



THOMAS MÜNTZER: A HISTORICAL CATALYST IN GERMAN PEASANTS WAR

THOMAS MÜNTZER: ALMAN KÖYLÜLER SAVAŞI'NDA TARİHSEL BİR KATALİZÖR

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Abstract

In this article, Thomas Müntzer, the leading historical figure in the German Peasants War, is scrutinized in a different context within the perspective of the social history of political thought. By choosing the mainstream literature, this study has used some of the important pamphlets, letters, and secondary qualitative texts on Müntzer's manuscripts about both the German Peasants War and his theological assertions toward the Reformation process which began with Martin Luther's contributions to Catholic Church in 16th century. Examining social, political, and theological dynamics in the 16th century German Reformation process, this article has tried to find the potential answers to the basic question, which is how contradicted theological conflict between prominent Protestant doctrines led to revolutionary tendencies among exploited groups in German Reformation Process. In this respect, Müntzer is described as a historical catalyst who combines the revolutionary dynamics with the theological assumptions under the identity of a reformist cleric.

Keywords: *German Peasants War, Marxism, Feudalism, Thomas Müntzer.*

Öz

Bu makalede, Alman Köylüler Savaşı'nda öne çıkan tarihi bir aktör olarak Thomas Müntzer, siyasal düşüncenin toplumsal tarihi perspektifinde farklı bir bağlamda irdelenmektedir. Bu çalışmada, ana akım literatür seçilerek, Müntzer'in hem Alman Köylüler Savaşı'na hem de Martin Luther'in 16. Yüzyıldaki Katolik kilisesine yönelik katkılarıyla başlayan Reformasyon sürecine yönelik el yazmaları, broşürleri, mektupları ve ikincil nitel metinleri kullanılmıştır. 16. yüzyıl Alman Reformu sürecindeki sosyal, politik ve teolojik dinamikleri inceleyen makale, Alman Reform sürecinde önde gelen protestan doktrinleri arasındaki çelişkili teolojik çatışmanın sömürülen gruplar arasında nasıl devrimci eğilimlere yol açtığı temel sorusuna makul cevaplar bulmaya çalışmıştır. Bu açıdan Müntzer, reformist din adamı kimliği altında, dinsel varsayımlar ile devrimci dinamikleri birleştiren bir tarihsel katalizör olarak tanımlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Alman Köylüler Savaşı, Marksizm, Feodalizm, Thomas Müntzer.*

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Thomas Müntzer'in teolojik, ideolojik ve politik tutumu hakkında geniş bir literatür mevcuttur. Alman Köylüler Savaşı ekseninde değerlendirilen bu çalışmalarda ağırlıklı olarak Müntzer'in pre-komünist bir ideolog olup olamayacağı tartışılmaktadır. Her ne kadar, Marksizm'in önde gelen düşünürleri dâhil bu izlekte hareket edenler Müntzer'i erken dönem bir komünist ideolog olarak görseler de, ilgili literatürdeki Müntzer'in kimliği ağırlıklı olarak teolojik eksende tartışılmaktadır. Buradan hareketle Müntzer'in teolojisi ile politik düşüncelerinin bir arka plan olarak Alman Köylüler Savaşı ile olan irtibatı sorunsallaştırılmaktadır.

Politik düşüncenin sosyal arka planını çözümleyebilmek, ilk olarak verili durumun somut sonuçlar üzerindeki etkisini ölçmek, ikinci olarak da bu nedensel ilişkinin imkânını ve niteliğini görebilmek açısından oldukça önemlidir. Bu tarihsel çözümleme sayesinde politik ve sosyolojik kodların değişim ve dönüşümünde etkisi olan dinamikler daha net olarak anlaşılabilir. Genellikle Marksist Eleştirel Metodolojinin, 'ekonomik determinizm' olarak nitelendirildiği bu perspektif, verili durumun ekonomik altyapısını incelemeyi gerekli kılmaktadır. Tarihsel materyalizmin genel patolojisini ifade eden bu yaklaşım tarzı görüngülerin ontolojisini keşfedebilmenin temel gerekliliği olarak nitelendirilmiştir. Alman Köylüler Savaşı ise tam anlamıyla böylesi bir tarihsel çözümlemenin gerekliliğini gözler önüne sermekle beraber, bu kaotik ortamın bileşenlerini, aktörlerini sosyal, ekonomik ve politik arka planını ortaya çıkarabilme isteğine cevap olabilmektedir. Nitekim söz konusu olayın bir ekonomik reaksiyondan mı kaynaklandığı yoksa aydınlanma taleplerinin kolektif bir alana yayılmasının bir sonucu mu olduğu tartışması dönemselleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışma ise tam olarak böyle bir gereklilikten hareketle, zaten açmazla düşen bir kimlik tartışması ekseninde Thomas Müntzer'in Alman Köylüler Savaşı'ndaki etkisini anlamlandırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Müntzer'in Alman Köylüler Savaşındaki etkisine yönelik ana akım yaklaşımlar temelde iki kutup üzerinde toplanmaktadır. Bunlardan ilki teoloji-politik perspektiften hareketle, Reformasyon sürecinin kültürel ve sosyolojik çözümlemesini yapmakta ve savaşa neden olan ana etmenin Aydınlanma eksenli bir kolektiviteden kaynaklandığını iddia etmektedir. İkinci kutup ise tüm sosyal ve siyasal fenomenlerin doğasında olduğu gibi bu savaşlarında ekonomi-politik bir eksenden incelenmesi gerektiğini ifade etmekte ve Müntzer'in ekonomik eşitsizliklere teolojik varsayımlar üzerinden meşruiyet kazandıran bir ideolog olarak ele alınması gerektiğini ileri sürmektedir. İkinci perspektifin, Köylüler Savaşı'nın ekonomik gerekçelerine, bir başka deyişle kilisenin asimetrik vergi uygulamalarının köylüler üzerinde yarattığı yıkıma vurgu yaparak, Müntzer'in bu taleplere ses olan bir ideolog olarak tanımlanması gerektiği yönündeki görüşü, Marksist tarihsel materyalizmin bir sonucu olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Nitekim gerek Engels'in gerekse de Ortodoks Marksizm'in önde gelen düşünürlerinin ileri sürdükleri dikkate alındığında, Thomas Müntzer tam olarak bir erken dönem komünist olarak görülmelidir. Hatta Zimmerman gibi kimi düşünürler, daha da ileri giderek sınıf savaşımını tarihinin ilk temsilcisi olarak Müntzer'i görmekte ve sınıf tarihinin önemli kırılma anlarının Thomas Müntzer'in ideolojisinden ilham aldıklarını ileri sürmektedirler.

Politik düşüncenin sosyal arka planı üzerinden köylü isyanlarına yaklaşıldığında, köylüler üzerindeki ağır vergi yükünün yarattığı yıkımın izleri daha net olarak anlaşılabilir. Bu doğrultuda ikinci perspektifin kurduğu deterministik bağlamın daha etkili olduğu iddia edilmektedir. Nitekim Reformasyon sürecinin önemli iki teoloğu olan Martin Luther ve Thomas Müntzer'in gerek kendi aralarındaki teolojik çatışmanın, gerekse de Müntzer'in sivil ve kilise otoritesinin alanlarına yönelik fikirlerinin bu ekonomik gerekçelerle somutlaştırıldığı farkedilmektedir. Öyle ki çoğu el yazmasında Müntzer'in İncil'e referansla, köylü isyanlarını teşvik etmesi, sivil ve dini otoritenin konumunu tartışması bu nedensel ilişkinin güçlü yanları olarak görülmektedir.

Bu çalışmada böylesi bir tarihsel nedensellik ele alınarak, Köylü Savaşlarının ve bir bütün olarak Reformasyon sürecinin arka planı çözümlenmektedir. Bunu yaparak, hem Martin Luther ile Thomas Müntzer'in sivil otoriteye itaat veya itaatsizlik doktrinlerinin nedenleri açıklanmakta hem de ekonomik arka planın, teolojik referanslara nasıl meşruiyet kazandırdığı ortaya konulabilecektir. Bu sayede tarihsel materyalizmin teolojiye olan etkisi ve marksizmin 16. yüzyıldaki orijini daha net olarak anlaşılabilir.

1. INTRODUCTION

German influential cleric Thomas Müntzer (1491-1525) was born in Harz Mountain at Stolberg in Germany and affected radical reformation thought in the 15th and 16th centuries as an insightful predecessor of Martin Luther. Even though there was no sufficient knowledge about his life until 1520, some findings of his academic achievements in Leipzig and Frankfurt have created a theoretical base for further inquiries (Kuenning, 1987). When he worked as a pastor in Thuringia, he wrote some pamphlets and letters in 1524 and 1525. In the same year, he joined the battle in Frankenhausen and was executed with other peasants who participated in the rebellion to struggle against the princes' forces. He is remembered as the influential leader of the German Peasants War throughout the 16th century. Because of some political thinkers' efforts to position him as a proto-communist, he has also been described as a prominent name in the Marxist political tradition since the 16th century.

The philosophers who associated Müntzer's revolutionary thoughts with Marxian theory moved from Zimmerman and Frederic Engels's prefaces regarding the German Peasants War of 1525. Engels, for this linkage, addressed the different sides of the Medieval through the effects of Müntzer in his "Peasant War in Germany." Engels depicted Müntzer as a famous insurgent, hero of the German Peasants War, and an authentic representative of the material demands of the masses instead of illusions (Friesen, 1965). He positioned Müntzer as a unique example of the Feudal age by stressing, "he was no religionist, but he used the religion to promote his political aspirations among peasants." In addition to these theoretical assumptions, some academic works concentrated on the Cold War between communism and imperialism and showed religion's role in this conflict by illustrating the Post-Cold War era in Poland (Packull, 1977). Although Thomas Müntzer was commemorated as the Priest of the Reformation Period, his political opinion towards using a sword on behalf of God created deep cleavages in the spiritual realm. The primary differences between Luther and Müntzer stem from this point. Hence, the primary purpose of using religion in the Peasants War was seen as a logical consequence of ideological legitimization by Müntzer. Engels also tried to approach both the German Peasants War and Müntzer's effects on peasants and plebs in Germany through materialist conditions (Engels, 2018).

Basically, the political phenomenon in the Marxist paradigm is generally fed by material circumstances experienced by the human being through production relations. In this respect, Engels separated two distinct views on the church in the 16th century. In this historical interval, while the rising middle class demanded the 'cheap church' which was conceptualized by some clerics as discipleship without cost, the plebs and peasants who had nothing like a property desired a more egalitarian society and re-organization of the church. Engels, in this line, has portrayed the peasants with the head of Müntzer as the proletariat of the 16th century by departing from this event. According to some thinkers, Müntzer saw the church and its political *potestas* as a fictional world. This comment is retrieved from his words: "I was nothing less society without class differences, the state without private property and the absence of state supremacy against dissent figures in a society" (Friesen, 1965, p. 306).

For this reason, the imagination of "*The Kingdom of God*" in the Christianity context would be a dream, not a genuine demand for a further egalitarian society if Engels's thoughts on this issue were considered. In this regard, latterly, it was argued that the revolutionary thoughts of Müntzer guided the Anabaptist's resistance against both the principal and clerical authority during the Peasants War in 1525. However, Engels stressed that the failure of war with the head of Müntzer should not be seen as the failure of resistance to establish a better and more egalitarian society; controversially, it should be seen as a result of the immaturity of historical conditions (Engels, 2018 p. 34).

Similar to this argument, August Bebel not only differentiates the Peasants War from the patterns of communist revolts but also accentuates the main reason for the failure of the resistance. According to him, this reason is not based on building a common man to consolidate revolutionary consciousness among the masses. The building of the common man is another debatable issue in the literature on German Peasantry. In so much that, according to some, this myth should be evaluated within the perspective of the apocalyptic doctrine of Medieval Christianity (Jones, 2020, p. 466). Apocalyptic doctrine, in this manner, is accepted as the central axis of the German Peasants War to shed light on the secular dynamics of ecclesiastical struggles between the clerics in the 16th century.

Accumulated knowledge about the Müntzer has also created a research venue in which similar discussions have been carried out through the ideological sect of the war and its differences from the other

counter-movements mobilized throughout the centuries. In this line, Franz Mehring, who tried to analyze the Reformation Era in Medieval, took side with Karl Kautsky by claiming that, like the Revolt of Hutten, Sickingen, and French (1789), the German Peasants War by the head of Müntzer should be seen as a reactionary movement (Friesen, 1965, p. 312).

While Müntzer desired an egalitarian society for the sake of the Gospel; peasants, and plebs were fighting for the same society through a different purpose, which means material welfare. Zchabits, by quoting Müntzer's letter about the Mühlhausen, showed that the failure of revolt was caused by the selfishness of peasants because they did not fight against existing conditions for a more egalitarian society around shared interest (Friesen, 1965, p. 316). Nevertheless, in both cases, the fighting against the vulnerable and unfair conditions created by the corrupted secular and ecclesiastical elites during the 16th century was announced by the Müntzer himself. For this reason, it is emphasized that Müntzer should be accepted as a revolutionary hero since he responded to the demands of both peasants and plebs for a more egalitarian society.

Starting from these complicated points in the current debates about the essential identity of Thomas Müntzer, in the following parts, firstly the social background of the German Peasants War will be scrutinized by considering the historical materialist perspective and existing conditions of the Reformation Process. Aftermath, to discuss whether Thomas Müntzer should be evaluated as a cleric or leader of common rights, Luther's and Müntzer's thoughts on some ecclesiastical issues such as justification by God, re-building of the Bible, personal piety will be resolved. In the fourth section of the article, the political identity of Thomas Müntzer in the Marxian tradition can clearly be understood by demonstrating the further details of his letters in which Müntzer discussed his primary concerns about the spiritual matters and peasants' rebellion against the civil authorities. Thus the divergent paths between Müntzer and Luther, the essential theme of Müntzer's approach to the complicated issues during the Peasants War, and finally the exact reason for peasants' rebellion in this period will be aimed to be presented in the conclusions.

2. SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF GERMAN PEASANTS WAR

When one argues that the Reformation process started with the crisis of Feudalism, it is vital to show under what conditions it took place in Western and Eastern regions of Europe. In order to design a theoretical framework and historical background, the German Peasants War should be evaluated within this perspective. After the crisis of Feudalism in Europe, the administrative and hierarchical structure of the emperor and church immediately was transformed into a different pattern. While the crisis about the parcellization and fragmentation of monarchy was described as a risk in the Eastern region of Europe, in the West, it was not wholly valid (Wood, 2012). Germany and Italy were evaluated as different cases during the transition from Feudalism to centralized monarchy. In Germany, for instance, in the aftermath of the crisis of Feudalism, the Feudal lords transformed into local rulers instead of positioning themselves under the centralized monarchy like in other regions of Europe. During the transition, German Feudal lords penetrated their sword against the peasantry and local landlords. Thus, the resistance to local princes and other propertied rulers, including church clerics such pope, cardinal, and pastors, started to increase during this transition period. In this respect, according to some, the German Peasants War broke out since peasants' tax burden reached an intolerable level after the transition (Ozment, 1980).

The exacerbated conflict between the secular and spiritual authorities about collecting tax revenues from the peasants encouraged which authority must be obeyed by the people. Protestant doctrine at this point aimed to solve this mess with the prospering contributions of Martin Luther on the realm of swords. According to the general tendency of this doctrine, the church aims to declare its eternal authority by implying strong power in both secular and spiritual matters. However, in essence, the spiritual clerics in the Christian church consider their personal interests and positions against the centralized monarchy. To break this political pressure on the church authority, the spiritual authority of the church was considered to expense the secular realm by collecting more tax and *'tithe'* which was levied by the peasants. Thus, to separate boundaries of secular and spiritual authority, the Bible should be re-structured, and the church disintermediated.

During the crisis of Feudalism, the pattern of Reformation was understood differently. As a matter of fact, the reason behind this event was the excessive tax burden on the peasantry, which was mainly regarded as the fundamental revenue of princes by the emperors. The theological alteration affected the power relations among rulers and ruled. Reformist theologians such as Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and Thomas

Müntzer came to the fore as effective religious engineers in the Reformation Age (Lindberg, 2010). The common prejudice among these reformers against church authority stemmed from the predestination and salvation theory in faith. Despite the fact that the church surrounded its sword among these issues utilizing baptism and others, these reformers cautioned the people about the church's authority in baptism and salvation. This improvement fixed the history as a revolutionary moment in the Reformation history. The independent clerics and their descendants did not trust the sword of the church anymore; they, instead, started to advocate personal piety, the right to resist to church, salvation, and universal faith against Christian dogma. The primary cause that triggered the transformation of church authority was the role of Christian clerics, pope, cardinal, and pastors in achieving salvation for sin. This role, according to reformers, needed to be transformed from clerics to the sinners themselves. Therefore, the right of justification profoundly changed during the reformers' attributions to personal piety.

The theological aspect of the Reformation gained theoretical ground with Martin Luther's arguments about personal piety and re-interpretation of justification after he issued his great thoughts named *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (Matheson, 1989). He refused the clerics' assertions about justification and salvation at their hands and accepted every person's single will. However, the coming rigorous conflict between reformers, especially between Luther and Müntzer, was also caused by this salvation theory. While the Lutheran view accepted the obedience to secular authority in contrast to the church, Müntzer and Anabaptists rejected the obedience to secular authority (Kuenning, 1987). The most important cause which triggered Luther's theory of obedience to secular authority was the division of powers and usurpation around the secular authority. This innovative contribution to Reformation was considered as a challenge to the secular authority of the church. Luther rejected the jurisdictional authority of the church and accepted the sacramental authority as the most appropriate pattern for the political *potestas*. In his opinion, the jurisdiction should not be accepted as a means of baptism the people by the clerics since belonging of it to the faith. He also denied the envisaging of the public realm through the church's sacramental authority. Therefore the theory of "justification by faith" also confirmed the unconditional loyalty to the secular authority to abolish plenitude of powers. The boundaries for the secular and ecclesiastical power between the Catholic Church and Prince became disputable issue for the theologian after Christianity became the formal religion in Europe.

Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine were deemed to be prominent figures who tried to separate authority domains between the church and emperors. However, the existing conditions in Christian Rome were mainly different from 16th century's circumstances. First of all, the rising territorial cities simultaneously meant the fragmentation of the church and empire's swords on their own domains. Secondly, the landlords and peasants changed their status in this fragmentation process. Thirdly, one started to grasp that the division of powers between church and empire could not be limited to spiritual and temporal authority since the church's expansionary desires towards the empire's domain. For the third reason, Luther and his successors pursued the strict demarcation between the spiritual realm, which is accepted as belonging to the church, and the temporal sphere, which is considered to belong to the secular government (Matheson, 1989). Nevertheless, according to radical reformers, this demarcation is blurred because of the usurpation of power both by the church and secular authorities.

In Müntzer's perspective, the theory of disobedience to secular authority was legitimized by utilizing the centralization of power in the hands of monarchs. The Lutheran theory of obedience enabled it to secular authority since this strengthened the binary sword of secular authorities. Some monarchs those who came from England and Spanish, declared their role as "*defenders of the faith*." Thereby, the church delivered power corruption to monarchs, and the pattern of exploitation was not changed consequently. This exacerbated the theological conflict between Luther and Müntzer. Luther already admitted the right to resistance in his following treaties. However, the most radical interpretation of scriptures and the Bible was contended by Müntzer and Anabaptists. Müntzer and his descendants, named Anabaptists, considered that the Lutheran interpretation of Protestantism and Reformation led to the penetration of local princes on the peasants and deteriorated their material conditions. Wood (2012), in this respect, asserts that although the doctrine of obedience to secular authority prevented the mobilizing of peasants against local emperors, it could not prevent the corruption and mobilization of princes in the property and tax issues. Thus, the obedience theory created a different pattern of exploitation in this theological line. Although the Anabaptist's radical movements were encouraged by the Thomas Müntzer's revolutionary thoughts during the Peasants War, it is argued that after the execution of the Müntzer and defeat of resistance against civil authority,

Anabaptists rejected this theory and swiftly shifted towards the more peaceful position (Kuenning, 1987 p. 320).

3. MÜNTZER AND LUTHER WITHIN THEOLOGICAL VIEW

When he became the preacher of the church, Müntzer followed Luther as a protestant and reformist cleric. Although they shared some common theological concepts and ecclesiastical visions about Reformation, it would later be transformed into contrasted theology (Kuenning, 1987). This conflict reached its peak when they discussed the matter of civil obedience or disobedience to the secular authority. Despite Luther's theology that refers to fundamental obedience to the secular authority and accepting the moral, political and theological loyalty to them, Müntzer contradicted him by saying that civil obedience to the secular authority was unacceptable when the ruler was unfair and being corrupted.

Literally, the theological contradiction between Müntzer and Luther is similar in some subjects. Especially the issue of 'justification through God's grace' is common in both. However, another debatable issue that exacerbated the tension between them arises from the essential insight of the Bible on the fundamental aspect of human living. This, on the other hand, is based on the different meaning of the Bible when it was translated into the German language by Luther for the first time in Scripture's history (Packull, 1977). Aftermath, the transcendent essence of the Bible was considerably detailed, and as a result, the different interpretations of this text led to the conflict between reformist theologians. In Luther's interpretation, the dogmatic insight into the Bible remarkably was retrogressed by the church. Therefore, it should be re-interpreted according to the conventional essence of Christian Ethics.

Despite the well-known distinction between secular and sacred domains being accepted by Luther and Protestantism intrinsically, it can be traced back to Saint Augustine (Wood, 2012). Nevertheless, the decisive pattern of this dichotomy was intensely utilized within the Protestant doctrine. In Luther's view, while the spiritual domain is infinitive and more significant for personal piety and salvation, the secular domain is finitive and temporal. Additionally, the supreme values of humankind related to the doctrine cannot be integrated with temporal and secular issues that belong to human life. While the former could harm God's order as if the church corrupted it, the latter could not cause harm even though that deteriorated. In this respect, the separation of kingdoms as secular and spiritual is compatible with the Word of God and the Bible for Luther. However, the division of power in the first manuscripts of Luther instantaneously was altered when Charles V. came to power. To protect every sphere from any radical interpretation of the Reform movement, he cautioned the people about excessive reform demands to re-regulate church hierarchy and rebellion against it. In fact, this theological shift occurred when peasants' insurrection against the head of the radical reformist Thomas Müntzer. Luther condemned civil disobedience to the secular authority since he considered that as a heinous sin to God's will and advocated civil obedience to the secular authority because it envisaged supreme Christian virtue. In his opinion, civil authority derives from the main scriptures of the New Testament, and it needs to be accepted as a piece of divine authority for the sake of God.

After the German Peasants War broke out between peasants and princes in 1525, Luther's position on the division of powers – no surprisingly- immediately changed. He started to accept that the anti-slavery allegations of peasants are unacceptable and are not compatible with the main essence of the scriptures by saying, "A worldly kingdom cannot stand unless there is inequality of persons". He goes on, "I am opposed to those who rise in insurrection, no matter how just their cause, because there can be no insurrection without hurting to innocent and shedding their blood." (Kuenning, 1987, p. 316). Thereby, theological position of Luther changed during the Peasants War in favor of the prince and divine powers.

To sum up, Luther deeply criticized the church's secular authority on the people in the name of God and the expanding secular authority of chosen rulers against sacred power. By translating the main scriptures of the New Testament into the German Language, the ecclesiastical visions and apocalyptic doctrine on individual liberty and religious authority strictly were altered by him. But yet, he cautioned the people about the risk of insurrection against the spiritual domain for the sake of God since he admitted that it was unacceptable for the word of God and Christian supreme virtue. Thus, the Peasants War was seen as a hideous sin to God's will.

Müntzer's perspective on the apocalyptic issues needs to be examined through his manuscripts. The general line of these pamphlets is based on the idea of a corrupted church. Accordingly, Müntzer saw the church's current position as stolen by relying on the re-reading of the Bible himself. Müntzer constantly

stressed that the Bible's sentences contained a hidden meaning, and it was vital to look deeply at the essence of the sentence when examining critical details (Mjaaland, 2016, p. 158). This, in essence, shows the main reason for the different interpretations of the Bible by both Müntzer and Luther.

4. POSITIONING THE MÜNTZER IN MARXIST THOUGHT

Although modern communist revolutions are illustrated with upsurge class mobilization in the 19th century, for some Marxists, these can be traced back to earlier class struggles carried out in the 16th century. Accordingly, some leading historical figures had already launched a class-based revolution against existing political, economic, or religious circumstances. Thomas Müntzer, in this regard, is accepted as a proto-communist because his politico-theologist counter-arguments against the church's *potestas* led to class-based collective mobilization (Friesen, 1965). At this point, Zimmerman is considered a defender of this academic view. In his words, French Revolution in the 18th century was inspired by Müntzer and his revolutionary hero characteristic.

In general meaning, the Marxist paradigm presupposes that the historical line of human relations is based on the class struggle between propertied ones and those who are deprived of it. Therefore, the class struggles based on property ownership emerge in production relations. Contrary to widespread sense, some Marxists put forward that religion gained ideological importance among the proletariat and other exploited groups. But with the former Marxian thinker, Feuerbach, religion was accepted as a phenomenon based on the political ideology of the dominant class (Engels, 2018). Until the failure of labor revolts in Germany, this common sense remained a fixed assumption. Since then, with the contributions of Engels and August Bebel, who wrote about the Müntzer and Peasants War in Europe, in addition to material conditions that created class struggle, religion has been endorsed as an explanatory tool to grasp which kind of social mobilization carried out during the Peasants revolts. Following this paradigmatic alteration, Müntzer and German Peasants War have been scrutinized in light of the Marxist paradigm.

In his ground-breaking book named "Peasant War in Germany" (1850), Engels portrayed Müntzer as a real fighter of eligible demands, not spiritual desires in peasants' revolts (Engels, 2018). Müntzer cleverly used religion to promote his materialistic demands in establishing a more egalitarian society instead of using that as the main motivation source. Engels and the classical camp of Marxism have constantly emphasized that every social and political phenomenon derives from the economic base. With the Reformation put into the Catholic Church, the social demands from every step of societal segments have been expanded to all veins of the European territory. While the middle class demanded cheap church for them, plebs and peasants were more radical. They wholly demanded the restructuring of German society as arranged with more egalitarian precautions. The possible actor of these materialistic demands also arose from these exploited groups since plebs and peasants have no property and, parallelly, nothing to lose (Engels, 2018). For Engels, as a matter of fact, Müntzer was not an honest Christian; he was an atheist and fell into curiosity about Christianity, Heaven, etc. Similar to these outcomes, he went on and re-interpreted the Müntzer by contending that Heaven and Hell were non-existent and just like every humankind, Christs were also ordinary men.

Engels's thoughts on the German Peasants War and Thomas Müntzer were based on the 16th century and the political, social, and economic conditions that peasants and plebs were exposed in this time. In essence, Müntzer found the excessive tax burden on the peasants, who were deprived of property rights, as unacceptable and tried to mobilize them according to classical themes of the New Testament and other scriptures. He, therefore, confirmed that the religious tools could be utilized for further social mobilization in class conflict as a Marxian thesis. In this respect, the using of religion by Thomas Müntzer in the German Peasants War firstly means the re-considering of his theological aspect and loyalty to Bible and Christianity, and secondly, accepting as a catalyst for revolutionary solidarity among exploited peasants and plebs according to Engels and Zimmerman.

4.1. Was Müntzer Harbinger of Modern Communism in Medieval?

Engels also describes the extraordinary feature of Müntzer as similar to communist propaganda patterns in his revolutionary thoughts (Engels, 2018). In Thuringia (*Türingen in Turkish*), where headquarters and underground cells existed, Müntzer organized peasants' revolutions (Friesen, 1965). There were many thoughts on Müntzer's revolutionary attempts in Peasants War, but one of the most important of

these descriptions came from Engels and August Bebel. Bebel and Engels overwhelmingly emphasized that Müntzer and the Anabaptist movement should be illustrated with the communist revolution. However, one difference brought their impressions of the German Peasants War. While Engels explains the main reason of failure the peasant's revolution by saying the time was not ripe for a revolutionary attempt, Bebel contended differently on this issue. Bebel was convinced that the common man had no ability to carry out a revolution against existing conditions.

Karl Kautsky was another Marxist who defended the Müntzer as a communist hero. He argued that despite his failure in the Peasants War, he had revolutionary energy because he had the ability to politicize plebs and peasants against secular authority. Additionally, there are some interpretations of the communist identity of the Müntzer in the literature. Kniss (1988), in his short-sized article, introduced Thomas Müntzer as a forerunner Anabaptist (Kniss, 1988 p. 35). However, by going on, Kniss argued that the common purposes between Müntzer and Anabaptists diverged when they started to represent the third force in the Reformation process, in addition to the Catholic and Protestantism. The different interpretations of Müntzer's revolutionary attempts emerged from his letter to his brothers in Stolberg. Every Marxist concluded the different outcomes about the content of this letter. Kautsky, for instance, depicted Müntzer's letter as forgery and text that contained despondency among exploited.

The traditional interpretation of historical materialism, which mainly refers to that religion, law, society, politics, and other intellectual phenomena are shaped by economic base, has brought a debatable issue among some Marxist thinkers. Accordingly, in some historical intervals, as an intellectual phenomenon, religion played a major role as a historical force in determining economic base (Packull, 1977). For this reason, Thomas Müntzer and Anabaptists can be considered within this perspective. Müntzer's religious attempts to build the Kingdom of God on earth concurrently meant establishing a more egalitarian society triggered by the class struggle between feudal nobility and exploited plebs and peasants. Although the primary motivation that was behind the social revolutionary thoughts of Müntzer has been accepted as religiously, it might be useful to account for these events as an economic class conflict for some Marxian thinkers. This legitimization can be embodied within peasants and Müntzer's contradicted demands for purposed society. While Müntzer desired the Kingdom of God for both elected people against godless, peasants and others mobilized people against the church, and secular authority demanded more equal material conditions for them. Zschabitz was one of these thinkers who supposed that (Matheson, 1989). By stemming from Müntzer's letter to his friend in Muhlhausen, Zschabits advocated that despite this fact, revolutionary thoughts were shaped by religious manner; Müntzer unconsciously organized a proto-communist reaction against Reformation.

When Müntzer went to Bohemia in 1521, he published a pamphlet which led to strengthening of the perceptions about him by contending that he must be accepted as a real leader of the Hussite movement and supporter of the order which is compatible with the Bible's defended. In his pamphlet, he said that "all things should be in common and everybody must participate in the works according to their needs and abilities". This simultaneously depicts the real communist order that was portrayed by Marx and Engels. Biblical doctrines also confirmed Müntzer's communitarian demands at this point. Thus, accordingly, Müntzer was actually, a proto-communist of his age because he quoted egalitarian codes of society from Bible that were considered similar to Marxian classless society in which property belongs to the whole community in equal. Zschabits also stressed Müntzer's religion by saying he actually was an atheist but he utilized the religion's role in organizing and mobilizing peasants against the church and secular authority. Accordingly, Müntzer used religion to cloak his fundamental desire for revolution (Packull, 1977).

Additionally, Müntzer denied the prince's hegemony and demanded a more egalitarian society similar to a Marxist classless society in which people participate both in the production process and achievements commonly and obtained benefits equally. This actually strengthens the similarities between Müntzer's revolutionary thoughts and well-ordered design for the masses with Marxian classless society.

5. THE OPEN LETTER TO THE BROTHERS AT STOLBERG

In this part of the article, the first publication of Thomas Müntzer will be scrutinized to detect his radical reformation thought and its root in his manuscript when printed in the late or early summer of the year. Although this letter is not his first manuscript beside the "*Prague Manifesto*" it is the only available

document for researchers. But in his first unwritten essay, Müntzer portrayed the profile of a true believer according to Protestantism.

Stolberg is a city where Müntzer spent his childhood and youth term and Reformation's firstly entered a place in 1523 thanks to the clerics Johann Spangenberg and Tilemann Platner. When Reformation was put into Stolberg, the country was divided into two different groups as moderate and radical camps. While moderate camp gradually adapts themselves to immediate transformation in changing of *potestas* between spiritual and secular authority, radicals support immediate resistance towards secular authority by using violence if necessary. The significant aspect of this letter mainly lies in the Christianization of social and political life after the Reformation entered the Stolberg (Baylor, 1986). In this process, Müntzer tried to mobilize people's minds towards individual enlightenment.

5.1. Remarkable Outlines of Letter

In his letter, Müntzer cautioned his brothers (*elect*) engaging in rebellion for the sake of God. He, therefore, tried to avoid the possibility of rebellion against the Reformation process by preventing his brothers' spiritual motivations in positioning against Reformation in favor of Christianity (Baylor, 1986). When he lived in Allstedt he was appointed as a preacher and devoted himself to radical preaching. Soon after the Reformation entered the German peasant's and plebs' minds, he dedicated himself to collaborating with people against the religious authority of the church and advocated personal piety for everyone. In his theological manner, universalism was a key component of personal piety. Without considering people's personal race and identity he admitted that everyone started his life with the same religion "*even if one was born as Turk*" in his words. Thus, in his approach humankind was only separated as "*elect*" who represented real believers of god, contrary to "*godless*". This sociological classification inspired him to re-structure social segments which already exposed to the unequal economic intervention, in accordance with the celestial essence of the Bible (Baylor, 1986).

While drawing his letters, in an etymological sense, Müntzer used the more soft language, with regard to the scriptures and classical essence of the New Testament. The preferring such communication language was received by some that religion might play a major role in agenda-setting for revolution and Müntzer implemented this reasonably. Furtherly, this was so remarkable that Müntzer was admitted as the moderate reformer in the German Reformation process by some (Kuenning, 1987). But for others, using such rhetorical interpretation concurrently required every social mobilization in upsurging against exploiters (Friesen, 1965).

Although the significant details of this first publication by Müntzer contain the details about the longstanding conflict between the moderate Protestant camp and the radical one that later operated by the order of Müntzer's theological doctrine, it is blurred to what extent these conflicts similar to Marxian class description as proletariat and bourgeoisie. This, in turn, stressed the exploited groups in the 1500s when peasants were victimized by the increasing tax burden and unequal distribution of property ownership. It might be useful to argue that it does not exactly reflect the similar conflict and same production relations that the proletariat and bourgeoisie experienced after the 18th century in both England and France. This, on the other hand, has not shown the similarity between mobilization pattern and demands by peasants. Lastly, it cannot be understood as class conflict between propertied group and those deprived of it literally. Just like Engels's justification about whether existing conditions in the German territories were suitable for the emerging communist revolution, it should be noted here that, neither class typologies nor the maturity of the time does not seem compatible with the agenda-setting for a Marxian revolution.

6. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION: THE CRISIS OF FEUDALISM

The concrete situation is the main determinant for understanding what people did and how they got into these circumstances. Emperor Germany can be contextualized in this respect to investigate these fundamental questions. While the center of the kingdom consecutively was diminished and crystallized towards local decentralization, seniors and noble families had gained many significant authorities both upon peasantry and the center of the kingdom. Peasants, local servants, craftsmen, miners, and farmers counted as groups whose negatively affected by the local decentralization process. The decay of the kingdom towards local regions impoverished the power of the kingdom against local senior and nobles. Thus, these groups

arbitrarily used the political authority to dominate peasants and their economic interests for individual purposes such as their personal achievements in product and culminated lands. In this regard, clerics and religionism achieved local and political importance for many contradicted purposes. This contradiction, in turn, emerged because of different interpretations of scriptures and the Gospel as a result of reformation doctrine passed to West Germany.

The aforementioned details about power de-centralization in Germany could be accepted as important determinants in the direction of Reformation and interpretation by the protestant reformists. When the Reformation process began with Luther's popular *95 Thesis*, the Protestant doctrine was started to be interpreted by many different clerics and preachers with different meanings. The parcellization of the Emperor towards local principalities subsequently led to the fragmentation of Protestant doctrine at the hand of these reformists. While the first wing of this division was represented by Catholic- Conservatives who protect the symbolic values of the church, the second wing named Moderate- Urban Reform Movement with the head of Martin Luther rejected the role of the church in the secular realm replacing secular princes. The third wing with the head of Thomas Müntzer, on the other hand, refused all authority assertions by both church and principalities in both secular and spiritual domains by claiming that all power factions exploited the peasants through different legitimized sources. Thus, similar to the parcellization of state power from the emperor to local princes and nobles, the fragmentation of the reform movement derived from the same historical conditions.



This study does not require ethics committee approval.

Notes about the article

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics.

The entire study was conducted by the only declared author.

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