

any of the other alleged leaders of the Ranters. His so-called autobiography, *The Lost Sheep Found* (1660), has to be treated with extreme caution. It is a work of Muggletonian polemic and, I would argue, its polemical purposes override any intention to provide a record of actual events.

There was no coherent core of Ranter ideologues providing leadership for a mass movement, nor even for a loosely associated conjunction of individuals. There were no Ranters but there was a Ranter phenomenon, dissociated from reality and projecting an image of ultimate sectarian deviance, disintegration and inversion. There was a hegemonic structure in the seventeenth century but it was not challenged by the Ranters who did not exist. Rather Ranterism; an antinomian libertinism, pantheistic immoralism and a spiritual enthusiasm slighting Scripture; was a projection of that hegemonic aspiration. It was a control myth as the myth of atheism or that of the excesses of Munster were before it. The curious irony is that the myth of the right in 1650, the myth of Ranterism became the myth of Marxist historiography in the 1970s and 1980s. Coppe did challenge the hegemonic structures of his day but not in the name of Ranterism, of an antinomian libertinism throwing off all moral restraint to be free of the protestant ethic. Rather his protest was in the name of a Scripturally based ethic of Christian charity and antiformalism. It was more dangerous and difficult to deal with precisely because it was rooted in the established order's own legitimations.

In this instance, it is not simply a question of dotting i's and crossing t's, but, to use a pregnant and familiar phrase a matter of turning the world upside down or setting it back on its feet. The Ranters were not, as historians have suggested, a coherent group, or even a movement, who challenged Scripture, rejected sin and hell, declared an antinomian liberty and the pantheistic legitimation of all things equally; in other words, repudiated the protestant ethic and its hegemonic apparatus. These people did not exist. We cannot find them. The more closely we look, the more completely the chimaera of their sect, group, movement disintegrates before our gaze. But the belief in their existence was real enough in the seventeenth century, as it has been latterly in our own time. Who benefitted then from the belief's dissemination? Certainly not those who aspired to free religious speculation, unfettered spiritual illumination: the mission of the things that are not to set at nought those things that are. The belief in Ranterism was a terrible warning against the speculative liberty of the untutored, against spiritual enthusiasm, against plebeian religion, against allowing the slightest authority to the things that are not. Ranterism was a hegemonic myth, a repressive myth—not its counter. It was used by those who