

CHAPTER 2

THE MAKING OF THE REVOLT

The rise in population that had marked the later decades of the thirteenth century was, by the early fourteenth century, coming to an end. The rise had in part been self-stimulating. As the quantity of human labour power increased, so too did total production. This in turn provided the basis for further demographic growth. This could only occur up to a point, however, within the limitations of feudal productive techniques. By the turn of the century, population had started to decline as the output of food proved insufficient for the number of mouths to be fed. The early decades of the fourteenth century were marked by food shortage and famines as well as cattle plagues. In some parts of the kingdom of Edward I, social structures were breaking down as local gangs terrorized villages. A sense of crisis pervaded the already fragile world of medieval England. At the turn of the mid-century, however, a calamity of Old Testament proportions occurred which was to profoundly shape the history of the rest of the century.

The plague of 1348–9 struck on a scale and with a savagery that people could only explain as being an act of divine retribution by a vengeful God angry at the sinfulness of the human world. Its appearance from the East, from the lands of 'pilgrimage and crusade', gave it a demonic aspect in the mid-fourteenth century imagination. The expansion of trade between western Europe and the Orient had provided a new vehicle for the transmission of disease. The bacillus responsible for the plague was carried in the blood of the black rat and the vector for the transmission to humans was the common rat flea. These rats and their companions travelled on the boats of the growing grain trade.

By the end of 1347, the plague had arrived at Cyprus. The following month it had struck at Provence and Avignon. Already it had ravaged Italy and had reached far into Germany. In June of 1348 two ships from Gascony arrived in Melcombe Regis on the

Dorsetshire coast and the Black Death, as the Elizabethan historian John Stow was later to call it, made its first appearance in England.

The symptoms of the disease itself added to the terror. This was no sleeping sickness of slow fatigue and decline. Bubonic plague creates a disgusting effect on its victim. It strikes fast. Within two days the lymphatic areas of the neck, groin and armpits have swollen. These swellings, or buboes, begin to ooze vile-smelling pus. Black carbuncles also appear. One Welsh poet and victim described the effect:

It is seething, terrible, wherever it may come, a head that gives pain and causes a loud cry, a burden carried under the arms, a painful angry knob, a white lump. It is of the form of an apple, like the head of an onion, a small boil that spares no one. Great is its seething, like a burning cinder, a grievous thing of an ashy colour.¹

The victim died within a week, tortured by intense points of pain over their body. The plague is represented in the art of the fourteenth century by the figure of St Sebastian, who suffered death by arrows.

Once in England, the plague travelled swiftly. From Dorset it moved westwards and northwards. Bristol was the first major town to be ravaged. In vain, the Gloucestershire authorities attempted to prevent anybody entering from the direction of Bristol. Soon it had reached Oxfordshire. By 1 November 1348 the disease had worked its way back down the Thames into London. It appeared in Norwich in January of 1349. Over the next few months York, Lancashire and the northern districts of England and eventually Ireland were visited, before eventually the plague expired by the end of the summer.

Estimates vary considerably as to how many human souls were dispatched by the plague. A general consensus says that at least a third of the population of England died. Upper estimates put the figure at more like a half. The death toll also varied from one part of the country to the next. Certainly the church graveyards were quickly exhausted. The plague cemeteries that are marked today are only the sites of which we still have records. But one feature of the plague that should not surprise was that it affected the poor more



The panicked burial of victims of the plague did not stop it spreading at frightening speed throughout Europe.

than it affected the rich. Amongst the attendants of the House of Lords, for example, only 4½ per cent died in 1348 and 13 per cent the following year. Only one member of the royal household was struck down.² As in every age dominated by inequalities of wealth, the housing and lifestyles of the wealthy ensured that they remained relatively protected from the rats and fleas that brought death to the doors of the rest of the population.

The plague had immediate effects, both psychologically and socially, for those who survived. Some chronicles report a mentality of abandon and dissoluteness. More commonly though, the atmosphere in England seems to have been one of a strange malaise and an outlook of pessimism and deep despair.

In these days was death without sorrow, wedding without friendship, wilful penance, and dearth without scarcity, and fleeing without refuge or succour.³

The longer-term consequences of the Black Death, however, were social and economic. Villages had been cleared and large areas of

the country had become depopulated. With such a dearth of labour, harvests could not be brought in, despite women and children being put into the fields. Famine came in the shadow of disease. A dislocation now occurred in the economic relations that had prevailed on the manors. A loosening of the old loyalties and obligations began to develop. The villeins were now in a position to make demands. In particular, they insisted on payment for working the lord's land. The old habits of labour dues and customary working of the lord's *demesne* land were replaced more and more by waged labour.

Increasingly, villeins would 'flee' the manor on which they and their families before them had spent their whole lives, confident in the knowledge that they would find another lord or merchant landowner only too happy to hire them. In doing so they were breaking the customs, obligations and legal attachments to the land that had provided the basis of feudalism for generations. Many of the landowners would eventually choose forms of farming that relied less on human labour and far more on the grazing of animals. Sheep farming, in particular, was to become significant as peasants were driven off their lands for pasture and the market for mutton grew in the urban centres. More importantly, in our period, wool became a crucial export to Flanders and other centres of the early textile industry. It was also to become a dominating factor in the European political conflicts of the later fourteenth century.

The shortage of labour, caused by a plague that had affected the young and fit more than the old, began to make itself felt. It became possible now for a labourer to travel from one village and town to another and find work, particularly during the harvests. Trades people and artisans were especially in demand and the prices of manufactured goods rose accordingly. The price of food fell with fewer mouths to buy for. Chroniclers of the day commented on the phenomenon of the travelling labourer as almost a motif of the times. He represented a wanderlust that was significant on both a psychological and an ideological level as well as being important from an economic point of view. It was no longer only the travelling friars who moved around the country. Workmen also moved from place to place, carrying news of the places from whence they had come as well as occasional ideas and stories they had picked up along the way.

The plague had made labour a precious commodity for the first time on any serious scale and wages began to rise on the basis of the bargaining power of the labourer. After a century of growing differentiation and internal contradiction, the wealthiest classes now found unity in a common purpose – to stem the rising wage levels of the rural labourers and to break their rising confidence and social aspirations. The open struggle over wages and social status that had now begun was to define the English domestic social scene for the next thirty years.

The first act of the King in Council designed to push back wages to pre-plague levels was the Ordinance of 1349. It attempted to set wages at 1346 levels. This was given parliamentary backing in 1351 in the form of the Statute of Labourers. Under the statute, labourers were obliged to work for a lord for a whole year. Short time and day labouring, which in a time of labour shortage benefited the labourer, was declared unlawful. The argument used to recommend the statute was one that we can recognize today:

*. . . because a great part of the people, and especially of workmen and servants, late died of the pestilence, many seeing the necessity of masters, and the great scarcity of servants, will not serve unless they may receive excessive wages, and some willing to beg in idleness [rather] than by labour to get a living; we considering the grievous incommodities, which of the lack especially of ploughmen and such labourers as may hereafter come, have upon deliberation and treaty of the prelates and the nobles and learned men assisting us . . . ordained . . . (1) Every ablebodied person under sixty 'not living in merchandise or exercising any craft, not having his own whereby he may live nor proper land' shall be bound to serve when required at no higher wage than in the 20th year of the reign [of Edward III] . . . or else be committed to prison . . .*⁴

The statute laid down the payment that could be given for every type of work: hay could be mown for 5d an acre; a quarter of wheat could be threshed for 2½d. Every craft – carpentry, metalwork, stone masonry, tailoring, etc. – was regulated in similar manner:

*carters, ploughmen, leaders of the plough, shepherds, swineherds, domestic and all other servants shall receive the liveries and wages accustomed in the said twentieth year [of the reign of Edward III] and four years previously; so that in areas where wheat used to be given, they shall take 10d for the bushel, or wheat at the will of the giver, unless it is ordained otherwise.*⁵

In every town 'ceppes' or stocks were to be placed for the punishment of those who attempted to raise their wages beyond these levels or who refused to take an oath of obedience to the statute.⁶ Those who broke their oath would be imprisoned for forty days. Those who broke their oath for a second time would be imprisoned for a 'quarter of a year'. Thereafter the sentence would be doubled each time such a rebel was caught contravening the statute.

The Statute of Labourers was to be returned to again and again by Parliament over the next three decades to be elaborated and updated. In 1360 we see Parliament institute a new statute designed to control the mobility of labour and in particular to stamp out the phenomenon of the wandering labourer. Those labourers who were found to be straying too far from their ascribed place of residence were to have the letter 'F' for 'Falsity' branded on their foreheads. In 1361 local sheriffs were given greater and somewhat arbitrary powers to arrest all 'evil-doers, rioters and barrators'.⁷

Parliament was not only concerned with wages, however. As peasants gained in confidence with regard to their economic position, they also began to feel differently about the social hierarchy to which they were supposed to defer. Peasants now began to have aspirations 'above their station'. This was more than their betters could stomach and so was passed what must be regarded as one of the most openly and odiously class-conscious pieces of legislation in history. The Sumptuary Laws of 1363 attempted to lay down by parliamentary decree the standards of consumption for different classes in society. The types of clothing and diet to which each stratum within society had to restrict themselves were spelled out in detail. For example, those who worked at handicrafts and yeomen were not to wear

stone, cloth of silk or silver, girdle, knife, button, ring, garter, brooch, ribbon, chains or any manner of things of gold or silver, or any manner of apparel embroidered or enamelled, their wives and children similarly

whereas

*Carters, ploughmen, drivers of the plough, oxherds, cowherds, shepherds, dairyworkers, and all other keepers of beasts, threshers of corn . . . shall not take or wear any manner of cloth but blanket and russet wool of 12d, and shall wear girdles of linen according to their estate, and come to eat and drink as in the manner that pertain to them and not excessively.*⁸

Such a statute could never be effectively implemented and the Sumptuary Laws were something of a dead letter from the outset. They were repealed two years later. In their very conception and enactment, however, they speak volumes about the conflict that was shaping social opinion in this period.

The attempts to hold down wages also proved to be ultimately unsuccessful. The Statute of Labourers could never really be effective and average wage rates continued to rise. The repeated attempts to enforce it, however, meant that it became not only a hated piece of class legislation but also the grist in a class struggle of a new type. Previously, peasants had struggled against a particular lord who oppressed them. Now their hostility was aimed increasingly at Parliament and other national institutions. The politicization that this made possible was to become generalized into a much more fundamental questioning of society.

By the 1370s the class antagonisms that had been unleashed by the Black Death were intensifying into a more generalized unrest. In the 1370s we see landlords and employers, unable to control the labour 'problem' on their estates unaided, petitioning Parliament for help. The appeals and statutes of the time give evidence of union and combination amongst the peasants as they both resisted the feudal reaction being waged by the late-fourteenth-century ruling class and pressed home their own demands. A statute of 1377 was passed in response to an appeal from 'the commons' regarding truculent labour on the estates:

*These men have refused to allow the officials of the lords to distrain them for the said customs and services; and have made confederation and alliance together to resist the lords and officials by force, so that each will aid the other whenever they are distrained for any reason. And they threaten to kill their lord's servants if these make distraint upon them for their customs and services; the consequence is that, for fear of the deaths that might result from the rebellion and resistance of these men, the lords and their officials do not make distraint for their customs and services. Accordingly the said lords lose and have lost much profit from their lordships, to the great prejudice and destruction of their inheritances and estates.*⁹

Amongst the well-to-do a fearfulness of the peasantry and a growing anxiety about the threat they represented is apparent. Their imaginations were still dimly haunted by the *Jacquerie* – the bloody uprisings of the French peasantry in 1358. By the late 1370s there was certainly a sense of impending catastrophe. But economics alone cannot explain the storm that was soon to break. The consciousness that was emerging amongst the 'lower orders' was focused by a growing antagonism towards not only the 'higher orders' but actually the very 'highest' in the land. The sharpness of the class conflict that was brewing was quickened by the politics of the time.

By the mid-1370s the reign of Edward III was disintegrating. Edward himself was in his dotage and already senile. He had retreated into a private inner court with his mistress, the universally unpopular Alice Perrers, who had arrogated her own social and political influence as the king's favourite. The real power behind the throne was a man who dominated the political life of England – John of Gaunt.

John of Gaunt was easily the most powerful individual in England in the period immediately before the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt. He was by far the largest landowner with lordships stretching from Liddel and Dunstanburgh on the Scottish border to Kingston Lacey and Willingdon on the south coast of England, and from Gimingham and Aylsham on the East Anglian coast to Monmouth and Kidwelly in Wales.¹⁰ He was third son to the king and the brother of the ageing heir to the throne, Edward of Wales –

the Black Prince. John of Gaunt raised his own private armies when he set out on one of his many military expeditions to Scotland, France or Spain.

*He was probably the mightiest subject England has ever seen. The Duchy of Lancaster was an independent palatinate within whose boundaries the King's writ did not run. In addition Gaunt possessed countless rich estates and properties throughout England, ranging from a vast sheep ranch in the Peak District to his splendid palace of the Savoy just outside the City. His revenues and his retinue were scarcely surpassed by those of his father. Moreover, as the husband of Pedro the Cruel's daughter he was rightful King of Castile.*¹¹

John of Gaunt, however, also faced a challenge to his power in the form of an institution that was beginning to play a more independent and critical role. As society had become more complex and heterogeneous in terms of its class composition, Parliament began to change too in terms of the interests that it represented. Previously, parliaments had consisted of gatherings of lords and senior gentry summoned by the king and his council and elected gentry from the counties and shires whose purpose, in broad terms, was to approve the king's law and to set taxes. The 'Good Parliament', however, which began in April 1376 and lasted until July 1376, was not only the longest running parliament that had assembled. It was also a focal point for tensions that were reaching breaking point within the political establishment. The towns and shires had sent up representatives who were critical of what they regarded as the abuse of royal powers. An antagonism quickly opened up between the members of the Good Parliament and John of Gaunt.

The Good Parliament complained about the corruption surrounding the king and his clique. The most powerful magnates in London had been able, through court influence and manipulation of the enfeebled monarch, to secure highly lucrative monopolies and financial arrangements for themselves. London financiers such as Richard Lyons, Adam Bury, John Peeche and John Pyel were all charged with having sold licences to merchants for the avoidance of tax on goods passing through the Calais 'staple' and with having

arranged loans to the crown at exorbitant rates of interest. The fact that this parliament was able to score victories, albeit temporary, over John of Gaunt and the royal court betrayed rumblings occurring deeper within society. This parliament was reflecting the interests of a new and ever-growing mix of smaller merchants and lower gentry who wished to check the power of the court over their social and business affairs. When Peter de la Mare, speaker for the Good Parliament, laid out the chief grievances to John of Gaunt and said that the 'king has with him certain councillors and servants who are not loyal or profitable to him or the kingdom',¹² he considered himself to be speaking for the 'Commons of England' and not for one particular group. The Good Parliament was eventually closed by John of Gaunt. The crisis surrounding Gaunt, however, did not subside. But now his conflict was with the Church.

The Church of late-fourteenth-century Europe was undergoing its own political crisis. Since 1309 the papacy had been caught within the 'Babylonish captivity'. This referred to the fact that France, the largest and most politically powerful region in Europe, had brought the papacy from Rome to Avignon. This gave the French monarchy an immensely important lever of political influence inside every other country. It gave the French ruling class, for instance, the power to appoint bishops and prelates of its own choosing into key positions in England. A proportion of the taxes raised in England were also sent to Avignon to support the Church. The tensions that were opening up between different European countries with the growth of trade were now becoming focused, within England, on an increasing opposition to the Church.

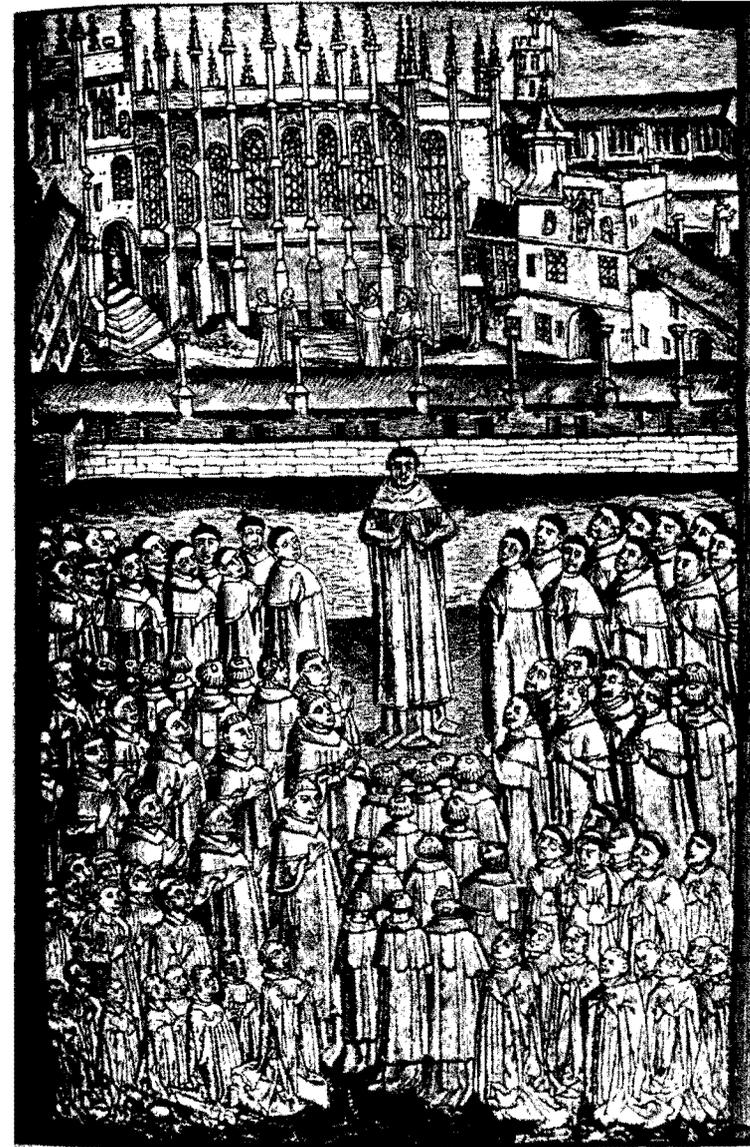
The reoccupation of Rome by the Italians paved the way for the return of the papacy to its historic home by 1370. It was the papacy of Urban VI, however, and the anti-French reforms that became associated with it, which was to split the Church for nearly half a century. In 1378 a group of cardinals returned to Avignon and appointed their own pope, Clement VII.¹³ The great 'schism' meant that two popes now ruled God's kingdom on Earth. Now the different emerging powers on the western European continent lined up around these two poles. The Spanish, the English and the Italians supported the Pope in Rome. The Scots and the Neapolitans supported the Pope at Avignon. The Church had never been above politics. But now this was obvious to the most

uneducated peasant in the furthest flung reaches of the Church's influence. The mystical power of the key ideological institution in medieval society, which had dominated the mind of Europe for centuries, was shattered.

The crisis of the Church was not only political. The voices that questioned the authority of the Church were becoming more numerous, louder and more confident in the late fourteenth century. Numerous cults surrounding saints, visionaries and holy figures had emerged. In Europe the manias surrounding Brigitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena had posed fundamentalist challenges to Church authorities. The Apostles, in particular, became objects of adoration and popular affection as figures who were 'more like us' than the bishops and cardinals. In England the cult of Thomas à Becket and the popular trade in relics betrayed an erosion of religious awe for the established Church. The crisis of Christian ideology, however, was occurring on a much more profound level and right in the heart of the intellectual establishment. One name above all others stands out as being of key importance in this part of the story – that of John Wycliffe.

John Wycliffe was a senior figure at Oxford University who, for a time, had been Master of Balliol College. He was one of a line of Oxford schoolmen who had been dissenters from Church orthodoxy on theological matters. Ockham before him had put forward views that favoured the restriction of theological authority to religious and spiritual matters. But Wycliffe's teachings, resonating through the immense contradictions of the fourteenth century, rang louder in the ears of his contemporaries – and in every part of society. He preached against the wealth and ostentation of the official Church. He castigated the abbots and friars for their corruption and he appealed to a fundamentalist sentiment that was at large in society and which made him a popular figure.

It was Wycliffe's theological teachings, however, which attracted the attention of the authorities in Rome. He denied the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, which struck directly against the power that the priest and friar held over their congregates. He denied the Pope's authority over men's souls. In his doctrine of 'Dominion' he declared that God dispensed grace to men according to the state of their souls and not according to a pre-ordained station in life. Mortal sin broke this state of grace and therefore the right of



The universities were hotbeds of intellectual debate and dissent.

all temporal authority. He advocated the abolition of the Pope and Church authorities. He inspired and was partly responsible for the writing of the first English translation of the Bible. In 1377 a Papal Bull was issued against Wycliffe which asserted that:

*The heretic was standing for England against Rome, for the State against the Church . . . that he had declared against the power of the Pope to bind and loose [the souls of men], and had maintained that excommunication when unjust had no real effect. He had pronounced it the duty of the State to secularise the property of the Church when she grew too rich, in order to purify her. He said that any ordained priest had the power to administer any of the Sacraments, several of which the Roman Catholic Church reserves to Bishops alone.*¹⁴

Wycliffe's influence was of European significance. He directly influenced Jan Huss and the peasant communist movements on the continent. But in England, Wycliffe became inevitably embroiled in the contemporary political struggle. John of Gaunt saw in Wycliffe a powerful weapon against the Church in England and so took him under his protection. When Wycliffe was summoned by the bishops at St Paul's Cathedral to answer the charges of the Papal Bull, crowds gathered to support him. When John of Gaunt appeared, however, as Wycliffe's protector, the mood changed completely. Rioting occurred and Gaunt was forced to flee for his life. The first bubbles were appearing in the pot that was soon to boil over.

The overlapping crises both within and between the politics of state and those of religion reverberated downwards to meet the rising discontent emerging from the base of society. What hastened this situation was the issue of taxation. For most of the fourteenth century England had been at war. This was the period of what historians were to call the 'Hundred Years War', which lasted in its different phases from 1337 to 1453. The year 1369 had seen the end of a nine-year peace and the war since then had not gone well for the English armies in France. The French expeditions had to be paid for and by 1375 the resumption of war had cost the treasury £650,000.¹⁵ In practically its last act during the reign of Edward III, the parliament of 1377, a parliament now loyal to John of Gaunt, declared a tax of 4d on every person over fourteen years of age.

Traditionally the villeins had been spared direct taxation by the state and the injustice of the new tax was not lost on the poorest in society. This poll tax was to be followed by two others.

The scene was set for revolution when Richard of Bordeaux came to the throne in 1377 at the age of ten. But this historical moment might still have passed were it not for one final essential ingredient – the patient work of revolutionaries. Throughout England there were poor priests who were close to their parishioners and who shared the sense of outrage and social injustice of their times. Such priests were frequently influenced by Wycliffite ideas. Certainly they were impressed by Wycliffe's support for the collective non-payment of taxes that were considered to be unfair, and many were the priests who actively led their flocks in such resistance. There were friars also who preached a levelling doctrine. The most popular expression of this appeal for a human equality on Earth to match that in heaven drew on a radical image of the Garden of Eden. Often a sermon by a local or travelling priest would include the couplet:

*When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then a gentleman?*

God had not created classes. This was the work of humankind. And what had not been made by God could be unmade by human beings. Versions of this rhyme can be found all over Europe at different times in this historical epoch. There were some, however, who had been preaching such sentiments well before the late 1370s and well before the influence of Wycliffe and his itinerant priests. The most important of these was John Ball, who had begun his career twenty years previously. He was known to the authorities, who repeatedly tried to silence him. Ball was no stranger to the inside of a fourteenth-century prison. But nothing would deter him. He attacked Church and State alike with a militant rhetoric and was awarded the predictable title of the 'Mad Priest of Kent' by his enemies. He attacked in particular the indignities of bondage and serfdom. We have a record of his style of speech and the notions that inspired him and his listeners:

He was accustomed every Sunday after Mass, as the people were



John Ball was the spiritual leader of the rebellion. He preached that in the Garden of Eden there had been no such thing as 'rich and poor'.

coming out of church, to preach to them in the market-place and assemble a crowd around him, to whom he would say, 'My good friends, things cannot go well in England, nor ever will until everything shall be in common; when there shall be neither vassal nor lord and all distinctions levelled, when lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How ill have they used

us? And for what reason do they hold us in bondage? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? And what can they show or what reasons give, why they should be more masters than ourselves? except perhaps in making us labour and work for them to spend. They are clothed in velvets and rich stuffs, ornamented with ermine and other furs, while we are forced to wear poor cloth. They have handsome seats and manors, when we must brave the wind and rain in our labours in the field; but it is from our labour that they have wherewith to support their pomp. We are called slaves, and if we do not perform our services we are beaten.¹⁶

It was such ideas that raised the imagination of the villeins beyond their most immediate concerns and fused their social anger with a new and utopian vision. That vision was creating a revolutionary consciousness and the revolution that this had made possible was about to begin.