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Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context

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The scholarship on the intellectual, religious and political history of early modern England presents a large use of terms such as ?orthodox?, ?deist?, ?atheist?, ?radical?, and their respective ?isms?. These labels and the conceptual categories they imply have received renewed study in relatively recent years.(1) This volume is among the most significant contributions to clarifying the meaning and significance of one of these terms, namely radicalism, which has proven to be a ?flexible? conceptual category.

As Conal Condren has pointed out, it was not until the late 18th century that ?radical? became a political term associated with extensive political and social reform, and it was not until 1819 that Jeremy Bentham coined the word ?radicalism?.(2) As Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan observe in their brilliant ?Introduction? to the volume, which traces the history of the term and examines its different uses in historiography, ?radicalism? has always been far from being a univocal word: its different meanings largely depend on the methodological approaches adopted for studying 17th- and 18th-century England. In this respect, Hessayon and Finnegan identify three main approaches, which are named ?nominalist?, ?substantive? and ?functional?.

The nominalist approach, which is adopted by scholars such as Conal Condren and Jonathan Clark, entails the removal of anachronism from our discourses on historical phenomena.(3) According to this approach, it would be anachronistic, and therefore inappropriate, to use the term ?radicalism? when talking of eras preceding its coinage. The nominalist approach is thus skeptical about the use of any kind of historiographic category. But if we accept this premise, we should also avoid using any kind of periodization (and thus terms such as ?antiquity?, ?medieval?, ?modern?, etc.). Nevertheless, the nominalist approach highlights the risk that the term ?radicalism? is used as a container that can be filled with different contents, in accordance with different needs and aims. This is indeed what happens when adopting the opposite approach, which is called ?substantive?.

The substantive approach was predominant from the late 19th century to the second half of the 20th, and was at the core of two divergent historiographic currents:

> ?One was bourgeois and liberal, essentially concerned with tracing the growth of democratic and republican ideas in response to acute social and economic tensions as well as drawing parallels between the English and French Revolutions. The other was Socialist and Marxist, likewise emphasising secular class struggle but this time under the shadow of capitalism? (p. 14).

These two trends dominated historiography at least until the 1970s, and the Marxist current, with historians such as Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, A. L. Morton and E. P. Thompson, who tried to give greater attention to ?history from below?, was particularly influential in the rethinking of the English Revolution in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the substantive approach presents two significant shortcomings: first of all, it implies an ideological and teleological consideration of the past; moreover, it fails to integrate traditions of religious dissent within an organic conception of radicalism.

In the end, the authors of the essays presented in this volume have largely preferred a functionalist approach to the study of English radicalism. This approach takes into account the different contexts that saw the emergence of ideas and movements labeled as ?radical? in that they ?challenged the fundamental political, religious or social axioms of their day? (p. 25). This approach was championed by J.C. Davis in the 1980s, and the dependency of radicalism on context was later underscored by, among others, Jonathan Scott and Glenn Burgess.(4)

The 12 essays in this volume, written by scholars in various fields of history and literature, originated at a conference held at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2006. These essays deal with radicalism in relation to the English Revolution and with other applications of the terms ?radical? and ?radicalism? in 17th- and 18th-century England.

In their chapters, Nicholas McDowell, Noam Flinker and Ariel Hessayon deal with some of the main radical figures of the English Revolution. McDowell?s essay examines the language of religious radicalism in the 1640s, with special focus on the poems of Richard Crashaw and John Saltmarsh. McDowell highlights that these authors were strongly influenced by literary currents external to the English context, such as post-Tridentine Catholic poetry. Thus, their radical ideas were expressed in a style that proves the continual interaction between vernacular and humanist, popular and elitist traditions. Another representative of the radicalism of the English Revolution, Abiezer Coppe, drew on non-English and even non-Christian literary and hermeneutical traditions. In his chapter, Noam Flinker shows how Coppe used the rabbinical exegetical method of the Midrash in combining millenarian warnings and social reform claims, sexual imagery and spiritual awakening. All these elements of Coppe?s prose made his prophetic style particularly powerful. A very famous and influential radical was Gerrard Winstanley, whose reformist thought is the subject of Hessayon?s essay. Hessayon?s research on Winstanley is extremely significant. In fact, the role that this theologian and revolutionary leader played in his time was particularly valued by the Marxist historian

Christopher Hill, whose work was crucial to reassessing the Diggers? importance, but entailed obvious ideological distortions of Winstanley?s background, ideas and goals. In this respect, Hessayon points out that Winstanley?s heterodox religious views did not result from a sort of ?unexpected aberration? of the status quo, but originated in a spiritual journey characterized by distinctive Puritan and Baptist phases. In the end, the revolutionary potential of General Baptism, in matters of social justice and egalitarianism, played a crucial role in the ?radicalization? of Winstanley?s positions.

Mario Caricchio?s and Jason Peacey?s chapters analyze the role of bookselling and pamphleteering in the political and religious debates of the English Revolution. Caricchio concentrates on Giles Calvert, one of the main publishers and booksellers in England between 1641 and 1660. Caricchio maintains that Calvert?s bookshop was part of a cluster of social networks that:

> ?took part in the heated debate about Church settlement and religious toleration from a shared antinomian and spiritualist standpoint. In this sense, the core authors of Calvert?s stable [?] can be considered an offshoot of the ?radical? wing of the Reformation? (pp. 72?73).

In his analysis of royalist politics and pamphleteering in the late 1640s, Jason Peacey stresses that radical ideas, especially in matters of religious, social and political reform, penetrated into various areas of English politics and, therefore, were shared by different, and sometimes clashing, milieus. Therefore, Peacey argues that radicalism was a phenomenon largely independent from the distinctions between Royalists and Parliamentarians, and actually influenced both sides of the political spectrum.

The fact that radical ideas influenced English politics and culture across the political spectrum is confirmed by Jim Smyth?s excellent study of republican Empire-building and its ideological foundations. Smyth underscores that a sense of English superiority was widespread and deep-rooted in the time of the Revolution, and was nurtured by both Protestant providentialism and the rediscovery of classical republicanism, as is manifest in James Harrington?s *Oceana* (1656). The context in which providentialist and republican ideals emerged and spread ? a context characterized by anti-popery, the alleged Irish threat, a largely shared desire to avenge the 1641 massacres, and the need to fund the Parliament?s armies ? combined with a view of England as an elected nation and led to the invasion of Ireland and, later, to the Anglo-Dutch Wars. I would like to observe that Smyth?s thesis on the significance of both ideology and the historical context is corroborated by the fact that, in 17th-century England, republicanism was furthered by the rediscovery of classical republican theories and the emergence of a new interest in Jewish political sources among Christian scholars.(5) It is no accident that the perception of England as a ?New Jerusalem? was an important theme in the Puritan colonial and imperial enterprises. In this respect, Smyth correctly calls attention to Machiavelli?s influence on Harrington and other republican thinkers, with particular regard on the Italian author?s distinction between ?republics for increase?, such as Rome, and ?republics for preservation?, such as Venice, and his preference for the former. Briefly, the rise of republicanism in England was part of the momentous process of evolution of European political culture in the early modern era, a process that J. G. A. Pocock has termed ?the Machiavellian moment?.(6)

The English Revolution attracted the attention of political observers even in countries geographically and culturally distant from England. In his chapter, Stefano Villani concentrates on the echo that the Revolution had in Italy, where numerous diplomats and intellectuals conceived of the English events as different from other rebellions or civil wars. However, most Italian observers stressed especially the merely economic and social dimension of the Revolution, and interpreted it as resulting from the opposition between the aristocratic elites and the middle and low classes. Most Italian commentators dismissed the religious motives and claims of the Revolution as mere pretexts to conceal political ambitions and raise popular support. On the other hand, several Catholic writers used England as an example to demonstrate that religious heterodoxies, when permitted by toleration policies, necessarily led to social and political unrest, and they viewed the English turmoil as the inevitable result of the separation from Rome?s authority.

The last five essays in the volume deal with the development of radicalism after the Puritan Revolution. These essays draw attention to the necessity to relocate the concept of radicalism and adapt it to different historical contexts. Nevertheless, as Warren Johnston observes in his chapter on apocalyptic ideas, continuities must be taken into account when examining the evolution of English radicalism. In this regard, Johnston particularly stresses that the main elements of mid 17th-century apocalyptic ideas were still present in the apocalyptic trends of late 17th-century England, and these concepts indeed continued to play a major role in English religious life well into the 18th century, among both mainstream Anglicans and Dissenters.

Also Sarah Hutton underscores continuities in the development of radicalism. In her chapter, she suggests that the Cambridge Platonists? rationalism resulted mainly from their exposure to the debates that inflamed 17th-century England. Therefore, although refraining from reinterpreting Cambridge Platonism tout court in a radical framework, Hutton argues that the Cambridge Platonists can be numbered among the so-called ?radicals? in light of their ?sweet reasonableness?, which, despite their substantial disinterest in political issues, was abhorred by their detractors.

Sandra Hynes, Giovanni Tarantino and Jason McElligott concentrate on intellectuals of the ?long eighteenth century? who are commonly labeled as radicals. Hynes examines the correspondence between the Presbyterian minister Joseph Boyse and the antiquarian Ralph Thoresby, who was a Dissenter until his conversion to the Church of England in 1699. The two Nonconformists? letters prove that, in the years following the Glorious Revolution, ?it was the State and the Established Church that defined what was radical and not Dissenters? (p. 206). On this point, Hynes correctly observes:

> ?During this period, [?] different beliefs and church systems were accommodated within or without the established State Church so that a sense of religious continuity was achieved. The term radicalism implies the transformation of a system and in terms of religious radicalism suggests a move from mainstream belief to alternate beliefs. Those who dissented from the beliefs expounded by the State Church therefore had to find ways to ensure that their belief system survived? (p. 205).

Giovanni Tarantino?s chapter focuses on Anthony Collins, a freethinker, a bibliophile, a heterodox disciple of John Locke, and one of the leading figures of the intellectual current later called ?English deism?. Tarantino?s essay turns the attention to the concept of ?radical Enlightenment?, proposed first by Margaret Jacob in the early 1980s and recently reformulated by Jonathan Israel.(7) This concept has proven extremely influential in recent historiography on the Enlightenment. By ?radical?, scholars of the Enlightenment mean the rationalist trends that, in matters of religion, attacked revealed religion and its inconsistencies and, in matters of politics, questioned the divine right system of cultural and political power of the Church and the Christian State. In this respect, Tarantino maintains that the analysis of Collins?s impressive library, which consisted of more than 10,000 titles, makes it:

> ?possible to chart his brilliant and irreverent use of the weighty traditions of ?orthodox? thought, his direct involvement in an uncompromising journalistic campaign to moralise political life and his unflagging denunciation of the abuse of popular credibility by the ecclesiastical authorities? (p. 222).

Finally, the work of the early 19th-century polemicist William Hone, examined in Jason McElligott?s chapter, confirms that there is continuity in the history of English radicalism, if one considers the rejection of any compromise with the past and the attitude to sweep away existing political, social and cultural structures as its main features. Hone was indeed a fierce enemy of the status quo and harshly attacked political corruption, scorned any form of tyranny, oppression and bigotry, and ?was interested in reforming much more than the system of political representation in Parliament? (p. 258). Although Hone eventually

abandoned progressive politics and embraced reaction, his criticism of the system of power of the time and his projects for extensive social and political reform influenced the liberal tradition of thought in nineteenth-century England.

As we have seen, this volume has the merit to highlight the evolution of English radicalism in the early modern era by concentrating on different issues, authors and historical contexts. The functionalist approach, which is largely adopted in this book, helps understand the interconnections between radical ideas and the contexts in which these ideas emerged and had an impact. It has been maintained, particularly by J. C. Davis and other historians who oppose the Marxist vulgate, that

> ?canonical English radicalism failed because it did not sufficiently delegitimate the old monarchical order, established Church and traditional basis of society; nor did it adequately legitimate the new republic, alternative forms of Church government or far-reaching social change; nor was there an effective transfer mechanism to get from the displaced system to its replacement? (p. 22).

In their introduction to the volume, Hessayon and Finnegan consider Davis?s analysis persuasive, in view of the republic?s eventual failure to legitimate itself and survive after Cromwell?s death. On the other hand, while avoiding teleological interpretations of the English Revolution and its outcomes, this volume helps the reader appreciate the development of radicalism in the age of the Puritan Revolution and beyond. This book is therefore a useful resource to find the red thread that runs throughout more than one century of English history. In that era, and especially after the Glorious Revolution of 1688?9, England experienced remarkable social and political reforms, which often resulted from a long-lasting, exhausting cultural battle between the orthodox and the radical for the improvement, or even the overcoming, of the system of cultural and political power of the time. For this reason, I think that the tradition of English radicalism, starting in the time of the English Revolution and developing well into the 19th century, was not a complete failure.

I would like to conclude with some remarks on the specificity of English radicalism. As the two editors of this volume point out, the prevailing view is that the distinctive trait of the English Revolution, which differentiated it from other rebellions, religious wars (including the Thirty Years? War) and the general crisis of the mid 17th century destabilizing other European countries (from France to Ireland, from the Iberian Peninsula to Naples), was its radicalism. In fact, the variety of religious views and political positions that emerged in England provided the English Revolution with a degree of pluralism (and conflict) unmatched in other contexts. However, in view of the functionalist approach adopted in this volume and highlighting the historical development of radicalism and its dependency on contexts, I agree with the two editors that radicalism was not peculiar to England.

As Hessayon and Finnegan observe in their *Introduction*, when studying 17th-century English radicalism there are enough indications for ?transnational contexts?, such as the influence of non-English religious and philosophical traditions on English authors and circles, interactions between England and Continental Europe, and the impact of the English Revolution on European imagination. I would like to add some reflections on this issue. As a matter of fact, if one considers the background of the English Revolution, it is undeniable that the rediscovery of classical republicanism and the theories of the ?Hebrew Republic?, which had a powerful influence on the Puritan mentality, were indebted to a form of late Renaissance humanism, filtered through Erasmus and other Continental authors, and to the researches of Dutch thinkers such as Grotius and Cunaeus: in fact, both John Selden and James Harrington acknowledged their debt to these Dutch ?unorthodox? authors and their republican theories. Moreover, if one considers the span of time beyond the English Revolution, and particularly the period between the Glorious Revolution and Walpole?s era (as some chapters of this volume do), it must be admitted that English radicalism continued to develop also thanks to stimuli from abroad (for instance, from Dutch culture, which transmitted to England various versions of Cartesianism, Spinozism, and the anti-Trinitarians? insistence on the reasonableness of Christianity).

For all these reasons, new and comprehensive studies that consider early modern radicalism in its transnational dimension and historical development would be strongly welcome. As regards specifically the English context, the volume edited by Hessayon and Finnegan is definitely a precious resource for scholars and students who want to have a better understanding of English radicalism. This book is indeed a very important contribution to clarifying radicalism as a conceptual category, its fundamental elements, and its application to different contexts.

Notes

1. *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford, 1992); *The Margins of Orthodox: Heterodox Writings and Cultural Response, 1660?1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge, 1995); *English Radicalism, 1550?1850*, ed. Glenn Burgess and Matthew Festenstein (Cambridge, 2007).Back to (1)
2. Conal Condren, *The Politics of Language in Seventeenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 155?8. Back to (2)
3. Ibid.; J. C. D. Clark, ?Religion and the origins of radicalism in nineteenth-century Britain?, in *English Radicalism, 1550?1850*, pp. 241?84.Back to (3)
4. J. C. Davis, ?Radicalism in a traditional society: the evaluation of radical thought in the English Commonwealth, 1649?1660?, in *History of Political Thought*, 3, 2 (1982), 193?213; Jonathan Scott, *England?s Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge, 2000); Glenn Burgess, ?Radicalism and the English Revolution?, in *English Radicalism, 1550?1850*, pp. 62?86. Back to (4)
5. Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572?1651* (Cambridge, 1993); Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).Back to (5)
6. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975).Back to (6)
7. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London, 1981); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650?1750* (Oxford, 2001).Back to (7)

The editors are happy to accept Dr Lucci's review of this collection and are grateful to him for his thorough reading of all the essays as well as his constructive remarks.

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