

Emancipatory History and the Critique of Anachronism

Discussant's response to the Western Political Science Association panel on "Thomas Müntzer and the German Peasants' War at 500 Years." Holy Saturday, April 4th 2026.

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It is a pleasure to respond to this fascinating panel from afar, here in Ontario, Canada, and it is all the more exciting to have been invited by O.L. Silverman to respond out of my strange subject position and research position – which I share with Alejandro Zorzin, another contributor to the special issue of *History of the Present*¹ – and that is, that I am both a scholar of Anabaptist historiography and political theology,² and a pastor in the Mennonite denomination which takes its inspiration from the Anabaptists, who were contemporaries with those who fought in the Peasants' War.³

In my capacity as editor of the Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies series with Pandora Press,⁴ I have had the pleasure of editing translations of works on the Anabaptists by Thomas Kaufmann, Astrid von Schlachta, and Hans-Jürgen Goertz. This gives me a particular angle of approach on the subject matter of this panel – not least because both confessional Mennonites and historians of Anabaptism have just come off a full year of celebrating the 500-year anniversary of Anabaptism and its signature action: the first adult baptisms – what Goertz calls “the greatest scandal of the Christian west.”⁵

The German Peasants' War and the figure of Thomas Müntzer present fascinating historiographical problems for scholars of the Anabaptist movements.⁶ Within the fields of Anabaptist history and theology there has been a sea change in the past half-century: first (1950s-1960s), confessional historians recovered the dignity of Anabaptism as a field of study and as a usable history for Mennonite pacifism (against those who reduced the Anabaptists to fanatics), and then the discourse entered a period of disenchantment

¹ Alejandro Zorzin, “Thomas Müntzer, in Latin America,” trans. Loren Goldman. *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025). Cf. Alejandro Zorzin, “Reformation publishing and Anabaptist propaganda: two contrasting communication strategies for the spread of the Anabaptist message in the early days of the Swiss Brethren” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82.4 (Oct 2008).

² I outline my work at: <https://maxwellkennel.ca/>

³ For information on my congregation see: <https://www.hmc.on.ca/>

⁴ For the 14-volume series, see: <https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B0C8W8Y7JZ>

⁵ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Conrad Grebel (1498-1526), Critic of Pious Facades: A Biographical Sketch*. Trans. Christina Moss. Ed. Maxwell Kennel (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2025).

⁶ See the introductory bibliographical comments in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary*. Trans. Jocelyn Jacquierey, Ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

(1970s-1980s) wherein social historians provided important correctives to the overly-idealized image of the Anabaptists that confessional historians had held, and then (since the early 2000s) a more complex vision of the history of the Anabaptist groups has unfolded that mediates between social, historical, political, and theological paradigms. One of the main features of the current, complex stage in the historiography of Anabaptism, is a change the status of the relationship between the Anabaptists, the German Peasants' War, and the figure of Thomas Müntzer.

Long has the violent figure of Müntzer loomed in the eyes of confessional Mennonites, who rejected his kinship with the nonresistant and pacifist Anabaptists. And long has the Peasants' War been something that confessional historians were invested in keeping separate from Anabaptism – despite the fact that key Anabaptist figures like Hans Hut were fighters in the Peasants' War.⁷ But more and more, the connections are coming clear between the Anabaptists, the German Peasants' War, and the figure of Thomas Müntzer.

For example, in her recent lectures on this topic in Winnipeg last year, Astrid von Schlachta, author of an authoritative history of the Anabaptists,⁸ writes: “Anabaptists sympathized with the political and economic concerns of the peasants and even fought alongside them in the Peasants' War. Prominent Anabaptist figures were involved in the peasant uprisings to varying degrees and for different reasons.”⁹ She goes on to say that:

From these examples, we can conclude the following about confessional historiography: The relationship of Anabaptists and the Peasants' War directly challenges the core of Mennonite beliefs, namely the topics of nonviolence and separation from the world.¹⁰

My current research concerns critical historiography and the question of what normative values guide the writing of history. In my home discourse of interdisciplinary Anabaptist and Mennonite studies, the norms have shifted toward critiques of the anachronistic projection of present categories onto the past, alongside a critique of the reduction of

⁷ See Gottfried Seebass, *Müntzer's Heir: The Work, Life, and Theology of Hans Hut*. Trans. Amalie Enns, with James Stayer and Victor Thiessen. Ed. Maxwell Kennel (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, forthcoming). Siegfried Bräuer writes in 2010 that: “Recent scholarship has confirmed an influence of Müntzer on central and south German Anabaptists, transmitted above all through Hans Hut, who was correctly labeled one of Müntzer's heirs by Gottfried Seebaß.” <https://www.thomasmuentzer.de/vita/en-thomas-muentzer/>

⁸ Astrid von Schlachta, *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century*. Trans. Victor Thiessen. Ed. Maxwell Kennel (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

⁹ Astrid von Schlachta, “Anabaptists and the Peasants' War” *Direction* 54.2 (Fall 2025): 213–228. <https://directionjournal.org/54/2/anabaptists-and-peasants-war.html>

¹⁰ Ibid.

religious motivations to social, economic, and political factors. Now, the discourse on Anabaptist history is determined by various *responses* to the idea that we should not simply see what we want to see in the past (critiques of anachronism and confessional ideal-type normativities). Recent responses include the *even-handed* notion that Anabaptists were both positive and negative progenitors of contemporary Mennonites (both fallen and exemplary), and the *hands-off* approach that withdraws from normative evaluation of the past and allows contradictions to stand.¹¹

My question for the panelists concerns these complex responses to historiographical critiques of anachronism. I wonder: is there a parallel between the problems that von Schlachta points out concerning Anabaptism and the Peasants' War, and the relationship between Marxist historiography and the Peasants' War? I do not know enough about Marxist historiography of the Reformation to know the answer, but I do notice the following patterns, and I have the following questions:

- **“The Scandalous Equality of the *Croquants* and *Va nu-Pieds*: Peasant Revolt and Genesis of Concepts in Seventeenth-Century France,” Silvestre Gristina**
 - I agree with Silvestre Gristina that “one must pay particular attention to those canonical figures and concepts who might not appear as objects of inquiry for political theory” because they conceal and can reveal a politics that lurks behind metaphysics, and because these hidden political moments are thresholds that periodize time.¹²
 - In response I will just say that I think we are in a period of history when the use of history is uniquely at issue because we continue to theopolitically periodize time without seeing the role of theology in politics, which partially funds the desire to see in the past what we want to see. We are always more religious and more secular than we want to think.¹³
- **“1525: The Insurgent Theology of the German Peasants,” Massimiliano Tomba**
 - Much of Tomba’s argument is premised on moving toward a complex freedom from teleology,¹⁴ which is essential inasmuch as it frees us from the limits that come from pre-deciding what we will see history. By delineating

¹¹ Cf. Maxwell Kennel, “Pacifist Historiography” *Angelaki* 30.4 (2025): 34-48.

“Pazifistische Historiographie,” trans. Leonard Horsch. *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 83 (2026).

¹² Silvestre Gristina, “The Scandalous Equality of the *Croquants* and *Va nu-Pieds*: Peasant Revolt and Genesis of Concepts in Seventeenth-Century France.” (draft, 2026)

¹³ Cf. Tomasz Wiśniewski, “Extension of the domain of faith: Maxwell Kennel’s *Postsecular History*.” *Rethinking History*, 1–15. (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2025.2604364>

¹⁴ *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025), 16.

tensions between “old and new laws,” “worldly and divine order,” and “secular time and eschatological time,” Tomba shows the profoundly *contingent* character of the Peasants’ War, revealing how our political concepts are made *polemically* rather than *naturally*.¹⁵

- But the larger question of teleology remains, even after we achieve some distance from the projection of pre-decided ends onto history. In a way, we cannot help but see the Peasants’ War as a *telos* for reflection on emancipation, with a tacit expectation that we will learn lessons from it. This is not a bad thing, but it is a thing to acknowledge: teleology remains, and the question is how do we configure and mediate origins and ends.
- And Tomba does acknowledge this in an especially prescient line from his book – which I am not done reading – that says: “Anachronism works in the present as scandalous temporalities, in the exact sense that the term *scandalum* had in Greek, that is ‘obstacle’ or ‘stumbling block.’”¹⁶
- But again, the question remains as to whether we will allow ourselves to be tripped up by the past or whether we will pick up the stumbling block of anachronism to throw at the feet of others, and how we might mediate between the desires for protection and polemics in both ...
- **“‘We Are Free and We Wish to Be Free’: Political Thought and the Peasants’ War,” Oliver Silverman**
 - For Silverman, the question is about a violent political order being forcibly disordered by peasants’ who were then pathologized as fanatics.¹⁷
 - In some respects, I follow the “political theology of ingression” that Silverman posits, and I see how the peasants’ bridged separations by ‘literalizing metaphor,’ but the dangers of anachronism and teleology still lurk here in the potential desire to relieve our present anxiety about the separation between theory and practice by seeing in the peasants a form of life where the two are not separate.
 - I want to be clear that this is not a risk that is unique to Silverman’s argument, but a general one for all of us who look to the past for the sake of the present – and that risk is that we will miss dissociations and disjunctions between theory and practice in the past because we want the peasants to be exemplars of embodiment.

¹⁵ *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025), 35.

¹⁶ Massimiliano Tomba, *Revolution and Restoration: The Politics of Anachronism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2025), 9.

¹⁷ *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025), 112.

- **“Thomas Müntzer in the Marxist Imagination,” Loren Goldman**
 - In his essay, Goldman is careful not to pigeonhole Müntzer, but is clear in saying that “he unquestionably presents a radically egalitarian and politically charged” vision of anti-authoritarian mysticism.¹⁸
 - Goldman notes our tendency to impose “fictive frames” on Müntzer’s multitudes, pointing out that Tomba’s enlisting of Müntzer for insurgent universality is a kind of reconfiguration of anachronism.¹⁹
 - As I read Goldman, I am reminded of the other side of the coin: when attention to complexity and usability of a figure like Müntzer can render emancipatory possibilities diffuse.
 - Again, I am not saying that Goldman’s framing stands in the way of emancipation, but rather that what remains after revealing Müntzer’s usabilities, is to articulate how to return to the responsible and emancipatory use of the past in a way that sustains critiques of those who enlist Müntzer as an ally for their purposes, but in a way that becomes self-critique or reciprocal critique.
- **“‘This Is My Body’: Thomas Müntzer, Prophetic People, and Embodied Sovereignty,” Anne Norton**
 - Anne Norton accords a democratic spirit to Müntzer, and although I see how Müntzer is a figure who was deeply anti-authoritarian and populist, I am not sure that he would have been sympathetic with democratic institutions or activities like the rule of law or voting.
 - Again, this is not to invalidate the democratic impulse that Norton sees in Müntzer (I see it too), but only to clarify that if our historiography is to be fully emancipatory, then we must continually allow history to emancipate itself *from* our categories (like democracy). Müntzer is a mystic with a hammer,²⁰ and he would likely take a hammer to our democracy just as much as to our authoritarian politics – but perhaps the point is that this movement of undoing is the most democratic of all...
 - So too with the notion that Müntzer is a figure of the body and embodiment. Surely this is true, and yet there is a deep distance between contemporary approaches to embodiment and the spiritual bodies of

¹⁸ *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025), 55.

¹⁹ *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025), 68.

²⁰ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “The Mystic with the Hammer: Thomas Müntzer’s Theological Basis for Revolution.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 50 (1976): 83-113.

Müntzer's time which were far more disposable *and* far more resurrectable in face of the eschaton, than we think of our own.

So, the question may become whether there is a cost to seeing Müntzer as proto-democratic or more embodied than we are? Are there things we would not be able to see in him if we did not also continually affirm that he would greet the present with iconoclasm?²¹

In general, the special issue we are here to discuss is framed by the desire for a “different historiographical approach” defined by “a history of attempts at emancipation that still need to be fulfilled.”²² I agree with this impulse, but the question, of course, is *how* does emancipation modify historiography?

I will propose the following, in conclusion:

A properly emancipatory history is one that can both draw something usable from the past into the present for the sake of freedom, while at the same time always allowing history to emancipate itself from us, from our desires, from our categories, such that it refuses to be used. Only when our vision of the past can carefully, critically, contextually mediate between the descriptive facts of the matter and the normative need for present emancipation, can we approach an historiography that would not be vulnerable to the violent uses of the past that one witnesses today on the far-right.

Tomorrow I will preach on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ at our Easter service at the Hamilton Mennonite Church. I do so, in hopes that the Resurrection can be a usable history for antiviolenent Christians in the present who desire new life, and at the same time, I see in all revolutionary, reforming, and resurrecting impulses, the need for *Gelassenheit*, letting-be, letting the past be the past without subjecting it to instrumental reason, possessive desire, or the theatricality of power,²³ such that we are always asking anew the question of what is living and what is dead in our inevitably anachronistic use of the past, and that we are trying to “think outside the cages,” as Michael Driedger is fond of calling historians of the Radical Reformation to do, even if that means questioning the category of the “Radical Reformation,”²⁴ and indeed all categories and forms of capture.

²¹ Cf. Berta Lask, *Thomas Müntzer: Dramatic depiction of the German Peasants' War of 1525 for the German proletariat of 1925*. Trans. Sam Dolbear (Rab-Rab Press, 2025).

²² Introduction, *History of the Present* 15.1 (April 2025), 6.

²³ Cf. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Anabaptists: A Comedy in Two Acts*. Trans. Lauren Friesen. Ed. Berit Jany and Maxwell Kennel (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2025).

²⁴ Cf. *New Directions in the Radical Reformation: “Thinking Outside the Cages.”* Ed. Geoffrey Dipple and Kat Hill (Leiden: Brill, 2023), and Michael Driedger, “Thinking inside the Cages: Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence,” *Nova Religio* 21.4 (2018).