

## The Levellers: Radical Political Thought in the English Revolution

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It may be hard to believe but there has been no single-author, book length study of the Levellers since H. N. Brailsford's *The Levellers and the English Revolution* was published in 1961. Rachel Foxley has ended this interregnum in fine style, but before looking at her new work it is worth examining why its publication is such a rare occurrence. Firstly, the absence of a monograph about the Levellers is not the same as there being no published work at all. The recent collection of essays on the Agreement of the People edited by Philip Baker and Elliott Vernon was a substantial contribution to the history of the Levellers. Michael Mendel edited a similar collection about the Putney Debates in 2001. And there have been some collections of Leveller writings brought together by Geoffrey Robertson in 2007 and by Andrew Sharp in 1998.<sup>(1)</sup> Beyond this there has been a mass of essays and articles in academic journals which have debated the role of the Levellers in the revolution. But taken all together this is still a relatively small amount of material compared to the rate at which books came from the presses between, say, the two collections of Leveller tracts published by Wolfe and by Haller and Davies in 1944 and Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* in 1971. The dearth is all the more marked when the acceleration of the academic production line in recent years is taken into account.

Rachel Foxley provides an explanation for this phenomenon in her introductory chapter on 'The Levellers and the historians'. As she says, 'The revisionist historians who have rewritten the history of the seventeenth century have questioned almost every aspect of the historical reputation of the Levellers' (p. 3). Foxley argues that although the revisionist challenge produced some fruitful avenues of research its overall effect was to push the study of the Levellers to the margins of what 'at its most extreme' this current saw as

‘unrevolutionary England’ (p. 3). Baker and Vernon note a similar trajectory in studies of the Levellers, arguing that the Levellers are less distinctive and original as a political force than they were thought to be by an earlier generation of liberal and Marxist historians.<sup>(2)</sup> While this view is not a consensus, it is relatively widely held. To mention only some more recent examples, Jonathan Scott argues that ‘any notion of a “Leveller party” is misleading’ and that the ‘movement never established a large-scale organisation of its own’, and Diane Purkiss says ‘The term “Leveller movement” used by historians is misleading ... the Levellers were not a party or a group ... certainly they did not have any kind of simple programme’. Michael Braddick is similarly sceptical of the Levellers’ ‘practical significance to the events of the 1640s’.<sup>(3)</sup> No doubt this view in part explains the absence of a book-length study. It is, after all, hard to write a book about something that is supposed barely to exist.<sup>(4)</sup>

For all that Foxley pays tribute to revisionist scholars for their ability to challenge previously existing accounts of the Levellers she is herself an advocate of a post-revisionist approach. She argues that ‘Even the most ardent defender of the cosy and consensual political world in early Stuart England must concede that Charles I was publicly tried and executed in 1649 – not killed in a corner’ (p. 4). She insists that ‘revisionist treatments of the later 1640s cannot wipe out the contribution of the Levellers to the radicalisation of parliamentary political thought’ (p. 4). And again, while Foxley is appreciative of some recent scholarship that has located the Levellers in the broader spectrum of radicalism in the gathered churches, the parliamentary opposition and the army, she makes the point that this should not lead us to ‘dissolve them into an undifferentiated part of that complex political world’ (p. 6). This is an essential methodological point. The approach which Foxley criticizes runs the risk of producing the effect that the philosopher Hegel describes as ‘a night in which all cows are black’, meaning that it is impossible to differentiate the object of study from its background. Foxley’s book is a tour-de-force in that while it properly and carefully delineates what the Levellers owed to their background it also demonstrates the ways in which they combined their influences in unique patterns and it outlines their specific, original contribution to the political ideas of the 1640s.

Foxley is predominantly concerned with Leveller political theory, perhaps the most difficult area in which to make the case for their coherence and novelty as a movement since they were at heart a political organisation responding to fast-emerging challenges. And it was in response to these that they developed their arguments. But Foxley makes a convincing case in a series of chapters devoted to popular consent and the origins of government, the Levellers’ appeal to the people as the ultimate source of political authority, Lilburne’s notion of the ‘free-born Englishman’, the relationship between consent in the religious sphere and in political life and, in a final chapter, the Levellers and the classical Republican tradition.

It is not possible to summarise all of Foxley’s arguments here, but two cases give a flavour of the approach. Firstly, in two chapters on popular consent and the origins of government and on the Levellers’ appeal to the people Foxley rejects the argument that the Levellers only inherited and extended arguments current among the radical supporters of parliament at the start of the civil war. Instead she gives us a more complex picture of the way in which the Levellers combined some of these views, associated with Henry Parker, with more conservative parliamentary theorists keen to place limits on the authority of parliament. Thus she argues ‘[t]he Levellers were creating a troubled but powerfully original synthesis of two aspects of parliamentary thought which had hitherto often been mutually exclusive’ (p. 45). This leads her to reject the ‘grand claims’ made for Leveller ideas as the forerunner of social contract theory arising from the notion that the civil war had returned the nation to a state of nature. In this she is surely correct. The Levellers did have an ideology, but it was fashioned on the move and in the midst of a political crisis, not in the seminar room. This makes it vital to place the emergence of the Levellers within the dynamic of the revolution. And while Foxley’s book is not a narrative of the Leveller movement she is careful to signpost the critical moments of transition. So of the July 1646 *Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* she says this ‘was the first Leveller text to make a claim to a mass following, a significant moment in the genesis of the group’. It emerged from the role that the Levellers were playing in ‘the increasing radicalisation of opinion on the fringes of Independency, both against the Scots and the king’ (p. 36).

A second example of this approach comes in the chapter on religion. Foxley argues that Leveller ideas about

political consent cannot be divorced from, but cannot be reduced to, the influence of religious forms, either in covenants or in gathered churches. As she says, 'There is simply no need to go hunting in covenant theology or congregational practice for Leveller political ideas of equality or "democracy", or for a prototype of the Agreement of the People'. Her case is that the 'contractarian and voluntarist elements of parliamentary thought' combined with, and this is crucial in my view, 'the extension of natural rights thinking into justification for political action in extreme circumstances ... render hypothetical religious sources for such ideas in the Levellers' writings redundant' (p. 121). This general stance does not, however, prevent Foxley from examining the more general relations between politics and religion in Leveller thought. Her overall position is a useful corrective to the balance of recent scholarship. But at the same time it is unlikely that, for instance, the soldiers that Richard Baxter found arguing 'sometimes for state-democracy, sometimes for church-democracy' were not drawing connections between the two. Even more radical forms of church democracy were being practiced in New England, and the connections to the Independents through returning New Englanders like Hugh Peter and regicide Owen Rowe's family, and to the Levellers through William Eyre and the Rainsborough-Winthrop family are worth further investigation.

The best chapter, in a book that has no bad chapters, is on the 'Levellers and the army', because it is here that Foxley's approach of placing the Levellers in their context without obscuring their specific contribution to the revolution most fully combines ideological analysis with an examination of the effects of the Levellers' political activity. Foxley notes that the Independents, other army activists and the Levellers all existed on a political spectrum in which it is difficult to cleanly separate one set of ideas or personnel from another. Nevertheless she also insists that revisionist scepticism about the existence of the Levellers as a movement is unjustified in the light of 'the petitioning campaign of the spring 1647, the pre-existing cooperation between the core of Leveller leaders, and the growing consistency of concerns and demands in the sequence of joint and individual works associated with the Leveller leaders' (p. 153). She is careful to trace Leveller influence on the Grandees of the army and the contacts between the 'civilian' Levellers and the army radicals. She concludes that 'the revisionist story about Putney and its aftermath cannot easily account for these continuing connections' (p. 159).

In my opinion the revisionist insistence that the Levellers were exterior to the army is overstated. Many Levellers were *of* the Army themselves. Lilburne had an exemplary and widely publicised military record. But Lilburne was not alone in this. Leveller William Allen served in Holles' regiment. Leveller printer William Larnier served as a sutler in Lord Robartes' regiment. Thomas Prince fought in the London Trained Bands until he was injured at Newbury in 1643. John Harris ran an Army printing press. Leveller ally Henry Marten had close engagement in military affairs in London and eventually raised his own regiment in Berkshire. Thomas Rainsborough and his brother William were Leveller sympathisers. Edward Sexby was a central figure in the actions of the Agitators. Army chaplains Jeremiah Ives and Edward Harrison supported the Levellers. This list is indicative but far from exhaustive. It does not include most of the figures directly involved in the mutinies at Ware in 1647, and at Bishopsgate and Burford, both in 1649. These connections add weight to Foxley's observation that the Putney debates 'marked not the end but the beginning of a potentially fertile alliance between civilian Levellers and army radicals' and that this 'reverses the picture painted by the standard revisionist historiography' (p. 158).

Rachel Foxley's book should be widely discussed in the academic circles which are its main audience. But its arguments also deserve wider circulation. Foxley notes that the Levellers retain a place in the popular imagination sustained by events like the annual Levellers' Day event in Burford and Caryl Churchill's play *Light Shining* in Buckinghamshire (pp. 2-3). And whatever might be said about the romanticism that attends such popular cultural transmissions they have in some respects pictured the Levellers more accurately than the more extreme revisionist historians. Foxley's book has the capacity to reset the debate about Leveller thought and restore it to a critical role in the history of the English revolution. It is an understatement to say that this book is long overdue. It deserves to be the benchmark post-revisionist study of Leveller political thought.

## Notes

1. The Agreements of the People, The Levellers and the Constitutional Crisis of the English Revolution, ed. P Baker and E Vernon (Basingstoke, 2012); *The Putney Debates of 1647*, ed. M Mendel (Cambridge, 2001); *The Levellers, The Putney Debates*, ed. G Robertson (London, 2007); *The English Levellers*, ed. A Sharp (Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Agreements of the People*, pp. 17–20.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J Scott, *England's Troubles, Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 270–1; D Purkiss, *The English Civil War, A People's History* (London, 2006), p. 476; M. Braddick, *God's Fury, England's Fire A New History of the English Civil War* (London, 2008), p. 444.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Indeed in some circles even the wider notion of radicalism in the 17th century has been called into question. For an overview of this debate see *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan (Farnham, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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