

1688: The First Modern Revolution

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In this brilliant and provocative book, Steve Pincus creates a welcome stir that will enliven the study of the later 17th century. Its author is like his revolutionary Whig subjects: self-conscious and polemical about a desire to set things on a new footing. The result is a bracing, combative, highly stimulating argument, written in vivid and lively prose. The book is an ideal one to give to students, not only because Pincus enthuses about and revels in his subject in a way that is highly infectious, but also because he writes such a strongly argued and argumentative piece. Almost all the chapters court controversy and should provide ample scope for debate.

The overall argument is relatively easily summarised. The revolution of 1688 was the first modern revolution. Like more recent revolutions, it was violent, popular, and divisive. It was not an aristocratic coup or a Dutch invasion, but a popular rejection of James II's French-inspired, Catholic, absolutist modernisation of the state in favour of an alternative Anglo-Dutch vision that prized consent, religious toleration, free debate and commerce. By the mid-1690s this second, Whig version had triumphed. Britain had experienced a truly transformative revolution that had reshaped religion, political economy, foreign policy and the nature of the state.

The first half of this review will sketch out the argument in more detail. I shall then conclude with some reflections on it.

The first chapter examines the way in which 1688 has been viewed by subsequent generations. Pincus seeks to explain why, if 1688–9 was really revolutionary, it should have acquired a reputation as conservative, moderate and peaceful. Discerning a change of Whig attitudes under Walpole in the 1720s and 1730s,

Pincus also suggests that the radicals of the later 18th century turned their back on what they saw as an imperfect revolution. Both moderates and radicals thus came to see 1688–9 as a conservative revolution, though the first group celebrated it for that and the second despised it for it. Pincus then takes the modern scholarly community to task for having ‘claimed with a united voice’ that the ‘lives of most Britons were remarkably little affected’ by the revolution.

The next five chapters (part two of the book) examine pre-revolutionary England. Chapter three adopts an explicitly comparative European perspective, arguing that by James II’s reign England was urbanising ‘more rapidly than any place in Europe’; had become commercial; and had developed an infrastructure of communication and debate (p. 60). These ‘social and economic changes informed a new kind of politics’ (p. 87). Political change thus occurred in part *as a result of* a new type of commercial society. Chapter four surveys politics in 1685. Pincus argues that the warmth with which his accession was greeted showed that ‘the vast majority of English men and women were willing to accept a Catholic king as long as he was willing to rule within the parameters established by the English constitution in church and state’ (p. 104). Chapters five, six and seven turn to an examination of the king and his policies. Chapter five takes issue with Macaulay’s interpretation of James’s policies as ‘stupid and perverse’ – Pincus thinks James had political skill – and also with historians who have suggested that James did not have absolutist intentions. Instead, Pincus argues that James ‘pursued an aggressive and very modern agenda – modern not because it was particularly tolerant but because it adopted the most up-to-date notions of state building’ (p. 121). The model was the brand of Gallican Catholicism developed by Louis XIV. The French king’s alliance with the Jesuits and hostility to Rome shows that James deliberately surrounded himself with those closest to the French position. Indeed, Pincus argues, ‘James’s commitment to French-style Catholicism placed limits on his commitment to toleration’ (p. 135). For James, toleration was merely ‘a means to an end, not a deeply felt principle’ (p. 137).

Chapter six, the most traditional in the book, explains the ways in which James sought to modernise the state by reforms of the army and implement ‘a very modern surveillance state’ (p. 153) in which discussion of royal policy was unwelcome and in which opposition resulted in removal from office. Chapter seven charts the resistance to this process of Catholic modernisation which Pincus argues was more widespread than has previously been recognised. Returning to a thread running throughout the book, he sees this opposition arising on secular rather than religious grounds. Even those who wanted toleration saw ‘that civil liberty was a necessary prerequisite to real religious liberty’ (p. 180). Indeed ‘it was precisely because James II’s opponents deployed the language of liberty rather than that of salvation ... that it makes little sense to discuss their triumphs as an Anglican revolution’ (p. 198). Having initially embraced the opportunity for religious freedom offered by James, more and more dissenters voiced their opposition to James’s Catholic modernisation project. ‘Most Whigs and Dissenters moved beyond a narrow politics of religious identity in 1687 and 1688. They did not believe that religion was unimportant – far from it – rather, Whigs and Dissenters developed the claim that religious liberty was impossible without the protection of the law’ (p. 209). Even so, Pincus argues, the demise of James’s regime was not inevitable by the summer of 1688’, since he had proved remarkably successful (p. 211). ‘James was able, using the resources, institutions and traditions he had inherited, to mold a modern state’ (p. 213). He was ‘not the bumbling, bigoted and hopelessly unrealistic king described in Whig historiography. He did much to centralise political power in England’ (p. 216).

The next section of the book examines the revolution itself. Three chapters insist that 1688–9 was popular, violent and divisive. It thus meets ‘the theoretical standard of revolution’ (p. 223) and can be compared to events in France in 1789. Indeed, ‘popular disaffection rather than military revolt destroyed James II’s modernizing regime’ (p. 234). 1688 was not an aristocratic putsch or a Dutch invasion. It was bloody, with violence directed not just against Catholics but also James’s protestant supporters, and extensive in both Scotland and Ireland. Rather than spawning political consensus, the revolution also fostered bitter division. Party-political differences rapidly rose to the surface and the temporary unanimity of groups in 1688 fell apart soon after as a result of partisan feuding. ‘As in all modern revolutions, there was a political ebb and flow between those who simply wanted to dismantle the modernizing programme of the ousted leader and

those who wanted to implement an alternative modernization agenda' (p. 300).

The fourth part of the book – in many ways its intellectual heart – therefore examines the revolutionary transformation envisaged and ultimately effected by the Whigs. The first transformation, explored in chapter 11, was a revolution in foreign policy that was explicitly intended by the revolutionaries rather than being the result of a Dutch king's will. William did not simply impose his European agenda on the nation; instead, 'the English invited William to England because they knew he would support their image of the national interest', which meant war with France (p. 307). James's aggressively pro-French and anti-Dutch foreign policy meant that 'most English people came to understand their own problems in remarkably modern and nationalist terms'; they saw the world in European terms (p. 333). This was not, however, a war of religion, for Catholic powers supported England and the Dutch; rather it was 'an international struggle against Louis XIV, a tyrant and aspiring universal monarch, who was equally threatening to Catholic and Protestant' (p. 339).

A second revolutionary transformation occurred in political economy, the subject of chapter 12. Against those he sees as stressing hostility to new economic ideas, Pincus argues that the revolution has to be seen in the context of a debate 'between two rival modern economic programs' (p. 368), a 'fierce debate between a land-based Tory political economy and labor-centered Whig one' (p. 369). Both sides wanted the post-revolutionary state to intervene in support of their economic programme. James had thus sought to use the state to back Josiah Child's East India Company, which sought to expand territorially in India. James had a 'coherent and modern imperial policy' but it was at odds with Whig notions that property was created by human endeavour and that banks had much to do with the nation's wealth (p. 381). The Whigs wanted a manufacturing rather than a landed society. And they initiated their economic policies in the 1690s after gaining the political ascendancy.

The third major revolutionary change, Pincus argues, occurred in the Church. Claiming that many scholars insist that the revolution did little to change the Church of England and that 'the post-revolutionary Church of England was united in its commitment to intolerance and persecution' (p. 402), Pincus argues that it was transformed by 1688–9 into a church whose bishops upheld toleration and which placed the security of civil liberties above all else.

The final chapter of the book takes the debates over the assassination plot against William in 1696, and the subsequent widespread subscription to a national 'association', as testament to how much had changed. Embracing William as rightful and lawful king, most 'now eschewed a moderate and ambiguous interpretation of the events of 1688–9' (p. 454). Notions of hereditary divine right were abandoned; and the plot 'dealt the final deathblow to Jacobite economics' (p. 461). The assassination plot of 1696 'made it possible for the Whigs to consolidate their radical revolution' (p. 473).

Pincus's methodology and many of his recurrent themes are extremely welcome. The book's concern to see history in the whole, and hence to correlate changes in politics, religion and the economy, helps us to evade scholarly ghettos. The book's deliberate use of the secondary literatures of other disciplines, notably the political and social sciences, is important and should help us to stand back from events in 1688 to ask how they fit into wider patterns of change. The thrust of the book's argument, that 1688–9 was the first modern revolution, is made in the light of a wide-ranging analysis of the literature on revolutions. The criteria for a revolution are set out and, it is suggested, centre on state modernisation programmes. These open spaces for contest by conceding the need for radical change, are often related to international affairs and create new forms of publics and politics. Though this is a wide definition of revolution (and requires us to think harder about modernisation theory), encouraging historians to engage with the social science literature in this way must surely be a good thing.

Pincus's desire to compare the revolution of 1688 to other revolutions and to compare England with its continental neighbours is methodologically refreshing. Similarly he has an important case to make when charting of a shift from the confessional concerns of the earlier 17th century to the more complex and interest-ridden world of the 18th, in which matters of political economy featured prominently. Indeed, this

will make the book an important read for anyone studying the 17th century and trying to assess the degree of change and continuity over the century. By stressing that key changes occurred in the later Stuart period rather than earlier, and that these help to explain the character of Britain in the 18th century (not a point that he makes a good deal of but which his concern with political economy makes very clearly) Pincus's book will find a place in any discussion of the timing and impact of revolutionary change. The overall argument that 1688–9 was and is important and that the controversies it both reflected and created penetrated a wide political nation are also an important addition to work by Geoff Holmes, Bill Speck and (more recently) Tim Harris who showed how popular and divisive partisan politics were in this period. Pincus really does show why 1688 mattered and why it can't just be dismissed as the last invasion of England or as an aristocratic coup. By refocusing attention on the later 17th century as a period of national importance and as a period of exciting changes, Pincus has helped to reinvigorate it and make it worthy of discussion and debate.

As this suggests, I have great sympathy for many of the arguments put forward. But, in the interest of further stimulating that discussion and debate, I shall suggest that some of the strengths of the book also, paradoxically, admit weaknesses.

Pincus is nicely argumentative, delights in controversy and is keen to take on scholars, both dead and alive – but sometimes this is also problematic. He invents some historiographical Aunt Sallies to knock down. In each of the three chapters in part four, outlining revolutionary change, he creates a rather distorted view of what historians actually argue. There are very few scholars, I think, who don't admit that the revolution transformed the contours of foreign policy or that this change was not in some way part of a longer struggle against French influence and power, as he suggests at the start of chapter 11. At the beginning of the following chapter Peter Dickson and John Brewer, who between them have done most to establish the notion of a financial revolution in the 1690s, are lumped together with a 'profound consensus' that sees no demand for modern financial institutions. Pincus's characterisation of the historiography of the church, at the start of chapter 13, is also rather questionable. There are few historians who don't recognise the changes brought about by the revolution or who are unaware of divisions between Low and High Church wings or who argue that the church was 'united in its commitment to intolerance and persecution' (401–2). Pincus, sometimes rather needlessly, exaggerates the coherence of scholars ranged against him. Moreover, if we take two standard textbooks for the period, Geoffrey Holmes's *Making of a Great Power* and Julian Hoppit's *Land of Liberty?* (1) we can find many of the arguments developed in Pincus's book. Similarly, although Pincus and Tim Harris disagree about the strength of James's regime (Pincus thinks it much stronger and more successful), the argument that 1688–9 was more important than the mid-century revolution and was radical, violent and popular (particularly in Ireland and Scotland) is shared by Harris's recent *Revolution*. (2) This is not to say that Pincus's book is not original or well footnoted. Indeed, there are over a hundred pages of notes. But he highlights areas of disagreement rather than agreement with other historians. Sometimes that is a virtue; but not always, and it can actually make it harder to appreciate his own contribution.

Other strengths can also at times leave his argument vulnerable. Pincus must surely be right to argue that the revolutions are not made overnight and he does well to integrate an account of change in the restoration era into an account of 1688. Yet he is himself open to the accusation that he makes against others of an overly short chronology. There is relatively little consideration of the claims of the mid-century revolution – which was also violent, divisive and popular. A more sustained comparison between the two 17th century revolutions would have been extremely useful to show how they differed and answer a series of questions that are raised by Pincus's argument. How precisely did debates over property and political economy differ in the 1680s from those of the 1640s? How was the 'public' of the later Stuart period different to that of the earlier? Was the vision of religious toleration different in the later period? How did the imperial impulse of the mid-century differ from that of the end? I think there were differences (though also interesting parallels) but these are never spelt out. Perhaps there is scope for a collection of essays comparing the two 17th century revolutions and indeed those with the American and French revolutions of the 18th century.

Moreover, by ending his account in 1696 Pincus leaves himself little scope to examine the medium and longer term impact of 1688–9; and the early end-date may actually leave a false impression of Whig triumph. He ends his story at the high-tide of Whig fortunes. Just a few years later, in 1698–1700, the Whigs

were divided and weakened; and if the story had ended in 1710 or 1713, it might have sounded very different. By then, the Tories were resurgent. Ideas about non-resistance and about the danger of toleration were again being openly discussed in the popular literature; and the political economy of the Whigs was distrusted and reviled. At the end of Anne's reign, then, the revolution and its principles seemed far from being consolidated; they were once again being contested. Longer term, the critique of the later 18th century radicals about what the revolution failed to achieve also deserves some real consideration. Moreover, such reservations make Pincus's claim that 1688 'paved the way for parliamentary democracy' (p. 43) seem a needless exaggeration of his argument, one that ironically give his analysis a Whiggishness even though he is explicitly countering Macaulay's Whig interpretation.

Pincus is excellent on integrating different branches of history. It is genuinely refreshing to read an account that brings together politics, religion and economics, as well as drawing on the theoretical literature about revolutions and modernisation. So it is slightly curious that one of the central concepts of the book – the state – is so lightly conceptualised and that Pincus doesn't make more of the social history of the state that has been developed by Mike Braddick, Phil Withington, Patrick Collinson, Steve Hindle and others. Central to Pincus's argument is that there were competing state-modernisation programmes. By 'state' Pincus tends to mean a centralising, bureaucratic state that becomes, as he puts it on page 467, 'more than a local affair'. But the social historians have taught us that the early modern state was never merely a central or local affair, nor was it simply about institutions. We can talk of a parish state and also of a dispersed state, whose institutions were locally situated, socially constructed and which also relied less on power than on negotiation. The ideal of the voluntary office-holding, participatory state was one retained by many of the revolutionary Whigs. There were many others who discerned in the post-revolutionary state a decay of the 'public spirit', a danger of overly large royal influence as a result of the enormous amount of patronage now at its disposal and a restricted freedom of self-governance, whilst at the same time remaining deeply supportive of revolution principles and indeed interpreting the latter as representing their own ideals. Pincus argues that both 'sides' wanted to transform the state and that one vision of the state triumphed over another; but the battle against a centralising, bureaucratic, authoritarian and coercive state was certainly not over by 1696.

As this suggests, Pincus's polemical vigour, so refreshing in many ways, sometimes leads him to oversimplify the complexity of the dividing lines. For example, Sir Bartholomew Shower is described as an anti-monopolist lawyer who successfully pleaded that property was not limited to land but also included mobile wealth (pp. 385–6). Pincus hails his argument as sounding the deathknell of an opposing political economy based on land, exemplified by James II's policies and by the East India Company. The decision that Shower helped to secure is described as a 'landmark' one. Shower thus outlined 'a very different imperial regime' to the one espoused by James II. We would conclude from this that Shower was a revolutionary Whig. In fact, he was a Tory, who was knighted for his services to James II, with whom he was very closely identified in the late 1680s. He was attacked as a Francophile, mercenary and popish tool of the king – the very reverse of the image that his legal argument would suggest. The larger point to be made here is that the ambiguities of positions within the two competing ideological camps are important and sometimes need more acknowledgement.

Two reservations might also be made about the interpretation of 1688. First, the attempt to rehabilitate James is interesting but there is also a tension in the argument. Pincus goes out of his way to say that James was a skilful politician; that he was, until as late as the summer of 1688, rather successful; and hence that revolution was not inevitable. But he also refers to institutional collapse in 1688 and stresses the depth of popular and elite hostility to James's policies. Given that collapse and hostility, and the reliance of the state on large ranks of unpaid office-holders, it is difficult to argue that James's absolutist policies and modernising programme were really very successful at all – or at least not without offering some yardstick for measuring 'success'. Of course, hindsight is a wonderful thing and certainly in 1687 the king still *seemed* strong. But the strength of James's modernised army state was always rather illusory, an edifice of royal power built on a monarchical republic. It took courage to challenge it; but once challenged, it fell apart rather rapidly in England, if not in Ireland. Second, Pincus is also excellent at showing the divisions within

Catholicism and how James II surrounded himself with Francophile Jesuits and emulated Louis XIV's model. But (beside the issue of whether the French and English states were sufficiently similar for that to work) this creates another tension. In 1685 Louis XIV tore up religious toleration in France; yet after 1686 James II in England embraced toleration as a central policy. Pincus argues that the latter was only ever a means to an absolutist end; but the ideological defences of toleration that he encouraged complicate any use of France as a model and ironically also promoted commercial arguments that were designed to appeal to the Whigs.

These are only a few of the controversies that Pincus's excellent book stirs. That it invites such debate is one of its very real strengths and makes it a book that will be difficult for any student of the 17th century or of revolutions to ignore.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain, 1660-1722* (London, 1993); Julian Hoppit, *Land of Liberty? England 1689-1727* (Oxford, 2002). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tim Harris, *Revolution: the Great Crisis of the British Monarchy, 1685-1720* (London, 2006). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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