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Intolerable Opinions in the Time of Genocide

In Love's free state, all powers so levelled be
That them affection governs more than awe.
– William Davenant

In 1638, John Lilburne was put on secret trial by the Star Chamber of Charles I. His crime? The writing and distribution of seditious pamphlets that skewered the legitimacy of the monarchy and challenged the primacy of the high prelates of the Church of England. He was promptly convicted of publishing writing of "dangerous consequence and evil effect."

For these intolerable opinions, the royal tribunal sentenced him to be publicly flogged through the streets of London, from Fleet Prison, built on the tidal flats where Fleet Ditch spilled out London's sewage, to the Palace Yard at Westminster, then a kind of public showground for weekly spectacles of humiliation and torture. By one account, Lilburne was whipped by the King's executioner more than 500 hundred times, "causing his shoulders to swell almost as big as a penny loafe with the bruses of the knotted Cords."

The bloodied writer was then shackled to a pillory, where, to the amazement of the crowd of onlookers, he launched into an impassioned oration in defense of his friend Dr. John Bastick, the Puritan physician and preacher. Only weeks before, Bastick's ears had been slashed off by the King's men as punishment for publishing an attack on the Archbishop of Canterbury, an essay that Lilburne had happily distributed far and wide. Lilburne gushered forth about this barbaric injustice for a few moments, until his tormentors gagged his mouth with a urine-soaked rag. After enduring another two hours of torture, the guards dragged him behind a cart

back to the Fleet, where he was confined in irons for the next two-and-a-half years. This was the first of "Free-Born" John Lilburne's many parries with the masters of the Empire.

While in his foul cell in Fleet prison, Lilburne was kept in solitary confinement on orders of the Star Council, his lone visitor, a maid named Katherine Hadley. Somehow, the maid was able to sneak pen, paper, and ink past the Fleet's guards to the young radical. According to Lilburne's own description, he was "lying day and night in Fetters of Iron, both hands and legges," when he began to write furiously, penning a gruesome account of his mock trial and torture, The Work of the Beast, and a scabrous assault on the Anglican bishops, Come Out of Her, My People. These pamphlets were smuggled out of Newgate, printed in the LowLands and distributed through covert networks across England to popular acclaim and royal indignation.

Oliver Cromwell, then a Puritan leader in the House of Commons, took up Lilburne's cause, giving a stirring speech in defense of the imprisoned writer. It swayed Parliament, which voted to release Lilburne from jail. Lilburne emerged from the grateful to Cromwell, but was not blind to the general's dictatorial ambitions: he would later pen savage attacks on Cromwell and his censorious functionaries.

Soon, Lilburne joined the Parliamentary Army, fighting with distinction against the royal forces in numerous clashes, including the battle at the Edgehill, the first significant encounter of the English Civil War, before being captured at Brentford on 12th November 1642. Once again, he faced trial, this time at Oxford, for "taking up arms against the King." Lilburne was swiftly convicted and sentenced to death. But his friends in Parliament rose to his defense, threatening similar reprisals against Royalist prisoners. A prisoner exchange was arranged and Lilburne was on the loose again, leading soldiers into battle against the King's troops, eventually rising to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.

But in 1645, Lilburne abandoned Cromwell's New Model Army, known for singing the Psalms as they clamored into battle, after he was told that he must swear to the Solemn League and Covenant, Cromwell's equivalent of a religious loyalty oath to the Presbyterian church. Lilburne, an Independent, hated oaths and had defied the Star Chamber in his first prosecution by refusing to take the oath ex officio, which he argued violated the ancient right of habeas corpus.

But by now, Lilburne was plotting a more profound insurrection aimed at democratizing the army, as well as the rest of the nation. Why, he asked, should soldiers be expected to fight in a war declared by legislators for whom they could not vote? Why, he asked in the halls at

Westminster, weren't the soldiers paid more? Why weren't the families of the slain compensated?

"Every free man of England, poor as well as rich, should have a vote in choosing those that are to make the law," Lilburne wrote. "All and every particular and individual man and woman, that ever breathed in the world, are by nature all equal and alike in their power, dignity, authority and majesty, none of them having (by nature) any authority, dominion or magisterial power one over or above another." Jefferson sounds cautious beside Lilburne's exuberant prose.

These were the opening shots of the Levellers, aimed, in the words of one observer, "to sett all things straight and rayse a parity and community in the kingdom." It would be, in Lilburne's view, a new kind of kingdom without a king or a House of Lords or even landlords.

The Leveller movement began as a rebellion within a rebellion, spreading from the Army to persecuted religious sects to farmers and working-class people. It was a movement energized by writers, headlined by Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn, and the pamphlets flew off the presses, with more than 2,100 different tracts being printed in 1645. This prompted the repressive acts known as the Ordinances, which suppressed public assemblies, outlawed meetings of Antinomians and Anabaptists, prohibited preaching by lay preachers, and imposed strict censorship of the press. Cromwell's notorious Committee of Examinations, essentially Parliament's version of the Star Chamber, was tasked with investigating "scandalous" writing, destroying independent presses, and arresting writers, publishers, and vendors of documents deemed seditious. These were the oppressive laws that prompted Milton to write "Areopagitica." Milton's urgent polemic–one of the great defenses of a free press–was mild compared to the furious denunciations that poured from Lilburne's pen.

These testy impertinences landed Lilburne in Newgate again, this time on charges of libel. But 2,000 leading Londoners signed a petition on his behalf and public riots in his defense prompted his quick release. The experience only sharpened his resistance to Cromwell, who he saw as a dictatorial sell-out to the forces of Empire (not unlike, say, Anthony Blinken) and the leading agent of state oppression. He fired off a threatening public letter to Cromwell, which darkly concluded: "Rest assured, if ever my hand is upon you, it shall be when you are in your full glory."

Lilburne and his Leveller cohorts started an underground paper called The Moderate. The title was a joke. After all, the Leveller platform seems downright pinko by our constricted

standards: They wanted to outlaw monopolies, eliminate taxes on the poor, impose term limits on members of Parliament, eliminate all restrictions on the press and religious worship, guarantee universal suffrage, and assure trial by jury for all defendants.

But Lilburne was far from the most radical spirit in those topsy-turvy days. He was outflanked to his left by Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers and by the Seekers, Ranters, Antinomians and militant fen dwellers, the Earth First!ers of their time.

Like Tom Paine, he opposed the death penalty, speaking out against the execution of Charles I. "I refused to be one of his (Charles I) judges," Lilburne wrote. "They were no better than murderers in taking away the King's life even though he was guilty of the crimes he was charged with. It is murder because it was done by a hand that had no authority to do it."

Cut to 1649. Lilburne is imprisoned once more in the Tower of London, along with four of his Leveller cohorts, including the brilliant polemicist Richard Overton. This time, they'd attacked Cromwell head-on, accusing him of being a reactionary force roaming the land with secret police threatening all dissenters. "If our hearts were not over-charged with the sense of the present miseries and approaching dangers of the Nation, your small regard to our late serious apprehensions would have kept us silent, but the misery, danger, and bondage threatened is so great, imminent, and apparent that whilst we have breath, and are not violently restrained, we cannot but speak, and even cry aloud, until you hear us, or God be pleased otherwise to relieve us." The charge was treason.

His wife Elizabeth, herself a forceful agitator for peace and the rights of women, wrote an impassioned pamphlet in his defense titled A Petition of Women. The prose still resonates, perhaps more now than it has in 300 years. "Would you have us keep at home in our houses, when men of such faithfulness and integrity as the four prisoners, our friends in the Tower, are fetched out of their beds and forced from their houses by soldiers, to the affrighting and undoing of themselves, their wives, children, and families? Are not our husbands, ourselves, our daughters, and families, by the same rule as liable to the like unjust cruelties as they?" Elizabeth got 10,000 people to sign a petition on Lilburne's behalf.

Lilburne was soon freed but arrested again within the year, this time for denouncing Cromwell's genocidal raids on Ireland. But the jury refused to convict him and Cromwell had him banished from England. Lilburne spent a few months in Holland writing incendiary pamphlets before sneaking back into England. He was soon discovered and arrested on charges of treason once again. Again, the jury refused to convict. But Cromwell declined to release him, shuttling Lilburne from the Tower to Mount Orgueil, a dank Norman castle in

Guernsey, and finally to Dover castle. One of his guards described Lilburne as being more challenging to handle than "ten Cavaliers."

While locked in Dover castle, Lilburne fell under the spell of the Quakers and became a radical pacifist, writing that he had finished with "carnal sword fightings and fleshly bustlings and contests." His pen never stopped, though. The pamphlets continued to flow until he died in 1657.

Lilburne refused to be a martyr. He faced the beast, endured prisons and tortures that would give even an inmate at Guantanamo the chills, and remained defiant and upbeat. He lived the life of an escape artist who could talk himself into and out of trouble almost effortlessly. His mind ran in overdrive and so, apparently, did his mouth. His friend Harry Marten, the regicide, quipped: "If the world was emptied of all but John Lilburne, Lilburne would quarrel with John and John with Lilburne." And so it should be.

I first encountered the writings of John Lilburne in 1981 during a series of lectures on Milton and the radicals of the English revolution delivered by the great British historian Christopher Hill, author of *The World Turned Upside Down.* Hill was stalking other game in those lectures, but his energetic asides on Lilburne and his band of Levellers pricked my interest. Here were Puritans who detested imperial ambitions and believed in unfettered free speech and absolute equality. A far cry from Nathaniel Hawthorne's band of vicious prudes, not to mention the neo-puritans, like Falwell and Robertson, then in the ascendancy.

Lilburne had long fallen out of favor with American historians and his writings were difficult to track down. I ended up devouring them in one of the lonely carrels inside the oppressive brutalist design of Georgetown University's Lauinger Library (the meager library at American University, where I went to school, was an international scandal), overlooking the Potomac River and the gloom-stricken Lincoln Memorial. In those days, the chill shadow of Reagan loomed over the Republic, and Lilburne's caustic essays on freedom and repression gripped me like a burning voice from the grave.

It's strange, but perhaps instructive of our current historical amnesia, that Lilburne's reputation has fallen into such neglect in the US since his anarchic style seems more in line with the rambunctious spirit that animated the American Revolution than the dour pontifications of John Locke, whose writing gets all the press clips these days.

So why do I reprise the moldering life of John Lilburne now, during the time of a genocide that his country and my own have armed, funded, and run interference for, when the words that describe the horrors we've witnessed are being criminalized, and it's become dangerous to speak or write about what you see happening and how you feel about it and even more

perilous to act, in even small ways, to try to stop it. It's a time when college students have put what they've learned in their history and philosophy courses into nonviolent action on campus and seen their own administrators call in SWAT teams to brutally break up their camps and demonstrations. It is a time when professors who come to the defense of their students are roughed up by campus security, arrested, banned from classrooms, denied tenure, and fired. A time when journalists are removed from their beats, fired from their jobs, and had their homes raided merely for making public expressions of their aversion to the mass slaughter and forced starvation in Gaza. A time when sitting members of Congress are smeared, slandered, and chased out of office for objecting to the transfer of weapons used to commit mass atrocities against civilians. (Being a journalist in Gaza, of course, puts you on a drone hit list.) The successful perpetuation of genocide depends on it not being named, not being recognized, and being called out in real time for what it is.

Well, for starters, the forces that Lilburne confronted "with violent and bitter expressions" have coalesced once again (not that they ever really dissipated, mind you) and threaten to impose their preemptive will upon the living creatures of the world. What are these forces? Militarism, religious bigotry, official censorship, prosecutorial inquisitions and torture, imperial expansion, monopolists, land grabbers, misogynists and those who buy and sell the earth and humans, too. In short, the whole sick crew.

When you survey the wreckage of the Biden/Trump imperium, it's very easy to become overwhelmed by the darkness of the times, submerged in the remorseless riptide of blood and official violence. But even facing methods of torture and imprisonment that would unnerve an inmate of Guantanamo, Lilburne never surrendered to defeatism. His writing remains infused with radical purpose, a radiant call from across the centuries for collective resistance.

As you steel yourself to confront the new imperialists, ask what Lilburne would do.

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