

THE PLACE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY REVOLUTION IN ENGLISH HISTORY

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What I want to do is to talk about and try to understand, how and why England, a second class power in the Middle Ages, became top nation in the eighteenth century and why in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries England did not go the way of the rest of Europe towards Absolutism. I think these are two versions of the same question.

My starting point is that in the sixteenth century England seems to have missed out. Whilst absolute monarchies were strengthening their power on the Continent, Britain was an island and did not need an army to defend its frontiers. Gunpowder, invented in the fifteenth century, led to a monopoly of state power inside the country and to a reduction of noble armies, but there was no national standing army created to replace them. A standing army is not only useful for repelling the enemy from your frontiers, it is even more useful for collecting taxation internally. If you have a standing army you can tax as much as you like: the government decides what it wants and the army enforces it.

In England there was no standing army, no internal police force of that kind and consequently no bureaucracy, which in the Continental countries existed mainly to collect and distribute the taxes. Britain being an island, its defence depended on shipping and its main economic occupation was trading. This was just at the time when, as Bacon pointed out, the invention of the Mariner's compass and gunpowder - or, rather, not the invention, for we took these over from the Chinese, but the development of the mariner's compass and gunpowder - opened up the world to European trade and European domination. In England, as we all remember, Henry VII and Henry VIII reduced the power of the nobility, and disbanded their gangs of retainers who used to terrorise the countryside. In addition to these people thus made unemployed, the population explosion of the sixteenth century, produced a surplus of agricultural labourers and together these groups formed the ideal personnel for servicing a mercantile marine. Thus, together with the destruction of noble castles, internal peace was established in England; internal peace and order, with a monopoly of such force as there was, and that was not very much, in the hands of the government. This internal peace in England, in the sixteenth century, occurred just at a time when internal religious wars and international wars were tearing the rest of Europe apart. This too helped English trade.

Thus in England, increasingly in the sixteenth century, you get the gentry taking a growing interest in sheep farming in the expanding cloth trade, and in developing English exports. On the Continent younger sons of the gentry could always find a career in the army. In England there was no army for them to find careers in; they had to find careers of their own and so they became seadogs; they took part in the exploration of America; they colonised Ireland in a particularly brutal manner, or occupied other colonies and some of them actually took part in trade themselves. Those who particularly wanted to go into the army had to take service with the armies of continental countries where there was always work for them.

It is not, therefore, surprising, I think, that, as an historian recently discovered, most of the members of the House of Commons in the Parliaments of James I reign, (and traditionally, of course, they were drawn from the gentry) had investments in overseas trading companies. What is even more interesting is that most of them became investors in overseas trading companies *after* they became MP's, not before. Thus Parliament acted as a sort of recruiting ground for business investment. Whereas in France and

Spain and the other great absolute monarchies the middle class, at this time, are buying their way into the bureaucracy, purchasing offices which were on sale, and so not investing their money in trade and industry, in England, the middle classes are not buying land or offices - which are not on sale because there is no significant bureaucracy - but are investing in trade. The nearest that England got to a bureaucracy in the sixteenth century was in the machinery of the Church: the court of High Commission was an organ of government repression and the Bishops were royal civil servants. There is at least a partial reason here for the rise of puritanism among the gentry, who did not much like the independent power of the bureaucratic Church machine.

Although England was doing very well economically, it nevertheless slipped behind as a state power. Just at a time when Spain and France are building up massive armies when Spain and Portugal are taking over the whole of America and South East Asia to establish world empires and when the Netherlands, a tiny little republic which had established its independence, is also taking a share of the world trade, England's merchants did not get the support from their state that Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch merchants got from their respective states. In 1588 England was very lucky to defeat the Spanish Armada and this was done almost entirely by private enterprise. The Government navy was infinitesimal; it had to take over the ships of its merchants. Similarly the colonisation of Ireland; the colonisation of the West Indies and North America, which are all starting at this time, were all done by private enterprise with the State taking a minimal part in it.

As we move into the seventeenth century the Thirty Years War breaks out on the Continent; the first European war in which all the major powers take part and in which Catholics and Protestants are at loggerheads. A Catholic victory at one time seemed probable, and this would have had very serious repercussions for England whose turn would have come next if Protestants on the Continent had been defeated. While all this was going on England was powerless because the government had no money. James I tried hard to make a virtue of the necessity of not being able to intervene by mediating, but neither side took him very seriously. England's inability to rally round the Protestant side in the 30 Years War between 1618 and 1648, offended the good Protestants and good patriots, who formed a large part of the English population.

There was also an economic problem. The 30 Years War caused England to lose markets for its main export, cloth, which used to go to North Germany and the Baltic countries, cold countries needing heavy English cloth. The way forward for the English clothing industry, everybody agreed, was by switching to the so called "new draperies", lighter cloths which could be sold to the Mediterranean countries. But in order to sell to the Mediterranean countries, English merchants had to be protected against Turkish, North African and other pirates who swarmed all over the Mediterranean and indeed were taking English ships in the Channel and slaves from southern English ports. The governments of James and Charles were not able to give the protection which English merchants thought that they ought to have. Indeed in the 1630's Charles I ordered English merchants to stay out of the Mediterranean because he could not protect them. So the road forward for the English clothing industry out of the grave depression of the 1620's seemed to be blocked because the government could not cope.

The final straw was the outbreak in the late 1630's of war between England and Scotland. The Scots - a miserable seventh-rate nation if we are classing England as second- or third-rate - invaded the north of England and the English government could do nothing to drive them out. State power had collapsed in England. In November 1641 the Venetian Ambassador said that England had become a nation useless to the rest of the

world and consequently worthy of no consideration. The people who had been offended by this feeble foreign policy, feeble because of lack of financial means, were Protestants, patriots and merchants: the three interests which coalesced to raise Civil War against Charles I in the 1640's.

Many people could agree on the need for stronger state power; for a stronger foreign policy; for a stronger economic policy: but who was to pay for it? Because the government had no army, and no bureaucracy, it could not collect taxes without the consent of the taxpayers. England was in fact one of the least taxed countries of Europe in the early 17th century. A further question arose: who was to control the policy even if taxation could be reorganised? Crown and Parliament made attempts at reorganization in 1610, in the 1620's, in 1640 and 1641; they broke down every time over vested interests. It was only after the revolution of the 1640's that the situation changed. Then, after the collapse of Charles I's government, his attempt in the 1630's to levy tax without the consent of the Parliament was declared illegal. The taxes, particularly obnoxious to the monied men, monopolies, impositions, arbitrary fines and so on were abolished, and were replaced by taxes imposed by Parliament; taxes which fell more on the landed class and the poor than on the middling sort as they had done earlier: the assessment, a land tax which lasted right through the 18th century, and the excise, a value added tax which lasted even longer.

And so, as a result of the financial reorganisation which was carried out during the Civil War, the English state had suddenly far greater resources at its disposal than ever before and thus was able to indulge in a quite new foreign policy and a quite new economic policy. The first outward sign of this came in 1651 when the Navigation Act was passed. This declared that the whole British Empire was a closed trading area, in which only English merchants were entitled to trade, and of course to take the profits of trade. Foreigners were excluded unless they had special licences for which they had to pay and which, as time went on, got fewer and fewer.

A Navigation Act was something which English merchants had wanted for a very long time - since the fourteenth century in fact - and it had been very seriously put forward by English merchants in the 1620's as a way out of the economic problems created by the Thirty Years War and the collapse of English markets in northern Europe. But the effectiveness of a Navigation Act, shutting foreign merchants out of the British Empire, would depend on sea power. The people who had to be shut out were the Dutch who were virtually monopolising trade with the British Empire (such as it was then), and, being a commercial republic run by merchants, they had a powerful navy. The English government would have been, before 1640, totally incapable of taking on the Dutch to wrest English trade from them. After the 1640's, after the financial reorganisation and after the passing of the Navigation Act in the middle 1650's, Drake's fleet swept the Mediterranean, cleared it of pirates, and made the Mediterranean a free area for British merchants to trade in. Oliver Cromwell's Western Design, led to an English invasion of the West Indies and the establishment of much more secure bases there with which to guarantee the independence of the English colonies in the West Indies and in North America. Three wars were fought against the Netherlands between 1650 and 1673 which effectively forced the Dutch to accept the exclusion of their merchants from the British Empire, and so established English trade not only with America and the West Indies but also with the East Indies and Africa as a monopoly of English merchants.

So the state in the 1650's, on the basis of this financial reorganization, takes over trade from private enterprise. Similarly in Ireland the private enterprise colonization which had got a certain way before 1640 was replaced by the extremely brutal conquest

of Ireland by Oliver Cromwell: the transplantation of large numbers of Irishmen and the establishment of Ireland as an effective English colony to be exploited by the English; this was also something the old monarchy had not been able to do. These new policies continued after Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. Charles continued the policies which his father had been unable to implement but which had been made effective during the Revolution. From 1660 onwards, Parliament was always extremely generous to the Navy but suspicious of any attempt by any government to build up an army - even that of William III, the King they had chosen themselves - because of the threat that an army would constitute to control of taxation.

In France, the financial power of the state was hampered by the lack of any long term public debt. Samuel Pepys had it explained to him in the late 1660's that a bank was incompatible with a monarchy because it would give too much power to the merchants. The Dutch republic had a bank: France did not. After 1688 England was no longer a monarchy in the sense that France was a monarchy and the Bank of England was established to crown the financial control of Parliament. Therefore England after 1694 had all the economic advantages of a republic with the social advantages of a monarchy. From the late seventeenth century English governments seem to have a limitless capacity to borrow from that section of the citizenry which was enriching itself equally consistently. Trade expansion was to a considerable extent self-financing, because revenue from customs and excise continuously increased to pay for the navy. None of this would have been possible without the financial reorganisation and the changes in the orientation of policy which were made possible by the Revolution. Before 1640, without a bureaucracy or an army, the government could only collect taxes through Justices of the Peace and their subordinates in the parishes, the parish elites, and this meant those paying tax had an effective long term control over what was paid. The 1630's had shown the impossibility of taxation without consent for more than a limited period. Those who assessed and collected and paid the taxes were given a virtual veto which, after the Revolution, took the form of Parliamentary control of taxation; no taxation could for long, be collected without this representation.

An economic transformation which takes place in the seventeenth century is also, I think, relevant. At the beginning of the century England is a country which undergoes starvation in bad seasons (like the 1590's, 1620's) and England is a corn *importing* country. By the end of the century, English corn production has changed so much that England is a corn *exporting* country in normal times and in years like the 1690's, when there is starvation in France and in Scotland, there is no starvation in England. One of the main reasons for this was the abolition of feudal tenures in England. Abolishing feudal tenures gave big land owners their land in absolute ownership. Feudal tenures originated from the days when all big land owners were tenants-in-chief of the crown and they held their lands of the crown in return for rendering military service when the King wanted it. They had to turn out with their tenants when the King needed them in time of war. This had ceased to be a military reality since landlords no longer turned out with their tenants to fight for the King: they paid for the King's wars through taxation. One survivor of this system was wardship in the Court of Wards. Every tenant-in-chief (and that meant all big land owners), owed military service to the Crown, but if he died when his heir was a minor, his heir could not render military service to the crown, could not lead his tenants into battle. When that happened the crown resumed - in theory - the lands of the tenant-in-chief. People died at a much younger age in the seventeenth century than they do now and it was very rare for any big landed family to go for three generations without one of the inheritors dying when his heir was a minor. In the seventeenth century this meant in effect that the estate was handed over to some impecunious courtier, some hanger-on at the court, who entered on to the estate and made

mayhem in order to make as much money out of it as he could before the heir reached his majority. And so he would cut down all the timber on the estate, plough up lands or not plough up lands according to his own convenience in getting quick profits; he did not act with any view to the long term profitability of the estate.

The abolition of feudal tenures and the Court of Wards, meant that land owners were freed from this periodic, irregular death duty which had disastrous effects on any long term agricultural planning. It became possible to plan agricultural production and and this is the basis of the agricultural prosperity of England in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the so called Agricultural Revolution. Land owners were now secure in their ownership and could plan and invest, and they did invest very heavily in agriculture in the second half of the seventeenth century. Agriculture prospered and England became a self-sufficient agricultural country.

Another aspect of the abolition of feudal tenures is that it established absolute ownership for big landowners, that is, for the gentry. Tenants were dependent on their lords and could be evicted when their lords wanted to evict them. There was a big movement in the 40's and 50's to establish equal security of tenure, equal absolute property rights, for tenants or copy-holders. This movement was supported by the Levellers and many others of the radicals and it was defeated. When the abolition of feudal tenures was confirmed by the Act of Parliament in 1660 a specific exclusion was made of any claim for copyholders to have equal benefits in their land. And so big landowners got their land in absolute ownership and the power to evict their tenants whenever it was convenient for them in the interests of enclosure, consolidation, or reorganisation of their estates. They had an absolutely free hand, and this contributed very much to their agricultural prosperity although not exactly to the prosperity of their tenants.

Thus, by the end of the seventeenth century agriculture has become what Edward Thompson called the greatest capitalist industry; feudal obstacles to the development of that industry, landlord rights over rivers and so on, which were to delay capitalist development in France and other Continental countries, have gone. It was done at the expense of the poor and resulted in greater differentiation in the countryside between landlords and those who were ceasing to be yeoman tenants and becoming agricultural labourers. This is combined after 1660 with increasing legislation against traditional customary rights of the peasantry; against traditional rights to collect wood, and new and very fierce game laws: a redefinition of traditional customs to the disadvantage of poor tenants. There had been statutes against depopulating enclosure in the early seventeenth century; all were repealed. There had been many pamphlets attacking enclosure in the 1640's and 1650's; there were none after 1660. Expropriated tenants contributed to the pool of wage labour available.

Now the dates of all this are interesting. The abolition of feudal tenures was under discussion from the early seventeenth century. There was bargaining between crown and Parliament on it in 1619 but this broke down because agreement could not be reached on the compensation to be given to the crown. When Parliament had won the Civil War against the King in 1645 one of the first things it did was to abolish feudal tenures. When, eleven years later, in 1656, it looked as though the Revolution was going to stabilize under a Cromwellian monarchy, the first Cromwellian Parliament passed an Act confirming the abolition of feudal tenures. Then, the House of Cromwell collapsed and in 1660 Charles II came back.

In April 1660 the House of Commons received a declaration from Charles announcing the terms on which he proposed to return to the throne of his fathers; and agreed to accept it. The first business they turned to after acceptance was the confirmation of the abolition of feudal tenures. That was the importance they attached to it. It did, I think, transform English agriculture. But the price that was paid for the Agricultural Revolution was the defeat of the movement for security of tenure for copy-holders and small land owners; that is the defeat of any idea that the Parliamentary franchise might be extended from the gentry to humbler mortals and the defeat of any idea of law reform for the benefit of the middling and poorer classes which Levellers and others had put forward.

The Restoration of Charles II confirmed the power of landlords. It established liberty for landlords, but liberty for landlords was accompanied by something like slavery for their tenants. When Charles II came back in 1660, England had been ruled for twenty years without King or House of Lords; without Bishops and without the Privy Council. The Restoration was in no way a reversion to what England had been before 1640. The instruments of absolutism which Charles I had used, Star Chamber and Court of High Commission, were not restored; the Church was no longer independent of Parliament but was brought under its direct control. In the 1620's and 1630's the only theorists supporting absolutism had been the clergy; in the 1630's, in the years when Charles I ruled without Parliaments, Archbishop Laud and his bishops played a leading part in the government of England. But fifty years later the first people who opposed James were the Seven Bishops who refused to read his Declaration of Indulgence from pulpits. The Church had changed from being a valuable and powerful instrument of an independent monarchy to being subservient to and under the control of Parliament. 1688 simply confirmed this situation. Revolution had occurred in 1640 because Charles I could not any longer rule in the old way, having lost the confidence of the taxpayers. Charles II announced that he did not intend to go on his travels again and so he did not attempt to upset the accommodation arrived at with Parliament. James II was more foolish and he travelled.

Another point that I must just mention briefly is the commercial revolution which took place under the protection of the Navigation Act. The Navigation Act created a closed imperial economy in which English merchants were able to buy cheaply abroad and sell at a profit either at home or abroad. The colonial area was expanding steadily all the time. Sir Josiah Child, who knew about these things, said "None can deny that the Act of Navigation has and does occasion building and employing three times the number of ships and seamen than otherwise we should do". Under the Navigation Act there developed a vast re-export trade in colonial products to Europe; new processing industries, sugar and tobacco and so on, and a stimulus to home industries to produce goods for the colonies, again within a closed monopoly market. All this prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution.

The merchants' wealth derived very largely from the institution of slavery in the colonies. Davenant in the later seventeenth century said that "the labour of a slave in the plantations is worth six times as much as the labour of an Englishman at home". Six times is quite a large figure if you think about it. Behind the English Navy the plunder in Africa and Asia is going on, England is muscling in on the slave trade, and by the early eighteenth century has a near monopoly of it. Do-gooders like the Society for Propagation of the Gospel owned slaves in the West Indies, and would not allow them to be instructed in the principles of Christianity lest they should get ideas above their station.

Before 1600 England had been culturally dependent on Italy, France and Spain. No Englishman had any significant reputation at all on the Continent. In the scientific revolution England lagged behind Italy and France. Bacon was a prophet without honour in his own country until the 1640's and 1650's. Then came the reorganisation of science which led to its institutionalisation in the Royal Society, and to the appearance of Sir Isaac Newton, by general consent the top scientist in Europe. Professor Eisenstein, who knows about the press in this period, suggests that the free press in England and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century was the only guarantee of the survival of science. Galileo was persecuted in Italy; Descartes left France for the Netherlands, because he could publish there more comfortably, and Newton congratulated himself that he had been born an Englishman. If England had not followed a different path from that of the Continental absolutist, regimes, the emergence of modern science might have been very much delayed. The ideas of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century are the ideas of the English Revolution - of the Levellers, of Hobbes, of Harrington, of Milton, of Locke and of Newton. Nobody in 1640 intended any of these things; there were no revolutionaries and at most three republicans in the Long Parliament. But Parliament did not make the Revolution. The sort of people who began the Civil War either thought in terms of going back to the days of Good Queen Bess, idealised as a time of consensus, or they wanted to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. Neither of those is what actually emerged.

I oppose the view of those of my historian colleagues who say that all these changes would have happened anyway; that the ideas were about long before 1640; that people were agitating for a Navigation Act and wanted financial reorganization; that the abolition of feudal tenures had long been discussed and that the Revolution was just an unfortunate accident, which temporarily interrupted trade. I think that this is all totally fallacious, I do not think it could possibly have happened. First, pre-Revolutionary governments just had not got the financial resources to pay for the vast navies which were needed to enforce such changes in policy. They could not have got the money without the agreement of the taxpayers, and they could not have got the agreement of the taxpayers without a total reconstruction of government such as the Revolution brought about. But even if they could have got the money they would not have had the will or the desire to forward a commercial imperial economic policy. When there were quarrels between the Dutch and the English East India Companies in James I's reign, James had representatives of the two companies brought before him, and tried to negotiate between them. He did not regard his job as being to forward the interests of the English East India Company against the Dutch, who were establishing a monopoly in the East Indies, as any post-1640 government would have done; rather James thought these sordid affairs of trade were something he could perhaps benignly mediate in. The *idea* had been there for a long time: the idea of a Navigation Act since the 14th century; the idea of abolishing feudal tenures since at least the early 17th century, but a revolution was needed to put them through. To say that they would have happened anyway is really saying that 1660 *did* restore the monarchy as it had existed before 1640. So my argument (for you to think about and no doubt disagree with), is that England was the country of the first political revolution; this led to England becoming the country of the first industrial revolution, and this, in turn, led to her becoming the first world empire. The three processes are, I think, indissolubly connected.