

The Century of Revolution

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Hill is a Marxist historian. What does it mean? Marxism can mean many things. There is Marxist philosophy as a variant of Hegelianism, Marxist economy wedding socialism to politics, and finally Marxist history. The first two tend to have been overrun being too dogmatic, the third may still have relevance. One would like to think that it means taking an intrapersonal point of view. History is not the history of kings, individual action counts for very little, the most a historical actor can do is to ride the tides of history (incidentally a view Bismarck ascribed to). The task of the historian is to identify those tides, the deeper currents that drive the events of history. To be more specific, the Marxist historian cuts through sentimentality and focuses on economic issues and the invariable stratification of classes such as give rise to. The classical Marxist speaks about class-war, how the interests of one class clash with that of others, and how a final synthesis is brought about by historical forces. An even more Marxist view is to recognize general laws of change, and even to see history as the working out of a pre-conceived plot. Instead of following the confusion of minor narratives, of which history abounds, one identifies the master narrative. Such a view of history, very Hegelian by the way, has come into severe criticism, especially by Popper, who coined the concept of 'Historicism' the better to batter it to pieces. Finally, being a Marxist historian may also mean being a moralist. That means taking sides, in particular siding with the poor and downtrodden, regardless or not of whether being convinced that the meek will indeed inherit the earth.

Hill focuses on the 17th century in England. More specifically the time between 1603, with the ascension of James I, and concluding with 1714, the death of Queen Anne and the Hanoverian succession. This century brought about a political revolution, ushering England from the Middle-Ages into the Modern world, the culmination being the glorious revolution of 1688. A peaceful revolution without bloodshed, velvet ahead of its time, but nevertheless as momentous as the French that occurred almost exactly a hundred years later. While democracy was introduced in ancient Greece, modern democracy, meaning Parliamentary democracy evolved in Britain. A democracy that has been the inspiration to us all and provides the blueprint to be exported worldwide as the supreme example of state-hood, not only the optimal way of governing but in fact the only morally and technically permissible. Or so we should want to think. This idea of the Glorious revolution is indeed due to Macaulay, the quintessential whig historian, and to a large extent I suspect it still holds its sway. The purpose of Hill's book is to qualify this picture, in particular to present it as an unplanned development being the conclusion of different responses to a series of political crises. No one willed it, it just came about (not unlike the acquisition of India?).

For that purpose his presentation is rather rigid. True to the historians propensity for linear packaging he chops up the period in four different sub-periods. 1603-40 (The reigns of James I and Charles I), 1640-60 (The Civil War and the Cromwell protectorate

- Interregnum), 1660-88 (The Restoration) and finally the post-Stuart period of 1688-1714. Each part consists of similar chapters, first a narrative of events, then chapters on economics, politics and constitutions, religion and ideas, and more often than not a concluding summary. The method is supposed to be didactic, and as such somewhat dry. There is little focus on personalities, although a great many names are paraded, and there are very few anecdotes. Thus the palliative of so called human interest is almost entirely absent, the reader is treated not to history as a species of nostalgia and day-dream, but to history as a technical subject, in particular how it relates to the evolution of human governmental institutions.

In 1603 we are still in a way in medieval times, or rather at the very end of the epitome of such times, namely the renaissance. Religion is important, not only as spiritual guidance, but more to the point as political power. A monarch holds power by the divine right of God. To us this seems a very crude and primitive idea, but at the time it was taken not only seriously but for granted. James I, the first Stuart and the king of Scotland certainly adhered to it, and even found it worthwhile to formulate it (which could indicate that it was subject to some doubt). His son Charles I was an even more ardent supporter of the idea. In that they did not differ significantly from Elizabeth I, her siblings, her father and grandfather. And we tend to agree with those of the past, only with James and Charles do we tend to censure them, and this is of course only by the advantage of hind-sight. It is important to realize that neither of those kings came to grief because they held such out-dated views, but because their incompetence (especially in the case of Charles I) in dealing with the realities of the political situation. James I was a clever man, Hill admits, his son on the other hand was a vain fool¹, and like most fool, obstinate to the point of inflexibility, a cardinal sin in politics. He was not unopposed, there being a Parliament representing a class of people with property and wealth, and with interests not entirely congruent with that of the Monarch. So what were the bones of contention?

First and foremost religion. Or so we were taught. Reformation came to England with Henry VIII who defied the Pope turned himself into the head of the Church and expropriated its wealth and ransacked the monasteries and abolished its tradition, an act paralleled by Gustavus I in Sweden at roughly the same time. And just as in Sweden among his descendants there were a tug of war between those of the new religious order and those wanting to bring back the old faith. The Anglican church effected a much less radical breach with the rituals of the Catholic church, than did the Protestant state churches in Scandinavia. Still the animosity was at least as strong, and the political repercussions more violent. Catholicism was seen as Papism, in other words its proponents were suspected of divided loyalties at best and being beholden to a foreign power at worst.

Secondly there was the economy. The economy was still rather primitive, feudal so to say using Marxist language. A king held his power by disposing of favors. Typical such

¹ who had the court painter the Flemish van Dyck paint himself and his family in the most beautiful way which no doubt has contributed to the rather romantic way with which we may be tempted to view him. I remember reading the Three Musketeers, in which I think I was for the first time introduced to the specter of the execution of the King. I in particular remember the word 'remember' of which I had no idea of its meaning as it was left untranslated, and which consequently intrigued me for years before I finally learned its rather prosaic connotation.

favors being monopolies, be it monopolies of industry or trade. The economy being not only primitive but vital, (as bourgeoning processes tend to be), with the rise of a wealthy class of traders, there were strong pressures of changing it to a more liberal one, before such changes had been more clearly formulated by theoretical hindsight in the next century. A vital process defines interests. The interests of the trading class were not necessarily congruent with those of the king. It is true that a smoother, more flexible monarch, more corrupt so to speak, would have eased matters and deflected a head-on-collision. But Charles I made no compromises, instead he offended sensibilities, especially religious ones (a particular sore point being the appointment of Laud, the archbishop with a great latitude of exercising political power².), and blundered. A parliament was summoned, only to be summarily dismissed. One thing led to another, and then there was Civil War for almost ten years.

Hill makes an important point that one should not view the conflict as between an absolute monarch and his oppressed people. The people the members of parliament represented, and to a large percentage actually constituted, were the wealthy and propertied. Their rhetoric might sound impressive, but as the author reminds us, words carried different connotations back then. 'Liberty' meant a freedom from obligation, be it taxes or interference in business³. Just as in ancient Greece, democracy only applied to the elite consisting of those with a vested interest in the affairs of the state, i.e. those with property. This obviously left a large portion, maybe as much as three quarters of the population outside the political sphere altogether. A large mob of people were seen not as citizens but as subjects, not significantly above the station of cattle, only proving to be more of a liability (as exemplified by the poor-aid administered by local communities, based on charity rather than entitlement.).

The execution of the king was indeed a momentous action, which once committed had consequences which were irreversible. It was not so much the private person that had been beheaded, but the notion of a king. Kings had been killed before, but then by other kings, internal rivals or external conquerers. Then it had been a case of true royalty ascending to its rightful position, and when that had been in doubt, there had been a very specific agent on which to lay the blame, and it had of course been seen as a crime. This was different. By executing the King the idea of divine right had been defied. But on what basis had it been defied? What made it legal? There is in any effective government a need of a sovereign, of someone having the last say. To defy divine right you need to come up with something even more basic. This might strike us as easy and obvious, but that is deceptive. Basic law was proposed as a solution. A law more basic than the written code of which the latter is but a mere haphazard interpretation of the former. This proposal might strike us as an obvious answer, but if you stoop to think about it, it is even vaguer than the notion of a divine right, which at least through rules of heredity can be transparently interpreted. In fact during a Parliamentary debate at the time someone actually challenged a speaker as to what he actually meant by basic laws. No one had bothered to define them, and for good

² He was of comparatively humble origins, illustrating the rather common fact that commoners often were taken up by kings and put to serve important functions much to the ire of their social superiors

³ The Swedish word 'frlse' as applied to the two estates of the nobility and the higher ecclesiastics respectively, means 'liberated' i.e. from taxes.

reasons too, any such attempt would of course have given rise to different opinions and dissenting voices. Better to leave the notion undefined lest it lose its power to unite. So the unanswerable challenge by the member was met with the only possible retort. Namely that anyone who does not know and understand what the fundamental laws are has no business speaking in the Parliament. And of course there is an undeniable logic to such a retort.

Thus the ultimate basis making the actions of the Parliament legitimate was metaphysical in nature. About metaphysics we may be vaguely aware, but we cannot pin it down, and thus not think of it in any manipulative way. The success of the execution was ultimately what legitimized it.

But there is a need for sovereignty, be it not exercised by a king, it will be exercised by someone who is not king in name only, as Burke pointed out in connection with the French Revolution a century and a half later. One such figure rose to prominence. He was not called king but protector, and as such he was offered all the insignia that belongs to a king including that of a coronation. But only his sense of propriety prevented him from accepting them all. When he suddenly died, the protectorship went to his appointed son, but the office being so tied to the person of Cromwell did not survive him for long. And then there was a reaction resulting in a restoration of the Stuart dynasty⁴.

The twenty years between 1640 and 1660 had been an upheaval, and a traumatic such during which England turned itself inwards, neglecting any active foreign policy, its passivity during the Thirty Years War being the most noteworthy⁵. But it had also been a period of experimentation, not only political and economical with repercussions on art, philosophy and above all on science. New ideas such as egalitarianism were propagated by the so called Levellers. The alarming idea that everyone irrespective of stature was entitled to a good life and had natural rights was being formulated. The Levellers lost out in the political struggle and thus had little direct influence on current affairs, but of course their ideas reverberated, and have repeatedly arisen anew in history, gaining more and more momentum and acceptance. Protestantism is foremost about rebellion, and even if Luther himself became rather reactionary as he grew old, the source of the inspiration he conveyed was his youthful admonishment to think for yourself and to accept no human authority. Consequently Protestantism spawned a lot of sects, another manifestation of radicalism. The Catholic Church accepted no dissent, every attempt of such were condemned as heresy and with dire consequences to boot. One need not remind the reader of the Inquisition and also the radical vigil that the Protestant secession provoked. Also for a Protestant state church, sects constituted a threat, and draconian measures were taken, yet an already splintered organization which had risen out of the need to rebel does not possess the same mandate of coercion, and the multitudes of heretical views, although constricted could never be fully suppressed. Hence as a lasting legacy of the experiment of the Interregnum was an awareness of religious toleration, ultimately to be encoded in law.

⁴ A more modern and ruthless action would have been to wipe out not only the head of the dynasty but all his descendants as well, in order to forestall any future claims.

⁵ Initially this can of course be explained by the lack of enthusiasm for such adventures the kings may have felt. Certainly there could have been no religious zeal to inspire. As Puritanism was getting the upper hand, the Thirty Years War was winding down.

The Restoration was obviously a counter-movement and to some observers a regression. A regression or not, it was not a complete volte-en-face. As noted above the execution of the King had irreversible consequences, monarchy had by it suffered an irreparably loss of prestige. When the son Charles II was invited to assume the throne, it was more or less on the terms Parliament had thought fit to impose. Thus the ultimate basis for his power was not a mandate given by God but by a human institution. Charles II probably understood this. Like his grandfather he was lazy but clever, perhaps more interested in the pursuit of his own pleasures than those of the State. His brother James II were more like his father. Inflexible, stupid, and short-sighted. Consequently his reign became brief and he was ousted only three years later. The kings had not really performed according to expectation, their dalliances with Louis XIV, had threatened to make them the puppets to a foreign dignitary. And besides that French King was not really that interested in his poor relatives. A misreading which above all James II was guilty of.

The twenty years of the Interregnum had had its irreversible effects. The economy had grown and become more complex, monopolies of industry had been abolished, although monopolies of trade still remained for some time. The political influence of bishops had ceased, never to be revived again. In short a more complicated state had the need for a more developed government. The Parliament had been instrumental in evolving such an improved bureaucracy. The monarch simply became an add-on without really an independent base. To use an old cliché. It had been overrun by time.

The ejection of the last Stuart became a matter of course, hardly traumatic, more farcical than tragic as the last inept actions of the deposed king showed. Although he was succeeded by his daughter Mary, that was part of a package including the ascension of her Dutch spouse, who took a rather active part in foreign policy and above all military command, the subjection of the Irish being perhaps the most important of his actions.

The War of the Spanish Succession established England as a major European power. This power was based on naval supremacy, which in particular allowed a monopoly of trading. Everything that went to England or out of it had to be carried on English bottoms. This protective measure had implications not to be underestimated. While the Dutch had earlier been a most dangerous trade rival, and in fact once coming close to seizing London, the end of the 17th century saw a reconciliation and an awareness that the two countries had common goals, and that in particular France was their common enemy. This alliance invariably made the Dutch into a junior partner.

Little by little, maybe more as an effect of absent-mindedness than conscious design, the Parliament consolidated its power. And political power often comes by effective governing, and that they appeared to be able to do well. Departments developed with ministers at their heads, and with that the need for a concerted effort, and the institution of a cabinet had been born, and with it its parliamentary control⁶.

Democracy is often confused with egalitarianism⁷. It is important to be aware of this confusion. The development in England was not an egalitarian one, except for the demys-

⁶ Hill remarks sarcastically, that if you take the notion that a King can do no wrong, the responsibility for actions invariably becomes transferred to the underlings - the ministers. And with real responsibility comes real power

⁷ It is important to note that Poppers main argument for democracy is not phrased in terms of

tification of a monarch, whose role thereafter would be purely ceremonial and symbolic; on the contrary Hill remarks, the ruptures between social classes became more pronounced than it was before. As feudal rights and obligations were abolished, the situation of the poor became even more desperate. The gentry assumed more power and the use of the land were concentrated in fewer hands as the small actors lost their rights, even as more land became cultivated. The interests of the gentry class were attended to and the small land-owner simply disappeared. This was all in the interest of capitalism and efficient economics. In fact a large part of the population was reduced to abject poverty, real wages never quite in line with real costs. You may have to be a Marxist like Hill to put it in such stark and simple terms, but that does not necessarily mean that it is false or distorted. Certain demographical and statistical facts are there to be addressed and can be so objectively. When the industrial revolution would one day take place, there were no shortage of available hands. The proletarianization of the masses may have been a prerequisite for the industrial revolution, not a consequence of it.

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egalitarianism, although he might sentimentally be attached to it, but in terms of efficiency. A democratic society is one in which everyone is listened to, and arguments are judged by their power, not by the social status of those who present them. Democracy is above all a case of free discussion and intercourse, not of leveling per se