

A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England's Long Social Revolution, 1066–1649

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David Rollison has written a remarkable work of social and political history: vertiginously ambitious, *A Commonwealth of the People* showcases England's constitutional and economic development from the 11th to the 17th century within world histories of nationalism, democratization, and globalization. 'My subject', he writes, 'is the emergence of a "civilization"' (p. 16). At the heart of this grand narrative is mass engagement in English public life between the Norman Conquest and the execution of Charles I. Through this theme, Dr Rollison traces the emerging class-consciousness of the commons of England and thus the roots of progressive politics.

The peopling of Britain in prehistoric times had begun to foster a shared sense of 'landscape', that is, the political geography of identity, ownership, and belonging. Over such a *longue durée*, the Norman Conquest represented a moment of discontinuity, the two centuries or so that it took the invading and the indigenous populations to assimilate. Yet the conquest as idea resonated down the centuries. The experience of subjugation (as collective servility) reinforced a 'hard-core dualism of elite ruling class and subject multitude' that would be reflected in the writings of populists such as John of Salisbury and of reactionaries such as Thomas Hobbes – the two thinkers who bookend the study (p. 45). In the *Policraticus* John of Salisbury recognized and also vindicated the independence of the commons, the 'feet' of his body politic. This metaphor also de-centred the crown: in its place, a collective sense of the greater good – what would, in time, be called the 'commonweal' – appeared.

Over the three centuries after the *Policraticus* was written, the commons became an insistent presence in

public life. The rise of English – the language of the commonalty – as the collective tongue of national culture intensified this intervention. The vernacularization of public life over the 14th century privileged the people, the ‘common voice’. Public opinion – whether in the exchange of news, the telling of stories, or the repeating of anecdotes – was, above all, ‘common opinion’. Because of its power, vernacular discourse came to be seen as dangerous, the object of suspicion and (in the case of religious expression) of suppression. Nevertheless from 1381 the commons succeeded in creating a tradition of rebellion that unnerved the elite, who struggled to adapt inherited social theory to a changing balance of power. An awareness of the commons’ potency coloured elite politics throughout the long 15th century and beyond its conventional caesura of 1549.

As important as linguistic development was material circumstance. The challenge of ‘making shift’ in an unequal society laid the basis for popular politics, irrespective of demographic conditions. The commercialization of medieval England intensified the ability of commoners to pool collective experience; the growth of industry, concentrated in particular areas, generated a greater consciousness of shared interests and hence a greater readiness to vocalize them. Around the mid 16th century these atomized and often competing concerns began to be treated collectively as the national interest – to be protected, nurtured, and enhanced. Increasingly, Englishmen looked overseas for opportunities to trade, to discover, and to conquer. A new empiricism, based on the amassing of information, characterized domestic social policy and overseas expansion. Around the same time, divisions within the commons between the middling sort (the yeoman class) and the rest started to widen.

England in the early 17th century was thus poised at a revolutionary conjuncture of forces. Works such as *Coriolanus* rendered half-elegiac accounts of a vanished politics of ‘great men’. The English had never adopted a passively reverential attitude to government, but from the 1620s the circulation of frankly critical views engendered a many-headed monster of public opinion – the *Behemoth*. As its author Hobbes recognized, royal authority collapsed two years before the Civil War formally broke out. Medieval notions of commonweal and the tradition of tyrannicide legitimated the execution of Charles I. The legacy of the Republic was an English polity reconstituted as ‘a commonwealth of landed households’ (p. 464). A settlement that recognized the social depth of the governing class reclaimed for the elite this formerly subversive language, and radicalism thereafter assumed new guises. The era of the commonweal, stretching from the 14th century, thus finally ended.

This short synopsis of a complex argument reveals the nature of the work Rollison has written. *A Commonwealth of the People* is not a miniaturist monograph, hedging limited conclusions with caveats; rather, it is a panoramic essay, full of imaginative links and bracing observations. Thus *A Commonwealth of the People* is boldly conceptual and brashly argued, demandingly written and recursively structured, well read and lightly referenced. In an impressive feat of synthesis, Rollison sets seminal recent studies of the late medieval and early modern periods against a range of political theorists. He pulls together an eclectic range of evidence into an overarching account that excites and also provokes. Much depends on how plausible the reader finds the principles on which the book is based.

As Rollison points out in his preface, *A Commonwealth of the People* draws on and extends the new social history of early modern politics, pushing its approach back into the middle ages, where it can connect with recent works on the political culture of late medieval England. Rollison makes a compelling case for the common identity of the popular politics of the late 14th and early 17th centuries. Equally timely is his emphasis on language as a constituent, as well as an expression, of political consciousness. He establishes convincingly that the rise of English and the emergence of a self-consciously ‘common’ politics over the 14th century were not coincidental. Nevertheless, Rollison’s intellectual interests are not entirely of the present moment. I spotted a single reference in the book to James C. Scott and found none to Gramsci.

In its overarching conceptualization, *A Commonwealth of the People* owes much to traditional Marxist historiography. Invoking Marx several times, Rollison amplifies, modifies, and in fundamentals endorses the view that the social revolution of the long 15th century powered the political revolution of the mid 17th century. Thus, ‘the first Commons Rebellion in 1381 and the execution, 268 years later, of Charles I are

historically – causally – related events’ (p. 34). The overarching theme of *A Commonwealth of the People* is hence the state of class-consciousness, which perhaps differs subtly in emphasis from Andy Wood’s episodes of class-conflict.

For Rollison, as for Marx, class is the primary means of interpreting human society. Class is autochthonous, which explains the digression into prehistory in chapter one. Class-consciousness is thus waiting in the wings: it is either a latent potentiality or an active force. In the case of late medieval England, the reagents were socio-economic expansion and linguistic development. *A Commonwealth of the People* hunts for nascent class-consciousness. For example, Rollison insists that the Latin word *communitas* meant not only ‘community’ but also ‘the commonalty’, for ‘we should not assume that class divisions that are obvious in retrospect were not also obvious at the time’ (p. 95).

Rollison accepts in a note that class is not the only way of categorizing medieval and early modern society (p. 21 n. 33). Other analyses, however, often seek not to complement but rather to challenge the role of class as either the universal organizing principle of historical enquiry or a hermeneutic device for the study of pre-modern England. Even within a broadly Marxist tradition, some studies – for example, Stephen Rigby’s *English Society in the Later Middle Ages* (1) – have developed alternative interpretations of the gross inequalities of power and possession in medieval and early modern England. Many scholars have argued, of course, that factors such as diversity of material circumstance, restriction on communication, and localism of outlook inhibited the commons from identifying as a class before the Industrial Revolution. Rollison’s answer is the linguistic turn. This methodology enables him to side-step the notion that the commons needed to be a homogenous group for class-consciousness to have existed.

The credibility of this approach depends on the sources selected and on the lens through which they are perceived. In its aim of reconstructing popular politics, *A Commonwealth of the People* pursues two rather different lines. On the one hand, Rollison maintains that ‘basic ideas are simple and refer to universal human experience’; on the other hand, he plots the commons’ ideological development in large part through individual authors (p. 19). These writers were sometimes members of the elite (bishop, judge, or statesman); they were certainly unrepresentative and possibly atypical. Rollison’s engagement with political theory here may result in an emphasis on canonical works, whereas his broader argument would point instead towards the reconstitution of more quotidian and plebeian speech. Rollison then divides his thinkers into progressives and reactionaries. Works written in English often acquire an inherently demotic status, though only if they express appropriately progressive views. In a revealing slip, Rollison at one point lists the *Policraticus* among these ‘vernacular English classics’ (p. 2).

The valorization of vernacular expression and a close reading of powerful, but possibly unrepresentative, texts may explain the analysis of the Church, which feels tendentious. Rollison reads the institution through *Piers Plowman* and *The Practice of Prelates*. The Church is thus presented as an alien Norman imposition that never won the commons’ affections and that then conspired systematically to repress native piety. Only those outside the institution – such as hermits and anchorites, ‘the proletarians of the medieval Church’ – commanded popular support (p. 217). This alienation was publicized in the debate between William Tyndale and Thomas More. Tyndale spoke up for an open-ended, inclusive, and indigenous interpretative community; More defended an elitist, exclusive, and foreign cult of authority. A victory for the vernacular, the Reformation was also a triumph of the commons.

Were the commons really estranged from the late medieval Church? In presenting the campaign against Lollardy as an assault on popular religion, Rollison adopts the Protestant equation of vernacular religion with the English Bible as book. Yet the Church fostered other forms of scriptural and textual piety. The experience of Margery Kempe (who is mentioned in passing) illustrates how polarities of elite and popular, clerical and lay, orthodox and heterodox can be misleading. The commons reacted to Margery’s unusual devotion with hostility, on occasion accusing her of heresy; in contrast, Archbishop Arundel – the villain in Rollison’s version – was impressed by Margery’s devotion, conversing happily with her far into the night.

Did the commons nevertheless welcome with open arms the doctrinal vernacularity of the 16th century? In

conception, Tyndale's commonwealth was no more democratic than More's Church: scripture interpreted itself, not the ordinary reader scripture. Tyndale argued that reading the Bible would make the commons better subjects; it was More, not Tyndale, who foresaw the revolutionary effect of *sola scriptura* on constituted authority. The reformers' message undoubtedly inspired some commoners and eventually – but in part through elite pressure – won over the majority. Yet Tyndale's ideas did not enjoy the immediate and near-universal acceptance that Rollison's argument requires. Indeed, the new English liturgy helped to provoke the commons' risings of 1549 (a point that is overlooked in a discussion concentrating on Kett's rebellion).

Communal politics therefore seems more ambivalent than Rollison allows. *A Commonwealth of the People* gives the impression that popular rebellions were inherently progressive because they were epiphenomena of the commons' class-consciousness. As a consequence, the unique circumstances that provoked each rebellion feel somewhat downplayed. In particular, the more minor risings between 1450 and 1536, which are rather summarily treated, are deemed merely cumulative. For Rollison, rebelliousness had become natural and endemic rather than transgressive and occasional. In supporting this idea, more could have been made of the recurrence in successive risings of particular pseudonyms, places, and gestures. But perhaps we should be more sceptical about our ability to reconstitute the collective memory of such events: the failure of mass popular risings equally could have promoted quietism or even providentially have vindicated the established order. Rollison identifies the commons as a trained militia, but identifies only its 'progressive' potential as an army waiting to rise: but who suppressed popular risings if not commoners themselves?

Rebellion, it is easy to forget, was still rare. Yet the pattern of rebelliousness matters rather more to *A Commonwealth of the People* than do the objectives of individual rebellions. The serendipity of rebel articles makes it difficult to hear one progressive voice; I sense that Rollison would like to attribute that deficiency to the unconstructive contributions of gentry participants, as is argued in the instance of Robert Aske. Yet, as Rollison acknowledges, rebel articles still stated plebeian 'vocationalism': everyone should know their place in an immutable social order. Rollison does not fully reconcile this (surely 'reactionary'?) vision with the Hakluyts' (presumably 'progressive'?) vision of trading empires. Commoners were unlikely (at least over one lifetime) to benefit from the expanding horizons that Rollison describes so vividly.

Thus the connection between the profiteering and privateering of Elizabethan merchants and courtiers and the wider interests of the commons does not really emerge. More would need to be established about the effects of overseas ventures on the popular political imagination for this link to be convincing. Although *A Commonwealth of the People* illuminates both developments, they still seem to run in parallel, rather than in converging, lines. The same may also have been true of 'improving' landlords, who seldom enjoyed popular support. Landless wage-earners seem the sort of group likely to have developed a strong political consciousness because of their distinctive interests. Rollison, however, defers the political impact of growing stratification within the commonalty until after the Civil Wars, so this dimension – the Wrightson thesis – does not fully integrate into his preceding argument.

All of my observations stem from the fact that *A Commonwealth of the People* is an unabashedly Whig interpretation of history. Forces of modernity sweep through the work, laying a trail that the author follows up to the present. In the medieval English commons, for example, Rollison detects the 'self-consciously plebeian' political culture of modern Australia (p. 9). Thus he has little time for revisionist scholarship on the Reformation or on the early Stuart period. Rollison's strong conviction of the moral progress of history irons out the complexity and contingency of the past. Take, for example, his comments on poll taxes:

Poll taxes are offensive because they are unfair. The rich pay the same as the poor.

Especially intense was the tradition of hostility to poll-taxes like those of colonial Virginia. This

is a constant of vernacular English politics from the clumsy efforts that sharpened the teeth of the rebellion of 1381 to the mass protests against Margaret Thatcher's local poll tax. (pp. 227, 248)

Yet the implications of a differential tax burden for the balance of power varied across these societies. For Aristotelians, the extent of an individual's contribution should correspond with the strength of his or her political voice (or vote); no one argued that in 1990. Rollison treats the (for me) relativist concept of fairness as an absolute principle of historical enquiry.

In sum, *A Commonwealth of the People* is both stimulating and perplexing. It is a learned piece of socialist scholarship that, although dense and difficult, deserves a wider readership. It makes a strong case for the non-deferential nature of pre-modern England, demonstrates how political history and social history enhance one another, and shows why the medieval and early modern periods should be conceptualized together. It is crammed full of arresting insights on a staggeringly broad range of subjects. Even if it does not convert, it certainly challenges preconceptions. As a framework for English politics from the Norman Conquest to the regicide, it is possibly 'wrong but wromantic'. But one does not need to accept Rollison's interpretation to be inspired by his ideas. *A Commonwealth of the People* fizzes with historical imagination.

Notes

1. Stephen Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (Basingstoke, 1995). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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