

BOOK REVIEWS

KENYON, TIMOTHY. *Utopian Communism and Political Thought in Early Modern England*. Pinter Publishers, London 1989. x, 286 pp. £27.50.

The core of Timothy Kenyon's book consists of a subtle and persuasive analysis of Thomas More's *Utopia* and Gerrard Winstanley's *Law of Freedom*, considered as related but contrasting exercises in utopian political and social thought. Kenyon's central concern is the meaning of these two works, as defined by intention and context, and it must be said that this produces some very interesting and thought-provoking arguments. Kenyon begins by defining, for each of these writers, the essential context in terms of his "conception of the human condition". In both cases, the Christian theology of the Fall of Man encountered the Aristotelian doctrine that the aim of the state is to promote the good life, which raised the question of how far human institutions can improve human prospects of virtue and, ultimately, salvation. Kenyon argues that while More retained an Augustinian pessimism about the potential of fallen human nature for improvement, Winstanley came to believe that the moral regeneration of humanity could be actively promoted by the reform of earthly institutions.

Kenyon provides a useful operational definition of the utopian form, as a literary exercise which defers to prevailing circumstances and world views in order to put forward proposals for amending the human condition by institutional means. Both writers chose this form in order to explore the possibilities of creating a human society which would facilitate rather than obstruct prospects of salvation for the individual, or indeed (in Winstanley's case) for the whole of humankind. Kenyon points out that, far from being a purely religious preoccupation distanced from the mainstream of political thought in Western Europe, a concern for the improvement of human character had been considered an important goal of the state since Plato. This concern was gradually superseded by those of utilitarian material improvement and natural rights by the end of the seventeenth century. Kenyon sees Winstanley's *Law of Freedom* as standing at the point of transition, combining the concern for salvation with the language of natural rights and a popularized Baconian belief in material improvement through scientific knowledge.

As far as More is concerned, Kenyon sees his aim in *Utopia* as going no further than "the neutralisation of man's propensity to sin". Private property and existing forms of political authority, far from limiting vice and disorder as classical and Christian theorists had claimed, could be seen to have given almost unlimited scope to the depravity of fallen human nature. A rationally planned communal society could restrain human beings' worst inclinations and improve prospects of salvation. Kenyon situates these propositions in the context of More's earlier and later religious writings, above all in his understanding of the doctrines of free will and divine grace. This enables Kenyon to counter J. C. Davis's contention that the totalitarian state of Utopia, with its manifold controls over human behaviour, deprives individuals of the capacity to make moral choices. More held to the view that human beings' capacity to choose the good was fatally weakened by original sin and stood in need of divine assistance (which More referred to as grace in its

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aspect of “prevention”) for any correct moral choice. If human institutions, as outlined in *Utopia*, could offer additional help to fallen humanity, this was not interfering with free choices but alleviating the terrible effects of Adam’s Fall on the human will.

This analysis is a compelling one, but it has potential weaknesses. Kenyon locates More’s thought on the human condition in the context of Erasmus and Colet’s northern Christian humanism, but he ignores the Italian tradition of humanist thinking on the condition of humankind. It is surprising, for example, to find no reference to Charles Trinkaus’s work on humanity and divinity in Renaissance thought, nor any consideration of the implications of More’s having translated a biography of Pico della Mirandola, author of the celebrated *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. For all their neo-Platonic spirituality, Pico and Ficino presented a more positive view of human capacity, which may have influenced More more than Kenyon allows.

Kenyon’s analysis of the thought of Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the Digger movement of 1649–1650, is exceptionally thorough and sensitive. Arguing against both those who claim that Winstanley evolved from a religious to a secular thinker, and their opponents who insist he was a consistent millenarian for whom digging was a symbolic action only, Kenyon sees Winstanley’s development as passing through three stages. In the first, he expected the millennium to come about by divine action, for which human beings must prepare but wait; in the second (the period of Digger settlement on the common lands), he believed that morally regenerated individuals should implement a social transformation immediately by inaugurating the communal society; in the third, the period in which he wrote *The Law of Freedom*, Winstanley turned to devising long-term social and political reforms which would be the instrument of a moral regeneration of humanity. This regeneration would remove the “curse” of the Fall, which Winstanley saw as a psychological weakness whereby each generation since Adam had inclined towards sin.

Kenyon is particularly attentive to Winstanley’s attitude to labour, which he saw not as a punishment laid on humanity but as a means to salvation; and to the Diggers’ strategy of bringing about the fall of private property and the “conversion” of property owners by withdrawing the labour of the poor from the landlords’ enclosures. He handles the notoriously thorny problem of *The Fire in the Bush*, a late but mystical tract, by allowing it to have been written in a period of uncertainty when the Digger settlements were facing failure and suppression. Aspects of the utopia presented in *The Law of Freedom* which Kenyon treats originally and convincingly are Winstanley’s patriarchalism, which he sees not just as residual sexism, but as part of the deliberate creation of a “sphere of private property” within the family; and his commitment to a hierarchy of authority based on age. (Brian Manning’s forthcoming work on the climax of the English Revolution includes a discussion of generational as well as gender conflict, and points out how most of the radical groups and sects came down on the side of the restoration of “order” in these matters.)

The main content of Kenyon’s book will thus be of great interest to social historians, who on the whole are inclined to recognize that the history of ideas is an important source of insights into the history of social change. Unfortunately, for Kenyon at least, the feeling is not mutual. His introductory chapter on “Philosophical Bearings” is dogmatic in its adherence to the principle that only ideas can be considered as the sources of further ideas, and his declaration of “methodolo-

gical pluralism" relates only to the circumscribed universe of debates among historians of ideas about the relevance of context to meaning. The differences between More's thought and Winstanley's are a central theme of this book, but Kenyon is adamant in his assertion that explanation for these differences "is not to be sought in any fundamental societal transformation that occurred between 1516 and 1652, but in the intellectual changes that had begun to inform the world of ideas by the mid-seventeenth century" (p. 234). In line with this principle, changes in concepts of property are attributed to advances in "the sophistication of legal theory" – though at one point Kenyon does hint that the buoyancy of the land market in England from the 1530s onwards may have had something to do with Winstanley's attitude to the buying and selling of land. The question of whether sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England underwent social changes which can be judged fundamental is, of course, a hotly debated one on which Marxists and revisionists have their entrenched positions. But historians such as Keith Wrightson and Barry Coward have presented balanced accounts which conclude that the question of deep and lasting changes in English society in this period cannot simply be brushed aside, as Kenyon seems to imply. To recognize this would oblige the historian of ideas to discuss the possible connections between social and intellectual change. The fence which many practitioners such as Kenyon have erected around "the History of Ideas" (and in many cases institutionalized in courses and departments in higher education) is a barrier which it is surely in the interests of both social and intellectual historians to demolish.

Finally, it has to be said that this book is sometimes hard to read because it has been rather badly produced. It contains a quite extraordinary number of uncorrected typographical errors, and some consistent spelling mistakes (presumably the author's) which have not had the attention of a conscientious editor; occasionally the meaning of a crucial sentence seems to have disappeared into some word processor's limbo. This is rather hard on undergraduate students and speakers of other languages, who are expected to derive their knowledge of English at least in part from academic books. If the content of a book is worth publishing (which this one certainly was), the text is surely worth editing carefully.

Norah Carlin

GRANDJONC, JACQUES. *Communisme/Kommunismus/Communism. Origine et développement international de la terminologie communautaire pré-marxiste des utopistes aux néo-babouvistes 1785–1842. Tome 1: Historique. Tome 2: Pièces justificatives.* [Schriften aus dem Karl-Marx-Haus, Nr 39/1,2.] Karl-Marx-Haus, Trier 1989. 559 pp. DM 35.00 per vol.

Jacques Grandjonc, who has already published pioneering studies on internal migration in Europe in the nineteenth century and on the early history of the expatriate German labour movement, has now published, with a ten-year delay, his doctoral thesis as one of the Karl-Marx-Haus Schriften. Readers have to prepare themselves for a tour around a scholar's workshop filled to the brim with items of terminological history. At the same time they can also indulge their own curiosity, for they will encounter an unexpected wealth of the most varied finds.

The starting-point for Grandjonc's investigation seems remarkably simple. He