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0521843758 - Commonwealth Principles: Republican Writing of the English Revolution

Jonathan Scott

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COMMONWEALTH PRINCIPLES

Republican Writing of the English Revolution

The republican writing of the English revolution has attracted a major scholarly literature. Yet there has been no single volume treatment of the subject, nor has it been adequately related to the larger upheaval from which it emerged, or to the larger body of radical thought of which it became the most influential component. *Commonwealth Principles* addresses these needs, and Jonathan Scott goes beyond existing accounts organised around a single key concept (whether constitutional, linguistic or moral) or author (usually James Harrington). Linking various social, political and intellectual agendas, Professor Scott explains why, when classical republicanism came to England, it did so in the moral service of a religious revolution. The resulting ideology hinged not upon political language, or constitutional form, but upon Christian humanist moral philosophy applied in the practical context of an attempted radical reformation of manners. This opposed not only private interest politics, embodied by monarchy or tyranny, on behalf of the publicly interested virtues of a self-governing civic community. It was part of a more general critique of private interest society: a republican attempt, from pride, greed, poverty and inequality, to go beyond the mere word 'commonwealth' and reconstitute what Milton called 'the solid thing'.

JONATHAN SCOTT is Carroll Amundson Professor of British History at the University of Pittsburgh and is now established as one of the most important historians of the seventeenth century writing today. This association of author and topic will render *Commonwealth Principles* essential reading for numerous scholars of British history, political theory and English literature.

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For J. C. (Colin) Davis

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Preface

My doctoral and subsequent work upon Algernon Sidney (1623–83) yielded three wider perspectives. One was an argument concerning ‘the shape of the seventeenth century’.¹ Another was a view of the European context of that period of English history which placed emphasis upon the formative influence of the United Provinces.² The third was an account of English republican thought alternative to that usually arrived at through the study of James Harrington.³ It is to this last that I turn here, partly on the grounds that there still exists no single book-length introduction to a subject of relatively recent, though now buoyant, historiographical coinage.⁴

Thus in the first place this book draws heavily upon, and attempts to assess, a still-developing historiography of remarkable richness.⁵ This connects subjects ancient, early modern and modern; continental Europe, the British Isles and the Americas; and social, economic, religious, political and intellectual history. This reflects the intellectual content of a body of seventeenth-century writing which itself spanned Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, and had a wide, indeed global, subsequent impact.

¹ Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge, 2000). See also Scott, ‘Radicalism and Restoration: the Shape of the Stuart Experience’, *Historical Journal* 31, 2 (1988); Scott, ‘England's Troubles: Exhuming the Popish Plot’, in Tim Harris, Paul Seaward and Mark Goldie (eds.), *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford, 1990).

² This theme of *England's Troubles* is further explored in Jonathan Scott, ‘What the Dutch Taught Us: the Late Emergence of the Modern British State’, *Times Literary Supplement* (16 March 2001); Scott, ‘“Good Night Amsterdam.” Sir George Downing and Anglo-Dutch Statebuilding’, *English Historical Review* 118, 476 (2003).

³ J. G. A. Pocock, ‘England's Cato: the Virtues and Fortunes of Algernon Sidney’, *Historical Journal* 37, 4 (1994) esp. pp. 917–21; Jonathan Scott, ‘Classical Republicanism in Seventeenth-Century England and the Netherlands’, in Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: a Shared European Heritage* (2 vols., Cambridge, 2002) vol. 1, pp. 61–81.

⁴ The nearest we have to this are the four chapters by Blair Worden in David Wootton (ed.), *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society 1649–1776* (Stanford, 1994). The present study precedes its own chronological account with contextual and textual analysis.

⁵ Daniel Rodgers, ‘Republicanism: the Career of a Concept’, *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992); James Hankins, ‘Introduction’, in Hankins (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge, 2000).

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It did so partly because the republican writing of the English revolution constitutes one of the finest bodies of political literature in the English language.⁶ In addition, in the course of a penetrating engagement with the failures as well as hopes of one past society in crisis, it aspired to universal observations concerning the human condition.

The specific objective of this study is to supplement the work of those who have given accounts of English republicanism by reference to a single key concept (constitutional, linguistic or moral), or author (usually Harrington), with an analysis of this body of writing as a whole.⁷ This attempts to show that we are less likely to understand English republicanism through Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), than we are to understand *Oceana* by relating it to the context of the republican and other political writing from which it emerged. One result is the demonstration that Harrington's republicanism was highly atypical.⁸ Another, restored to its religious as well as humanist context, will be a reconsidered account of classical republicanism in England. This hinged not upon political language, or constitutional form, but upon Christian humanist moral philosophy applied in the practical context of an attempted radical reformation of manners.⁹

To seek thus to restore the appropriate relationship of texts to context is no more than to follow the methodological injunctions made famous by that university (of Cambridge) where this book was begun. Yet within the history of political thought contextual methodology is a partially realised aspiration. As it remains common to characterise a tradition of thought by reference to one or a few paradigmatic texts, so where contextualisation occurs it is more likely to be intellectual than political. Republican political thought has not always been systematically related to the larger upheaval (England's troubles) from which it emerged. Nor has it been integrated with

⁶ The predominant focus here is upon prose. For republicanism and poetry see David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁷ For an analysis organised around one constitutional idea, see Zera S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: an Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth Century England* (Evanston, Ill., 1945). For republicanism as a language see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975). For a discussion devoted to the recovery of a moral concept see Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997); Skinner, 'Classical Liberty, Renaissance Translation and the English Civil War', in Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Volume 1: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge, 2002). All take Harrington's thought to exemplify English republicanism as a whole, as does Worden in chapters 1–4 of Wootton, *Republicanism*. See my review of the latter in *Parliamentary History* 16, 2 (1997).

⁸ Jonathan Scott, 'The Rapture of Motion: James Harrington's Republicanism', in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁹ Scott, *England's Troubles*, in particular Part II. For the role of Christian humanism see especially chapters 2–3 below. For moral philosophy see especially chapters 7–8.

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the larger body of radical thought (the English revolution) of which it was the most influential component. Above all there has been a historiographical disassociation between that revolution's classically informed political republicanism and its religiously inspired social radicalism. One reason for this is that the major historians of classical republicanism have tended to treat it as a secular, or secularising, ideological force. Another is that the most important historian of that social radicalism, the late Christopher Hill, had ideological preoccupations which led him to be less interested in classical republicans than in plebeian sectaries. The eventual exception to this rule was Milton, portrayed by Hill as a plebeian 'heretic' rather than a Christian humanist.¹⁰ In fact, just as the revolution may be seen as a single intellectual process, so republicanism combined radical protestantism and anti-monarchical humanism. We will not understand it until we reintegrate our examination of its religious, social and political agendas: until we combine the worlds of Pocock, Hill and others.

This study does not pretend to have identified, let alone adequately treated, all relevant contexts of the subject. It does, however, attempt to give equal weight to long- and short-term contexts, and to ideas and events, in relation to both of which it subjects a range of key texts (and others) to comparative analysis. This analysis is first thematic, and then chronological. The objective is to assess, within a body of writing united in the prosecution of a cause, the nature and extent of its shared concerns, its internal variety and its development over time. We will find in the process that English republicanism cannot be reduced to that anti-monarchical component which was a negative precondition for the achievement of positive objectives. Nor can it be associated with a single political language, or constitutional prescription, not only because there were many of each, but because these things were held by most republicans to be secondary forms, adaptable in relation to an unchanging moral substance.

The writing of this book was made possible by the award of a British Academy Research Readership. Although an academic appointment in the United States cut my tenure of that award from two years to one, I am deeply grateful to the Academy, and especially Dr Ken Emond, for making that possible. I am no less grateful to Downing College, Cambridge, for the same support, and much else besides, over a very happy period of eleven years. Nor have my colleagues and students at the University of Pittsburgh

¹⁰ Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977). Although its anti-intellectual posturing is tiresome, and its anti-classicism leads to the neglect of much that was important to Milton himself, this is a deeply learned study, particularly of the religious content of the major poems.

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Preface

given me reason to be anything other than delighted with a new job and phase of life in that beautiful city.

This book is dedicated to Colin Davis, with whom it was first discussed twenty-three years ago, and who has throughout the intervening period continued to teach me about much more than history. Not for the first time I am indebted to the friendship and scholarship of James Belich, Mike Braddick, Glenn Burgess, Patrick Collinson, Barry Everitt, Miles Fairburn, Andrew Fitzmaurice, Richard Greaves, Janelle Greenberg, Mark Greengrass, Germaine Greer, Tim Hochstrasser, Julian Hoppit, Adrian Johns, John Kerrigan, Mark Kishlansky, Melissa Lane, Paul McHugh, John Marshall, Paul Millett, Hiram Morgan, John Morrill, John Morrow, Eric Nelson, Markku Peltonen, Paul Rahe and Richard Smith. In addition I have drawn particular inspiration from the work of David Armitage, Sam Glover, Mark Goldie, Jonathan Israel, David Norbrook, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Nigel Smith, Blair Worden and Keith Wrightson. Special thanks are due to Leonidas Montes and Eric Nelson for reading several chapters of an early draft, and to Markku Peltonen as well as the two readers for Cambridge University Press for penetrating criticisms of the entire manuscript. I have benefited from many conversations about republicanism with Annamarie Apple, Tania Boster, John Donoghue, Michael McCoy, Chris Magra, Jill Martin and Hiro Takezawa. I am grateful to Jill Goodwin of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, for help furnishing seventeenth-century materials during a period of leave in New Zealand in 2001. Finally I am greatly indebted to the stimulus provided by the European Science Foundation workshop on 'Republicanism: a Shared European Heritage', organised by Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, which met at Gottingen, Wassenaar, Perugia, Bordeaux, and Siena between 1997 and 1999.

That commonwealth principles were a tall moral order, in the attempted application of which the risk of failure was high, was well understood by the writers examined in this study. For their presence in our own lives, Sophia, Thomas and I are entirely beholden to Anne.