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Radicals of the Bourgeois Revolutions

by Andrew Drummond

On February 9 1534, in north Germany, there began one of the most audacious, and fantastic, experiments of the epoch of bourgeois revolution. A group of religious and political radicals, the Anabaptists, called for the foundation of a communistic 'Kingdom of God', and they maintained this proto-socialistic community for an incredible 17 months against the army of Church and State; and thereby provided a model for many later revolutionary movements, including that of the English radicals of the bourgeois revolution of the 1640s. And thereby, of course, incurred the gross displeasure of bourgeois theologians and historians.

The Reformation period, which developed on a European scale from Germany and Switzerland to Scotland and England, and which grew like a slow child into political revolution, is a very important link in the chain of development of modern capitalist states. The budding doctrine of 16th and 17th century capitalism was raised by the Reformation to a position at the right hand of God and coloured in the colours of righteousness; capitalism was given philosophical justification just at the moment when it began to eat into the heart of the feudal system. But, at the same time, capitalism was creating its own proletariat and its own peasantry — a proletariat still in swaddling clothes, unable to understand its historical significance, only able to grasp fantastically after social equality. Thus, while the bourgeoisie was fighting for the privilege of praying to its own reformed deity, the lower classes seized the opportunity of the social crisis to put forward their own case for a radical God and a communist society. So the Reformation engendered the first expressions of socialism. And the feudal state dealt no less severely with these expressions than the

bourgeois state has dealt with all proletarian revolts: with blood and cruelty.

What Trotsky said of the English bourgeois revolution holds true of all the moments of the Reformation period — in Britain, in France, in Germany:

The British bourgeoisie has erased the very memory of the seventeenth-century revolution by dissolving its past in 'gradualness'. The advanced British workers will have to re-discover the English revolution and find within its ecclesiastical shell the mighty struggle of social forces . . . In the seventeenth-century drama, the British proletariat can find great precedents for revolutionary action.¹

Of course, just as the modern proletariat is a thousand times stronger than the radicals of the English Revolution, so were they a hundred times more powerful than the radicals and Anabaptists of the Reformation in Germany. But contained in the seeming religious morass of the German *Reformation* were the seeds of the later social *revolution* in England, and, from there, of the French Revolution of 1789. And we must not forget that the religious forms of the ideas and actions of the Reformation contain a profoundly social and political content.

THE GERMAN ANABAPTISTS

The German Reformation proclaimed by Luther in 1517 effectively ceased to be a really progressive social force in Germany in 1525: it died, drowned in the blood of a peasantry massacred by the joint forces of the Catholic and Lutheran nobility, to the applause of Luther and his cronies.² It died in this particular form; but the revolutionary content of the left-wing of the Reformation was negated to a higher level of theory, and preserved in different form for future generations. We will explain this: the Reformation was a highly contradictory movement, embracing both very conservative and very revolutionary social forces and their representatives. In 1525, during the peasants' uprising, there was a clear polarisation between the two theologians and political leaders, Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer. Luther backed the victorious princes, and Müntzer sided with the more radical (if not consciously revolutionary) peasants and plebeians. After the massacres on the battlefields, the left wing of the movement was driven underground, existing in social conditions of harsh repression and the classic cycle of counter-revolution — illegality, arrest, torture, execution. The left wing thus came to found and

develop the Anabaptist movement — although the name 'Anabaptism' was an umbrella term used by the state to describe so many different and often contradictory groupings (much as today's fearful bourgeoisie sees the spectre of 'Marxism' everywhere from the Labour Party leftwards — and often rightwards for good measure). Anabaptism, if it means anything, refers firstly to the general practice of the radicals of baptising (or baptising again) new recruits in a conscious state of their dedication to their Ideal (God); and secondly, to almost any grouping which consciously opposed both the Lutheran and the Catholic State and Church.

There were two distinct Anabaptist currents: one, which was greatly influenced by the Swiss pacifistic and humanistic doctrines propounded by men such as Grebel and Hubmaier; and one which borrowed heavily from the theory and practice of Muntzer and from older radical traditions — usually from Bohemia, and which was rarely pacifistic. The two currents were divided as early as 1527 on the question of the 'sword'. The second current was nurtured in Middle Germany, and gradually spread to north Germany, Holland, undergoing many negations of form and content en route, and finally to England. Although the pacifistic trend developed a more general religion and world-view compatible with the social conditions, the militant Anabaptists were far more capable of communicating with the urban lower classes and acting on their needs, and their theories were far more revolutionary — if still fantastic — in the conditions of the period. It is this trend which interests us.

TERRORISM AND THE WRATH OF GOD

At Christmas of 1527, one Hans Römer had a plan: his plan was frighteningly simple. He supposed that, along with some of his comrade Anabaptists, he would enter the town of Erfurt on New Year's Day, preach his word of religious revolution to the populace, and then, when his comrades had set fire to the houses of the Catholic and Lutheran churchmen, the city gates would be thrown open, the local peasantry would flood in and fraternise with the plebeians and the city would become the citadel of revolutionary Anabaptism. He did this 'from a particular hatred which he had for the town of Erfurt, since they had strangled his father, Thomas Müntzer'. It was indeed fortunate that Römer's careful plans also included a plan for escape, since simply, the material social forces in Saxony did not exist for success.

But the incident is indicative of the energy and optimism and mode of action of these radicals. In the period immediately following the defeat of 1525, there were many reported cases of individual terrorism, of symbolic and real threats against officials of the State, of arson, of robbery. There are literally hundreds of reports on the interrogations of radical leaders and their followers, reports of their theories and hopes. Some lived in expectation of the imminent Day of Judgement, when God would arrive on Earth and kill the 'Godless' tyrants. Some actively prepared for that day with propaganda and agitation. Some imagined that the Turks (and in that period, the expanding Turkish Empire was always a serious threat to Germany) would invade the land, kill the 'Godless' and leave the 'Faithful' unharmed, so that the Kingdom of God could be built. One peasant sold all that his family possessed in order to buy a crown, a sceptre and finery to present to Christ on his vengeful descent to Earth (and he was inevitably punished for this rebellious action).

The one common feature of all these theories and actions is this: that, instead of working gradually, openly and progressively for revolution in a favourable social climate, and developing a revolutionary theory accordingly, the radicals now found themselves in a completely opposite situation, where openness was negated into the secrecy of a closed exclusive sect, where revolutionary hope was negated into passive expectation or desperate action, where all the theories and practices of men such as Muntzer were raised to a new theoretical level. 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.'³

The expectation of the coming of God and of the Day of Judgment when the feudal system would be destroyed and replaced by an egalitarian millennium, was the subjective reaction to drastically altered objective circumstances. In that period, the radicals in fact combined the theories of Müntzer with the older medieval traditions of millenarianism and of the Bohemian Reformation of the 1420s — the Taborites in Bohemia set up a communistic community in the hope that they were thus establishing a 'safe' town which would remain unscathed by the wrath of God. Both the Taborites and the later Anabaptists, however, found their real meaning in the aspirations of the lower classes — mostly urban plebeians. Some of the Anabaptists suggested that the town of Mühlhausen in Thuringia — where Müntzer had reached the revolutionary peak of the social revolt

in the Reformation — was such a 'safe' town. Hans Römer thought Erfurt was the place. The role of a 'safe' town varied according to circumstances; sometimes it was a place to hide from destruction, sometimes it was a base for revolutionary activity in the countryside.

The men who led these Anabaptists, then, were mostly followers or admirers of Thomas Müntzer. Hans Hut, Hans Römer, Melchior Rinck — all had had decisive contact with him. Rinck was also the man who agitated in Hessen and who converted the men who, in 1534, found the truly astonishing Anabaptist 'Kingdom' in the town of Münster.

MUNSTER: A COMMUNE FOR THE LOWER CLASSES

The leaders of the commune of Münster were three outstanding Anabaptists: Jan Matthys, Bernhard Rothmann and Jan Bockelson (Jan van Leiden). Matthys was a baker from the Dutch town of Haarlem, who electrified the emerging Dutch Anabaptist movement with his calls for intervention in the process of history in place of the passive stance adopted until then. (It is remarkable that the most vigorous Anabaptist groups had a wide base in Holland where capitalism was developing in a close relationship with England, and that these economic links simplified both the conditions and instruments of spreading the radical doctrines.) Matthys came into contact with a Melchior Hoffman (and Hoffmann's teacher, Rinck) in Strasbourg in the years 1531-1532, and soon became the most important leader of the Melchiorite sect while its founders were sitting in prison. By 1534, cadres of this sect were travelling throughout Holland and north Germany, spreading the word that a 'New Jerusalem' would shortly be founded in Germany. In January 1534 the movement reached the town of Münster.

Bernhard Rothmann began his revolutionary career — like so many — as a Lutheran; in 1530, he began to spread the Reformation in Münster. The material conditions for these reforms in north Germany, we should note, were quite different from those in south Germany. During the uprising of 1525, while the entire south was blazing, there were only pockets of revolt, in towns, in the north. Since the town bourgeoisie of the north, with their flourishing economy, were already blessed with the 'democracy' which their poor cousins in the south sought, the Reformation was scarcely enough to draw them out of their counting-houses and on to the streets. The

north remained largely Catholic, and the plebeians were not encouraged to revolt by any example. So when the Lutheran Reformation arrived with its healthy Anabaptist child in tow, the attack on the Catholic Church was led by the plebeians. In 1532, the reformers had the guilds on their side, the churches were plundered, but in 1534, when two emissaries of the Melchiorite Anabaptists turned up and Rothmann decided himself for them, the entire power of the town fell into the hands of the radicals *within one month*.

This success would, of course, not have been possible without favourable material conditions. Among these conditions must be counted the development of the economy in Münster, which was just beginning to introduce capitalist relations of production between employer and employed, gradually wearing away the old patriarchal guild system and introducing instead a labour market where labour was bought as cheaply as possible. These relations were also beginning to embrace the peasantry. One must not forget also that Lutheranism — a truly moderate reforming force, cap in hand — had not had enough time to gain a foothold in what had been a camp of anti-Catholic grudge among the lower classes, and so their will to reform was tapped by a more radical group. And the boldness with which the Anabaptists intervened was also decisive.

The take-over was not without its problems. As soon as the 'Kingdom' was announced, and the people were told to repent of their sins, respectable citizens, Catholic and Lutheran, picked up their skirts and fled the town, scurried straight to the court of Bishop Franz of Münster and asked him breathlessly for protection and counter-measures. The benign bishop, anxious for his revenues (and the souls of his flock, naturally) immediately announced that 'he would make certain, with all his powers and the grace of God, that the good citizens would see and learn how he felt'. The grace of God, fortunately for the bishop, included a mercenary army and material assistance from his comrade archbishops and princes, and, at the beginning of March 1534, the state began a siege of the town, at first in the hope of assault, and then in the expectation of starving or tricking the inhabitants into submission.

The commune, then, rested on the almost unanimous support of the lower classes. The newly-elected revolutionary council was backed in every one of its measures. Messengers were sent out over north Germany, Friesland and Holland to invite Anabaptists and others to join the 'New Jerusalem'. And come they did, abandoning house

and home, walking for hundreds of miles, avoiding and not avoiding the ambushes laid by the feudal authorities, all in the hope that here at last was an escape from poverty and feudalism.

COMMUNISTIC MEASURES TAKEN

One of the first acts of the new republic was to establish the regime of the lower classes in no uncertain terms. On February 25, Jan Matthys proposed that 'since this Christian republic has begun so happily in the grace of God, but that it could not be of any duration if there were so many opinions, sects and continual disturbances, it was the will of God that this new Jerusalem, like the Temple, should be cleansed of all impurities; so he thought it useful that all Papists, Lutherans, Sacramentarians and all those who did not accept the doctrine, should be killed, so that a single body and a single republic should be founded and strengthened by new customs and Christian laws . . .'. This proposition met with enthusiasm, although it was finally amended to punish dissidents with expulsion.

With the seizure of political power complete, the Anabaptists turned to the reorganisation of the economy. Whatever the leaders of the commune thought *subjectively* about the purpose of their experiment — to wit, the establishment of a citadel for the Second Coming of Christ — *objectively* it was a bold start to an experiment in communism. Objective conditions determined the policies of the commune. These policies then found a form of 'divine confirmation' in the texts of the Bible — particularly of the Old Testament. The policies were given out as 'visions', 'dreams', and other manifestations of living experience. This was the language of Reformation, the old form containing the new content of revolution. To go forwards, men had to find support from the past. Thus, when the predicted Day of Judgment failed to materialise, and while the besieging army remained before the gates, it was necessary to impose a communism of consumption — public dining halls, shared foodstuffs and shared wealth, communal purchase of food from an often sympathetic peasantry. Such policies, we will not deny, found little favour among bourgeois historians. The learned Norman Cohn says of the early events that: 'The terror had begun and it was in an atmosphere of terror that Matthys proceeded to carry into effect the communism which had already hovered for so many months, a splendid millennial vision, in the imagination of the Anabaptists'.⁴ The professor cannot see the

wood for the trees; he does not understand that harsh measures — including the death sentence and exile — were absolutely vital for the survival of the commune. A single crack would have sufficed to open the town wide for the wrath of the state.

So the reforms that were undertaken were these: the establishment of a new democratic council of twelve men — mostly craftsmen — who were responsible to a specific district of the town, in matters social, judicial, economic and military. Each district had its own militia, each its own house for communal meals. A series of 33 'Articles' was drawn up to establish who was responsible for what, and to stress the communistic nature of the 'Kingdom'; for example, the 21st article said: 'So that gold and silver, both coined and uncoined, should be used in a correct and lawful way, Magnus Koehus, Konrad Kluse, Gerhard Reynick and Lukas Gruter should arrange with especial zeal that nothing should be distributed uselessly, but should be used in the public good according to the advice of the Elders.' All valuables and clothes and food were collected in — under severe penalties for hoarding — and redistributed. All privileges were annulled. All debts were cancelled. The economy was harmonised, organised and geared to the needs of civil war. The people of the town were given a thorough and continuous education in the ideas of Anabaptism. Rothmann in particular was a most able writer and propagandist, learned and popular at once; his writings of 1534 laid the theoretical foundation for future developments in this militant branch of Anabaptism, proclaiming the social equality of all men in the equality of the faithful with the saints of old.

Steps were also taken to win the support of the mercenary army; messages and messengers were sent out to spread the word. In early April 1534, under the delusion that he lived in the protection of God, Matthys and some companions went out to argue their case among the ranks. And were met with steel and death. With Matthys' death, the new leader of the movement was Jan Bockelson, a young Dutch tailor from Leiden, who had come with Matthys to Münster. Under Bockelson's guidance, the life of the community developed almost as far as the material historical conditions permitted; and although it is undeniable that Bockelson abused his position of power on several occasions, it is foolish to throw the social baby out with the individual bathwater, as moralistic commentators have done.

One of the innovations now introduced, with suitable Biblical justification, was polygamy. Polygamy! cried the Lutherans, and

invoked the wrath of God. But the truth is simpler: in a town of 11,000 inhabitants, around 7,500 were women and there were many children to be looked after. Given the economic development, it was simplest for each man of age to take two or three women; and this measure of July 1534 alleviated many social problems. That Bockelson collected 15 wives for himself is exceptional, and only gives colour to a necessary social law.

In September, Bockelson proclaimed himself 'King of the New Zion', in an effort to further legitimise the new regime with mystical phrases and Biblical actions. Two assaults on the town by the Bishop had already taken place, and although they had failed, the Bishop, desperate and in debt, was not going to lift the siege. Provisions in the town were running low. No more supplies or recruits could pass through the siege. In October another desperate attempt was made: twenty seven 'apostles' were chosen and sent out to raise support among the peasants and plebeians of the area. These 'apostles' turned up in the towns of Soest, Osnabrück, Warendorf and other places, gained some support, but were immediately and almost inevitably arrested and executed. Only one, Heinrich Graes, survived to tell the tale: for he sold his loyalty, turned informer, and was returned to Münster as an agent of the state.

The life of the town continued in this new revolutionary form for several months, with religious ceremony and ecstasy alternating with confident festivity. But the communism of consumption was not enough; and isolation exacted its price. Hunger, and then starvation set in; by the spring of 1535, the townspeople were reduced to eating cats, rats and grass. The state, as during the Paris Commune of 1871, showed no mercy. 'Inhumanity' was laid at the door of the Anabaptists. Tales of enslavement, rape and murder were broadcast; but all evidence indicates only civil order and severe punishment for common crime. The severity of the regime was imposed by material conditions and was not the result of the subjective 'dictatorial' will of Bockelson. Although the good bishop had problems from time to time in that his army demanded money and more money, he always found some old friend willing to finance him; the besieged had nothing. Anabaptists from Holland collected provisions, but could not get through; and indeed they themselves were involved in uprisings and a massive pogrom between March and May 1535.

By the third week of June it was all over. A section of the commune, becoming desperate, plotted with Heinrich Graes to open the gates of

the town and have done with suffering. On the 25th, the town was taken. There was plunder, rape and murder. All the leaders were arrested, interrogated, executed. In January of 1536, when the victors had paraded the fallen Bockelson enough, he and two other leaders were tied to a stake, tortured with red-hot pincers, and tortured to death, 'to the great applause of the priests'. Bockelson uttered no sound at his death. And finally, as a grisly warning to any surviving radicals, their bodies were shut in iron cages suspended from the church tower and left to rot. The grace of God in the Bishop Franz had conquered.

MUNSTER AS A SYMBOL

The experiment of Münster was crushed, perhaps inevitably. But the fame of what the radicals had done spread. Luther and his colleagues throughout Europe found themselves compelled to denounce this 'coarse devilry of Münster', in fear of repetition. The whole Anabaptist movement was split on the question of whether such a subjective impulse into history was correct. But the lower classes saw here a model of their own desires. The English Levellers disputed the atrocity stories and condemned 'that lying story of that injured people . . . the Anabaptists of Münster . . . Who writ the histories of the Anabaptists but their enemies?'⁵ In 1657, beholding the threat posed by the English radicals, William Hughes of Oxford felt obliged to write a tract condemning 'Münster and Abingdon, or the open rebellion there and the unhappy tumult here . . . With marginal notes on Müntzer and Mahomet'.

The English bourgeois revolution stirred up society once more, and there emerged the radical groupings — Levellers, True Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Anabaptists, Quakers, Proud Quakers, etc. — who desired a more far-reaching social revolution than the revolutionary bourgeoisie could safely offer. Their social experiments — like Winstanley's on St George's Hill — were directed against the rule of capitalism. But, although the radicals of England were far more conscious in political and economic philosophy than their predecessors (due to the material development of the productive forces), there is no doubt at all that they owed much to the Dutch-German Anabaptist movement, to the examples set by Thomas Müntzer and the town of Münster. Their philosophies were extraordinarily similar; their 'divine' justifications were the same; their stress on living experience

rather than imposed 'dead' theory as the determinant for action was identical; their preference for the militant Old Testament rather than the forgiving New Testament is striking. If, for the bourgeois, 'in Cromwell, Luther joins hands with Robespierre,'⁶ then we might also say of the lower classes that, in the Levellers and Diggers, Müntzer and the German Anabaptists link with the Chartists and the Paris Communards. A definite link can be established.

'What one bourgeois historian after the other has been repeating for the last four hundred years, that the Anabaptist regime in Münster was a dissolute orgy of inhuman cruelty and bestial lust — that is impudent invention and bare-faced lies.'⁷ In Münster, the closed community of Anabaptism tried to break beyond the limits set by historical development. In Anabaptism of the 16th and 17th centuries, the theory of sensual perception of reality as the primary source of knowledge was accepted and developed, preserving the ideological and class opposition to the feudal state for later generations. The class that nurtured it — the plebeians and pre-proletariat — was small and weak. The form of this thought was always religious and hence fantastic, but its content was social. The citizens of Münster provided the subjective impulse into history to make a further development of their theory possible; and Münster became, for many decades, the symbol of hope for an eternally oppressed class throughout Europe. The cages that hung from the church tower in Münster can still be seen; but today's revolutionary actions will not be strangled so easily.

Notes

¹ L. Trotsky, *Writings on Britain*, Vol.2 p.87. New Park 1974.

² For more on this episode and on Thomas Müntzer, see *Labour Review* Vol. 1, No.4, 1977.

³ Karl Marx, *Preface to 'A Critique of Political Economy'*.

⁴ N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p.264, London 1972.

⁵ In: C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p.120. London 1976.

⁶ Trotsky, *ibid*, p.92.

⁷ Franz Mehring, *Absolutism and Revolution in Germany*, p.22. New Park 1975