

Levellers or Diggers?

At the end of April a few hundred demonstrators occupied the site of the old Wisley airfield near George's Hill, in Surrey. This was where, in 1649, the Diggers had set up a communist community with the aim of starting a movement to make the Earth "a common treasury for all" again. The demonstrators called themselves the "New Levellers". This was appropriate because, like the original Levellers (but unlike the original Diggers), they were demanding a reform of the laws governing land ownership and use rather than the abolition of private property, as the leaflet we distributed pointed out.

Many of the Levellers of the 1640s, being inexperienced in rebelling against the injustices of the market, and yet to recognise the incompatibility between FREEDOM and PROPERTY, sought to reform and make just property relationships. For example, the Leveller leader, Lilburne, in March 1648 wrote that the Levellers had "been the truest and constantest asserters of liberty and property (which are quite opposite to communitie and levelling)".

THE TRUE LEVELLERS were the Diggers. Their ideas can serve as an inspiration to those of us in the 1990s who detest and reject the iniquities of the commercial system. The Diggers stood not for state ownership but COMMON OWNERSHIP: "The earth with all her fruits of Corn, Cattle and such like was made to be a common Store-House of Livelihood, to all mankind, friend and foe, without exception" (*A Declaration From the Poor Oppressed People of England*).

Where all wealth is commonly owned there will be no need for money. In the above-quoted *Declaration* the Diggers proclaimed that "we must neither buy nor sell. Money must not any longer . . . be the great god that hedges in some and hedges out others . . ." Production must be solely for use and all people able to take from the common store on the basis of FREE ACCESS. As Winstanley explained in his *Law of Freedom*: "As everyone works to advance the Common Stock so everyone shall have a free use of any commodity in the Storehouse for his pleasure and comfortable livelihood, without buying and selling or restraint from any". This is a wonderful and compelling socialist vision of a society where all things in and on the Earth are the common property of all; where all people give according to their abilities and take freely according to their needs; where money and other time-wasting features of property relationship are done away with. It is a practical alternative to capitalism's property mania.

Modern Tory defenders of property assert that owning things makes us free. This false equation between liberty and property was spread by the 17th defenders of property power, and was also accepted by several well-intentioned Levellers, just as it has been by subsequent leftists who have feared to break with the ideas of THE MONEY SYSTEM. In truth, property and money make us unfree. As Winstanley stated: "True freedom lies where a man receives his nourishment and preservation, and that is in the use of the Earth". Those in Britain living beneath the poverty line and the millions in the world dying from starvation should see the sense of that.

Socialists must learn from the wisdom of our Digger predecessors and have the boldness to state the case for A MONEYLESS WORLD SOCIETY – a case now more materially feasible and globally urgent than ever.

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