lurking in the minds of such radicals as Blake – to be entertained or acted upon. (Paulson 116)

“To be entertained and acted upon” is key. What is crucial is that this is not a “desk” exercise. In Winstanley’s case, it is born out of involvement, suffering, and professional disappointment and particularly a sense of call; the awareness of the indwelling Christ in the interpreting subjective prompt reflection on the Bible and the distinctive interpretation of key passages which we see throughout his work. Within the Bible are analogies to his thought. The New Testament evinces an ethos of fulfilled hope, the conviction that the divine speaks through auditions, visions, and inspiration, and that their relationship to the past authoritative scripture and the contemporary socio-religious practice and belief, to which they related, must be one of superiority not subordination. “Now is the day of salvation,” words from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 6:2), are typical. The mix of claim to inspiration rather than appealing to precedent, and the strong conviction that a new world was already on its way and was livable now, are at the heart of the New Testament. There are several consequences of these twin convictions. First of these is that there is a “disease” with the present as an inadequate demonstration of the divine will and a longing, and an obligation, to live differently. Second, there is a refusal to allow convention and precedent to be the final determinants for life. Rather, present experience is the lens through which the past and institutions of authority, however august, are going to be viewed. It is this pattern we find in the extant writings of Gerrard Winstanley. As we shall see, according to liberation theology, there are two “texts” which are crucial for discernment, the “text of life” and the text of the Bible, and that this way of living is explored in the context of community in which previous power relations are re-thought and there is a more participative and egalitarian lifestyle. In other words,

the existential and the historical, and the dialectic between them, generate the resources in the Bible for the discernment and the consequent development of a critical space to reflect on situation and action.

What distinguishes the kind of move made by those like Winstanley is that this is not primarily about faithfulness to the faith once handed down, an ultimately revealed truth in the past, but an appeal to an ongoing revelation which has a similar kind of relationship to the past and its authoritative interpreters as we find in the story of Jesus and his followers in relation to the Jewish tradition in the New Testament. There is a deep-seated conviction that there is more to come and, what is more, divinely inspired human agents will have a part in seeing that through to fulfillment. We find explicitly stated by Gerrard Winstanley the conviction that there is an analogy with the experience of the people of God “back then,” so that one’s own experience is analogous to it, or that the later interpreter enters into the same kind of experience as their predecessor. This is indeed going back to roots, but to the experience to which the text bears witness. As such, the biblical text enables a sharing of a common human experience which can inspire the later reader.

There is in the pages of Winstanley’s work a reflection of patterns which are central to the New Testament: questioning the hegemony of the text; prioritizing experience, not least visionary and other more immediate ways of knowing God; the democratizing of biblical interpretation and indeed access to knowledge of God more generally. Linked with this is the questioning of criteria of intellectual engagement, and indeed learning more generally, as being characterized by an encyclopedic view of knowledge in which the accumulation of information counts for wisdom, and, arising from this non-conformity, a politically charged interpretation in which biblical interpretation provides the medium of critique and understanding. Occasionally, Winstanley recognizes this for himself, such as when he appeals to the revelation he received to dig the common ground, endorsing it by means of appeal to many such examples in the Bible and in the ways in which the New Testament contains the writings of ordinary people. Largely, early Christian literature does not constitute the writings of a literary elite but, as Winstanley puts it, the witness of ordinary folk to the events that had been going on and which had turned their worlds upside down. Winstanley’s exegesis also is part of a pattern, which stretches back into early modern Christian humanism to writers like Hans Denck, Sebastian Franck, and Jacob Boehme (Smith 114–16). What is key is acceptance of the fundamental worth of humanity enabling the ability to perceive the divine without necessitating a recourse to scriptures, clergy, or the church, to provide guidance (Apetrei; Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*; Wallace 52–86).

### **Understanding political and economic oppression: the biblical roots**

Winstanley interpreted the Diggers’ project as a claim to land which was common to all, for the earth was a common treasury, and, as such, the whole concept of ownership of land as private property conflicted with this fundamental right (*New Law* 6; *CWGW I* 502–03). The origin of private property is the institutionalization of the act of covetousness, in which the power of those who have satisfied, and go on satisfying their



covetousness, yield political, economic, and ideological means of ensuring that they keep their power to maintain their lifestyle whatever the cost to those they oppress:

The first Adam is the wisdom and power of flesh broke out and sate down in the chair of rule and dominion, in one part of man-kind over another. And this is the beginner of particular interest, buying and selling the earth from one particular hand to another, saying, *This is mine*, upholding the particular propriety by a law of government of his own making, and thereby restraining other fellow creatures from seeking nourishment from mother earth. (*New Law 1; CWGW I 481*)

This then pervades the emergence of human social structures:

The first Adam, or man of flesh, branches himself forth in divers particulars, to fetch peace into himself, from objects without himself.

As for example covetousness is a branch of the flesh or first man that seeks after creature enjoyment or riches; to have peace from them.

Pride looks abroad for honour; Envy seeks the revenge of such as crosses his fleshy ends, by reproach, oppression, or murder . . . (*New Law 4; CWGW I 497*)

Winstanley exposed the ways in which the elevation of private property to a universal human good reflected a fundamental characteristic of humanity after the Fall of Adam. Those who act out their desires seek to maintain the fruits of their actions by hanging onto what they possess by oppression, murder, or theft (*CWGW I 482*). This rule of the Serpent is supported by a professional ministry, the Kingly power, the judiciary, and the buying and selling of the earth. In *The Saints Paradise*, he describes the predicament of the human situation as two “band-dogs” pursuing an individual human being (*Saints Paradise 6; CWGW I 368*). So, there is a struggle between the flesh and the law of righteousness, resolution of which can only come about through the mediation of a third power, Christ (*CWGW I 365*). Winstanley rejects both theological and anthropological dualism, in the light of the Book of Job (*CWGW I 335*). He denies that the Devil is a third power between humans and God (*CWGW I 333*), for the Devil is a way of describing malfunctioning of the flesh. This monistic scheme is then mapped out more simply in *The New Law*.

## **The Bible: the record of experience of ordinary people**

What is striking about the writings from the immediate pre-Digger phase of Winstanley’s life to the end of his writing career is the centrality of experience. This is a theme to which Winstanley returns again and again, reflecting his own journey from being a “professor” to knowing the reality of the indwelling Christ, which is “the Law of Righteousnesse,” the law written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33; *CWGW II 6–7*). The eschatological hope of Jeremiah 31:31–4 is the context for understanding the new law of righteousness, not the Mosaic law, with its “teaching and ruling power” which caused

people to “seek and run abroad for a teacher and a ruler,” while being a “stranger to the Spirit that is within himself” (CWGW II 8).

Key aspects of Christian doctrine, heaven and hell, the person of Christ, the devil are all ways of helping to understand the human experience, a lens through which one might understand the struggles of the human soul and life in the world (a theme which becomes more prominent as time goes on). For Winstanley, it becomes the subjective appropriation of that peculiar way in which Jesus lived and died and its universal dissemination in the “rising up of Christ in sons and daughters, which is his second coming” (*New Law*; CWGW I 485), so that all experience the same change, in which the flesh and covetousness is subdued and the life of altruism and mutuality takes precedence. We find particularly from *The Saints Paradise* onwards a repeated emphasis that theological orthodoxy is of dubious value unless it is internalized and transforms the life of an individual. Third, there is in consequence a subordination of the importance of doctrine to that of action. Belief and the knowledge of theology are less important than allowing action and involvement to inform and change human lives. That means that Winstanley returns to the issue of the authority of theological expertise. Knowledge, however encyclopedic, is repudiated. The experience of those who share that same experience as the fisherman and artisans, whose experience is reflected in the pages of the New Testament, is to be preferred to the learned University people who know what to believe but do not “feel” the indwelling Christ within themselves.

So, asks Winstanley, “What use is to be made of the Scriptures?” A good question given that they are subordinate to experience. The answer is, as we would expect:

First, they are, or may be kept as a record of such truths as were writ not from imagination of flesh, but from pure experience, and teachings of the Father. Secondly, we are taught thereby to waite upon the Father with a meek and obedient spirit, till he teach us, and feed us with sincere milk, as he taught them, that wrote these Scriptures. (Truth Lifting up its Head; CWGW I 435)

What is crucial is the need to “get behind the words”:

Therefore learne to put a difference between the Report, and the thing Reported of. The spirit that made flesh, is he that is reported of. The writings and words of Saints is the report. These reports being taken hold of, by corrupt flesh that would rule, are blemished by various translations, interpretations and constructions, that King flesh makes; but those sons and daughters in whom the spirit rests, cannot be deceived, but judgeth all things. (Truth Lifting up its Head; CWGW I 431)

The importance of the Bible is not the fact that it is the Word of God, but that its words bear witness, which testimony parallels the experience of later readers:

For it is not the Apostles writings, but the spirit that dwelt in them that did inspire their hearts, which gives life, and peace to us all: And therefore when the Prophets, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Isaiah* spake what they saw from God, they spake, thus saith the Lord, out of experience of what they saw, and felt, and they were called true prophets.

But when others rise up, that spake their words and writings, and so applying them to another age, and generation of men, saying, Thus saith the Lord, as the other did, yet they were called false Prophets, because they had seen nothing themselves from God, but walked by the legs, and saw by the eyes of the true Prophets . . . (Saints Paradice, 1; CWGW I 322)

What is crucial is to understand from one's own experience and find in the scriptures echoes of that experience and ways of handling it. In his tract of 16 October 1648, *Truth Lifting up its Head* (addressed to the scholars of Oxford and Cambridge), [Winstanley](#) writes about the difference between that which is stated in scripture and that to which it bears witness, the report, on the one hand, and "the thing reported of," on the other. It is the latter which is of greater importance, and which resonates with the present experience of "sons and daughters in whom the spirit rests" and who judges all things.

The Bible offers a *confirmation* of the witness to the indwelling Christ. Scripture is the experience of "Christ in the letter," written by the apostles. This may be accessed as a result of later readers' experience of the Spirit which allows them to share the original experience to which the biblical text bears witness. The task is to discern the spiritual truth lying beneath the "experimental words" of the writers who set forth the actions of God in different circumstances. That is, the experience of the apostles with which the contemporary experience resonates, together, offers a mutually reinforcing confirmation of the authenticity of both as the spirit works within, for "the spiritual man judges all things" (*Truth Lifting up its Head*; CWGW I 435; cf. 1 Cor 2:15). This is similar to Blake's emphasis on 2 Cor 3:16 and 1 Cor 2:14 in his *Illustrations of the Book of Job* ([Bindman](#)), and as he puts it in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, borrowing from his engraver's trade, there was need to read the Bible in its "infernal or diabolical sense" (MHH 24, E44). Here, the engraving process is applied to the process of interpretation. The fiery process of imaginative interpretative engagement is one of "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid" (MHH 14; E39). As Ralph Cudworth put it in 1647, "Neither are we able to enclose in words and letters, the Life, Soul, and Essence of any Spiritual truths" ([Rowland](#), *Blake and the Bible*, 50).

### **"The poor people that are trod under foot"**

[Winstanley](#) notes that the ones to whom the Son of Man first went were the poor people. The writings that the elite scholars live by "were not writings that proceeded from any Schollars, according to humane art, but from Fisher-men, Shepherds, Husbandmen, and the Carpenters son, who spake and writ as the Spirit gave them utterance, from an inward testimony" (*New Law* 15; CWGW I 562). It is no surprise to [Winstanley](#) that "many a poor man and woman that are counted blasphemers by the understanding Pharisees of our age, as the learned Pharisees of old called Christ . . . have more sweet peace, more true experience of the Father" (CWGW I 536). In his day "the declaration of this law of righteousnesse shal rise out of the dust, out of the poor people that are trod under foot" (*New Law*; CWGW I 528). That means "that the poorest man, that sees his maker, and lives in the light, though he could never read a letter in

the book, dares throw the glove too al the humane learning in the world, and declare the deceit of it" (*CWGW I 537*). What such learning can do is to seduce people away from "knowing the Spirit, to own bare letters, words and histories for spirit" (*New Law; CWGW I 537*). "The sight of the King of glory within lies not in the strength of memory, calling to mind what a man has read and heard" (*CWGW I 557*). It is the syllogistic method of which [Winstanley](#) is suspicious, "a humane capacity to joyn things together into a method" and with it the rhetoric in "Sermon work" to persuade and convince. What [Winstanley](#) advocates is a democracy of learning based on the Spirit being shed abroad on all flesh, so that "a plough man that was never bred in their Universities may do as much; nay, they do more in this kind (as experience shows us) then they that take Tythes to tell a story" (*CWGW I 557*). Knowledge of Christ, of the New Jerusalem, means attending to the "light arising up from an inward power of feeling experience, filling the soul with the glory of the Law of Righteousnesse, which doth not vanish like the taking in of words and comfort from the mouth of a hearsay Preacher, or strength of memory" (*New Law; CWGW I 557*).

Blake too contrasts "memory" and "inspiration" well exemplified in his Preface to "Milton A Poem" (E95). In [Winstanley's](#) terms, it is not about "book learning" but experience of the Christ within. So, [Winstanley](#), like Blake after him, is suspicious of "the literal knowledge of Scriptures of the Prophets and Apostles, and . . . the History thereof," without experience. [Winstanley](#) will have none of the attempt to create distance between text and reader. Objective, detached engagement with the Bible, the hallmark of most academic biblical scholarship, was anathema to him (*CWGW I 547–48*). What is required is "experimental knowledge," not abstract reflection on the Bible and the secondary application of it.

### **Action is the life of all: resistance to the beast and the whore who "rule without controls"**

[Winstanley's](#) words are in effect a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew's "Not every one who says Lord, Lord who will enter Kingdom of heaven" (Matt 7:21), or 1 John 3:18 "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (cf. John 8:31–2). He asks, "What is it to walk righteously, or in the sight of reason?" The answer echoes some of the themes from the Gospel of Matthew, especially Matt 25:31–45:

First, When a man lives in all acts of love to his fellow-creatures; feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; relieving the oppressed; seeking the preservation of others as well as himself; looking upon himselfe as a fellow-creature (though he be Lord of all creatures) to all other creatures of all kinds; and so doing to them, as he would have them doe to him; to this end, that the Creation may be upheld and kept together by the spirit of love, tenderness and one-nesse, and that no creature may complain of any act of unrighteousness and oppression from him.

Secondly, when a man loves in the knowledge and love of the Father, seeing the Father in every creature, and so loves, delights, obeys, & honours the Spirit which he sees in the creature, and so acts rightly towards that creature in whom he sees

the spirit of the Father for to rest, according to its measure. (Truth Lifting up his Head; CWGW I 418–19)

That means that salvation is not by believing that there was a man called Jesus:

that lived, and died at *Jerusalem*, for though you believe there was such a man, yet that is not saving faith to you, till you feel the power of a meek spirit come into you, and reign King, and tread all your envy, frowardnesse, and bitternesse of spirit under foot. (Saints Paradice, 6; CWGW I 357)

Winstanley's position is one that is non-violent with a concern to engage in reconciliation with former enemies (Sproxton; *New Years Gift*; CWGW II 143–44). The overthrow of the Beast of political power should come about through force of arms. Indeed, he offers a view of political change which is dependent on transformation in attitudes: what he describes as the "rising of Christ in sons and daughters" (*New Law*; CWGW I 485). Winstanley's aim, therefore, was not to conquer by force of arms but to enlighten. There are passages deploring victory "gotten by the sword." What he looks forward to is the time when "This great Leveller, Christ our King of righteousness in us, shall cause men to beat their swords to plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and nations shall learn war no more" (CWGW II 145 cf. Isa 2:4). He repudiated the resort to violence by some of his political allies and enjoins people to make "peace with the cavaliers" on the basis of "love of enemies" and The Golden Rule: "do to them as you would have had them done to you."

Winstanley had understood the struggle within the individual and in society at large by means of the apocalyptic imagery of the Book of Revelation. The mystery of the coming age of righteousness means not life after death, but "this new heaven and earth" that has already begun to appear (CWGW I 493). Universal freedom has never filled the earth but has been foretold by prophets (CWGW I 507). When this happens it will be a new heaven and earth. The great day of judgment means the Righteous Judge sitting upon the throne in every man and woman (CWGW I 506 cf. CWGW I 550). Winstanley believed that the future age promised in the Bible was already being inaugurated, both in the individual and in society at large, but one which was capable of being interpreted of the inner life. "Heaven within himself" is not achieved without a struggle within the human soul against the negative power of imagination. Winstanley describes the struggle utilizing to the full the dualistic language of apocalypticism.

His view of individual transformation ran in tandem with his conviction about the end of oppression in society. Christ rising means the conquest of fourfold power: imaginary teaching power called hearsay; imaginary kingly power; imaginary judicature; buying and selling of the earth, which Christ will destroy by the word of his mouth. These are then interpreted with the four beasts of Daniel 7. Winstanley uses the imagery of Daniel and the New Testament Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, to interpret the oppressive behavior of the wielders of political and economic power of his day. In particular, he regarded the prevalence of private property as typifying the rule of the Beast, as prophesied in Revelation and the Book of Daniel. Like John the visionary, Winstanley's interpretation of Daniel's vision of the beasts arising out of the sea becomes a vehicle of a powerful political critique of the contemporary polity. As in Revelation 13, the Danielic vision is interpreted synchronically rather than

diachronically. It is not a succession of empires, therefore, but a fourfold multifaceted imperial oppression. According to [Winstanley](#), the first of the four beasts described in Daniel was royal power, which by force makes a way for the economically powerful to rule over others, “making the conquered a slave; giving the Earth to some, denying the Earth to others”; the second Beast he regarded as the power of laws, which maintains power and privilege in the hands of the few by the threat of imprisonment and punishment; the third Beast is what [Winstanley](#) calls “the thieving Art of buying and selling, the Earth with her fruits one to another”; the fourth Beast is the power of the clergy which is used to give a religious or, in something like Marx’s sense, an ideological gloss to the privileges of the few. According to [Winstanley](#), the Creation will never be at peace, until these four beasts are overthrown and only then will there be the coming of Christ (*Fire in the Bush*; *CWGW* II 190–96; [Rowland](#), *Blake and the Bible*, 171). Meanwhile, it is necessary to ensure that “the doors of perception” are “cleansed” and recognize that “the Beast and the Whore rule without controls,” to quote [Blake](#) (E39, E611).

### **Liberation theology and Winstanley’s “Action is the Life of All”**

In *The English Bible*, Christopher [Hill](#) (447–51) appended a note on analogies between liberation theology and radical religion in seventeenth-century England. He starts by pointing out that liberation theology is “mainly a product of the laity” and emphasizes lay Bible reading. His major source is a collection of essays for Gustavo Gutiérrez widely respected and recognized as the godfather of liberation theology. Hill’s instinct was correct. The similarities have been noted by several of us over the years ([Rowland](#), *Radical Christianity*; [Rowland and Corner](#)) and are certainly worthy of some consideration. Hill rightly recognizes the complex relationship with the Roman Catholic hierarchy but fails to point out the enormous importance of the Brazilian hierarchy’s espousal of liberation theology for its pastoral practice in the 1980s. He acknowledges the importance of the Exodus as a symbol of liberation but he fails to note the way in which liberation theologians handle the problematic culmination of that story in the destruction and ejection of indigenous peoples from Canaan. Liberation theologians are aware of this and take pains to ensure that what they take from the Bible is not a prescription but more of an inspiration. Also, while it is true that the political content of Revelation is recognized, more of a puzzle is Hill’s assertion that “liberation theologians make full use of the prophets, especially Ezra and Nehemiah, concentrating on their vigorous denunciation of injustice and vindication of the rights to the poor, and on God the liberator.” Well, yes, up to a point as the latter principles are true. The problem is that Ezra and Nehemiah, unlike Amos and parts of Isaiah, are not the obvious biblical sources for this, being among the more conservative and chauvinistic texts in the whole of the Bible!

What Hill fails to capture is the nature both of the liberation theology project and the character of its engagement with the Bible. Many liberation theologians functioned as Gramscian organic intellectuals mediating between the grassroots and the hierarchy, and helping the grassroots in various places and in contextually driven ways to articulate their understanding of their lives. There is nothing that I am aware of in the

seventeenth century quite like the methodology of [Paulo Freire](#) (1921–1997), which drawing on prior experience, finds ways of allowing that experience to inform engagement with the Bible (e.g., [Freire](#)). Freire criticized a view of education in which students become accumulators, storing material away as if in a banking process, the “banking concept of education,” in which the all-knowing teacher fills the grateful, ignorant, and inert students with deposits of “knowledge.” What Freire promoted was a process whereby human beings engage in active yet critical forms of education through which they embrace both their world, and each other. Freire believed that education must be the site of transformation in which the traditional pupil–teacher relationship is dealt with, for this relationship maintains and mirrors other forms of oppression within society. So, the ways in which one engages in theological education are inseparable from the questions that theology deals with. Understanding the learning process is central to the understanding of power-relations both in a local community and in the group who are reading the Bible. This is crucial for understanding the character of liberationist hermeneutics.

There is much that is hermeneutically and politically similar, at least in general terms. The appeal to experience as the motor of understanding the Bible is an obvious example. Also important is the political perspective on scripture and the consequent rejection of a narrowly religious or otherworldly focus and theological agenda. Theology is now about life and the Bible is a witness to the political struggles of the people of God at another time and another place. While the similarities in form and content between what [Winstanley](#) writes and what we find in liberationist exegesis are striking, there is a crucial difference. Experience is the motor of his exegesis; the way in which the ideological is subordinated to the praxis is never theorized in the ways in which we find it in liberation theology, influenced as it was by Marxism and, as a result, picking up on the strands in the Bible where practice is regarded as crucial for theological epistemology.

[Winstanley’s](#) “Action is the life of all” (*CWGW* II 80; cf. *CWGW* I 508, 516; [Gurney](#) 43), is the context in which one may begin to “read” the world, “the book of life” and the links with the Bible are forged. [Winstanley’s](#) experiences led him to another way of reading the Genesis story with a more political edge, colored by his appreciation of the divisions in society. It is the perspective of the poor and marginalized, the “little ones” of Matt 11:25, 18:5, 10, who have a particular epistemological insight (*New Law*; *CWGW* I 508). What drives understanding is experience – of poverty, of oppression, of actual injustice. Thus, the task of engaging with the Bible as an active subject is a creative engagement contrasting with more mainstream hermeneutics, where orthodoxy is something to be understood (and explained by those usually equipped by their training to understand it) and applied in various contexts.

In the method of liberation theology, there is an emphasis underlining the dialectic between text and life and the mutually illuminative process that is involved, something we find in [Winstanley’s](#) hermeneutics too. Clodovis Boff describes two different kinds of approach to the Bible in liberationist hermeneutics ([Boff](#); [Bennett](#)). One is more immediate, in which the biblical story becomes a type for the people of God in the modern world. One of these he calls “correspondence of terms” and the other “correspondence of relationships.” So, the Bible offers a way of speaking about and indeed understanding, for example, displacement and homelessness. Thus, the biblical stories are seen to reflect *directly* on the experiences of displacement, poverty, and

powerlessness. In the process of reflection, the Bible functioned as a typological resource which gave meaning and hope. In this kind of engagement with the Bible, the words become the catalyst for discernment of the divine way in the present.

In the other way of engaging with the Bible in liberationist hermeneutics, which Boff describes as a “correspondence of relationships” method, one must look at the correspondences between the relationship of text and context in the case of the biblical text, which bears witness to the life and struggles of the people of God at a particular time and place in the past, and compare it with the modern “text of life.” The Bible is read through the lens of the experience of the present, thereby enabling it to become a key to understanding that to which the scriptural text bears witness – the life and struggles of the ancestors in the faith. This exploration of Scripture in turn casts light on the present. The relation of the contemporary situation of the people of God, properly understood, sociologically and politically, stands in an analogical situation to that to which the Bible bears witness, and may inform, inspire, and challenge modern readers of the Bible. There are echoes of Winstanley’s emphasis on the analogues between the poor people with whom Jesus consorted and were his first witnesses, and the people among whom Winstanley lived and worked as opposed to the elite, though Winstanley is less interested in maintaining the distance so that the text’s witness in its context is given its own integrity. Winstanley functions more in Boff’s first mode. But in other respects, Winstanley’s biblical interpretation is close to Boff’s “correspondence of relationships” method and functions on the basis of analogy. Thus, just as in the time of Jesus shepherds, fishermen, and ordinary people, rather than the scribes, grasped the meaning of the gospel, so in Winstanley’s day “book learning” often prevents the “scholars” from grasping the truth of the gospel as compared with the comprehension of ordinary people.

It is not clear that Winstanley anticipates the emphasis on praxis so typical of liberation theology. We have seen him writing of practice as the means of salvation and of more importance than assent to creeds. Nevertheless, Winstanley never quite reaches that Marxist perspective in which one’s deeds and one’s context determine one’s view of the world, which is fundamental to the Marxist understanding of ideology. That said, we may note John Gurney’s judgment that “Winstanley certainly learnt much from his short time in Cobham, for one of the most telling aspects of the Digger programme was its successful fusion of religious with social radicalism and its skilful appropriation of traditional languages of rural discontent” (Gurney 21). We have seen that there is a critique of the ideology of the powerful by means of the apocalyptic imagery from Daniel and Revelation, and, as modern commentators on Winstanley, we might want to interpret what is going on as the choice of biblical passage is being determined by the experience of oppression. But notwithstanding Winstanley’s glorious rhetorical flourish “Action is the life of all,” there is no awareness on his part that how one lives and what one’s commitments are determine one’s ideas and political and theological preferences. Yes, there is an emphasis on experience but whether Winstanley quite gets to the point of asserting that the professors in the university are conditioned by the way in which they learn and the context in which they do it I am not convinced. It may be appropriate for a modern commentator to point out the references to the dire social and economic context in Winstanley’s writing, which suggest that he saw a link between “life” and “writing.” After all, he does come close to articulating what is in effect the hermeneutical advantage of the poor and the outcast



when he writes of “Fisher-men, Shepherds, Husbandmen, and the Carpenters son” (CWGW I 562), rather than “humane learning” as the authors of New Testament texts, and “the declaration of this law of righteousness” rising out of the poor people that are trod under foot (*New Law*; CWGW I 528).

In both Winstanley’s and liberationist engagement with the Bible, there is an emphasis on the Spirit rather than on the letter of texts, and this is accompanied by the conviction that the indwelling Spirit qualifies the writer or speaker to “bring the divine down to earth” in an arresting, authoritative way. In this kind of hermeneutic, the words of the Bible become less an authoritative guide to life as a gateway to communion with the divine Word through the Spirit, and that communion enables new types of understanding which are socially and contextually meaningful.

There are other similarities between Winstanley’s situation and that of the practice of liberation theology in, say, a country like Brazil, where ownership of the land is a major issue and the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (*MST*, *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) has practiced land occupations and “digging the common land” in a way similar to the Digger movement and with support from the Roman Catholic Church when it was most influenced by a liberation theology (Burdick; Gurney 111; see also the UK-based movement “The Land is Ours,” Bradstock). “Bruising the serpent’s head” is what is happening in the Digger experiment and in the awareness raising that is going on in Winstanley’s writing. Just as in the liberationist hermeneutic, the emphasis is placed on the interpreter in the first place and not the biblical text, so Winstanley’s emphasis on the “teacher within us” makes a similar point. Like Winstanley’s critique of the “professors” who merely parrot what they have learnt and do not allow space for the interpreting subject, so also there is a critique of those who put distance between text and reader and see biblical interpretation as a detached historical exercise. Basic to the whole project is hope for *this world*, not for some ethereal world (*New Law*; CWGW I 522, for an example of a typical chiliastic hope).

Winstanley’s writings evince a robust humanism in which the human has the capacity to discern the divine will, independent of Bible, church, and tradition. There is a rejection of the priority of the letter, and a preference for a way of engaging with the Bible which sees it less as a code of law and dogma, and more as a witness to the divine spirit, whose effectiveness is the result of its confirmation of what has been tasted, “experimentally,” by those who are the meek of the earth.

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# David Loewenstein

## AFTERWORD: WHY WINSTANLEY STILL MATTERS

*“Why Winstanley Still Matters” argues that the most radical social thinker and prose writer of seventeenth-century England continues to matter today because of his acute and daring analyses of power, social oppression, religious conflict, and economic inequalities.*

**Keywords** Winstanley; oppressive power; collective action; rhetoric; relevance today

Gerrard Winstanley’s career as a writer was dramatic and short: he was active for four extraordinary years of political, religious, and social upheaval at the height of the English Revolution. Yet between 1648 and 1652 he produced an extraordinary body of writings whose radical ideas and literary creativity matter for many reasons. He remains the foremost radical socialist English thinker and activist of the early modern period and one of the significant radical social thinkers of any time. He is also an English prose writer of exceptional vividness and distinctiveness: his power of verbal expression draws both upon his everyday experiences as a Digger on the commons of Walton-on-Thames and Cobham and upon his striking interpretations of the Bible and its myths as he articulates the sharp socioeconomic, religious, and political conflicts of his time. As this collection of essays on theology, rhetoric, and politics in Winstanley attests, the remarkable writings he published coinciding with the climatic events of the English Revolution have attracted the intense interest of both historians and literary scholars, and his radical religious, political, and social works will continue to stimulate interdisciplinary interest and debate. As Christopher Rowland and Andrew Bradstock remind us above, Winstanley also deserves to be taken seriously as an original theologian. He gave fresh expression to a wide range of heterodox beliefs during a period of religious speculation, political upheaval, social instability, and escalating poverty (which he directly experienced) due to harvest failure, economic depression, and civil war.<sup>1</sup> Winstanley also uniquely combined visionary radical thinking and writing with some of the most provocative social activism of the English Revolution, aphoristically proclaiming, while the Digger experiment was underway, that “action is that life of all” and “if thou dost not act, though dost nothing.”<sup>2</sup> The leading modern American radical activist and historian Howard Zinn has observed that “the struggle for justice should never be abandoned on the ground that it is hopeless, because of the apparent overwhelming power of those in the world. . . who seem invincible in their determination to hold on to their power” (231). Winstanley the Digger and visionary writer – acutely aware of the social, political, legal, and religious injustices of his seventeenth-century world – understood this message in his own distinctive way as he

aimed to challenge the powers of the earth through the praxis of “righteous” and collective acting.

In terms of effecting long-term political and social change, Winstanley the agrarian communist and “True Leveller” may seem, from one perspective, a marginal and even an inconsequential figure in the English Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, although he was a product of the political and religious upheavals of the English Revolution, he was nevertheless in many ways too radical for his own age; his small and fragile agricultural community of Diggers, which he led from April 1649 until April 1650, was doomed to failure even during the experimental but socially and religiously cautious government of the English republic.<sup>4</sup> Yet when considered in terms of his unorthodox political, economic, and religious beliefs, his motivations for social activism, and his original prose writings characterized by radical interpretations of the Bible, he remains a significant and deeply inspirational figure. However, his vision, especially of institutional powers, also has a darker side that complicates his writings. His analysis of oppressive, violent, and interwoven networks of political, social, religious, and legal powers in his age, including the English republic, reminds us that he is no simple radical idealist.<sup>5</sup> From his perspective, the protean, interconnected, and sinister forms of Antichristian iniquity include kingly power, ecclesiastical power, the power of professional lawyers, and the power of rapacious landlords. He perceives both the subtle and coercive ways in which institutional powers operate and he gives their menacing consequences vivid figurative expression (as in the exceptionally colorful apocalyptic prose of *Fire in the Bush*); his perceptions and representations of power in socioeconomic terms are as penetrating in their own distinctive ways as anything written in the seventeenth century. And for this reason too he continues to matter.

The historically informed, interdisciplinary essays in *Gerrard Winstanley: Theology, Rhetoric, Politics* offer fresh accounts of why his social activism, religious heterodoxies, political thought, and rhetoric matter in terms of our understanding of the upheavals and radical culture of the English Revolution. These studies remind us that for Winstanley political theory, radical theology, visionary rhetoric, personal experiences, and concrete practice were inseparable. John Gurney examines how the ideas of the most radical thinker of the English Revolution were profoundly shaped by “the context of place,” notably his experiences living and working in London, on St George’s Hill, and in Cobham. In a dense reconsideration of Winstanley’s spiritual development, Ariel Hessayon freshly reassesses Winstanley’s relation to the culture, social network, and beliefs of the General Baptists (e.g., regarding adult baptism, general redemption, the superiority of the interior Spirit, the oppression of tithes), thereby providing a new perspective on the originality of Winstanley’s radical positions as well as his indebtedness to this contemporary radical movement. Both Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland explore interconnections between theology and experience, belief and action, so that we come away with a renewed sense of the ways theory and practice were inseparable in Winstanley; their essays also demonstrate that his unorthodox scriptural hermeneutics and mythmaking deserve a central position not only in the radical culture of the English Revolution but also in the history of Christian radicalism. Ann Hughes’ study of the complex reception of *Winstanley’s Law of Freedom* in news culture of the early Interregnum not only illuminates how Winstanley’s polemical writing was selectively used by contemporary reformers but also demonstrates that he “engages with but also always transcends more conventional

currents of thought” in radical political culture. Winstanley’s daring social, religious, and radicalism thus remains distinctive – and continues to matter because of this – even as it can be situated within the culture of contemporary radical parliamentarianism. Sarah Apetrie adds another dimension to Winstanley’s radicalism and its complexities as she looks closely at his metaphorical language and reveals that he was by no means conservative when it comes to gender: he challenges traditional patriarchy, critiques “a militant model of masculinity,” and unites “sons and daughters” in his vision of the second coming.<sup>6</sup> By examining Winstanley’s self-representations in relation to leading radical contemporaries, Thomas Corns illuminates the specific challenges he faced in closing the gap between his radical theories and practice, especially as he was engaged in collective social action and envisioning a more universal “spiritual transformation of England.”

As the contributions to this collection of essays underscore, then, Winstanley matters because he is constantly rethinking orthodox positions and received ideas of this age. The collection also makes clearer, from both historical and literary perspectives, that he matters as a radical writer, social activist, political thinker, and religious visionary because he struggled *to combine* theory and practice, rather than disconnect them.

In terms of appreciating Winstanley’s radical achievements in relation to the past and present, one might claim that the Oxford University Press edition of his works, published on the occasion of the 400-year anniversary of his birth, will paradoxically help to make Gerrard Winstanley respectable. For the first time his works are available in a fully annotated, scholarly edition published by a major academic press. We are now better able to regard Winstanley as a great if idiosyncratic prose writer and unorthodox thinker of seventeenth-century England to be read alongside Milton and Bunyan. Yet if the Oxford edition helps to establish him in the canon of significant English prose writers, his writings and activism remind us, to quote Edward Said, that we should not forget “that many of the figures in today’s canon were yesterday’s insurgents” (28). This is especially true in Winstanley’s case. No other early modern English writer wrote so movingly and probingly about the class conflicts, inequalities, exploitation, and oppression that were keeping the poor in a state of misery. Few radical writers of the English Revolution (or any other period in English literature) have analyzed more acutely and expressed so vividly the abuses of institutions of political, religious, legal, and economic power and explored their interconnectedness. Few English writers have dared to envision, with such conviction, a world completely transformed in political, religious, and economic terms – a world that could indeed become a “common treasury” for all humankind, not just for the powerful few. Winstanley understood in his own distinctive ways that “peace cannot exist without equality” since “the huge accumulations of power and capital” greatly “distort human life.” Those words are not his; they are, again, *Said’s* (142). Yet Winstanley’s writings express this observation as memorably as any in the English language. For all these reasons, then, Winstanley continues to matter.

We sadly still live in a world of acute social and economic inequality that would have appalled the radical visionary Winstanley who yearned to transform the earth into “a common treasury for all” and abolish “particular propriety”; “propriety” suggests not only the unrighteous power that comes with owning private land or property but also (the now obsolete sense of) the excessive concern with or covetousness of worldly

goods.<sup>7</sup> For example, the USA, the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world, has a sharply growing gap between the rich and the poor so that in the years after the financial and economic crisis of 2008 there has developed a class war that pits the hyper-wealthy one per cent against lower income families.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, political power and moneyed interests are more interconnected than ever in a nation of social and economic inequality: the USA has a money-driven political system, a plutocracy rather than a democracy.<sup>9</sup> In 2010, according to the US Census Bureau, there were already 46.9 million people (or 15.1 percent of the US population) living in poverty.<sup>10</sup> According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, nearly 870 million people of the 7.1 billion living in the world, or one in eight, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2010–2012.<sup>11</sup> The USA, which invests in a huge military machine that asserts its power throughout the world, neglects or has failed to establish the most basic and humane domestic social institutions and services – institutions and services (for example, universal health care) that would help millions of vulnerable ordinary citizens, the common people whose susceptibility to economic hardship Winstanley acutely understood and passionately articulated in his age. Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system, especially his insight that the profit motive was ruinous for humankind as the material resources of the world become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, remains deeply relevant in the early twenty-first century<sup>12</sup>; yet in his own way and language, Winstanley anticipated this insight, including the notion that the infinite, restless pursuit of power and “propriety” was a curse that could corrupt the whole earth and keep the poor in bondage.

And what would Winstanley think of our early twenty-first century world of religious hatred and prejudice, given his deep mistrust of religious institutions and authorities, his preference for the promptings of the indwelling Spirit, and especially his desire that “no man shall be troubled for his judgment or practise in the things of his God, so [that] he live quiet in the Land” (*The Law of Freedom*, CWGW II: 370)? After all, we live in a world where religion still too often fuels fanaticism, intolerance, and violence – a world blighted not only by Islamic extremism but also by Christian, Jewish, and Hindu fundamentalism. Ours is a world where the mainstream institutions and organizations of one of the great religions – Judaism (my religion) – have aligned themselves with a new Israel whose nationalistic and messianic identity is inspired by the stories of the Hebrew Bible and its often violent, angry, and exclusionary God<sup>13</sup>; it is a religious and political state that also asserts its power and dominance by coveting and colonizing the land of another people rather than making it a common treasury for Israelis and Palestinians alike. When it came to resistance, violence, and effecting radical change, Winstanley himself may not have been an “absolute pacifist,” but he clearly preferred the “Sword of the Spirit” over the “Sword of Iron,” since the latter only reinforced political and religious oppression.<sup>14</sup> Winstanley the social egalitarian, religious radical, and unorthodox political thinker, as well as the penetrating critic of institutions of oppressive power, would have found much to lament in our early twenty-first-century world; he would have regarded “the whole Earth” still “filled with this devouring self-righteousness,” its rulers “upholding this particular propriety of *Mine* and *Thine*” (CWGW II:218, I:482).

Winstanley the experimental social activist, visionary writer, heterodox thinker, and searing critic of the institutions of power is thus far from respectable and for that we should treasure him all the more: he challenged and questioned orthodox beliefs

and he challenged and questioned all kinds of institutions of power, including ecclesiastical, political, legal, and economic ones. He did so in writings that freely rework the Bible's fundamental myths, stories, and visions – including Genesis and the garden of Eden, the Fall, Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, the Exodus narrative, the first and second Adams, and the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation – in original allegorical ways that represent the profound socioeconomic divisions of his time and that continue to resonate today. We need not only his suspicion of oppressive institutional powers but also his insights into the multifarious and sinister ways in which they can damage the lives of ordinary people. We also need his visionary idealism – his belief that the world blighted by acute social and economic inequalities and predatory capitalism can change and be a better place for “the common people” and thus for all humankind. And we need his conviction that we must take concrete *action* to match our rhetoric since “words and actions going together are the declaration of a sincere heart.”<sup>15</sup>

As Wordsworth famously addressed Milton, so I would address Winstanley: “thou should'st be living at this hour: /England hath need of thee.” Here I would make only one crucial but significant modification: Winstanley, it is “the *world* [that] hath need of thee.”

## Notes

1. Steve [Hindle](#) provides a valuable account of the economic crisis of these years.
2. *A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Armie* (1649), in *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Thomas N. Corns, Ann Hughes, and David Loewenstein, II: 80. Further citations from Winstanley are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in my text preceded by the abbreviation *CWGW*.
3. See [Mark Kishlansky](#)'s humorous but dismissive assertion that he was “a small businessman who began his career wholesaling cloth, ended wholesaling grain, and in between sandwiched a mid-life crisis of epic proportions” (196). See also [Kishlansky](#)'s review of *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*.
4. On the socially and religiously cautious character of the English Republic, see especially [Worden](#).
5. See my detailed analysis of Winstanley's subtle understanding of institutional religious, political, and economic powers in *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries* ([Loewenstein](#), chapter 2).
6. Cf. the acute comments by [Ann Hughes](#) (116–8). For the claim that Winstanley was more conservative on this issue, see [Mack](#) (668–72), as well as the scholarship cited on 54 of [Apetrei](#)'s essay's in this volume.
7. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s (OED) definitions of “propriety” 3 and 4.b. The *OED* provides only sixteenth-century citations to support the latter sense; yet surely Winstanley evokes (and revitalizes the second sense) when he links “propriety” to “covetous flesh [that] delights in the enjoyment of riches” (*CWGW* I: 443) and stresses that “Covetousness. . . gives the Earth to part of mankind, and denies it to another part of mankind” (II: 110), thereby dividing humankind and creating bondage, enmity, and wars.
8. In a *New York Times* blog posted in May 2013, the liberal economist [Paul Krugman](#) noted that “in 2011 the top 1 percent of Americans has a combined income of \$1.4

trillion, not counting capital gains.” See “Newt Economic Thinking” (krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/31).

9. See especially [Stiglitz](#) and Krugman.
10. *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010*, issued September 2011 by the US Department of Commerce, prepared by Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith (14); the report reveals 20.5 million living in extreme poverty in 2010 (19).
11. See the report prepared by the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#).
12. Marx’s analysis of the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation (in the first volume of *Capital*) illuminates how the concentration of capital in the hands of fewer and fewer leads to “the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market” and increases “the mass of misery, oppression, slavery degradation, exploitation” (*Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan 487). See also [Zinn](#) (256, discussing the relevance of Marx’s analyses).
13. For a courageous, often acute discussion of this terrifying Old Testament God and his legacy in the modern world, see [Schwartz](#).
14. See the contributions by Ariel Hessayon and Christopher Rowland above (27, 84), as well as [Knott](#), [chapter 4](#). On Winstanley as no “absolute pacifist,” see Winstanley (41), and Sarah Apetrei’s discussion (above, 55) of Winstanley and a militant model of masculinity.
15. *Truth Lifting up His Head*, CWGW I: 446; so Winstanley declared at the end of 1648, still some months before he took his spade and broke the ground on St George’s Hill.

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