

Because he is identified as a Ranter, his 'recantations' must be suspect. Ambiguity is held to typify their protestations.<sup>29</sup> Read in this light, his guilt is presumed and any assertions of innocence are to be regarded with suspicion. Moreover, the burden of proof has fallen on Coppe. Nigel Smith, for example, finds him wanting in that he denies accusations of immoral behaviour but 'with no supporting evidence'. *Copps Return* is held 'to read like the parody of an apology, as if Coppe is mocking the authorities'.<sup>30</sup>

My claim is that Coppe has been misread because he has been read against the overriding preoccupations of the people's history in the Communist Party Historians' Group sense, rather than against the context of seventeenth century concerns and, in particular, the Biblicalism of its Christianity. Moreover, I believe that that kind of misreading has clouded our view of the Ranter phenomenon as a whole.

There was no Ranter movement and consequently no savage repression. Frank McGregor recognised this as long ago as 1968. Quaker and Baptist 'evidence' of such a movement is suspect because the 'Ranter' was used by both movements, as McGregor has shown, to discipline their own members, to sectarianise them, and to distance themselves from unacceptable sectarian excess. And yet Quaker and Baptist sources provide the most prolific 'evidence' of a protean Ranterism. In this connection, it is worth remembering Thomas Edwards's depiction of Independents in 1646. In his account, they practised incest, bigamy, rape, adultery and fornication of all kinds. They were, according to him, notorious for their drunkenness. They neglected religious observance, were ostentatious in dress, wore long hair, laughed, jested and were generally frivolous. Were this not enough, an Independent had been heard to assert his liberty to worship the sun, moon, or a pewter pot if he saw fit.<sup>31</sup> Before the Ranters existed, they were prefigured in Edwards's view of the Independents, illusory as it might have been, and elsewhere.

These are projections of deviance which tell us more about moral anxieties and uncertainties, about the need to reassert moral boundaries, than they do about substantive historical reality. Sociologists and some historians are used to dealing with these categories of projected deviance and moral panic. There is a lurid, semi-pornographic, yellowpress sensational literature produced in some quantity in late 1650 to early 1651 which depicts Ranter orgies, promiscuity and blasphemy. Historians have, with the left hand, expressed caution about it while, with the right hand, using it as evidence of a Ranter movement. There is an absurdity here. We can link almost all of this output to a very small circle of printers and writers, of the Grub Street variety, producing their material rapidly