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Charles II and the Politics of Access

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Brian Weiser takes as his subject the court and politics of Charles II's reign, examining them through the glass of access. Following the examples of earlier historians of European courts, he is interested in how a monarch's availability to his subjects reflects his policies and attitudes. Weiser defines a spectrum of access ranging from open to closed, with various gradations in between. Open access monarchies were largely a thing of the past in the latter seventeenth century, exemplifying a more medieval governing style, hearkening back to such examples as St Louis sitting under an oak, or Edward I roaming the countryside on progress. More common by Charles II's time were monarchies that surrounded princes with thickets of ceremony and protocol. A king's appearances in these baroque courts were carefully choreographed. Weiser cites Louis XIV as an obvious example, but the Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs would make the point equally well.

Weiser argues that Charles II occupies a number of points on the spectrum during his reign, from attempting to be 'everybody's king' (p. 66) to a cloistered monarch accessible only to the politically sound. In every case, changes in the 'politics of access' were connected with the broader political goals of the regime. Using the evolving architecture of Charles II's palaces, including the existing hodge-podge that was Whitehall, Windsor and the planned (but never completed) extravagances of Winchester, he demonstrates the king's accessibility as it waxed and waned. Household ordinances, laying down the rules governing admittance to the royal presence, also figure in Weiser's account. The book's chapters on the court and its architecture are

much the most useful part of the work, illuminating the inner workings of faction and the complex interactions between the king and his courtiers. The author also provides a useful summary of Charles's travels during the reign, and his periods of residence in his various palaces.

Using the organisation of the court and the king's accessibility as his starting point, Weiser then proceeds to the bigger picture, attempting to apply his analysis of the shifting currents of court access to the kingdom at large. He does this with varying degrees of success. In succeeding chapters he discusses local politics and trade policy in light of Charles's changing accessibility. From 1660 to 1681 Charles waffles back and forth, from openness to exclusivity. In the early 1660s, influenced by Clarendon, Charles opts for openness; by the 1670s, with Danby's rise to prominence, a more exclusive attitude takes hold. Ultimately, the king denied access to those refusing to accept Royalist Anglican principles. The decisive break comes in 1681 as a result of the Exclusion Crisis, which finally persuades Charles that rewarding his friends with a monopoly of power was the only sure way to save the legal succession. The importance of the succession crisis has long been known, of course, and Weiser also recognises it as a watershed. The resulting vision, however, while at times illuminating, is fundamentally myopic; the king's decision to embrace open access, ensuring open lines of communication (or not), trumps all.

For example, Weiser sees the lieutenancy as primarily an avenue of communication between the crown and locality, and appointments to offices in it (as lord or deputy lieutenants) as part of the royal policy of access. But this ignores the fact that the lieutenancy's principal role was security, not communication. He never mentions, for example, Venner's Rising of 1661 which, though in hindsight a rather pathetic failure, thoroughly frightened the court and spurred a much harsher attitude towards dissenters. Continued plotting in subsequent years, followed by the Dutch Wars, ensured that security would remain at the forefront of the government's concerns. Not until the Exclusion Crisis did the lieutenancy begin to take on a serious political role, as the enforcer of Royalist Anglican orthodoxy. Similarly, he treats the crown's campaign to regulate municipal corporations as exercises in communication: 'Quo Warranto proceedings exemplify the king's desire to turn over all conduits of communication between town and crown into the hands of Anglican stalwarts.' (p. 118) This is true, as far as it goes – but the most important reason was Charles's determination to control the make-up of any future house of commons. Like the Royalist Anglicans to whom he turned in 1681, Charles knew that the lesson of '41 was not about communication: it was about preventing the election of another runaway parliament.

Weiser's chapter on accessibility and trade sits rather uneasily with his previous discussion of politics. Certainly Charles was interested in trade and made attempts to advance it. Equally certain was the conviction of merchants and businessmen that the king could advance their interests if only they could capture his personal attention. Throughout the reign they struggled for opportunities to present their cases before the throne. After 1681, merchants who hoped for a polite hearing from the king had best tow the Yorkist line, but Charles's handling of trade matters also depended upon his own personal interests, and were in any case always subject to pressures from parliament and foreign competition. Weiser's attempt to bind commercial policy rigidly to the ebb and flow of Restoration politics does not allow for the complex reality of trade during a period of dramatic expansion.

Weiser's focus upon access to the sovereign's person is salutary; Charles II presided over a personal monarchy, and the king's decisions about whom to admit to his presence had important consequences. But at times the author seems to miss other important factors influencing Charles's policies, and often he asserts royal intentions without demonstrating what the king actually thought. 'In the 1670s Charles II abandoned the task of uniting his nation, for he no longer believed England to be a naturally organic whole' (p. 4). While this might be true, it neglects the fact that England's organic wholeness was purely imaginary from at least 1640, and does not demonstrate that Charles II ever truly believed in the idea. Charles's attempt to recreate a medieval-style open access monarchy – being 'everybody's king' – was short-lived and, arguably, rather half-hearted. But Weiser is undeniably correct to note the important change in royal attitude towards political foes from 1681: Charles did create a one-party state in order to assure his brother's accession, and he used every reward he had at hand – including regulating access to the court – in the process.

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