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English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime

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The publication of Jonathan Clark's *English Society* in 1985 marked the appearance of a new and original revisionist historiography of the long eighteenth century. For over two centuries Whig historians had sponsored an interpretation of the long eighteenth century which emphasised England's unique qualities, including its constitutional traditions, parliamentary government, the rule of law, religious toleration and freedom of speech. Clark's revisionist alternative depicted a different model of English society during the long eighteenth century, one which was structured around specific themes which the Whig interpretation had traditionally either excluded from its historiographical agenda, or relegated to a minor place within it: 'religion and politics, the Church and the social elite of aristocracy and gentry' (1). England was presented less as a liberal society than as an *ancien regime*, similar in many ways to the absolutist societies of the continent.

My aim throughout has been to re-integrate religion into an historical vision which has been almost wholly positivist; to discard economic reductionism, to emphasise the importance of politics in social history, and to argue against the familiar picture of eighteenth century England as the era of bourgeois individualism by showing the persistence of the ancien regime until 1828-32, and the autonomous importance of religion and politics in its final demise (2)

What Clark is questioning, therefore, is nothing less than the nature of eighteenth century English society as well as the trajectory of English historical development. These issues are of such overwhelming significance that they require analysis and detailed consideration.

Clark's argument proceeds from the initial assumption that the history of England in the long eighteenth century was a series of sustained and glorious achievement. How, he asks, should historians explain the sensational financial and economic advances of the period, the much-lauded establishment of parliamentary government and limited monarchy, the repeated military victories against the national enemy, France, the spectacular expansion of the British empire and, not least, after the Acts of Union of 1707 and 1800, the emergence of a united kingdom? He is at pains to point out that:

We are clearly dealing with a society which improved its position greatly over two centuries from 1660, strengthening its political institutions, its economic base, its strategic position, its colonial presence.

Clark has no time for the traditional explanations of England's rise to greatness. These include: spurious notions of a bourgeois revolution, of a constitutional ideology and an issueless political stability, of an industrial revolution, of a proletariat without belief or dignity, exploited to finance a bleak new world of possessive individualism.(3)

To discard these old explanations, in Clark's view, offers a number of advantages. First, it liberates us from the anachronistic presentation of eighteenth century England as a preparation for the emergence of England as a 'modern' state in the nineteenth. Clark's revisionism, therefore, allows us to present the long eighteenth century in its own terms, not as a preparation for what was to come in the nineteenth century. He argues that it is misleading to incorporate the long eighteenth century within a nineteenth century paradigm of 'modernity' (which downgrades the all-important traditional social and political elements). After all, according to Clark, industrialisation had made little impact before the early years of the nineteenth century while secularism had still to confront the powerful organisation of the Anglican Church. Social relationships were still inclined towards deference rather than class enmity.(4)

To conceive of eighteenth century England in Clark's revisionist terms arguably offers a further advantage. It lends historiographical unity to a lengthy period (1660-1832), which had been in danger of both fragmentation and serious misinterpretation. In particular, it brought together within a coherent historical interpretation two very different periods, the superficially tranquil and placid early decades of the eighteenth century, so often presented as 'an unpleasant hangover after the euphoric revolution of the 1640s'(5) and the much more dynamic era of reform and industrialisation of the early nineteenth. It did so by presenting English society between the Restoration and the Reform Bill as a continuous and mutually-reinforcing system of three main elements: 'it was Anglican, it was aristocratic, and it was monarchical'(6).

Clark's revisionism offered a yet further, important advantage - it allowed the historian to emphasise the common features which England shared with her European neighbours and to avoid the mythology of England's 'exceptionalism', the idea that she pursued a unique and independent path to constitutional government, economic revolution and imperial greatness. In other words, England was an *ancien regime* society, in many ways like those of the European continent. *English Society* 're-emphasises the similarities between England before 1832 and other European social systems of the *ancien regime*' (7). 'Only the concept of an *ancien regime*', argues Clark 'offers effective ways of reintegrating the history of England into that of continental Europe' (8).

The scope, ambition and originality of Clark's book deserve favourable emphasis. It is not too much to say that his work has inspired an enormous degree of debate and controversy and, not least, excitement. His book has become the starting point for research and writing in many fields of British history in the long eighteenth century.

However, as Jonathan Clark would certainly accept, some elements of his model of eighteenth century society had been anticipated by earlier writers. Many historians - not least Namier - had argued that eighteenth century England retained many traditional features, not least the social and political conservatism. I wrote a lengthy review article for *The Historical Journal* which included John Cannon's *Aristocratic Century*, Ian Christie's *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth Century Britain* and John Gunn's *Beyond Liberty and Property*. These books stressed the hierarchical basis of Hanoverian society, the aristocratic nature of its leadership, the conservatism of its pattern of thought and its adherence to existing forms of behaviour, within a framework of traditional institutions and values. None of them would have gone as far as Jonathan Clark in describing England as *ancien regime* society but they would have agreed that traditional institutions and patterns of thought maintained their grip on eighteenth century England.

Others would not have done. Social and economic historians were predictably unhappy with the *ancien regime* model because it appeared to ignore many of the modernising elements upon which their careers depended: industry, capitalism, commerce and the new patterns of consumption.⁽⁹⁾ Clark, however, replied that both economic development and rapid social change can occur within traditional societies, dominated by the monarchy, the church and the aristocracy, as is the case today in Japan and other Asian countries.

To picture an *ancien regime* in the ways adumbrated in *English Society* is to remind ourselves of the substantial compatibility of the hegemony of the traditional elite and of the orthodox religion with broadly-diffused commercial activity and incipient industrial growth.⁽¹⁰⁾

In this manner, the idea of England as an *ancien regime* society becomes marvellously flexible. It incorporates both the old and the new, industry and land, science and religion. Because it offers an historical explanation of activities hitherto presumed to be incompatible, Jonathan Clark's *English Society* has ingeniously squared a number of historiographical circles. In so doing, he has apparently succeeded in providing an overview of England in the long eighteenth century which has not only dislodged the old Whig interpretation but has gone far beyond the Tory constitutionalism of Sir Lewis Namier.

It is probably too early to reach any sort of final judgement on such an ambitious and wide-ranging synthesis. Perhaps inevitably, Clark's hypotheses have attracted their share of unfair criticism. Two such criticisms stand out: the tendency to dismiss Clark's interesting theses as driven by an extravagant right-wing political stance; and the charge that Clark ignores social change.

On the first of these, it is a caricature of his learned and considered approach to dismiss *English Society* as driven by little more than an historical reflection of the Thatcherite values of the 1980s. The work is a serious and scholarly contribution of a very high quality. At the same time, Clark himself intended his book to be a repudiation of the academic politics of the 1960s and 1970s.⁽¹¹⁾ Furthermore, there can be no doubt that revisionist historians were not without influence during the 1980s in the debate over the role of History in the National Curriculum, arguing for a syllabus that dealt principally with high rather than low politics and for political rather than social history. On the second, it is misleading to argue that Clark is unconcerned with social change.⁽¹²⁾ It is the extent of social change in the eighteenth century, and its implications for political and dynastic life, about which he is rightly sceptical. This may represent a narrowing of the scope of political history but it certainly does not represent a total neglect of social issues.

Notwithstanding a very real appreciation of Clark's achievement in reconstructing the historiographical landscape of England in the long eighteenth century, it has not been able to escape without suffering serious criticism from a varied assortment of scholars. On certain crucial issues, it has to be confessed, *English Society*

has not satisfied its critics.

Part of the reason for this failure is the inexorable accumulation of research. Clark was thoroughly justified in drawing attention to the impressive ability of the old regime to maintain and even to strengthen itself during the long eighteenth century, culminating in its success both in conducting and in financing over two decades of war with revolutionary and napoleonic France. Research published since the appearance of *English Society* has revealed that this was achieved less by the monarchy and the church, and the abiding forces of patriarchalism and divine right than the bureaucratic and financial innovations that characterised the century and which were highlighted by John Brewer's *The Sinews of Power: War Money and the English State* in 1989. It was the willingness of the middling orders both to finance and to staff the new state bureaucracy and armed services which explains the steadily rising power of the Hanoverian state not the pillars of the *ancien regime*. Although Jonathan Clark finds 'no room for bourgeois modernity'(13) in Hanoverian England the revenues of the state depended upon the taxes of the middling orders, the customs dues of commerce and the rapidly expanding trade of the empire and the wealth of the City of London. In considering the nature and the growing strength of the Hanoverian regime the commercial and imperial dimensions are of crucial significance. It might be added that while England derived enormous strength from her monarchy and church she derived no little strength, too, from the rising importance of Parliament during the long eighteenth century. The readiness of the propertied classes to regulate their affairs through recourse to parliamentary statute enhanced the legitimacy and the powers of parliament and its accountability to the public.(14)

Consequently, although eighteenth century justifications of monarchy may have owed much to divine right ideas, it does not follow that 'Gentlemen, the Church of England and the Crown commanded an intellectual and social hegemony' (15). It may be the case that 'An examination of its self-image, its rationales and its links with religion will allow us to see something also of the establishment's strength' (16) but it does not follow that such dynastic and religious justifications were widely shared. No doubt some contemporaries conceived of themselves as citizens of an *ancien regime* but others employed a cluster of rather different concepts: the Freeborn Englishman, the Anglo-Saxon constitution, the freedom of the press, the virtues of a Protestant nation and the legacy of the Glorious Revolution. They do not appear to have conceived of England as an *ancien regime*, preferring to compare her with Sweden and Holland rather than with the hated Catholic powers of France and Spain. In any case, the concept of an *ancien regime* is not without its own difficulties. To argue that England was an *ancien regime* state like her continental neighbours rather than a parliamentary or a liberal state confronts the problem of definition. What is an *ancien regime* state? England may have had many features in common with her European neighbours but there was no European standard. France differed from Austria, from Prussia, from Russia, from the Scandinavian monarchies. To argue that France served as some sort of absolutist model for continental states is seriously misleading. The massive variations in the powers enjoyed by monarchs and the number of large, important countries in which the monarch was self evidently *not* absolutist - Britain, Sweden, Poland and Holland - all weaken the force of the *ancien regime* argument. To assert that England was an *ancien regime* state because she had a monarchy, a church and an aristocracy borders on platitude. Most regimes in European history fit that description. It is the differences between such regimes which explain their differing patterns of development. The development of Britain is explained less by her status as a so-called *ancien regime* state than by her island status, located on the north western periphery of Europe, as a naval rather than a military power. Her system of common law retained its distinctiveness and its peculiar version of maritime Protestantism its character. Her great victories in the wars of the long eighteenth century ensured that her territories would not be over-run by France, thus enabling her to achieve economic pre-eminence in Europe and to establish a global maritime and imperial supremacy. It is particular, thematic considerations such as these rather than theories of her *ancien regime* status which provide explanations of England's development.

Such explanations, however, are not to be found in Clark's book which focuses almost exclusively upon high politics, political theory and Anglican ideology. Although Clark has striven to liberate politics from reductionist teleologies, whether Marxist or liberal, he has perhaps fallen back upon an equally reductionist high political definition of politics.

There is little or nothing in his book about the links between high and low politics, about the political implications of popular culture or about the cyclical challenge of reforming movements to the stability of the Hanoverian state. From the pages of *English Society* it would be difficult to imagine that there was a popular political culture at all, still less that a popular political loyalism or a popular political reformism ever existed during the Confessional regime of the long eighteenth century.

England may in theory have been a Confessional State, that is, a state with a single confession of faith, a faith established by the law and to which the majority of the population was expected to conform, but it is not clear that the English people were docile and deferential to their clerical superiors. Few of them - probably well under 20% - attended church with any regularity, fewer still communicated and indifference, secularism and even paganism were rife.

The fall of Clark's *ancien regime* came swiftly, between 1828 and 1832. It was not overthrown gradually by external pressures such as demographic change, industrial revolution, urbanisation or by new social and religious organisations. It came about through an act of betrayal from within. The bishops of the Church of England failed to defend their church with sufficient vigour and thus enabled the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the passage of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Not surprisingly after this, they did little to resist the passage of the Reform Act of 1832. There was nothing new about challenges to the Confessional State, whether from Civil War sectaries, Restoration Roman Catholics, post-Revolution non-Jurors, American Dissenters, Irish Catholics and Painite radicals. As Clark bitterly notes: 'there was nothing unique about the challenges faced by the regime in the 1820s except their spectacular success' (17). Thereafter, 'the cultural hegemony of the aristocracy and gentry disintegrated with great rapidity'(18).

Few aspects of Clark's book have encountered greater criticisms than his account of the collapse of the *ancien regime*. Almost every singly historian who has examined the issue has highlighted the substantial amount of continuity between the periods before and after 1828-32. Indeed, the *ancien regime* did not collapse because of an act of internal treachery. It contained the seeds of its own steady transformation. The authority of the Hanoverian regime had rested less upon its prescriptive qualities than upon its dynamic and conditional features: its ability to absorb and to respond to discussion, dissent and disagreement, its ability to accommodate new wealth and new property, its subtle and complex webs of patronage in so many areas of national life, its generalised sentiments of reciprocal deference between landed superiors and the rest of the population, all underlined by a powerful and, in all probability, a growing patriotism. There was no sudden collapse of the regime. There was, rather, a continuous series of accommodations. It is, perhaps, inherently unlikely that the staggering achievements of England between 1688 and 1832 could be explained simply by the fact that she had a monarchy, a church and an aristocracy. Important though these are, we should not forget that the regime derived great strength from its commerce and from the rapid growth of consumer goods, from the growth of the new bureaucratic structures of the fiscal-military state and, not least, from the incorporation of the middling orders. As Jonathan Clark has conceded, 'the residual values of an ancien regime co-exist with and subtly modify apparently quite contradictory values'(19). Indeed, the regime was particularly successful in devising the means of its own perpetuation, especially through the harnessing of social and economic change. This it undertook continuously both before and after 1828-32.

English Society, then, provides an engrossing account of some of the formal and official features, both political and ecclesiastical, of the Hanoverian regime and a partial explanation of its acceptance and of its longevity. If it fails to provide a global account of the regime it is because Clark has led us to expect too much. *English Society* is not a work of social history, despite the somewhat misleading sub-title. It is, in my view, essentially a work of polemical and historiographical innovation. As Clark admits in his Preface;

This book is offered as a breach of the historiographical peace, not as an obituary of its subject: as an attempt to stimulate a new debate, not as an attempt to bring an old debate to an end by a precise and definitive statement. (20)

No book could achieve as much. If *English Society* does not quite convince the reader of the validity of all of its many and varled theses and arguments it nevertheless has served to reawaken interest in many neglected features of the *ancien regime* and thus to reposition the debate about the kind of society that England was during the long eighteenth century.

Notes:

1. J.C.D.Clark, *English Society 1688-1832. Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien regime* (C.U.P. 1985), p. ix

2. *Ibid.* pp. Ix-x

3. J.C.D.Clark, 'On Hitting the Buffers: the Historiography of England's Ancien Regime. A Response', *Past and Present*, no. 117 (November 1987) p. 203.

4. *English Society* pp. 42-64.

5. J.C.D.Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (C.U.P. 1986), p. 7.

6. *English Society* p. 7.

7. *Ibid.* P. 6.

8. 'On Hitting the Buffers', p. 202.

9. See, for example, Roy Porter, 'English Society in the Eighteenth Century Revisited', in J. Black, (ed.) *British Politics and Society from Walpole to Pitt 1742-89* (1990), pp. 29-52; M.J. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: an Economic and Social History of Britain, 1700-1850* (O.U.P. 1995); J. Rule, *Albion's People: English Society, 1714-1815* (1992).

10. 'Buffers', p. 203.

11. *English Society* pp.1, 5-6, 8- 14.

12. As is the case with Porter, *supra* n. 9.

13. *English Society* p. 118.

14. See, for example, P. Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689-1798* (Clarendon Press,

Oxford, 1991), especially chapters 3 to 6.

15. *English Society* p. 7.

16. *Ibid.* p. 4.

17. *Ibid.* pp. 409, 374-424.

18. *Ibid.* p. 411.

19. *Revolution and Rebellion*, pp. 168-89.

20. *English Society*, p. x.

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