Christopher Hill

The World Turned Upside Down

RADICAL IDEAS DURING THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

'The master ... Hill is the reason why most of us know anything about the 17th century at all'

MARTIN KETTLE, *GUARDIAN*

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The World Turned Upside Down

Christopher Hill (1912–2003) was educated at St Peter's School, York, and at Balliol College, Oxford, and in 1934 was made a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. In 1936 he became lecturer in modern history at University College, Cardiff, and two years later fellow and tutor in modern history at Balliol. After war service, which included two years in the Russian department of the Foreign Office, he returned to Oxford in 1945. From 1958 until 1965 he was university lecturer in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history, and from 1965 to 1978 he was Master of Balliol College.

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CHRISTOPHER HILL

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Radical Ideas During the English Revolution

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would never have got written.

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Preface

There are few activities more cooperative than the writing of history. The author puts his name brashly on the title-page and the reviewers rightly attack him for his errors and misinterpretations; but none knows better than he how much his whole enterprise depends on the preceding labours of others. I should like to single out three scholars to whom I am most conscious of indebtedness – Mr A. L. Morton, who has published the only serious book on the Ranters, and whose study of Blake in relation to seventeenth-century radicals is equally important; Dr G. F. Nuttall, whose meticulous scholarship ranges over all the obscure by-ways of seventeenth-century religious history; and Mr K. V. Thomas, whose majestic *Religion and the Decline of Magic* has made us all re-think our ideas about seventeenth-century England. I benefited very greatly from supervising Mr Frank McGregor's thesis on the Ranters, and from reading Professor W. A. Cole's unpublished dissertation on the Quakers and discussing it with him. Many more debts are recorded in the footnotes. Dr Bernard Capp, Mr Peter Clark, Mrs K. R. Firth, Dr A. M. Johnson, Dr R. C. Richardson and Professor Austin Woolrych all allowed me to read and quote from material in advance of publication. Dr Robin Clifton, Professor G. H. George, Dr P. J. R. Phizackerley, Mrs Joan Thirsk and Professor C. M. Williams were generous in answering questions. Professor Rodney Hilton saved me from many errors, and did what he could to make the book more readable. My colleagues at Balliol allowed me a sabbatical term during which most of the writing was done: I am most grateful to them for their forbearance and to the protective vigilance of the College Secretary, Mrs Bridget

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Page. Especial thanks are due to Miss Pat Lloyd, who typed the whole book and corrected many of my spelling mistakes. She also helped generously and skilfully with proof-reading. My wife always comes last among those to be thanked and should always come first.

16 October 1971

Note to the Penguin Edition

I am grateful to many friends for suggesting corrections and improvements to the first edition of this book, especially to Dr Bernard Capp, Mr John Dunn, Mr Charles Hobday, Professor Ivan Roots and Mr Keith Thomas. I should have explained in my original Preface that seventeenth-century spelling and capitalization have been modernized in quotations. I have not altered the grammar when – for instance – Winstanley uses a plural subject with a singular verb. Readers of this book may be interested in *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, by Gerrard Winstanley, published as a Pelican Classic in 1973.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in the notes:

A.H.R.	*Agricultural History Review*
Braithwaite	W. C. Braithwaite, *The First Period of Quakerism* (1912)
C.J.	*Commons' Journals*
C.S.P.D.	*Calendar of State Papers* (*Domestic*)
E.H.R.	*English Historical Review*
Fenstanton Records	Ed. E. B. Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham, 1644–1720* (Hanserd Knollys Soc., 1854)
H. and D.	Ed. W. Haller and G. Davies, *The Leveller Tracts, 1647–1653* (Columbia U.P., 1944)
H.M.C.	Historical Manuscripts Commission
I.O.E.R.	C. Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford U.P., 1965)
J.M.H.	*Journal of Modern History*
L.J.	*Lords' Journals*
P. and P.	*Past and Present*
P. and R.	C. Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (Panther edn)
Sabine	Ed. G. H. Sabine, *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (Cornell U.P., 1941)
S. and P.	C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (Panther edn)
T.R.H.S.	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
U.P.	University Press

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V.C.H.	*Victoria County History*
Wolfe	Ed. D. M. Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution* (1944)
Woodhouse	Ed. A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (1938)

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The Lord preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and the widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down.

Psalm 146, 9

The Lord maketh the earth . . . waste, and turneth it upside down . . . And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress . . . The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage . . . The Lord shall punish the host of the high ones . . . and the kings of the earth upon the earth.

Isaiah xxiv, 1–2, 20–21

They came to Thessalonica . . . and Paul . . . reasoned with them out of the Scriptures . . . And some of them believed . . . and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar . . . crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.

The Acts of the Apostles xvii, 1–6

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1
Introduction

> It hath been . . . mine endeavour . . . to give unto every limb and part not only his due proportion but also his due place, and not to set the head where the foot should be, or the foot where the head. I may peradventure to many seem guilty of that crime which was laid against the Apostle, to turn the world upside down, and to set that in the bottom which others make the top of the building, and to set that upon the roof which others lay for a foundation.
>
> HENRY DENNE, *Grace, Mercy and Peace* (1645) in *Fenstanton Records*, p. 422.

Popular revolt was for many centuries an essential feature of the English tradition, and the middle decades of the seventeenth century saw the greatest upheaval that has yet occurred in Britain. The present book does not attempt to tell again the story of how the Army of the Long Parliament overcame Charles I and his supporters, executed the King and established a short-lived republic. Although there was considerable popular support for Parliament in the 1640s, the long-term consequences of the Revolution were all to the advantage of the gentry and merchants, not of the lower fifty per cent of the population on whom I try to focus attention.

This book deals with what from one point of view are subsidiary episodes and ideas in the English Revolution, the attempts of various groups of the common people to impose their own solutions to the problems of their time, in opposition to the wishes of their betters

who had called them into political action. The reader who wishes to restore his perspective might with advantage read the valuable book recently published by Professor David Underdown: *Pride's Purge* (Oxford U.P., 1971). This deals with almost exactly the same period as I do, but from an entirely different angle. His is the view from the top, from Whitehall, mine the worm's eye view. His index and mine contain totally different lists of names.

The revolt within the Revolution which is my subject took many forms, some better known than others. Groups like Levellers, Diggers and Fifth Monarchists offered new political solutions (and in the case of the Diggers, new economic solutions too). The various sects – Baptists, Quakers, Muggletonians – offered new religious solutions. Other groups asked sceptical questions about all the institutions and beliefs of their society – Seekers, Ranters, the Diggers too. Indeed it is perhaps misleading to differentiate too sharply between politics, religion and general scepticism. We know, as a result of hindsight, that some groups – Baptists, Quakers – will survive as religious sects and that most of the others will disappear. In consequence we unconsciously tend to impose too clear outlines on the early history of English sects, to read back later beliefs into the 1640s and 50s. One of the aims of this book will be to suggest that in this period things were much more blurred. From, say, 1645 to 1653, there was a great overturning, questioning, revaluing, of everything in England. Old institutions, old beliefs, old values came in question. Men moved easily from one critical group to another, and a Quaker of the early 1650s had far more in common with a Leveller, a Digger or a Ranter than with a modern member of the Society of Friends.

Our period begins when Parliament seemed to have triumphed over the King, and the gentry and merchants who had supported the Parliamentary cause in the civil war expected to reconstruct the institutions of society as they wished, to impose their values. If they had not been impeded in this, England might have passed straight to something like the political settlement of 1688 – Parliamentary sovereignty, limited monarchy, imperialist foreign policy, a world safe for businessmen to make profits in. But instead there was a period of

glorious flux and intellectual excitement, when, as Gerrard Winstanley put it, 'the old world . . . is running up like parchment in the fire.'[1] Literally anything seemed possible; not only were the values of the old hierarchical society called in question but also the new values, the protestant ethic itself. Only gradually was control re-established during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, leading to a restoration of the rule of the gentry, and then of King and bishops in 1660.

There were, we may oversimplify, two revolutions in mid-seventeenth-century England. The one which succeeded established the sacred rights of property (abolition of feudal tenures, no arbitrary taxation), gave political power to the propertied (sovereignty of Parliament and common law, abolition of prerogative courts), and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property – the protestant ethic. There was, however, another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.

The object of the present book is to look at this revolt within the Revolution and the fascinating flood of radical ideas which it threw up. History has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors. The Levellers were better understood as political democracy established itself in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England; the Diggers have something to say to twentieth-century socialists. Now that the protestant ethic itself, the greatest achievement of European bourgeois society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is at last being questioned after a rule of three or four centuries, we can study with a new sympathy the Diggers, the Ranters, and the many other daring thinkers who in the seventeenth century refused to bow down and worship it.

The historical narrative, the main outline of events, is given. No amount of detailed working over the evidence is going to change the

factual essentials of the story. But the interpretation will vary with our attitudes, with our lives in the present. So reinterpretation is not only possible but necessary. Just as Professor Barraclough has made our generation aware of the narrow provincialism which dominates the outlook of most historians and urges us to extend our geographical area of study, so experience of something approaching democracy makes us realize that most of our history is written about, and from the point of view of, a tiny fragment of the population, and makes us want to extend in depth as well as in breadth.

Each generation, to put it another way, rescues a new area from what its predecessors arrogantly and snobbishly dismissed as 'the lunatic fringe'. Thanks to the admirable work of Messrs Lamont, Toon and Capp, we now see millenarianism as a natural and rational product of the assumptions of this society, shared by John Milton and Sir Henry Vane as well as by Vavasor Powell and John Rogers. Thanks to the admirable work of Dr Frances Yates, Professor Rattansi and Messrs Webster and Thomas, alchemy, astrology and natural magic similarly take their place as reasonable subjects for rational men and women to be interested in, from Samuel Hartlib to Sir Isaac Newton. So far only Mr A. L. Morton and Mr Frank McGregor have demonstrated that the Ranters too must be taken seriously, that they perhaps have something to say to our generation.

Historians, in fact, would be well-advised to avoid the loaded phrase, 'lunatic fringe'. Lunacy, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder. There were lunatics in the seventeenth century, but modern psychiatry is helping us to understand that madness itself may be a form of protest against social norms, and that the 'lunatic' may in some sense be saner than the society which rejects him. Many writers who were aware that their views would seem intolerably extreme to their respectable contemporaries deliberately exaggerated their eccentricities in order to get a hearing – as, in rather a different way, George Bernard Shaw did in the twentieth century.[2]

Moreover, foolery had had a social function in medieval society. There was a convention that on certain set occasions – Shrove Tuesday, the Feasts of Fools, All Fools Day and others – the social hierarchy and the social decencies could be turned upside down.

It was a safety-valve: social tensions were released by the occasional *bouleversement*; the social order seemed perhaps that much more tolerable.[3] What was new in the seventeenth century was the idea that the world might be *permanently* turned upside down: that the dream world of the Land of Cokayne or the kingdom of heaven might be attainable on earth now.

During the brief years of extensive liberty of the press in England it may have been easier for eccentrics to get into print than ever before or since. Before 1641, and after 1660, there was a strict censorship. In the intervening years of freedom, a printing press was a relatively cheap and portable piece of equipment. Publishing had not yet developed as a capitalist industry. The late Miss Iris Morley noted the natural harmony which existed between Leveller writers, printers and hawkers of pamphlets, at a time when printing was a small man's occupation.[4] Printers like George Calvert were prepared to run considerable risks to get radical works published.[5] It may also have been that in a market flooded with printed matter there were sales advantages in calculated eccentricity. At least it is better for the historian to err on the side of looking for rational significance in any ideas which the men of the seventeenth century took seriously. If we dismiss such ideas because they seem irrational to us, we may be depriving ourselves of valuable insights into the society, as Mr K. V. Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* has so brilliantly demonstrated. It is no longer necessary to apologize too profusely for taking the common people of the past on their own terms and trying to understand them.

Historians are interested in ideas not only because they influence societies, but because they reveal the societies which give rise to them. Hence the philosophical truth of the ideas is irrelevant to the historian's purpose, though all of us have our preferences: the reader will no doubt soon discover mine.

By studying some of the less conventional ideas which surfaced during the English Revolution the object of this book is to obtain a deeper insight into English society than the evidence permits either before 1640 or after 1660, when the censorship ensured that really subversive ideas were not published. In so far as the attempt is

successful it may tell us something not only about English history in this period of unique liberty, but also about the more 'normal' periods which preceded and followed it – normal because we are again ignorant of what the common people were thinking. We may find that the obscure men and women who figure in this book, together with some not so obscure, speak more directly to us than Charles I or Pym or General Monck, who appear as history-makers in the textbooks. This would in itself be a satisfactorily upside-down thought to come away with.

2
The Parchment and the Fire

> Enemies of the church . . . abuse the precious saints of God with these and other reproaches . . . Oh, these are the men that would turn the world upside down, that make the nation full of tumults and uproars, that work all the disturbance in church and state. It is fit such men and congregations should be suppressed, . . . that we may have truth and peace and government again.
>
> WILLIAM DELL, *The Building, Beauty, Teaching and Establishment of the Truly Christian and Spiritual Church* (1646) in *Several Sermons* (1709), p. 109.

I SOCIAL TENSIONS

I have tried elsewhere to suggest that there was a greater background of class hostility in England before 1640 than historians have normally recognized.[1] A Scottish observer indeed commented in 1614 on the 'bitter and distrustful' attitude of English common people towards the gentry and nobility.[2] These sentiments were reciprocated. Only members of the landed ruling class were allowed to carry weapons: 'the meaner sort of people and servants' were normally excluded from serving in the militia, by a quite deliberate policy.[3] When in the exceptional circumstances of 1588 military training was extended to the whole settled population, there were complaints from Herefordshire that once servants were trained as soldiers they would become unruly and unwilling to continue to serve their masters

in proper subordination.[4] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as population rapidly expanded, London, I shall suggest, became the refuge of 'masterless men' – the victims of enclosure, vagabonds, criminals – to an extent that alarmed contemporaries.[5] One of the arguments advanced in propaganda for colonizing Ireland in 1594 was that 'the people poor and seditious, which were a burden to the commonwealth, are drawn forth, whereby the matter of sedition is removed out of the City'.[6] The same argument was often used later to advocate exporting 'the rank multitude' to Virginia. The judicious Hooker, arguing that 'extraordinary motions of the spirit' could be very dangerous, suggested that this was especially true in the case of 'men whose minds are of themselves as dry fuel, apt beforehand unto tumults, seditions and broils'. Such men, he thought, were to be found among the lower orders of society.[7] They were certainly to be found in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where we are told in 1633 that 'people of mean condition . . . are apt to turn every pretence and colour of grievance into uproar and seditious mutiny'.[8]

Not far below the surface of Stuart society, then, discontent was rife. In 1626 a soldier had thought of assassinating the Duke of Buckingham, and perhaps the King too, so as to establish a republic or put the King of Bohemia on the throne.[9] When Felton actually did assassinate Buckingham two years later, his popularity was so great that other men pretended they were Felton. 'The devil go with the King and all the proud pack of them,' said a Yorkshire village blacksmith in 1633. 'What care I?'[10]

This class antagonism was exacerbated by the financial hardships of the years from 1620 to 1650, which Professor Bowden has described as economically among the most terrible in English history.[11] The government was held to blame for its mismanagement of the economy and for monopolies and other fiscal devices of the 1630s which visibly added to the cost of living. Looking back at one of these schemes, a pamphlet of 1649 spoke of 'pilling and polling the nation by oppression', and asked, 'How many poor apple-women and broom-men, rag-merchants and people of all sorts, sold and pawned their bedding and their clothes' to buy themselves the freedom of the new royal incorporation of the suburbs of London? 'And

when all was done, it proved a cheat: thus was the king's coffers filled with oppression.'[12]

That of course is propaganda, not to be taken too literally. But there can be no doubt of the bloody-mindedness of other ranks in the army which Charles collected to oppose the Scottish invasion of 1640. The common people ('men with no shirts', a disgruntled royalist called them)[13] took an unusually active share in elections for the two Parliaments of 1640, on the anti-court side – often introducing an element of class hostility as well. Thus in High Wycombe all four candidates for the Short Parliament were opponents of the court, but two of them represented 'the popular party' against the local ruling oligarchy.[14] In Essex one of 'the rude vulgar people' threatened to 'tear the gentlemen to pieces' if the popular candidate was not elected for the county. At Great Marlow, Buckinghamshire, bargemen, labourers, shopkeepers – 'the ordinary sort of townsmen', led by 'a country fellow in a plain and mean habit' – put up their own candidate against the local landlord who had court connections – and won.[15]

Yet when the Long Parliament found itself faced by a king who refused to surrender to their demands, they were forced to look for support outside the charmed circle of the ruling class. In London crowds of demonstrators used 'to flock unto Westminster' in moments of crisis. They were, 'most of them, men of mean or a middle quality themselves, having no aldermen, merchants or Common-Council men among them . . . They were modest in their apparel but not in their language.' (One waterman indeed told the Lord Mayor in May 1641 that 'it was Parliament time now', and that 'the Lord Mayor was but their slave'.) 'The present hatred of the citizens was such unto gentlemen, especially courtiers, that few durst come into the City, or if they did, they were sure to receive affronts and be abused.'[16] A royalist called the Grand Remonstrance of November 1641 'that appeal to the people',[17] and he was quite right: it was printed and distributed throughout the country. All major speeches by opposition M.P.s were published and widely circulated: we may be sure they were read and discussed in taverns and ale-houses. Carefully organized petitions of support for Parliament poured in from the counties from 1641 onwards: collecting signatures for these

must have been a novel and very effective way of drawing ordinary people into political action.

This background of social insubordination naturally influenced men of property when they had to choose for King or Parliament on the outbreak of civil war. The royalism of Richard Dowdeswell, agent to Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex, Mrs Prestwich tells us, stemmed from a concern for social order, not from positive loyalty to King or church. 'The countenances of men are so altered,' he wrote in October 1642, 'especially of the mean and middle rank of men, that the turning of a straw would set a whole county in a flame and occasion the plundering of any man's house or goods.'[18] 'Whenever necessity shall force us to make use of the multitude,' Sir John Potts wrote to Sir Simonds D'Ewes in August 1642, 'I do not promise myself safety.' So he was still working for a compromise peace.[19] When war came both Potts and D'Ewes chose the side of Parliament, but the latter too reflected that 'all right and property, all *meum et tuum*, must cease in a civil war, and we know not what advantage the meaner sort also may take to divide the spoils of the rich and noble amongst them, who begin already [1642] to allege that all being of one mould there is no reason that some should have so much and others so little'.[20] 'What do you tell me of birth and descent?' cried a Northamptonshire sectary in July 1643. 'I hope within this year to see never a gentleman in England.'[21]

The civil war years saw the breakdown of church courts and the censorship; judges no longer went on circuit. The actual fighting was not very devastating, at least by comparison with what was going on in Germany at the same time. But in some areas law and order broke down completely. In Gloucestershire royalists plundered any clothier; men assumed that 'the clothiers through the whole kingdom were rebels by their trade'.[22] Between 1643 and 1645 the Verneys in Buckinghamshire were collecting less than ten per cent of rents due.[23] In 1644 Richard Dowdeswell, also from Gloucestershire, complained that 'such kind of people as the tenants are do now take no small liberty over their betters. They that see it not cannot believe it.'[24]

Before civil war started Charles I had warned the supporters of Parliament of the danger that 'at last the common people' may 'set

up for themselves, call parity and independence liberty, . . . destroy all rights and properties, all distinctions of families and merit.'[25] The Scottish poet Drummond had the same nightmare three years earlier, asking 'whether these great commotions and discords may not dissolve in *bellum servile*, and peasants, clowns, farmers, base people all in arms, may not swallow the nobles and gentry, invest their possessions, adhere together by a new Covenant, and follow our example'.[26] 'And follow our example': the gentry by encouraging revolt in Scotland and England had broken the chain of degree, disrupted the long accepted hierarchy of subordination; they had only themselves to blame for what followed. Many observers feared that the common people, those below the rank of yeoman, would set up for themselves as a third party. This happened in 1645, when groups of countrymen (Clubmen) all over western and southern England took up arms to oppose royalists and parliamentarians alike. They could not be dispersed until they were faced by the New Model Army, with its regular pay and strict discipline. Tinker Fox, the Birmingham blacksmith who had led popular forces against the royalists in the early years of the war, seemed to be setting himself up as an independent third force in the Midlands until the New Model Army pushed him too into the background.[27]

The New Model, the creation of which had been so fiercely opposed by conservatives, seemed to have saved the social order: this no doubt was the calculation of many M.P.s who voted for it. But the New Model, as it was to declare proudly in June 1647, was 'no mere mercenary Army'; it was the common people in uniform, closer to their views than to those of the gentry or Parliament. And the free discussion which was permitted in this unique army led to a fantastically rapid development of political thinking.

II LOWER-CLASS HERESY

In addition to, or expressing, these class tensions there was a tradition of plebeian anti-clericalism and irreligion. To go no further back, the Lollards carried a popular version of John Wyclif's heresies

into the sixteenth century. Professor A. G. Dickens has shown how Lollard influence survived in a popular materialist scepticism which makes one 'feel appreciably nearer to the age of Voltaire than is normal in the 16th century'.[28] A carpenter in 1491 rejected transubstantiation, baptism, confession, and said men would not be damned for sin; in 1512 a Wakefield man said 'that if a calf were upon the altar I would rather worship that than the . . . holy sacrament . . . The date was past that God determined him to be in form of bread.'[29] The clergy, an earlier Lollard had declared, were worse than Judas, who sold Christ for thirty pence, while priests sold masses for a halfpenny.[30] The commons, said another, 'would never be well until they had stricken off all the priests' heads'. 'There was a saying in the country,' a north Yorkshireman pleaded in 1542, 'that a man might lift up his heart and confess himself to God Almighty and needed not to be confessed at a priest.' A shearman of Dewsbury elaborated on this point: he would not confess his offences with a woman to a priest, 'for the priest would be as ready within two or three days after to use her as he'.[31] Mr K. V. Thomas has collected a number of similar examples under Elizabeth and the first two Stuarts – denial of the resurrection, of the existence of God (very common in the diocese of Exeter at the end of the sixteenth century) or the devil; all things come by nature. He emphasizes how wrong it is to describe all such fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century expressions of irreligion as 'Lollardy', and expostulates with embarrassed historians who dismiss them as the products of drunks or madmen.[32]

Such men tended to be called Anabaptists or Familists by their enemies. These names – familiar enough on the continent – were very loosely applied in England: most of our evidence comes from hostile accounts in the church courts.[33] The essential doctrine of Anabaptism was that infants should not be baptized. Acceptance of baptism – reception into the church – should be the voluntary act of an adult. This clearly subverted the concept of a national church to which every English man and woman belonged: it envisaged instead the formation of voluntary congregations by those who believed themselves to be the elect. An Anabaptist must logically object to payment of tithes, the ten per cent of everyone's earnings

which, in theory at least, went to support the ministers of the state church. Many Anabaptists refused to swear oaths, since they objected to a religious ceremony being used for secular judicial purposes; others rejected war and military service. Still more were alleged to carry egalitarianism to the extent of denying a right to private property. The name came to be used in a general pejorative sense to describe those who were believed to oppose the existing social and political order.

Familists, members of the Family of Love, can be defined a little more precisely. They were followers of Henry Niclaes, born in Münster in 1502, who taught that heaven and hell were to be found in this world. Niclaes was alleged to have been a collaborator of Thomas Münzer in insurrection at Amsterdam.[34] The Puritan divine John Knewstub said of him: 'H.N. turns religion upside down. He buildeth heaven here upon earth; he maketh God man and man God.'[35] Like Francis Bacon, Familists believed that men and women might recapture on earth the state of innocence which existed before the Fall: their enemies said they claimed to attain the perfection of Christ. They held their property in common, believed that all things come by nature, and that only the spirit of God within the believer can properly understand Scripture.[36] They turned the Bible into allegories, even the Fall of Man, complained William Perkins.[37] Familism was spread in England by Christopher Vittels, an itinerant joiner of Dutch origin. In the 1570s English Familists were noted to be wayfaring traders, or 'cowherds, clothiers and such-like mean people'. They believed in principle that ministers should be itinerants, like the Apostles. They were increasing daily by 1579, numerous in the diocese of Ely in 1584, also in East Anglia and the North of England. They were particularly difficult for the ecclesiastical authorities to root out because – like many Lollards before them – they were ready to recant when caught, but not to give up their opinions. The Family of the Mount held even more subversive views. They were alleged to reject prayer, to deny the resurrection of the body. They questioned whether any heaven or hell existed apart from this life: heaven was when men laugh and are merry, hell was sorrow, grief and pain.[38]

Familism, developing the lower-class scepticism of the Lollards,

was an anti-clerical, layman's creed. In this it fitted the temper of Elizabethan society, when members of many congregations, increasing in wealth and self-confidence, were more and more critical of traditional clerical claims. In numerous Elizabethan parishes where there is no reason to suspect anything so subversive as Familism, the minister was pushed on by his congregation to reject the ceremonies and vestments of the state church.[39] For the breach with Rome and especially the radical measures of Edward VI's reign had opened up hopes of a continuing reformation which would totally overthrow the coercive machinery of the state church. The Elizabethan settlement bitterly disappointed expectations that a protestant church would differ from popery in the power which it allowed to bishops and clergy. The episcopal hierarchy came to be seen as the main obstacle to radical reform. Puritan attacks on this hierarchy are sometimes dismissed as propagandist exaggerations, though whenever we can check their statements they prove surprisingly reliable. But the most impressive evidence for the unpopularity of bishops and clergy comes not from their opponents but from their defenders.

The opening words of Bishop Cooper's *Admonition to the People of England* (1589) speak of 'the loathsome contempt, hatred and disdain that *the most part of men* in these days bear . . . towards the ministers of the church of God'. He attributed such views especially to the common people, who 'have conceived an heathenish contempt of religion and a disdainful loathing of the ministers thereof'.[40] 'The ministers of the world,' Archbishop Sandys confirmed, 'are become contemptible in the eyes of the basest sort of people.'[41] In 1606 a man was presented to the church courts for saying that he would rather trust a thief than a priest, a lawyer or a Welshman.[42]

'If we maintain things that are established,' complained Richard Hooker, 'we have . . . to strive with a number of heavy prejudices deeply rooted in the hearts of men, who think that herein we serve the time and speak in favour of the present state because thereby we either hold or seek preferment.'[43] Thomas Brightman in 1615 confirmed that hostility to the hierarchy 'is now favoured much of the people and multitude'.[44] We recall the oatmeal-maker who, on trial before the High Commission in April 1630, said that he would never

take off his hat to bishops. 'But you will to Privy Councillors,' he was urged. 'Then as you are Privy Councillors,' quoth he, 'I put off my hat; but as you are the rags of the beast, lo! I put it on again.'[45] Joan Hoby of Colnbrook, Buckinghamshire, said four years later 'that she did not care a pin nor a fart for my Lord's Grace of Canterbury . . . and she did hope that she should live to see him hanged'.[46] (Laud was in fact executed eleven years later, but we do not know whether Joan Hoby was still alive then.)

Further evidence of the unpopularity of the whole church establishment is to be found in the popular iconoclasm which broke out whenever opportunity offered: in the late 1630s and 40s altar rails were pulled down, altars desecrated, statues on tombs destroyed, ecclesiastical documents burnt, pigs and horses baptized. 'Is it well done of our soldiers,' asked *The Souldiers Catechisme* of 1644, 'to break down crosses and images where they meet with any?' The answer was, rather shamefacedly, 'I confess that nothing ought to be done in a tumultuous manner. But seeing God hath put the sword of reformation into the soldiers' hand, I think it is not amiss that they should cancel and demolish those monuments of superstition and idolatry, especially seeing the magistrate and the minister that should have done it formerly neglected it.'[47] So early was the army rank and file encouraged to usurp the functions of minister and magistrate.

In 1641 there were nine hundred petitions against allegedly 'scandalous' ministers, one from every ten parishes in the land. Since they came mainly from the South and East, the proportion in those areas is far higher. 'If the meanest and most vicious parishioner they had could be brought to prefer a petition to the House of Commons against his minister,' Clarendon tells us, the latter was sure to be prosecuted as scandalous.[48] It was 'the very dregs and scum of every parish' who petitioned against 'the orthodox clergy', a royalist pamphlet of 1643 declared.[49] In 1641, 'when the glad tidings were brought to Chelmsford that episcopacy was voted down by the House of Commons, all usual expressions of an exulting joy were used', and 'bonfires were kindled in every street'.[50] In 1642 we find soldiers plundering *all* ministers, royalist or Parliamentarian, and there was much rabbling of the royalist clergy. From London itself

there is a great deal of evidence for unpopularity of bishops and parish clergy in the 1640s.[51] All this throws retrospective light on the relationship of church and common people before the Revolution. It is a matter of the advancing education and self-confidence of congregations – especially urban congregations – at least as much as of the inadequacies of the clergy. 'There is scarce a man that can read English,' grumbled Thomas Adams, 'scarce a woman that can make herself ready to church, but will presume to teach the minister, and either we must preach what you will hear, or you will not hear what we preach.'[52]

There was further complaint of interference by church courts in the private lives of ordinary men and women, to an extent that would be thought quite intolerable today. Looking back in 1653 an ex-officer in the Parliamentary army who had become a parson said that the Laudian 'firebrands of state made the bishops odious to the gentry and commonalty' of England and Scotland. 'The people also generally disliked their rigour in citing them to their courts for working on holidays or marrying without a licence or upon a groundless suspicion of unchastity. Many such poor pretences, merely to drain the people's purses, did their officers make.'[53]

It was thus nothing new when in 1642 the Rev. Edmund Calamy told the House of Commons that 'the people complain of their ministers, that they are dumb dogs, greedy dogs, which can never have enough'.[54] They also complained that university-educated divines tended to be members of the ruling class, 'full of all outward necessaries'.[55] The patronage system gave power to 'the greatest of the parish, who were not always the best, to prescribe what religion they pleased to parishioners'.[56] It was 'under pretence of religion', Thomas Hobbes wrote in 1651, that 'the lower sort of citizens . . . do challenge [liberty] to themselves'.[57]

William Tyndale in 1528 had alleged that the hierarchy of his day said to King and lords 'these heretics would have us down first, and then you, to make of all common'.[58] The argument was repeated by the Elizabethan bishop Bancroft, and became a commonplace. 'The title which bishops have to their livings,' said Richard Hooker with unusually crude directness, 'is as good as the title of any sort of men'

to their property; and he warned that by reception of the Presbyterian discipline the world might be 'clean turned upside down'.[59] It was a bishop who in the 1650s recorded James I's famous epigram as 'No bishop, no king, no nobility': 'which, as you see, hath fallen out according to his prediction'.[60] Oliver Cromwell's first recorded speech in the Long Parliament attacked the view that parity in the church must necessarily lead to parity in the state.[61] Most defenders of episcopacy in the debates of 1641 based their arguments on social rather than religious grounds.

Both sides were aware of the risks which appealing to the common people involved; but the simple fact remained that the royalists could not be beaten without arming and taxing ordinary people. ' "The generality of the people must be engaged," ' the Leveller Richard Overton imagined the Parliamentary leaders saying; ' "and how must this be done? Why," say they, "we must associate with that part of the clergy that are now made underlings." ' But ' "we must be careful the supreme power fall not into the people's hands" '.[62] John Selden was almost as cynical as that when he declared 'If men would say they took up arms for anything but religion, they might be beaten out of it by reason; out of that they never can, for they will not believe you whatever you say.' Francis Osborne spoke of religion 'in which the poor claim no less ample a share than the rich; all being noted to fight with the greater animosity for the world to come, the less they find themselves possessed of in this'.[63]

But we need not doubt the sincerity of the great numbers of preachers who proclaimed that Parliament's cause was God's, and that – whatever Charles I's subjective intentions – his government was objectively forwarding the cause of the Roman Antichrist. The royalists were 'the antichristian party'.[64] Such preachers drew on a long tradition. Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* established a pedigree for protestantism among Lollard heretics and Marian martyrs, and supplied evidence for the idea that it is especially the poor who stand up against Antichrist. Some English protestants came to see themselves as God's chosen people.[65] The Thirty Years War (1618–48) on the European continent looked like a death-grapple between protestant and catholic, and had given widespread credence to the view of

an influential group of Bible scholars, that the end of the world was at hand.[66] It was natural for those preachers who genuinely believed that Charles I's government was antichristian to see the civil war as the beginning of cataclysmic events and to call on their congregations to support the cause of Parliament. They encouraged expectations that Christ's kingdom was at hand – expectations which John Milton among many others shared. What turned out to be especially dangerous was the wholly traditional view, repeated by many of the preachers, that the common people had a very special role to play in this crisis, that they were somehow more chosen than the rich and the powerful. 'The voice that will come of Christ's reigning is like to begin from those that are the multitude, that are so contemptible especially in the eyes of Antichrist's spirits and the prelacy.' The words are those of a perfectly respectable Independent divine, by no means an extreme radical, who believed the last times would begin in 1650.[67] There were many similar sermons preached: the doctrine became almost orthodox on the Parliamentary side.

A little imagination will convey to us the effect of this prospect in conditions of economic and political crisis, when Parliament itself was calling the common people to political action for the first time in history, when the accredited preachers of God's word not only proclaimed that the millennium was approaching but told 'you that are of the meaner rank, common people' that they were to take the lead in forwarding Christ's cause.[68] All this at a time when censorship and government control had broken down, when hitherto suppressed sects were able to meet openly, when mechanic preachers could extend and elaborate on the teaching of their betters. 'The vulgar mind,' Sir Edward Dering said in 1642, is 'now fond with imaginary hopes. What will the issue be, when hopes grow still on hopes?'[69] The prospect was enough to bring Sir Edward's own brief period of radicalism to an end. A royalist looking back from 1648 noted that 'heresy is always the forerunner of rebellion'. He spoke of:

> that fatal liberty of the subject, which the profane vulgar in the beginning of these disorders so passionately petitioned the Parliament to

> grant them, who intending to save themselves of their blind fury, not only suffered but applauded their violence to their neighbours; but like unskilful conjurors they often raised those spirits which they could [not] lay; for under cover of zeal to the cause, the poor levelled the rich of both parties . . .[70]

'All sorts of people dreamed of an utopia and infinite liberty, especially in matters of religion,' another royalist confirmed in the same year.[71]

'The *vox populi*,' said Stephen Marshall in a sermon preached before the House of Commons in December 1641, 'is that many of the nobles, magistrates, knights and gentlemen, and persons of great quality, are arrant traitors and rebels against God.'[72] A Puritan minister could hardly have put it more strongly than that. It is not surprising that the hint was taken up by many outside Parliament who would not need to be reminded that *vox populi* was also *vox dei*. Nor indeed was this class emphasis new. As long ago as the 1620s that neglected radical thinker Thomas Scott had, in a pamphlet called *Vox Populi*, pointed to great landowners as of the Spanish, i.e. the antichristian, faction.[73] In 1642 preachers were quoting 'When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?'[74] So it was only a development, not a daring innovation, when Christopher Feake in 1646 declared that there was an 'enmity against Christ' in aristocracy and monarchy.[75]

There was then a long tradition of popular materialist scepticism and anti-clericalism; there was the Familist tradition that Christ was within every believer; there was the sectarian tradition of opposition to a state church, to the tithes which paid for its ministers and to the patronage system which ensured that its clergy were appointed by the ruling class.[76] There were also the millenarian hopes built up by the Puritan preachers. It is hardly surprising that the breakdown of censorship and the establishment of effective religious toleration let loose a flood of speculation that hitherto had only been muttered in secret. In England as in Switzerland 'the lower sort of people being bred in an ancient hatred against superiors', greedily embraced the doctrines of Anabaptism.[77] Anabaptists, William Gouge told his shocked

City congregation in the 1620s, 'teach that all are alike and that there is no difference betwixt masters and servants'.[78]

In the early 1640s attitudes towards the lower-class heresy of Familism were almost the test of radicalism. John Milton defended Familists. The Leveller William Walwyn asked the enemies of the Family of Love, 'What family are you of, I pray?'[79] John Hales of Eton condescendingly observed that 'some time or other those fine notions will take in the world'.[80] Hales was a member of Falkland's set at Great Tew, a collection of intellectuals who discussed liberal theories together in that depopulated parish. But while they were talking, Walwyn and hundreds like him were walking the streets of London, discussing, organizing, canvassing the 'fine notions' with the intention of making them 'take in the world'. They came near to turning it upside down – so near that the members of the Great Tew circle supported the royalists in the civil war.

The sects insisted that ministers should be elected by the congregation and paid by the voluntary contributions of its members; many of them denied the need for a separate clergy at all, and would have had a gifted layman preach on Sunday whilst labouring with his hands the other six days of the week. They advocated toleration for all protestant sects, rejecting ecclesiastical censorship and all forms of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in favour of a congregational discipline with no coercive sanction behind it. They attached little importance to many of the traditional sacraments of the church. Their programme would have destroyed the national church, leaving each congregation responsible for its own affairs with only the loosest contact between congregations; the church would no longer have been able to mould opinion in a single pattern, to punish 'sin' or proscribe 'heresy'. There would have been no control over the thinking of the middle and lower classes.

The attempt in the 1640s to replace church courts by a Presbyterian disciplinary system – later described as 'Egyptian bondage to keep up and maintain the oppression of tithes'[81] – led to fierce hostility against what Lilburne called 'the devil and the clergy his agents', and a later pamphlet called the 'black guard of Satan'.[82] 'Without a powerful compulsive presbytery in the church,' reflected the Leveller

Richard Overton in 1646, 'a compulsive mastership of aristocratical government over the people in the state could never long be maintained.'[83] 'The necks of the people of the world,' thought the Rev. William Dell in 1653, 'have never endured so grievous a yoke from any tyrants as from the doctrine and domination of the clergy.'[84] The demand for separation of church and state was a demand for the subordination of the clergy, for an end to their coercive authority. Inevitably, utterly inevitably, discussions among the separatist congregations spread over from religion to politics. In the intoxicating new freedom of the early 1640s no holds were barred.

The allegations of royalist propagandists should always be used with caution. But Bruno Ryves's account of the principles held by the lower classes of Chelmsford at the beginning of the civil war bears sufficient resemblance to ideas that developed later to be worth summarizing. Kings, these plebeians thought, are burdens. The relation of master and servant has no ground in the New Testament; in Christ there is neither bond nor free. Ranks such as those of the peerage and gentry are 'ethnical and heathenish distinctions'. There is no ground in nature or Scripture why one man should have £1000 *per annum*, another not £1. The common people have been kept under blindness and ignorance, and have remained servants and slaves to the nobility and gentry. 'But God hath now opened their eyes and discovered unto them their Christian liberty.' Gentlemen should be made to work for their living, or else should not eat. Learning has always been an enemy to the Gospel; it were a happy thing if there were no universities, and all books except the Bible were burnt. Any gifted man may be chosen by a congregation as their minister.[85] The presentation is slanted; but ideas very similar to these will recur in our story.

When the Leveller Richard Overton wrote 'I am confident that it must be the poor, the simple and mean things of this earth that must confound the mighty and strong,' he seemed only to be repeating preachers like Thomas Goodwin. But the words occur in *An Appeale from the degenerate Representative Body the Commons of England . . . to the Body Represented, the free people in general* (1647).[86] Overton's political appeal was aimed especially at the

people in arms in the New Model Army. At Putney in the same year representatives of the rank and file claimed that since 'the poorer and meaner of this kingdom . . . have been the means of the preservation of the kingdom', 'the poorest man in England' had a right to choose his own government.[87] In 1649 Gerrard Winstanley saw that 'the poor must first be picked out and honoured in this work, for they begin to receive the word of righteousness, but the rich generally are enemies to true freedom'. 'The poor are those in whom the blessing lies, for they first receive the gospel.'[88] But again the apparent continuity with the Puritan preachers is deceptive: for Winstanley 'the word of righteousness', 'the gospel', meant communism, subversion of the existing social order. 'If you would find true majesty indeed, go among the poor despised ones of the earth . . . These great ones are too stately houses for Christ to dwell in; he takes up his abode in a manger, in and amongst the poor in spirit and despised ones of the earth.'[89]

3
Masterless Men

> Vagabonds . . . which do nothing but walk the streets, wicked men, to be hired for every man's money to do any mischief, such as we commonly call the rascals and very sink and dunghill knaves of all towns and cities . . . Into what country and place soever they come, they cause sedition and tumults.
>
> *Geneva Bible*, marginal comment on *Acts* xvii, 6[1]

I MOBILITY AND FREEDOM

The essence of feudal society was the bond of loyalty and dependence between lord and man. The society was hierarchical in structure: some were lords, others were their servants. 'Whose man art thou?' demanded a character in one of Middleton's plays. The reply, 'I am a servant, yet a masterless man, sir', at once produced the incredulous retort, 'How can that be?'[2] The assumptions were those of a relatively static agricultural society, with local loyalties and local controls: no land and no man without a lord. Reality never corresponded to the model, of course, and by the sixteenth century society was becoming relatively mobile: masterless men were no longer outlaws but existed in alarming numbers – 13,000, mostly in the North, a government inquiry calculated in 1569; 30,000 in London alone, it was guessed more wildly in 1602.[3] Whatever their numbers such men – servants to nobody – were anomalies, potential dissolvents of the society.

First, there were rogues, vagabonds and beggars, roaming the countryside, sometimes in search of employment, too often mere unemployable rejects of a society in economic transformation, whose population was expanding rapidly. The necessity to economize led lords to cut down their households; the quest for profit led to eviction of some tenants from their holdings, the buying out of others. The fluctuations of the early capitalist cloth market brought wealth to a fortunate few, ruin to many. The inefficient and the unlucky went to the roads. They caused considerable panic in ruling circles during the sixteenth century, but they were never a serious menace to the social order. Vagabonds attended no church, belonged to no organized social group. For this reason it seemed almost self-evident to Calvinist theologians that they were 'a cursed generation'.[4] Not till 1644 did legislation insist that rogues, vagabonds and beggars should be compelled to attend church every Sunday. Such men were almost by definition ideologically unmotivated: they could steal and plunder, but were incapable of concerted revolt. Until the 1640s there seems to have been little concern in the propertied classes to help vagabonds. They presented a security problem, no more. There is plenty of evidence of popular sympathy for the down-and-outs of society. Ordinary people were reluctant to call upon the full penalties of the law against them, even when they stole. But it was not till the revolutionary decades that we get pamphleteers arguing that houses of correction, so far from curing begging, were more likely to make honest men vagabonds and beggars by destroying their reputation and self-respect.[5]

Secondly there was London, whose population may have increased eight-fold between 1500 and 1650. London was for the sixteenth century vagabond what the greenwood had been for the medieval outlaw – an anonymous refuge. There was more casual labour in London than anywhere else, there was more charity, and there were better prospects for earning a dishonest living. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries men suddenly became aware of the existence of a criminal underworld. Its apparent novelty perhaps caused it to be over-publicized: it was no doubt far less important than the world of dock labour, watermen, building labourers and journeymen of all sorts who had no hope of becoming masters.

(Non-freeholders had been excluded from skilled crafts by the Statute of Apprentices of 1563.) What matters for our purposes is the existence of a large population, mostly living very near if not below the poverty line,[6] little influenced by religious or political ideology but ready-made material for what began in the later seventeenth century to be called 'the mob'. Pym may or may not have called out such support; forty years later Shaftesbury almost certainly did. But 'the mob' is basically non-political: it could be used by Presbyterians against the Army in 1647,[7] by royalists in 1660, by church and king men under Anne. It was, in the prescient words of the Geneva Bible margin, 'to be hired for every man's money to do any mischief'.[8] Its existence was always a potential threat, especially in times of economic crisis.

A quite different sort of masterless men were the protestant sectaries. These had as it were chosen the condition of masterlessness by opting out of the state church, so closely modelled on the hierarchical structure of society, so tightly controlled by parson and squire. Sects were strongest in the towns, where they created hospitable communities for men, often immigrants, who aspired to keep themselves above the level of casual labour and pauperism: small craftsmen, apprentices, serious-minded laborious men, all could recognize each other as the elect in a godless world. As soon as they were free to function legally, the sects organized social services, poor relief etc., for their members: they provided social insurance in this world as well as in the next.[9] Such men were highly motivated, and they carried to its logical conclusion the principle of individualism which rejects all mediators between man and God. From the circumstances of their life in vast anonymous cities and towns they had escaped from feudal lordship. The bond of their unity was a common acceptance of the sovereignty of God, against whose wishes no earthly loyalty could be weighed.

'He which dwelleth in heaven is mightier,' Archbishop Grindal had told that 'mighty prince' Queen Elizabeth.[10] Sir Henry Slingsby in 1628 told the Earl of Huntingdon that 'he cared not for any lord in England, except the Lord of Hosts'.[11] Martin Marprelate succinctly spoke of those who were 'obedient subjects to the Queen and disobedient traitors to God and the realm'[12] – the last three words giving this

remark extra bite, looking forward to the time when Charles I would be executed as a traitor to the commonwealth. In the revolutionary decades the argument and the confidence it gave descended the social scale. *God a Good Master* was the title of a pamphlet published by John Goodwin in 1641. 'He that fears God is free from all other fear; he fears not men of high degree,' said William Dell in 1645.[13] 'We have chosen the Lord God Almighty to be our king and protector,' the Diggers told Fairfax in June 1649.[14] In 1653 a Fenstanton farmer was afraid his landlord would turn him out if he joined the Baptists. Henry Denne told him 'to trust God, and he would be a better landlord than Mr Bendwich'.[15] 'Be not afraid of man,' Margaret Fell urged her husband in the same year. 'Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.'[16] 'He that is in you': God has been democratized. He is no longer merely the greatest feudal overlord, a kind of super-king. He is in all his saints, but he is almighty and gives them of his power.

Fourth among our masterless men are the rural equivalents of the London poor – cottagers and squatters on commons, wastes and in forests. Like our first two categories, these were victims of the rapid expansion of England's population in the sixteenth century; sometimes the victims, sometimes the beneficiaries of the rise of new or the growth of old industries. Unlike the relatively stable and docile populations of open arable areas, these men, cliff-hanging in semi-legal insecurity, often had no lords to whom they owed dependence or from whom they could hope for protection. They might exist for long enough to establish a precarious customary claim to continuance. Labourers' cottages erected within a mile of any mineral works, coal mines, quarries, etc., were not regarded as coming within the statute of 1589 which prohibited the erection of any cottage without four acres of land.[17] Such men might form a useful source of additional labour. Clothiers, stocking-knitters, iron-masters, coal-owners, all might have uses for such casual labourers, and so the latter might win a relatively secure position so long as the market held. They were liable to suffer from large-scale schemes for agricultural betterment – disafforestation, fen drainage and the like. Meanwhile they existed, in the interstices of society, but undoubtedly growing in numbers by migration.[18]

Sylvan liberty is idealized in the ballads of Robin Hood, in Shakespeare's Forest of Arden and in the wise 'wild men' who appear in Elizabethan and Jacobean pageants. This may relate to contemporary migration to forests in search of security and independence.[19] Freedom of tenure was traditionally enjoyed in forest clearances; from at least the fourteenth century there had been numbers of free craftsmen in woodland areas, as well as outlaws.[20] In Massinger's *The Guardian* (licensed 1633) the bandits – ostensibly Neapolitan, but explicitly related to 'the courteous English thieves' – were occupants of the woods, opposed to the king and his laws. They specialized in robbing those who ground the faces of the poor, enclosers of commons, usurers foreclosing on land, 'builders of iron mills that grub up forests with timber trees for shipping', cheating shop-keepers and vintners; but not rent-racked farmers, needy market folks, labourers, carriers or women.[21] Firth noted the sympathy for 'spirited crime' in the popular ballads of the period;[22] it continued at least till the eighteenth century.

The Forest of Arden gave shelter to a shifting population of blacksmiths and nailers as well as to Shakespeare's artless countrymen; to Tinker Fox and his partisans as well as to Coventry Ranters. Richard Baxter refers to the 'exceeding populousness of the country' round Dudley (Worcestershire), 'where the woods and commons are planted with nailers, scythe-smiths and other iron-labourers, like a continued village'. 'Among weavers, tailors and such-like, there is usually found more knowledge and religion than among the poor enslaved husbandmen.' 'Constant converse and traffic with London doth much promote civility and piety among tradesmen.'[23]

Fifthly, shading off from our fourth category of masterless men, was the itinerant trading population, from pedlars and carters to badgers, merchant middlemen. The number of craftsmen in villages, in those days of restricted markets, was vastly greater than it is today:[24] in bad times they would look for customers over a wider area. Professor Everitt has suggested that these wayfarers, linking heath and forest areas, may have helped to spread radical religious views – as earlier Familists had been weavers, basket-makers, musicians, bottlemakers, joiners, who lived by travelling from place to

place.[25] In 1556 a clothier collecting wool acted as liaison man in Dudley's conspiracy. An itinerant cobbler was the principal dispenser of the Marprelate Tracts.[26] Propaganda for the abortive Oxfordshire rising of 1596 was made by a carter and a miller 'travelling the country'.[27] Scottish Covenanters in the 1630s were alleged to have used travelling merchants 'to convey intelligence and gain a party in England'. The same charge was made against the Rye House plotters in 1683.[28] Certainly the Privy Council was worried about carriers in 1637–8.[29] In a sermon deploring *The Growth and Spreading of Haeresie*, preached before the House of Commons on 10 March 1647, Thomas Hodges attributed to 'every . . . vagrant itinerant huckster' such heresies as denial of the Trinity, of the authority of the Bible, of the historicity of Jesus.[30] Country inns and taverns used by itinerants were noted as centres for news and discussion. In the civil war, Professor Everitt observes, troops were normally billeted in the inns of provincial towns.[31]

Dr Thirsk and Professor Everitt, to whom we are indebted for emphasizing the distinction between woodland and pasture areas on the one hand, and champaign arable on the other, remind us that the former was much more extensive in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than it is now, including e.g. North Essex, the Weald, the 'cheese' area of Wiltshire, the industrial parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire, as well as forests like Sherwood, Arden, the New Forest, the Northamptonshire forests, and the highland zone generally. Professor Everitt distinguishes between 'a relatively free and mobile society in the heath and wood parishes, and a relatively static and subservient one in the parishes of the fielden plains'.[32] (Just because they were 'relatively static', I say little about the mass of simple husbandmen. This would be wrong if I were analysing the society as a whole, but seems inevitable in a book whose emphasis is on social and intellectual change. The reader should remember that husbandmen in fielden parishes formed a majority of the rural population.) The heath and woodland areas were often outside the parochial system, or their large parishes were left with only a distant chapelry, so there was freedom from parson as well as from squire: here men might, in Winstanley's words, 'live out of sight or out of slavery'.[33] In such areas

feudal ties of subordination hardly existed, and there was little obstacle to the intrusion of rural industry in search of cheap part-time labour. The 'mean people' of the woods, Aubrey tells us, 'live lawless, nobody to govern them; they care for nobody, having no dependence on anybody'. These were also the areas in which there was most peasant revolt in the early seventeenth century – Wiltshire and the Forest of Dean, for instance.

Dr Thirsk and Professor Everitt go on to suggest that squatters in forest or pastoral regions, often far from any church, were wide open to radical religious sects – or to witchcraft. (Hostility to the clergy had been a striking element in the Robin Hood ballads.[34] Pendle and Knaresborough forests harboured witches.[35]) The Weald was 'that dark country which is the receptacle of all schism and rebellion' – a view confirmed by Thomas Edwards. The densely populated forests of Northamptonshire were centres of rural puritanism, strange sects, and witchcraft.[36] The 'cheese' district of Wiltshire, the scene of violence resulting from disafforestation in the early seventeenth century, was also an area of poorly-paid part-time clothing workers and of religious heresy.[37] Ely, Edwards's 'island of errors and sectaries', had long been a centre of plebeian irreverence and resistance, down to the time when Oliver Cromwell, 'Lord of the Fens', encouraged the commoners. Ely became a Seeker centre in the forties, when it was for some time William Erbery's headquarters. In the Isle of Axholme the inhabitants were said to have been virtual heathens till the draining of the Fens; in 1650–51 they supported the Levellers enthusiastically enough.[38] In Cumberland in the mid-fifties the Quakers met 'in multitudes and upon moors'.[39]

Professor Walzer has suggested that Puritan insistence on inner discipline was unthinkable without the experience of masterlessness. Their object was to find a new master in themselves, a rigid self-control shaping a new personality. Conversion, sainthood, repression, collective discipline, were the answer to the unsettled condition of society, the way to create a new order through creating new men. He compares Jacobins and Bolsheviks in similar circumstances.[40] This runs parallel to the contemporary vogue for gipsies, depicted by Cervantes as critics of society, seen by the French engraver Jacques Callot (1592–1635), and by English poets from 'The raggle-taggle

gipsies' to Wordsworth, as offering a freer alternative to the constrictions of society. The comparison is illuminating and helpful; but Professor Walzer takes, I think, a rather one-sided view of the phenomenon of masterlessness. What produced alarm and anxiety in some was an opportunity for others – though not an opportunity for climbing up the normal social ladder. A masterless man was nobody's servant: this could mean freedom for those who prized independence more than security. Richard Brome's *A Joviall Crew* certainly idealizes the beggars' life in seventeenth-century England, which must have been anything but romantic. Nevertheless, the form his romanticization takes is interesting. The beggars are

> The only freemen of a common-wealth;
> Free above scot-free; that observe no law,
> Obey no governor, use no religion,
> But what they draw from their own ancient custom
> Or constitute themselves, yet are no rebels.[41]

Beneath the surface stability of rural England, then, the vast placid open fields which catch the eye, was the seething mobility of forest squatters, itinerant craftsmen and building labourers, unemployed men and women seeking work, strolling players, minstrels and jugglers, pedlars and quack doctors, gipsies, vagabonds, tramps: congregated especially in London and the big cities, but also with footholds wherever newly-squatted areas escaped from the machinery of the parish or in old-squatted areas where labour was in demand. It was from this underworld that armies and ships' crews were recruited, that a proportion at least of the settlers of Ireland and the New World were found, men prepared to run desperate risks in the hope of obtaining the secure freehold land (and with it, status) to which they could never aspire in overcrowded England. In England mobility was taken for granted, at least outside the champaign agricultural areas. (This is, incidentally, another reason for looking sceptically at total population figures based on surviving records from agricultural villages, by definition much more stable than those of the woodland areas. A family which can be reconstituted, Mr Peter Clark suggests, is by this very fact an untypical family.[42])