

Chapter 5

The Sword in the Ragged Sheath: The Motif of the Peasant Radical in Sixteenth-Century Prints

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Introduction

One of the striking visual elements of the Northern Renaissance is the concentration on the depiction of everyday life, with the vast array of social classes, apparently, faithfully and accurately recorded by the artists of the time.¹ This belief that “life in nature manifests the truth of these things”² is found not only in the work of acknowledged masters of the period, such as Albrecht Dürer, Sebald Beham, and Lucas Cranach, but also in the anonymous prints that illustrated the ephemeral pamphlets and tracts of the sixteenth century. Amongst these drawings, paintings, and prints were, naturally, many of the rural commons—the peasants—engaged in both work and pleasure. These depictions, always based in class politics and social perceptions took on a particular importance within the context of the Reformation, with *Karsthans*—the good peasant who wishes to hear the gospel without human additions—being cast as a supporter of reform.³ The 1521 pamphlet *The Divine Mill* (fig. 5.1) presents the figure with the lines: “*Karsthans* who still has his flail and now also understands the sacred Scripture; since he is but a fool, he would use his tool, if an attempt should be made to deceive him once more.”⁴ **[PLACE FIGURE 5.1 HERE]** This image of the loyal servant to the Reformation was

¹ Ulinka Rublack, *Dressing Up; Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27.

² Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 279.

³ R.W. Scribner, “Images of the Peasant, 1514-1525,” in *The German Peasant War of 1525*, ed. Janos Bak (London: Frank Cass, 1976), 29-48, here at 30.

⁴ Werner Packull, “The Image of the “Common Man” in the Early Pamphlets of the Reformation (1520- 1525), *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 12 (1985): 253-77, here at 260.

complicated by the peasants' actual religious and political ambitions, which were manifest in the *Bundschuh* uprisings (ca. 1493-1517) and the German Peasants' War (1525).

Among these images there are a number of constant recurring themes: alongside the figure *Karsthans* with his flail, which he uses to separate the wheat of good Christian doctrine from the chaff of Popery,⁵ there are the peasant dance or *kermis*, showing the social life of the peasantry,⁶ and the peasant going to market, presenting their economic function.⁷ Within these latter two images is found an apparently minor detail: in common with almost all men of this period, the male peasants are shown carrying edged weapons, generally a long knife or a single-edged short sword—a *Langmesser* or *Bauernwehren*—at their belt. This is often depicted as being worn in a damaged sheath, typically with the blade of the weapon protruding from the end of a sheath where the chape or ferrule is missing, and the body is ragged or bound about with supporting straps. In a visual context replete with symbolic elements, this recurring motif requires explanation. This chapter will trace the history of this motif from its initial use as a symbol of peasant licentiousness, through the representation of the peasant as both a supporter of the Lutheran movement and as a separate political subject in the *Bundschuh* and the Peasants' War. The images of the later sixteenth century will also be discussed with the sword in the ragged sheath becoming associated with the *Landsknechte* and peasant festivities, and with the carnivalesque image in the early 1600s.

⁵ *Karsthans* (Hans with the hoe) and his brother-in-law *Flegelhans* (Hans with the flail) were popularized as evangelical figures in the anonymous 1521 pamphlet *Karsthans*. The two were conflated in *The Divine Mill*, where *Karsthans* is depicted with flail in hand. Subsequent prints followed this latter depiction. See Packull, "The Image of the "Common Man"" 258-60, and Scribner, "Images of the Peasant," 33.

⁶ Alison G. Stewart, *Before Bruegel: Sebald Beham and the Origins of Peasant Festival Imagery* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 50-51.

⁷ H-J. Raupp, *Bauernsatiren; Entstehung und Entwicklung des bäuerlichen Genres in deutschen und niederländischen Kunst*, (Niederzier: Franz J. Lukassen, 1986), 41-45.

The general overview of the depiction of peasants with swords and the reality it represents is well summarised by Ann Tlusty in *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*: [S]ixteenth-century satirical prints often had sexual overtones, the sword in this instance taking the place of the penis in hinting at a brutish sexuality among country folk. Depictions of peasants with swords most likely exaggerate a practice that had some basis in fact; otherwise, it would not have functioned effectively as humor. On the other end of the scale, prints illustrating peasant uprisings during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which their arms seem to consist almost entirely of converted farm implements, must also be understood as iconic, not realistic. A list of arms confiscated from 113 peasants by officials in Oettingen-Wallerstein in the wake of the hostilities of 1525 reveals that along with their ubiquitous javelins and *Langmesser*, 32 percent of them also had pole arms (pikes or halberds), 16 percent swords, over 10 percent guns, and 24 percent armor.⁸

A review of the surviving weapons from this period in historic collections produces relatively few military or semi-military weapons directly attributable to the peasants. The Deutsches Historische Museum in Berlin contains several modified farm implements attributed to the Peasants' War, but this attribution is uncertain and traditional; similarly, their collection of *Bauernwehren* is not verifiable as directly connected with any specific series of events.⁹ The similar collection of peasant swords at the Mülhausen Museum (fig. 5.2) was recovered from a military site at Weberstedt, with neither of these two collections having either the scabbards

⁸ B. Ann Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany; Civic Duty and the Right to Bear Arms* (New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2011), 171.

⁹ Email correspondence with S. Lüken, DHM historic weapons collection curator, (April 2020). Heinrich Müller, *Albrecht Dürer, Waffen und Rüstungen* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2002), 62.

nor the handles of the weapons preserved.¹⁰ **[PLACE FIGURE 5.2 HERE]** The extensive collection of *Bauernwaffen* in the weapons collection at Salzburg Museum contains three pikes or billhooks, a flail, and sixteen maces of variable quality, from the improvised to the military, and only one *Katzbalder* (a *Landsknecht* sword, see below). Many of the records for this collection were lost during the Second World War and the provenience of these weapons is unverifiable.¹¹ What this collection and the Deutsches Historische Museum collection suggest is that the victorious forces kept a triumphal collection of some of the more “picturesque” weapons confiscated, and recycled the more mundane items. *Langmesser* and other more military weapons would therefore have been reused, or potentially, in the case of the short swords and knives, redeemed by the peasants after a period of good behaviour. We can see therefore in the print record and the surviving physical material a correlation between weapons that are exemplary of the peasants as a type, rather than those they were likely to be bearing in the field if the literary sources are to be believed. Therefore, a symbolic meaning for the sword in the damaged sheath in these images could reasonably be argued.

Early Examples: *Marktbauern*

The image of the sword in a damaged sheath dates back at least as far as Martin Schongauer’s *Peasants on the Way to Market* (1471-73, fig. 5.3), a depiction of a laden male peasant on foot, leading a horse on which are seated a female peasant and child. **[PLACE FIGURE 5.3 HERE]** The male peasant carries a sack of round objects—turnips, beets, or even eggs given the later

¹⁰ Sarah Lösel and Thomas Müller, *Luthers ungeliebte Brüder; Alternative Reformationsideen in Thüringen* (Mülhausen: Mülhäusener Museen, 2018), 59.

¹¹ Email correspondence with M. Schwellensattl, SM historic weapons collection curator (April 2020).

tradition—a basket on his wrist, and a straight sword tucked under his arm. The garments of the man are ragged; his hose is loose and gone at the knees, his undershirt frayed, and the hair on his bare head is unkempt. He has no belt, but his shoes are in good condition. The sword itself is a straight battle-sword with a large pommel and the later characteristic missing ferrule. His hooded eyes and stooped posture suggest long weary labour, but he seems to have a half smile on his face. The woman on the horse is plainly and modestly dressed, with covered head and bare feet, and the child is wearing the man's hat—a rather elaborate turban with trailing tails. Behind them is a small village with a church, and between them and it another two peasants, a man and woman, follow them down the road, presumably with the same destination in mind. As Hans-Joachim Raupp points out, this image immediately brings to mind the depiction of the holy family on the road to Egypt.¹² This conceivably could be a satire but the stoicism and good humour of the figures, the father giving his son his hat to wear, the mother with a switch to keep flies away, and the orderly purpose of their journey, suggests a rather more sympathetic treatment.¹³

Other depictions of *Marktbauern* certainly portray their subjects in a less favourable light—the engraving known as *Egg-man and Duck-woman* by the master BXG (1475-1500) also has the male peasant with a ragged scabbard to his sword—this time identifiable by its hilt as a peasant *Langmesser*. Here the ragged clothing of the man with the elaborate hat, the double of Schongauer's, and the peasant's sly expression create the impression of a fool or hint at the

¹² Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, 42.

¹³ Joseph was considered “a comic type, in spite of the very special reverence paid to him. (Jan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman, Harmsworth: Penguin, 1972, here at 164) so an ambiguous reading is possible here.

traditional cunning of the peasant.¹⁴ This type of image, of peasants attending markets, was likely aimed at an urban audience who very likely would have their main interaction with the peasants of the surrounding area at the market.¹⁵ A situation that would likely be a site of mutual distrust as both urban and rural dweller would assume that the other was attempting to cheat them in some manner—a theme of later prints as we shall see. The depiction of the villager as sly and slovenly would therefore have a ready market amongst an urban population that wished to see itself as superior to its country cousins.

Similar in tone to Schongauer's subtle response to the *Marktbauern* genre is Albrecht Dürer's engraving of *Three Peasants in Conversation* (circa 1497, fig. 5.4). **[PLACE FIGURE 5.4 HERE]** Dürer was an admirer of the earlier engraver and, had it not been for Schongauer's death, Dürer would have been under his direction following his apprenticeship.¹⁶ In this image he appears to borrow the sword of Schongauer's "Joseph" with its prominent pommel and gives it to one of his three conversing peasants. However, Dürer places it in the centre of the composition between the three marketgoers. The weapon is a straight longsword about two-and-a-half to three feet in length. The end of the sword protrudes from the split end of the scabbard with either the baldric or some form of webbing wrapped around the top half. The sword is unambiguously a military weapon of the type that would be expected to be found in the possession of a knight rather than a peasant or even a foot soldier. The carrying of such battle-swords was technically forbidden to the lower social orders, though this was frequently

¹⁴ J. Berger, "Towards Understanding Peasant Experience," *Race and Class* 19/4 (1978), 345-59, here at 346.

¹⁵ Tom Scott, *Freiburg and the Breisgau; Town—Country Relations in the Age of Reformation and Peasants' War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 116.

¹⁶ Panofsky, *The Life and Work of Albrecht Dürer*, 5

ignored; the *Landsknechte* typically carried a short blunt ended sword called a *Katzbalder* as a secondary weapon for close fighting, and the peasants a long knife—the *Langmesser* mentioned above.¹⁷ The incongruity of this weapon chimes with the spurs worn by the peasant with the egg basket, again a symbol of knightly status that would not likely be required by the average carthorse riding tiller of the earth—this incongruity is remarked on by Heinrich Müller in his discussion of this print where he describes their presence as “unusual.”¹⁸ Jürgen Müller suggests that the garb of the two figures on the left indicates that they are not “peasants” but frustratingly does not elaborate on this.¹⁹ Certainly there is little to differentiate them from the other peasants depicted in the prints of this period, many of whom wear elaborate headgear. However, regardless of technicalities of profession, it would be fair to assume that all three characters are taken to be members of the lower orders. It could be argued that the fine distinction of their relationship to farming is not, for our purposes, relevant—as we know, the various peasant uprisings of the period were not the sole preserve of agriculturalists.²⁰ It might be, however, that with the sword and the spurs these peasants are taking on symbols of their social betters and that within this image is a comment on the recent *Bundschuh* and a sense of the world being turned upside down. If so, this would give us the first indication of a radical implication for this symbol.

¹⁷ Tlusty, *The Marital Ethic in Early Modern Germany*, 171.

¹⁸ Müller, *Albrecht Dürer, Waffen und Rüstungen*, 63.

¹⁹ Jürgen Müller, “Albrecht Dürer’s Peasant Engravings: A Different Laocoön, or the Birth of Aesthetic Subversion in the Spirit of the Reformation,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 3 (2011): DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2011.3.1.2.

²⁰ Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525; The German Peasants’ War from a New Perspective*, trans. Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H.C. Eric Midelfort (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 123.

Early Examples: *Narrenpaar*

The second major genre of peasant art prior to the figure of *Karsthans* and the radical peasant was that of the peasant couple either dancing, arguing, or behaving in some other way “foolishly.” These images of dancing peasants were later to evolve into the *kermis* prints of Sebald and Barthel Beham and their followers.²¹ The rural *kermis* or church-ale was, with the market, a major site of interaction between the peasants and the urban population, with town-dwellers using it as a chance for a country holiday, sometimes leading to conflict between the two populations.²² These *Narrenpaar* images were a feature of moralising print in the early 1500s and were part of a tradition of mockery aimed at the peasant since the high middle-ages, where they were depicted in comic songs as “upstart yokels who in their gaudy manner of dress, crude behaviour and bearing of arms, foolishly aspire to a higher station in society.”²³ This is attested to by the popularity of Hans Heselloher’s poetic work *Von üppiklichen dingen* (*Of Extravagant Things*, 1450-83), which narrates a drunken fight at a dance. It is here that we find, after Dürer’s *Three Peasants*, the second depiction of peasants that has a major bearing on our study (fig. 5.5). **[PLACE FIGURE 5.5 HERE]** An edition of Heselloher’s works from 1500 contains the poem, illustrated and titled *The Extravagant Peasants*.²⁴ This woodcut is of two male peasants both wearing swords with ragged sheaths: the one on the left a shorter blade that could be said to be a typical peasant *Langmesser*, his companion/antagonist a longer sabre

²¹ Stewart, *Before Bruegel*, 50-1.

²² Scott, *Freiburg and the Breisgau*, 110-1.

²³ W.C. McDonald, “Hans Heselloher” in *Routledge Revivals: Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John M. Jeep (London: Routledge, 2017), 357.

²⁴ Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, 44. Nb. *üppiklichen* can possibly be translated as either extravagant or trifling, both of which will fit in this context.

of less civilian origin. The image is also indebted to Dürer's earlier *Three Peasants* with various costume elements; notably the hats and the sack borrowed from the earlier work. However, these peasants are sturdier than the ones in Dürer's first depiction, having more in common with his later dancers in that regard. With the exception of the sword sheaths, both figures seem comparatively well dressed without the ragged knees and broken shoes of Dürer's dancers.

The final stanza of Heselloher's ballad is as follows:

*Der uns das hat gedichtet | und neues hat gemacht,
der hat di sach pesichtet | und aigentlich petracht,
das er sich maint zu hueten | wol vor der pauren schar;
alspald si werden wueten, | so hilft an in chain gueten.
So gar fürwar, cham ainer dar | waiß wan im jar
und macht ir ainen plueten, | er mueste lassen har.*

He who wrote this [poem] for us and made it new, he saw these things and with that view, means to hide himself from the peasants' ire; for soon they will be angry, so help [him] for goodness sake. In truth they will come, who knows in what year, and are after his blood, so we must leave him here.²⁵

²⁵ My translation of H. Heselloher, *Von üppiklichen dingen*, (stanza 13), made with the assistance of Anuka Ramischwili-Schäfer.

This stanza indicates the ever-present fear of the violence of the underclass—presented here in comedic form but with the understanding that the peasantry was capable of retaliatory violence. In discussing worsening class relationships between peasants and landowners in colonial Southeast Asia in the mid-twentieth century, James Scott makes reference to landlords being forced to leave the villages at night for fear of attack, and of acts of social banditry and enforced redistribution.²⁶ The increasingly mocking way in which some, but not all, artists depict the peasants in the early sixteenth century is aimed to both keep the poor in their place, but also provide a further aesthetic justification for attitudes that implied that they were worthy of neither sympathy nor charity.

As with his *Marktbauern*, Dürer's contributions to the *Narrenpaar* genre were more nuanced than those of his contemporaries, fitting in with his ideas about human beauty being "inherent in the mass of all men."²⁷ One of these, his *Peasant Couple Dancing* (1514), includes a sword in a damaged sheath. The man's back is to the viewer and his face obscured, but his sword can be seen, again protruding from the ragged end of the sheath at his waist. This weapon is a more typical peasant short sword or knife, and the image is less ambiguous than the earlier image in terms of the dress of the protagonists. As both Jürgen Müller and Alison Stewart have discussed, Dürer's depictions of peasants during this period have sexual undertones—with not just dancing, but with all the connotations of gyrating, panting, male and female bodies in intimate embraces, and also with the symbolism of swords, eggs, and purses.²⁸

²⁶ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant; Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 76 and 124.

²⁷ Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 74.

²⁸ Stewart, *Before Bruegel*, 18-9. Müller, "Albrecht Dürer's Peasant Engravings," 6.

As Tlusty puts it, “The sword symbolized both a man’s right to protection in the public realm, and his potency, in both the sexual and the metaphoric sense.”²⁹ The badly sheathed sword in this context is a sexual symbol of this type—one of excessive male desire poorly contained.

This can be seen more explicitly in the *Narrenpaare* of the master BXG, whose dancing and fighting couples represent the stereotype of the brawling, licentious peasant with a combination of crude vulgarity of subject and delicacy of line. His *Dance of the Foolish Couple* (1475-1500, fig. 5.6) has a fantastical figure for his male dancer: this balding man is dressed above the waist as a fool with a belled doublet over a shirt with voluminous sleeves and below as a ragged peasant—little better than a beggar—with torn hose loose around his shins and broken shoes. **[PLACE FIGURE 5.6 HERE]** At his waist is a string bag with a goose in it and his sword, which has an elaborate hilt and pommel worthy of a courtier. The ferrule is again missing from the sword’s scabbard and the frayed leather echoes the fringes of the sleeves of his doublet and the scrollwork for the (absent) text that he is clasping in his left hand. His partner is a modestly dressed elderly woman with a stick—her “foolishness” presumably her desire to dance like a young maid, despite her age and infirmity. Although this chapter focusses on the very “masculine” symbol of the sword, it should be pointed out that these images also contain a variety of symbols around expected female behaviour. Not only is the female figure the stereotype of the *häßliche Alte*— the old housewife—Dürer had rejected in favour of a more naturalistic figure,³⁰ but the damaged sheath itself could in this context be seen as a misogynistic symbol of female sexuality. The sheath being the vagina (both are covered by the

²⁹ Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*, 164.

³⁰ Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, 52.

same word—*Scheide*—in German) and the connotations of looseness and damage part of the stereotype of the peasant woman as immodest and sexually available, her “sheath” worn-out through overuse.

We see therefore that, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, print depictions of the broken sword sheath were part of the general condescending image of the peasant as “vulgar and uncultured,”³¹ and this specific motif was part of the peasants’ reputation for “rowdiness, and beastly sexual desires.”³² The political implications of this were to reinforce the opinions of the urban mercantile class who viewed the peasant with suspicion. The “gaudy” and “crude” peasants depicted in the illustration of Heselloher’s *Von üppiklichen dingen* continue this condescension while highlighting the peasants’ potential for insurrectionary violence in the face of social and political subjection. However, with the work of Schoengauer and Dürer, the peasant as a Biblical or religious figure and as advocate of the world-turned-upside-down is pointed towards a role that will become more prominent with the emergence of evangelical theology.

The Expansion of the Motif

In the same year as Dürer’s *Peasant Couple Dancing* (1514), a copy of Pamphilus Gegenbach’s *Bundtschu* (fig. 5.7) was produced in Basel that contains a depiction of a group of peasants saluting a banner—both the standard bearer and the peasant on the far right of the image have swords in ragged sheaths. **[PLACE FIGURE 5.7 HERE]** The standard bearer wears a longsword

³¹ Packull, “The Image of the “Common Man,” 253.

³² *Ibid.*, 255.

similar to the one in Dürer's first print, the peasant on the right a sabre similar to that in *The Extravagant Peasants*. Whether Gegenbach's illustrator took inspiration directly from Dürer or Heselloher's unknown illustrator is uncertain. However, this is the first indication of the symbol being used in a definitively radical context—it is also the only print from this period that depicts a woman in the context of peasant revolt, as a peasant woman can be seen kneeling in front of the crucifix on the banner. There are later drawings by Lucas Cranach (1537) of women with flails beating members of the clergy, but there are no extant prints of this subject.³³

In 1516 Peter Schöffer the younger adapted *The Extravagant Peasants*, renaming them Cless and Heintz and presenting them in his broadsheet depicting discussions between two members of various social classes. For the peasants the text was as follows:

Sih helmer lug | lieb vetter Cleß

Du tregst warlich | vil gutter keß

Pack dich in dstat | balt mit eim sprung

Sie gelten dir ietz | gelts genung

Entrawen Heintz | du sagst gar war

Doch had ich fed | dern vil im har

Welch prockretorn | mir stecken drein

³³ See K. Hoffmann, "Cranachs Zeichnungen 'Frauen überfallen Geistliche,'" *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, 26 (1972): 3-14 and Jonathan Trayner, "The image of the female Karsthans in Lucas Cranach's Women Assaulting Clergy," paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, San Diego, CA., October 2021.

Die schwingen mir | das seckelein

Now see here dear cousin Cless, you probably have much good cheese, take yourself to the town with a spring in your step, there will be wealth for you, much wealth.

Trusty Heintz, you don't say much [of worth], though I have many feathers in my hair, which the town clerk gave me, they only gave me a small bag [of money].³⁴

The poem is obscure; the reference to the feathers in the hair could possibly be a sign of a right to trade or alternatively a mark of shame—as in tarring and feathering. According to Josef Benzig, *prockretorn* is the town *Gerichtsprokurator*, the clerk in charge of the market.³⁵ Therefore, this could mean either that despite the *prockretorn* giving Cless the right to trade in the market, he received little money for his goods, or that the *prockretorn* ruled his cheese to be substandard and he was driven out of town with feathers in his hair before he had the chance to make much money. Regardless, the story appears to be the lament of the peasant throughout the ages—of going to the town and getting cheated—and as such is not particularly focused on the recent peasant uprisings nor on the concept of militancy, or of the sexual potential of Dürer's and vxG's images. Likely Schöffler found them just pleasing depictions and a recognisable existing stereotype that he could deploy for his own work. However, the distress

³⁴ My translation of P. Schöffler the younger, *Ein Frankfurter Messeflugblatt*, made with the assistance of Anuka Ramischwili-Schäfer.

³⁵ J. Benzig, "Ein Frankfurter Messeflugblatt von Peter Schöffler d. J.," *Archiv für Frankfurts Geschichte und Kunst* 53 (1973): 41-8, here at 42.

of the peasants, left poor by the legal manipulation of their betters, prefigures the later uses of this image by Schöffer and others in 1525.

Chronologically the next appearance of this symbol is in the 1522 woodcut *Battle of the Naked Men and Peasants*, designed by the master NH and cut by Hans Lützelberger in Basel. In this large broadsheet the third peasant figure from the right is drawing his short sword from a sheath with a damaged end. As Landau and Parshall point out, this print is a combination of the Italian idealism of Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* of the 1480s and Dürer's depictions of peasants. The suggestion here being that the artists' intention was to demonstrate their virtuosity and command of both Italian and German vocabularies without any particular message to be attached to the image.³⁶ The various peasants echo, however, not just Dürer but also the images of *Karsthans* and the *Bundschuh* pamphlets of the proceeding decade. Certainly, none of the previous narratives of peasant foolishness or debauchery, or of the peasants' daily tasks, are present in this purely allegorical scene, which could reasonably be supposed to be a depiction of the conflict between German and Italian virtues within art. There was a keen interest in this and in the idea of German-ness following Celtis' publication of *Germania generalis* (1498),³⁷ in which case the peasants could be standing for the German people in an early example of the type of artworks that Margaret Carroll describes as "important political gestures in validating a culture of resistance to foreign papal [...] control."³⁸ This would suggest that the symbol of the sword in a ragged sheath had become one of the

³⁶ David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print, 1470-1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 212-3.

³⁷ Rublack, *Dressing Up*, 130.

³⁸ M.D. Carroll, "Peasant festivity and political identity in the sixteenth century," *Art History*, 10 (1987), 289-314, here at 295.

tropes used in the depiction of peasants by German artists at this point and at least partially decoupled from any specific moralising context about the behaviour of peasants.

The final use of the symbol before the Peasants' War was in Barthel Beham's *Twelve Vagabonds* (1524) where the disabled former soldier still wears his longsword at his belt in its now broken scabbard. As mentioned above, the longsword tends to indicate a knightly origin for this unfortunate, but the text does not appear to elaborate on or confirm this. This image is significant as it is the first occurrence that has been found of this symbol transferring from the peasant (who admittedly may be a former mercenary) to the soldier or *Landsknecht*. There is a prior image that possibly does this—the anonymous *Death and a Landsknecht* (1504)—but the cutting style of that print makes it impossible to be certain whether the scabbard of the sword is damaged or has a long chape. In the early sixteenth century, the *Landsknecht* was generally seen and depicted in a positive light—“athletic, bold, and aesthetically attractive,”³⁹ though occasionally ragged owing to the rigours of his profession. It was only later in the mid-sixteenth century did prints critical of the mercenary become more common.

This second phase in the development of the motif coincides with the expansion of the role of the peasant within the visual culture of the empire. The peasant's voice as a victim of political and economic injustice is heard with both pamphlets relating to the *Bundschuh* and the day-to-day travails of the *Marktbauern*, Cless and Heintz—in both cases swords with damaged scabbards feature prominently. The peasant is also linked to the notion of German-ness within the *Battle of the Naked Men and Peasants*, and the sword in the ragged sheath appears in the hands of the imperial *Landsknecht* for the first time. With these innovations the motif has

³⁹ Rublack, *Dressing Up*, 141.

become disassociated with the previous reading of it as a sexual image. This expansion mirrors but does not yet cross over with the expansion of the image of *Karsthans* as the evangelical peasant.

The German Peasants' War

Schöffler's image of Cless and Heintz image was used to illustrate three copies of *The Twelve Articles*: his own (fig. 5.8), that of Matthias Schürer (Strasbourg), and one of Jörg Gastel's Zwickau prints (all 1525). **[PLACE FIGURE 5.8 HERE]** In the same year, Cless was separated out and used for Jakob Schmidt's (Speyer) imprint of *The Sermons of the Peasant of Wöhrd*.⁴⁰ It was here, therefore, that the sword in the ragged sheath was linked indisputably to the image of the radical peasant. This was further enforced by the appearance of the symbol in the frontispiece of Johann Weyßenberger's imprint of Luther's *Against the Peasants* (1525, fig. 5.9). **[PLACE FIGURE 5.9 HERE]** Whereas previous depictions of the armed peasant could be said to be either positive or equivocal, this image depicts the peasant as a thief and a rogue, little better than a highway man and utterly undeserving of the viewer's sympathy. Rublack's examination of the peasant's dress argues:

⁴⁰ *The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants* were the compiled grievances of the peasants of Memmingen, which were initially printed by Melchior Ramming in Augsburg (1525) and rapidly reprinted in numerous cities throughout southern Germany during the Peasants' War. They were one of the key sources of inspiration and justification for the various Peasant Bands (see Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*, 25-67). *The Sermons of the Peasant of Wöhrd* were a series of sermons by Diepold Peringer, a defrocked priest masquerading as a peasant who preached in favour of the Reformation in Kitzingen in 1524. See Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities; The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 66-7.

[T]he image detailed the stupid simplicity and hypocrisy of rebellious peasants who were anything but poor. The peasant sported feathers in his hat, jewellery, and an overly long sword used just as an adornment [...] The peasant's appearance, in short, revealed him to be a laughable, limited figure who just wanted to look fashionable.⁴¹

The sword is seen here as nothing more than an affectation—the aping of the peasant's betters and a symbol of his desire to subvert the natural order of society. As with his gold chain and ragged hose-less boots, the sword that he carries, but is too lazy or stupid to properly maintain, becomes a symbol of the danger of allowing the lumpen masses too much freedom or material wealth.

Weyßenberger did reprint the pamphlet in 1526 with a less hostile image where the peasant is depicted, with spear and belted sword in ragged sheath, listening to Luther's admonitions. Hans Holbein the younger also used the same symbol in his *Death and the Peddler* from his *Dance of Death* (1525-6), which also contains Death as a flail-bearing peasant assailing a count. Within these images, therefore, the ragged sheath joins the threshing flail as a symbol of peasant militancy. These two symbols are rarely seen in possession of the same peasant—an exception being the later Barthel Beham's *Three Peasants Intent on Becoming Monks* (1532)—possibly suggesting that at this stage the ragged, disreputable, radical peasant with the ill-kept weapon was being contrasted with the neater, more civic-minded and religiously responsible *Karsthans*. Through these contrasting images two differing political and religious roles can be seen for the peasant: *Karsthans* is generally plainly but neatly dressed and carries a flail as

⁴¹ Rublack, *Dressing Up*, 105.

befits his social position. His place in the reforming church is to support the preachers of the Gospel, not supplant them. The peasant with the ragged sword sheath is no longer content with his place in the social order: he seeks a wider role.

Literal and Symbolic Meanings for the Motif

This image in a martial context could have a number of potential resonances, some with positive and some with negative connotations. As noted above, the use of longswords was the prerogative of the upper-classes, and any depiction of a peasant bearing one would therefore be suggestive to the contemporary viewer of a disregard for the social order. In his *Bauernsatiren*, Hans-Joachim Raupp makes a specific point of mentioning the depiction of the *zweischneidige Schwert*—the double-edged sword—in his discussion of the prints of Schongauer, Dürer, and the master BXG. While pointing out that under the imperial ordinance of 1150, peasants were forbidden to carry lances and swords. He comments that the contemporary writer Johann Boemus “remarked [in 1520] that no one goes out on the streets unarmed due to the general uncertainty and describes swords as usual peasant weapons.”⁴² It is unclear whether Boemus means military swords or the peasant *Langmesser*— the Latin word used, *gladiis*, does not specify— but as mentioned above, Tlusty points out these laws were largely ignored by the early sixteenth century. The 16 percent of Oettingen-Wallerstein peasants having weapons described as swords (as distinct from *Langmesser*)⁴³ suggests that military swords were carried but not common. The public carrying of swords, and other

⁴² “Boemus vermarktet ausdrücklich, das wegen der allgemeinen Unsicherheit niemand unbewaffnet auf die Straße gehe und nennt Schwerter als übliche Bauernwaffen” Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, 57 (my translation).

⁴³ Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*, 171.

weapons, in early modern Germany, was linked explicitly to both manhood and to citizenship, with peasants excluded from the responsibility/right to bear and maintain arms in various jurisdictions because they were not considered “weapons capable.”⁴⁴ This did not mean that they were not allowed to carry a knife or *Langmesser*, but that serfs, owing to their lack of freedom, were not eligible for military duties or responsible for maintaining weapons for civic defence. In which case the carrying of martial weapons by the peasants should be linked to these concepts of liberty and masculine virtue. It is possible to imagine, therefore, that there is a crossover with symbolism of Anabaptists—who were seen as unmanly because of their refusal to fight or swear oaths— and other offenders against the social order only being allowed to carry a breadknife with a broken-off tip to the blade as a mark of social stigma.⁴⁵

Why then the damaged sheath? Leaving aside the interpretations to do with lustfulness given above with the *Narrenpaar* prints, could any specific symbolic meanings be attached to this symbol when used within depictions of peasant militancy? Two interlinked meanings present themselves; the peasants are reluctant fighters in that the weapons are in bad repair because they are shoved in the corner/back of the barn/never used. Equally poorly maintained weapons could be a suggestion of irresponsibility towards duties to the state—ordinances demanded that militia members keep their weapons in good repair. Therefore, the peasants are either serfs carrying weapons above their station, or if they are free peasants, are neglectful of their civic duty. However, in his discussion on this subject in relation to Dürer’s prints

⁴⁴ Ibid., 56, 70-1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 73, and Adam Bonikowske, “Anabaptist Recanters: Masculine Identity and the Maintenance of Dishonor,” paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, St. Louis, MO., October 2019.

Heinrich Müller suggests a number of possible practical reasons for the existence of this phenomenon:

Most of the sheaths of these weapons probably did not have metal bands (reinforced tips) and were therefore slightly damaged when the blade was inserted. Peasant weapons usually had no special protection against the penetration of water into the sheath, which could easily cause rust on the blade and make it difficult to pull the weapon out of the scabbard. The once damaged sheath was unlikely to be repaired again.⁴⁶

Though this does not satisfactorily explain the broken scabbards of the two long swords of Schongauer's and Dürer's initial prints, both of these swords were presumably acquired, legitimately or not, from more military sources. Unless the sheaths were made later these would presumably have been of better quality than the average peasant scabbard. Regardless of this point, this combination of factors could mean that a peasant who either did not regularly draw his sword, or who was careless of its condition, could quickly find that it was difficult to sheath correctly, or even draw it at all. Müller does however present a practical benefit for this:

In the fields or the forest, and on the way to town or to his lord, the peasant was endangered by bandits or wolves. In this situation, or even in a fight, he could stab the

⁴⁶ "Vermutlich besaßen die meisten Scheiden dieser Waffen keine metallenen Ortbänder (verstärkte Spitzen) und wurden deshalb beim Hineinstecken der Klinge leicht beschädigt. Bäuerliche Waffen hatten in der Regel auch keinen besonderen Schutz gegen das Eindringen von Wasser in die Scheide. Hierdurch konnte leicht Rost an der Klinge entstehen und dadurch das Herausziehen der Waffe aus der Scheide erschwert werden. Die einmal beschädigte Scheide wurde deshalb nicht wieder repariert." Müller, *Albrecht Dürer, Waffen und Rüstungen*, 64-5 (my translation).

attacker at lightning speed without having to pull the weapon out of its sheath:

Something he would not have the opportunity to do in the event of a sudden attack by someone who was more skilled with a longsword.⁴⁷

However, it is worth pointing out that in the *Battle of the Naked Men and Peasants*, discussed above, the peasant with the damaged sheath is in the act of drawing his weapon. The damaged sheath therefore becomes emblematic of the peasant through a combination of literal and symbolic factors. Their lack of care for and skill with their weapons gives a handy metaphor for their general love of ease and lechery and of their lack of martial responsibility. It also demonstrates an unchivalrous attitude to combat, relying on underhand tactics rather than skill in a “straight fight.”

The image of the peasant bearing a sword in a ragged sheath, as symbol of the militant or radical peasant, was not just disseminated in pamphlets against the peasants but also in those sympathetic towards them or printed for them, such as *The Twelve Articles*. Why would the peasants distribute images with such a negative set of connotations? Quite simply, they could have viewed these vices as virtues. The carrying of swords as a symbol of the peasant wishing to rise above their proper station or of revolt and the world turned upside down would obviously appeal to the peasant *Bundschuh*, as might anything that linked them to the *Landsknechte*, for whom the usual rules and hierarchies did not apply. A peasant reproached

⁴⁷ “Auf den Feldern, im Walde und auf den Wegstrecken zur Stadt und zum Grundherrn war der Bauer durch plötzlichen Überfall durch Räuber oder durch Wölfe stark gefährdet. In dieser Situation oder auch bei einer Schlägerei konnte er blitzschnell, ohne die Waffe erst aus der Scheide ziehen zu müssen, auf den Angreifer zustechen. Diese Möglichkeit hatte er nicht bei einem Überfall durch einen Reiter, der durch ein Langes Schwert ohnehin überlegen war.” Müller, *Albrecht Dürer, Waffen und Rüstungen*, 65 (my translation).

for the poor state of his arms might reply that he was not a knight, but a poor and godly person preferring the ploughshare to the sword. The peasants have taken up arms as a last resort, so of course their weapons are in bad repair. As is seen in the list of confiscated peasant weapons and in the fine collection of maces in the Salzburg collection this is hardly accurate, though it might have suited both the peasants and their opponents to pretend otherwise. This being said, Tlusty's examination of court proceedings of the period suggests most peasant brawls were conducted with clubs or fists, suggesting that drawing swords or knives in anger was a rarer occurrence than with the urban population.⁴⁸

The peasants taking ownership of derogatory visual representations of their cause is part of a general response to the depictions of them and their social role. The re-appropriation by the peasants of terms of mockery and condescension such as *Armer Konrad* (poor fellows, for the Württemberg peasants of 1514),⁴⁹ or *Zierhelden* (beautiful heroes, for the Black Forest Band of 1525),⁵⁰ indicates a keen understanding of the role of symbolic language and an ability to subvert this and turn the approbation back on their oppressors. In his discussion of peasant revolt in India, Ranajit Guha makes frequent reference to this tendency to appropriate and negate the symbols of the existing order, using the German peasants' theft of noble victims' hats and gloves, as an example of such subversion.⁵¹ Peasants looking at the image of themselves presented by Weyßenberger could have seen a success—the plundered hat and chain merely reparations for decades of abuse at the hands of their lord. Similarly, within these

⁴⁸ Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*, 174.

⁴⁹ A. Laube, "Precursors of the Peasant War," in Laube, *The German Peasant War of 1525*, 49-50.

⁵⁰ Rublack, *Dressing Up*, 106.

⁵¹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 64.

images both symbols, like the sword or spurs that are properly owned by the aristocracy, and symbols like the flail or the ragged sword sheath that are placed on the peasantry by the urban artist, are subverted and reclaimed. The image of both the Bible-reading common man and the extravagant peasant rebel are presented back to the authorities as a challenge to their injustice.

A similar thing could be taking place with the vices of slothfulness and lustfulness that are used to stereotype the peasant: the idea that one could eat (and dance, and copulate) without labour is the peasant utopia: “a dream of the opposite to a world of toil and malnutrition: a still world, a fat world, an idle and irresponsible world, a world of bodies.”⁵² Therefore the emergent bourgeois idea that labour was a virtue and its own reward could easily be dismissed by the peasant who rarely saw anything else. Such activity can also have a radical political meaning—not just in the sense of the refusal or withdrawal of labour that is the industrial strike but the consumption and destruction of surpluses during the peasant uprising. Guha describes the “four methods or forms of struggle” that define the peasant revolt as “wrecking, burning, eating and looting”.⁵³

Eating in this context, must be understood as an integral part of the political process.

Neither the gargantuan scale on which it is often organized by the peasants to celebrate a successful jacquerie nor the enormous waste involved makes any sense at all of this as simply a measure of satisfying hunger. On the contrary its use by the rebels as an instrument of inversion and/or as a penalty imposed on their foes in order to remunerate

⁵² T.J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth; Painting and the Life to Come*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 115.

⁵³ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 136.

themselves for 'public services' rendered in the cause of insurgency bears testimony to its political character.⁵⁴

Therefore, underneath the seemingly patronising or moralising depiction of the peasant festival can be seen, maybe, the spectre of a violently seized utopia.

At the same time as the Peasants' War, the Landshut painter Hans Wertinger was producing a series of wall panel paintings depicting rural harmony and the labour of the passing seasons for an unknown aristocratic patron. Seven of these—the months of March, May to September, and December—are in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. These paintings depict the presumed patron and his happy, smiling, properly deferential peasants engaged in leisure (the patron) and profitable work (the peasants). The painting for August (fig. 5.10) depicts the threshing of the grain after a successful harvest and in the foreground contains two figures: a portly steward or overseer and a grey-haired older peasant in conversation at the barn door. **[PLACE FIGURE 5.10 HERE]** The peasant is the direct visual descendent of Dürer's peasant with the spurs, via Gegenbach's *Bundtschu* or Schöffner's Heintz, and has at his belt the same sabre in a ragged sheath as these two latter figures. Wertinger's figure has removed his hat like the peasants in Gegenbach's print. Instead of this being a symbol of oath-taking it is one of deferment to his social better, a clear sign that this is an image of the correct and proper order of society and not of conflict and dissent. Assuming that the commissioner of this work is local to Landshut, this could be a deliberate ironic gesture contrasting the stability and peacefulness of this part of Bavaria compared to the revolt and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 147.

disorder to the west and south. In a sense, therefore, it is not an “anti-peasant” image but rather an idealised view of the feudal contract, where everyone knew their place and co-operated for the benefit of all—some by flirting near a neo-classical fountain, some by tending the cattle. The final result is that the militant peasant, presented positively by the publishers of *The Twelve Articles* and negatively by the publishers of *Against the Peasants*, is de-radicalised.

Later Manifestations

After the Peasants’ War the rules against peasants holding martial weapons were reinforced and tightened, the revolting peasants were made to hand over their weapons, and “battle swords were forbidden, along with the other military equipment that was emblematic of local authority”.⁵⁵ Similarly, the symbol of the sword in the ragged sheath underwent an evolution: in their large multi-sheet woodcuts of army baggage trains both Sebald Beham (1530) and Erhard Schön (1532) included figures with ragged sword sheaths. Beham’s is a young *Landsknecht* with a pike, Schön’s a mounted man in a peasants’ cap, possibly part of the supply train or a recent recruit who had yet to acquire enough loot to afford the typical *Landsknechte* garb. Beham again depicts a man identifiable as a *Landsknecht* by his clothing with a ragged scabbard to his *Katzbalder* in *The Dance of the Noses at Gimpelsbrunn* (1534). He also includes the depiction of a peasant with sabre in a ragged sheath among the procession of musicians and wedding guests in his *Wedding Procession* (1540). We can see here that the symbol had become associated again with pleasure seekers (like Dürer’s earlier dancers) and mercenaries—exemplars of disorder and loose living. As Alison Stewart points out in her study of Beham’s work, this image

⁵⁵ Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*, 82.

is not necessarily entirely censorious,⁵⁶ but it is a step away from the idea that the peasant had a radical political role. The *Landsknechte* were considered, in the early sixteenth century, in an ambivalent light but one where their symbolic role as “a personification of imperial power”⁵⁷ lent them a heroic air. This began to change in the later part of the century as sectarian conflict and civil unrest put the emperor at odds with his subjects, and the Protestant cause “now withdrew their support for the contested ideal of Lansquenets as the embodiment of masculine patriotic honour”.⁵⁸ This is the type of figure that the unknown Antwerp artist of the painting *The Prodigal Son* (1550, fig. 5.11) chooses to use for his ragged mercenary gambler and that appears in the same costume but more contemplative pose in Bruegel’s *The Sermon of St. John the Baptist* (1566). **[PLACE FIG 5.11 & 5.11a HERE]** Here a spiritual redemption for the dissolute and rebellious sword-bearer is hinted at. He remains unrepentant, however, in Jost Amman’s depiction of a ragged, peasant-hat wearing, rooster stealing *Landsknecht* that appears in his *Kustbüchlin* (1578), and as such can finally have said to have become a definite artistic trope, as Amman’s aim was to compile “the representations of many clergymen and secular persons of high and low rank”.⁵⁹ It can also be argued that these images of *Landsknechte* with damaged sword sheaths present this motif as definitively sexually symbolic—the stereotype of the mercenary is that he is neither slow to draw his sword or neglectful of his weapons, but he is dissolute and lustful.

⁵⁶ Stewart, *Before Bruegel*, 157-9.

⁵⁷ Keith Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors and Wives; Popular Imagery in the Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 72.

⁵⁸ Rublack, *Dressing Up*, 143-4.

⁵⁹ *293 Renaissance Woodcuts for Artists and Illustrators; Jost Amman’s Kunstbüchlin* (New York: Dover, 1968), ix.

After 1525 there was a sharp reduction in the number of peasant images with direct political themes, the space being filled with *kermis* dances and other social scenes,⁶⁰ and the sword with the ragged sheath was present but no longer a major symbolic element. Barthel Beham's *Three Peasants Intent on Becoming Monks* (1532) depicts a figure with both the flail and sword in ragged sheath. The title indicates perhaps that the former radical has given up on his dream of the priesthood of all believers and hopes rather to join the established elite. Jörg Pencz's *Shepherd and Wolf* (1531) contains visual echoes of Weyßenberger's second print of *Against the Peasants*, with the shepherd in a similar pose and the hunter carrying a similar spear to the peasant in Weyßenberger's print. Given the relative positions of the shepherd and huntsman, and the peasant and Luther in the earlier print, this image could be presenting Luther as huntsman protecting the shepherd and his flock from wolves. However, both Barthel Beham and Pencz were, along with Sebald Beham, part of a group of artists and preachers—including Hans Denck and Sebastian Franck, "whose political and religious ideas were deemed radical by Nuremburg's mainstream Lutheran direction."⁶¹ It may be, therefore, that these images have an ambiguous relationship to their subjects. A similar ambiguity is present in Jörg Breu the Elder's *The Investiture of King Ferdinand I* (1536). This print is a large multi-sheet woodcut; one of the vignettes included is of a peasant couple, the man with spear and sword, meeting a noble couple. The level of detail in the print makes it unclear as to whether the peasant's sword sheath is damaged but, besides this, the figure has a marked similarity to the peasant in Weyßenberger's second print. In this instance, the peasant has not removed his hat

⁶⁰ Scribner, "Images of the Peasant," 32.

⁶¹ Stewart, *Before Bruegel*, 28.

and is not deferring in gesture to the nobleman. What is the meaning behind this gesture, or lack of it? It could be a general nod towards the troublesome *Karsthans* or a symbol that the German estates were less than impressed with the Spanish-raised Ferdinand. As Christine Shaw points out the election of Ferdinand as King of the Romans was not as uncontested as previous successions,⁶² in which case the figure of the peasant could be being used as a plausibly deniable figure of the nation (as Margaret Carroll suggests occurs in Bruegel's peasant images).⁶³

The Motif in the Seventeenth Century

By the 1550s, the motif of the sword in the ragged sheath had already passed beyond the context of the German popular print and into the wider set of European artistic tropes. Both Jacques Callot's *Man Preparing to Draw his Sword* (1622) and Adriaen Brouwers painting *Card Players Scuffling in a Tavern* (1632-33) continue the life of the symbol as a presentation of the carnivalesque and the unsavoury underworld of gamblers, tavern brawls, and strolling players, the political potential of which is explored in Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais.⁶⁴ As Nina Schroeder highlights in her discussion on Arnold Houbraken's early eighteenth-century history of *Netherlandish Painters and Paintresses*, there was a considerable crossover between dissenting and radical religious identities and artists.⁶⁵ This can also be seen specifically in the work of

⁶² Christine Shaw and Michael Mallett, *The Italian Wars 1494-1559; War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019), 207.

⁶³ Carroll, "Peasant festivity and political identity in the sixteenth century," 289.

⁶⁴ M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁶⁵ Nina Schroeder, "Art and Heterodoxy in the Dutch Enlightenment," *Church History and Religious Culture* 101 (2021): 324-56.

Dirck Coornhert with his *Luther Reveals the Deception of the Catholic Clergy* (1570), which features a book-reading peasant leaning on his spade. However, these latter examples are perhaps more concerned with “religious agency” rather than “political agency.”⁶⁶ As discussed above it is the act of negation—the over consumption and celebratory destruction—that operates on the tipping point between the festival and the revolt that allow for this political transformation, and for this both the tavern brawler and bookish digger are required. Many peasant revolts began or were framed in the context of the festival or carnival, and for this reason were increasingly curtailed by the authorities in early modern Europe; though, equally, such symbolic inversions can be used as a safety valve to temporarily relieve these social pressures.⁶⁷ Throughout western literature the political radical has been linked to the brothel and the drinking den, most significantly for our study in the figure of “the bastard born in a roadside ditch” Jan van Leyden, “barkeep and pimp who could play the literary dilettante” and was later Anabaptist King of Münster.⁶⁸ Within official culture the reading of this confirms to the bourgeois audience the iniquity of the subaltern classes but this is not necessarily how the image would have been seen by other viewers; “Bruegel’s peasants’ wedding feast was meant to show the vulgarity and gluttony of the lower classes. In fact, they were “feasting” on bowls

⁶⁶ Dorothee Sturkenboom, “The ‘Simple Burgher’ of D.V. Coornhert (1522-1590): A Dutch Freethinker Opens the Door to a New Age,” in *In Praise of Ordinary People; Early Modern Britain and the Dutch Republic*, ed. Margaret C. Jacob and Christine Secretan, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 19-46, here at 27.

⁶⁷ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 30. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994), 119-204.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, *A History of the Münster Anabaptists: Inner Emigration and the Third Reich*, tran. and ed. by G.B. von der Lippe and V.M. Reck-Malleczewen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 9. This historic set of assumptions has been belatedly and usefully challenged by Michael Driedger with “Against ‘the Radical Reformation’: On the Continuity between Early Modern Heresy-Making and Modern Historiography,” in *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*, ed. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 139-61. And, with particular emphasis on the problem of relying on mid-twentieth century polemical positions, in his “Thinking Inside the Cages: Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence,” *Nova Religio* 21 (2018): 38-62.

of porridge.”⁶⁹ We can argue therefore, with Bakhtin, that these images can operate as an interface between official and subaltern cultures, and that it is through aberrant readings that the political meanings can be uncovered. This is certainly the case with later radical movements as Jacques Rancière and Adrian Rifkin discuss in relation to the café-concerts and political prints of nineteenth century Paris.⁷⁰ However, it was also present in the sixteenth century, as the heresy trial of the Friulan miller Menocchio suggests. In this trial it was obvious that the miller was synthesising his ideas of “Christian” cosmology from a variety of literary sources: “The gulf between the texts read by Menocchio and the way in which he understood them and reported them to the inquisitors indicates that his ideas cannot be reduced or traced back to any particular book.”⁷¹ Similarly the images of the peasant radical operated in an ambiguous state for the sixteenth-century viewer. The continuing political relevance of the sword in a ragged sheath to the protagonists in peasant militancy can be seen in the banner of the Basel peasants from the Swiss Peasants’ War of 1653 (fig.12).⁷² **[PLACE FIGURE 5.12 HERE]** Here the Swiss peasants are depicted in the same manner as their earlier German counterparts—half farmers, half mercenaries—one of whom is carrying a sabre in a battered

⁶⁹ Miriam U. Chrisman, *Conflicting Visions of Reform; German Lay Propaganda Pamphlets 1519-1530* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 184.

⁷⁰ J. Rancière, “Good times or pleasure at the barriers” in *Voices of the People: The Politics and Life of ‘La Sociale’ at the end of the Second Empire*, ed. Adrian Rifkin and Roger Thomas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 45-94. Adrian Rifkin, “No Particular Thing to Mean” in *Communards and Other Cultural Histories: Essays by Adrian Rifkin*, ed. Steve Edwards (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 206-28.

⁷¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms; The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), xxii.

⁷² This flag is incorrectly identified as being from 1525 in Adolf Laube, Max Steinmetz, and Günter Volger, *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen frühbürgerlichen Revolution* (Berlin: Dietz, 1982), 243, and is in the collection of the Kantonsmuseum Baselland. The flag itself has not been officially documented, and the photographic reproduction in Laube, Steinmetz, Volger, *Illustrierte Geschichte* is not very clear. Therefore, a drawing of the flag from 1890 by Karl Jauslin, from the collection of the Muttenz Museum, is included for comparison.

scabbard. It is possible that “the sense of legitimacy which sustained the rebels in 1653 rarely derived from personal experience of earlier revolts but rather from the collective memory of the heroic establishment of the original Confederation” in the late thirteenth/early fourteenth century.⁷³ The establishment of the original Confederation was also used as a point of reference for the Peasant Bands of 1525, with the slogan “Who increases the Swiss [i.e., forces the peasants to seek self-governance]? The greed of the lords!”⁷⁴ This, therefore, represents a re-emergence after 125 years of this image of the peasant radical, demonstrating that these ideas and images were able to continue in the minds of the peasants despite attempts to suppress and delegitimise them.

Conclusion:

As is demonstrated with reference to contemporary written sources and museum records, there appears to be considerable disjuncture between representation and reality when it comes to peasant weapons. As is usually the case with this period all three major sources of information—images, textual accounts and surviving objects—are partial. The lists of confiscated weapons perhaps give the best overview of how the peasants were armed, but do not include converted farm implements. The surviving examples of *Bauernwaffen* in museums are of uncertain attribution and probably best described as representative trophies—the more military ones being in any case indistinguishable from the general armoury contents. The images contain examples of both symbolism and representation, often closely intertwined, with

⁷³ Tom Scott, “Der schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653,” *English Historical Review*, 114 (1999), 196.

⁷⁴ Scribner, “Images of the Peasant,” 44.

the most obvious example, the flail of *Karsthans*, being both a commonly used farm implement and a Biblically-inspired metaphor for the priesthood of all believers. Similarly, the image of the sword in a ragged sheath was probably, at least initially, based on observation, becoming a metaphor through repetition. Poor weapon maintenance, lack of metal ferrules, and, in the case of repurposed military swords, the possibility of using them more effectively as a short pole arm, are all possible reasons for the peasants to carry swords with damaged sheaths.

The early examples by Schongauer and Dürer, both of whom were interested in the production of representation in art, and whose work became the basis for many of the subsequent images, show a military sword which gives support to the first and third of these possibilities. The sword, through underuse and lack of maintenance, has rusted in its sheath, the ferrule has subsequently been removed, and the sword turned into a short spear. This type of sword was less common than the *Langmesser* that all peasant men seem to have carried (as discussed above, military swords were confiscated from only 16 percent of the Oettingen-Wallerstein peasants, and this was after hostilities where they may have had further opportunities to acquire them) and was technically illegal for the peasant class. This leads to the suggestion that these earlier images reference the *Bundschuh* and the inversion of society, the weapon being a symbol of the peasant stepping outside of his prescribed social role—a suggestion supported by the spurs worn by a second peasant in Dürer's print.

The peasant acting above their station is also present in Heselloher's *The Extravagant Peasants*—which provided the original for Schöffner's paired peasants—but here it is presented in a social context only obliquely referencing the possibility of political radicalism. These tentative political interpretations are subsequently masked with the *Narrenpaar* and peasant

dance images of the early 1500s, which add an element of sexual symbolism to the sword and sheath: the sword being the penis and the damaged sheath the vagina, making an obscene and misogynistic comment on the supposed sexual laxity of the peasantry. After this point the sword in the ragged sheath can be seen to have passed into a general trope within peasant images, appearing alongside but not crossing over with *Karsthans'* flail. This suggests that in the period between the start of the Reformation and the Peasants' War we have two parallel images of the peasant: the "good" peasant as defender of the Gospel and the "bad" peasant as debauched reveller. The events of 1524-6 pushed these two notional peasants together, as the peasants drank looted wine from monastic cellars while petitioning the leaders of the Reformation to endorse their articles—something that can be seen in both the texts and images in the pamphlets of these years.

Within the reuse of Schöffner's Cless and Heintz in an edition of *The Sermons of the Peasant of Wöhrd* and three editions of *The Twelve Articles*, one by the pro-peasant Jörg Gastel, this apparently negative image was, like labels such as *Armer Konrad*, inverted and turned to serve the peasants in their construction of their self-image. It does not matter—and is indeed probably impossible to discover—whether these images were used at the peasants' request or not; what matters is that the peasants took them and used them in their own propagandising (a common tactic of inversion in peasant uprisings noted by authors such as Guha and Bakhtin in their discussions of the carnivalesque).⁷⁵ However, with the defeat of the Peasant Bands, post-1525 the sword in the ragged sheath again became subsumed within depoliticised images of

⁷⁵ See Jonathan Trayner, "The Monstrous Subject in the 16th Century: The Importance of the Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabia Peasants for Reconciling the Contemporary Image in Politics" (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2019).

peasant revelry where, even if artists and printers retained sympathy for the peasantry, any sense of agency was apparently lost.

Despite this, we can see the continuation of a sense of carnivalesque inversion within the work of a number of artists who used the trope in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Dutch artists such as the master of *The Prodigal Son* and Adriaen Brouwers produced images that had the potential to maintain the subversive elements of this motif of the peasant radical in the context of scenes of apparent worldly dissolution. It is questionable the extent to which these artists were consciously reflecting upon the moment when this motif was combined with that of the bookish “good” peasant *Karsthans* to create the images of 1525, and again there is a marked lack of agency in these images. However, the reappearance of the sword in the ragged sheath within the banner of the Basel peasants of the Swiss Peasants’ War (1653) indicates that the political and visual literacy of the wider population during this period was higher than it is usually presented, and that a symbol such as this one could remain within their socio-political consciousness despite its apparent negation by official culture. These are points that should be taken into account in future discussion on the images of the commons in this period.

Image List

Fig. 5.1: Melchior Rammingner, *The Divine Mill*, 1521 (Zentralbibliothek, Zurich, public domain)

Fig. 5.2: Bauernwehren, 16th century (copyright: Mühlhäuser Museen/Tino Sieland)

Fig. 5.3: Martin Schongauer, *Peasants on the way to Market*, ca.1471 (Metropolitan Museum, New York, public domain)

Fig. 5.4: Albrecht Dürer, *Three Peasants in Conversation*, ca.1497, (Metropolitan Museum, New York, public domain)

- Fig. 5.5: Hans Heselloher, *The Extravagant Peasants*, 1500, (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Einbl. I,5.)
- Fig. 5.6: Master v.x.g., *The Dance of the Foolish Couple*, 1475-1500, (Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, 65)
- Fig. 5.7: Pamphilus Gegenbach, *Bundschu*, 1514, (copyright: Stadtarchiv Bruchsal)
- Fig. 5.8: Paul Schöffler the younger, *The Twelve Articles*, 1525, (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 Eur. 332,38)
- Fig. 5.9: Johann Weyßenberger, *Against the Peasants*, 1525, (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/Germ.sp. 671 n)
- Fig. 5.10: Hans Wertinger, *August*, 1525, (copyright: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg)
- Fig. 5.11: Master of the Prodigal Son, *The Prodigal Son*, 1550, (copyright: KHM-Museumsverband)
- Fig. 5.11a: Master of the Prodigal Son, *The Prodigal Son*, 1550, (detail)
- Fig. 5.12: Karl Jauslin, *Flag of the Basel Peasants*, 1890, (Muttentz Museum, Basel, public domain)
- Or
- Fig 5.12: *Flag of the Basel Peasants*, 1653, (copyright: Kantonsmuseum Baselland, Liestal)

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