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978-0-521-18882-1 - Politics, Religion and Popularity in Early Stuart Britain: Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell

Edited by Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake

Excerpt

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*Revisionism and its legacies: the work of
Conrad Russell*

Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake

‘The unity of the revisionists in the 1970s was always built around a series of negative propositions.’ Conrad Russell’s comment highlights the extent to which ‘revisionism’ arose out of a sense of dissatisfaction with the assumptions and approaches which still dominated the study of early Stuart history at this time. Two of the assumptions stood out, as Russell himself looking back on this period, explains: firstly, the supposition which permeated Whig and Marxist historiography that ‘there were two sides to every division’ and that change necessarily took place through the clash of opposites; and secondly, the belief, rooted in Victorian ideas about progress, that the basic task of the historian was to explain why events led to a particular conclusion.¹ The rejection of a dialectical framework, and the determination to avoid the use of hindsight, led revisionists back to the task of constructing a political narrative for the early Stuart period.

During the early 1970s this was still taken as more or less read, having been put together by S. R. Gardiner and not substantially changed since the late nineteenth century. The assumption underlying much of the most influential historical writing from this period was that the basic story was already well known and that the historian’s task was to discover the social and intellectual roots of what could be regarded as a crucial phase in the drive towards modernisation.² This tended to mean the creation of a number of different narratives of social and cultural change which were taken to relate the political crises of the 1620s and more particularly of the 1640s and 1650s to broader processes of transition from one sort of society (traditional, feudal, patrimonial) to another (modern,

¹ C. S. R. Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621–1629* (Oxford, 1979), 5; C. S. R. Russell, *Unrevolutionary England* (1990), ix–xi.

² For further discussion of this point see, Peter Lake, ‘Retrospective: Wentworth’s political world in revisionist and post-revisionist perspective’, in J. F. Merritt (ed.), *The Political World of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, 1621–1641* (1996), 253–7.

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commercial, individualist). The forms which this search took were various. Some of them were organised around the notion of the rise of the gentry or the linked notion, famously developed by Lawrence Stone, of the *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, of a variety of socio-economic, as well as culturally constructed, notions of ‘court’ and ‘country’. Others centred on the rise of the middling sort in town and country and the attendant religious and cultural changes (organised under the sign of ‘puritanism’ seen as a movement reflective of the class interests and social trajectory of that group) and here, of course, we are referring to the works of the middle-period Christopher Hill.³ Others still – and here the prime example is Michael Walzer, using models taken from political science rather than social theory – portrayed puritanism not as the ideology of an emergent social group so much as a nascently modern revolutionary movement, a direct precursor of Jacobinism and bolshevism.⁴ All these accounts of the period were centred on the events of the 1640s, events which they termed relatively unproblematically the English Revolution, often placing it at the start of a series as the ‘first modern revolution’.

All this served to concentrate a great deal of attention on the nature of the events of the 1640s. If social explanations, that is to say explanations in terms of the social origins and interests of the parties to these struggles, were to be made to stick, then agreement had to be reached as to who ‘the real revolutionaries’ were. Taking the regicide as the revolutionary event, and the regime that followed it as the real revolutionary regime, some of the most distinguished political histories of the revolution – in particular David Underdown’s magisterial account of *Pride’s Purge* and Austin Woolrych’s analysis of the Barebones parliament⁵ – doubled as extended tests of a variety of social characterisations, and even explanations, of the Revolution. At roughly the same time Christopher Hill was trying to provide a social profile and explanation of those whom he regarded as the real revolutionaries – the radical thinkers and incendiary evangelists who inhabited the world turned upside down of the 1650s, a group which Hill identified with the shifting plebeian population of the wastelands and forest regions.⁶ These attempts at a variety of social and structural explanations of the sides and parties to the Civil War and Revolution continued into the early 1970s, when they received

³ C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964); C. Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958).

⁴ M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

⁵ A. Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (1982).

⁶ C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972); C. Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977).

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a magisterial summation in Lawrence Stone's synthetic overview *The Causes of the English Revolution*.

In short, a great deal of the most distinguished writing on the political and religious history of the period was centred on questions about the long-term social and economic causes and nature of the English Revolution. In many ways what we were seeing here was the fag end, the long death, of the gentry controversy. And here, of course, was one of the central sites for the generation of what was to become revisionism. For in testing claims about rising and falling gentry, historians had been forced into extended local studies of gentry society, politics and what would later come to be known (under the influence of certain sorts of anthropological writing) as culture. In so doing not only had they so muddied the economic and social waters as to make any generalisations about the political opinions or actions of rising or falling, 'court' or 'country', nobility or gentry virtually impossible to make stick, they also started to produce a very different model of gentry social and political life. This was centred on the county community in which the majority of the landed class lived out their lives, dominated by local issues and the need to maintain local order and further local interests. It was a world to which the sort of political and ideological passions, the side-taking over issues of ideological or constitutional principle, the jockeying for political advantage and office that characterised the conventional accounts of the political history of the period had virtually no place. In this world we were dealing not with the first modern revolution but rather with the Great Rebellion, an event unwanted and unwilling by the majority of the local gentry who populated and ran the English shires. This was a vision of provincial life first developed by Alan Everitt in his extraordinarily influential *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion* and then applied by a variety of other historians to other counties before being generalised to all England in John Morrill's seminal overview *The Revolt of the Provinces*.

Other straws in what would become the revisionist wind could be found in both the religious and intellectual history being written during the 1960s. Crucial here was J. G. A. Pocock's account of *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, a book which, in stressing the insularity of English legal thought, and the dominance of English political and legal culture by the notion of a common law based on immemorial custom and untainted by any ordinary act of either royal or parliamentary sovereignty, removed the basis of a great deal of earlier writing on the constitutional divisions and principles said to have divided early Stuart England into rival camps labelled 'government and opposition'. Here

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was an inherently conservative way of looking at the world dominated by ancient precedents and immemorial custom, a unitary realm of discourse outside of which anyone trained within the English legal tradition was in effect unable to think. Increasingly it provided the conceptual limits within which early Stuart Englishmen conducted their political disputes and disagreements. Of course, disagreement could and did occur within the discursive structures laid down by the common-law mind, but Pocock was anxious to point out that there was a common-law case to be made for the king as well as his opponents and contemporaries were well aware of that. On this account, non-negotiable arguments about, or self-conscious struggles for, sovereignty lay in the future; they were a consequence rather than a cause of political conflict and revolution.

Parallel to Pocock's work on political and legal ideology came a similarly sceptical account of the revolutionary potential of 'puritanism'. Here a key text, the significance of which is not perhaps often enough recognised, was William Lamont's study of *Marginal Prynne*. Prynne was the classic point where the radical, even revolutionary, potential within both the common law and puritanism came together to forge the quintessential puritan revolutionary lawyer. That, however, was not how Prynne emerged from Lamont's study of him, but rather as a far more conservative figure. Intensely erastian, committed to the norms and forms of both the common law and what he took to be the Elizabethan and Jacobean church, on Lamont's account, Prynne was only gradually converted to the need for ecclesiastical reform by what he perceived as the 'innovations' being foisted on the church by a clique of Arminians and papists. Lamont's work was followed, of course, by Nicholas Tyacke's hugely influential 1969 Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 'Arminianism in England, in religion and politics, 1604 to 1640', which again did much to undermine the notion of an inherently radical or revolutionary puritanism, placing its emphasis instead on the revolutionary impact of Arminianism. Similar was the purport, if not the immediate impact, of Patrick Collinson's seminal and enigmatic masterpiece, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*. The product of a 1957 London thesis, the book came out in 1967 and seemed at first reading to confirm Sir John Neale's vision of a radical, indeed proto-revolutionary, puritan movement under Elizabeth; a predictable precursor of what was to arrive red in tooth and claw in the late 1630s and early 1640s. And yet a close reading of that text shows that Collinson had adduced a vast range of evidence to enable a radical re-evaluation of the English church as a reformed or Calvinist church and of 'puritanism' as, in many of its most distinctive forms and at many times,

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a distinctly establishment creed. In a crucial footnote Collinson cited Tyacke's thesis in a way that showed which way his views were tending and in a series of articles published in the mid 1970s he started to draw out insights that had been left implicit in the book into explicit arguments. These fugitive pieces signalled a basic change in the hitherto ostensibly Nealean tenor of his work, a trend that reached its height with the publication in 1982 of the more or less explicitly revisionist text *The Religion of Protestants*.

The claim being made here is not that either Pocock or Lamont's (and still less Collinson's) books were in any meaningful sense 'revisionist books'; in fact the work of all three men went on to have a decidedly ambiguous, even at times adversarial, relationship to what subsequently emerged as the revisionist interpretation of the period. It is, however, to argue that by the mid to late 1960s, in a number of disparate fields – local and religious history, the history of 'political thought' – many of the central aspects of what was to become revisionism were already available in the literature. To these books one might add several studies of 'high politics'. J. N. Ball and T. G. Barnes's work on Sir John Eliot and Sir Robert Phelps respectively showed that these MPs did not fit easily into models of conflict based on 'court' v. 'country' or government v. opposition, and G. R. Elton's analysis of the Commons' Apology of 1604 challenged one of the accepted milestones on 'the High Road to Civil War'.⁷ Arguably, most important of all was Menna Prestwich's magisterial book on *Cranfield* which insisted on the importance, for any sensible account of the central politics of the period, of issues of court favour and patronage and, of course, of royal finance.

Across the scholarly world, starting from very different places, using different sorts of sources, to answer very different questions, we can, in retrospect, see a number of scholars arriving at conclusions none of which quite fitted within the conventional wisdom and all or many of which seemed to be tending in the same general direction. Many, therefore, of the empirical and interpretative materials necessary to launch a challenge to the dominant modes of viewing the period or framing research upon it were available by the late 1960s. But they had not been brought together into anything like a coherent assault and still less into anything resembling an alternative master narrative or interpretation.

⁷ J. N. Ball, 'Sir John Eliot at the Oxford Parliament, 1625', *BIHR*, 28 (1955), 113–27; T. G. Barnes, *Somerset 1625–1640* (Oxford, 1961); T. G. Barnes, 'County politics and a puritan cause célèbre: Somerset churchales, 1633', *TRHS*, 5th ser., 9 (1959), 103–22; G. R. Elton, 'A high road to civil war', in his *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, 2 vols. (1974), II, 164–82.

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Nicholas Tyacke tells a fascinating story about his efforts to continue to teach a long-standing course in English constitutional history at University College, London. Having encountered increasing difficulties in maintaining the intellectual integrity of the course, he was forced finally to give up; a decision that Joel Hurstfield found both regrettable and incomprehensible. Something, in short, was about to give. We might speak, in retrospect, therefore, of a revisionist or perhaps of a pre-revisionist moment, poised uneasily between old and new approaches and paradigms.

This was a decidedly odd moment, betwixt and between different historiographical worlds; ‘the court’ and ‘the country’, having ceased to be identifiable socio-economic interests or groups, were enjoying an afterlife as ideologically and politically defined connections or cultural archetypes; a now canonical division between centre and localities was sometimes being mapped onto and sometimes juxtaposed against these polarities. The distinctive products of this period were perhaps Perez Zagorin’s *The Court and the Country* or Derek Hirst’s *Representative of the People?*, the latter divided between a revisionist localism and an account of rising levels of political conflict and popular participation in elections that would sit awkwardly with the revisionist account of the period. Even *Faction and Parliament*, the famously ‘revisionist’ collection of essays edited by Kevin Sharpe, shows something of this mood. For, despite the self-proclaimedly revisionist rhetoric deployed in the introduction (the existing version of the period did not so much need touching up as a complete reworking, Sharpe argued), the actual essays contained in the book were strewn across the interpretative map, with some, like those by Christopher Thompson or Simon Adams, fitting extremely ill with what was emerging as the revisionist account of the period.⁸

Something of the atmosphere of the time can be gained from the reviewing activities of Geoffrey Elton. He characterised Stone’s *Causes of the English Revolution* with a finely measured and modulated disappointment, even derision, as ‘a handsome restatement of the traditional explanations’. He responded, however, to Conrad Russell’s edited volume on *The Origins of the English Civil War* with considerably more enthusiasm; here, he claimed, was the antidote to Stone. ‘Any historians who were depressed by the enthusiastic reception given to L. Stone’s recent rehashing of outworn notions of “the causes of the English revolution” may

⁸ S. L. Adams, ‘Foreign policy and the Parliaments of 1621 and 1624’ and C. Thompson, ‘The divided leadership of the House of Commons in 1629’, in K. Sharpe (ed.), *Faction and Parliament* (Oxford, 1978), 139–71, 245–84.

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take heart. The New Look has arrived.' The collection, Elton opined, was not yet 'the magisterial revision of the kind that must surely be on the way, sweeping whig, marxist, high tory and social disruption models (and their builders) into oblivion', but it was nevertheless a firm indication of which way the wind was blowing. 'What we have here is a truly welcome prospectus for that very necessary revolution in historical thinking.'⁹

And in this, Elton was surely right. For with the publication of Russell's edited volume in 1973 (and in particular of his own two essays and the seminal piece by Nicholas Tyacke on 'Puritanism, Arminianism and counter-revolution') revisionism, as we have come to know it, had finally started to arrive on the historiographical scene. Thereafter, full fig revisionism emerged with a rush. The staging posts are well known: Russell's own iconoclastic essay on 'Parliamentary history in perspective' and Morrill's *Revolt of the Provinces*, both of 1976; Kevin Sharpe's edited collection *Faction and Parliament* of 1978; Mark Kishlansky's *Rise of the New Model Army* and Russell's first major book, *Parliaments and English Politics, 1621–29*, both of 1979. The crystallisation of the revisionist view was rapid and its success at first almost complete. As Tom Cogswell has observed, many of the central contentions of the revisionist case were translated into textbook truisms almost over night.¹⁰ Truly this had been an historiographical revolution waiting to happen.

It did not, however, happen of its own accord, and it was Russell, more than anyone, who drew the disparate elements of research, argument and assertion, outlined above, together into a compelling new synthesis; and, in particular, it was Russell who, having done so, led the assault on the last redoubt of 'Whiggery', the high-political and parliamentary narratives themselves. For perhaps the greatest benefit conferred on the field by revisionism was the freeing of the domain of the political from a whole series of determinisms, of petty inevitabilities, of tacitly assumed we-already-know-thats, comprised, first, by the familiarity of the traditional renditions of the tale and, second, by multifarious implicit connections to other notionally 'more profound' economic, social or, latterly, 'cultural' factors. By acknowledging, indeed even celebrating, the breakdown of existing social-change explanations of political conflict, revisionism rendered the political interesting again. It was interesting, of course, because the direction, or even the outcome, of the political process under study

⁹ G. R. Elton, 'Review of Stone, *Causes of the English Revolution*', *HJ*, 16 (1973), 205–8; 'Review of Russell, *Origins of the English Civil War*', *HJ*, 17 (1974), 213–16.

¹⁰ T. E. Cogswell, 'A low road to extinction? Supply and redress of grievances in the parliaments of the 1620s', *HJ*, 33 (1990), 284–5.

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was no longer always already known. For the first time probably since Gardiner the politics of early Stuart England had become an open-ended subject for research. The issue was no longer to find deeper, more long-term causes for a process of political change the course of which was already known; rather, the question was how best to reconstitute, to retell (and interconnect) the basic (both high and low, national and local) political narrative/s.

All this Russell set out to do. If the traditional Russellian stories are true, he had started by intending to write a biography of John Pym. But such a project only made sense within the traditional political narrative. For Pym was a figure whose significance was underwritten by the telling of a certain story about the politics of the period, a story about the rise of parliamentary opposition, about the continuities of issue, rhetoric and personnel that linked the crises of the 1620s to those of the Civil War. As those traditional narrative templates ceased to make sense, so too did the initial Pym project. Thus did the early chapters of a Pym biography transmute into *Parliaments and English Politics, 1621–29*. Where a biography about Pym would inevitably have tended to privilege a story of continuity between the 1620s and the 1640s, now what was emerging was a story of discontinuity, as the attempt to reconstruct the political world of the 1620s served to render one in which a civil war could break out unimaginably strange and remote.

What Russell did in the book on the 1620s was to synthesise existing or emergent accounts of the political and religious culture of the period – accounts which, with Pocock, Lamont and Tyacke, were far more consensual than anything the existing Whig narratives would lead one to believe – with his own peerless knowledge of the parliamentary sources, to produce a high political narrative entirely different from anything that had passed for current before. Through the unique connection between centre and localities that was parliament the Everittian and Morrillian localism of the local gentry was now allowed to penetrate to the very centre of the high political story. As inflation ate into the real value of traditional sources of royal revenue, the unwillingness of localist MPs to meet the mounting (but unacknowledged and misunderstood) costs of royal government in general and of war in particular, became central. So too was the assumed conservatism of Calvinist MPs in the face of Arminian and Caroline innovation, which replaced, in the revisionist version of these events, traditional accounts of puritan activism in the face of a static Anglican establishment. But perhaps the most daring innovation introduced into an account still centred on events in parliament,

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and founded on parliamentary sources, was the claim, based logically enough on the materials and assumptions summarised above, that parliament was an event not an institution. The focal point of the entire Whig narrative was redescribed as an epiphenomenon, an effect rather than a cause of a political narrative, the real causal factors behind which were based elsewhere, based, in fact, where, in a personal monarchy, one might well expect them to be based, at the king's court.

It was often claimed by the early opponents of revisionism that all this amounted to little more than high-political antiquarianism, that the revisionists had reduced the history of the period to a one-damn-thing-after-another retelling of contingent high-political events and interactions. This claim was often combined with the assertion that they had stripped the ideology out of contemporary politics.¹¹ Whilst it is certainly true that revisionists have insisted that the high-political narrative needed to be redone from the sources up and denounced the teleological tendencies of their opponents, it is simply not the case that they have eschewed long-term structural analysis or ignored issues of ideology. Indeed, one of the criticisms one might make of the wider movement is that after its initial programmatic statements of intent, revisionists have not written enough narratives. With the exception of Russell himself (and, of course, Mark Kishlansky's seminal early text, *The Rise of the New Model Army*) political narrative has not been the distinctive revisionist genre. They have, if anything, tended to favour the analytic essay and the topically arranged overview.

As for Russell himself, his exercises in narrative have always been set in densely argued structural contexts. These were laid out as early as *The Origins of the English Civil War* and were certainly placed at the very centre of the explanatory structure of *Parliaments and English Politics*. They comprise, of course, the so-called 'functional breakdown' – a phrase that Russell appropriated from Gerald Aylmer and made his own as a short-hand label for the long-term fiscal sclerosis of the early Stuart state.¹² This was predicated on the long-term impact of inflation on many of the relatively fixed revenues of the crown interacting with the entrenched localism of the ruling class. It was compounded by a second factor, the financial consequences and effects of 'the military revolution'.

¹¹ L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history', *P&P*, 85 (1979), 3–24; T. K. Rabb, 'Revisionism revised: the role of the Commons', *P&P*, 92 (1981); D. Cannadine, 'British history: past, present – and future?', *P&P*, 116 (1987), 169–91.

¹² The term emerged out of his tape-recorded discussion with Aylmer in: 'Parliamentarianism 1604–1642', in W. Lamont (ed.), *Sussex Tapes* (1976), 135–53.

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Here Russell's parliamentary narrative intersected with Everittian and Morrillian local history to produce a new account of the political reactions and values of the landed class both in Westminster and at home in the counties. The third long-term structural feature of Russell's analysis was the impact on a political and religious culture obsessed with unity of the brute fact of post-Reformation religious division. Latterly, these three long-term structural tensions or points of contradiction have been joined by the issue of multiple monarchies – the so-called British Problem. As the presence in *The Origins* of a piece by John Elliott shows,¹³ all these various aspects of the case were present *in potentia* at least from the early 1970s and all in their turn were based on or worked out against comparisons with the structure and history of a variety of European monarchies. Here a seminal influence, which Russell has often acknowledged, was Elliott's *Revolt of the Catalans*.

Nor have revisionists eschewed issues of ideology; rather they have recategorised what they take to be the dominant ideological norms, assumptions and expectations of contemporaries in terms of the desire for, and assumption of, consensus, rather than in terms of conflict. In so doing they greatly broadened the range of sources and sorts of places in which one might look for 'ideology'. No longer to be found solely in programmatic statements of principle and argument, in treatises, sermons, parliamentary speeches – the classic places in which that curious beast 'political thought' has always been studied – in the revisionists' hands it would be fair to say that 'ideology' came to be redefined more broadly as the operating assumptions, the often implicit, only partially articulated, beliefs and expectations that underpinned the workings of the polity. Such bodies of belief and assumption could best, indeed could only, be properly reconstructed with reference to a whole variety of texts and practices, not usually examined by historians of political ideology. That surely was what localism was – an attempt to reconstitute from out of the basic structures of their social and political lives the underlying political values and priorities of the provincial gentry. Again that was what Russell was doing in the opening eighty pages of *Parliaments and English Politics*. This is a brilliant analytic essay on the operating assumptions, the ideological structures or culture of the polity of early Stuart England. In fact, a case could be made that – without ever quite admitting or formulating it in this way – revisionism was operating with a notion of political culture (rather than of ideology). Latterly, of course, some

¹³ J. H. Elliott, 'England and Europe: a common malady?', in C. S. R. Russell (ed.), *The Origins of the English Civil War* (1973).