

Medieval Revolts against Church and State

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In a fairly recent booklet, I came across a very standard view of pre-modern class society. It was stated that the life of the individual was completely controlled, and based on something quite external to him.

“The central mode of experience in pre-capitalist society was the event, principally the religious/historical event—Christ on the cross,” it explained further.

This general view prevails, of course, and is put pretty much identically by orthodox textbooks, historians and marxists alike, nostrums about the universality of class struggle by the former notwithstanding. Yet certainly the natural history of the revolt tradition is grotesquely maligned by the notion that somehow authentic revolutionary movements do not begin until the nineteenth century.

Marc Bloch, historian of the “Dark Ages,” admits that even the most fabled of feudal rulers were constantly beset by revolts. And we find, for example, the inhabitants of Cambrai engaged in insurrection between 959 and 962, and an analogous rising at the same time in Liege in France.

Elsewhere in Europe, other revolts were taking place; on the part of the weavers of Milan from before 1050, and in other northern Italian cities, in Lyon and other cities of southern France, in German cities of the Rhine region, and in the Netherlands by the 1100s.

The most popular method of banishing the fact of social revolt from the “Dark” or “Middle Ages” has long been that of assigning to it a merely religious character. Revolutionaries are called heretics, the class struggles portrayed solely in the context of the Church. Thus the most famous work of this genre, Norman Cohn’s *Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, is found in libraries under church history. Recently, however, this method or point of view has been losing its persuasiveness.

It is true that violent heretical movements abounded—the Albigensians in France in the 1200s, the Lollards in England in the 1300s, the Hussites in Bohemia in the 1400s, to name a very few. But as the Norwegian historian, Halvdan Koht, and others have begun to recognize, rebellions were not basically theological in nature at all but were generally clear-sighted and thorough-going struggles against oppression, and only occasionally and partially motivated by a religious consciousness.

It becomes easier to see the non-religious character of challenges to authority by the latter half of the Middle Ages, when we can see past the power of the Church for evidence. If the quiescence and stability before this time was largely a fiction, it is far more obvious that by the 1200s both the spiritual and temporal authority of the Church was in ruins. Strikes and riots were common from 1250 on in the industrial regions of Europe, such as Lombardy, Tuscany and Flanders.

In 1244 there was a riot of the workers of Douai and in 1248 a general revolt broke out in Bruges, Ypres, Ghent and Douai. There was much initiative shown by rural workers, too, including but not limited to strikes at peak harvest times. Similarly, historian Daniel Waley notes that “movements of the clothmaking proletariat had let to violence in Flanders and some parts of Italy well before the close of the thirteenth century.”

Medieval Class-Consciousness

And though we might well detect a note of condescension in Miriam Beard's discussion of "the hearty frankness characteristic of the medieval mind" (in her *History of Business*), the appreciation of the deep class-consciousness of medieval people is well-founded indeed. In Italy, for instance, the ruling classes were called the fat ones, or *popolo grosso*, while working people were known as the small or lean folk, the *popolo minuto* in the popular usage.

Before the 1200s were out, the ruling merchant-industrialists of Flanders were forced to seek aid from the King of France to keep the workers in subjection. This move, however, brought defeat for King Philip and the French army for it precipitated a powerful alliance between the textile workers and the artisans. At Courtrai in 1302 the united urban proletariat slaughtered Philip's army, and dominated Flemish city governments until the end of their partnership.

Also in Flanders occurred the most violent and prolonged of the many peasant revolts of the 1300s, lasting from 1323 to 1328. Once again the urban wool-workers took up arms, too, and the peasants plus these allies waged a war of extermination against landlords, capitalists and clergy.

As Friedrich Heer pointed out in his *Medieval World*, the watchword of this rising was "War against the rich and the priests!" Another civil war in 1348 through 1349 ended in the massacre of weavers in Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres, but the weavers (plus artisans in this case) of the three cities rose again in 1359 and for two years held out in the face of all opposition. These struggles embody an organized political and social revolution which flared up repeatedly and contained radically democratic demands.

In 1357 and 1358 northern France saw the unrestrained outburst of peasant fury known as the Jacquerie, for the common peasant name Jacques. The rebellion was especially alarming to the rulers because it involved an alliance between the peasants and the people of Paris. In fact, though England was at war with France at the time, this more pressing class interest took immediate precedence and English help was rushed across the Channel to suppress this great explosion.

Mass Revolts

In 1378 the day laborers, or Ciompi, of Florence were successful in revolt for a time, succumbing mainly to proletarian divisions rather than the power of the rulers. Returning to northern Europe and Flanders again, 1367, 1370, and 1377 saw further insurrections in Ypres. And in 1379 cloth workers throughout the country rose in a mass revolt against the nobility and the bourgeoisie, being defeated only by these combined forces plus much aid from the French monarch, after three years of fierce civil war.

The peasants' Revolt in England took place in 1381 when free and generally prosperous peasants joined city workers in a highly class-conscious rebellion. London was quickly captured and occupied after a general and well-planned uprising broke out simultaneously throughout the eastern counties.

Though its success was short-lived, the undertaking showed once again how tenuous was the hold over the laboring classes. And while most accounts still try to drag Wycliffe and others in as supposedly providing an important religious character to the revolt, it was clearly quite anticlerical in nature.

In 1380 Parisian revolutionaries known as the *maillotins* from the hammers or mallets they carried, attacked the government buildings, burning the archives, killing tax collectors, and opening the jails. Similar risings took place in Rouen and other French cities, and again in Flanders until the middle of the decade.

Continuing this thumbnail survey, revolts occurred in Catalonia from 1409 through 1413 (and from 1462 onwards), Denmark in 1411, Finland in 1438, and many others throughout the century.

The Bundschuh, or peasant league, was the organized expression of revolts which became increasingly widespread in central Europe by the last years of the century. Alsace in 1493, Speyer in 1502, in the Breisgau area and many other regions in 1513 through 1514, in Austria in 1515, and again in the Black Forest area in 1517—these were to culminate in the great Peasant War of 1524 through 1526.

Meanwhile, in Spain, the peasants of Valencia rebelled in 1520 as the bloody revolt of the *Comuneros* spread through the cities of Castile. The wool-carders, traditional rebels in the textile industry, were among the most ad-

vanced in the armed urban uprising at Segovia, in which the people hanged officers of the crown and seized the city. In Burgos, a few days later, workers invaded and destroyed the houses of officials; they made a great pile of documents relating to property and taxes and burned them in the public square.

Robust Vandalism

At the beginning of an otherwise mediocre book, *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels accurately compares the German revolt of the 1520s to the 1848 through 1849 revolution. As to the power and fury of that earlier conflagration, which engulfed central Europe and smashed nobility and clergy alike in its heyday, Engels is forced to say that here was a time “when the German peasants and plebeians were full of ideas and plans that often made their descendants shudder.” He concedes, in a fleeting honesty, that the 19th century brand of insurrection rarely approached the “robust vandalism” of the Peasant War.

And next, the 1600s, French historian Roland Mousnier has called “a century of revolts all over the world.” It was in the middle of that century, of course, that the Diggers and Levellers and their even more radical allies in England called all the values of hierarchical society into question and produced a time when “literally anything seemed possible,” as Christopher Hill put it. According to Gerrard Winstanley at the time, “the old world... is running up like parchment in the fire.”

The point of this very brief and incomplete list of cases is only the reminder that contrary to what is taught, revolt has always been alive. And that it runs not according to anyone’s theoretical conceptions or classifications but by the real class struggles of individuals, however obvious this may be. Herein lies a rich history: have heart and take aim.

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