James M. Stayer. *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. Pp. x, 227.

James Stayer has been on the cutting edge of Anabaptist studies for more than two decades and is internationally recognized as a leading scholar in the field. His *Anabaptists and the Sword*, published in 1973, opened the way for a new appreciation of the heterogeneity of Anabaptism, while challenging prevailing assumptions about the normativity of nonresistance for the movement. Two years later Stayer was instrumental in formulating the polygenesis model of Anabaptist beginnings. Now in his most recent book he offers a new synthesis, one built less on static theological ideas than on the dynamic historical context and background against which Anabaptist ethic and praxis are best understood. Based on a scrupulously meticulous reading of the sources and on a judicious interaction with existing scholarship Stayer argues that Anabaptist social-economic ethics owed "a crucial, if indirect" debt to the broader, popular "communal reformation" that peaked in the Peasants' War of 1525.

The book divides into two parts. Three background chapters constitute the first part and provide a frame of reference for reading Anabaptist history from below. The first chapter provides a guided tour through the mine field of Peasants' studies as seen through the "Prism of Current Historiography" (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 documents radicalization by reform-minded pamphleteers of the Reformation message into the Social Gospel which became an intrinsic part of the commoners' quest for change. Chapter 3 challenges claims by Claus-Peter Clasen in the only social history of Anabaptism to date, namely, that no significant connections existed between the Peasants' War and Anabaptism. To the contrary, Stayer's empirical investigation suggests that many of the original Anabaptist leaders had a pre-history in the peasants' uprising and been decidedly shaped by it. He argues further that under the changed circumstances of the peasants' defeat Anabaptism continued in part the commoners' program. In this scenario the practice of community of goods appears not only as a form of apostolic primitivism based on a literal reading of Acts 2 and 4 but also in continuity with the aspirations of the commoners and their struggle for just and more equitable economic social relations.

Part Two begins with an analysis of the social-economic ethics of the branch of Anabaptism generally known as Swiss Brethren (Chapter 4). Against the older historiography, led by Mennonite scholars like Harold Bender, John H. Yoder and Paul Peachy, Stayer argues that the Swiss initially espoused the ideal of community of goods, although they never contemplated the abolition of private dwellings or held that the community should supersede the family as the basic social unit. Thwarted by circumstances the Swiss eventually settled for mutual aid. Chapter 5 traces the influence of Thomas Müntzer's anti-materialist spirituality on Central

and South-German Anabaptism. Leaders like Hans Hut gave a more radical expression to community of goods by the renunciation of private property in the name of spiritual *Gelassenheit*. This anti-materialist bias prepared the way for the more rigorous application of community of goods eventually practiced in Moravia. Chapter 6 is dedicated to a descriptive analysis of "war communism" in Anabaptist Münster. The Münster episode, long considered an aberration in the history of Anabaptism, seems less out of place in Stayer's account. Yet, compared with the practices of other groups, the communism which gained notoriety for Münster proved a corrupted form. Stayer blames this corruption in part on the continued influence of local urban notables in the Anabaptist kingdom and more importantly on the conditions created by war. He concludes that the administration of community of goods in Anabaptist Münster was determined more by pragmatic considerations arising from "the circumstances of the siege" than by the "dogmatic expression" found in the writings of Bernhard Rothmann. The last chapter concentrates on Anabaptist communal experiments in Moravia under the somewhat misleading title, "Anabaptist Moravia, 1526-1622: Communitarian Christianity in One Country" – misleading because Moravia, as Stayer knows, was never Anabaptist nor one country. Instead, this duchy of the kingdom of Bohemia represented a hodgepodge of feudal holdings and lordships in which the Anabaptists, even in areas of concentration such as the South-East, amounted to no more than ten per cent of the population. But the titular misnomer notwithstanding, the chapter provides the best overview yet of the development of the Anabaptist-Hutterite communities in Moravia. Compared to Münster, where the host community with its tradition shaped and limited the Anabaptist experiment, the refugee situation of Moravia permitted a more radical attempt at Christian community formation unencumbered by "the dead weight of the tradition-bound host community." The resulting "systematic weakening of the family as a focus of productivity and loyalty independent of the community" led, according to Stayer, to the triumph of the community "over the family" (pp. 144-145) as symbolized by the "pigeon coop" apartment buildings that became typical of Hutterite living quarters. There existed "no other such radically integrated community anywhere in sixteenth-century Europe" (p. 145). Under lay-artisan leadership the town-village distinction was broken down in these communities and the "social radicalism of the early Reformation lived on unabated."

Stayer's masterfully crafted reinterpretation of Anabaptist social-economics ethics against the background of historical circumstances will, no doubt, influence the scholarly discourse for years to come. For while the book represents a generational harvest of scholarship, it also reflects the newer sensitivities toward social history and anticipates new directions. For non-specialists and specialists alike this book opens new, fascinating vistas on the Anabaptist experience.

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