

## CHRISTOPHER HILL ON THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION: A SCEPTICAL DE-CODING OF SIGNIFICANCES.

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Christopher Hill is an eminent historian and hence I am pleased to provide a commentary on his paper concerning the significance of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. My response is to the version of the paper I was given to read and which was then delivered at the workshop, although I understand that a similar version was given to a more a general audience earlier in 1987. I propose to approach the topic largely obliquely--complementing Hill's paper for the most part, rather than criticising it in detail.

My reasons for this procedure are as follows. I take it that the idea of a workshop is to open up a range of issues. To devote time to the English Revolution invites above all else raising questions (however one tries to settle them) concerning its status as a revolution and the role in understanding that the predication 'revolution' might have. Hill's paper, perhaps because it was written with a different forum in mind, does not canvass such matters and I have difficulties in getting to grips with the way in which he does approach his subject matter.

It seems to me that there is always a certain difficulty with any argument of the Cleopatra's nose type, which ponders whether events X or Y would finally have come about without event 'A' preceeding them. In any case, (though this may well be for lack of space) we are presented less with networks of complex events and circumstances than with the occasional happening which is taken to symbolise a series of highly rarified abstractions, a series of revolutions of indeterminate identity and rather long duration; and these in turn are attached to the barely discussed English Revolution. The status of this revolution as revolution is simply assumed and it is from this which comes, ultimately, the capitalist empire of 'top' nation England. It reminds me a little of *1066 And All That* which ends with a 'A Bad Thing', America's becoming 'top' nation and with history coming to a stop.

Hill's paper is as noticeable for its simplicity of styles as it is for its innocence of generalisation. Yet it anticipates disagreement. Certainly some of the issues, on which Hill writes as if they needed no attention, require some direct comment, and as I am treating his paper indirectly, I trust that allusion to some of the earlier papers delivered at the present workshop, insofar as they illuminate the English Revolution *topos*, is permissible.

Unless they have the good fortune to be working with self-evidently "precious happenings" in the ambit of political celebrations, many historians feel the need to assure a sceptical audience that their subject matter is important. As the tabloid press has a rich repertoire of semantic exclamation marks 'Vicars tea party orgy shock horror drama' so the historian has an array of terms, that, although in some contexts useful enough (just as there are vicars who have tea parties), can become mere indiscriminate substitutes for the italic font, or the mega-letters of *The Mirror*. **Crisis** and **Revolution** are foremost among such terms. Sometimes, when combined, as David Christian has asked us to run them together to form a neo-Trotskyist revolutionary crisis epoch, it is like being asked to go to sea in a sieve. To be more fair (though I take it that is not part of my brief) words like revolution have shifted register from being descriptions to being, partly, and hence ambiguously, indicators of historiographical and political priorities. They indicate voice changes as does the use of terms such as

cause and idea. We call something a cause when a narrative ceases to seem self-evident; we specify the ideas of a text when some meaning needs explicating; what we call the idea is thus a hypothetical completion or refashioning of the material word. It seems to me that more attention needs to be given, as David Marr did, to our most immediately palpable subject matter--the role of revolution in historiographical narrative and political commitment. Like Christopher Hill we are all apt to jump past this to look at the revolutions whose ontological status we take for granted (we call that 'getting at the real issues'). It is a jump that is more justifiable for some case studies of revolution than for others.

We can probably agree that the expression the "English Revolution" - found initially within the context of Whig historiography - was originally something of a semantic exclamation mark, a promotional device. It could also be suggested that the expression has nowadays become so standardised as to be a harmless token in the currency of historiography, a short-hand phrase which is quite acceptable because it need not pre-empt too many interpretative options. I use the expression myself and need no persuading as to the interest and importance of the seventeenth century. However, among the interpretative options before us, there needs to be the possibility that no revolution in any modern sense of the word occurred then, and that whatever happened, Ireland and Scotland are as important as England in the matter. I mention Ireland and Scotland, because on occasion Hill does seem to conflate sixteenth-century England with Britain, which is to effect a geographical economy of scale that can most kindly be described as singular. Britain we were told needed no standing army because it was an island. But England was not an island and it is England for which Hill is providing an explanation. England shared a border with Scotland, a traditional enemy with very close links to France.

Whether the English Revolution was a revolution in a modern sense is a more complex issue, and I will touch on it below. The most obvious way to reveal it as being so, however, is to predetermine any analysis of seventeenth century events by using the anachronistic nomenclature of post-French and Russian Revolutionary discourse (to lift a useful line from Alastair MacLachlan's paper). There was, after all, a very large change in the nomenclature of social and political analysis in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This imposes a real barrier between us and the seventeenth century. Simply to impose our terminology of social relationships upon the seventeenth century is sleight of hand as it begs the question of whether there was a revolution. It is the way Milton was turned into a revolutionary yesterday by Michael Wilding's very interesting (but Hill-reliant) paper. We have here, in fact, a microcosm of the larger problem posited by Hill's paper. All this however, is hardly to touch on the full force of the expression the "English Revolution", or the full flavour of the literature generated around it.

One might start then, with the obvious reflection (explored in different ways by Soumyen Mukherjee and Alastair MacLachlan), that societies without revolutions (safely tucked up in the past) or lacking clear-cut foundational mythologies, suffer a somewhat impoverished repertoire of political rhetoric in the present. Where would the French, the Vietnamese and Americans be without a recent, hardcore revolution, Australians and Canadians might ask with a soupçon of envy? Where are the Southern Cross decrepit prison, geriatric warders and seven inmates awaiting transfiguration? If the significance of history *per se* does not always lie in the political present, with the dead dog of the past having to be wagged by the tail of political enthusiasm and necessity, as John Ward seemed to suggest had to be the case, nevertheless the significances of revolutions do seem to lie in the political present. Further, calling

something a revolution is often enough part of a strategy of accommodating it to that present. Its analysis can then become *ipso facto* a means of fighting our own political battles by proxy, in a mandarin code. This is an unfortunately escapist confusion of distinguishable activities (politics and historiography), activities which involve differences of impulse and criteria of judgement, if not always differences of net result. Frequently enough the confusion culminates in a houdini-like avoidance of genuine political activity and historiography; and yet it is nevertheless a manifestation of that perpetual and unstable interplay between notions of past and present with which both historian and myth-monger operate.

With respect to the English Revolution, the propensity to rely on and defend it as a genuine revolution is linked usually with models of explanation to which there is a very firm, perhaps even a prior, commitment; these models are contingently tied to understandings of twentieth century politics, and in turn are as much hortatory as explanatory. As a result, the attachment of the term revolution to, or its severance from, the period in question (stretching variably from around 1640) has a more than scholarly air, and some less than scholarly consequences. The whiff of hagiography and heresy is familiar enough to anyone who has worked at all in English seventeenth century history. There is a tolerable amount of pedigree polishing involved in the difficult enterprise of sifting through the detritus of the devious and diverse happenings of the revolutionary period. To abridge what one scholar has favourably said of Hill, his life's work, in one of its dimensions, has been a sort of "lest we forget" exercise on behalf of the prototypes of our own revolutionary age, a monument for the vanguard that was - the Levellers, the Baptists, Fifth Monarchy Men and the Ranters, all victims of the emerging bourgeois state.<sup>1</sup> The significance of the English Revolution lies for many where the Whigs would have put it: firmly in the present. And, as over the last generation or so the predication 'revolution' has been severely questioned from a number of directions and for varying mixtures of historiographical and political motivations, the possibility of the English Revolution being the Revolution that never was and was never conceived of, is a problem as much for political varieties of the present as for historical hypotheses about the past. Reaction against 'revisionism' (a dubious term nicely referred to by one historian as the liberal democratic alliance of British history) has begun to look as much a matter of threatened faith as historical understanding. This is what Hill's paper should have confronted. Instead, Hill postulates a very general causative sequence deriving from a phenomenon the identity of which is unexamined and unspecified, a sequence which is neither falsifiable nor verifiable, takes no explanatory risks and so must itself remain in the realms of faith. We are, after all, invited to contemplate the eighteenth century without the revolution preceding it, as a means of showing everything to be 'indissolubly linked', a problematic akin to the choreographic condundrum about angels on the heads of pins.

The problems surrounding the identity and significance of the English Revolution embrace the myriad personalities, the whole gamut of events, the opinions about events and the contemporary perceptions which may serve to explain the sustained conduct of those involved. I shall say a few words about each in turn, in order to convey something of the difficulties involved in ascertaining the Revolution's significance.

When we talk about the English Revolution, are we referring to the two civil wars fought during the 1640's, to the Cromwellian regime that followed, or to the whole period between 1640-1660? Or, are we extending the term to refer to the whole period between 1640 and 1690? We have various options, but I do not think we can take them all up as Hill seems to by turns. For the most part he seems to refer to the Civil Wars and Interregnum, but in referring to the ideas of the Revolution, we are given the

Levellers, Newton and Locke. Anybody who is good gets in. One can think of plausible reasons for the broader identification not least because that so called revolution of 1688-89 was manifestly in the shadow of the events from 1640-49. Yet if that is so, what is the status of the intervening period of Stuart Restoration? Is *that* the real interregnum? Or is the whole period perhaps a revolutionary crisis epoch? If so, we can indeed be assured that without it, there would have been no eighteenth century, but what concepts can we employ to help discriminate within the revolutionary epoch itself?

Revolution is a porous classifier and all revolutions seem matters of degree; we are rarely confronted with the sort of dramatic totality of transformation the word revolution might seem to suggest. The term, being variably applicable, leaves the way open, especially when submerged or nescient criteria are at work behind the loose talk, some of which can, in fact, be justified: as David Christian has indicated, loose concepts do play an important role in historiography. The scope and extent one assigns to the revolutionary identity then, has important consequences for explanation. The wider the chronological scope of the putative revolution, the more a diversity of possible causes can plausibly be put forward and the more, in the most trivial and indiscriminate sense, can a plethora of consequences be claimed. The narrower the scope of the Revolution, the more minor and personal causes seem adequate to explain 'it' and the fewer, perhaps, its long term portentous consequences seem to be. We can thus shift from Stone's hypothesis of a crucial decline in the ruling aristocracy, to Russell's notion of the war being a sort of traffic accident. We can see it as being little more than a constitutional hiccup, as Lamont describes one contemporary's analysis of it;<sup>2</sup> we can see it as 'indissolubly linked' (using Hill's ambiguous phrase) to Imperial Britain of the eighteenth century. This principal claim about indissoluble linkage does of course fudge the issue. On the one hand, the claim can be trivial; any two things can be linked with enough connectors of sufficient variety; historians are not dealing in any strict sense with factors, parameters or independent variables, despite the fantasies of cliometrics. On the other hand, 'indissolubly linked' can be an implausible bit of metaphysics, if we are expected to read that expression as referring to a causative chain. Apart from the logical difficulty of making sense of patterns of indirect causation, why start with The Revolution, why stop with Imperial Britain - remember Cleopatra's nose, think of Mrs Thatcher's hair - Thatcher and Scargill must fit into the picture somehow if a capitalist empire is a consequence of the revolution.

With respect to the question of who was involved, or opposed to whom, we are familiar with the notion of an alliance between merchants and Puritans, and there is some truth in this. But in recent years the importance of an alliance has been questioned, and even the usefulness of such abstractions as 'Puritan' have had doubt cast upon them. The Civil War might partly be explained in terms of regional differences, north and west versus south and east, or in terms of the national projection of entrenched local differences - and with very large proportions of the community wanting to have nothing to do with it at all. To cast a further spanner in the engine's social causation, John Adamson's work (as yet largely unpublished) seems to be suggesting that the Revolution was initiated through an attempted coup by the old aristocracy, a body of men who managed to keep firmer hands on the parliamentary warhorse than we have traditionally thought.<sup>3</sup>

If one turns briefly to perceptions of the issues involved and perceptions of what the 'it' [England and the seventeenth century] was, revolution or something else, again we see something which only partially fits with the traditional sort of perception Hill intimates. Tax and money do not seem to have been the major issues, and I suspect

another sleight of hand, or an attempt to preempt explanatory possibilities by referring to people as taxpayers, as if it has to be in that capacity that they reacted against the monarch. Charles' personal government lasted for a remarkably long time. He raised money in ways that were not uniformly considered unconstitutional, or sufficiently so to justify rising up against him; this is impressive, given his apparent lack of bureaucracy. Even the ship money case, which was certainly a *cause célèbre* did not stop Charles gathering his ship money with relative ease. Further, the town of Shrewsbury for example, in which there had been great hostility to ship money with consequent and considerable difficulty in its collection, proved staunchly loyal to the king throughout the war. It was Charles' religious policies which caused so much hostility and it was in terms of religion that opposition was organised and sustained, as Christopher Hill has I think come more and more to recognise. Ignorant of the alleged long term social causes of the revolution, contemporaries stressed with remarkable uniformity both the peace and good fortune of the realm before the outbreak of war and the issue of religion as vital in dividing people. This remains the case if one extends the revolution to include the dynastic change of 1688-89. The fear of Charles I's Romish fellow travelling and Arminian innovations (and, *pace* Michael Wilding, 'innovation' was not the seventeenth century equivalent of revolution) was played upon in the pamphlet literature of the 1688-9 revolution and the fear seemed to be justified in the religious policies of his sons.

Common to the whole period was the inherited vocabulary of late medieval and reformation religious politics and it was through such a resilient inheritance that debate was organised. It is from the survival of such debate that we have to extrapolate what was going on. Too often, I have found, historians have been tempted to read past the debate to the no longer extant social reality (highly euphemistic expression), describing the latter in the nomenclature of their own *ex post facto* models of social explanation and political commitment. To repeat, this is to establish the appropriate credentials of the Revolution or its central figures such as Milton, by conceptual sleight of hand. As I have recently argued at some length, such a stacking of the conceptual cards occludes the very sense of self awareness the study of history is supposed to promote. Yet, if given sufficient attention, the inherited vocabulary and the conventions of its use give a less than revolutionary, in the sense of forward-looking, aspect to political argument and apparent perception, and seem to intimate something less than a revolutionary transformation. Not surprisingly, when people reflected on the cataclysmic disturbances of the 1640's symbolically encapsulated in the dramatic execution of Charles, they were apt to predicate the events less in terms of revolution (a word available but not very significant in any modern sense) and more in terms of a sacrilegious rebellion - a mundane analogue of God's local difficulties with Lucifer; or conversely, as a continuation of the reformation.

In 1690 much the same political class continued to be in control as in 1640, using much the same range of intellectual materials. There was an expanding, remarkably literate, and interested population beyond the traditional confines of the political nation; but I think it arguable that the traditional ruling groups were perhaps only once seriously threatened from outside during the army discontents that briefly put the Levellers on the centre stage. On occasion, it was in the interests of the ruling groups to orchestrate a fear of intrusion for their own ends.

This is not to say that the events of 1640-1660 were not of great moment. I do not believe the over-awing shadows of civil war mythologies have yet been sufficiently stressed or explored; but it could be misleading to call it all a revolution if that implies assimilation to later revolutions and explanatory models that might be appropriate to

them. If one is in search of an historically adequate explanation, the word revolution might simply be redundant. To settle such issues one needs to distinguish the predications 'revolution/revolutionary' as referring to descriptions of intended and executed action on the one hand, from being retrospective abridgements of significance on the other. Such distinctions should do something to help avoid confusion between Russia, China, France and Britain--assuming confusion is what we want to avoid. At the very least, I think one needs to distinguish between a revolution *within* a political culture and a revolution *of* a political culture. The first, I think, can surely be said of seventeenth-century England, and the rare contemporary usage of revolution would support such a view; but the second specification of revolution, of a political culture, is much more contentious and one cannot point to the evidence of the former to support the latter. This being said, are we nevertheless left with the choice between the non-existent woods of Whig or Marxist mythology and the impenetrable infinities of the revisionist tree? Only a Queensland or Tasmanian logger would hope so. There are general historiographical categories distinct from political mythologies. The distinction, fluid though it is in practice, is partly a matter of the differing purposes that organising categories are made to serve, and by what standards one judges their use. There is certainly a good deal more involved than whether or not there is a political party around to monitor one's work--the only difference David Marr suggested in his "history and North Vietnamese propaganda".

One alternative between the wood and trees is the hypothesis John Morrill is developing that the English Revolution was the last of the Reformation Wars of Religion. This incidentally seems a much more fruitful key to decoding Milton's political poetry and I agree with Michael Wilding, that such decoding needs to be done. To use such a key in preference to those provided by post French revolutionary social theory is not necessarily to ignore the importance of social groupings and economic change, but it is to look less anachronistically through the other end of the telescope at the confusions and revolutions of seventeenth-century Britain. The consequence, for good or ill, is to undermine the accommodating strategy of using the word revolution. This is not likely to be popular and we might prefer to rescue the coinage of revolution by its further debasement. If we make such a move and the currency, as John Ward showed, can easily enough be debased, we will be paying a significant historiographical price, for revolution can be a useful concept; but the political temptations are strong, for as I have suggested, the significance of the English Revolution qua revolution is in the twentieth century.

Regardless of historiographical intention then, revisionism has political consequences, and it would be naïve of any historian, to think that some utopian synthesis of the extraordinary work of the last twenty years can easily be established or disentangled from what ultimately is more important for most people than the surviving evidence of the seventeenth century.

The point can best be made with reference to the reception of a recent study on the Ranters. For a long time now we have been familiar with the Ranters as perhaps the most avant-garde group thrown up by the Revolution, expressive of its most libertine and perhaps liberating possibilities, the hostility towards them indicative of the forces of conservatism. In a word, they have become part of a lineage of liberation appropriate to twentieth century struggles. Colin Davis has recently published a short study which argues that they did not exist, that as any sort of cohesive group they were a fiction created by those who had need of such enemies.

Now there are discernibly historical matters at stake in the Ranter controversy, such as the evidential status of surviving attacks on the 'Ranters' [as also of the tracts associated with them], and the slipperiness of theological doctrines and their variable transformation into principles guiding specific action--issues of widespread importance. Equally, there are distinguishable historiographical problems involved. How far have historians such as Morton, Hill and McGregor really portrayed the Ranters as a cohesive movement? How far is it legitimate to develop an abstract paradigm as a means of defining a class and then, as in Davis's case, using it to exclude all putative members from that class? What is really noticeable in the debate, however, is how all such matters have slid almost inexorably into contemporary political controversy and mutual accusations concerning the desertion of history for ideology--everyone seems to accept some difference between the two. For Thompson, Davis is anti-communist, an anti-historian of Thatcherite leanings; Davis replies with reference to Gulags.<sup>4</sup> Outsiders might think that this is both unnecessary and distracting, something analogous to the way in which the debate between Hobbes and Wallis over squaring the circle ended with recriminations about being disloyal to Charles I. But as I hope I have made clear there is more to the matter than that and it is indissolubly linked to the very presence of an English Revolution in our political present, a point precisely captured by Jonathan Scott's reply to Thompson. What we see is historians sliding, if not inevitably down a value slope, to use an expression of Charles Taylor, at least into the arm chair politics so common amongst historians of the seventeenth century. It is less the offensiveness of some of Thompson's remarks that is striking here than the falling away of the mandarin idiom for direct reference to our own world. Hill has always been too much of a scholar and a gentleman to grace his historical criticism with epithets such as 'Thatcherite', but the manifest merging of seventeenth century with twentieth century issues seems to me only the expected consequence of the sort of significance he and many more besides have traditionally built into the English Revolution. As I suggested, with the somewhat grand if arbitrary causative sequence Hill posits, there is little way of excluding Margaret Thatcher as one of the Revolution's significant consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore K. Raab, "Levellers and Fellow Travellers", *The Guardian*, 17 March, 1985, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> William Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millenium*. London, 2979, p.118.

<sup>3</sup> But see 'The English Nobility and the projected settlement of 1647', *The Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), p.567-602.

<sup>4</sup> Colin Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians*, Cambridge University Press, 1986; E.P. Thompson, 'On The Rant', *The London Review of Books*, 9th July 1987, p.9-10; and letters by Colin Davis and Jonathan Scott, *ibid.*, 17th September, p.4; and E.P. Thompson, *ibid.*, 1st October, p.4; Nigel Smith, 15th October, p.4. For a more measured critical response, see G.E. Aylmer, 'Did the Ranters Exist?', *Past and Present*, 117 (1987), p.208-19. [See also, now, Nigel Smith's book on the subject].