

THE ORDER AND THE MEMORY:  
SOME PROBLEMS OF THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

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There was no Jean Jacques Rousseau or Karl Marx of the English Revolution.

Englishmen and women did not know that they were participating in a revolution: the word acquired its modern sense only during and because of the Revolution itself. There had been earlier revolts in the Netherland and in France, but these were regarded by contemporaries as religious or nationalist risings. In the absence of revolutionary ideology, or of consciousness of participating in something called a "revolution", men had to improvise. The nearest thing they had to a guiding text was the Bible, translated into English only a century earlier and believed to contain the solution to all problems.

The simple Welshman Arise Evans tells us that before he came to London in 1629 "I looked upon Scripture as a history of things that passed in other countries; but now I looked upon it as a mystery to be opened at this time, belonging also to us". He thought that the book of Revelation foretold the English civil war, and that Amos VIII and IX set down all that had come to pass since the beginning of the long Parliament. If the Bible told you what was going to happen, this could determine course of action. In the sixteen-forties men and women were everywhere reading and discussing the Bible, asking it questions. Some found good revolutionary answers. "In Christ is neither bond nor free". "The truth shall make you free". "Overturn, overturn, overturn", cried the prophet Ezekiel. "These are the men that have turned the world upside down" it was said of the Apostles. Biblical myths were re-interpreted, Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, the elder and the younger brother, became for many radicals the ruling and the exploited class. "Cain is still alive in all great landlords", said Gerrard Winstanley. But God loved Abel and hate Cain: the time Would come for Cain's overthrow. "True religion and undefiled", declared Winstanley, "is to let every man have land freely to manure" (i.e. to cultivate).

This would be the millenium, a golden age. "We expect a new earth as well as a new heaven", said William Erbery and the Quaker Edward Burrough. The saints would rule over a decent egalitarian society. "Whatsoever can be named of a common or public good we mean by the kingdom of Christ", proclaimed a Fifth Monarchy Manifesto of 1661. Structurally not much would change. A tract of 1652, *The Coming of Christ's Appearance in Glory*, concluded that "nothing is more important than questions of trade, to strengthen the position against all eventualities". Business as usual.

So belief that the Second Coming of Christ was at hand had to do duty as a revolutionary ideology, for Oliver Cromwell no less than George Fox. Men could justify fighting against an anointed king only by claiming the higher authority of God: regicide came to be justified in biblical terms too. "No laws", said the prosecutor of Charles I at his trial, "are so righteous as those which it pleased God to give to his elect people". The elect, Cromwell said, "knew the mind of Christ". But who are the elect? How can you be sure? We are reminded of members of the Communist Party in eastern Europe, who knew what the God of history wanted.

But millenarism had its defects as revolutionary ideology. Precise dates had to be given: men expected the Second Coming at latest in the sixteen-fifties, on what seemed then to be sound scholarly grounds. But when the fifties came and went with no agreement on policies among the revolutionaries; when Charles II rather than King Jesus sat on the throne, the millenarian ideology collapsed. Men had to accept that Christ's kingdom was not of this world. They previously claimed that God had called the Long Parliament, had created the New Model Army. But then God must have willed 1660. Providential history no longer seemed to give the right answers. There were splits among Russian Marxists in the nineteen-twenties as they disagreed in interpretation and policy-making. But the splits, as in England, arose from objective social facts: ideological explanation was added. The disagreements could not *destroy* the ideology, as the failure of the Second Coming to materialize destroyed revolutionary millenarianism. After 1660 dissenting religion had to separate God from revolutionary politics. The very radical and bellicose Quakers had looked forward to the rule of the saints ("of whom I am one", George Fox declared ominously): they were the last defenders of military dictatorship in England. But in 1661 they proclaimed for the first time Peace Principle which we now associate with Quakerism. All dissenters had to stress their respectability, their peaceful intentions.

A further reason for the swift oblivion which appeared to overtake the memory of the English Revolution was England's prosperity during the second half of 17th century, based on the achievements of the Revolutions - the Navigation Act of 1651 (confirmed 1661) which set England on the path towards domination of the world trade, the strongest fleet in the world which the Revolutionary governments had built up, the conquest of Ireland and Jamaica, the latter marking the beginnings of England's world empire. England soon won a near-monopoly of the lucrative slave trade, and through employment of slave labour profited greatly by sugar, cotton and tobacco. The abolition of feudal tenures (1645, confirmed 1656 and 1660) enabled capitalist and yeoman agriculture to solve England's food problems. From corn-importing country at the beginning of the 17th century England had become a corn-exporter by the end of the century. In the fifteen-nineties and sixteen-twenties there had been starvation in England; in the sixteen-nineties, when France and Scotland experienced famine and starvation, England did not. Some prosperity trickled down.

Remember that in the first half of the 17th century there had been genuine and justified fear of international Catholicism conquering Europe in the Thirty Years War and destroying England's Protestant independence. After 1660, that threat no longer existed, and England was enormously more powerful to resist any revival. Meanwhile the radical dissenting interest had become the trading interest. There was a revolution in science, too. James I had no use for Francis Bacon's scientific ideas: they came in to their own only with the liberation of the press and discussion after 1640. The nucleus of the Royal Society gathered in Oxford during the revolutionary decades, with government backing: Charles II wisely became patron of the Royal Society, whose secretary was John Wilkins, symbolically both Oliver Cromwell's brother-in-law and post-Restoration bishop. Thanks to the Royal Society England now led the world in science. "Newton is unthinkable without the English Revolution", says Margaret Jacob, who knows.

So, though the English revolutionaries were not aware of what they were

doing, they created a model for later revolutionaries: Americans in the 18th century, as Bridget Hill shows. The French discussed English regicide in 1793, and were always anticipating the emergence of a Cromwell until they got Napoleon. Henceforth it was the English model which was copied and to which revolutionaries conformed. Girondins and Jacobins, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, reproduced the divisions between Presbyterians and Independents in the sixteen-forties.

The ideas of the English Revolution passed into the European enlightenment through Locke, Toland and others; the biblical criticism of the sixteen-forties and fifties was summed up by Samuel Fisher in 1660 and passed on via Spinoza. There was a Scottish Enlightenment: none was needed in England. But the ideas of the Revolution had been bowdlerized and sanitized before they were adopted in Europe. Sceptical-libertine restoration drama draws heavily on the ideas from the revolutionary period, but it mocks Puritan "enthusiasm". The caricature image of a "Puritan" which many historians have adopted is false, more applicable to the 19th-century nonconformists than to 17th-century Puritans. A genuine Puritan like Bunyan tells us that a teetotaler is "a man who walks after his own lusts, not after the spirit of God". William Whately, the great Puritan, who became "the Roaring Boy of Banbury", thought that adultery dissolved marriage and should lead to divorce: Milton was an advocate of divorce for incompatibility of temperament. But many dissenters came to live up to the "Puritan" image. Excluded from political life and from the universities, losing their gentry supporters, they became narrow, provincial and inturnd, holding on to the letter of the Bible, forgetting the daring intellectual criticism of their 17th-century predecessors. Bunyan remembered the *Pilgrim's Progress* the bad characters are obsessively described as "gentlemen" and "gentlewomen", except where they are "lords" and "ladies". Antichrist is a gentleman, the whore of Babylon "this gentlewoman". Bunyan's fierce class consciousness restricted his readership to the lower classes (and Americans) in the 18th century.

After 1660, revolutionary writers of the forties and fifties were censored, either by the state or by religious sects into which Restoration government forced dissent to organize, if they were to receive any toleration. Quakers censored the early writings of their leaders, so that the radical social policies and belligerent international crusading aims of the sixteen fifties have been recovered only by modern historians. Harrington's ideas influenced later 17th-century political thinking, but his republicanism and his advocacy of "an equal commonwealth" dropped from memory. The *Memoirs* of republican Edmund Ludlow were printed after 1688, but his millenarism was hushed up. Toland and Addison sanitized Milton, turning him into a orthodox "Puritan" poet. Critics these days stress Locke's "radicalism", but ignore the fact that he never defined the word "people" which plays so large a part in his thought. Sometimes it means parliamentary electorate, sometimes the men of property. In the sixteen-nineties, with greater press freedom, Ludlow, Sidney, Rushworth and Selden were published; but not Levellers, Diggers or Ranters. Censorship by market forces proved far more effective than government repression in limiting printed memory.

The radicals were forgotten by the political nation, but their memory may have survived underground and in vulgar circles such as those which read Bunyan's works. Radical traditions perhaps lived on in America, where there were fewer gentlemen and Anglican parsons.

Many English academics dislike revolutions, which they associate with the wicked continent and other foreigners. They prefer the tradition of English freedom slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent, of muddling through and conquering an empire in a fit of absence of mind, the elevation of 1688 over 1649. "Revisionist" historians to-day argue that the mid-century Revolution was an accident with no longer-term causes or consequences.

By contrast, in the U.S.A., France and Russia the tradition of revolution was cherished; Independence day, Bastille day, and November seven were celebrated. England knows no such national holidays. The English Revolution left behind no resounding revolutionary and republican phrases for posterity to quote. The sixteenth-century, and especially regicide, were disowned and hushed up: the compromise of 1688 was glorified; 1649 obliterated from memory and after a century of sermons sanctifying King Charles, Martyr. As Ellen Ginsburg Migliorino shows the American constitution and statements by the Founding Fathers were there to help the abolitionist in their campaign for the rights of slaves. When 18th-century English radicals and 19th-century Chartists looked back to the 17th-century, they were invoking much less respectable and acceptable traditions.

But we can trace vestiges of these surviving traditions. The radical Whig Thomas Hollis gave a copy of Winstanley's *Law of Freedom* to Henry Fielding. In the seventeenth-century a group of Welshmen were discussing Winstanley in Welsh valley - an interesting place and an interesting date. But in the war against the French Revolution and Napoleon, dissent could be rallied against godlessness; and French imperial competition threatened the economic basis of English prosperity Blake supported the French Revolution, and looked back to Milton and continuing the antinomian counter-traditions. This proclaimed the true freedom of beggars (*The Jovial Crew*, 1641, *The Beggars' Opera*, 1728) against the greed of capitalist society and a state which protected property at the expense of the lives of the unpropertied. Popular sympathy often went with outlaws, pirates, smugglers, highwaymen. Ballads tell us that Dick Turpin took from the rich to give to the poor: he recalls the "highwayman" God with the whom ranter Abiezer Coppe threatened the rich in 1650.

Other relevant points have been made in papers given to this conference. D.W. Blight observed that the American civil war "was not yet disengaged from a mythological social memory" - from white supremacist historiography and a popular memory that has "obliterated" the black experience of "libel, innuendo and silence". That describe the fate of English radicals after 1660 when they mocked as religious "Enthusiasts". Marco Sioli asks "Where did the Whiskey rebels go?". We must ask where the English radicals went. Many emigrated - to Ireland, and especially to the West Indies, and to North America, where some prospered. The Whiskey rebels went into the wilderness, some participating in frontier independence movements which helped to forward land redistribution. In England there was no geographical focus like the frontier; and the agricultural revolution brought better conditions for the fortunate among the English peasantry. Others benefited from imperial trade and conquest.

Antonio De Francesco stresses that Napoleon's imperialism helped to win acceptance of his government by many former Jacobins. We may compare the continuity of the navigations act and of Cromwell's foreign policy by post restoration

government. The dissenting interest was the London moneyed interest and the latter was deeply committed to the empire. England's fleet - the most powerful in the world from the sixties-fifties became largely self-supporting through the continual rise of customs revenues. Many things conspired to obliterate the memory of the radical Revolution.