

THE LEVELLERS AND THE BIRTH OF LIBERAL POLITICAL ECONOMY*

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Abstract: When did liberal political theory, or perhaps liberal political economy, begin? Although many would trace their beginnings to the writings of Adam Smith, David Hume, or perhaps John Locke, in fact many of the propositions we today recognize as forming the core of liberalism were articulated in the first half of the seventeenth century by an unduly neglected group called the Levellers and their leader John Lilburne. In this essay, I first give some historical background and context to the Levellers and Lilburne. Next, I articulate several of their liberal positions, including freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of commerce and trade, and I examine their justifications for these positions, which I argue were both novel and radical. I conclude by exploring the contemporary relevance of the Levellers and argue that they should be considered as among liberalism's most important founders.

KEY WORDS: Levellers, John Lilburne, liberalism, political economy, freedom of religion, free trade, origins of liberalism

I. INTRODUCTION

When did modern liberalism as a system of philosophical thought begin? There is, of course, some degree of arbitrariness to any answer that might be given to this question. But for many who teach political philosophy or political theory, a common idea seems to be that it began with John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, first published (anonymously) in 1689, just after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that deposed James II and installed William and Mary on the British throne. Some mark the beginning of modern political theory earlier, perhaps with Hobbes's *Leviathan*, first published in 1651, or with Grotius's *On the Law of War and Peace*, first published in 1625; or perhaps even earlier with Machiavelli's *Prince*, published posthumously in 1532 (though first circulated as early as 1513).

If we narrow the question and ask when liberal *political economy* began—understanding political economy as an integration into political theory of what we would now recognize as the principles of economic reasoning, and the making of policy recommendations regarding economic matters¹—the

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¹ Because there is more than one way to define “political economy,” the argument I am about to make that the Levellers were an early source of liberal political economy must be qualified. As will soon become clear, perhaps the best way to put my claim is that they were developing a

most obvious founding fathers would seem to be David Hume and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century. An argument might be made that liberal political economy might also have begun with Locke, given that there is some discussion of what might be considered an economic conception of scarcity and value, as well as money, in the *Second Treatise*. Yet the discussion there is not developed, and there is no exploration of trade, prices, or markets, no proposal offered for why some places are wealthier than others or how a country might increase its prosperity, and no policy proposals regarding specifically economic matters.² That would seem to bring us back to Hume and Smith, and perhaps justify the seeming consensus that the best place to identify as the birth of modern liberal political economy is the publication of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1776.

I would like to argue for an earlier provenance for modern liberal political economy. Specifically, I trace the ideas we now recognize under that term, and that we typically identify with Smith (and perhaps Hume), to a group of English thinkers and activists who were active in the lead-up to and during the English Civil War of 1642–1651. This group was derisively called “Levellers” by Oliver Cromwell. The leading figures of this group, including in particular John Lilburne, embraced “Levellers” as their title, and in the process of constructing arguments for the specific policy reforms they advocated the Levellers articulated several of the key philosophical positions we often today associate with later thinkers. Among other things, they argued for private property, free trade, and markets half a century before Locke, and a century before Hume and Smith. I argue that the Levellers should be regarded as among the founders of modern liberal political economy.³

This essay begins with some historical background about the Levellers generally and their leader, John Lilburne, in particular. I then flesh out several of the central philosophical principles for which they argued, which I claim form some of the principal elements of what we would now recognize as liberal political economy. I close by suggesting what I believe is the enduring significance of the Levellers.

normative conception of individualism from which they deduced both political and economic positions on which other, later thinkers could build.

² Locke did, however, have several short letters and essays on topics like trade, interest, and paper currency. See *The Collected Works of John Locke*, vol. 9 (London: C. Baldwin Press, 1824). Another major figure in this early period of liberalism's development is Grotius, though the Levellers did not cite Grotius and there appears to be no evidence that they were aware of his writings.

³ See Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), which claims that the “Levellers undertook one of the first egalitarian social movements of the modern world,” though Anderson claims that it was a “left” variety of egalitarianism (7). See also Ann Hughes, “Learning from the Levellers?” in Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 75–88.

II. WHO WERE THE LEVELLERS?

The group of people Oliver Cromwell called “the Levellers”⁴ entered the historical, political, and legal scene in the lead-up to the English Civil War. Although their movement lasted only a few years, they declared and defended principles that prefigured central elements of the liberalism that grew and spread in subsequent British and Western history.

Many of the central ideas that motivated the American desire for independence are traceable to John Locke, who in his *Second Treatise of Government* had articulated notions of natural rights, individual sovereignty, and limited government of separated powers based on the consent of the governed nearly one hundred years before the American revolutionary war. Yet many of the substantive premises on which Locke would base his arguments were already expressed some fifty years earlier in the works of the Levellers.⁵ In their writings, one finds—in some cases for the first time ever⁶—nearly all of those premises enunciated and defended: men⁷ are equal insofar as each is essentially an individual, and under natural law they have natural rights, including natural rights to private property, that precede and trump manmade legal rights; each person is also equal insofar as he possesses reason, which, when exercised properly, will apprehend not only the natural law and its entailed individual rights, but also their self-evident authority;⁸ one of the rights each man has by nature is sovereignty over his conscience, which includes the right to practice religion as his conscience privately dictates; and no government is legitimate that is not

⁴ The term “Levellers” was used earlier than this. Its first known political use was in 1607 to name a group in Northamptonshire who protested the enclosure of commons by filling in the ditches and leveling the fences that marked the new boundaries. Although there is some dispute about who first called the political group led by Overton, Walwyn, and Lilburne “Levellers,” it was probably Cromwell in the Putney Debates of 1647, as Lilburne himself later reported. See Blair Worden, “Appendix—‘The Levellers’: The Emergence of the Term,” in Michael Mendel, ed., *The Putney Debates of 1647: The Army, the Levellers and the English State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 280–82; Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John: The Biography of John Lilburne* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 221; and Joseph Frank, *The Levellers: A History of the Writings of Three Seventeenth-Century Social Democrats: John Lilburne, Richard Overton, William Walwyn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 291–92.

⁵ For a discussion of this lineage, see David McNally, “Locke, Levellers, and Liberty: Property and Democracy in the Thought of the First Whig,” *History of Political Thought* 10 (1989), 17–40; and Rachel Foxley, “John Lilburne and the Citizenship of ‘Free-Born Englishmen,’” in John Rees, ed., *John Lilburne and the Levellers: Reappraising the Roots of English Radicalism 400 Years On* (London: Routledge, 2018), 6–31.

⁶ See David Wooton, “Leveller Democracy and the Puritan Revolution,” in J. H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 412–42.

⁷ The Levellers used masculine nouns and pronouns throughout their writings. For that reason, and not to beg any questions, I will follow their practice. As I will discuss later, however, they intended their principles to include women as well. See Ann Hughes, “Women and the Levellers: Elizabeth and John Lilburne and Their Associates,” in John Rees, ed., *John Lilburne and the Levellers* (London: Routledge, 2018), 49–60.

⁸ See, for example, the 1645 *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, in James R. Otteson, ed., *The Levellers: Overton, Walwyn, and Lilburne*, 5 vols. (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2003), vol. 3, 56–57.

founded on the voluntary consent of the governed.⁹ The central figures in the Leveller movement, including Richard Overton, William Walwyn, and John Lilburne,¹⁰ were motivated principally by a desire for religious toleration, and they withstood repeated imprisonments, public condemnation, torture, and threats on their lives for defending the right of individuals to exercise their private conscience on religious matters. What they produced during those tumultuous years—in scores of pamphlets, tracts, and briefs¹¹—was the beginnings of a vision of individualism and limited government that, despite the group's relatively brief existence as an organized movement, laid the philosophical groundwork for subsequent generations of "liberals."

The English Civil War had been waged in the name of the people and of Parliament, and the Levellers, who claimed to speak in the name of everyday Londoners and Englishmen, demanded that sovereignty be given completely to the people via the House of Commons. When they were unsuccessful in persuading Parliament, they took their argument directly to the public, and to the New Model Army under the leadership of Cromwell and his son-in-law Henry Ireton. The army proved amenable to their arguments, and in 1647 it elected leaders that were largely Leveller supporters. In October of 1647, a Council of the army met with Cromwell and Ireton at Putney to discuss the army's demands, which were presented in the *Agreement of the People*. These discussions became the famous Putney Debates.¹² Although initially in sympathy when their common target was Charles I and his (by joint agreement) "arbitrary" rule, the Levellers and Cromwell did not see eye to eye once Charles was executed and it came time to discuss details of a new government. In the end, Cromwell took a hard line and would not adopt the bulk of the Levellers' leveling and democratic program, which he believed would result in a government with no true seat of authority and hence, as Ireton put, in "utter confusion." It must also be said that Cromwell, like most other English at the time, simply did not

⁹ In his 1649 *The Free-man's Freedom Vindicated*, Lilburne argues that legitimate government requires "mutual agreement or consent" (Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 105).

¹⁰ Other notable figures in the movement included Katherine Chidley, John Wildman, Thomas Prince, Thomas Rainsborough, Edward Sexby, and Walwyn's son-in-law Humphrey Brooke. Henry Holorenschaw, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971 [1939]), lists several more persons, on several sides of the events of the time in his list of "Dramatis Personae" (9–10). See also John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017).

¹¹ The total output of the Levellers during the 1640s—in letters, pamphlets, petitions, and tracts—numbered in the hundreds. For a list of Leveller writings, see Joseph Frank, *The Levellers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 276–89.

¹² For a collection of speeches, remarks, and so on, delivered at the Putney Debates, see A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647–9) from the Clarke Manuscripts with Supplementary Documents* (London: Dent, 1938). See also Lesley Le Claire, "The Survival of the Manuscript," in Michael Mendle, ed., *The Putney Debates of 1647* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19–35; and Frances Henderson, "Reading, and writing, the text of the Putney debates," in Michael Mendle, ed., *The Putney Debates of 1647* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 36–50.

believe in the radical equality that the Levellers were preaching. The prevailing belief, shared by Cromwell and presumed by most others, was that people were, by dint either of nature or God's will, quite unequal and thus should not enjoy the same rights. Although Cromwell was sympathetic to parts of the Leveller views of religious freedom and property rights, he differed with them on what the role of the state should be. Cromwell thus chose to reject some of the Levellers' demands and reintroduced a hierarchical discipline into the army and ultimately in the government. Over the next two years, leaders of the Levellers, though still enjoying sporadic popular support, were imprisoned, and mutinies among sympathizers in the army were forcibly put down.

After the execution of Charles I on January 30, 1649, the Levellers were unsatisfied with their newly acquired liberty, which they thought merely "Notionall, Nominall, Circumstantiall."¹³ Notwithstanding their disputes with the Levellers, a group led by Cromwell called the Independents had adopted some important parts of the Leveller argument, even recommending a few Leveller principles as the basis of England's new government. But the Independents had not abolished tithes and excise taxes or removed certain hated monopoly privileges, and they had not made many of the judicial and military reforms the Levellers demanded; so it was not enough for the Levellers.¹⁴ In the February 1649 *Englands New Chains Discovered*, the Levellers enumerated the differences that led to the final break with the Independents, whose initial successes in garnering public support had arguably been due to the Levellers' own arguments. As weeks passed, the Independent government became stronger and more entrenched, and Leveller influence waned. Many of the Levellers' erstwhile supporters began to side with the Independents as they saw the balance of power shifting to the latter. The Levellers made several attempts to regain support among the army by severely criticizing Independent leadership, particularly that of Cromwell and Ireton, but to increasingly less avail.

Four principals of the Leveller movement—Overton, Walwyn, Lilburne, and Thomas Prince—were arrested in the early hours of March 28, 1649 at the behest of Cromwell, who had grown tired of their agitation. On May 1, from their prison cells, these Levellers issued their third *Agreement of the People*, by which means they were able to muster an improbably large amount of both army and popular support in London. On May 2 some of the troops under Ireton and Cromwell would not march; this led to the mutiny of further troops, until by May 14 some twelve hundred men stopped taking orders from Ireton and Cromwell, demanding instead the release of Lilburne and the other Levellers. This was the last straw for Cromwell. Just after midnight on May 14, 1649, he and a contingent of the

¹³ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 4, 206.

¹⁴ See Don M. Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), 97ff.

men who were still loyal to him surprised and crushed what remained of the Leveller army sympathizers at Oxfordshire near Burford, effectively putting an end to the Levellers as an organized, political movement.¹⁵

Destruction of the Leveller movement did not mean, however, that the Levellers' ideas were extinguished. The individuals who constituted the Levellers began to evaporate from British consciousness after the 1650s, and by the 1680s were largely gone from British memory—not to re-enter until later historians rediscovered them.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the ideas the Levellers articulated did not dissipate; on the contrary, though usually under other banners and in other guises, those ideas spread and propagated a philosophy that endured far beyond their first proponents.¹⁷

III. JOHN LILBURNE

The political and philosophical leader of the Levellers was John Lilburne, or Free-Born John, as he was called.¹⁸ He was born in Greenwich in 1614 or 1615 to a family of low-level gentry, and he was an agitator and troublemaker almost from the beginning. In 1630 he began an apprenticeship to a Puritan cloth merchant in London, and shortly thereafter he joined the radical opposition to Charles I. In 1637, at the tender age of twenty-two, he smuggled from Holland outlawed copies of John Bastwick's account of the punishments he had suffered for denouncing Catholicism. When one of Lilburne's accomplices betrayed him to the Archbishop's agents, Lilburne was arrested and tried before the Star Chamber, a body Lilburne detested and whose existence he protested. When Lilburne was brought to the bar before its judges, however, he refused to bow. He also refused to take the customary oath pledging to answer all interrogatories.¹⁹ Lilburne explained that as a freeborn Englishman, he was, as he put it, the "peere and equall" of

¹⁵ The reasons for the rapid collapse of the Levellers as a political movement are more complex than one might suspect. For discussion, see Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000); Theodore C. Pease, *The Leveller Movement: A Study in the History and Political Theory of the English Great Civil War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965); H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961); and John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017).

¹⁶ See Andrew Sharp, ed., *The English Levellers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xi–xiii. For an excellent recent collection of reappraisals of the Leveller movement, see John Rees, ed., *John Lilburne and the Levellers: Reappraising the Roots of English Radicalism 400 Years On* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁷ For discussion of the Levellers' influence after Burford, see Tim Harris, "The Leveller Legacy: From the Restoration to the Exclusion Crisis," in Michael Mendle, ed., *The Putney Debates of 1647* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 219–40; and Edward Vallance, "Reborn John? The Eighteenth-Century Afterlife of John Lilburne," in John Rees, ed., *John Lilburne and the Levellers* (London: Routledge, 2018), 117–42.

¹⁸ For more information about Lilburne and his life, see Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000) and Michael Braddick, *The Common Freedom of the People: John Lilburne and the English Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). In this section I draw on James R. Otteson, *The End of Socialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 120–23.

¹⁹ See Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 59–60.

both the bishops and the Star Chamber's judges; there was therefore no reason for him to show the deference they demanded.²⁰ For this shocking snub to the authority of the Chamber, he was fined, publicly whipped and pilloried, and finally imprisoned, receiving increasingly harsh punishment over time because he refused to stop denouncing the presumed authority of the bishops. Lilburne remained in prison until he was liberated by the Long Parliament in 1640 after a speech on his behalf by Cromwell (who himself would later imprison Lilburne).

Lilburne became a brewer and got married, but his principles would not allow him to lead the quiet life of a working- and family man. When the Civil War broke out in 1642, Lilburne was commissioned as a captain in the Parliamentary army. Despite his success and popularity, he resigned from the army in 1644 at the rank of lieutenant colonel rather than subscribe to the Solemn League and Covenant with Scotland, which required the Church of England to be reformed along Presbyterian lines. His opposition to the oath seems to have been principled: he objected to being forced to swear any kind of religious oath, regardless of whether he had sympathies with its doctrines or not—signaling a general commitment to liberal freedom of religion.²¹

Even as he was put in the stocks, imprisoned, and tortured, Lilburne continued denouncing the presumed authority of the bishops, of the Star Chamber, of Parliament, and then even of Cromwell. As David Hume wrote approximately a century later, “[I]t was found difficult to break the spirits of men, who placed both their honour and their conscience in suffering.”²² He was again arrested and spent most of August 1645 to August 1647 in prison. But Lilburne was unbowed. On May 1, 1649, while imprisoned yet again, he published a pamphlet arguing that people had a right to their private consciences by birth, not by pleasure of government; furthermore, that the authority of each individual's conscience for himself was equal to that of everyone else; that therefore a person's religious beliefs were only his own business; and that therefore no one was entitled to any answers about others' beliefs.²³

Lilburne's message and example resonated. After Cromwell crushed the Leveller rebellion in 1649, Lilburne was arrested and tried for treason. He defended himself in court, and he argued to the jury, in defiance of the explicit instructions of the judge, that as the judge's peers and equals the members of the jury were empowered to judge not only the facts but also the law itself. To Cromwell's consternation, Lilburne was acquitted—and he promptly returned to denouncing Cromwell's increasing imperiousness.

²⁰ See John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017) and Michael Braddick, *The Common Freedom of the People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²¹ See Braddick, *Common Freedom of the People*, chap. 2.

²² David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1983), vol. 5, 244.

²³ See Lilburne's *Legall Fundamentall Liberties of the People of England* in Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 289–367.

Cromwell grew so infuriated that in 1653 he re-arrested him and had him tried for treason again. Again Lilburne defended himself, and again he was acquitted. This second acquittal led to a large popular demonstration in support of Lilburne, symbolized by thousands of sympathizers wearing the Levellers' characteristic sea-green ribbons on hats and clothing. This sufficiently worried Cromwell that he decided to keep Lilburne in prison despite the acquittals. Lilburne remained in prison until 1655, when he converted to the Quaker faith and apparently, finally, foreswore his aggressive, confrontational ways. In 1657, with his health failing, he was granted parole to visit his wife, Elizabeth. Exhausted from years of imprisonment and torture, he died in her arms at the age of 43. Hume concluded that Lilburne was "the most turbulent, but most upright and courageous of human kind."²⁴ In his recent biography of Lilburne, Michael Braddick writes of Lilburne's "remarkably courageous career" and his "remarkable life."²⁵ Pauline Gregg writes, "nothing dims the luster of the remarkable man who was [the Levellers'] leader"; "John Lilburne's name stood for freedom against oppression."²⁶

Lilburne's agitations formed a surprisingly coherent philosophy of individualism, from which he derived several specific political policies. These included the rights to be free of arbitrary seizures, to a trial by jury, and to face one's accusers in open court.²⁷ He also called for an extension of the franchise;²⁸ he advocated free trade and private property; he called for freedom of religion; and he called for all laws to be "binding to the very *Parliament* themselves as well as others."²⁹ He demanded, furthermore, an abolition of legal economic privileges like state-enforced monopolies, including the Levant Company's chartered monopoly of trade with the Middle East, arguing that the right to trade with whomever one wished was one of mankind's natural rights.

IV. LEVELLER POSITIONS

Contrary to later description, the Levellers were called "Levellers" not because they sought to level all property holdings—that was the position of a contemporaneous group called the Diggers.³⁰ The Levellers were called

²⁴ David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1983), vol. 6, 39.

²⁵ Michael Braddick, *The Common Freedom of the People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), ix.

²⁶ Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 354 and 358.

²⁷ At his trial during his second imprisonment, Lilburne, who was facing charges of treason that carried a potential sentence of death, took his claimed right to face his accusers even further: he "demanded a sword telling them [the Lords] that he desired to die in single opposition man to man with any there, or if they feared the trial, any two so he might die with honour" (quoted in John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* [London: Verso, 2017], 83–84).

²⁸ See Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 137.

²⁹ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 57.

³⁰ Lilburne refers explicitly to, and distinguishes the Levellers' claims from, the "erroneous tenents [sic] of the poor Diggers" in his 1649 *The Legall Fundamentall Liberties of the People of England* (Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 366).

“Levellers” instead because they sought to equalize the privileges and rights of citizens: no one was by nature or by God entitled to less authority over his own life than anyone else, and no one was justified in asserting authority over anyone else without the latter’s willing consent.³¹ This conception of morality and human personhood spread and eventually gave rise to many of the institutions we enjoy in the West today. If no one, regardless of class, family, or wealth, had any justified authority over anyone else, then individuals no longer needed to beg leave from their “superiors” to own property, to select lines of work, to trade or exchange or cooperate with others, or to worship and associate as they judge fit. Lilburne inspired many others and was emblematic of a changing conception of morality and thus politics. The liberal government that promotes justice for all while at the same time respecting each person’s unique individual dignity as an equal moral agent is consistent with, even an embodiment of, this moral imperative.

Many of the Levellers’ arguments appeal to unaided reason—able, as they believed, to discern natural law—instead of to biblical authority. The Levellers were divided on whether precedent was relevant. Sometimes they cited common law precedents and long-standing customs—as when Lilburne argued that the Star Chamber and the House of Lords were un-English institutions, making his argument by reference to an allegedly pre-Norman-invasion limited monarchy in England.³² At other times they derided and flouted tradition—as in their recurring contempt for the long-standing practice of the limited franchise and in their call for all law and legal proceedings to be in English rather than in the traditional Latin (or French). Nevertheless, they seemed not to waver in their faith in human reason, or in their belief that all men of good faith would ultimately find compelling the principles on which they based their arguments. Hence the Levellers assiduously practiced the arts of pamphleteering and petitioning in preference to organizing violent uprisings.³³ This would have made no sense unless based on the belief that mankind can be persuaded by reason.

The Levellers’ reliance on reason has led to some scholarly dispute about the extent to which a particular religious faith, or even religion generally, is necessary for the success of the Levellers’ claims.³⁴ Many of the Levellers’ writings included multiple references to the Bible and to God, but it is not

³¹ See Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 105–6, and Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

³² For discussion of this Levellers’ claim, see Robert Seaberg, “The Norman Conquest and the Common Law: The Levellers and the Argument from Continuity,” *Historical Journal* 24 (1981): 791–806.

³³ There were exceptions to this—for example, the mutiny of 1647 and the final resistance at Burford in 1649—but violence was not their usual *modus operandi*.

³⁴ Robertson, for example, argues that the Levellers’ writings cannot be understood apart from their religious faiths. See D. B. Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy* (New York: Kings Crown Press, 1951). For an alternative view, see George H. Sabine, ed., *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley with an Appendix of the Documents Relating to the Digger Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1941), 1–8.

always clear that their arguments require or rely on these references.³⁵ This issue is of no small moment. A claim to natural rights or a questioning of a state's authority that is based on a particular religious worldview will necessarily be limited in its appeal, unable to persuade people who do not subscribe to the same view. Despite their contentions, the Levellers could not expect even the possibility of universal consent to their principles if they could not offer a justification that built upon something common to all.

My view is that the Levellers took pains to show that their positions were consistent with, but not reliant upon, a theological worldview. I base this view on several considerations. First, the people constituting the Leveller movement did not have the same religious beliefs—indeed, the religious beliefs of many of them seemed to change throughout their lifetimes—yet their support for the elements of what we now recognize as liberalism did not waver. Moreover, the frequent reliance on unaided reason belies the necessity of a particular religious belief or set of beliefs. It was reason, the Levellers insisted, that would prove them right, not a particular set of religious doctrines; their claim to universality therefore relied on the universality of reason, not religion. Finally, as they claimed repeatedly, the Levellers themselves believed their arguments to apply to and be compelling to all men, not just believers of one particular stripe or another. Of course, one cannot overlook the important role that the Levellers' early exposure to various strains of Puritanism played in the development of their radical dispositions. But my suggestion is that although these might have been influences in the origins of their beliefs, they were not the ultimate philosophical justifications for them.

Some of the rights, liberties, and demands claimed in various places by the Levellers included: the right not to pay the legally required tithes to the official church; the claim that no one is above the law; freedom of the press and freedom of expression; an equality of legal rights among all classes of citizens; toleration for minority and dissenting religious views, including Anabaptists and Jews; the right to petition the government for redress of grievances; and the general right to freedom of religion. These would come to form central parts of modern political liberalism. But they also argued for specific economic policies, which might justify their place as early modern liberal political economists. For example, in the 1652 *Conceptions for a Free Trade*, William Walwyn argued against public charters for companies and argued for "forraine Trade to be universally free to all English men alike"; he claimed the right to free trade to be an "ancient and continuall Claime of Right" accorded to all Englishmen going back to Magna Carta of 1215.³⁶

³⁵ I note that a similar issue arises when trying to understand the argument of Locke's *Second Treatise*. See, for example, Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁶ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 399.

Both this ancient birthright and the fact that it would be “more profitable for the Commonwealth” demanded “universall freedome in all forraine trades.”³⁷ Walwyn argued that free trade would lead to an increase in the number of merchants, and that competition among them would “produce the best ordered goods” and would lead to goods “more exquisite in the workmanship,” and that by contrast denying free trade would “impoverisheth the maker, worker, grower, growth & Land.”³⁸ Thus Walwyn’s conclusion was that “the Right & the publique good both are conceived to be undeniably with generall Freedom of Trade.”³⁹

V. LIBERALS OR SOCIALISTS?

Some scholars have considered the Levellers to be proto-socialists, some arguing indeed that they are the forerunners of Marx and of twentieth-century socialism.⁴⁰ Yet Overton, Walwyn, and Lilburne were not socialists in the modern meaning of that term. These Levellers must be distinguished from the radical Surrey Digger’s movement at St. Georges Hill, a group calling themselves “True Levellers,” who arguably were proto-socialists. These “True Levellers” were led principally by Gerrard Winstanley,⁴¹ who argued that the earth belonged to mankind in common,⁴² and that no distinction of land ownership was recognized by God or nature; it was under that justification that they occupied the land on St. George’s Hill in Cobham, Surrey in 1649. These Diggers were levelers in land ownership, and it was by that standard that they regarded themselves as distinct from the Levellers, who did not argue for equal distribution of land.

Indeed, with regard to land ownership, as well as other forms of private property, Overton, Walwyn, and Lilburne were anything but levelers: they seemed to have regarded it to be part of man’s natural rights to own as private property whatever he could legitimately acquire.⁴³ The sense in which they did argue for a leveling was in bringing all men—at least “all

³⁷ Otteson, *Levellers*, *ibid.*

³⁸ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 402.

³⁹ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 401.

⁴⁰ See Fenner Brockway, *Britain’s First Socialists: The Levellers, Agitators and Diggers of the English Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980) and Henry Holorenschaw, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971).

⁴¹ See Christopher Hill, “Introduction,” in Leonard Hamilton, ed., *Gerrard Winstanley: Selections from His Works* (London: Cresset Press, 1944), 1–8.

⁴² Cf. Psalms 115:16: “The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of men.” Sir Robert Filmer articulated a related argument in defense of the divine right of kings, namely, that God gave the world to Adam and his descendants, in his *Patriarcha; or, the Natural Power of Kings*, published posthumously in 1680. Although Filmer was probably in his 50s during the time of the Civil War, and surely would have been aware of the Diggers and the Levellers, he makes no reference to them in *Patriarcha*.

⁴³ See, for example, Lilburne’s 1645 *Englands Birth-Right Justified* (Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 57–58).

the freeborn" men of England—before the same bar of laws, enfranchising them all,⁴⁴ and granting none special legal privileges. All men were "leveled" by their equal participation in natural right, and the equal defense thereof that was thereby required of the state. In both their Petition of September 1648, which was presented to Parliament, and in their December 1648 *Foundations of Freedom* (the second *Agreement of the People*), they explicitly call on Parliament *not* to abolish private property or to try to equalize wealth by law—requests made in part precisely to distinguish themselves from others, such as the Diggers, who were calling for such measures. The Levellers were repeatedly critical of the concentration of power in the hands of a few, a condition that possessing great wealth could facilitate, but their objection here was to the erection of legal guarantees of power rather than to the possession of wealth.

This last point raises the issue of the extent to which the Levellers should be counted as what we today might call "classical liberals."⁴⁵ In some respects, their concerns were local and provincial rather than principled. For example, in his 1649 *Walwyn's Just Defence*, Walwyn defends himself against the charge that he is ambitious for power and is an unscrupulous Machiavelli in his attempts to get it; moreover, in the 1649 *Manifestation*, signed by Lilburne, Walwyn, Overton, and Thomas Prince, the Levellers defend themselves against the specific accusations that they were atheists, anarchists, and wealth-levelers. As a rule, however, their arguments were phrased in general terms and based, as I have noted, on universal concerns. For example, although Walwyn's 1652 *For a Free Trade* was initially motivated by a dispute between people supporting free trade, on the one hand, and the Levant Company's monopoly of trade with the Middle East, on the other, its argument is that free trade respects all men's natural rights and will have economic consequences of benefit to everyone. Thus Walwyn said free trade respected both the "publique good" and "Common right." And in Lilburne's 1653 *Just Defence*, in addition to his defenses against particular charges Lilburne nevertheless also enumerates a series of "fundamental rights," which he argues are held by all men, including the right to be free of arbitrary seizures, to a trial by jury, to face one's accusers in open court, and "to worship God according to their own Judgements and

⁴⁴ For discussion of exactly how far the Levellers wanted to extend the franchise, see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). See also A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) and David Wooton, "Leveller Democracy and the Puritan Revolution," in J. H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 412–34.

⁴⁵ For a view that is skeptical of the connection between the Levellers' concerns and general individual liberty, see William Lamont, "Puritanism, Liberty and the Putney Debates," in Michael Mendle, ed., *The Putney Debates of 1647* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 241–55. See also Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000) and C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

Consciences."⁴⁶ We can clearly see in these arguments the building blocks of the larger classical liberal tradition, dedicated to a radical individualism—indeed, an individualism so radical that it shocked the conscience of many of the Levellers' detractors, including Ireton, who, at the Putney Debates, spoke of "that wild and vast notion" and remarked in horror "at the boundless and endless consequences of it."⁴⁷

The Levellers might therefore justifiably be called radical individualists. Andrew Sharp argues that the Levellers were seen indeed as anarchists because they stood against the deeply seated view at the time that subordination, not equality, reflects human nature.⁴⁸ The common view was articulated by the 1648 *Larger Catechism*, published by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which claims that "inferiors owe . . . willing obedience to [superiors'] lawful commands and counsels" and that inferiors sin if they rebel "against their [superiors'] persons and places and their lawful counsels, commands and corrections."⁴⁹ But note the repetition of the word *lawful*. The Levellers claim that all men are equal insofar as they are required to obey lawful commands, but they also hold that commands count as "lawful" only if they are consistent with and perhaps issue from natural law.⁵⁰ Moreover—and here is perhaps the opening of the door to eventual anarchism after all—each person is himself, individually, both entitled and duty-bound to judge for himself what counsels, commands, and corrections are lawful. This is the radical individualism for which the Levellers became notorious, the possible consequences of which so worried Ireton. It is, I argue, precisely this notion of individualism, and the Levellers' repeated demands for "liberties" and "freedomes" (note the plural), that chiefly constitute their enduring political and philosophical significance. They consistently fought tyrannical authority and consistently sided with the abused and oppressed, always against the strong and for the weak.

VI. THREE CENTRAL POLITICAL-ECONOMIC CLAIMS

As I have suggested, among the rights for which Lilburne and the Levellers argued were the right to freedom of conscience and religion, the right to vote, the right for citizens and accused not only to judge guilt or innocence under the law but to judge the law itself (i.e., nullification),⁵¹ the right to be free from arbitrary seizure and imprisonment, and the right to freedom of speech and publication without censorship. Let me now emphasize, however, three main ideas from Lilburne and the Levellers that were not only

⁴⁶ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 376.

⁴⁷ A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty* (London: Dent, 2001), 27.

⁴⁸ Andrew Sharp, ed., *The English Levellers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xx–xxi.

⁵⁰ The Levellers also frequently used "lawful" to refer to the principles articulated in the Magna Carta. See, for example, Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 147 and *passim*.

⁵¹ See Walwyn's 1651 *Juries Justified* (Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 387–98).

novel and radical, but central to what would become liberal political economy. The three ideas are: (1) a conception and defense of equal rights for all (all are “freeborn”); (2) a conception and defense of what I will call “residual liberty”; and (3) a defense of the economic freedoms of free commerce, free trade, and the abolition of legal monopolies or charters. Let me address these briefly by turn.

A. Equality

Before Lilburne, the term “free-born Englishman” was quite uncommon. As Foxley points out, until Lilburne the phrase one was more likely to hear was “free-born subject,” not “free-born Englishman.”⁵² Lilburne changed that. He deliberately and frequently used the term “free-born Englishman,” by which he meant to indicate two principal things. First, people had rights either from their essential nature or from God; either way these rights preceded manmade law and, if there was a conflict between the two, their natural rights trumped manmade law. In his 1646 *Liberty Against Slavery*, Lilburne refers to Magna Carta as recognizing, rather than creating, the free-born Englishman’s freedom: “these Liberties and Franchises were not of Grace and donation, but of Right and Inheritance”; Magna Carta was “no new Declaration,” but instead was merely “declaratory of the principall grounds of the fundamentall Lawes of *England*.”⁵³ Second, Lilburne used the term “free-born Englishman” to refer to everyone in England, not only a select or privileged few. For example, the 1646 *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* refers to the “Birth-right and Inheritance” of “all the Inhabitants of every countie throughout this Kingdome,” and asserts equal natural rights for “all the inhabitants of this Land”—not only those born in England.⁵⁴

The Levellers argued for an extension of the scope of natural rights and freedoms beyond only highborn men to, first, Englishmen of all classes, then to English of both sexes of all classes, then to all inhabitants of England and even of the entire British empire, and then, finally, to all humans on earth. It may be hard to appreciate today the radicalness of such claims made in the 1640s, but they had virtually no philosophical precedent and virtually no intellectual history on which to draw. They were effectively new moral claims. Lilburne and other Levellers frequently cited Magna Carta in support of their view, but Magna Carta did not conceive of the rights and freedoms for which Lilburne and the Levellers argued. The Levellers repeated the claim again and again in their writings and speeches throughout the 1640s. In addressing his fellow English citizens, Lilburne writes: “These your Neighbours were [. . .] each one laboring in his place to

⁵² Rachel Foxley, “John Lilburne and the Citizenship of ‘Free-Born Englishmen,’” in John Rees, ed., *John Lilburne and the Levellers* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵³ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 108.

⁵⁴ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 138.

preserve the common Liberties and Lawes of the Kingdome, which makes us indeed true free-men, without seeking, or endeavouring to Lord it thus (as now we do) one over anothers faith; your Brethren, together with you, and all the Commons of England, have an equall interest and property in the Law, being all of us free-born English-men."⁵⁵ Note that Lilburne speaks of "common" liberties, of "all" the Commons, and of "all of us" having "equall" interest and rights under the law—which he extends to everyone in the British kingdom. Elsewhere, Lilburne extends the scope of those rights and freedoms even further when he claims a right to plead his case and defend himself against criminal accusations, a right, he claims, is "the natural and undoubted right of every individual Englishmen, yea and of every man, upon the face of the Earth."⁵⁶ Not only "every man," but women also: while discussing Adam and Eve in his 1649 *The Free-man's Freedom Vindicated*, Lilburne claims that "every particular and individual man and woman" are "by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority, and majesty, none of them having by nature any authority, dominion, or magisterial power one over or above another."⁵⁷ He further claims that humankind's equal freedom entails that no one may exercise any power or authority over another except "by mutual agreement or consent."⁵⁸

Lilburne was thus constructing a novel and bold argument that there was a universal equality in the rights and freedoms the Levellers were asserting, and that no one—neither a king nor a judge nor a bishop—had proper authority to take those rights and freedoms away.

B. Residual liberty

One implication of universal rights and freedoms was that people possessed what I will call "residual liberty"—that is, an indefinitely wide scope of freedom to engage in behavior, activities, and associations that were neither described nor delimited, except as specifically prohibited by warranted law. It was a claim to a natural right to permissionless living. Instead of conceiving of the individual as being allowed only certain prescribed freedoms, it conceived of the individual as in possession of full, complete, and limitless freedom—with only those few exceptions required by proper recognition of others' rights and freedoms. This became for Lilburne and the Levellers the claim that I have the right to full and "unmolested" use of my person and my property, to full freedom of conscience and religion, and so on, except and only insofar as my activity impinges on the similar full rights and freedoms of others—who are equal in their rights and freedoms to me.

This conception of residual (natural) liberty is reflected in the Levellers' numerous and frequently interchanged terms—used both in singular and

⁵⁵ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 142–43.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Foxley, "John Lilburne and the Citizenship of 'Free-Born Englishmen'," 21.

⁵⁷ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 105. See also vol. 3, 372.

⁵⁸ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 105.

plural—for which they were pressing, including: right/rights, liberty/liberties, freedom/freedoms, privileges, immunities, and so on.⁵⁹ Their argument, in other words, was not for specific rights or specific freedoms, but, rather, for a broad and indefinite scope of liberty within which rights to practice religion, speak and write freely, and so on were merely instances. In his 1649 *Legall Fundamentall Liberties of the People of England*, for example, Lilburne explicitly defends “all private aims, personal respects or passions whatsoever” against the king’s and the bishops’ “reall intentions to destroy Liberty and property,” as well as to curtail “the maintenance and advancement of Religion, Justice, Liberty, Propertie, and peace.”⁶⁰ As this passage indicates, and as his subsequent extended discussion makes plain, Lilburne’s intention is to assert a general or plenary freedom on behalf of all, and “naturall” rights under that plenary freedom to engage in an indefinitely large range of unspecified liberties.

C. *Free commerce*

The final set of rights and freedoms advocated by the Levellers was to engage in commerce and trade without restriction, and to enter into any line of work without a mandatory requirement of license or apprenticeship. Lilburne criticizes, for example, the legal attempt to take the “Lives, Liberties, and Estates out of their hands whom they have chosen and entrusted therewith,”⁶¹ and he claims it is among “our Nationall and Fundamentall Lawes, Rights, and Priviledges” to employ our “lives, Liberties and Estates” according to their own wishes.⁶² He rails against “so many Monopolies and Pattents under pretext of publike good”; he denounces “the Prerogative-Monopolizing Patentee-men of London” and “Patentee-Monopolizing Companies, Corporations and fraternizes”; and he concludes: “So that to speak properly, really, and truly, their Brotherhoods are so many conspiracies to destroy and overthrow the lawes and liberties of England, and to ingrosse, inhance, and destroy the trades and Franchises of most of the Freemen of London.”⁶³ William Walwyn, for his part, claims as a “native right” a “general freedom of Trade,” which, as noted earlier, he argues includes “forraine Trade to be universally free to all English men alike.”⁶⁴ Walwyn specifies that this freedom to work, trade, and associate includes the right to the “buying & transporting of Native Commodities,” to “occasioning profitable Labour for all industrious people, in buying and transporting all sort of Manufactures,” to “the increase of Shipping,” to

⁵⁹ See Rachel Foxley, “John Lilburne and the Citizenship of ‘Free-Born Englishmen,’” 21 and Peter Wende, “‘Liberty’ und ‘property’ in der politischen Theorie der Levellers,” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 1 (1974): 147–73.

⁶⁰ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 295.

⁶¹ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 296.

⁶² Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 142.

⁶³ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 137–38.

⁶⁴ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 399.

“being more secure from advantages of Forraine States,” and to “the increase of Wealth and plenty.”⁶⁵ Walwyn goes on to argue in favor of both foreign and domestic market competition, and argues that monopolies and charters create “greater prices for worke” and “impoverisheth the maker, worker, grower, growth & Land.”⁶⁶ He concludes by advocating the abolition of all “unreasonable Orders, Oathes, fines, Censures” as well as “Courts & meetings” on the grounds that they violate every citizen’s “Generall & equall freedom.”⁶⁷

The Levellers’ argument is that the rights to trade, exchange, and associate freely are natural rights and are thus possessed by all people, and that they entail the right to trade with people from other countries. Thus, contrary to what some might suggest,⁶⁸ the general and equal freedom they supported was not only consistent with, but they believed was actually fulfilled within, commercial society based on open markets and free trade. And this argument is made both on principle—they possess these rights naturally—and on the consequentialist grounds that free trade and free commerce allow all citizens to improve their stations by generating wealth and prosperity. By contrast, charters, legal monopolies, and forced apprenticeships impoverish both individual citizens and the overall economy while enriching the privileged few.⁶⁹

VII. CONCLUSION: ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE

To illustrate the radical nature of the Levellers’ positions, consider the heinous practice of slavery. Slavery has probably existed as long as humans have existed. Think of the Pharaohs and their pyramids, the Romans and their Colosseum, or the Great Wall of China. What is remarkable about these accomplishments is not only that these feats of architecture and construction were achieved without modern mathematics and engineering and wealth, but also that they did not produce any real change in average levels of prosperity of their communities. Pharaoh, Caesar, and the Emperor enjoyed levels of freedom and prosperity that were spectacular in their days, but their people did not. Their achievements were built instead on the backs of conscripted slave labor, imperialism, conquest, and theft. Though we may revere and enjoy them today, one does not need to wonder whether the slaves hailed the pyramids as something of which to be proud.

⁶⁵ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 401.

⁶⁶ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 402.

⁶⁷ Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 2, 402–3.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Ann Hughes, “Learning from the Levellers?” in Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 75–88. See also Rachel Foxley, *The Levellers: Radical Political Thought in the English Revolution* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013) and Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 7–17.

⁶⁹ See the 1649 *Englands New Chains Discovered* (Otteson, *Levellers*, vol. 3, 257–60).

Although slavery might serve the narrow economic interests, and flatter the vanity, of the slaveholders, the cost in human liberty and suffering and misery cannot begin to make the tradeoff worthy of endorsement. Yet some defended the practice on the grounds that the enslaved were not worthy to be free. Even the great liberal John Stuart Mill in his 1859 essay *On Liberty* argued that his first principle of freedom—namely, “that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection”—should not apply to everyone, in particular to people too still in their “nonage” to be granted the full rights of free human beings.⁷⁰ In the middle of the nineteenth century Thomas Carlyle could still write of the “two-legged cattle” who required the “beneficent whip” to bend them to righteous ends.⁷¹ What monstrous ends, Carlyle asked rhetorically, would African slaves pursue if granted freedom as full human beings?

Carlyle’s rhetorical question has a real answer, however, which had been provided over two decades earlier by Thomas Macaulay:

There is only one cure for the evils which newly acquired freedom produces; and that cure is freedom. When a prisoner first leaves his cell he cannot bear the light of day: he is unable to discriminate colours, or recognise faces. But the remedy is, not to remand him into the dungeon, but to accustom him to the rays of the sun. The blaze of truth and liberty may at first dazzle and bewilder nations which have become half blind in the house of bondage. But let them gaze on, and they will soon be able to bear it. In a few years men learn to reason. The extreme violence of opinions subsides. Hostile theories correct each other. The scattered elements of truth cease to contend, and begin to coalesce. And at great length a system of justice and order is educed out of the chaos.

Many politicians of our time are in the habit of laying it down as a self-evident proposition, that no people ought to be free till they are fit to use their freedom. The maxim is worthy of the fool in the old story, who resolved not to go into the water till he had learnt to swim. If men are to wait for liberty till they become wise and good in slavery, they may indeed wait for ever.⁷²

⁷⁰ Mill wrote: “It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. [...] Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage” (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978 (1859)], 9–10).

⁷¹ Thomas Carlyle, “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (1849: 675), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000080778727;view=1up;seq=695>.

⁷² Thomas B. Macaulay, “Essay on Milton” (1825, paras 70 and 71), https://archive.org/stream/cu31924010389868/cu31924010389868_djvu.txt.

But the answer to Carlyle's rhetorical question had already been provided some half-century before Macaulay by Adam Smith, who wrote, "There is not a negro from the coast of Africa who does not, in this respect, possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished."⁷³ And yet the answer to Carlyle had been provided by John Locke three-quarters of a century before Smith, when he wrote, "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule. [. . .] This freedom from absolute, arbitrary power, is so necessary to, and closely joined with a man's preservation, that he cannot part with it, but by what forfeits his preservation and life together."⁷⁴ In fact, however, the answer had already been provided by John Lilburne and the other Levellers in the 1640s.

Despite the dark episodes of repression in this history, then, there have also been inspiring examples of courage and resolve in the assertion of individual liberty.⁷⁵ When Lilburne had been brought before the Star Chamber in 1637, he stood his ground, asserting his equal right as an individual to the freedoms anyone else enjoyed. In 1641, Lilburne saw the Star Chamber abolished. That was a great moral leap forward, elevating the individual—even the low, the mean, the disrespected, the disfavored individuals, those to whom Leveller Thomas Rainsborough referred as "the poorest he that is in England" and "the poorest man in England"⁷⁶—to the status of moral agents equal in dignity to those in the favored classes. Lilburne's conception of morality and human personhood spread and eventually gave rise to many of the institutions we today in the West often take for granted. If no one, regardless of class, family, or wealth, had any justified natural authority over anyone else, then individuals no longer needed to beg leave from their "superiors" to own property, to select lines of work, to trade or exchange or cooperate with others, to worship and associate according to their private consciences. In time, and in fits and spurts, individuality, diversity, and of course various inequalities—except formal or legal inequality—arose, and along with it the ensuing unprecedented growth in human accomplishment, in material prosperity, in longevity and health

⁷³ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, eds. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1976 [1759]), 206–7.

⁷⁴ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, C. B. Macpherson, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), 17.

⁷⁵ See David Schmitz and Jason Brennan, *A Brief History of Liberty* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁷⁶ Quoted in Andrew Sharp, ed., *The English Levellers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 103.

and nutrition that we have seen occur in the world in the last two centuries.⁷⁷

Now, of course neither Lilburne nor the Levellers were solely responsible for this—and in any case it is extremely difficult to establish causal links, in part because the historical record is incomplete—but their example was emblematic of a changing conception of morality and thus politics. The lesson to draw from the example of Lilburne and the other Levellers is that each individual is unique and precious, and that fact issues in a moral imperative of equal respect. The liberal government that promotes justice for all while at the same time respecting each person's unique individual dignity as an equal moral agent is consistent with, even an embodiment of, this moral imperative. Moreover, the prosperity to which it leads can give rise to the hope, and even the realization, of lives of meaning and purpose for increasing numbers of people. These twin goals of dignity and prosperity, for which the Levellers argued and risked (and sometimes paid with) their lives, are at the core of modern liberalism and the liberal political economy built upon it. For these reasons, then, the Levellers may rightfully be considered among its most important founders.

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⁷⁷ See Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Hans Rosling, Anna Rosling Rönnlund, and Ola Rosling, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World—And Why Things Are Better Than You Think* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018).