

# Two Kinds of Freedom: Language and Practice in Late Medieval Rural Revolts<sup>\*</sup>

## Dos tipos de libertad: lenguaje y práctica en las revueltas del último medievo

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**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza el papel de la libertad como motivación para la rebelión rural en la Europa del Norte entre 1200 y 1450. Se centra en la comparación entre el levantamiento inglés de 1381 y las revueltas en Francia y añade comparaciones adicionales con otras regiones. Si bien los discursos sobre la libertad fueron importantes en los textos cronísticos y para los propios rebeldes, la mayor parte de los rebeldes no articularon sus reclamaciones en términos de libertad. El último epigrafe demuestra que aunque las demandas de libertad fueran poco frecuentes durante las revueltas, las redes sociales a través de las que se organizaron los levantamientos, revelan que las prácticas comunales rurales constituían un tipo de libertad que facultaba a los campesinos para implicarse en la acción socio-política.

**Palabras clave:** Revuelta de los campesinos ingleses; Jacquerie; Igualdad; Libertad; Servidumbre.

**Abstract:** This article looks at the role of freedom as a motivation for rural rebellion in northern Europe from c. 1200-1450. It focuses comparatively on the English Rising of 1381 and revolts in France with some further comparison to other regions. While discourses of freedom were important in 1381 both in the chronicle texts and to the rebels themselves, most rebels did not articulate their demands in terms of liberty. The last section demonstrates that although demands for freedom were rare in revolts, the social networks through which uprisings were organized show that rural communal practices constituted a kind freedom, enabling peasants to engage in socio-political action.

**Keywords:** English Rising (Peasants' Revolt); Jacquerie; Equality, Liberty; Serfdom.

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

The concept of freedom or liberty has always been important to the study of medieval revolts. Those who wrote the foundational studies in the nineteenth century, such as Simonde de Sismondi on the Florentine Ciompi Revolt of 1378 and Siméon Luce on Étienne Marcel's Parisian revolt in 1357-1358, saw them as the medieval forerunners of their own recent experiences of revolutionary liberation<sup>1</sup>. More recently, both of the most influential Anglophone monographs on the subject, Rodney Hilton's *Bond men made free* and Samuel K. Cohn's *Lust for liberty*, put the subject at the centre of their explanations, as well as their titles. Hilton's book, focused on rural rebellion across the whole of the Middle Ages, concludes that 'that the concept of the freeman, owing no obligation, not even deference, to an overlord, is one of the most important if intangible legacies of medieval peasants to the modern world'<sup>2</sup>. Cohn's, which posits a large increase in the number of revolts after the Black Death, explains that increase as driven by 'a new self- and class-confidence' that motivated people to revolt in search of 'liberty'. By liberty, Cohn argues rebels did not mean 'special corporate privileges' (*libertates* in the traditional, medieval sense), but rather 'an implicit sense of equality'<sup>3</sup>.

Hilton and Cohn's emphasis on freedom (or liberty) owes in part to their sources, as I will discuss further below, but as is true of all historical discussions of liberty/freedom, it also owes something to modern experiences and uses of the term(s)<sup>4</sup>. The national traditions of Anglo-American historians place the idea of liberty (or in America more usually 'freedom') at the centre of revolutionary moments in their own political histories and trace the intellectual genealogy of that idea to Roman republicanism and its Renaissance revival<sup>5</sup>. Another interpretative factor specific to Anglo-American scholarship is the existence of the two English words liberty and freedom. Although they are often used interchangeably, and

<sup>1</sup> de Sismondi, *Histoire des républiques italiennes*, vol. 4, pp. 455-456, 465; Luce, *Histoire de la Jacquerie*, pp. 127-128. See also, Lantschner, «The 'Ciompi revolution'».

<sup>2</sup> Hilton, *Bond men*, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> Cohn, *Lust for liberty*, pp. 233-242, quotes at pp. 233, 236, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Comparatively for the post-War German context, see Grundmann, «Freiheit», pp. 23-25.

<sup>5</sup> Classically, Pocock, *Machiavellian moment*; Skinner, *Liberty before liberalism*.

indeed that is the way Hilton and Cohn seems to have been using them, these words do not mean exactly the same thing. Freedom can be an absolute quality, but liberty is always a relational one. To be 'free', for example, one does not need the potential of enslavement – one can be 'born free' – but one can only be 'liberated' from some kind of constraint<sup>6</sup>. As the political philosopher Hannah Fenichel Pitkin demonstrated, 'freedom is more likely to be holistic, to mean a total condition or state of being', while '[l]iberty seems to connote something more formal, rational, and limited than freedom; it concerns rules and exceptions within a system of rules'<sup>7</sup>. A further distinction important to Anglo-American approaches is that between negative and positive liberty articulated by the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Berlin defined negative liberty (freedom from) as the absence of constraint, and positive liberty (freedom to) as one's ability to act in the pursuit of specific ends deemed laudable. He was, however, quite critical of positive liberty. He argued that it curtailed individuals' negative liberty by entailing decisions by others about what one should be free to do, leading, for example, to the authoritarian regimes he observed in contemporary Communist nations<sup>8</sup>.

As I will demonstrate in this article, a range of significations, running from an idea of total condition, to a variety of available capabilities, to specific legal rights, to the physical documents that confirm them, as well as a whole heritage of political experience and expression, are evoked when modern historians, medieval writers, or medieval rebels invoke 'freedom'. These meanings can overlap and the emphasis be placed differently according to context. What Hilton and Cohn meant by freedom or liberty was similar but not identical, and neither believed that freedom/liberty had only a single, unvarying meaning in the societies they studied. As Cohn notes, medieval usages of the term *libertas* in the plural might mean something almost the opposite of the modern quality of freedom. The three chronicle accounts for the Rouennais Harelle and Parisian Maillotin revolts of 1382 that he drew upon to illustrate the post-plague lust for liberty clearly demonstrate this range of meanings. Michel Pintoin's humanist chronicle portrays the rebels as acting 'in the hope of liberty' (*spe libertatis*) or even 'for the freedom of the fatherland' (*ob libertatem patrie*), language that perhaps echoes an exhortation of Sallust's Catiline<sup>9</sup>. But the two other chronicles speak in terms of the 'customs and

<sup>6</sup> One can, of course, be 'freed', an adjectival past participle which requires the existence of some previous constraint in the same way that 'liberated' does, but the past participle is liberty's sole adjectival form. To be 'at liberty' has a narrow range of meaning, largely related to permission, so again, implying rules and their absence or removal.

<sup>7</sup> Pitkin, «freedom and liberty», pp. 542-543.

<sup>8</sup> Berlin, «Two concepts». Berlin (p. 169) stated that he used the terms liberty and freedom interchangeably, though as Pitkin notes, his deployment of one term or another actually varied according to context.

<sup>9</sup> Pintoin, *Chronique*, ed. Bellaguet, pp. 22, 136. Other usages of *libertas* in this way: *Quantum per regnum Francie liberatem quisque libencius appetebat et jugum subsidorum excutere* (p. 20); *ut libertatem velle tueri viribus viderentur ... vanissimi homines sperant eciam invito rege posse consequi*

liberties current in the reigns of Louis IX and Philippe IV'<sup>10</sup> or even of *libertates*, meaning the actual charter in which those privileges were stipulated, a physical document that the rebels fetch from Rouen's cathedral treasury and read out<sup>11</sup>.

Cohn's lust for liberty seems to appear exclusively in urban revolts. In cities, as Patrick Lantschner writes elsewhere in this issue, liberty does seem strongly linked with special corporate privileges, especially ones textually encoded in a document. In the rural contexts on which Hilton's book and this article focus, liberties in this sense appear to have been less of a concern to rebels<sup>12</sup>. By contrast, some rural rebels demanded freedom in the much more expansive sense of Hilton's 'owing no obligation' or that of Cohn's 'social equality'. As Hilton and others have underlined, demands for freedom underpinned a number of the largest and most famous rural uprisings of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, including the English Rising or Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the Czech Taborite movement and the Catalan Remenses revolt of the fifteenth century, as well as the German Peasants' War of 1525<sup>13</sup>. Such demands are also found in rural revolts during the War of the Comuneros that this issue commemorates<sup>14</sup>. The importance of freedom to these rural revolts makes sense because those risings were directed against lordship and serfdom, phenomena that shaped social relations in the countryside far more strongly than in urban contexts. No rebellion was wholly rural; all had considerable interactions with urban centres. But we might think of negative freedom in the holistic sense of liberation from seigneurial constraints as particularly characteristic of rural rebel discourse.

However, the significance and significations of freedom to the rebels and their observers were not homogenous nor was this discourse one universally shared by all rural rebels. As I will discuss for the English Rising's main narrative sources, the range of meanings and implications related to freedom/liberty cover the full

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*libertatem* (p. 130). Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, ed. Rolfe, cap. 58, p. 120: *pro patria, pro libertate, pro vita ...* On other medieval adaptations of Sallustine language, see Grundmann, «Freiheit», pp. 34-35 and discussion of Walsingham, below. It is notable that Pintoin personally witnessed the English Rising of 1381, given the importance of freedom in broad senses to that rebellion, as discussed below.

<sup>10</sup> *omnes consuetudines et libertates quibus utebantur tempore Sancti Ludovici et Philippi Pulcri... deffenderent libertates civitatis* (*Chronographia*, ed. Moranville, p. 28).

<sup>11</sup> *furent tant qu'il orent la charte des franchises & libertés de Normandie ... firent venir à la dicte assemblée ... la charte de Normandie seellée en las de soie et et chire verte, laquelle avoit esté prise ou tresoir de Notre-Dame de Rouen; fu leue en general* (Cochon, *Chronique*, ed. de Robillard de Beaurepaire, pp. 163, 165). Similarly, in the passage from the *Chronographia* cited in the previous note, the rebels' liberties are to be secured *per modum carte perpetue, cujus sigillum de cera viridi et filis cercicis apendi solet*.

<sup>12</sup> This is unsurprising since such privileges are mainly considered an urban phenomenon, but cf. for French village franchises, Verriest, *Institutions*, pp. 163-164; Bourin, *Villages médiévaux*, vol. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Hilton, *Bond men*, ch. 3; Freedman, «German and Catalan».

<sup>14</sup> Rafael Oliva Herrer notes the protest during the War of the common people of Najera, who 'knew that freedom ought to come before everything and that their parents, who had been born free under royal jurisdiction, had been bound by force and reduced to slavery...' (Oliva Herrer, «Popular voices», p. 55, n. 34).

spectrum from freedom as social equality and the absence of constraint, to a particular set of privileges, to legal documents. Moreover, discourses of freedom cannot be found in all rural rebellions, and even in rebellions to which freedom was important, participants often articulated other objectives. Turning to France to consider a range of late medieval revolts, while some ‘freedom talk’ can be heard, most rural rebels championed other causes. During the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), rural rebels claimed to be moved by nobles’ abrogation of their obligations of protection to non-nobles, a concern to which freedom in any sense was an ancillary or even an alien concern. Still, if some rural rebels did not talk about freedom or make explicit demands in that vein, the communal solidarities and associations that were the precursors to and enablers of resistance and revolt might be thought of as practices of freedom that fundamentally challenged the hierarchical constraints and social inequalities under which they laboured.

## 1. ENGLAND

### 1.1 Chronicles of the Rising

Despite the centrality of freedom to Hilton’s assessment of the Rising, since the 1980s, historians have tended to de-emphasize its contribution to inciting the rebellion<sup>15</sup>. Instead, they have stressed other factors, such as the Third Poll Tax, resentment of misgovernment and corruption, especially associated with the prince John of Gaunt, fears of French and Castilian military incursion, wage-price mismatches, opportunistic pursuit of personal vendettas, and garden-variety greed and ribaldry<sup>16</sup>. The recent, relative neglect of freedom as a rebel objective may partly result from efforts to consider the revolts’ urban contexts and participants more fully, an emphasis that has, correctly to my mind, led us to re-label the ‘Peasants’ Revolt’ as ‘the ‘English Rising’ or similar<sup>17</sup>. Yet, if we focus on the chronicle accounts that Barrie Dobson called the revolt’s ‘indispensable four gospels’, freedom appears very important indeed<sup>18</sup>. These chronicles, written by Henry Knighton, Jean Froissart, an anonymous author, and Thomas Walsingham, paint freedom as the main focus, or at least a major focus, of the Rising, though they also demonstrate the multiplicity of meanings that the term and its cognates could have.

That chronicle written by Knighton, an Augustinian canon, mentions *libertas* in the singular in the context of rebel demands at the rebels’ audience with

<sup>15</sup> An important exception is Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, which stresses underlying socio-economic causes, especially serfdom.

<sup>16</sup> Dyer, «Social and economic background»; Prescott, «Judicial records»; Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 56-61; Dunn, *Great Rising*.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Dobson, «Rising»; Liddy, «Urban conflict»; Dunn, *Great Rising*, Cohn, *Popular protest*; Prescott, «‘Great and horrible’».

<sup>18</sup> Dobson, *Peasants’ Revolt*, p. xxxi.

Richard II at Mile End, where they ask that ‘all men in England be free and of free condition’ and in the plural at Saint Albans where the rebels force the abbot to grant them ‘many privileges’ (*multis libertatibus*)<sup>19</sup>. The Hainaulter Jean Froissart reported that the people were encouraged to rebel ‘in order to be free’ (*pour estre afranchi, nous sieuront*), and that their demand at Mile End was that the king free them (*tu nous afranchisses*)<sup>20</sup>. The anonymous author of this section of the Anonimalle chronicle, writing in a different French dialect to Froissart, also emphasized freedom’s importance to the rebels. Interestingly, in preference to the word *franc* used by Froissart or any derivative of the Romance *libere*, he opted to describe their demands with the English word ‘free’: *destre free; graunter a eux destre free; toutz estre free*<sup>21</sup>. All three chronicles speak of these freedoms and liberties in connection with charters – *cartae*, *chartres*, or in Froissart *franchises* – demonstrating the high degree of legalism and textuality shared by all levels of English society.

*Libertas* and its synonyms are employed especially frequently and with a wide range of meanings in the *Chronica maiora* written by the Saint Albans monk Thomas Walsingham. The semantic range of Walsingham’s *libertas* partly reflects the polyvocal composition of his chronicle, which incorporates his own narrative register, speeches that he recorded from or attributed to various actors in the Rising, and documents that he transcribed into his text. Like the other three chroniclers, he reports that freedom was the proximate cause of the rebellion, which began *pro libertate*<sup>22</sup>. (It should, however, be noted that he believed the revolt’s ultimately cause was the spiritual perversion of Wycliffism and the mendicants.) His chronicle later evokes the condition of freedom in a stirring speech reportedly made by rebel leader William Grindcobbe, who proclaims his willingness to die – indeed to be martyred – defending the freedom the rebels had won (*causa libertatis adquisite moriar*)<sup>23</sup>. Like Knighton, however, Walsingham also uses the plural *libertates* in the sense of corporate privileges giving the ability to do specific things, and these privileges are often contained in charters (*novas cartas ... libertatum, cartam antiquam ... de libertatibus villanorum*)<sup>24</sup>. As in Knighton’s chronicle, this usage is particularly associated with towns, especially his own monastic borough of Saint

<sup>19</sup> *cartam sub magno sigillo quod omnes homines in regno Anglie liberi essent et libere condicionis et ab omni iugo seruitutis et uillenagii exuti* (Knighton, *Knighton’s Chronicle*, ed. Martin, pp. 212, 226).

<sup>20</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, pp. 96, 112, and see p. 117 for *franchisses*.

<sup>21</sup> *Anonimalle*, ed. Galbraith, pp. 143, 145, 147. On the notable rarity of English in fourteenth-century chronicles, see Strohm, «‘A reveille!’», p. 41 on the Anonimalle’s use of ‘trew’, also considered also below.

<sup>22</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 410, see also vol. 1, pp. 412, 514, 560.

<sup>23</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 534.

<sup>24</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 456 and see vol. 1, pp. 444, 460, 462, 468, 470, 472, 474, 478, 484, 554, 558. Walsingham also uses the singular form in the sense of a jurisdictional immunity, as discussed below.

Albans<sup>25</sup>. These various significations – holistic freedom, legal privileges, and the documents that grant them – also overlap in this chronicle. For example, Grindcobbe's stirring appeal to 'freedom from oppression' (*libertas de oppressione*) is said to fortify his audience's determination not to give up their privileges (*libertates*). In this instance, that meant retaining the charters (*cartae*) that they had extorted from the abbey of Saint Albans.

In all of these chronicles, freedom is frequently defined as the opposite of servitude, especially the condition of serfdom. Walsingham says that the Rising was instigated by those 'whom we call *natiuos uel bondos*', and he records that they contrasted the *libertas* that they demand with the *seruicio* under which they actually laboured<sup>26</sup>. Walsingham's account frequently mentions his monastery's *nativi* and those of other manors, especially Bury St Edmunds, where the revolt followed a similar path to the uprising at Saint Albans<sup>27</sup>. In Froissart, too, the men of Kent and Essex begin their rising in protest of serfdom: *pour che que il dissoient que on les tenoit en trop grande servitude*<sup>28</sup>. They go to London in order to ask the king for their freedom and the abolition of serfdom, a pairing that appears repeatedly in the chronicle's account: *pour estre tout franc, car il voloient que il n'i eust nul serf en Engletiere*<sup>29</sup>. The meaning of 'free' in the Anonimale chronicle also appears synonymous with the abolition of serfdom in two of the word's three incidences: *free de toutz maners de seruage; ne nulle seruage ne nayfte, mes toutz estre free*<sup>30</sup>. In Knighton, too, freedom is liberation 'from all yoke of serfdom and villeinage' (*ab omni iugo seruitutis et uillenagii*)<sup>31</sup>.

If in these chronicles the opposite of freedom is servitude, one of its synonyms seems to be social equality<sup>32</sup>. In some contexts, equality between lords and peasants is used interchangeably with freedom or portrayed as freedom's natural result. In the Anonimale Chronicle, Wat Tyler closes his summary of the rebel demands with the demand that all be 'free and of one condition' (*estre free et du une condicione*)<sup>33</sup>. Froissart reports that the rebels desired that 'there would be neither

<sup>25</sup> On the question of whether the borough of Saint Albans, which had no corporate existence of its own, might be considered a 'town' see Cohn, *Popular protest*, p. 18. See also n. 57 below for the mixed social composition of those under the monastery's lordship.

<sup>26</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol.1, p. 410 and see vol.1, p. 560. *Bondagio* here is a definite reference to serfdom because the provision is later characterized as *manumissionem natiuis* (manumission to serfs) (ibid., vol. 1, p. 474 and see vol. 1, p. 470).

<sup>27</sup> E.g. *nativi omnium villarum pertinencium monasterio, asserentes se in mandatis habere ... cartas manumissionis et libertatis secundum tenorem carte regalis; propriorum seruorum et natiuorum* (Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, pp. 476, 478, 482).

<sup>28</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, p. 95

<sup>29</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, p. 100, and see pp. 97, 112.

<sup>30</sup> *Anonimale*, ed. Galbraith, pp. 143, 147.

<sup>31</sup> Above, n. 19.

<sup>32</sup> On the entangled concepts of freedom and equality in ancient and medieval thought, see Freedman, *Images*, pp. 72-79 and citations therein.

<sup>33</sup> *Anonimale*, ed. Galbraith, p. 147.

villeins nor gentlemen' but that all would be completely equal (*tout ouni*)<sup>34</sup>. Walsingham, too, associates the *libertas* desired by the rebels with social equality, claiming that the rebels wish to make themselves equal to the lords (*pares dominis effici*)<sup>35</sup>. He reports that the Essex rebels asked the king to confirm their liberty to be equal to that of the lords: *petere ut essent in libertate pares dominis*<sup>36</sup>. Having received their charter, he says that the *rustici* esteemed themselves nobles who were superior to royal lineage<sup>37</sup>. A programme of social levelling is also visible in that chronicler's report of the rebel leader Jack Straw's (possibly imaginary) confession, where Straw claims the Rising intended to destroy the realm's 'betters' (the *maior, fortior, and sciencior*) and that it was 'especially the poorer sort' (*precipue pauperiores*) who supported the rebels in London<sup>38</sup>.

These chroniclers write that rebels justified their demands for social equality on the basis of humanity's spiritual equality. The Anonimale chronicler reports that the rebels objected to the knight's claim that a man was his *nayff* (personal serf) because the man 'was Christian' (*fuiſt Criſtien*)<sup>39</sup>. Froissart similarly recounts that the rebels protested their *trop grande servitude* because 'at the beginning of the world there were no serfs nor could there have been any unless someone betrayed his lord, as Lucifer did to God ... but they [the rebels] were neither angel nor spirits, but men like their lords (*homme fourmet à la samblance de leurs signeurs*), who nevertheless treated them like animals... they wished to be all equal (*volioient estre tout un*)'<sup>40</sup>. The identification of social equality with freedom as a rationale for rebellion is tied to the revolt's clerical leadership, especially to the priest John Ball, whose famous sermon on the proverb 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?' appears in Froissart, as well as in Walsingham's Latin chronicle, where the proverb is quoted in the vernacular<sup>41</sup>. Arguing that servitude was against God's will and urging his audience to remove the yoke of servitude (*seruitutis iugo*) and to enjoy their long desired *libertas*, Ball ends this sermon with a ringing call for 'equal freedom, identical nobility, equivalent status, and the same power' (*equa libertas, eadem nobilitas, par dignitas, similisque potestas*)<sup>42</sup>.

It is worth considering, however, why the chroniclers chose to relay these sentiments and whether the importance of freedom and equality in their work reflects the rebels' sentiments or the chroniclers' invention. Freedom is notably less apparent as a rebel objective in the Rising's extensive corpus of non-narrative sources than in the chronicles. Despite Froissart's claim that there were 'a greater

<sup>34</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, p. 96.

<sup>35</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 410.

<sup>36</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 514.

<sup>37</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 478.

<sup>38</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 498.

<sup>39</sup> *Anonimale*, ed. Galbraith, p. 136.

<sup>40</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, p. 96.

<sup>42</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 546.

number of [serfs] in England than elsewhere', Mark Bailey has demonstrated that serfdom had actually begun to decline in England immediately after the Black Death; by 1381 it was a condition afflicting relatively few English peasants<sup>43</sup>. And there are notable inconsistencies between the centrality of freedom and equality in Walsingham and Froissart's report of John Ball's sermon, and the so-called 'John Ball letters' that Knighton and Walsingham transcribed into their narratives. These letters do not explicitly mention these ideals at all. Rather, they emphasize moral virtue, exhorting the rebels to 'stand manfully together in truth, and help truth' (*stonde manlyche to gedyr in trewþe, and helpeþ trewþe*) and to avoid sin<sup>44</sup>. That moralizing discourse jibes comfortably with the Anonimale chronicle's report (again lapsing into English) that the rebels' *wache worde en Engleis* was to hold 'with King Richard and the True Commons (*trew communes*)', but it seems to sit less easily with that and other chroniclers' emphasis elsewhere on freedom in socio-political and legal senses<sup>45</sup>.

As has been repeatedly demonstrated, chroniclers' accounts of rebellion tend to characterise rebels' actions and demands as irrational manifestations of their animalism or insanity, either because they did not understand them or because they did not want to<sup>46</sup>. *Deliramenta* is the word Walsingham refers to Ball's preaching<sup>47</sup>. The chroniclers' equation of rebel demands for social equality with disorderliness also appears in their treatment of the rebels' sociability toward their betters. Their actions are portrayed as disgustingly overfamiliar, as in the rebels' occupation of the Queen-mother's bedroom, even fatally so, as in Wat Tyler's disrespectful exchange with King Richard II and his noble companions leading to his death<sup>48</sup>. These motifs of inversion and parody, again common in narrative reports of rebellion, further caution against taking their evidence about freedom at face value. Walsingham's insistence on Saint Albans' rebels' demands for *libertas*, supposedly granted in an Anglo-Saxon charter, resonates suspiciously with his monastery's own, oft-reiterated claim that King Offa had granted to it an unusually extensive jurisdictional liberty. Indeed, 'Libertas', Julia Crick writes, 'is a word stamped through the documentary history of the house'<sup>49</sup>. It was also as a concept with

<sup>43</sup> *trop plus grant fuisson de tels gens a en Engletière que ailleurs* (Froissart, *Chronique*, ed. Luce, vol. 10, p. 95); Bailey, *decline*, esp. pp. 294-306, 310-311.

<sup>44</sup> Knighton, *Knighon's chronicle*, ed. Martin, p. 224.

<sup>45</sup> *Anonimale*, ed. Galbraith, p. 139; Green, *crisis*, pp. 198-205.

<sup>46</sup> Bulst, «'Jacquerie' und 'Peasants' Revolt'; Pearsall, «Interpretative models»; Strohm, «'A revelle!'»; and comparatively, de Medeiros, *Jacques et chroniqueurs*. See also Greenblatt, «Murdering peasants» on the disparity between historical and modern reception of representations of rebellion.

<sup>47</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 546.

<sup>48</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, pp. 422, 424, 434, 436, 438. See Ormrod, «In bed with Joan of Kent»; Challet, «Violence».

<sup>49</sup> Crick, «Liberty and fraternity», p. 93 and see Freedman, *Images*, p. 265 n. 37 for Walsingham's own citations of the Offa tradition.

which Walsingham had considerable familiarity from Classical texts<sup>50</sup>. The rebels' demands for *libertas* in this chronicle may therefore be read as an inversion of the monastery's own rights and/or as an echo of their evil predecessors in rebellion. Knighton, too, invoked a 'right' kind of liberty, drawing an implicit contrast with the rebels' own demands, in his report of how John Ball's anti-clerical preaching was harmful to the *libertati iuris ecclesiastici*<sup>51</sup>. Rather than conveying a heroic or forward-thinking rebel discourse, the chroniclers may be attributing ideas to them that they considered obviously dangerous and wrong.

## 1.2 England: Freedom and the Rebel Voice

Yet, if serfdom was becoming rarer and the chroniclers considered freedom and equality to be the delirious ravings of rabid masses, it does not necessarily follow that those ideals were absent from the Rising. As Paul Strohm argues, in condemning or mocking rebels, chroniclers often reveal the very motives and mentalities that they seek to conceal<sup>52</sup>. Although *libertas* may have meant one thing to Walsingham and another to the rebels about whom he was writing, appeals to pre-Conquest freedoms (real or imagined) were made on many English manors, including at Saint Albans itself in previous generations<sup>53</sup>. Setting the chronicles' reports in historiographical and historical context suggests that freedom from a variety of constraints was important to the Rising's participants, even if the rebels' language and that of the chroniclers sometimes differed in form or meaning.

Serfdom, though declining, was probably still of concern to many rebels: Chris Dyer found that upwards of 10% of his sample of rebels were personal serfs and that the majority held servile tenures<sup>54</sup>. But the perception of unfreedom may have been more important than its actual prevalence. The foreigner Froissart's remark on the pervasiveness of English servility may reflect his genuine shock at the level of unfreedom compared to his native Hainaut, where serfdom had mostly disappeared<sup>55</sup>. Walsingham's experience, on the other hand, would have been of an unusually robust servile community, for serfdom declined more slowly on the manors of Saint Albans than elsewhere in England and was enforced more

<sup>50</sup> Clark, «Thomas Walsingham reconsidered»; Federico, *classicist writings*; and comparatively, Ciceronian and Sallustian liberty as shaping ideas about 'Frisian freedom' in Vries, «*Frisonica libertas*», pp. 241-244 and n. 9, above. For Walsingham's use of *libertas* in this jurisdictional sense (e.g. *hominibus uillarum de libertate Sancti Albani*), see Walsingham, *St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 450, also vol. 1, pp. 442, 506, 520, 558.

<sup>51</sup> Knighton, *Knighton's chronicle*, ed. Martin, p. 210.

<sup>52</sup> Strohm «'A reveille! », esp. pp. 39-41.

<sup>53</sup> Faith, «'Great Rumour'»; Cohn, *Popular protest*, ch. 10. See also Dyer, «Memories of freedom» on ancient demesne appeals.

<sup>54</sup> Dyer, «Social and economic background», p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Verriest, *servage*, pp. 163-167.

strictly<sup>56</sup>. Saint Albans had free inhabitants (*burgenses et liberi*), but it also had many who were personally or tenurially unfree (*nativi/villani*)<sup>57</sup>. Saint Albans may be a place where the narrative of a ‘second serfdom’ imposed after the Black Death still holds good, as it may also at the abbey of Bury St Edmunds, where Walsingham similarly stresses serfdom as a rebel complaint<sup>58</sup>. At Bury not only did the abbey retain large numbers of serfs, it had also recently subjected its serfs to ‘aggressive management’, including a crackdown against emigration from its manors in the April preceding the revolt<sup>59</sup>.

Even for those rebels who were not themselves unfree, serfdom may still have been a significant concern precisely because of its increasingly rarity. The recently freed, as E. B. Fryde suggests, must have desired strong guarantees about their status in changed economic conditions, and this may help to explain the Rising in East Anglia and Essex, where there were few or no serfs<sup>60</sup>. The Statute of Labourers’ constraints on wages and working conditions, as well as its important but often overlooked provision forcing men (and especially women) into service (*servicio*), emphasized the fragility of their freedom<sup>61</sup>. On an affective level, as fewer and fewer people identified as serfs, servility may have come to seem an increasingly outrageous oppression to which no one ought to be subject. Michael Bush observed that the intensity of medieval uprisings against serfdom was not necessarily proportional to the practice’s pervasiveness, but rather to ‘the symbolic meaning serfdom held for the whole peasant community’<sup>62</sup>. The Anonimale chronicler’s story that revolt was brought to a boil by a gentleman’s efforts to claim a local man as his serf (*nayff*) has been shown to contain a factual error, but it does suggest that even one gentleman imposing serfdom on one peasant – in serf-less Kent, no less – was too much for the community to bear<sup>63</sup>. Also evocative of serfdom’s symbolic significance is Walsingham’s report that the burgesses of Saint Albans claimed that false denials of their rights and liberties (*iura et libertates*) meant that they had to grind their corn at the abbatial mill ‘like serfs’ (*more*

<sup>56</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, pp. 554, 556, 558. See also vol. 1, p. 462 and Faith, «‘Great Rumour’», p. 63. On serfdom as an inherited personal status as opposed to a consequence of holding lands with villein tenure, see Bush, «Serfdom», pp. 200-204.

<sup>58</sup> On ‘second serfdom’, see Dyer, «Villeins, bondmen».

<sup>59</sup> Bailey, *decline*, pp. 181-82, 190-192.

<sup>60</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> Given-Wilson, «Service»; Bennett, «Compulsory service».

<sup>62</sup> Bush, «serfdom», p. 209.

<sup>63</sup> *une chivaler ... chalanga illeques une homme destre soun nayff .... par qay graunde male et meschieff vient apres; et apres soun aler, les comunes comenserount a lever* (*Anonimale Chronicle*, ed. Galbraith, p. 136). This cannot have involved the gentleman whom the Anonimale chronicler names because he was on the continent at the time (Prescott, «Judicial records», pp. 128-129). See also Barker, *England, arise*, pp. 74-76. Bailey, *decline*, pp. 299-302 demonstrates the comparative rarity of harsh seignorial efforts to impose servile restrictions, though cf. Poos, *rural society*, pp. 242-246 for Essex.

*natiuorum*), even though they were free men (*liberos homines*)<sup>64</sup>. Walsingham seems notably insistent on using *servi* or *nativi* to describe people who were insistent on describing themselves, as in this instance, as *burgenses* or *liberi*.

As this conflation of servitude and seigneurial subjection in Walsingham suggests, rebel demands for freedom from serfdom were matched by demands for end of lordship and freedom in a very broad sense<sup>65</sup>. Discursively, the two were connected in the Anonimale chronicle, where the petition sought at Mile End was not only for the eradication of serfdom, but also for an end to paying homage or service to any lord<sup>66</sup>. It appears that seigneurial subjection might feel as restrictive as actual servitude. Turning again to Walsingham, we find the Saint Albans men speaking of the abbey's refusal to allow them the free enjoyment common pasturage and fishing as tantamount to 'enslavement' (*ancillacione*) to the monastery<sup>67</sup>. In this sense, the rebels demand for *libertas*, as Steven Justice put it, 'did metaphorical duty for abolition of all the oppressions under which the countryside laboured'<sup>68</sup>. Through the widespread burning of manorial records, the execution of seigneurial officers, and even some violence against lords themselves, the rebels sought to overthrow the seigneurial system<sup>69</sup>. Furthermore, the juridical effects of serfdom's abolition, allowing the manumitted full access to royal justice in place of their subjection to the manor court, dovetailed with the rebels' desire to have a direct relationship with the king, free from seigneurial intermediaries<sup>70</sup>. The idea of freedom as a direct relationship to the king, entailing subjection to him alone, can also be detected in the rebels' attacks on local royal officers, who were thought to be impeding the commons' access to Richard's direct justice and grace. To quote Hilton, "'Freedom" was conceived in much more general terms than freedom of tenure, being as much freedom from the tax collector, from the royal official, from the justice of the peace or of trailbaston as from the local lord'<sup>71</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, pp. 554, 556.

<sup>65</sup> Hilton, *Bond men*, pp. 224-225; Eiden, «Joint action».

<sup>66</sup> *requirauntz qe nulle homme ne deveroit estre nayf, ne fair homage ne nulle maner de servys a aucune seignur* (Anonimale, ed. Galbraith, p. 144).

<sup>67</sup> *tractare ceperunt de ancillacione monasterii ... libere sua pascere animalia, et piscacionem sine calumpnia* (Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, p. 442. See also Knighton, *Knighton's chronicle*, ed. Martin, p. 218). On the term *ancilla*, see Stuard, «Ancillary evidence» and Devroey, «Men and women». Latham's *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* gives only two earlier attestations of *ancillatio*. Possibly, Walsingham drew this unusual language from Paul's metaphor in Galatians 4.24-5.1 of Abraham's son of the free woman and his son of the slave (*ancilla*) and the liberation of Christ. Galatians is discussed further below.

<sup>68</sup> Justice, *Writing and rebellion*, p. 45.

<sup>69</sup> Eiden, «Joint action».

<sup>70</sup> On subjection to the manor court as a key marker of servile status, see Hyams, *King, lords and peasants*, extensively summarized by Fryde, *Peasants and landlords*, pp. 9-11, 17-25.

<sup>71</sup> Hilton, «Introduction», pp. 4-5. On direct relations with the king and justice, see also Harding, «revolt»; Faith, «'Great Rumour'», pp. 69-70; Lacey, «Grace», p. 43.

That liberation motives are largely absent in the documentary sources probably reflects a disinterest characteristic of judicial procedures against medieval rebels. In England, as elsewhere in later medieval Europe, the documentary sources usually present rebels simply as criminals<sup>72</sup>. However, *libertas* does appear in some of the royal decrees related to the Rising, some which Walsingham transcribed into his chronicle. *Libertas* appears alongside or interchangeably with manumission (*manumittere, manumissio*) in the sense of freedom from bondage, as well as the remission of crimes, as in the charter that Richard II issued at Mile End<sup>73</sup>. Documentary language related to freedom is particularly well demonstrated in the royal ‘letter revoking liberties (*libertatum*)’ that quashed the previous charter granting manumission from serfdom (*bondagio et seruicio*), commercial liberties (*liberi essent ad emendum et uendendum*), reform of villein land tenure (also *bondagio uel seruicio*), and any ‘liberties or privileges’ (*libertates siue priuilegia*) that anyone might have obtained on account of that charter, as well as reinstating the seigneurial services owed by ‘both freemen and serfs’ (*tam liberi quam natiui*) to their lords<sup>74</sup>. That this language could come from the rebels, not the crown, is demonstrated by the draft charter advanced by the inhabitants of Somerset but never ratified by the king, which was intended to free them *ab omni bondagio*, as well as to pardon their crimes in terms very similar to the charter transcribed by Walsingham<sup>75</sup>.

These socio-political aims need not be seen as at odds with the importance of truth and morality to the rebels<sup>76</sup>. A stress on moral rectitude very similar to that of the ‘John Ball letters’ also appear in the contemporary poem *Piers Ploughman*, which probably influenced the letters and certainly circulated among a similar social constituency and geographic extent to that of the rebels<sup>77</sup>. The poem was also highly critical of noble and clerical excess, as well as of governmental corruption, including John of Gaunt’s outsized influence on politics. (In the Prologue of the B and C recensions, he appears in the guise of a cat, of whom the mice in Parliament decide they are too frightened to bell)<sup>78</sup>. Indeed, the language of original freedom

<sup>72</sup> Réville, *soulèvement*; Dobson, *Peasants’ revolt*. See the comments of Hilton in «Introduction», p. 5 and comparatively, Gauvard, ‘*De grace*’, vol. 2, pp. 564-570. However, one manorial court clerk wrote that the rebels ‘had claimed to hold land “at their own will for ever, freely, and not at the will of the lord”’ (quoted in Dyer, «Social and economic background», p. 41).

<sup>73</sup> E.g. *natiui omnium uillarum pertinencium monasterio, asserentes se in mandatis habere ... cartas manumissionis et libertatis secundum tenorem carte regalis* (Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, pp. 476, 478, see also vol. 1, pp. 440, 442, 472, 474, 490). On the language and concept of pardon in the Rising and its royal sources, see Lacey, «‘Grace’».

<sup>74</sup> *Foedera*, ed. Rymer, vol. 4, p. 126, transcribed in Walsingham, *St Albans chronicle*, ed. Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, vol. 1, pp. 518, 520, 522.

<sup>75</sup> Harvey, «Draft letters».

<sup>76</sup> Arnold, «Religion and popular rebellion».

<sup>77</sup> Hudson, «Piers Ploughman»; Green, «John Ball’s letters»; Justice, *Writing and rebellion*; Sobekki, «Hares, rabbits, pheasants». See also Watts, «pressure», esp. pp. 164-171.

<sup>78</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Schmidt, pp. 20-23.

and spiritual equality found in Ball's sermon and elsewhere the Rising had a long history. Its Christian tradition can be traced to the Pauline epistles, as expressed most fully in Galatians 3.28: there is no Jew or Gentile, slave nor free, man nor woman, for *omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu*<sup>79</sup>. Paul's talk of liberation from the 'yoke of servitude' (*iugo servitutis*) later in the same letter (Gal. 5.1), where the yoke refers to the old testament law of circumcision, was adapted by many later writers. Augustine, for example, repurposed the juxtaposition between *libertas* and the *iugum servitutis* in a letter against the Donatists, in which the yoke is removed by baptism<sup>80</sup>.

As this complex heritage suggests, ideas about original freedom and innate equality were mutable and not always linked to rebellion, but they did have a wide circulation and could provide grounds for social criticism<sup>81</sup>. The earliest association of revolt with original equality from Adam and Eve may be an invocation in the Capuciati movement in late twelfth-century Burgundy<sup>82</sup>, but citations become more common in the later Middle Ages. This may reflect a widening audience for the 'framing metaphor' of humanity's common parentage transmitted from learned discourse to an increasingly-engaged public through a variety of written and aural media<sup>83</sup>. Exact paths of transmission in these social milieus are difficult to trace at this remove, but sermons as well as proverbs (both in evidence in the Rising), as well as songs, are possible routes<sup>84</sup>. The increased availability of this language perhaps helped to shape the demands of those who sought to abolish oppressions that they had always resented. Ball's Christian egalitarianism was echoed in fifteenth-century Catalonia by assemblies of serfs called *remences*, who connected their demands for liberation from servitude with Christ's spiritual redemption. Reworking a passage from Gregory the Great, they invoked Christ the Redeemer, who broke the 'chain of servitude', thus restoring humanity to its original liberty (*pristine libertati*), and they contrasted with this freedom with the 'yoke of servitude' (*iugo servitium*)<sup>85</sup>. Similar reasoning also appears in appeals for the

<sup>79</sup> Similar statement in First Corinthians 12.13. On ancient precursors, as well medieval usages, see Friedman, «'When Adam delved'».

<sup>80</sup> *Sicut enim nunc posteaquam venit libertas fidei, et remotum est servitutis iugum* (Migne (ed.), *Patrologia latina*, vol. 33, col. 96).

<sup>81</sup> Friedman, «'When Adam delved'»; Fourquin, *anatomy*, pp. 99-107; Freedman, *Images*, ch. 3, pp. 249-256.

<sup>82</sup> Freedman, *Images*, p. 84.

<sup>83</sup> On 'framing metaphors' and transmission, see Watts, «pressure».

<sup>84</sup> On sermons, see Andrews, «Preacher and audience»; on songs and proverbs, Dumolyn and Haemers, «Political poems» and Perett; «Vernacular songs». On non-elite political discourses and oral transmission see Dumolyn and Haemers, «'bad chicken'»; Lowagie, «political functions» and citations therein.

<sup>85</sup> *A nomine illius redemptoris nostri Ihesu Christi ... sue gratia dirupto quo tenebamur captivi vinculo servitutis pristinae nos restituit libertati. Et huiusmodi gratia homines quos ab initio natura liberos proliet et ius gentium iugo substituit servitutis sue legis beneficio libertas reddatur in mundo* (edited in Freedman, *origins*, appendix 1, pp. 224-226). On the Gregory passage, see Freedman, *Images*, pp. 253-

abolition of serfdom in the German Peasants' War of 1525<sup>86</sup>. Incorporated into much Reformation thinking, these kinds of claims about biblical freedom and original equality contributed significantly to later ideas about innate human liberty<sup>87</sup>.

## 2. FRANCE

### 2.1 France: Freedom in rural revolts

That a collection of ideas about freedom from servitude and subjection and human (or at least Christian) equality can be found associated with large, rural revolts makes sense, for serfdom and lordship were primarily rural phenomena. But it would be a mistake to consider this kind of language to be generally characteristic of medieval revolts. First of all, large, rural revolts were infrequent until the early modern period<sup>88</sup>. Two-thirds of the 162 peasant revolts listed in Hugues Neveux's book *Les révoltes paysannes en Europe* took place after 1500 and only 10 (6%) before 1400<sup>89</sup>. Peter Bierbrauer found a similar pattern for the 59 rural revolts in German lands that preceded the Peasants' War: only four happened between 1300 and 1400, with the majority occurring after 1450<sup>90</sup>. And second, while language about freedom can be found in some of these rebellions, it does not predominate in many of them. Focusing here on France (but excluding Flanders for concision's sake) from 1250 to 1450, the language of liberty – either as the opposite of servitude or the equivalent of social equality – appears seldom or not at all. These uprisings include the first and second Shepherds' Crusades that swept south from Picardy through Paris in 1251 and 1320; the Jacquerie centred on the Paris Basin in 1358; the Auvergnat Tuchinat in the later 1360s and the Languedocian movement by the same name in the early 1380s; a revolt in Forez and adjacent territories that reached its apogee in 1431; and the Normand *brigands de bois* active from 1434-1436. To this small number, one might add the 'revolts' of the serfs of Orly in 1252 and of the serfs of some villages near Laon in 1338, which are historiographically important even if they affected much smaller areas than the others.

The two servile movements might seem like a promising place to find the language of freedom. There is no doubt that serfs preferred to be free, and there was recognition among elites in France, as elsewhere, that 'according to natural law

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254. Echoing Augustine on baptism's liberating qualities, the Catalan serfs argued that serfdom, a punishment supposedly imposed upon recalcitrant Muslims after Charlemagne's Iberian conquest, ought to have been removed at the point when the Remences' putative ancestors accepted baptism (Freedman, *origins*, appendix 1, p. 224-225).

<sup>86</sup> Freedman, «German and Catalan».

<sup>87</sup> See Skinner, *Liberty*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>88</sup> Blickle, «Peasant revolts», pp. 232; Freedman, «German and Catalan»; Cohn, *Lust for liberty*, ch. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Neveux, *révoltes paysannes*, pp. 292-298.

<sup>90</sup> Bierbrauer, «Bäuerliche Revolten», pp. 26-28.

everyone ought to be born free' (*selonc le droit de nature chascun doie nestre franc*)<sup>91</sup>. But the evidence does not support considering either incident as a revolt for freedom similar to the War of the Remences or even to the English Rising. Neither was much of a revolt, if that term entails violence against their lords, nor is there evidence that either involved claims about liberty. Rather, in both cases, the serfs objected to taxation which led their lords to take physical reprisals against them. The serfs of Orly had indeed been negotiating their manumission from the cathedral chapter of Paris prior to their quarrel with the chapter, but that dispute – which never involved any violence on their part – did not arise over their liberation. Rather, the chapter had some of them imprisoned because they refused to pay a *taille* (head tax) after rejecting a novel taxation clause that the canons had sought to insert into the charter of manumission<sup>92</sup>. The Laonnois serfs, also subjects of a cathedral chapter, were similarly motivated by *tailles*, as Ghislain Brunel has emphasised<sup>93</sup>. Liberty itself was not among their claims. In fact, the issue of servility seems only to have been raised by the chapter in its complaints to the crown about their subjects' behaviour, and violence erupted only when royal commissioners interfered aggressively in the dispute<sup>94</sup>. Certainly, neither the Laonnois villagers nor those of Orly would have been subject to these *tailles*, which were servile exactions, had they been free, and manumission was valued by both communities. But no language of liberty is observable here: freedom was not the basis of their arguments against their lords' actions nor was it articulated as the objective of their movements. Indeed, while the serfs of Laon won suppression of the *taille* to which they had objected, they continued to recognize their servile status as *hommes et femmes de corps* and to pay *chevage*, another servile exaction<sup>95</sup>.

In the other French revolts, some instances of 'freedom talk' are locatable, though they are rare and often ambiguous. While Hilton saw the thirteenth-century Shepherds' Crusade as a movement to 'free the unfree', I cannot find any evidence that supports that claim; the anti-clericalism that was the overriding feature of the movement apparently had nothing to say about liberty from ecclesiastical lordship<sup>96</sup>. On the other hand, according to Bernard Gui, their fourteenth-century successors were joined by vagrants (*vagi viri et mulieres*) who sought *liberatem*

<sup>91</sup> Jordan, *From servitude*, esp. pp. 92-96; quote from royal legislation in Brunel, «hommes de corps», p. 171 and see Freedman, *Images*, esp. ch. 10.

<sup>92</sup> Bloch, «Blanche», esp. pp. 244-246.

<sup>93</sup> Brunel, «hommes de corps», pp. 154, 174-175, and 170-171 for comparison with Orly.

<sup>94</sup> The Laonnois chronicle of Jean de Noyal (edited in Molinier, «Fragments», pp. 250-251) gives some details not available in the royal chancery documents discussed in Brunel, «hommes de corps». The picture is further completed by several original parchments at Laon, Archives départementales [hereafter AD] de l'Aisne G 126, no. 2-4.

<sup>95</sup> Brunel, «hommes de corps», p. 175.

<sup>96</sup> Barber, «Crusades»; Dickson, «advent»; cf. Hilton, *Bond men*, pp. 99-101.

*malitie*<sup>97</sup>. This phrase, which seems best translated here as the ‘idleness of the wicked’, perhaps references the subjection to labour and deprivation of natural liberty that some moral commentators saw as the consequence of original sin. But if so, it seems to be Gui’s disparaging commentary; his chronicle does not cast it as the Shepherds’ affirmative claim.

In the Jacquerie, some serfs (*hommes/femmes de corps*) were accused of joining the revolt, but none of the rebels showed any apparent concern about servility<sup>98</sup>. Nor can the revolt be viewed as an anti-seigneurial uprising, for unlike in the English Rising, rebels rarely destroyed documents or attacked their own lords, and ecclesiastical lordships were left untouched<sup>99</sup>. An explicit discourse of freedom appears associated with that uprising only the letters of Étienne Marcel, head of the Parisian merchants, whose connection to the Jacquerie is likely but controversial<sup>100</sup>. During the revolt’s repression, Marcel sent letters to Ypres and other cities asking for help against the nobles taking reprisals against the Jacques. He sought their aid to protect Parisians from *perpetuel servage* so that they might remain in *france liberté*. Marcel also invoked the ‘yoke’ idea, claiming that the nobles wanted to ‘make us pull the plough alongside their horses’ (*nous feront traire à la charrue avecques leurs chevaux*)<sup>101</sup>. It cannot be ruled out that the rural rebels shared this language with the urbane Marcel, but his concern was especially for *la bonne cité de Paris*, whose citizens, he said, had ‘always been free’ (*franc*).

As we move later, there is a little more evidence for congruent sentiments. Michel Pintoin’s account of the Tuchins says that they wished to uphold ‘the ancient liberty of the fatherland’ (*patrie antiquam servantes libertatem*). This, of course, is a formulation which closely resembles the words he used to describe the objectives of northern urban rebels at exactly the same moment, as mentioned above<sup>102</sup>. Interestingly, he contrasts this rebel *libertas* not with the ‘yoke of servitude’, but with the ‘yoke of taxes’ (*iugo subsidiorum*). We might be inclined here to attribute his language here solely to classical imitation, but there is a reference to social equality as a consequence of original equality in a different context during the Tuchinat that is also associated with taxation. As discovered in a record of municipal deliberations, the *syndics* of Lunel argued during that revolt that nobles ought to pay their share of taxes because everyone was descended from Adam and Eve and therefore ought to be equal<sup>103</sup>. Perhaps Pintoin’s language

<sup>97</sup> *Recueil*, ed. Bouquet et al., vol. 21, p. 730. On this incident, see Barber, «Pastoureux»; Nirenberg, *Communities*, ch. 2; Passerat, *croisade*.

<sup>98</sup> Accused servile participants, all from Champagne, at Paris, Archives nationales de France [hereafter AN] JJ 86, no. 329, fol. 110v; AN JJ 86, no. 377, fol. 129r; Châlons-en-Champagne, AD de la Marne H 82.

<sup>99</sup> Firnhaber-Baker, «eponymous Jacquerie». Cf. Cazelles, «La Jacquerie».

<sup>100</sup> On Marcel, see Luce, *Jacquerie*; Firnhaber-Baker, *Jacquerie revolt*, ch. 3.

<sup>101</sup> d’Avout, *Étienne Marcel*, pp. 304, 309

<sup>102</sup> Pintoin, *Chronique*, ed. Bellaguet, p. 306.

<sup>103</sup> Challet, «mouvement anti-seigneurial? », p. 21.

shows that the rebels of Languedoc and Rouen shared a discourse of freedom, homogenised by the chronicler's imitation of Roman models. The claims of Lunel's *syndics* have a distant echo fifty years later in the statement of rural rebels in Forez, that all people ought to work because all people, including nobles, had been included in the curse laid upon Adam to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow<sup>104</sup>.

## 2.2 France: Failed Reciprocity and the Hundred Years War

The language of liberty was available to some French/Occitan rebels, especially in elite urban contexts like that of Marcel, or later ones, as in rebellions in the Languedoc and Forez. It does not, however, seem to have been an idiom widely shared. The scant evidence for liberty or equality as a motivation in French rebellions is greatly outweighed by the evidence that all of the large-scale rural revolts which took place during the Hundred Years War were incited primarily by resistance to military violence or to taxation linked to military violence<sup>105</sup>. Although the Jacquerie took place in areas that had *not* recently been subject to military incursions, its provocateurs used the threat of such violence as a means to motivate participation and in some cases to excuse their actions after the fact<sup>106</sup>. The Tuchinat in the Auvergne from the 1360s was primarily a self-defence movement, protecting non-combatants and communities from English forces but also from the pillaging of freebooting mercenaries<sup>107</sup>. So was the Tuchinat of Languedoc in the early 1380s, though here there was also resistance against taxes and objectionable political and military leadership<sup>108</sup>. Those of Forez and their companions in the Beaujolais and Lyonnais were similarly motivated. The Norman *brigands de bois*, like the Auvergnat Tuchins, were reacting against English occupation of the territory which had entailed widespread pillaging in the countryside. Their movement has been interpreted in different ways but can probably best be understood as 'a reaction of self-defence against a pattern of raiding which... put the survival of peasant communities at risk'<sup>109</sup>.

Rural self-defence could look suspicious to political elites. It cut to the heart of the justification for peasant subjection as the consequence of seigneurial protection from violence. As the German *Schwabenspiegel* law code observed, if the lords fail to protect peasants, then peasants owed them no service<sup>110</sup>. But it was not that alone which distinguished these movements as rebellious for contemporaries: the efforts

<sup>104</sup> *quand il fut dit à Adam qu'il mangeroit son pain à la sueur de son visage, tous les hommes furent comprise en icelle malédiction et que les nobles n'en sont point exclus ains doivent travailler pour vivre* (quoted in Leguai, «révoltes rurales», pp. 65-66).

<sup>105</sup> Leguai, «révoltes rurales»; Wright, *Knights and peasants*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>106</sup> Firnhaber-Baker, «À son de cloche»; Firnhaber-Baker, «Soldiers, villagers».

<sup>107</sup> Charbonnier, «Qui furent».

<sup>108</sup> Challet, «révolte»; Challet, «'Mundare'».

<sup>109</sup> Challet, «Tuchins and 'brigands'», p. 99.

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Blickle, «Peasant revolts», pp. 235-236.

of the peasant champions Guillaume Aloue and Grandferré against Anglo-Navarrese soldiers in 1359 were considered heroic as the Jacquerie the year before was not<sup>111</sup>. What was different about the Jacquerie was not just that the danger was prospective in 1358 and immediate in 1359. It was that the Jacquerie's violence primarily affected nobles. The sources are almost unanimous in naming *les nobles* as its target. Anti-noble sentiments are also clear in the Languedocian Tuchinat, as well as in in Normandy, where the rebels' anti-English activities were easily overshadowed by their hatred of nobles, at least in the eyes of the crown and elite writers<sup>112</sup>.

These concerns are reflected in what we can recover of the rebels' language from the Jacquerie. In the few cases where the 'Jacques Bonhommes' themselves speak in the sources, they emphasize nobles' failure to defend their subjects and the realm. Several chroniclers, including Froissart, report that the Jacquerie was incited by speeches about how the nobles had shamed and betrayed (*honnisoient, traissoient*) the kingdom or how they were stealing from commoners instead of protecting them as they ought (*les devoient garder*)<sup>113</sup>. Documentary sources are rarer, but the words attributed to an accused rebel named Robert de Jardin seem to reflect the same anger about the nobles' failures toward the community. Jardin asked his lord not to ride off to join other nobles (who were likely assembling to attack Marcel's Paris), but to stay and protect the village from enemies (*ab inimicis conservare*). He further threatened that if the lord did not stay, the villagers would have to 'all become masters' lest they lose all they owned (*sic oportet quod omnia reliquamus, aut quod omnes simus magistri*). A passing knight understood this to mean that that de Jardin wished to be 'lord over the nobles' (*dominus nobilium*), and subsequently killed him for it<sup>114</sup>.

For the Tuchins of the Auvergne and Languedoc, as for the rebels of central France and Normandy in the fifteenth century, the protection of the community from military violence was also a primary justification for taking up arms. Protest against nobles' military failings were closely tied up with fiscal protest, as at Lunel, because nobles argued, with increasing success in the late fourteenth century, that they ought to be tax-exempt, their military service constituting a sufficient contribution<sup>115</sup>. Rebels' complaints were also levied as much against the royal government for leaving the countryside undefended (despite the taxes paid for this purpose) as against the local nobility for its inaction. This discourse of 'failed reciprocity' was widespread in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France and

<sup>111</sup> Beaune, *Grand Ferré*.

<sup>112</sup> Wright, *Knights and peasants*, p. 88; Challet, «'Tuchins' and 'brigans'».

<sup>113</sup> Quotes from Jean le Bel, *Chronique*, ed. Viard and Déprez, p. 256; Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 5, p. 99, and *Chronique normande*, ed. Molinier, pp. 127–128. See *Chronique de Richard Lescot*, ed. Lemoine, p. 127.

<sup>114</sup> Edited in Luce, *Jacquerie*, no. 36, pp. 274–276.

<sup>115</sup> Henneman, «Nobility».

throughout later medieval and early modern Europe<sup>116</sup>. Based on the tripartite division of society into those who prayed, fought, and worked in which each order mutually depended upon the others' roles, the failure of *bellatores* to protect *laboratores* could be considered grounds for peasants to question their submission and even to rise up in rebellion<sup>117</sup>.

Yet if the discourse of failed reciprocity was at least potentially insurrectionary, it was also one which implied acceptance of the dominant socio-political order. Failed reciprocity in these rebellions had greater implications as a social critique of the nobility's self-perception as a warrior-aristocracy with a duty to protect the weak, than as political attack on lordship. The political institution of lordship and the social category of nobility were distinct phenomena that overlapped in many ways, including that both lords and nobles owed protection to their inferiors, but targeting nobles rather than lords suggests that political domination was a lesser concern than the moral economy of the social hierarchy. There certainly was anti-seigneurial feeling in late medieval France. It is perceptible in the resistance of the Orly and Laonois serfs discussed above, and in numerous, scattered incidents across the kingdom which usually (again like the Orly and Laonois incidents) were fought with lawyers and charters, rather than clubs and swords<sup>118</sup>.

Freedom from lordship was not an objective implied by claims of failed reciprocity in the big revolts. Like the Jacques Bonhommes, who mostly left their lords and their lords' document untouched, the Tuchins and the Norman *brigans* were apparently uninterested in opposing seigneurial domination<sup>119</sup>. To the contrary, in justifying rebellion based on elites' dereliction of their duty to their subordinates, the rebels objected not to the existence of a superior class, but rather to its failure to live up to its promises. The implication is that had elites done their duty, the rebels would have been satisfied with their subordination. Robert de Jardin's angry words to his lord, 'we all will have to be masters' was what the villagers would be *forced* to do in the lord's absence. Jardin presents this egalitarian state as a second-best option to seigneurial protection.

These conservative implications suggest that rural rebels did not possess alternative socio-political concepts to their own subjection. One could therefore conclude that rural people not only *did not* contest the seigneurial order but *could not* contest it, because they could conceive of no other. Such conclusions have been strongly critiqued<sup>120</sup>. While admitting that this *is* what these sources say about the rebels' motives, it is also worth remembering that, of course that is what they *would*

<sup>116</sup> Fourquin, *anatomy*, pp. 145-147; Neveux, *révoltes paysannes*, ch. 3.

<sup>117</sup> Duby, *trois ordres*; Freedman, *Images*, pp. 20-24.

<sup>118</sup> cf. Jacob, «meurtre de seigneur», pp. 249-250, which, though frequently cited, in fact gives only two clear cases of seigneurial murder over 300 years, the rest being murders either of non-lords (e.g. the *maire* of Alnes) or by other nobles (e.g. the Erembalds of Bruges).

<sup>119</sup> Challet, «mouvement anti-seigneurial? », pp. 24-28; Challet, «'Tuchins' and 'brigans'», p. 88.

<sup>120</sup> Oliva Herrer, «Les luttes anti-seigneurial», esp. pp. 100-108.

say about rebels' motives: That it was not lordship or nobility in themselves that motivate revolt but the failure of lords and nobles to fulfil the duties of their caste<sup>121</sup>. This discourse of reciprocity was a self-serving one for the chroniclers, who when they were not lords and nobles themselves, wrote for an audience of lords and nobles who were the beneficiaries of this ideology. It was also in the self-interest of non-nobles to adopt this conservative discourse when speaking to their social superiors: The redactors of the pardon for Robert de Jardin would not have transmitted his words if they had considered them subversive. His words were included because they made him sympathetic to the royal counsellors who approved the remission.

If we view rebel complaints about failed reciprocity through the lens of James C. Scott's anthropological work on modern resistance movements, we could plausibly interpret them as 'critiques from within the hegemony'. That is, the rebels borrowed the dominant discourse of elites to point out the injustice of the socio-political system, the way in which it failed on its own terms<sup>122</sup>. It is notable that not only the discourse of reciprocity but also that of original equality seem to have been adapted from language that first appears in learned and elite contexts. But we do not have to conclude from this that elite ideas and discourses were the only ones available. Rebels also use dominant discourses to conceal what Scott calls the 'hidden transcript' of their own socio-political values, which may not overlap at all with those championed by elites. Rebels may have used this discourse of protection and subjection in order to make their resistance intelligible to authorities, as well as to protect themselves from punishment. That does not necessarily mean that they endorsed that discourse and its values or that they could not imagine a freer or more egalitarian society.

### 3. COMMUNALISM: FREEDOM AS PRACTICE

Focusing on language helps to illuminate what these movements meant to their participants and their observers, especially if we are careful to consider how the interpretative layers of speech, reportage, and reception fit together. But language is ultimately frustrating. We can be no more trusting of the sources when they attribute conservative aims to rebels as when they report revolutionary ones. Nor does the emphasis on reported objectives adequately convey the range and variations of motivations that drove people to rebel. By their nature rebellions had nearly as many causes as participants. But language was not the only way that rebels communicated their interests to contemporaries, or to posterity. The violence that they committed and the targets that they attacked have been fruitfully examined for what they say about rebels' objectives and values, as in the anti-seigneurial

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<sup>121</sup> See the analysis in de Medeiros, *Jacques et chroniqueurs*, pp. 45-67 on Froissart's use of the *Jacquerie* to critique chivalric decadence to his aristocratic audience.

<sup>122</sup> Scott, *Domination*, esp. pp. 105-107; Freedman, *Images*, pp. 295-300.

burning of documents in the English Rising or the anti-noble destruction of manor houses in the Jacquerie. The organization and execution of revolt is another area that offers a view onto rebels' aims and attitudes. Even more than what rebels said or did, how they took decisions and mobilized to carry them out suggest not only a rejection of their subjection but also the existence of alternative socio-political ideals organic to rural commoners.

It has been insightfully argued that the operational organization of the Languedocian Tuchins contained the seed of an alternative political model that implicitly challenged hierarchical seigneurialism. Organized in autonomous bands of sworn companions who were supported by village and suburban communities, as well as some major cities, the Tuchins followed a model of relatively egalitarian communal cooperation<sup>123</sup>. That organizational model was one broadly followed by all the rural revolts considered here. Rural revolts were not spontaneous or shapeless explosions. All had some hierarchical leadership, but, as has been shown for the Jacquerie, the English Rising, and the Norman *brigans*, as well as the Tuchinat, these command structures tended to be relatively flat and porous<sup>124</sup>. Rural revolts were typically organized through massive assemblies at the village or regional level. This has been particularly emphasized by scholarship on rural society in Germany prior to the Peasants' War, but it is also true for all of the contexts examined here<sup>125</sup>.

Rebel leaders seem often to have been instituted as the product of revolt, rather than the revolt being instigated by pre-existing leaders. This helps to explain apparently contradictory chronicle reports that described rebels as acting 'without leaders' but then go on to name the rebels' captains. In both France in 1358 and England in 1381, it appears that the rebel leaders Guillaume Calle and Wat Tyler only took charge after the decision to rise had been taken at apparently acephalous communal assemblies<sup>126</sup>. Leaders seem to have been as constrained by their followers' demands as followers were expected to follow the orders of their leaders. Calle, for example, was forced by his troops to engage the king of Navarre in open battle, despite his (correct) assessment that it would be better to fall back to Paris<sup>127</sup>. Although there was usually an overarching target or strategy, rural revolts entailed

<sup>123</sup> Challet, «Un mouvement anti-seigneuriale?».

<sup>124</sup> Aiton, «'Shame'»; Firnhaber-Baker, *Jacquerie revolt*, ch. 6; Cohn, «Enigmas»; Brooks, «organisation», Challet, «'Tuchins' and 'brigans'».

<sup>125</sup> Blickle, «Peasant revolts», pp. 235-239; Bierbrauer, «Aufstieg der Gemeinde»; Bierbrauer, «Bäuerliche Revolten»; Blickle (ed.), *Resistance*. For the importance of communal organisation to revolt in early modern France, see Bercé, *Histoire des Croquants*.

<sup>126</sup> *s'assemblerrent es villages, partout, sans chief* (Jean le Bel, *Chroniques*, ed. Viard and Déprez, vol. 2, p. 256, followed exactly by Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Luce, vol. 5, p. 99. See also Firnhaber-Baker, *Jacquerie revolt*, ch. 3-4); *saunz test et saunz chieftayne, relierent de iour en iour a grande noubre... firent lour chieftayne une Watt Teghler de Maydenstoun pur les mayntener et conseiller* (Anonimale, ed. Galbraith, pp. 136-137).

<sup>127</sup> *Chronique des quatre premiers Valois*, ed. Luce, p. 73.

many semi-autonomous actions against targets chosen by individual communities or groups of rebels<sup>128</sup>. This proliferation of autonomous, loosely connected actions that is characteristic of rural revolts is one reason that it is often difficult to pinpoint a single cause or objective for those uprisings, and another reason that elite contemporaries found them unintelligible.

But it may be sensible to regard the ‘messiness’ of rural revolt as the message, conveying the multiplicity of motives inherent to mass movements incited and directed by the grassroots, and revealing the inherent socio-political structures and values that lay behind rebellion. These communal, associative, and relatively egalitarian practices in the organization of revolts grew out of and reflected the importance of such practices in the organization and culture of rural life. Peter Blickle’s formulation, ‘no rebellion without the *Gemeinde* (community)’, refers specifically to communities recognized as legal entities which had taken over key aspects of government, but the dictum holds true for the contexts considered here in which community sometimes existed only as unformalized *habitus*<sup>129</sup>. In villages, assemblies and associative practices were essential and quotidian features of existence<sup>130</sup>. Rural inhabitants had to gather in order to manage village infrastructure and agriculture<sup>131</sup>. These practices were not necessarily subversive; indeed, they were often prescribed by lords who needed their villagers to gather to pay taxes, to witness justice, or to establish custom<sup>132</sup>. But villagers also acted associatively to pursue their complaints, sometimes against the lord himself and sometimes in association with other neighbouring communities<sup>133</sup>.

Authorities often viewed these associations with suspicion. They prohibited them on occasion, sometimes explicitly because they were thought to be precursors to revolt or at least to disobedience<sup>134</sup>. It was exactly this fear, that ‘the inhabitants could form assemblies [and] conspiracies and revolt against their lords’, that led the cathedral chapter at Laon to request royal help against their serfs in 1338<sup>135</sup>. This associative threat seems in fact to have been the *only* action that the serfs of Laon took before being ambushed by their masters<sup>136</sup>. Similarly, those of Orly were

<sup>128</sup> Eiden, «Joint action»; Aiton, «‘Shame’»; Prescott, «‘Great and horrible’».

<sup>129</sup> Blickle, «Peasant revolts», p. 235. On the legal incorporation of twelfth- to fourteenth-century French villages, see references above in n. 12.

<sup>130</sup> Reynolds, *Kingdoms*, ch. 5; Bourin and Durand, *Vivre au village*, pp. 172-176.

<sup>131</sup> Bloch, *French rural history*, esp. pp. 176-185; Fossier, *Paysans*; Bourin and Durand, *Vivre au village*, ch. 9.

<sup>132</sup> Teuscher, *Lords’ rights*; Verdon, *Voix des dominés*.

<sup>133</sup> E.g. Cheyette, «Procurations»; Firnhaber-Baker, «monks». See also, Challet, «*Res publica*», p. 211. On the link between legal action and maintenance of communal infrastructure, see Beaumanoir, *coutumes*, ed. Salmon, cap. 21, §647, vol. 1, pp. 323-324.

<sup>134</sup> E.g. the case of Louvres-en-Parsis, discussed in Bloch, *French rural history*, pp. 171-172 and that of Saint-Thierry and associated villages discussed in Robert, «L’abbaye».

<sup>135</sup> *habitans pourroient faire assamblees conspiracions & eus reveler contre leur diz seigneurs* (AD Aisne G 126, no. 2).

<sup>136</sup> Above, nn. 93-95.

arrested in the wake of gathering (*colligati*) with neighbouring villagers<sup>137</sup>. ‘Assembling’, even when no violence followed, was one of the main crimes for which villages stood accused after the Jacquerie, and *assemblée* was sometimes used in conjunctions with the terms *commotion* or *effroiz* (noisy terrors) to speak about the revolt as a whole<sup>138</sup>. The Catalan serfs’ evocative demand for freedom discussed above was the product of peasant assemblies to elect synodical representatives, which had only recently been made legal by the king against seigneurial opposition<sup>139</sup>.

Associative practices were accompanied by values that placed the community’s welfare above other considerations. The term *Kommunalismus*, again one most associated with Peter Blickle, encompasses both the political ideals of later medieval and early modern village society and the cooperative practices out of which they grew<sup>140</sup>. Tyler’s demand as Mile End for ‘no law but that of Winchester’ evinces desire for community self-regulation, as Alan Harding has argued, and communitarian values are sometimes discernible in rural rebels’ language across the geographic and chronological span<sup>141</sup>. They are revealed, for example, in the way that they identified themselves in such terms as ‘true commons’ or ‘true men’, as brothers or companions, or in the case of the Jacques as ‘bonhommes’, or in how they spoke of their enemies as traitors and treated them as such<sup>142</sup>. Treason was not an exclusively rebel claim by any means, but as with the adaptation of original/Christian freedom tropes discussed above, rebels interpreted and expressed ‘treason’ as a crime against the community, not the king or the state. In a similar vein, commonplaces of late medieval politics such as *res publica* and *utilitas publica*, might be understood to refer to community welfare, rather than the state, and used as a means of critiquing royal policy and legitimizing self-defence<sup>143</sup>.

The rural corporatism visible in revolts might not look like freedom from the vantage of modern liberalism. If we view communalism in the light of Berlin’s ‘positive liberty’, it does seem to impose significant constraints on individuals, who were expected to sublimate their personal wishes to those of the community and thus to reduce their enjoyment of ‘negative liberty’. The village was no egalitarian

<sup>137</sup> Bloch, «Blanche», pp. 226, 265.

<sup>138</sup> E.g. *commotion & assemblee estoit entre les genz du plat pays d’une part et les nobles d’autre part a la quelle commotion ou assemblee...* (AN JJ 88, no. 89, fol. 56v–57r); *effroiz & assemblees ... faiz par les genz du dit plat pais contre les nobles* (AN JJ 90, no. 162, fol. 92).

<sup>139</sup> Freedman, *origins*, pp. 189–191.

<sup>140</sup> Blickle, *Kommunalismus*.

<sup>141</sup> Harding, «revolt».

<sup>142</sup> E.g. Challet, «‘Moyran, los traidors’». The destruction of aristocratic houses so common in revolts was it was also a characteristic judicial punishment for traitors and public enemies: see Delacourt, *vengeance*; Dumolyn, «vengeance», pp. 262–264, 286–289.

<sup>143</sup> Challet, «Political *topos*». See also Blickle, «Gemeine nutzen».

paradise, especially for the poor, the young, and the female<sup>144</sup>. But this is a judgment largely based on the modern and Western valorization of the individual and individual agency. Individualism was not as strongly valued by medieval people relative to the importance of their memberships in groups and communities, including their families and kin, their parishes and neighbourhoods, and their villages and communities. It was not that they lacked individual agency or consciousness, but they identified their self-interests with the corporate entities to which they belonged. Nor were they wrong to do so, for it was through membership in the community that ordinary people could exercise some political agency, pursuing those interests through group action. If we consider this as the maximalisation of positive freedom – the ability to pursue one’s self-interest – in fact rural corporatism was a practice of freedom. It gave to rural commoners both the means through which to revolt, and something approaching an ideological reason to do so.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Discourses of negative freedom as a holistic quality entailing the absence of constraint (meaning servility and/or lordship) do appear in some rural revolts across western Europe, especially those that post-date 1380. This is very visible in some of the sources for the English Rising of 1381, despite a recent de-emphasis on this aspect of that revolt, as well as in some later revolts that have received considerable attention. Most medieval rebels, however, did not frame their demands in the language of freedom or equality. Some even spoke (or were said to have spoken) in terms that reinforced socio-political hierarchies, as I discussed at some length for French examples. Yet, if freedom as an abstract idea was not central to their uprisings, the massive assemblies and autonomous bands characteristic of rebellions did demonstrate an alternative political culture.

Participatory and protean, rural dwellers’ communal actions posed an implicit challenge to the hierarchical model of seigneurial and royal subjection. Elites who found village assemblies necessary to their rule were nevertheless well aware of the danger inherent to commoners’ gathering, to judge from their panic in the face of even non-violent, unauthorized assemblies. Such gatherings did not always lead to armed insurrection, but whether preparatory to violence or otherwise, assembly was the necessary prelude for rural commoners to act against their subjection. If those at these assemblies did not always articulate the language of freedom, their communal activities should nonetheless be understood as a practice of freedom. The corporatism that revolt entailed is the way in which rural rebellions can be understood to have been about freedom, and as Hilton claimed, ultimately to have secured commoners more freedom, even though few medieval rebels claimed ‘freedom’ as an objective.

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<sup>144</sup> E.g. Bloch, *French rural history*, pp. 189-196; Dyer, «English medieval», pp. 418-424; Bourin, *Villages médiévaux*, vol. 2, pp. 184-86, 194-195; Forrest, *Trustworthy men*, esp. ch. 6.

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