INTRODUCTION

Framing Early Modern England

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In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English, the verb 'to frame' meant to construct, join together, shape, form, or devise and invent. 'Framing' was 'the action, method or process of constructing, making or fashioning something'.[1] All historical periods are constructed or devised in this manner. Sometimes they are bracketed by key events deemed to be of particular symbolic importance: happenings 'to which cultural significance has successfully been assigned'.[2] Sometimes they are defined in terms of broader processes that are cumulatively transformative: the 'rise' of capitalism or individualism, for example, or the 'decline' of magic or of the peasantry. But whatever the case, historical periods reflect perceptions of the shape of the past that originate in particular attempts to give it form and meaning, gradually become conventional, and persist while they retain the power to persuade us that they help make sense of it.

The term 'early modern' has become the conventional English-language way of describing the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the period covered in this volume. It is relatively novel in use. The orthodox view is that it emerged from the 1940s, and became more widely adopted from the 1970s in both history and adjacent disciplines (notably literary criticism of an 'historicist' cast). Despite this success, in recent years it has become unusually contested. Those who dislike, or are at least uncomfortable with, its widespread employment tend to emphasise a number of objections. First, it is 'a quite artificial term', unknown in the period to which it refers. It is a retrospective label, 'a description born of hindsight', imposed upon the past. Moreover, it has been uncritically adopted by those unaware of its deficiencies and implications. It is vague and elusive in definition and inconsistently applied. Its chronological boundaries vary not only with country but also with topic. It may be meaningful when addressing some themes, but is inappropriate to others. It is geographically restricted in its applicability, making more

sense when applied to those parts of Europe in which these centuries witnessed significant change than to those that retained more 'traditional' structures, and is largely irrelevant outside the European context. While it has been widely adopted in the historiographies of anglophone and German-speaking countries, it is more rarely used elsewhere. Above all, the very notion of an 'early modern' period allegedly embodies teleological assumptions about the course of historical change. It is tainted with 'Whiggish' value judgements about 'progress' in human affairs. Worse, that ethnocentric bias is compounded by its association with the 'modernization' theories prevalent in the social sciences of the 1950s and 1960s. The very term 'early modern' 'assumes that European culture was travelling towards something called "modernity" '; it contains 'a teleological modernizing trajectory', a pre-ordained evolution towards 'a uniform, homogenized world, dominated by western-style economies, societies and participatory politics'. Softer critics would warn against such linearity and redefine the period so as to make its chronology even looser: back, where appropriate, to the fourteenth century; forward, in other cases, to the mid nineteenth century. Harder critics would abandon it altogether – though generally remaining coy about what they would put in its place.[3]

Such reservations are to be taken seriously insofar as they promote reflection on the process of historical 'framing'. Yet they are not so telling as to demand the rejection of the very notion of a distinctive and meaningful early modern period. To be sure, the concept of such a period is artificial and retrospective. So is all historical periodisation. It may be fair to say that it is sometimes employed uncritically. So are many other historical coinages of disputed meaning and generally forgotten ancestry that remain in circulation because they are useful shorthands: 'feudalism'; 'Byzantium'; the 'Renaissance'; the 'Scientific', 'Agricultural' and 'Industrial' revolutions; the 'Counter- Reformation'; the 'Enlightenment'; and so on. But it was not adopted simply as a convenient label for a loosely defined period between (approximately) the late fifteenth and late eighteenth centuries. Nor did it arrive freighted with twentieth-century modernisation theory. It emerged earlier, and for good reasons.

The sense that there was something distinctive about these centuries of European history is hardly a new one. It existed long before the term 'early modern' was coined, and it persists even in those national historiographies that prefer to eschew that term. It originated in the revival and dissemination of classical culture by the humanist scholars of the Renaissance, and in an engagement with that recovered legacy that

enhanced their sense of difference from what eventually became known as the 'Middle Ages' and convinced them that they had entered a distinctive 'modern' age (meaning simply the present or recent times). To this extent, our sense of the early modern begins with an acceptance of 'the terms of use laid down by sixteenth-century scholars'.[4] It culminates in the self-perception of another justifiably self-conscious new age: that ushered in by the American and French revolutions, the Latin American wars of independence, and the technological and social transformations of industrialisation. Historians looking back from the vantage point of the nineteenth century came to divide 'modern' history into two phases. The earlier of these could be bracketed by specific events: the opening of oceanic routes to the East, the European discovery of the New World, the Reformation and the shattering of western Christendom at one end, the Age of Revolutions at the other. Alternatively, it could be defined in terms of more diffuse processes: shifts in military technology; the formation of (some) national states; the cumulative impact of print culture; the expansion of commercial and industrial capitalism; the foundation of extra-European colonial empires; philosophical innovation; radical political thought; new ways of exploring the natural world. Whatever the case, this period of European history seemed to have a distinctive texture. It was not discontinuous with the past. All developments have roots. It witnessed continuities as well as changes. All historical periods do. But that did not preclude change and growth of a kind that distinguished the period and laid tracks for what came later. To recognise this does not imply teleology. It is simply genealogy – a tracing of antecedents. Of course these changes were not universal. Nothing ever is. But they proved to be what most mattered.

The specific concept of the 'early modern' is also older than the orthodoxy maintains. It was not, as is often alleged, coined in mid-twentieth-century America in the context of economic history. So far as is currently known, it originated in mid-Victorian England, in the published Cambridge lectures of William Johnson, and in the context of cultural history: specifically, as a means of expressing the way in which the classical revival at the turn of the sixteenth century enabled humanist scholars to engage critically with their own society and to imagine a future. Johnson's notion of the early modern has been described as 'an alternative and indigenous' conception of the Renaissance, one very much influenced by the self-perception of the English humanist scholars of the sixteenth century. As a term it was not immediately successful. But it re-emerged in the early years of the twentieth century in another historical context: in the work

of scholars engaged in founding English economic history as a distinctive approach to the past.

The notion that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a period of significant transition in English economy and society was also deeply embedded. It originated in the period itself, in the writings of perceptive contemporaries who believed themselves to be living in changing times, characterised by the erosion of an older economic and social order and the animation of a new one. It was elaborated in the work of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers who traced the emergence of modern commercial society from the sixteenth century; it informed Marx's historical account of the development of industrial capitalism in England; and it was central to the writings of the English Historical Economists, James Thorold Rogers, William Cunningham and W. J. Ashley. The Historical Economists rejected the bleak dogmas of classical political economy and turned to history in support of their contention that the validity of economic theory is relative to the circumstances and values of a particular time and place. They advocated the study of past economic cultures in the round – an economic history that was also social and cultural – and were acutely aware that economic change involved a myriad of factors other than the purely economic. While they might celebrate particular economic achievements, they were also deeply concerned with what has been called 'the distinctive pathology of modern society'.[5] They dismissed teleological triumphalism, stressing instead the complexities and contingencies of economic and social change, – the ironies and human costs of the gradual, complex and uneven process of transition from an older set of institutions, practices and values towards the world of laissez-faire capitalism.

The British and American scholars who followed them with more specialised studies of particular sectors of English economic life between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries shared that general perception of the period's significance. Indeed, it is hard to see how they could have done otherwise, since it was perfectly evident that the England of the Industrial Revolution was a very different place from that of Henry VII. They were the first rigorous analysts of what Christopher Hill called 'the colossal transformations which ushered England into the modern world'.[6] And it was in the emergent literature of a broadly conceived economic history, among those that pioneered deeper research into those transformations, that the term 'early modern' began to appear more frequently. J. U. Nef, who is sometimes credited with having introduced the term in a paper delivered to the American Historical Association in 1940, was of course one of them. It was adopted because it was more appropriate

to their concern with long-term, gradual and diffuse processes than the dynastic and biographical dates or discrete centuries still most commonly applied to frame conventional political history. A broader vision of the past needed a different kind of 'chronological descriptor'.[7]

The notion of the early modern, then, was born of a more expansive approach to the English past. That being the case, it is hardly surprising that its more widespread diffusion occurred in the context of the next major broadening of the range of historical concern: the developments in social and cultural history that constituted the major historiographical innovations of the later twentieth century.[8] That movement was both international and interdisciplinary in nature, and ironically it introduced the concept of the early modern, through the interventions of anglophone historians, to the literatures of countries whose own historians mostly preferred to do without it – notably France and Italy.

In the English case, which is our concern, the rise of social history from the 1960s and 1970s was in direct line of descent from the more inclusive vision characteristic of early-twentieth-century economic history.[9] But it was also creating a new field, sometimes almost from scratch. That involved first of all a massive expansion of the historical agenda to include previously little-studied or wholly neglected dimensions of the English past. It aspired to create a set of histories that were surely there but had been largely excluded from the purlieus of conventional historical study: 'absent presences'.[10] In effect, it amounted to a call to discover a new country: a more fully inhabited country. Secondly, the pursuit of new questions meant identifying and exploring the potential of previously unknown or little-used historical sources (and the institutions that produced them), often at the local level in the county and diocesan archives that were becoming increasingly organised and accessible at the time. Thirdly, it required new methodologies, some of them developed under the influence of adjacent disciplines (notably social anthropology, historical geography and literary criticism) or innovative foreign historiographies (initially the French *Annales* school and later American 'social-science history' and Italian 'microhistory'). These included quantitative analysis where appropriate, or at least a more rigorous and systematic examination of qualitative evidence, both frequently supplemented by forms of record linkage. Finally, interpreting the findings of this research necessitated a higher level of theoretical awareness in the fashioning of historical arguments, both in approaches to particular problems and in thinking about how societies work as interconnected systems. Such interdisciplinarity

might begin with an element of imitation: the adoption of concepts and questions appropriate to the problem in hand. But it usually gave way rapidly to critical engagement: the generation of fresh conceptualisation and new interpretative insights as historians in dialogue with the evidence provided by the past sought to characterise unanticipated realities and to construct credible accounts of change.

This movement transformed the sense of the early modern as a distinctive period in several ways. First, it enhanced awareness of its contours. Economic historians concerned with economic growth before industrialisation had already established a more quantitatively precise and chronologically exact account of change in sector after sector of English economic life between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: prices, real wages, land ownership, domestic and overseas commerce, the diffusion of agricultural and industrial innovation, and so on. This continued, creating in the process not only a reconnaissance of national trends but also a greater sensitivity to regional and social variations in their impact. But it was now complemented and elaborated by comparable studies (at local, regional and, where possible, national level) of population trends and their constituent elements, urban growth, migration, popular literacy, criminal prosecutions and civil litigation, living standards and domestic consumption, poverty, and much more. People might joke about the existence of an 'early modern curve' in which everything seems to be increasing between the mid sixteenth and mid seventeenth centuries, followed by a century of relative stabilisation and consolidation before renewed growth in the later eighteenth century. In fact, it was much more complex. In some respects, the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw a reversal of previous trends – for example in the incidence of crisis mortality, criminal prosecutions and litigation. In others they witnessed their acceleration – in agricultural specialisation and industrial production, urbanisation and metropolitan growth, commerce, consumption, intensified communication networks, the expansion and diversification of print culture, and the growth of waged employment. And there were always forms of local and regional variation that were in some respects enhanced over time – some towns stabilised in size; others grew exponentially. The point is that the contours of all this were being charted for the first time and that this mapping seemed to confirm the distinctive identity of an 'early modern' period: one that was not imposed upon the evidence but grew from it.

Within that emergent sense of the broad shape of the early modern period the studies of social institutions, social relations, attitudes, values

and patterns of behavior that were undertaken to elucidate particular trends began to create not so much an 'early modern narrative' as a series of related early modern narratives. These were not conventional historical narratives, but analytical narratives, concerned with demonstrating and explaining medium-to-long-term processes of change. They were usually developed to explore specific themes – population trends and their dynamics, for example, or the rise and fall of witchcraft prosecutions, poverty and developments in poor-relief, the growth of popular literacy, or resistance to agrarian change. But each provided context for the others, and cumulatively they contributed to a growing sense of a process of 'social and economic reconfiguration' that took off from the sixteenth century and ultimately produced what E. A. Wrigley terms the 'advanced organic' economy and society that gave birth to industrialisation in the later eighteenth century.[11]

These narratives contained many surprises. Whatever their initial expectations, people found that the evidence presented unanticipated realities, leading them to uncover and address new problems and to make unexpected connections. They opened new perspectives. That meant initially sociological and social anthropological perspectives on continuity and change in social structures, social relationships, attitudes and beliefs. But it soon came to involve both the introduction of gender as a new category of historical analysis, and greater appreciation of the independent role of culture in the construction of historical reality. The narratives of social history began to include, and to be enriched by, those of cultural historians and historicist literary scholars concerned with understanding contemporary concepts in their context; with 'discursive trends' and their relationship to social change – reconstructing 'the discursive spine of English early modernity' – with the creation of a novel 'environment … congenial to literary creativity'; and with the 'emerging lexicons' that marked change in what could be said, thought, felt and ultimately done. They came to involve attention to material culture and its meanings; to changes in the landscape and in how spaces and places were used, defined, perceived and represented; to changes in the perception of time and in awareness of the historical past. They detected shifts in identity: the interconnected construction of a national identity and regional identities; the recasting of social identities; the shifts in individual identity made possible by what have been called 'the development of technologies and languages for representing the self' and 'an extraordinary burgeoning of the language of reflexivity': new media of self-expression; newly coined self-words.[12]

These early modern narratives were full of new stories: those evocative episodes and accounts of past experience that people scraped up against in the archives and that left indelible marks on their historical skins. They contained new voices: for the most part those of hitherto historically obscure people who nonetheless managed to leave a trace in the records from which we make history. To this extent they constituted a democratisation of the subject, an engagement with hitherto 'under-represented lives' – those of members of subordinate groups in general and of women in particular.[13] As such, they contained a sustained examination and critique of the conventional exercise of power. And they were critical in a further sense also. Specific findings frequently came into conflict with prior assumptions derived from the largely conjectural accounts of 'traditional' society to be found in social theory and with narratives of modernisation based upon them. This was particularly evident in the furore that erupted in the 1970s and 1980s over the history of family relationships.[14] But it was soon to be found elsewhere, for example among historians concerned with class relationships or with nationalism, neither of which was supposed to exist before the birth of modernity. Far from being tainted by teleology, the emergent social and cultural history of early modern England was frequently de-mythologising in its impact on theories of modernisation. It gave rise to a notion of the 'early modern' that involved 'resistance to the master narratives of modernity'; posing questions rather than accepting preconceived answers.[15] And it demanded a heightened sensitivity to the elements of continuity that persisted even within changing contexts, and the perennial problem of the complex relationships between continuity and change as 'people carried on, using both old and new social strategies, as they generally do across moments of change'.[16]

All of this also had an impact upon the ways in which the established themes and central dramas of the history of this period were understood and addressed. The traditional prominence of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in English historiography was of course because these were already viewed as formative centuries in political and constitutional, religious and intellectual history. These processes and the convulsive moments of crisis and conflict that they involved could now be understood within a much larger context, and interpreted in ways that drew upon a richer conceptual palette. Historians of the English Reformation concerned themselves not only with doctrinal and ecclesiological change but with the long-term social and cultural adaptations involved in the creation of a plurality of new religious identities. A 'new political history' emerged that placed the familiar landmarks of political

crisis and constitutional change within the contexts of processes of state formation, changing governmental priorities, the recasting of local political elites and the emergence of a more participatory political culture.[17]

In sum, the rise of social and cultural history had a transformative influence on the historiography of England between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. It massively broadened the scope of our engagement with the English past. It provided a new sense of the shape and dynamics of these centuries as a distinctive period of change, and it justified and advanced the notion of the 'early modern' as we now understand it. That term may well be of limited applicability in the periodisation of other histories. If one considers the whole of Europe, let alone the larger world, it might be said, in Peter Krištúfek's phrase, that 'Every clock in this house shows a different time.'[18] But it works rather well for England, the classic ground on which it was developed. If some of its forms, concerns, debates and dilemmas have aged out of existence, others to which it gave rise continue to resonate. They remain our own. That is why the term is appropriate. It describes a deep past that is not quite past.

This book is not intended as a compendium of what is now known about English society between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. It could have had many more chapters devoted to specific issues that have of necessity been subsumed within broader thematic essays. Nevertheless, it will certainly convey a great deal of hard-won knowledge about the structures of English society, its central social institutions, patterns of social relations and cultural values. All save one of the authors of its chapters could be regarded as members of the vital second wave of what used to be called 'the new social history': those who absorbed early the pioneering studies of the 1970s and 1980s, and went on to build upon, greatly extend, modify and where necessary challenge them. This is deliberate. Such scholars are in the best position to survey a particular area of what is now a large field, to know the roads already travelled and to suggest where we could or should be going next. Their chapters can be read as free-standing essays upon particular themes and issues. At the same time, however, they are intended to form a coherent whole, in which each provides context for the others. And taken as a whole, the emphasis of the book is upon the dynamics of early modern English society: sometimes the dynamics of relative equilibrium, more often the dynamics of change. The chapters are ordered in a way that is intended to unfold a panorama of interconnected processes that were cumulatively transformative; how they were experienced; what they meant; how we can understand them.

Part I, 'Discovering the English', is about the English people's discovery of themselves and about our discovery of them. One chapter explores the development of a more elaborate sense of national identity, the institutions central to its discovery (or invention) and how it came to be written. Another details the practice of surveying, listing, and categorising the population for a variety of purposes, a practice that not only enhanced awareness of the nature of English society (and its 'legibility' to the anxious men who tried to govern it) but also collected information that facilitates its historical reconstruction. Two more examine the basic social institutions of the household and the local community. These 'little commonwealths' provided the setting for people's most intimate personal relationships. They were emotionally intense spheres of both inter-dependence and conflict. They were deemed so crucial to the health of a well-ordered commonwealth that they were the foci of a prescriptive literature of 'conduct' books and manuals of governance. And they were also among the first social institutions to be rigorously examined (and argued over) by social historians. Understanding their dynamics is a central part of both recovering the texture of social relations in this period, and grasping the motives and imperatives that so often shaped the course of change.

Part II, 'Currents of Change', is self-explanatory. Its chapters provide pithy interpretative accounts of the processes that collectively reshaped English society. Aspects of demographic and economic change that were an essential part of these processes are constantly alluded to and briefly described. They can be studied in detail elsewhere.[19] Here the focus is on developments that had an impact upon social structures, social relations and social identities: changes in the structures of rural and urban society; in religion, education, literacy and employment of the written word; in access to and uses of the law; in material culture and the consumption of goods; in concepts of authority and the possibilities of protest and resistance. These are well-established themes: some of the staple narratives of the social and cultural history of early modern England. But they are handled here with a difference: sometimes revising the chronology of change; frequently recharacterising its nature; always alert to the need to reconsider its possible meanings.

Part III, 'Social Identities', offers a further shift of focus to chapters exploring the formation of social identities. Three of these examine the worlds of the three 'sorts of people' that by the seventeenth century had largely displaced more elaborate accounts of the social hierarchy in English discourses of social distinction: the ruling elite of landed 'gentlemen', which was itself undergoing redefinition; the 'middle' or 'middling'