

The Many-Headed Hydra

***Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the
Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic***



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VOLUME 4

CHAPTER FOUR

The Divarication of the Putney Debates



For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under; . . . I should doubt whether he was an Englishman or no, that should doubt of such things.

—Colonel Thomas Rainborough, *The Putney Debates* (1647)

AS DOROTHY HAZZARD and her band of Broadmead believers made their way to London during the mid-1640s, they crossed the river Thames at the village of Putney. With an alluvial plain to the north and hills to the south, Putney was a meeting place for travelers, as well as for commoners, household servants, market gardeners, and river workers such as the watermen, ferrymen, and fishermen who lived there. “Putney appears to have been at all times a considerable thoroughfare,” explained Daniel Lysons, the parish incumbent and historian of the 1790s. “It was usual formerly for persons traveling from London to many parts of the West of England, to proceed as far as this place by water.”¹

If Hazzard crossed the Thames at Putney in the autumn of 1647 on her return to Bristol, she would have seen the New Model Army encamped on the heath, ordered there by Oliver Cromwell to occupy strategic ground between the king at Hampton Palace and Parliament in Westminster. The soldiers had won great victories but now were restive, mutinous, and organized to advance their own interests. They wanted their wages, they wanted freedom from impressment, and they wanted provision for the wounded, widows, and orphans. They did not want to go to Ireland. Only a few months before, petitioning troops had wondered, “Have the Souldiers only, who have been Instruments to recover the lost

Liberties of the Nation, fought themselves into Slavery?" They considered themselves to be "free commoners of England drawn together and continued in arms in judgment and conscience for defence of their own and the people's right and liberties." They had advocated an end to slavery through the biblical jubilee, saying, "Ye may be free if ye will, be free now and ever, now or never, this is the seventh year, the year of jubilee." They had sidestepped General Thomas Fairfax and elected "agitators" to represent their interests. Fairfax had tried to suppress a soldier's petitions for wages but ultimately failed: "This was only as cutting off a *Hydra's* Head," he wrote, "for they began again, not so near the Head-Quarters, but in more remote Corners of the Army." Soon they presented their petition to a highly displeased Parliament.² Dan Wolfe writes, "The genius of war is audacious action, that of democracy, persuasion, tentative judgment, humility of mind." These were all in balance at Putney.³

Crossing at Putney in late October or early November, the Broadmead group may have passed Saint Mary's church at the time of the crucial debates between Cromwell, leading the officers of the army, on the one hand, and the agitators, representing the rank and file, on the other. The latter sat around the communion table of Saint Mary's, defiantly keeping their hats on as they discussed the future of England, indeed the very meaning of "England." The most powerful advocate for the common soldier at the Putney Debates was Thomas Rainborough, a member of a maritime family and a man of the sea himself. He had served in the navy until 1643, when he took a command in the Parliamentary army and fought bravely at Naseby, Sherburne, Oxford, Worcester, and Bristol, where we earlier saw him. The most radical of the leading officers in the New Model Army, he was affiliated with rank-and-file militancy and with soldiers who had returned to England from America to wage war against the king. He had opened London Bridge to the sectaries in the crisis of August 1647. He was also the virtual leader of the Levellers, perhaps the first political party of any kind and certainly the first democratic one, advocating law in the English language (proceedings had up to then been in Latin), the right to call witnesses, the right to a speedy trial, equality under the law, no impressment, religious toleration, jury trials, no double jeopardy, the right to confront accusers, and the abolition of capital punishment for theft. He emphasized the sovereignty and rights of "the poorest he that is in England," and was aware of the "many

scufflings between the honest men of England and those who have tyrannized over them.” One of these scufflings concerned the denial of access to the commons, which to Rainborough was the “greatest tyranny that was thought of in the world.” The gentry “turned the poor men out of doors”—that is, evicted them. Defending the popular right to the commons and the subsistence they afforded, Rainborough claimed that “God hath set down that thing as to propriety with this law of his, *Thou shalt not steal*.”⁴

Commonism and slavery defined the debate at Putney. On the other side was Henry Ireton, the learned and smoothly confident spokesman for the grandees and gentry. He, like Rainborough, was an active soldier, having fought at Naseby, Newbury, Gainsborough, Edgehill, and Bristol. After the capitulation of Oxford he married Cromwell’s daughter. In the debates he admitted frankly, “All the main thing I speak for, is because I would have an eye to property.” He took offense at Rainborough’s words about “the poorest he that is in England,” understanding clearly that they applied to people such as Francis, who were not English. Quoting the Mosaic Law to prop up the laws and authorities Rainborough attacked, he advised the assembled soldiers and indeed the entire nation, “*Honour thy father and mother*,” a maxim that “doth extend to . . . our governours.” Rainborough immediately perceived Ireton’s words as an argument for upper-class authority, whether kingly or Parliamentary, and answered impatiently, “The great dispute is, who is a right father and a right mother?” Since “the people of England . . . have not voices in the choosing of their fathers and mothers—they are not bound to that commandment.” His view paralleled that of Winstanley, for whom the father was the spirit of the community and the mother was the Earth. Colonel Nathaniel Rich meanwhile expressed the fear that if the propertyless four fifths of the kingdom voted, they might legislate “that there shall be an equality of goods and estates.” Rainborough explained the corollary: if only rich men ruled, then “the one part shall make hewers of wood and drawers of water of the other [four], and so the greatest part of the nation be enslaved.”

Putney thus became not only a geographic but a historical crossroads, one that has been interpreted in many ways over the last century. Three observations may be made here about the major interpretations. First,



*Meeting of the General Council of the Army, with agitators at right, 1647.
Thomason Tracts E409/25, by permission of the British Library.*

following the German socialist Edouard Bernstein, who used Putney to move revolutionary Marxism toward social democracy, one group of interpreters emphasized the origins of a broader franchise and citizenship in the debates of 1647. The project was parliamentary democracy; its subject was the respectable citizen worker.⁵ Second, in an hour of looming military defeat, on May Day, 1942, Aneurin Bevan, a Labour M. P. and future founder of the national health service, published an article under the name “Thomas Rainborough,” which helped to initiate the wartime political discussion that culminated in the Labour Party’s vic-

tory in 1945. The Putney Debates also held great meaning for British soldiers, including Edward Thompson, who carried in his knapsack a copy of the *Handbook of Freedom* (1939), in which Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay wrote, “It will be noticed how the word ‘common’ and its derivatives, now so strangely altered in drawing-room usage, appear and re-appear like a theme throughout the centuries. It was for the once vast common lands that the peasants took up arms; it was as the ‘true commons’ that they spoke of themselves when they assembled, and it was the aspiration of men not corrupted by petty proprietorship ‘that all things should be in common.’”⁶ Bevan summarized the debates in a single brilliant chiasmus of two breaths: “Either poverty must use democracy to destroy the power of property, or property in fear of poverty will destroy democracy.” Bevan’s project was the industrial welfare state; its subject was the industrial worker.⁷ Third, in September 1945 Ras Tafari Makonnen hosted the Pan-African Congress in Manchester. The delegates resolved, “We are unwilling to starve any longer while doing the world’s drudgery.” Among the independence seekers such as Nkrumah and Kenyatta were students of the Putney Debates, notably C. L. R. James, who saw their significance within the history of the struggle against slavery and empire.⁸ In this case poverty had no democracy to use in attacking property. The project of James and others was national liberation; the subject was the drudge worker.

The Putney Debates, ever patient of interpretation, have thus been useful to struggles for the vote, the welfare state, and colonial liberation.⁹ But there is more. We find two neglected themes: the struggle for the commons and the struggle against slavery. The author of *A Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* wrote that “man, following his sensuality, became an encloser, so that all the land was enclosed in a few mercenary hands and all the rest made their slaves.” The fork in the road at Putney pointed to either a future with the commons and without slavery, or to one with slavery and without the commons. The commons were a reality, not pie in the sky.

As soldiers at Putney gathered wood for their campfire, they knew that the debates had relevance to all commoners. Those in Putney, for example, enjoyed common pasture, furze, turf, gravel, underwood, and stones, as well as river resources of smelt, salmon, flounder, shad, roach,



*Colonel Thomas Rainborough, Putney debater.
Thomason Tracts, by permission of the British Library.*

dace, barbel, eel, and gudgeon. The debates had special urgency for those affected by the decision of Charles I in 1637 to enclose 236 acres of wastelands between Hampton Court and Richmond for a hunting park. Clarendon, the royalist, noted that the attack on common rights “increased the murmur and noise of the people,” which would eventually grow into a revolutionary clamor and bring down a succession of tyrants: Archbishop Laud, Lord Strafford, and King Charles I. The plunder of the Putney estate of his patron probably confirmed in a young Thomas Hobbes the love of private property and the loathing of the commons that he passed on to his pupil, the future Charles II.¹⁰

Rainborough spoke with angry eloquence against slavery. For slavery,

too, was a reality. As a military man, Rainborough was especially concerned about soldiers and sailors. “I would fain know what the soldier hath fought for all this while?” he asked. “He hath fought to enslave himself, to give power to men of riches, men of estates, to make him a perpetual slave.” He added, with bitter sarcasm, “We do find in all presses that go forth none must be pressed that are freehold men. When these gentlemen fall out among themselves they shall press the poor scrubs to come and kill [one another for] them.” Rainborough knew whereof he spoke. He had recruited soldiers among the mobility and ’prentices in St. Giles’s-in-the-Fields, a London parish that also contained a depot for children spirited to the West Indies. As a naval officer he had seen sailors resist impressment, and as a Leveller he knew that their resistance had registered in the *Agreement of the People*, a leveller’s attempt to provide a written constitution. They had warned that “the matter of impresting and constraining any of us to serve in the wars is against our freedom” and sworn that they would resist “slavish condition.” Impressment was slavery.¹¹

Another kind of slavery was being practiced a few miles downriver from Putney. Hardly a ship sailed for the West Indies, said a Parliamentary ordinance of 1643, without a cargo of the spirited. A specialist in the Virginia trade wrote, “The Servants are taken up by such men as we here call *Spirits*, and by them put into Cookes houses about Saint *Katherines*, where being once entred, are kept Prisoners untill a Mastter fetches them off; and they lye at charges in these places a moneth or more, before they are taken away when the Ship is ready, the *Spirits* charges and the Cooke for dieting paid, they are Shipped” to America. A precise vocabulary attended the practice: to “nab” was to take a person into custody; to “kidnap” was to seize a child; to “spirit” was to abduct and carry a person overseas; to “barbados” was to abduct someone and ship him or her to Barbados; and to “trepan” was to entrap or ensnare a person for labor. These slang terms came into existence in the 1640s and 1650s, but not without opposition: “Malitious tongues ha’s impaired it much: For it hath beene a constant report amongst the ordinaries sort of people, That those servants who are sent to Virginia, are sold as slaves.”¹² As late as 1660 ordinary parents pitifully followed ships carrying their children to the West Indies down river to Gravesend, “cryinge and mourninge for Redemption from their Slavery.”¹³

Rainborough also spoke out against African slavery, both the slavery of Europeans imprisoned in North Africa and that of Africans imprisoned for sale in the Americas. Rainborough's father, William, had led a naval blockade of eight ships against Sallé in North Africa in 1637; he had rescued 339 prisoners and returned to London in triumph. The Grand Remonstrance presented to the king in 1641 complained of the thousands of sailors lost to slavery. Richard Overton, the Leveller pamphleteer, saw a continuum of miserable slavery extending from the "aged, sick and crippled, begging your halfe-penny Charities," through those in naval vessels and "*the poore; your hunger-starved bretheren*" and "those whom your owne unjuste Lawes hold captive in your owne Prisons," to, finally, the "Gally-slave in Turkie or Argiere."¹⁴ Rainborough was concerned with the enslavement not only of English people; the signet ring he wore on his finger bore the image of "a Moor's head proper, wreathed argent, bearded sable." His official identity and the authority of his written word were thus represented by a symbol of liberation from slavery and an image of an African.

When Rainborough inveighed against slavery, he included mancipation of several kinds: the practice of impressment, spiriting or kidnapping to the Americas, the capture for forced labor of English people in West and North Africa, and the enslavement of Africans. Agitation against slavery was an essential element in the publications and practices of the Levellers. They fought to abolish slavery. What was at issue, then, was not a rhetorical abstraction of political propaganda, but something real, experienced, suffered, and known. A rough definition of slavery at the time would include these features: it began in an act of expropriation and terror; it affected children and young people particularly; it compelled violent exploitation; and more often than not, it ended in death. The hewers and drawers, or the laboring subjects of the Atlantic economy, met this definition in an era well before race or ethnicity came to define slavery.

Thomas Rainborough would not survive the English Revolution. He was assassinated by a royalist raiding party in 1648, to the grief of thousands of people who poured into the streets of London for his funeral. Yet what he stood for at Putney would flow down the Thames, where a hundred thousand seamen, watermen, and bargemen linked England to the Atlantic hydrographic system. For Thomas Clarkson, the abolition-

ist, rivers provided an image of freedom; for James Joyce, the smithy of the Irish soul, rivers transmitted languages. A recent student of rivers writes, "They are forever picking up solid matter in one place and putting it down in another."¹⁵ Rivers divaricate. From Putney, after 1647, would flow the ideas and practices of both freedom and slavery. A man, woman, or child might there embark upon a boat and, apart from transfers to other types of vessels, not disembark until reaching the harsh estuarial waters of the Shannon or the Liffey (Ireland); Bridgetown or Port Royal (the Caribbean); the Gambia or the Niger (West Africa); the Chesapeake or the Potomac (Virginia).¹⁶

NAPLES, 1647

On July 7, 1647, a Neapolitan fisherman named Masaniello led a protest by the market women, carters, porters, sailors, fishermen, weavers, silk winders, and all the other poor, or *lazzaroni*, of the second- or third-largest city in Europe.¹⁷ The rebellion began in the marketplace of Naples, where producers rural and urban discovered that the Spanish viceroy had levied a new *gabelle*, or tax, on the city's fabled fruit (Goethe believed that the Neapolitans had invented lemonade).¹⁸ The rebels turned the world upside down: galley oarsmen became captains, students were given books, prisons were opened, and tax records were burned. Nobles were forbidden to wear expensive garments, while their palaces were marked for destruction and their furnishings burned in the streets. "These Goods are got out of our Heart's Blood; and as they burn, so ought the Souls and Bodies of those Blood-suckers who own them, to fry in the Fire of Hell," cried one of the insurgents.¹⁹ The rebels decreed that anyone caught looting might be executed, so "that all the World may know, we have not enterpris'd this businesse to enrich ourselves but to vindicate the common liberty." The price of bread fell to rates consistent with a moral economy. This was the essence of the revolt, which Masaniello expressed in "savage eloquence." His preferred figure of speech, however, was not to be found in the rhetorical handbooks of the Renaissance; rather, it was the price list: "Look ye here, my Lads, how we are ridden, Gabel upon Gabel, 36 Ounces the Loaf of Bread, 22 the Pound of Cheese," et cetera, et cetera. "Are these things to be endured? No,

my Boys; Get my Words by Heart, and sound them thro' every Street of the City."

Although it lasted only ten days, the revolt of Naples in July 1647 marked the first time that the proletariat of any European city seized power and governed alone. Michelangelo Cerquozzi, the baroque painter, recognized the gravity of the event and painted *The Revolt of Masaniello* (1648) as a battle scene. Amid the tents and booths of the crowded market, the traffic of commerce, the herded livestock, the great barrel on the water wagon, that the hundreds of people have begun to take action is shown by new gestures of men bending for rocks, of bare arms raised, of pointed fingers. His is a sober assessment of an urban insurrection, equally without condescension or heroism.²⁰ An eighteenth-century historian raised his eyebrows and gasped, "After Ages will hardly believe what Height of Power this ridiculous Sovereign arrived to, who, trampling bare-foot on a throne, and wearing a Mariner's Cap instead of a Diadem, in the space of four Days, raised an Army of above 150,000 Men, and made himself Master of one of the most populous Cities in the worlde."²¹

Masaniello's story had special importance for the centers of European seafaring, England and Holland. English merchants had recently eclipsed their Italian counterparts in Levant shipping and now sent as many as 120 ships and three thousand sailors to Naples each year, with attendant desertions and turnovers. Sailors were a major source of information about the revolt. Less immediately effective but more lasting were the medallions struck in Amsterdam, the drama surreptitiously produced in London, and the translations of the first history of the uprising.²² In 1649 T. B. published a play entitled *The Rebellion of Naples or the Tragedy of Massenello commonly so called: but rightly Tomaso Aniello di Malfà Generall of the Neapolitans. Written by a Gentleman who was an eye-witness where this was really acted upon the Bloody Stage, the Streets of Naples*. In 1650 James Howell, an entrepreneur, a royalist, and literary man with connections to the Levant Company, translated Alexander Giraffi's *An Exact History of the Late Revolutions in Naples; and of Their Monstrous Successes*, and in the same year *The Second Part of Masaniello . . . The End of the Commotions*.²³ These were dedicated to the governor of the Levant Company with the reminder that,

*The people is a beast which heads hath many
England of late shew'd this more than any.*

Power and solidarity were themes of the play *The Rebellion of Naples*. On the frontispiece of its published text appeared an illustration of Masaniello himself, bare-legged and bonneted, overlooking a sky with a bare forearm hurling thunderbolts at a squadron of warships; Neptune raises his trident as squares of pikemen fail to prevent a few mariners from hauling the entire city of Naples from the sea to the beach. In his first monologue, Masaniello compares himself to a galley oarsman. The first words from the crowd, meanwhile, are the sailor's abiding principle of solidarity and the particular cry heard during the mutinies of 1626: "One and all, One and all, One and all."²⁴ Alluding to the English Levelers and John the Baptist (whose June feast day had been canceled in Naples for fear of tumult), Masaniello's adviser promises to "level the high walls of government with the earth they stood on: The Axe is already laid to the root." The Spanish viceroy refers to the furious beast with many heads and shamelessly asks, "How will you make your sauces, if you will not squeeze your Oranges? Or Wine, if you will not presse the Grape?"

Slavery, Africa, and the women of Naples were major concerns both of the play and of the translated history. One of Masaniello's advisers had been a slave in Algeria for nineteen years, and another had been a galley slave. The slave of a duke, a Moor, was freed. Masaniello had a daughter who was a blackamoor, who sang a song in praise of blackness. During the summer-festival ritual that actually provided the flashpoint of the insurrection, Masaniello led a group of teenagers masked in blackface who attacked a mock fort in the middle of the mercato. Giraffi compared the armed women and girls of Naples and their decisive street-fighting skills to so many Amazons. Masaniello's own wife was imprisoned for failing to pay the gabelle. The women vowed "they would burn the City, and themselves and Children along with it, before they would be Beasts of Burden any longer, and bring up their Children to be Slaves and Pack-Horses to a proud and haughty Nobility." T. B. compared the women to Ursula, the symbol of disorder in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. An old woman observing the black daughter suggested that she and the white daughter stop scrutinizing one another and instead look elsewhere, to "see what becomes of all the Money, and all the Land." *Cui bono*.



*Masaniello and his army of fisherman capturing Naples. T.B.,
The Rebellion of Naples, or the Tragedy of Massenello . . . (1649).
Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.*

The Rebellion of Naples combined persons, events, and ideas from both Naples and London, demonstrating a circulation of the experience of insurrection and suggesting a unity of class conflicts in a diversity of locations. The people had discovered their own strength; this was an autonomous insurrection whose force and power had to be respected—it could not be laughed off the stage. It remained a source of fear to the emerging politics of the bourgeois state; it also remained an example of hope for actual proletarians searching for justice, such as Thomas Spence, as we shall see later. In a notebook, Spinoza portrayed himself in the guise of the fishmonger.²⁵ John Locke sported with Masaniello to ridicule the divine right of kings. His friend James Tyrrell argued that even when the mobile, or urban mob, murmured at grievous taxes, it could not be justified in revolting because that inevitably led to vast spoilage of property, as Masaniello had proved.²⁶ Authorities in Maryland, New York, Massachusetts, Virginia, and London used the name of

Masaniello to tar political opponents. Tom Paine feared the name, but the soldiers, sailors, and commoners of the English Revolution did not. In November 1647, only a few days after the debates at Putney, a speaker in London said, “The same business we are upon is perfected in Naples, for if any person stand up for monarchy there, he is immediately hanged at his door.”²⁷

LONDON, 1649

If the Masaniello revolt and the Putney Debates of 1647 represented a high point of revolutionary possibility, the downfall began in 1649 with two exemplary executions. One seemed to kill the old regime of monarchy and hierarchy, the other the hope of a new regime based on neither of those. The first was the beheading of King Charles on January 30. A poor woman named Elizabeth Poole, of Abington, had twice advised the General Council of the army that though God “hath a controversie with the great and mighty of the earth,” they should have no “respect of persons” and therefore should not execute the king.²⁸ Many other radicals, Levellers included, also hesitated over the death of the king, but to no avail. An executioner disguised as a sailor decapitated him, and the Cromwellian republic was born in the bloodletting. The execution by firing squad of Robert Lockyer, a soldier, on April 27, originated in the grumblings of unpaid soldiers against what they called the “cutthroat expedition” to Ireland, which escalated into mutiny at Bishopsgate in April. Cromwell, fearing a general rising of “discontented persons, servants, reformadoes [and] beggars,” rode to Bishopsgate with Fairfax to lead the suppression of the mutiny, arresting a number of men, finding five guilty, and condemning Lockyer, a leader among the soldiers, to be shot at Saint Paul’s. When the moment of execution came, Lockyer disdained a blindfold and appealed to his executioners, brother soldiers, to put down their guns. They refused, fired, and killed him. Thousands, wearing green (the color of the Levellers and of Thomas Rainborough), thronged the streets of London at his funeral.

The executions of the king and the soldier came at a time when a portion of the revolutionary movement had begun to challenge capital punishment. The subject had attracted study by Thomas Browne, who in

1646 had published his thoughts concerning the biomechanics of decapitation, suffocation, crucifixion, and illagnation, and the various theatrical effects produced by each.²⁹ The critique offered by soldiers and religious radicals made the same connection that had been drawn in the Putney Debates, between expropriation and slavery. Samuel Chidley, a Leveller and a minister, once commented that if felons transported to America were “sold as slaves,” then “it is a worse slavery, yea, a great tyranny indeed, to take away their lives” by hanging.³⁰

Within a month of the execution of the king, the Council of State received information from Walton-on-Thames concerning Robert Everard, who had come to George’s Hill in Surrey “and sowed the ground with parsnips, carrots, and beans,” the signature action of the Diggers. The gesture was humble, but the Diggers’ hopes were not, for they saw their commune as a solution to the problems of expropriation, imprisonment, hanging, and slavery, not to mention hunger:

This freedom in planting the common Land, will prevent robbing, stealling, and murdering, and Prisons will not so mightily be filled with Prisoners; and thereby we shall prevent that hart breaking spectacle of seeing so many hanged every Sessions as they are. And surely this imprisoning and hanging of men is the Norman power still, and cannot stand with the freedom. . . . This freedom in the common earth is the poors right by the Law of Creation and equity of the Scriptures, for the earth was not made for a few, but for whole Mankind, for God is no respector of Persons.

Later the Diggers asked,

What need have we of imprisoning, whipping, or hanging Laws, to bring one another into bondage? and we know that none of those that are subject to this righteous law dares arrest or inslave his brother for, or about the objects of the earth, because the earth is made by our Creator to be a common Treasury of livelihood to one equall with another, without respect of person.

By taking direct action to repossess the land and by building about a dozen communes, the Diggers delivered themselves from slavery.³¹

To the Council of State, Everard’s planting seemed “ridiculous, yet

that conflux of people may be a beginning whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow.” Worried, Lord Fairfax interviewed Everard and Winstanley at Whitehall in April. They refused to remove their hats. Everard echoed the prophecy of Sarah and Dinah when he “said he was of the race of the Jews . . . but now the time of deliverance was at hand, and God would bring his people out of this slavery, and restore them to their freedom in enjoying the fruits and benefits of the Earth.” Winstanley defended himself in court in language that echoed Rainborough’s words at Putney: “I shew by the law of righteousness that the poorest man hath as true a title and just right to the land as the richest man.” Fairfax concluded that the alternative example of the Diggers was too dangerous to escape destruction. He personally led a troop of horse to the most important of the communes, George’s Hill, and drove the commoners off the land, breaking their spades, trampling the crops, and destroying their houses. Among the first acts of the leaders of the young English republic was thus direct military intervention on behalf of private property. They feared that rural commoners and the city proletariat might join forces in the conflux as they had done in Naples.

Winstanley and the Diggers more broadly believed that the death penalty was logically related to the enclosure movement. Kingly power “hedges the weake out of the Earth, and either starves them, or else forces them through poverty to take from others, and then hangs them for so doing.”³² Given that the poor were forced to work beneath subsistence, “this Law that frights people and forces people to obey it by Prisons, Whips, and Gallows, is the very kingdom of the Devil, and Darknesse, which the Creation groans under at this day.” Robert Coster queried “whether the Lords of the mannors, do not hold their Right and Title to the Commons, meerly from the Kings Will . . . and whether the strongest point in their Law for the keeping up their Title, be not, *Take him Jaylor?*” The author of *Tyranipocrit Discovered* advanced similar arguments in 1649, and with Atlantic scope. This abolitionist tract denounced the slavery being developed in America, of both poor people and Indians. The idle rich commanded others to labor, the thieving rich commanded others not to steal, and together they made thieves by Act of Parliament and hanged them. Yet God was no respecter of persons.³³

Samuel Chidley considered the death penalty an abomination that

defiled the land with blood. He petitioned the Lord Mayor in June 1649, announcing that since the penalty is “inhuman, bloody, barbarous, and tyrannical,” capital laws “are no rules for me to walk by.” He also petitioned the Council of State, warning that “the foundations of the earth are out of course.” He visited the Old Bailey, where he “observed that the [inmates] . . . are poor labourers, and such creatures, who stole things of a small value, peradventure, for mere necessity.” The magistrates threw him out. He advised Parliament to lay the ax to the root: “Certainly the law cannot be good, that forceth all men to prefer the meanest thing before the greatest, that is, a little wicked mammon with an idolatrous badge upon it, before a man’s precious life.” In 1652, as lay minister at Christ Church, Newgate, he published *A Cry Against a Crying Sin*, which was printed in red ink. He tried to nail the book to the Tyburn gallows, but the crowd was too dense, so he was “forced to nail it to the tree, which is upon the bank by the gallows,” where it was read by many. An anonymous writer joined Chidley in pointing the finger of shame: “For man to inclose all Lands and Creatures from his kind, is utterly unnatural, wicked, and treacherous. . . . Mark this you great Cormudgings, you hang a man for stealing for his wants, when you your selves have stole from your fellow Brethren all Lands, Creatures, &c.”³⁴

Following the regicide, the Levellers sought to ally with, in turn, the rural poor, the urban proletariat, and finally the soldiers in the army, but the execution of Robert Lockyer indicated the beginning of their end. Cromwell thumped the table and explained to Fairfax, “I tell you sir, you have no other way to deal with these men [the Levellers] but to break them in pieces,” for “if you do not break them they will break you.” Two weeks later the military power of the Levellers was tested at Burford. Levellers were rounded up and imprisoned, assassinated, executed, and exiled, but their ideas could not be contained. Despite near famine conditions, the London bourgeoisie gloated with a day of feasting. Abiezer Coppe objected in the most powerful single rant of class-war jubilee of the time, called *A Fiery Flying Roll: A Word from the Lord to All the Great Ones*. Levellers “were the cause of many turbulent commotions, which like Hydra’s heads, one being lopped, others instantly sprouted up,” as was observed as late as 1656.³⁵ So the killing of Lockyer, while not a martyrdom on the royal scale, helped to assure the survival of the ideas of the Levellers:

*Their self-will is their law, stand up now, stand up now,
 Their self will is their law, stand up now.
 Since tyranny came in they count it now no sin
 To make a gaol a gin, to starve poor men therein.
 Stand up now, stand up now.*

*The gentry are all round, stand up now, stand up now,
 The gentry are all round, stand up now,
 The gentry are all round, on each side they are found,
 This wisdom's so profound, to cheat us of our ground.
 Stand up now, stand up now.*

“The Digger’s Song” ended on a Francis note: “Glory here, Diggers all.” Once the antinomian challenge had been defeated, the way was open to conquer Ireland, to wage war against the Dutch and the Spanish, to stabilize Barbados, to seize Jamaica, and to establish slavery more broadly than ever by linking West Africa with the Caribbean.

IRELAND, 1649–1651

On March 29, 1649, the day after the Leveller leadership had been crushed by the arrest of John Lilburne, William Walwyn, and Richard Overton, Cromwell agreed to take charge of the expedition to conquer Ireland. Thus commenced “the Via Dolorosa of the Irish,” as James Connolly wrote, and, its historical corollary, the beginnings of the “green Atlantic.”³⁶ Once Cromwell’s Irish expedition had been announced, opposition to it grew quickly throughout the army in April and May. The author of *The English Soldiers’ Standard* warned that the officers intended to enslave the soldiers and advised the election of new agitators. The newsbook *Mercurius Militaris*, published by John Harriss, explained that “this Irish Design” was meant “to keep this nation in slavery.” The Levellers, for their part, circulated the mildly titled *Certain Queries Propounded to the Consideration of such as were Intended of the Service of Ireland*, which posed questions far from mild: “Whether Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, William Duke of Normandie, or anie other the great Conquerors of the world, were anie other then so manie great and lawless thieves?” The Levellers knew the Irish expedition was a diversion:

“If they could but get us once over into Ireland (they thinke) they have us sure enough: either we shall have our throats cut, or be famished, for they are sure we can never get back againe over the Great Pond.” A Leveler leaflet questioned the right of Englishmen “to deprive a people of the land God and nature has given them and impose laws without their consent.” The author wondered whether the Irish were not justified “in all that they have done . . . to preserve and deliver themselves from the usurpations of the English,” and declared that it was the duty of every honest man to oppose Cromwell’s campaign. While open resistance was quelled, thousands deserted.³⁷

Cromwell departed Bristol in July for Dublin. His destination was Drogheda, where massacre was dealt out. Cromwell described his approach: “Every tenth man of the soldiers killed, and the rest shipped off for the Barbadoes.”³⁸ Cromwell estimated that 2,100 were killed; Hugh Peter placed the number at 3,552. Two years later Ireton, the defender of property in the Putney Debates, laid siege to Limerick on the Shannon. “Ireton was content to rest his hopes mainly on famine and on the plague which raged within the walls,” writes one historian, but we must add that he had the heavy guns and the gallows with which to enforce the famine. “One old man desired to be hanged instead of his daughter, ‘but that,’ says Ludlow, ‘was refused, and he with the rest driven back to town.’ A gibbet was then raised in sight of the walls, upon which condemned criminals were hanged, and this stopped the exodus.” Thousands perished during the siege, including Ireton himself, who caught cold and died.³⁹ According to Gardiner, a new capital-punishment statute for Ireland put eighty thousand at risk of execution. Sir John Davis had argued a generation earlier that Ireland was barbarous precisely because, unlike other, well-governed kingdoms and commonweals, it did *not* have a death penalty.⁴⁰

Cromwell next turned his attention to seizing land, in order to pay the soldiers and the investors in *Adventures for Lands in Ireland* (including, at two hundred pounds apiece, Thomas and William Rainborough).⁴¹ The Army Council debated whether “to eradicate the Natives” or merely “to divest them of their Estates.”⁴² A few years later, in 1652, the preamble of the Act for the Settlement of Ireland decided the issue: the landlord system was installed. It was “not the intention of parliament to extirpate that whole nation,” for the land could not be cultivated “without the



*A "poore Souldier" in the New Model Army in Ireland.
The humble Petition of us the Parliaments poore
Souldiers in the Army of Ireland (1647).*

help of the natives." Fixed enclosures replaced open fields, single dispersed farms replaced nucleated settlements or the clachan, commercial tillage and an increase in agricultural labor replaced subsistence strips and environmental egalitarianism. This ruthless transfer of the land of Ireland to an immigrant landlord class was accompanied by a major cadastral mapping enterprise, Sir William Petty's Down survey of the 1650s, which put Ireland "down" on paper.⁴³ And it brought a wave of "rude persons in the country, [by] whom [the landlords] might expect often to be crossed and opposed," also known as tories, a name that

was first officially applied in 1647 to masterless men living a life of brigandage.

The labor of the dispossessed Irish would now be deployed on the estates of English masters, not only in Ireland but across the Atlantic. Cromwell sent thousands of Irish to Jamaica.⁴⁴ This was not a wholly new experience, as indicated by Hugh O'Neill on the eve of the defeat at Kinsale in 1601: "We Irishmen are exiled and made bond-slaves and servitors to a strange and foreign prince." A thousand Irish slaves had been sold to Sweden in 1610.⁴⁵ Sir William Petty estimated that one sixth of the adult males, some thirty-four thousand men, were shipped out of Ireland and sold abroad in the aftermath of the 1649 conquest. By 1660 there were at least twelve thousand Irish workers in the West Indies, and nine years later, eight thousand in Barbados alone. "Though we must use force in taking them up, . . . it is not in the least doubted that you may have such numbers of them as you see fit," wrote Henry Cromwell in response to a request from Jamaica for a thousand Irish girls and a thousand boys. The poet lamented,⁴⁶

*Tribeless, landless, nameless,
Wealthless, hostless, fameless
Wander now thine aimless
Children to and fro.*

In addition to the boys and girls and land, knowledge was taken, too. Robert Boyle received huge masses of Irish lands, the profits from which helped to maintain the Royal Society, which also benefited from the trade secrets that Boyle appropriated from the art and mystery of the Irish craftsman. He was impressed, for example, by "a smith, who with a hammer . . . can out of masses of iron, forge great bars or wedges, and make those strong heavy chains, that were employed to load malefactors, and even to secure streets and gates" in order to protect property in Ireland and to produce more of it overseas.⁴⁷

BARBADOS, 1649

Irishmen were among the conspirators who plotted in 1649 to make themselves freemen and masters of Barbados. The successful cultivation of sugar, brought by the Dutch from Pernambuco, Brazil, to the island

in 1640, had intensified the exploitation of plantation workers. Richard Ligon, an eyewitness, believed the conspiracy involved a majority of the servant class, which at the time numbered near ten thousand. He saw the event as a direct response to the cruelty of the masters, which caused the servants to seek freedom or die in the act. They never reached the moment of action, however, as an informer alerted the authorities to their plan. Hundreds were arrested, many tortured, eighteen executed. The leaders were “so haughty in their resolutions, and so incorrigible, as they were like enough to become actors in a second plot.” Despite the executions, resistance to slavery continued, including a new plot organized by Africans.⁴⁸

By the late 1640s the masters of Barbados had much wealth to protect from those who had produced it. After visiting the island in August 1645, George Downing wrote, “If you go to Barbados, you shall see a flourishing island, many able men. I believe they have brought this year no less than a thousand Negroes, and the more they buy, the better able they are to buy, for in a year and half, they will earn (with God’s blessing) as much as they cost.” When Richard Ligon first arrived in Bridgetown, in 1647, he counted twenty-two ships in the harbor, “quick stirring and numerous.” The 1651 charter of Barbados noted that the principal source of “wealth of the inhabitants of the island consisteth chiefly in the labour of their servants.” Barbados became England’s wealthiest colony, and “one of the richest Spots of earth under the Sun.”⁴⁹

Barbados was described as “the dunghill whereon England doth cast forth its rubbish. Rogues and whores and such people are those which are generally brought here.” True enough: the first cargo of convicts reached Barbados in 1642. An act of 1652 permitted English magistrates summarily to seize vagrants or beggars and ship them to the plantations. A shipload of prostitutes from the jails of London was transported to Barbados as breeders. Besides these, the island was inhabited by all sorts: English, French, Dutch, Scots, Irish, Spanish Jews, Indians, and Africans. Heinrich von Uchteritz, a German mercenary who fought for Charles Stuart, was sold to a plantation that had “one hundred Christians, one hundred Negroes, and one hundred Indians as slaves.” The Native Americans were mostly Guianese Arawaks, who came to the island early on as free people but were enslaved by 1636. English servants and African slaves ar-

rived in the first English ships in 1627, and the Irish in the 1630s; two thousand per year came from England in the 1640s, and three thousand in the 1650s. They were sometimes sold according to their weight. Many were veterans of the English Revolution—soldiers, “familists”—who became poor planters, propertyless freemen, and indentured servants. Some of them, in antinomian fashion, denied all ordinances. George Fox visited Barbados in 1671 and preached similar notions to “the *Blacks*, the *Taunies*, and the *Whites*.”⁵⁰ The planters moved against religious radicals suspected of involvement in the conspiracy of 1649 by banishing 122 men.

The sugar planters imposed a puritanical work discipline, which to the slave embodied a Satanic principle in both the physics and the economics of accumulation: “The Devel was in the English-man, that he makes every thing work; he makes the *Negro* work, the Horse work, the Ass work, the Wood work, the Water work, and the Winde work.”⁵¹ It took four decades to clear the island’s xerophilous forest, with its ironwood, rodwood, tom-tom bush, and hoe-stick wood. The final phase of deforestation began in 1650, after which coal had to be imported from England to keep the sugar boiling. The successful cultivation of sugar relied upon a labor process of multiracial gangs in the canefields:

trash, windmill, crack bubble o vat in de fac’try
load pun me head, load in de cart, de mill spinnin spinnin spinnin
syrup, liquor, blood o de fields, flood o’ the ages.

The workers of the early plantation system were chattels; their labor was organized and maintained by violence. Floggings and brandings left bodies scarred beyond the imagination, or so thought Father Antoine Biet, who witnessed these punishments in 1654. Orlando Patterson has written that “the distinction, often made, between selling their labor as opposed to selling their persons makes no sense whatsoever in real human terms.” The same Devil controlled all.⁵²

Resistance included running away, arson, murder, revolt. The Irish, according to Governor Searle in 1657, wandered around as vagabonds, refusing to labor. James Holdip, a planter, watched cane fields worth ten thousand pounds go billowing up in flames in the year of the conspiracy, 1649. In 1634 servants had conspired to kill their masters and make them-

selves free, then to take the first ship that came and go to sea as buccaneers. Their leaders, John and William Weston, had experienced the antienclosure riots surrounding Bristol in the 1620s and 1630s.⁵³ Cornelius Bryan, a redheaded Irishman, was flogged, imprisoned for mutiny, and eventually deported. “As he was eating Meat in a Tray,” he said “that if there was so much English Blood in the Tray as there was Meat, he would eat it, and demanded more.” The cooperation between such redshanks and African slaves was a nightmare for the authorities. The Governor’s Council announced in 1655 that “there are several Irish Servants and Negroes out in rebellion in ye Thicketts and thereabouts,” making a mockery of a law passed in 1652, “An Act to Restrain the Wanderings of Servants and Negroes.” The first recorded group of maroons in Barbados was interracial, as was the cage in the capital, Bridgetown, into which recaptured runaways were thrown. “What planters feared most of all was a rebellious alliance between slaves and servants,” explains the historian of Barbados, Hilary McD. Beckles. Irish and Africans conspired together in plots of 1675, 1686, and 1692. The “Black Irish” emerged as a regional ethnicity in Montserrat and Jamaica.⁵⁴

To stabilize their regime, the rulers of Barbados separated the servants, slaves, and religious radicals from each other. This they accomplished in the 1650s and 1660s, with inadvertent help from Oliver Cromwell, microbes, and the “spirits.” In Cromwell’s Western Design of 1655, a naval squadron headed by Venables and Penn stopped off at the island and carried away some four thousand servants and former servants of Barbados to attack Jamaica and seize it from Spain. Most of them died of yellow fever. As servants left the island or perished, the big planters replaced them with African slaves, who by the 1660s were being provided by slave traders in greater numbers and at lower prices than traders of indentured servants could offer. The upper class also used informal policy to create division, instigating criminality and taking comfort as workers quarreled among themselves. Morgan Godwyn explained this as the politics of “Tush, they can shift”:

An effect of their scant allowance of Food to their Slaves [is] the many Robberies and Thefts committed by these starved People upon the poorer English. Of which, I should affirm their owners to

be the occasion, by thus starving of them, I think I should not hit much either beside, or beyond the Mark. That they are not displeased at it, if dexterously performed, is the general belief and sense of the Sufferers: And this is said to be the true meaning of that customary reply, Tush, they can shift, to the Stewards and Overseers requests for a supplie of the Negro's want of Provision.⁵⁵

In this scenario, starvation produced theft, to which the poor English responded by shooting the thieves dead. The division between servant and slave was codified in the comprehensive slave and servant code of 1661, which became the model for similar codes in Jamaica, South Carolina, Antigua, and St. Christopher. The planters legally and socially differentiated slave from servant, defining the former as absolute private property and offering the latter new protections against violence and exploitation. The effort to recompose the class by giving servants and slaves different material positions within the plantation system continued as planters transformed the remaining servants into a labor elite, as artisans, overseers, and members of the militia, who, bearing arms, would be used to put down slave revolts. The policy of “Tush, they can shift” was institutionalized as a permanent structural characteristic of American plantation society. Once the abolitionism of the English Revolution was defeated, sugar production increased threefold in Barbados.⁵⁶

THE RIVER GAMBIA, 1652

Following the executions of 1649, the Irish invasion, and the defeat of the servant rebellion in Barbados, two of the main rivals of the era, Oliver Cromwell and Prince Rupert, took different paths to same destination, West Africa—one politically, the other actually. Rupert, the opponent of Rainborough at the siege of Bristol in 1643, nephew of the beheaded King Charles I, and cousin of the future King Charles II, took to the seas as a royalist privateer with his brother, Prince Maurice. Cromwell meanwhile pursued an aggressive strategy designed to reduce Dutch might and establish England as the preeminent maritime power of the Atlantic. The two halves of the English ruling class (the “new merchants” and the old aristocrats) met and clashed at the river Gambia, where they created

the triangular slave trade. The English were the major slavers in Africa at the end of the seventeenth century, but not at the beginning.⁵⁷ In fact, in 1623 one English trader, Richard Jobson, when presented in Gambia with “certaine young blacke women,” made answer, “We were a people who did not deale in any such commodities, neither did we buy or sell one another.” This would change by 1649.

The drama of the slave trade lies in the way the people of the river were caught between two historic forces, commonism and slavery. Léopold Senghor, the poet of Négritude, says that the “Negro African society . . . had already achieved socialism before the coming of the European.”⁵⁸ W. E. B. DuBois revered the human warmth of the West African village. Walter Rodney characterized political organization as chieftancies and “ethnicities organized communally.” The river Gambia is a major water-course of Africa, navigable for five hundred miles. Jobson observed that the Mandingo agriculturalists seeded their fields using a series of iron-tipped hoes: “One leading the way, carries up the earth before him, so many others following after him, with their several Irons, doing as he leadeth, as will raise up a sufficient furrow.”⁵⁹ Rice grown by Jola women in freshwater swamps was the major subsistence crop and would later form the basis for the South Carolina rice culture. The chief estuarial commodity was salt. Canoes traded in fish and the oysters of the mangroves. James Island was fortified in 1651, and rights were negotiated with the Niimi people to hew wood and draw water on the mainland. The Jola people on the southern bank would never recover from the slave trade. Nasir al-Din (d. 1674), a religious revolutionary and Berber cleric, preached naked in the villages to overthrow the dynasties corrupted by the slave trade, which would become a state enterprise by the end of the century.⁶⁰

In the storied year of 1649, British merchants ordered the construction of a trading fort, or factory, on the Gold Coast.⁶¹ At the same time the Guinea Company, first founded in 1618, was scrutinized by the “new merchants” and the Council of State, receiving a new charter in 1651, when ships were dispatched to West Africa. Matthew Backhouse, a representative of the Guinea Company and a triangulator of trade among England, Africa, and the West Indies, sailed to the river Gambia in September 1651 with Captain Blake aboard the *Friendship*. Their purpose

was to establish regular trading relations and to obtain fifteen or twenty “young lusty Negroes of about 15 yeares age” to carry to Barbados. Backhouse himself traded for twenty-five elephant teeth and African textiles, the esteemed “Mande country cloth” whose staggered bright colors influenced the visual traditions of Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States.⁶² They arrived in Gambia soon after a previous English ship had suffered a mutiny in which the slaves “got weapons in their hands, and fell upon the Saylor, knocking them on the heads, and cutting their throats so fast” that the master, in despair, “went down into the Hold, and blew all up with himself; and this was before they got out of the River.” Such events caused the Guinea Company to stock its ships with “shackles and boults for such of your negers as are rebellious and we pray you be veary carefull to keepe them under and let them have their food in due season that they ryse not against you, as they have done in other ships.”

After Prince Rupert was defeated by Rainborough at Bristol, he escaped to Kinsale, the Irish port, where he provisioned and manned a small fleet before setting out to roam the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, hoping to keep Barbados royalist. In December 1651 Rupert watered at Arguin, tucked under Cape Blanc, near the waters of the dreadful disaster memorialized in Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*. Rupert hired a pilot in the Cape Verde Islands, then another in the mouth of the Gambia River, then a third, a *grometta* named Jacus. A creole population of mixed African and Portuguese, beginning in the fifteenth century and known as *lançados*, acted the part of intermediaries. For his part, Jacus served first the Cromwellians and then the royalists.⁶³ Upriver in a tributary on March 2, Rupert captured two English merchant ships, the *Friendship* and the *Supply*, whose crews were weakened by malaria, before sailing on March 18 for Cape Mastre and the town of Reatch.

Jacus advised a stop. “Some of them stole off in one of their canoes a sailor of Prince Maurice’s, a native of that place, who lived long among Christians, and was become one himself; but upon promise of the others that he should return aboard again, he went with them to visit his parents.” The muster books of the era reveal scores of absences from any given ship, so this was hardly unusual. Nevertheless, the prince, resolving to capture the sailor by force, sent a hundred men after him, who were

dislodged from their boats in the surf. Two gentlemen, Holmes and Hell, were taken hostage. Of Hell we know little, but Holmes helped to form the imperial nation. Here followed a rapid series of events on sea and shore in which nautical power confronted indigenous people (“the beach of dreams, and insane awakenings,” wrote Césaire). A canoe paddled out to treat. One of the men was slain. The prince ordered out another hundred musketeers. The natives “sent a considerable party of men into the sea, as high as their necks, to impede our landing who, as soon as they saw us present at them, dived under water to avoid the execution of our shot; and then appearing, gave us a volley of arrows . . . until one of their arrows unfortunately struck his Highness Prince Rupert above the left pap, a great depth into the flesh, who called instantly for a knife, and cut it forth himself.”

This was enough, and thanks to Jacus, the others were rescued, rowed quickly back to their ships, and sailed away. Jacus himself remained, declining the offered rewards of Rupert, preferring the intermediating topography, the beach or estuary, between land and sea. Oral historians of the locality, the griot, remember not only Kunta Kinte and the “saga of an American family,” for this was the region of *Roots* (1976), but multitudes of sagas of centuries of European violence on the beaches.⁶⁴ Why was this African sailor so important to Rupert? Was it his linguistic ability? His knowledge of the region? His skills as a mariner? Or was it his transatlantic knowledge of American slavery, which might prove dangerous to English interests in the region? The tale we tell is not a family saga but one of class forces at the critical meeting of the sailor of the European deep-sea ship and the boatman of the African canoe. This meeting contained the possibility of cooperative resistance against a common enemy who in this case would bear the scar of it for the rest of his days.

No sooner had Rupert begun to retreat than a mutiny broke out on one of his ships and carried it away. A second mutiny then occurred in the Cape Verde Islands, led by William Coxon. With him were the cooper, the gunner, the boatswain, the master’s mate. Such officers spearheaded the 1648 mutiny. Capp quotes a gunner who claimed to be “above ordnances.”⁶⁵ The ship had 115 men on board—French, Spanish, Dutch, English, and many Africans. Twenty-five of this multilinguistic, multiethnic crew became active mutineers.⁶⁶ They changed the name of the

ship from *Revenge of Whitehall* (Charles Stuart had been beheaded at Whitehall) to *Marmaduke*, under which name it would sail in 1655 to the Caribbean with Venables and Penn. In 1649 the tenth query to the troops going to Ireland had been “whether those that contend for their freedom (as the English now) shall not make themselves altogether unexcusable, if they shall intrench upon other’s freedom; and whether it be not an especial note and characterizing badge of a true pattern of freedom, to endeavor the just freedom of all men as well as his own?”

The encounters on the river Gambia in the year 1652 continued to shape the lives of Prince Rupert and Robert Holmes, who in turn shaped the course of English Atlantic history. Robert Holmes would twice return to Gambia, first in 1661 to seize what would become James Island, the main English fortification on the river, and later, in 1663–64, to attack the Dutch factories. When he sailed by the place where he and Rupert had battled the boatmen years before, he remembered, “At this Portudally [Portudal] if it had not been for God’s providence I had been murdered by some of the Blacks of the Country on shore.”⁶⁷ Building his career at a time when the navy was becoming the formative institution of the nation, Holmes personally precipitated two world wars. James Island in particular and the river Gambia in general became “the main stronghold of the English in the northern part of Africa during all the history of the African Companies.” Dryden praised him: “And Holmes, whose name shall live in epic song . . . who first betwitched our eyes with Guinea gold.” Dryden praised Rupert, too, as an eagle, a messiah who “shook aloft the fasces of the main.” Rupert became the driving force in the rechartering of the Royal African Company in 1660 and again in 1663, after the restoration of Charles II to the throne. This charter laid pompous claim to the entire maritime interface from the Pillars of Hercules to the Cape of Good Hope, “and all the singular Ports, Harbours, Creeks, Islands, lakes, and places in the parts of Africa.” The weird speech-act of magical usurpation can be compared with the bat in the baobab tree who poked his head out to tell the first king (or *mansa*) of Niimi, “I do not deny your claim of having found a country, but whatever country you have found, it has an owner.”⁶⁸

So the incident of Rupert’s breast wound reminds us, first, that the workers in the slave trade participated only under certain conditions—in

this case, a sailor's being permitted shore leave to say farewell to his family—and second, that the fastest-growing parts of the proletariat were sailors and African slaves. The sailors were multiracial—Irish, English, African—and a center of this Afro-maritime world was London. Although Backhouse himself was unable to return to London, his cargo did, and it included “one niger boy” at a time when “Black Tom” was becoming a London stereotype. In Westminster Tom introduced himself to an old miser: “Gwide Maystre, Me non Inglant by mine Phace, none Inglant by mine Twang: Me de grecat strawnger of Aphric, me de pherry phull of Maney.” Tom, who had never been out of England in his life and spoke no other language but English, was a trickster who manipulated the Londoners' greed and prejudice against outlanders to turn the situation to his own advantage.⁶⁹

LONDON, 1659–1660

If the Putney Debates of 1647 revealed the English Revolution as an abolitionist movement, a 1659 Parliamentary debate on slavery and the “freeborn Englishman,” held on the eve of the restoration of Charles II and the Stuart monarchy, marked a counterrevolutionary reversal. Circumstances had changed since Francis and Rainborough questioned the relationship between slavery and freedom at the peak of revolutionary possibility. Domestic repression of the radicals had made possible new adventures for the English bourgeoisie in Ireland, Barbados, Jamaica, and West Africa. On March 25, 1659, Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle petitioned the House of Commons “on behalf of themselves as of three score and ten freeborn people of this nation now in slavery in the Barbadoes; setting forth most unchristian and barbarous usage of them.” The ensuing debate made it clear that a convergence of ideas about slavery, race, and empire among Parliamentarians and royalists, former antagonists in the English Revolution and civil wars, would ease the way to the restoration of the monarchy.⁷⁰

Rivers and Foyle had been arrested for running guns for Charles Stuart and imprisoned in the aftermath of the Salisbury rising of 1654. They protested their treatment as unbecoming “freeborn Englishmen” because they were never given a proper trial and were arbitrarily jailed for a

year. They were then snatched from their prisons and hurried to Plymouth, where they were thrown aboard a deep-sea vessel. As the goods and chattels of the merchant and M. P. Martin Noell, they were locked belowdecks with the horses. Rivers and Foyle did not say how many of their fellow white slaves had died, been sewn into canvas coffins, and been thrown over the side of the ship, but if the voyage was typical, the number would have been between eight and fourteen. After several weeks the prisoners arrived in Barbados and were sold to the “most inhuman and barbarous persons, for one thousand five hundred and fifty pound weight of sugar a-piece, more or less, according to their working faculties.” The slaves were forced to work, “grinding at the mills and attending at the furnace” or digging in the fields side by side with other slaves from England, Ireland, Scotland, America, and Africa.⁷¹ They lived in pigsties, they ate potatoes and drank potato water, they were whipped, they were bought and sold. Their petition implied that there were human rights against such exploitation.⁷²

The petition provoked a heated and disingenuous debate. The M. P.’s knew that the petitioners were little different from the thousands of English men and women who had been spirited away over the previous thirty years. Noell, who had spirited many of them, was forced to admit, “I trade into those parts,” but he hastened to defend the planter class in Barbados by saying, falsely, that the work on the sugar plantations was not as hard as represented and, truly, that the island was “as grateful to you for trade as any part of the world.” He tried to lessen the impact of the petition by denying the historic importance of indentured servants in building the plantation system and by interjecting racial distinctions: in Barbados, he reassured Parliament, “the work is mostly carried on by the Negroes.”⁷³

Some in Parliament treated the petition politically, as a royalist issue. But Sir Henry Vane, the millennialist radical who had supported Anne Hutchinson in the Antinomian Controversy in Boston in 1636–37, announced, “I do not look on this business as a Cavalierish business; but as a matter that concerns the liberty of the free-born people of England.” Arthur Annesley added, “I am sorry to hear Magna Charta moved against this House. If he be an Englishman, why should he not have the benefit of it?”⁷⁴ Several M. P.’s began to define English freedom against

African slavery. Edward Boscawen, who had invested in the successful campaign to capture Jamaica from Spain in 1655, explained that “you have Paul’s case before you. A Roman ought not to be beaten.” By this he meant that Englishness should be a global citizenship that protected its owners against violence. If Parliament failed to act on the petition, he solemnly explained, “our lives will be as cheap as those negroes.” Sir Arthur Hesilrige “could hardly hold weeping” when forced to think of Englishmen working alongside Africans. As the universalist claims of revolution shrank to a narrow, racist nationalism, a few still clung to broader ideals. Sir John Lenthall worried, “I hope it is not the effect of our war to make merchandize of men.” Thomas Gewen complained, “I would not have men sold like bullocks and horses. The selling of a man is an offence of a high nature.” Major John Beake summarized the point: “Slavery is slavery, as well in a Commonwealth as under another form.”⁷⁵

It was a decisive moment, as explained by Hilary McD. Beckles: “Parliament felt that the Barbadians, and other West Indians, did not really need white labour any more—black slavery was fully established and proven to be very profitable.” Meanwhile, military labor in the metropolis was proving itself to be troublesome again. Soon after the debate, the common soldiers of the New Model Army again grew mutinous and again elected agitators to represent them. The specter of Putney began to haunt the propertied; this time, they restored the monarchy.⁷⁶ Once back in power, the royalists acted out their conception of the “rights of the free-born Englishman” by organizing repression, including exemplary hangings, against the very people who had developed the discourse in the first place. The New Englander Thomas Venner led Fifth Monarchist workers into battle against the king in 1661, chanting, “King Jesus and the heads upon the gates”—meaning the heads of the executed regicides.⁷⁷ Venner himself was caught, hanged, and drawn and quartered, his head stuck up in public. *Hydra decapita*.

The development of the English doctrine of white supremacy thus occurred in the context of counterrevolution, the restoration of the monarchy, and the advance of the slave trade. England’s rulers, led and inspired by Rupert and Holmes, began to discuss writing a new charter for the Company of Royal Adventurers into Africa and waging war against the Dutch for control of the West African man-trade.⁷⁸ The meaning of the

expression “free-born Englishman” could never thereafter be entirely innocent or hopeful for most of the people of the world. The repression of the Restoration completed the radical diaspora. Regicides stowed away for America and Europe; Ranters, Quakers, and Muggletonians disappeared overseas. Edward Burrough, the Quaker, told Charles II, “If you should destroy these vessels, yet our principles you can never extinguish, but they will live for ever and enter into other bodies to live and act and speak.”⁷⁹ *Hydra redux*.

VIRGINIA, 1663–1676

In September 1663 a group of laborers in Poplar Spring (Gloucester County), Virginia, met secretly at midnight in a house in the woods. They plotted to seize arms and a drum, to march from house to house, appeal to others in bondage, and then demand their freedom from the governor. Several of the rebels had worn the red shirt of the New Model Army; some had been Fifth Monarchists, others Muggletonians. At the Restoration they had been sentenced to servitude and shipped to Virginia. They now aimed to capitalize on widespread labor discontent within the plantation system, planning to overthrow the governor and set up an independent commonwealth. An informer betrayed the plot. Four were hanged, and five transported. The planters determined that the day of the rising, September 13, should be commemorated as an annual holy day.⁸⁰ Revolutionary antinomianism had reared its head in the tobacco fields.

The early Chesapeake tobacco proletariat consisted of Newgateers, Quakers, renegades, sailors, soldiers, Nonconformists, servants, and slaves.⁸¹ In 1662 the House of Burgesses erected whipping posts and granted masters the legal right to beat their servants. Complaining of the “audacious unrulines of many stubborne and incorrigible servants resisting their masters and overseers,” they promised beatings and extra service to anyone who laid violent hands on his or her master, mistress, or overseer. Summarizing the rising tensions on Virginia’s eastern shore, Douglas Deal writes that “physical violence, verbal abuse, work slowdowns, sabotage, and running away by servants all became much more common after 1660.”⁸² As in Barbados, servants and slaves often ran

away together, prompting repressive, deliberately divisive legislation in 1661 and 1662 that made the servant responsible for the time that the slave was away from his master. In 1664 Maryland's rulers passed an act against Englishwomen who were "forgetfull of their free condition and to the disgrace of the Nation doe intermarry with Negro Slaves by which alsoe divers suites may arise touching the Issue of such women and a great damage doth befall the Masters." Virginia's big men worried in 1672 that servants would "fly forth and joyne" with slaves in maroon communities. The House of Burgesses banned the entry of Quakers into the colony, called for the imprisonment of those already there, and forbade their meetings and publications. George Wilson, a former soldier in the New Model Army who in early 1662 was chained to a post with an Indian in a stinking prison in Jamestown, denounced the cruelty and oppression of a "Company of Lazy and Leud people who not Careing to worke feed upon the Swete and Labour" of others. Wilson organized interracial gatherings at which women preached heretical doctrine. The big planters attacked interracial cooperation except where it was necessary for the production of tobacco.⁸³

The resistance of plantation workers exploded in 1675–76 in Bacon's Rebellion, which was actually two distinct uprisings. The first, beginning in late 1675, was a war for land by freedmen and small farmers against Indians and a portion of the colonial ruling class in Virginia. The second, beginning in September 1676, was a war against slavery, waged by servants and slaves who entered the fray after being promised their freedom by Nathaniel Bacon in exchange for military service against the forces of the Virginia governor, Berkeley. By late September, the rebel army was "sum'd up in freemen, searvants, and slaves; these three ingredience being the Composition of Bacon's Army." Many of Bacon's other followers, especially those who were masters, soon deserted him.⁸⁴ But if the freeing of servants and slaves cost Bacon support from one quarter, it increased it from another, as poor, rugged fellows flocked to him from all around the colony. *Strange News from Virginia*, published in London in 1677, noted that Bacon's forces consisted of "Runnagado English" along with slaves and servants. The poet Andrew Marvell heard from a ship's captain that Bacon entered Jamestown "having first proclaim'd liberty to all servants and Negroes."⁸⁵ This was the language of jubilee.

The abolitionists burned Jamestown and looted the estates of Berkeley's supporters. When Thomas Grantham began to negotiate on behalf of the king the final settlement of the conflict in January 1677, he faced four hundred armed English and African servants and slaves; he promptly tried to divide them by offering a better deal to the servants. Some accepted the deal and went home; others deserted to Roanoke; still others wanted to fight on. Eighty slaves and twenty servants remained in arms, prompting Grantham to make repeated, though treacherous, promises of freedom. After the still-armed rebels boarded longboats to make their escape, he turned a ship's cannon on them, forcing them to surrender and to suffer reenslavement.⁸⁶

Bacon was denounced as a Leveller, and his followers as antinomians. In her play *The Widow Ranter, or a History of Bacon in Virginia* (1690), Aphra Behn suggested the influence of the Ranters upon events in Virginia, seeing revolutionary continuity in the colony's seventeenth-century rebellions. She may have based the character of the Widow Ranter on any of a number of female rebels, including the prostitutes who chose to die alongside the soldiers.⁸⁷ Contemporaries saw in Bacon's army the fearful monstrosity theorized a half century earlier by Francis Bacon. Colonel Edward Hill lamented the many "brave, wise, just & innocent good men that have fallen under the lash of that hidra the vulgar," while Governor Berkeley wrote in June 1676 that a "monstrous number of the basest of the People" had declared for Bacon, who himself was another Masaniello. Virginia's rulers executed twenty-three rebels.⁸⁸

The uprising of the plantation workers in 1675–76 shaped the subsequent evolution of the Chesapeake. Immediately after the rebellion ended, the planters charged the governor with restraining "any inhumane severity which by ill masters or overseers may be used toward Christian servants." The self-conscious segmentation of the plantation proletariat became even more evident in legislation of 1682, providing that "all servants not being christians, being imported into this country by shipping" (i.e., Africans) should be slaves for life, while those who came by land (Indians) should be servants for twelve years. European servants continued to serve only four to five years. Virginia's big planters began to substitute African slaves for European indentured servants,⁸⁹ a development that changed indentured servitude in the Chesapeake as it had done in Barbados. Fewer indentured servants were imported, and

those who were tended to be given skilled supervisory and policing positions. Beginning in the late 1670s legislation was enacted throughout the British American plantation colonies to encourage and protect “Christian”—increasingly “white”—colonists.⁹⁰

By the 1670s antinomians were tolerated by the big planters only if they distanced themselves from the experiences of plantation labor and acted the now important part of the “white” colonist, serving in the militia to defend the colony against rebellious slaves. George Fox soothed Barbadian slaveowners by explaining in 1671 that slave revolt was “a thing we do *abhor* and detest.” If the first defeat of antinomianism in the English Revolution had helped to secure the slave trade and accelerate the growth of capitalism, its second defeat, in America, helped to secure the plantation as a foundation of the new system. The Chesapeake’s “unruly home spirits” slowly changed their colors, from motley to black, and by 1680 the day of the indentured servant and the antinomian as primary revolutionary forces in the Atlantic had passed. The planters’ fear of multiracial rebellion was replaced by fear of the slave revolt, as expressed in two acts aimed at preventing “Negro insurrections,” passed in 1680 and 1682. The transition was completed with “An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves” (1705), which guaranteed the rights of servants and defined slaves as a form of property that would constitute the basis of production in Virginia.⁹¹

The plantation was thus made fast in Virginia and Maryland by the late 1670s, but alternatives remained, one of them especially close at hand. Some who fled slavery recovered the commons in Roanoke, located in the Albemarle Sound. To the dismal swamp flew European and African American slaves (with and without indentures), felons, landless paupers, vagabonds, beggars, pirates, and rebels of all kinds, who beginning in the 1640s lived there under the protection of the Tuscarora Indians. They all fished, hunted, trapped, planted, traded, intermarried, and formed what their main chronicler, Hugo Leaming, has called a Mestizo culture. The members of the community included Nathaniel Batts, who was also known as Secotan, war chief of the Tuscarora Empire and member of the Grand Council of the Tuscaroras; African-Americans Thomas Andover (pilot) and Francis Johnson (coastal wrecker); and John Culpeper, who had left Charleston, South Carolina, because “he was in danger of hanging for laying the design and indeavouring to sett the poore

people to plunder the rich.” Culpeper had also taken part in Bacon’s Rebellion and yet another rising in New England before returning to Roanoke to lead armed mobs of former plantation workers, sailors, “Indians, Negroes, and women” against the effort to establish proprietary government in 1677. The people of Roanoke, known for their “enthusiasm,” opposition to oaths, anticlericalism, emphasis on the “inner light,” and devotion to “liberty of conscience,” were antinomian and abolitionist, calling for an end to slavery as early as 1675. The very existence of the multiethnic maroon state was a threat to Virginia, whose governor worried that “hundreds of idle debtors, thieves, Negroes, Indians, and English servants will fly” to the liberated zone and use it as a base for attacks on the plantation system. It would take years for the colonial authorities to tame Roanoke and to constitute North Carolina as an official colony, after which the struggle for the commons would shift to the seas, with sailors and pirates the new maroons.⁹²

The defeat of the servants and slaves and the recomposition of the plantation proletariat coincided with the origins of scientific racism. The cartographer and physician William Petty weighed the matter in *The Scale of Creatures* (1676): “There seem to be several species even of human beings,” he wrote. “I say that the Europeans do not only differ from the aforementioned Africans in colour . . . but also . . . in natural manners and in the internal qualities of their minds.” Following Francis Bacon, he was developing a new discourse, an ideological racism different in tone and methods from the racial prejudice of the overseer with a whip or the bully on the deck. The biological excuse for white supremacy would be refined by the English philosophers Locke and Hume and by English biologists, but there was nothing inevitable about its development, for alternative approaches existed even in England. In 1680 Morgan Godwyn, for example, explained the doctrine of Negro inferiority by refusal of work: “Surely *Sloth and Avarice* have been no unhandy Instruments and Assistants to midwife it into the World, and to Foster and Nurse it up.” Earlier still, in April 1649, Winstanley wrote, “As divers members of our human bodies make but one body perfect; so every particular man is but a member or branch of mankind,” and noted again in August of the same year that the Earth was a common treasury “for whole mankind in all his branches, without respect of persons.”⁹³

THE COMMONS OR SLAVERY

Gerard Winstanley was the most articulate voice of revolution during the late 1640s. He opposed slavery, dispossession, the destruction of the commons, poverty, wage labor, private property, and the death penalty. He was not the first person to come up with a rational plan for social reconstruction, but he was, as Christopher Hill has noted, the first to express such a plan in the vernacular and to call on a particular social class—the common people—to put it into action.⁹⁴ How he came to these beliefs is revealed by his experience at the beginning of the revolutionary decade, when he worked as a cloth merchant and fell victim to fraud. At a time when the cloth industry was collapsing, Winstanley personally lost £274 and was reduced to parochial charity. He thus had a hard-won, bitter knowledge of the “theeving art of buying and selling.” R. J. Dalton has argued in a carefully researched article that this fraud was the “single most influential [experience] of Winstanley’s life; without it he might never have developed his communist ideology.”⁹⁵

The man who defrauded Winstanley was Matthew Backhouse, the same slave-trading merchant who sailed aboard the *Friendship* to the river Gambia in 1651. Backhouse was experienced in the trade, as a decade earlier he had fraudulently gathered an operating capital of roughly seven hundred pounds from Winstanley and others “before embarking on a preplanned voyage to the Guinea coast of west Africa.” Cloth, he knew, was in demand in Africa; slaves, he knew, were in demand in Barbados. After the repression of the radicals by Cromwell and the Parliamentarians in early 1649, Backhouse returned to England and renewed his relationship with the reconstituted Guinea Company, signing a five-year contract with the new merchants that led to the voyage of 1651. Backhouse had dispossessed Winstanley in 1641, pushing him toward antinomianism and communism. If Winstanley, like Rainborough at Putney in 1647, expressed a revolutionary vision of a future without slavery, Backhouse, like Ireton, helped to put into practice that vision’s counterrevolutionary opposite.

Backhouse had one solution to the crisis of the seventeenth century, Winstanley another. At the beginning of the century, the worry of the ruling class had been overpopulation, hence the plantations, migrations,

colonizations, and scarcely veiled suggestions of genocide; by the end of the century, the rulers were fretting about the opposite. Thus, qualitatively new policies for the creation of labor power—the mobilization of sailors, the attention to reproduction in utero, and the African slave trade—emerged as fundamental tasks of the mercantilist state. English rulers, merchants, and planters dispossessed tens of thousands more in Ireland, Barbados, West Africa, and Virginia, making slavery the foundation of Atlantic capitalism.⁹⁶ Winstanley's encounter with Backhouse helped him to formulate a new and different answer to the crisis: he took up commoning and became a theorist of the commons, but within an enlarging perspective. Just as English cloth was exported to Africa, where it would be traded for slaves to be shipped to Barbados, Winstanley saw that justice could not be a national project, nor could the commons exist in one country only: "Money must not any longer . . . be the great god that hedges in some, and hedges out others."⁹⁷ When in July 1649 he wrote, "The teeth of all nations hath been set on edge by this sour grape, the covetous murdering sword," he had Barbados and Gambia in mind. He moved toward a planetary consciousness of class: "English Christians are in a lower and worsen condition than the heathens," he lamented, smarting from the old wound, that English Christians cheated and cozened. "Surely, the life of the heathens shall rise up in judgement against you, from the greatest to the least."⁹⁸ His declaration of April 30, 1649, on behalf of the common people was addressed to "the powers of England and to all the powers of the world." Deliverance from oppression would rise "among the poor common people" and "spring up to all nations," and "all the commons and waste ground in England and in the whole world shall be taken in by the people in righteousness."⁹⁹

After being thrown off George's Hill in January 1650, Winstanley summed up, "I have writ, I have acted, I have peace: and now I must wait to see the spirit do his own work in the hearts of others, and whether England shall be the first land, or some other, wherein truth shall sit down in triumph."¹⁰⁰ Despite the defeats inflicted by Winstanley's enemies on London Levellers, Irish soldiers, Barbadian servants, and Virginia slaves, truth *did* sit down in other lands. It sat in swampy tri-isolate communities; it swayed on the decks of deep-sea ships; it rubbed shoulders with the poor in the taverns of the divaricated port cities; it strained for a hear-

ing on the benches of the churches of the Great Awakening, or on stools on the dirt floors of slave cabins at night. In England, it seemed to pause: “Now the Spirit spreading itself from East to West, from North to South in sons and daughters is everlasting, and never dies; but is still everlasting, and rising higher and higher in manifesting himself in and to mankind.”¹⁰¹ This was the everlasting gospel, which would migrate to the western Atlantic before returning in so many words to England with Ottobah Cugoano and William Blake: the struggle against slavery, the struggle for the commons.

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68. *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 103.

Chapter Four

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14. *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* (1646).
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19. Francis Midon, *The History of the Rise and Fall of Masaniello, the Fisherman of Naples* (1729), 95.
20. Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), 199.
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 93. *True Levellers Standard Advanced* (1649) and *A Watch Word to the City of London* (1649).
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 96. *Ibid.*, 983.
 97. *A Declaration from the Poor oppressed People of England* (June 1649).
 98. *Truth Lifting Up Its Head* (October 1648).
 99. *Ibid.*
 100. The pause in economic development or democratic practice in England has long been noticed—e.g., by Gooch, Brailsford, Thompson, Orwell, Hobsbawm, and Anderson.
 101. *Truth Lifting Up Its Head* (October 1648), s. 101, and *The New Law of Righteousness* (1649), s. 169.

