

Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part I

HUMANS HAVE LIVED WITHOUT MONEY – AND WE WILL AGAIN

In the early dawn hours of May 24, 1796, members of the Conspiracy of Equals stood on the Bridge Notre-Dame in Paris. They boldly distributed pamphlets to the masses rushing to work, urging the overthrow of the government. In the following days, women agitators took the lead in urging the troops to join in an insurrection to abolish bourgeois rule and private property.

Seventy-five years would pass before Paris workers could seize power and establish (briefly) the Paris Commune. But we are the descendants of the Conspiracy of Equals, and to us falls the world-historic task of mobilizing the masses for communism.

Early human societies existed for tens of thousands of years without money, exchange, or private property. This was once called “primitive communism,” but the word “primitive” wrongly suggests that such societies were simple and rudimentary. Actually they often had complex, stable social relationships and cultural practices. Some, but not all, of these social systems developed into the class societies of recorded history.

As class society and exploitation emerged, so did the movement to abolish them. The communist slogan “No privilege - From each according to ability, to each according to needs!” has been expressed in many forms, for thousands of years. It has inspired and motivated people on every continent.

The manifesto of the International Communist Workers’ Party, *Mobilize the Masses for Communism*, describes our roots in the communist-led revolutions from the Paris Commune of 1871 through the twentieth century. This article is the first in a series about the early history of communism, the red thread running through the tapestry

of human history.

Non-Class Societies Survived into the Twentieth Century

Sometimes we incorrectly speak of “early communism” as though it disappeared long ago, as it did in some parts of the world.

The !Kung San people of the Kalahari Desert

in Africa maintained egalitarian society almost to the present, though in a steadily decreasing area.

Much work in !Kung San society is collective (gathering expeditions, hunting large animals). The products of such work are shared according

to definite rules. In a hunt, the owner of the poison arrow decides how to divide the meat, even if the owner wasn’t present at the kill. When a woman lends her sack to others to carry back nuts, she shares out the nuts. In contrast, we mobilize for a communist society where nobody “owns” the means of production. We will collectively decide how to share according to need.

Men and women do different work, all of which is valued and valuable in their harsh environment. However, !Kung San society does not exist at a bare subsistence level. Women can often gather enough food in three days to feed everyone for a week. They probably could accumulate surpluses, but these would be a disadvantage in a highly mobile society. Music, dance, and joking around are all-important to the !Kung San: they solidify the social relationships at the heart of their system.

In !Kung San society there is no “exchange”

in the sense of barter or trade. Instead, gift-giving strengthens community ties. This gift-giving differs from disguised trade, for example among the Iroquois, where someone who isn’t satisfied with a return gift may take back the original gift.

Anthropologists call societies like the !Kung San “gift economies,” in contrast with (and in conflict with) market-based economies. Many Pacific Islanders had gift economies until the 19th century and some such practices remain today. People of Tokelau, for example, share all food resources in each atoll based on egalitarianism (*inati*). People of Anuta call a similar practice *aropa*. Reciprocal gifts (although now distorted by the dominant market economy) remain important culturally to Samoan and Tongan people in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.

The Raramuri people in the Sierra Tarahumara of northwestern Mexico still honor the custom of *kórima*: each person must share his or her wealth with anyone who needs it. Within living memory, however, Mexican capitalism has almost destroyed traditional Raramuri life.

Globally, class society emerged some 8,000-10,000 years ago (in different regions, in different ways). It enabled the mobilization of labor and other resources that would let it overpower gift societies wherever the two social systems clashed. However, the long-term persistence of gift societies reminds us that communism is possible. Indeed, scientific evidence suggests that the ability to cooperate and share was fundamental to human evolution.

The mobilization of the masses for communism is based on an ever-deepening scientific understanding that prepares us to unite the whole world into one interconnected communist society. Mass communist consciousness will prevent forever the re-emergence of private property and class society.

Next article: *Egalitarianism against slavery in ancient China*



Communist members of Conspiracy of Equals try to incite soldiers to mutiny.

Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part II

ANCIENT CHINA: “KINGS SHOULD PLOW THE FIELDS”

Slavery developed in China over 4000 years ago, as it did at other times and other places from India to Greece to the Americas. Few if any slaves in these ancient societies left written records of their ideas and aspirations. The rise of class society divided manual labor from mental labor such as reading and writing. However, we know that there were slave revolts. And egalitarian movements arose again and again in opposition to slave systems.

Slavery (or chattel slavery) meant that some people “owned” other people in the same way that they “owned” oxen or goats. That is, the legal system (including armed bodies of soldiers or police) enabled the “owners” to use and abuse the “slaves” 24/7, in almost any way they wanted. In China, slavery existed at least by 2100 BCE (the

Xia Dynasty) and lasted thousands of years. Most slaves did back-breaking work in the fields, the main form of production. Sometimes slaves were buried alive with their dead masters.

The Nongjia movement (Agriculturalism or Agrarianism) arose in the 8th century BCE. It advocated a form of peasant communism. It celebrated the folk-hero Shen Nong, a king who was portrayed as “working in the fields, along with everyone else, and consulting with everyone else when any decision had to be reached.”

The best-known Agriculturalist was the philosopher Xu Xing. One of Xu’s students reportedly criticized the Duke of Teng in these words: “A worthy ruler feeds himself by plowing side by side with the people, and rules while cooking his own meals. Now Teng on the contrary possesses granaries and treasuries, so the ruler is supporting himself by oppressing the people.”

In other words, the “king” should be a leader, not a boss or exploiter. Today, communists understand that our revolution will sweep away all bosses and exploiters. There won’t be one “leader,” even one who “consults with everyone else.” Instead, one mass communist party will reach, carry out, and evaluate all the decisions that af-

fect our lives. The role of this leadership, now and in the future, is to mobilize the masses for communism.

Agriculturalism was limited by its individualistic peasant outlook. It assumed that each family unit could and should be self-sufficient, instead of advocating collective work for the common good. And it didn’t criticize money or a market economy, which made inequality possible. It called instead for fixed prices for similar goods.

As far as we know, the Agriculturalist philosophy remained the property of an educated elite. We have no evidence that Xu and his followers ever tried to mobilize slaves, or any other elements of the masses, around their ideas. Their movement looked backward, not forward. However much they wanted an egalitarian society, it was impossible for them to attain it.

Agriculturalism died out in China around the 3rd century BCE. The dominant ideology became Confucianism, a philosophy that openly justified class society and its gross inequalities, including slavery. Any slave rebellions that occurred in China during this period have been erased from the written records.

Slavery in China survived the rise of feudalism and even of capitalism. It was smashed by the communist-led revolution of 1948-49. Sadly, remnants of slavery still exist under capitalism in the 21st century – even in now-capitalist China.

Next article: The fight for equality in ancient Greece



Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part III

ANCIENT GREECE: FOR “EQUALITY AND COMMUNITY OF POSSESSION”

We’ve seen that Chinese radicals of the 8th to the 3rd century BCE wanted their “king” to work alongside the masses and consult with them. Now we travel five thousand miles from China to Sparta, Greece, still in the 3rd century BCE. There’s no evidence that these societies communicated with each other, but they had many similarities.

Forget the so-called “glorious democracy” of ancient Greece. Its famous city-states ran on slave labor. Plato, Aristotle, and every other Greek writer considered slavery an unalterable fact of nature. Even when they imagined utopias without private property, or with women in power, slaves did the work.

And forget the myth that Greek slaves were “not treated so badly.” Beatings and threats of beatings were common. Slaves in the brothels and the Laureion mines endured a particularly brutal existence.

As in China, no records of slave rebellions survive. But we know that slaves ran away, because Antiphanes wrote a comedy called *The Runaway-catcher*. Twenty thousand slaves, encouraged by Spartan soldiers, escaped Athens in 404 BCE after the Peloponnesian War.

In Sparta, the helots of Messenia (publicly-owned slaves) would in turn be freed when Thebes defeated Sparta in 371. But chattel slavery remained. Wealth was rapidly concentrating into the hands of 100 Spartan families whose huge estates depended on slave labor. By the time twenty-year-old Agis IV became co-King of Sparta in 245 BCE, the “free” masses were drowning in debt.

According to the historian Plutarch, Agis “tried to exalt the people and incurred the hatred of the nobles.” He planned to “establish equality and community of possession among the citizens” and the free non-citizens – but not the slaves.

Agis and his allies convened a popular assembly to consider his plan. Agis contributed his own huge estate to “the common stock.” He convinced his mother and grandmother (two of the wealthiest Spartans) and others to do the same.

Most of the Spartan rulers (including Agis’s co-King Leonidas II) organized against him, but the masses were with him.

His popularity increased after his forces burned a huge pile of mortgage notes and other papers, wiping out the debts. “And now,” wrote Plutarch, “the multitude demanded also that the land should at once be divided.”

Before this could happen, Agis was sent on a military expedition. People were amazed by the discipline of his poor but now debt-free soldiers as “they marched through the Peloponnesus without doing any injury, without rudeness, and almost without noise.” Agis lived, dressed, and armed himself as the common soldiers did. The rich feared “that they might prove a disturbing force and set a bad example among the common people everywhere,” reported Plutarch.

Agis returned to Sparta amidst “much commotion and a revolution.” In his absence, other rulers had taxed and oppressed the people harder than ever. The land hadn’t been divided as promised. Agis sought sanctuary but was captured and im-



Ancient Greek pottery shows slave miners.

prisoned. Refusing to renounce his policies, he was quickly executed along with his mother and grandmother, shortly before a crowd arrived to attempt a rescue.

Cleomenes III, king of Sparta from 235 to 221 BCE, took up Agis’s cause. He emancipated the helots of Laconia – but still not the chattel slaves. Defeated in battle in 222-221 BCE, Cleomenes fled to Alexandria, Egypt, where he tried to organize a revolt. Failing, he committed suicide.

Like the Chinese Agriculturalists, Agis and Cleomenes tried to turn back the clock to a society based on small farmers. They didn’t see slaves as allies (much less leaders) of those they called the “common people.” They mistakenly thought that political reforms could create a more equal society, even on the backs of the slaves

Next: *Revolution versus Reform in Ancient Rome*

Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part IV

REVOLUTION VERSUS REFORM IN ANCIENT ROME

Like ancient Greece, Rome depended on slave labor. About one third of the people were slaves who worked the land, fought in the famous legions, built the viaducts, and served the wealthy. For most, it was a harsh existence. The life expectancy of a slave was about 20 years.

Land conquered by the Roman army was assigned to poor and indigent citizens. Laws prohibited the rich from accumulating too much, but rich landowners evaded these laws. They evicted citizens (plebeians) who worked the land and replaced them with slaves who were mostly captured in conquest. These slave plantations increasingly dominated the Roman political economy. In 135 BCE the First Servile War (centered in Sicily) erupted in a massive challenge to the slave system.

Two years later, the young tribune Tiberius Gracchus drew up his “Agrarian Law.” Roman tribunes were elected by the plebeians. Tiberius came from an aristocratic family, but he sided with the masses.

According to the historian Plutarch, who compared Gracchus to King Agis IV of Greece (see last article) Gracchus was motivated mainly “by the people themselves, who posted writings on porticoes, house-walls, and monuments, calling upon him to recover for the poor the public land.”

This was only a reform: landowners were to be compensated, and slavery itself was not questioned. However, wealthy citizens accused Tiberius of “stirring up a general revo-

lution.” Very sharp conflict – including armed struggle – ensued.

Plutarch’s account of the Agrarian Law conflict makes it clear that Tiberius was indeed trying to mobilize the masses against the rich and powerful land- and slave-owners who dominated the Roman Senate. He orated that wild beasts have caves or dens, “but the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children.”

Tiberius exposed the lies told to get soldiers to fight, declaring that “they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and ... have not a single clod of earth that is their own.” Knowing that the Senate would oppose him, Tiberius took his cause to the Popular Assembly.

Tiberius was killed in 132 BCE (the same year

that the slave rebellion was squashed). His brother Gaius Gracchus took up the cause. However, his strategy was not to mobilize the masses but to empower the rising business class (equestrians) against the landowning nobility. He gave them the right to collect taxes in Asia, and spent huge amounts of money on roads and harbors, to benefit trade.

Gaius tried to extend full Roman citizenship (including voting rights) to free people outside of Rome itself. This brought him into conflict with former supporters, and Gaius was later forced into suicide. Some consider the deaths of the Gracchi to be the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

“Gracchus” Babeuf, one of the first modern communists, took this name in honor of Tiberius Gracchus, the Roman champion of land reform.

But Tiberius Gracchus, like Agis and the Agriculturalists in China, looked backward and fought for a society based on small farmers. His brother Gaius looked forward but only as far as a society based on merchants. Neither saw slaves as allies (much less leaders) of the citizens they called the “common people.”

There was a Second Servile War (also in Sicily), and a Third (led by Spartacus) that shook Rome itself. The written records left to us are but a pale reflection of the power of egalitarian ideas in the ancient worlds.

Next article: *Egalitarianism in Judaism, early Christianity, and Hinduism*



Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus

Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part V

JEWISH, CHRISTIAN, AND HINDU SECTS: LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS EGALITARIANISM

The slavery-based Roman Empire controlled the Mediterranean region two thousand years ago. But within this empire, some religious communities rejected slavery and lived according to communist principles. One was the Essenes, a Jewish sect with thousands of members.

Listen to Philo (20 BCE–50 CE), a Greek-Jewish philosopher born in Alexandria, Egypt:

“Some [Essenes] cultivate the soil, others pursue peaceful arts, toiling only for the provision of their necessary wants. . . . They alone are without money and without possession, but nevertheless they are the richest of all, because to have few wants and live frugally they regard as riches . . . Among them there is no maker of any weapon of war, nor any trader, whether huckster or dealer in large merchandise on land or sea, nor do they follow any occupation that leads to injustice or to covetousness.

“There is not a single slave among them,” Philo continued. “They are all free, serving one another; they condemn masters, not only as representing a principle of unrighteousness in opposition to that of equality, but as personifications of wickedness in that they violate the law of nature which made us all brethren, created alike.”

Other sources indicate that Essene women and men were equals. The Old Testament referred to groups like them, and so did the 1st-century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus and his Roman contemporary Pliny.

The Essene community was probably massacred by Roman troops who crushed the Jewish Revolt against Rome in 66 CE.

Some say that Jesus’s family and other key people around him were Essenes. And the Apostles of Jesus are said to have lived by communist principles:

“The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. . . . Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. . . . Neither was there any among *them* that lacked: . . . and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.”—Acts 4: 32-35

According to the author(s) of Acts, as the Apostles gained adherents they were increasingly persecuted by King Herod and the Roman authorities. They soon dispersed as missionaries in remote lands, where most died. Unlike the Essenes, they didn’t establish a stable communist community.

The communism of the Essenes and the Apostles was compromised by their mystical religious philosophy. The Essenes emphasized living what they considered a godly personal life. They, and especially early Christians, taught that “life after death” meant more than earthly life.

Another religious distortion of egalitarianism was the centuries-long Bhakti movement in India. This cult preached that all people were equal in the eyes of God. It rejected traditional Hindu discrimination based on caste or creed, and had no priests. It welcomed even the lowest-caste (“untouchable”) men and women. It was a broad popular movement whose teachers spoke in the languages of the masses.

But the Bhaktis’ core idea was single-minded devotion to one personal God. They showed little interest in reforming (let alone revolutionizing) the highly hierarchical societies in which they lived. Instead they focused on personal “transcendence.”

Religion says that we are all brothers and sis-



**Ruins of Essene communist settlement
at Qumran**

ters as “children of God” and that the “true community” is in heaven. In the modern world, religion continues to misdirect the egalitarian, collective aspirations of the masses into a quest for personal “salvation” and heaven.

In contrast, scientific communism recognizes a material basis for solidarity among the oppressed. It will create the material basis for the long-desired “beloved community” through revolution, abolishing money, markets, and commodity production.

Today some revolutionaries continue to cite religious texts to justify anti-capitalism and find hope for a communist future. We work with these friends and welcome them into the International Communist Workers’ Party.

However, even anti-capitalist religious faith obstructs the dialectical, historical materialist understanding that we need to mobilize the masses for communism.

Next article: *Asian Peasant Revolts and Radical Challenges to Feudalism*

PEASANT REVOLTS AND RADICAL CHALLENGES TO FEUDALISM IN ASIA

Feudalism arose at different times in opposition to slave society on several continents. Feudal society differed from slavery mainly in that wealthy landowners didn't legally "own" laborers, although often slavery remained in a secondary role.

Feudalism was not the romantic system sometimes portrayed in literature or video games about knights and ladies. Feudal serfs lived in misery. They were forced to work several days a week on their masters' lands and render other duties. They paid crushing taxes to church and state.

In China, feudalism reigned for over one thousand years. Major peasant revolts occurred every century or so from 209 BCE to 1122 CE. The later rebellions were often entwined with cults that predicted or called for radical transformation of religion and society. Sometimes the rulers tolerated these cults. At other times they openly feared that a popular religious leader could mobilize peasant revolts around political goals.

Chinese historians since the 1970s have studied these movements closely. They found it difficult, often, to distinguish genuine radical leadership from the personal ambitions of warlords. It's also hard to identify the political goals of peasant rebels, since the written records were made by and for the feudal rulers.



The Battle of Azukizaka was the climactic clash between Ieyasu and the Ikki.

Japan: Masses Fight Samurai Rulers

A recent book by Fuminobu Murakami, *The Strong and the Weak in Japanese Literature* (2010), identified egalitarian themes in the *Tale of Genji* (10th century) and *The Tale of the Heike* (13–14th centuries).

Murakami linked egalitarianism to sympathy for the weak and to nationalism: "born together in opposition to absolute monarchy and feudal society Together, these notions supported the liberation of the common people from the oppression of a small number of high-status people in society."

Historical records tell of frequent uprisings against Japanese feudalism. In the "Ikkoshū Uprisings" (15th-16th centuries) crowds of peasant farmers, Buddhist monks, Shinto priests and some local nobles, rebelled against the samurai rulers. Some followed a Buddhist form of religious egal-

itarianism (the True Pure Land sect) that promised salvation for all believers.

This emphasis on "salvation" severely limited the movement. However, early True Pure Land Buddhism drew real strength from self-governing communities (called ikki, or leagues) among the masses. These ikki formed armies and fought the samurai.

In 1488, the masses drove out the Constable of Kaga and took control of an entire province. They occupied a string of fortresses and temples, quickly

adopting the new technology of firearms in spite of Buddhism's pacifist philosophy. This enabled them to hold out against the forces of Oda Nobunaga, who was in the process of unifying Japan.

By the end of the 16th century, samurai leaders like Ieyasu and Nobunaga were moving Japan into a new era based on trade (effectively, the seed of Japanese capitalism). The Ikko-Ikki, which controlled areas critical to their trade routes, became a significant obstacle. For this reason, and because they worried that the Ikki movement might spread, Ieyasu and Nobunaga attacked it ferociously.

The Ikko-Ikki were decisively defeated in the Battle of Azukizaka (1564). True Pure Land Buddhism still exists today, but it lost its radical edge long ago.

Next article: Apostolic Christianity: "All things in common... to all according to need."

Communism: Our Heritage and Future Part VII

“ALL THINGS IN COMMON...TO ALL ACCORDING TO NEED”

Earlier, we described communist themes in early Christianity: “All who believed were together, and had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all, according as anyone had need.” (*Acts* 2: 44-45) Early Christianity advocated unity (“love”) among all people, including Jews, Romans, Gentiles, Greeks, and the pagans called “Barbarians.” (*Acts* 17:26)

This movement was driven underground in the 4th century, when the Roman emperor Constantine made a very different version of Christianity the official state religion and a battle-creed for empire.

By the twelfth century, however, as feudalism matured in Europe, Christian communism re-emerged. The mystical theologian Joachim, or Gioacchino da Fiore (1135-1202) distinguished between the “reign of justice” (or “law”) which existed in unequal society, and the “reign of freedom” in the new egalitarian age to come.

His followers (Joachimites) expected that the Church’s hierarchical, authoritarian structure would collapse, replaced by a leaderless communal state. They found support for this view in the Book of Revelations.

The Joachimites were extremely popular in their own time and for centuries after. For example, Gherardo Segarelli started a formal Apostolic Christian movement in Lombardy in 1260. Its members tried to live according to the communist principles in *Acts*. The movement grew slowly, spreading across Europe mainly among the poor.

Thomas Aquinas attacked the Joachimites and Apostolic Christians. In 1263, a papal synod declared their views heretical. Segarelli was hounded by the Spanish Inquisition and burned at the stake in 1300.

Fra Dolcino (c. 1250 – 1307) became the new leader of the Apostolic movement. The “Dulcinian heresy” went further than Segarelli, calling not only for the fall of the church hierarchy but of the whole feudal system.

Dolcino and his partner Margherita Bonin-

segna (Margaret of Trento) taught that the people would free themselves from oppression by creating a new egalitarian society based on mutual aid and respect. Property would be held in common, and men and women would live as equals.



Poster Celebrating the 700th Anniversary of Margaret and Dolcino’s Uprising

Dolcino and Margaret rebuilt a sizeable Apostolic community, which the Inquisition quickly attacked. The 1400 surviving members retreated to a fortified mountaintop. Men and women fought hard, side by side. But they hadn’t mobilized the masses for communism and were defeated by the combined opposition of local villagers and soldiers.

Margaret and Dolcino were tortured and burned at the stake in 1307. But their ideas did not die. The next year, Dante’s poem *The Divine Comedy* placed Joachim in Paradise.

Peasant Rebellions: Beginning of the End of Feudalism

Revolts of peasants and sometimes urban workers rocked Europe throughout the late 13th and 14th centuries. The largest included the Ivaylo rebellion in Bulgaria (1277-1280), an up-

rising in Flanders (1323-1328), the St. George’s Night Uprising in Estonia (1343-1345), the Jacquerie in France (1358), the Revolt of the Ciompi in Italy (1378), Wat Tyler’s Revolt in England (1381), and the Harelle in France (1382).

The masses fought bravely, but mainly for relief from oppressive taxes or foreign domination, not for revolution. These struggles were important in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but the historical record has not revealed a direct influence of communist principles.

For example, Wat Tyler’s Revolt, a massive armed uprising of men and women, called for “equality among all people save only the king.” It demanded that church property be confiscated and divided among the commons. And it called openly for the abolition of serfdom. But it wasn’t a communist uprising. Instead, Wat Tyler aimed to replace feudal serfdom with wage labor.

When the rebels converged on London, the radical Lollard priest John Ball preached a sermon that famously asked, “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” This rhyme echoed down the centuries, as we’ll see in a future article.

Next: *15th Century Central Europe: “What’s Mine is Thine.”*



Wat Tyler’s Revolt, England, 1381

Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part VIII

RADICAL PROTESTANTS: “NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MINE & THINE”

The last article described Italian Catholic communist movements in the 12th through the 14th centuries.

Christian communism flourished especially where the wool industry – vanguard of capitalist production — took hold. Radical Christian sects like the Waldenses, the Apolisticans (northern France), the Beghards (Netherlands), the Lollards (England), and the Hussites (Bohemia) all recruited weavers, some of the first wage-laborers.

The 15th century Protestant Reformation attacked feudal rulers and served as a rallying point for their nationalist-capitalist opponents.

When the Church attacked rebellious Bohemia in 1415, one group rose up and took control of a town they called Tabor. They mobilized the masses for communism as they understood it.

The Taborites taught that “there shall be no king, ruler, or subject on the earth, and all imposts and taxes shall cease; no one shall force another to do anything, for all shall be equal brothers and sisters. As in the town of Tabor there is no mine or thine, but all is held in common, and no one owns anything for himself alone.”

The Taborites organized themselves as a military force, developing new tactics of warfare. They promoted mass literacy for women and men, while rejecting scholastic learning that only benefited the elite.

On July 22, 1419, over 40,000 people from Bohemia and Moravia converged on Tabor for a mass communist celebration.

Some Taborites, (the Picards) lived communally on an island. They rejected marriage, individual property ownership, and distinctions of rank. This sect attracted tens of thousands before it was crushed, in part by more conservative Taborite leaders.

The Taborite movement was defeated by a coalition of feudal and small-capitalist forces.

More important, the prevailing mode of production (individual family farms) limited their communist imagination and the possibility of realizing their aims. For most, communism meant sharing the proceeds of their labor, but not the collective production and planning that lay far in the future. Their principles were rooted in religion, not science.

Christian Communism and Peasant Rebellions

Peasant conspiracies and insurrections repeatedly threatened European rulers in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Thomas Müntzer (1498-1525) led a landmark uprising that linked Christian communism to the mass peasant movement in Germany.

On October 24, 1524, Stuehlingen peasants refused food deliveries to the town, assembled in force, and marched towards Waldshut. There they allied with townspeople against religious persecution of a Müntzer disciple. They aimed to end feudal power, destroy all castles and monasteries’, and eliminate all masters – except the emperor.

The uprising spread rapidly. Nobles panicked: their armies were away fighting the French in Italy. Stalling for time, they opened negotiations.

By March 1525 there were thirty or forty thousand armed insurgent peasants. Most fought only for concessions, and their morale was deteriorating. Before they could bring their demands to the



masters’ courts, the nobles attacked.

Müntzer and his troops, meanwhile, tried to institute a revolutionary Christian commonwealth, aided by Muehlhausen’s lower-middle-class masses. On March 17, 1525, on the eve of a general uprising in southern Germany, they took the town and elected a new council, led by Müntzer.

The new government proclaimed community of all possessions, universal and equal labor duty, and the abolition of all authority. Müntzer threw himself into the revolutionary work, but his forces couldn’t carry

out these decrees.

The rulers offered peace in exchange for Müntzer’s head, then treacherously attacked. Eight thousand peasants fought valiantly but were routed and massacred. Müntzer himself was captured. Under torture he recanted theological heresies, but insisted that *omnia sunt communia*, all things are in common. This brave young communist was executed on May 27, 1525.

Less than a decade later, communists would again seize power in a German town. Our next article will tell that story.

See Engels, *Peasant Wars in Germany* (1850) and Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation* (1897), available online.

Communism is Our Heritage and Future – Part IX

MUNSTER, GERMANY, 1534: RELY ON THE MASSES!

In January 1534, Dutch Anabaptist preachers in the city of Munster announced a new “prophet,” the 34-year-old baker Jan Matthys. An Anabaptist convert, Matthys won over thousands. He rejected the pacifist theology he’d been taught, preaching instead that oppression must be met with resistance.

Within a month, Anabaptists expelled Bishop Waldeck from Munster and took control of the city. They attempted to establish a society based on all things held in common.

However, the rebels made the serious error of installing Bernhard Knipperdolling, a wealthy merchant’s son, as mayor. They thought he would win broad support. Knipperdolling had the financial and political support of the guilds. But his personal interests stood against the most radical of Matthys’ policies, such as dissolving the guilds and confiscating private property.



This mistaken policy of a “united front” (as it would later be called) with so-called progressive capitalists would have sold out the interests of the masses, had Munster held out. But without mobilizing the masses for communism, even that was impossible.

Waldeck raised an army to besiege Munster. Matthys, confused by his religious outlook, prophesied that God’s judgment would come on Easter Sunday. That day he led thirty followers in a hopeless foray against Waldeck’s army. They were cut off from the town, Matthys was killed, and his severed head placed on a pole for all to see.

Still the city held out until June 1535.

As Engels noted in 1850, parallels between the German revolutions of the 16th century and the uprisings of 1848-49 were “too obvious to be altogether ignored at that time.” He attributed the failure of both revolutions largely to the fact that the masses aligned themselves behind the burgers (bourgeois, rising capitalists). The lesson he drew for the 19th century was that urban workers should ally instead with the working peasantry.

We must question another conclusion Engels drew from the German peasant revolts. “The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party,” he wrote, “is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents What he *can* do is in contrast to all his actions as hitherto practised, to all his principles and to the present interests of his party; what he *ought* to do cannot be achieved.”

Engels was clearly right that the work-

ing class was too weak to seize the leadership of society in the 16th century. In particular, 16th century communism was still rooted in religion, not science. Capitalism itself wasn’t developed enough to create a strong working class.

By Engels’s time, however, it was. We now know that we *can*, and *ought* to, mobilize the masses for communism under any and all circumstances, even when the communist goal cannot be immediately attained. That’s the only way to build the movement that will one day win the communist world of which so many have dreamed.

The Anabaptist movement continued to spread. Most Anabaptists were pacifist evangelicals (such as the Mennonites) or focused exclusively on God. However, the radical tradition survived.

In England, for example, amidst sharpening class struggles, John Foxe famously interpreted Revelation to mean that the kingdom of heaven on earth was near at hand. Thomas Goodwin’s *Glimpse of Syon’s Glory* vividly expressed the masses’ utopian dreams and urged them to “take heed that you lose not this opportunity.” Thomas Muntzer, Joachim of Fiore, and the Lollards were studied carefully.

Authorities particularly hated the growing number of uneducated men and women who began to preach to their families, friends and neighbors. The most important leader to emerge in this subversive tradition was a cloth merchant named Gerrard Winstanley. Revolted by the commercial world and unsuccessful in business, he took a job herding cows as a wage laborer and began writing revolutionary pamphlets in Biblical metaphors.

Next article: *Winstanley and the Diggers in the English Revolution*

Communist Heritage X:

“MAKE THE EARTH A COMMON TREASURY”

“When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” – John Ball, 1381

Ball pictured for Wat Tyler’s rebel peasant army an Eden of classless society. In the 17th century, Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers fought to make it real.

Winstanley was part of the radical Anabaptist movement. A former merchant, turned wage-worker, he wrote in Biblical language and imagery. But his analysis was firmly grounded in the class struggles rocking England as rising capitalists confronted the feudal landowners and their monarchy.

When civil war broke out in 1642, General Cromwell knew that the capitalists needed to mobilize the masses, especially the Army, in order to take power. But these dispossessed masses would get no relief from their victory.

The capitalists’ Puritan ideology equated wealth with virtue and poverty with damnation. Increasing numbers responded by embracing the Anabaptist Christian message that all are spiritually equal. Many concluded that all should be equal on Earth too.

In 1645, there were armed uprisings against the war. Radical democrats (Levellers) gathered support within the Army. Soldiers mutinied in 1647: they had been forced into the war, weren’t getting paid, and their families were suffering. They were suppressed but soldiers still eagerly read radical pamphlets.

Levellers wanted broader political rights but defended private property. In contrast, Winstanley’s group called themselves “True Levellers” because they fought to abolish private property.

“Break in pieces quickly the Band of particular Propriety [private property],” Winstanley urged

in 1649. “Disown this oppressing Murder, Oppression and Thievery of Buying and Selling of Land, owning of landlords and paying of Rents and give thy Free Consent to make the Earth a Common Treasury...that all may enjoy the benefit of their Creation.”

Winstanley warned that private property “di-

“England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons...”
Gerrard Winstanley, 1649



vides the people of a land and the whole world ...and is the cause of all wars and bloodshed and contention everywhere.”

“Money,” he declared, “must not any longer...be the great god...that hedges in some and hedges out others, for money is but part of the Earth; and ...we must make use of gold or silver as we do of other metals but not to buy or sell.”

Breaking from earlier peasant revolts, Winstanley attacked wage slavery. He called on “all Labourers, or such as are called Poor people, that they shall not dare to work for Hire,...for by their labours, they have lifted up Tyrants and Tyranny; and by denying to labor for Hire, they shall pull

them down again.”

Occupy St. George’s Hill

Instead, Winstanley called on the masses to “dig up George-Hill and the waste Ground thereabouts, and to Sow Corn, and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows.” He and dozens more “Diggers” settled a Surrey commons in April, 1649, and began to do just that.

Their colony was harassed with lawsuits and attacked by mobs instigated by local authorities. After nearly a year, in March, 1650, this communist experiment was crushed.

The Diggers attracted substantial sympathy and support. They approached radical Levellers in the Army, but pamphlets alone couldn’t mobilize soldiers to fight for their cause. The working class was still too immature to lead the masses in communist revolution.

Winstanley’s Biblical mysticism soon gave way to an essentially materialist concept of “natural law,” though still using religious language. In the future “commonwealth,” he predicted, “none shall say, This is my Land, work for me and I’ll give you Wages. For,” he continued, “the Earth is the Lord’s, that is, Man’s, who is the Lord of Creation.”

Winstanley’s final pamphlet, “The Law of Freedom in a Platform” (1652) spelled out how he thought a communist “Eden” should be implemented on a large scale immediately. We, today, disagree with his rulebook. Still, we claim the Diggers among our ancestors in the struggle to end private property, the wage system, and money itself. We share their vision of working collectively to “make the earth a common treasury.”

Communism: Our Heritage and Our Future Part XI:

“COLLECTIVITY IS NO WILD DREAM”

We began this series in 1796, standing with the Conspiracy of Equals on the Pont Notre-Dame in Paris, as they boldly distributed revolutionary pamphlets to the masses rushing to work.

Their story starts, not with radical Christianity (as in previous centuries) but with the secular French Enlightenment. Most Enlightenment writers supported the rising bourgeoisie (capitalists) against the feudal landowners and their monarchy. But a few voiced the aspirations of a growing class of wage laborers.

“Nothing will belong to anyone,” wrote Morelly in 1755, “except the things for which the person has immediate use.” Everyone “will be supported by, and occupied at the public expense” and “will make his particular contribution according to his capacity.”

“Are not the fruits of the earth put there for the common enjoyment of all mankind?” asked Mably a decade later. “Where do you find a law of inequality?”

“Collectivity is no wild dream,” Mably continued. “I find it hard to conceive how on earth humanity blundered into private ownership of goods.”

Babeuf’s Communism and the French Revolution

Francois-Noel Babeuf had a hard childhood in rural Picardy. He was mostly self-taught. He started working at age 15, and in 1783 found employment as a tax specialist for feudal landowners. He knew first-hand how they used tax law to rob the masses. This, together with his reading of Enlightenment authors like Rousseau, led Babeuf to conclude that taxes and land redistribution should be used instead to transfer wealth from the rich to the poor.

After the 1789 Paris uprising that launched the French Revolution, a mass rebellion against unemployment and scarcity prices spread in Picardy. Hundreds of armed peasants and laborers ransacked granaries and prevented grain transport. Babeuf embraced this movement, spoke out for the masses and was arrested as a subversive.

In a 1791 letter, he advocated the immediate “putting in common of all resources.”

From jail, Babeuf started publishing a radical newspaper that advocated direct mobilization of the Paris masses. “Let us so arrange things that everyone dominates at once, and no person dominates in particular.... **The People are the Sovereign,**” he wrote. Babeuf was released from jail with the help of the revolutionary leader Marat and of the thousands who were reportedly ready to march on the prison.

An economic crisis in the winter of 1792- 1793 sparked another wave of mass protests in the countryside, including a general insurrection of 10,000 in Oise. Babeuf had to flee to Paris, where he became secretary of the Parisian commune’s Food Administration.

When the capitalist Convention decreed the death penalty for advocating the Agrarian Law (redistribution of land), Babeuf renamed himself Gracchus, after the ancient Roman agrarian champion. The mass “Enragé” movement (1794-95) convinced him that a new society based on equal shares of common product, without rich and poor, without wage-slaves, could be achieved immediately.

“From each according to ability, to each according to need,” Babeuf wrote to his son in 1794.

While bourgeois leaders flaunted their wealth, Babeuf’s family shared the desperate misery of the masses. He published an illegal newspaper, *Tribun du peuple*, and pamphlets, and organized a distribution network.

During the spring 1795 uprisings, many insurgents

looked to Babeuf (imprisoned again) for leadership. In the Arras prison, he met Charles Germain, who introduced him to the history of the Essenes and the 16th century Anabaptist communist experiments. Together they formed the Conspiracy of the Equals to organize for communist revolution.

Babeuf was released in Paris in October. As the Conspiracy grew and prepared for armed insurrection, it attracted a more diverse following. By then the bourgeois government had criminalized even the radical democracy of the 1793 Constitution.

The insurrection was foiled by the police and their spies. Many revolutionaries were arrested, including Babeuf in May 1796. He was executed one year later, declaring that **“I lived and drew my breath only for one cause, the emancipation of the people.”**

The next article will continue Babeuf’s story and conclude this series.



September 9, 1796: With Babeuf in jail awaiting trial, hundreds of communist workers (including some deserters from the Grenelle army camp) broke into the camp to appeal to the many disgruntled soldiers to join them. Police and officers, forewarned, suppressed this last Babouvist uprising.

PART XII: BABEUF'S LEGACY: MOBILIZE THE MASSES FOR COMMUNISM

“One can do nothing great except with all the people,” wrote Gracchus Babeuf in 1795. “It is again necessary to do something with them, to tell them everything, to show them tirelessly what it is necessary to do, and less to fear.... One must take into account all the forces... one gains in activating opinion, in enlightening it and showing it a goal.”

Babeuf's strategy was to work within popular societies while organizing a working-class party... The party would mobilize the revolutionary crowd, break down divisions between members and spectators, and insist on equality for women. He published a revolutionary newspaper and pamphlets, and built a network to distribute them.

Babeuf's approach to local issues was to shift the discussion immediately to general principles. He thought this the best way to win immediate support and promote the revolutionary cause.

His comrade Charles Germain argued for a two-stage theory of revolution: first, “land to the peasants” and only later cultivation in common for the good of all, with absolute equality. Babeuf, in contrast, insisted that armed insurrection could immediately institute communist society.

By abolishing private property, Babeuf predicted, “The circle of humanity would grow, and step by step, frontiers, customs posts, and bad governments would disappear. [and]... the great principle of equality or universal fraternity would become the sole religion of the peoples. ... All distinctions between industry and commerce will

disappear, and there will be a fusion of all professions raised to the same level of honor.”

Babeuf's party made detailed plans for insurrection in 1796. Police learned about it ahead of time and arrested many, including Babeuf and Germain. Babeuf spent the next year in jail, composing his “Defense.”

“A nation takes the path of revolution,” Babeuf declared, “because ... the majority of its members can no longer continue to exist in the old way. The masses realize that their situation is intolerable, they feel impelled to change it, and they are drawn into motion for that end.... The hour strikes for great and memorable revolutionary events, already foreseen in the writings of the times, when a general overthrow of the system of private property is inevitable.”

In 1828, Babeuf's comrade Buonarotti published a book about their Conspiracy of the Equals. Marx and Engels, founders of scientific communism, cited this book in *The Holy Family* (1845) and honored Babeuf's leadership in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Finding Once More the Spirit of Revolution

“The social revolution ... cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future,” wrote Marx in 1852. He urged that the “awakening of the dead” should “serve the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again.”

That's been the purpose of this series. It ends here, on the brink of the modern era.

In *Mobilize the Masses for Communism*, our party summarized what we have learned from the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s. We hope that readers have been inspired to learn and write more, especially about communist movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

We stand shoulder to shoulder with the masses who have fought for a classless society for thousands of years. Their dreams—of a world where all work for the good of all, where none are privileged or exploited, a world without money or private property—are our dreams. We learn from their victories as well as from their mistakes.

We are at a new beginning. In our time, the horrors of capitalism in its many forms (including socialism) stand exposed as never before. The working class is increasingly connected across borders, the masses are proletarianized. The line of revolutionary communism is more advanced.

The need for communism has never been more urgent. The possibility of communism has never been greater.

In Babeuf's words, “the masses realize that their situation is intolerable, they feel impelled to change it, and they are drawn into motion for that end.” It is again necessary “to tell them everything, to show them tirelessly what it is necessary to do, and less to fear.”

Mobilize the masses for communism!