

SOCIAL CHANGE AND REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND, 1540-1640
centralization. But would the new committee, with its parochial gentry and its newcomers, be able to hold the country? It would not. The way was prepared for the major-generals. . . .

Such was Kent and its county committee on the eve of rebellion in 1648 - that impossible rebellion, to contemporaries, which began the second civil war. . . .

The ancient, indigenous gentry like the Twysdens and Honywoods - rooted in their lands, moderate, anglican, county-minded - had been embittered by sequestration if they were royalists, and elbowed out of their 'natural leadership' of Kentish society if parliamentarians. Control of the county committee had passed from these county gentry to other men. It had passed to the core of extremists, mainly of new and unpopular families like Sir Michael Livesey the regicide, national and Independent in outlook. But control of Kentish society had not passed to these extreme men, and when in 1648 the central knot of county gentry united as they had never done since 1640, nearly all Kentish society was drawn together in their following. Were they not all one family? Rebellion was not impossible; it was inevitable; and the dominant word was clear in their battle cry, 'For God, King Charles, and Kent'.

Before the national armies under Fairfax they failed. The county gentry were still excluded from the government of Kent; the new gentry remained the core of the reorganized county committee of the 'fifties; and the parochial gentry of the old accounts committee became its general body. But the problem of controlling Kentish society remained. The new gentry and the parochial families failed; the major-generals also failed. And when Cromwell had died, and in 1660 the people of Kent came down to Dover to greet Charles II, it was not only the king but the old families, the county gentry, that were restored.

[*The County Committee of Kent in the Civil War*, Department of English Local History Occasional Papers, No. 9, edited by H. P. R. Finberg (University College, Leicester, 1957).]

Notes

1. Sir Anthony Weldon, *The Court and Character of King James. Whereunto is added the Court of King Charles*.
2. Sedley did his utmost to regain favour, but having sowed the wind, he reaped the whirlwind: he was twice sequestered and at least once fined on the false allegation of assisting the 1648 rebellion.

III

Political Theory

14 James Harrington

J. SCHKLAR

It is well known that each age writes history anew to serve its own purposes and that the history of political ideas is no exception to this rule. The precise nature of these changes in perspective, however, bears investigation. For not only can their study help us to understand the past; it may also lead us to a better understanding of our own intellectual situation. In this quest the political theories of the seventeenth century and particularly of the English Civil War are especially rewarding. It was in those memorable years that all the major issues of modern political theory were first stated, and with the most perfect clarity. As we have come to reject the optimism of the eighteenth century, and the crude positivism of the nineteenth, we tend more and more to return to our origins in search of a new start. This involves a good deal of reinterpretation, as the intensity with which the writings of Hobbes and Locke, for instance, are being re-examined in England and America testify. These philosophical giants have, however, by the force of their ideas been able to limit the scope of interpretive license. A provocative minor writer, such as Harrington, may for this reason be more revealing. . . .

What is at stake here is the intrusion of ideology upon historical analysis. And ideology must be understood in three distinct senses. First of all there are simply the political convictions and preoccupations of later thinkers who read them into Harrington. Secondly, there was ideology, not as a mere matter of political preferences, but in its historicist, all-explaining form. Here the metaphors of historical explanation become personified entities, and catch-words like 'feudal', 'bourgeois' and 'revolution', dominate the stage entirely, while individual thinkers and events are used solely to prove the reality and necessity of these abstractions. Few writers have been exploited for this

purpose more thoroughly than Harrington. Nor has this been entirely accidental. As one whose own main concern was with revolutions he was sure to become a center of interest for those ideologists whose thought is both the product of, and a continuous reflection upon, social conflict. It is this circumstance that makes Harrington such an excellent case-study for those who wish to examine the play of ideology upon history. . . .

That Marxists should concentrate on revolutions is hardly surprising - that *was* politics. And the Civil War as a part of the 'bourgeois revolution' was bound to come in for its share of analysis.¹ Harrington, moreover, had more to contribute to the 'bourgeois' than to the 'Puritan' revolution. Indeed, as historicism turned to economism in general, Marxists were not alone in noticing how remarkably modern it was of him to have discovered 'the principle that the economic elements in a State will determine its government'.² Now this is fair enough: Harrington too prided himself on the discovery of the principle of 'the balance', the idea that those who have the greatest share of property must rule. That power follows property was undeniably his belief. However, it was left to Eduard Bernstein to discover that this simple formula made him a precursor of historical materialism. There was, of course, Harrington's use of the word 'superstructure' to describe political institutions to justify this suggestion, but there was more. Harrington, Bernstein felt, had accurately diagnosed the class relationships prevailing in seventeenth-century England. Far from being mistaken about the impossibility of a restored monarchy, he had really foreseen that absolutism was impossible, and that the bourgeoisie must rule, as, in fact, it did after 1688. In short, Harrington had discovered the 'bourgeois revolution', not just 'the balance'.³

R. H. Tawney has surely done more than anyone else to make that revolution intelligible, and he alone has given us a subtle and fascinating portrait of Harrington in the context of his age. He does not doubt that the decline of the nobility and the rise of capitalism were at the root of the Civil War, but at least we are told exactly who was rising and who was falling. According to Tawney's calculations, there emerged along with urban capitalists a class of rural ones, the gentry, who by benefiting from Tudor policies and by improving their estates, came to be part of the new bourgeois order that rose to challenge the Establishment.

If this is still the old bourgeois revolution it has at least been ruralized and we have been liberated from 1789, 1848 and 1917. For 'Tawney's

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country' is seventeenth-century England, his evidence is seventeenth-century evidence and the writers whom he quotes are seventeenth-century writers. Moreover, if the gentry had their Marx it was at least not a nineteenth-century Marx, but Harrington. . . . The only fault that Tawney can find in this prodigy is the weakness of all 'one key' explanations and the failure to grasp 'the dynamic power of religious conviction'.⁴ It is, of course, the very charge he has for years brought against doctrinaire Marxism. What remains is impressive enough, and it has found many supporters. It is a persuasive picture because due weight is given to Harrington's limitations, his preoccupation with peace and order, and his debts to earlier writers. However, it does not stand up. Poor Harrington simply cannot be made to bear the burdens of a twentieth-century social historian. . . .

To begin with, Harrington had no idea whatsoever of what we today call economic life. He never spoke of 'rents, sales or profits', only of property. Changes in ownership of property, not economic development, were his sole concern.⁵ Now the political consequences of the amounts of property held by either a few or many persons were indeed a matter of 'necessity', but it was not 'historical necessity', not the logic of an historical situation at all. The necessity that Harrington had in mind was the universal need to eat. From this it follows that anyone who has the means to feed men, controls them. It also means that he has the power to maintain soldiers who depend on him. . . .

Happily the Tudor kings by statutes of alienation and by expropriating the clergy had enriched the people and destroyed the nobility. However, by depriving itself of the social and military support of the nobles the monarchy itself became impossible, for it was not a Turkish absolutism in which the king owned the balance of property. In England the people now held the balance, and it only remained for Englishmen to face the facts and set up political institutions compatible with this new order.

There is much that is ingenious in this account, but is it good modern social history? There is neither a notion of economics nor of class conflict in all this. Nor did Harrington ever claim to have said anything new. He merely repeated the accounts given by Bacon, Raleigh, Selden, and Henry Wotton. Not one of them spoke of the 'rise of the gentry', but all described the conflict that our textbooks have long spoken of as the end of feudalism and the rise of absolutism. . . . Harrington's only contribution to this history was to see the rise of the people as the consequence of Tudor policy and to explain

the origins of the Civil War by that fact. The conflict itself had been one between absolutist legal institutions and a new economic-military balance of power. His originality was in the correlation of feudal history with the Polybian theory of constitutions. Had Tawney not insisted on treating Harrington's constitutional preoccupations as trivial, he would not have so distorted his ideas.

Against the traditionalists Harrington had to show only what conditions were necessary for the rule of law. He did not have to justify the inseparability of law and property, since their constitutional theory, too, rested on it. To refute Hobbes, however, he had to find a new answer to the question, 'What is law?' And it is here that his theory of 'interest' really comes to play its part.⁶

Legitimacy is based solely on interest, on the balance of property. Effective law can only be made by those who possess the balance of property, and stability depends on law expressing their interests. It follows that the only legitimate government, the only government that *should* rule, is that which must in fact rule – that is, the government of the dominant 'interest'. An intelligent government will acquire authority, but its legitimacy rests on the interests that it represents. Against Hobbes's psychological account of the origins of law Harrington simply pitted an institutional one. It is an argument which, in rather less subtle form, still rages among political theorists. . . .

Tawney is perfectly right in attributing to Harrington a sense for the 'impersonal forces'. The trouble is that this came not from any historical sense, but from its total absence. One need only compare his account of the origins of the Civil War to Hobbes's. To Hobbes it was a war of ideologies. The doctrines of fanatical preachers, the seditious universities and the fantasies of those who, like Harrington, had derived exaggerated notions about Greek and Roman liberty from their youthful readings of classical authors, these were the causes of the disaster.⁷ Hobbes was as sure as any post-Gardiner historian that it was a war of minorities. The people had merely followed prospects of pay and plunder. As for 'social factors', Hobbes noted the city merchants' disinclination to pay taxes, and the hopes of improvident gentlemen who were out to make their fortune in war; but these were minor points for him.⁸ Ideas and the passions they produced were at the heart of the war. Now Harrington, having friends on both sides, was not, like Hobbes, inclined to deal out praise and blame. It was not the characters of the king or of the rebels that had caused the war, it was the nature of the situation.⁹

However, Harrington never gave the barest account of what that situation really was. He never described the interests at work. He is even less sociological than Hobbes, not to speak of Baxter. After repeating his predecessors' accounts of Tudor policy he tells us in one paragraph that the balance of property and power had shifted to the people and the Commons. Elizabeth had been able to charm them into acquiescence. The Stuarts, prompted by false counsellors, had ignored their demands, and, presumably lacking charm, were bound to fall. That is all he knew, that is all he had observed. Yet these were the crucial years during which the gentry is said to have been transformed. But Harrington had no interest in these events as such. He had read of republican institutions; he wanted them in England. His war was a very simple one between the monarchy and the people, a political war of institutions. There is no mention of the social or economic trends of his own age. He tells us nothing of the life of the towns, nor did he notice that the actual trend was toward the consolidation of estates. . . .

There is little left of Tawney's objective social historian; of the seventeenth-century Marx nothing remains at all. There is only a very ingenious defender of classical republicanism, an institutional historian who applied a modified version of Polybius to the history of England. . . .

Facing the 'rising gentry' is now a very different species of gentlemen. Trevor-Roper's gentry are far from prosperous. Stagnant economically, politically disgruntled, they are shopping for ideologies. . . .

Of this unattractive group, Trevor-Roper tells us, Cromwell was the incarnation, and Harrington the ideologue – still the Marx of the gentry here, but a very different gentry and a very different Marx. The science of society has been replaced by disastrous prophecy. Instead of giving his clients an accurate view of their prospects Harrington gave them a dream-picture of what they wished to be. . . .

It is an immensely persuasive picture. As Hexter says, we've seen these types before, and he mentions the Raubritter and Lord Eldon's entourage. But why stop there? Surely we have seen all this in our own day. As we have emerged from the twin myths of the eternal 'right' and 'left' and of the creativity of revolutionary movements, we have come to a new view of the nature of fanaticism and the forces that feed it.¹⁰ And who knows more about the most ghoulish manifestations of nihilism than the author of *The Last Days of Hitler*?¹¹ The fact is that

the picture of a group of socially displaced malcontents, animated by a pure wish to destroy the 'system', corresponds far more to our own experience than that of a sturdy, solid group of consciously 'rising' men, engaging in radical politics so as to assert the claims of their class against an order in which they are, after all, getting on. To which it might, of course, be very justly answered that we have not been living through the 'bourgeois revolution'. The impression remains that psychologically Trevor-Roper wins hands down. It has simply become difficult to envision a class-revolution of any kind. The work of nihilistic discontent, on the other hand, is not unfamiliar....

But it is in the structure of government of *Oceana*, and in its policies, that Trevor-Roper's case finds its greatest support. Although it is an active state it has no taxes and no bureaucracy; administration is local, even if the traditional division of England has been replaced by a more symmetrical one. The 'owner at his plow' is the genius of this society. The city is to be curbed, since ancient history 'proves' that where city-life has had 'the stronger influence' in a republic it led to turbulence. The clergy and the lawyers, the natural deceivers of the people, are to be banished from political life. Indeed, one of the advantages of ending primogeniture was that it would end the flow of younger sons into these professions.... Here indeed is a 'pseudo-realistic utopia', a mixture of prophecy, historical speculation and exhortation that might well appeal to people like Trevor-Roper's rebellious hay-seeds.

Nevertheless, it is a false picture. Whatever may have been happening to the gentry, Harrington was not their Marx, and not their Lenin - neither a discoverer of the springs of history, nor a maker of ideology. All that Trevor-Roper has done is to turn Tawney's Harrington on his head, along with the 'rising-gentry' and the entire 'bourgeois revolution'. It is a procedure that does little to explain him....

The first question is whether Harrington, in fact, provided the Cromwellian gentry with their operative political ideas. The second question is what light, if any, the ideology of the gentry can cast upon the character of Harrington's thought. For Trevor-Roper's Harrington depends not only upon a positive answer to the first question. It also assumes that this function of Harrington's thought, the role it played in gentry politics, corresponds exactly to Harrington's intentions. The present argument is that both these propositions are false. The first is a simple mistake in fact, the second a common, but extremely obvious, error in the art of historical interpretation. One need only

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recall how often Rousseau has been treated as if the Jacobins had *written*, rather than *quoted*, the *Social Contract*, to see, at once, what has happened to Harrington. In both cases the intellectual biography of a man has been distorted in the course of a far more general and complex argument about the 'nature' and 'causes' of a revolution. If Tawney is, perhaps, mistaken in his view of Harrington's purposes and methods, he at least has given us a portrait of a man, even if a rather impressionistic one. The same can hardly be said of Trevor-Roper's Harrington. What we get here is not a picture of a thinker, but a personification, an artificial assemblage of the various roles that his ideas *may* have played in gentry politics. This montage of their potential functions is then passed off as a genuine picture of Harrington's ideas....

It is the habit of personifying events, ages, nations, classes and other groups, indeed history itself, that has led to the depersonalizing of individuals.¹² For it is now these abstract categories that have motives and intentions that must be uncovered and evaluated as one judges the behavior of individuals. Ideas are now rationalizations, deceptions practiced semi-consciously by groups, and the omniscient historian must expose them and grade them as 'ideology', 'utopia' or 'false consciousness', depending on their relation to the true standard - the course of 'real' history.¹³ This has been the method of neo-Tories no less than of Marxists. According to the latter the 'virtue' of the seventeenth-century bourgeoisie was to have been 'progressive', that is, in line with the demands of history. Their error was to have thought that they were a 'universal' class, realizing general moral and religious values, not just their own aspirations; and this disguise must be pulled aside. Thus, too, the sin of Trevor-Roper's gentry is not that they were nasty, but that they attempted the impossible by vainly trying to interfere with the set course of England's historical development; and because they could not succeed their ideology was a mere cover for their impotence, 'false consciousness'. The terms of historical classification now become those of moral obloquy. Puritanism is 'really' only the 'veil of the bourgeoisie' or the 'false consciousness' of the declining gentry. Hobbes's philosophy was 'really' only 'bourgeois ideology'; Harrington's, that of an array of distempered 'merc' gentry. The revolution was 'really' caused by the rising classes, or it was 'really' caused by declining groups.

As has been well observed - and by a Marxist too - to describe Puritanism as the ideology of the declining gentry does little to explain

the spiritual life of Milton or Vane.¹⁴ To classify it as the rationalization of bourgeois aspirations does no better.¹⁵ Nor does this distributing of identification disks throw much light upon Hobbes and Harrington. The only extenuating circumstance that excuses this rage for revealing the intimate secrets of groups and classes, and of history itself, is the political prudery of the Whigs, which was designed to bring out the worst in anyone. For to have said that the Civil War was 'really' about 'faith and freedom', not a 'social war' but 'a war of ideas', was to invite abuse.¹⁶ Whatever else wars may be, they are social events in which organized groups of men fight each other....

It remains to disentangle Harrington from the fortunes of the gentry and the 'real' causes of the Great Rebellion. To begin with, Trevor-Roper accepts Tawney's view that Harrington described the 'rise of the gentry', and in a way that was different from the earlier accounts of the decline of the nobility by Bacon, Raleigh and Selden. This, as we have seen, was not the case. If he appealed to the gentry this was not the reason for his popularity. However, the gentry did not in fact accept Harrington's ideas, and at no time did *Oceana* become the intellectual weapon, the verbal gunpowder, of the Independents. If they and Cromwell were the political leaders of the mere gentry, as Trevor-Roper claims, then Harrington never became their prophet.... Moreover, if Trevor-Roper were not so anxious to destroy Tawney's unreal Harrington he might well have asked himself who, in fact, did write Cromwell's propaganda, who answered his critics and rationalized his policies? It was not Harrington; it was Milton. The dying gasp of Independent ideology is the *Ready and Easy Way*. Here is the disillusion with 'the people', the call for the rule of the best, the best being the last Commonwealthmen. Here, too, is the religious fervor, the true note of seventeenth-century ideological combat. It is here that the Commonwealth is held up as the will of God, as toleration had earlier been defended as the way to help men to God. As for Cromwell's radical Republican opponents, they talked of rights, consent, the 'will of the nation' and 'the cause we fought for'. Whether the gentry was coming up or going down, these were the terms in which they, and the majority of their contemporaries, talked. It was not Harrington's manner any more than it was Hobbes's. That is why no one cared for them....

[Ideology Hunting: the Case of James Harrington', *The American Political Science Review*, III (1959).]

Notes

1. C. Hill, 'The English Civil War Interpreted by Marx and Engels', *Science and Society*, vol. 12 (1948), pp. 130-36; L. Krieger, 'Marx and Engels as Historians', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 14 (1953), pp. 381-403.
2. J. Bonar, *Philosophy and Political Economy* (London, 1922), p. 895; H. F. Russell Smith, *James Harrington and his Oceana* (Cambridge, 1914), pp. 23-4 and 28.
3. E. Bernstein, *Sozialismus und Demokratie in der grossen englischen Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1919), pp. 259-67.
4. R. H. Tawney, 'The Rise of the Gentry', *Economic History Review*, vol. II (1941), pp. 36-7; 'Harrington's Interpretation of His Age', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 27 (1941), pp. 200, 204, 221.
5. I am very much indebted to the analysis of J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 128-30, and to his letter to *Encounter*, July 1958.
6. R. Polin, 'Economie et Politique au XVII^e Siècle: L'Océana de James Harrington', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 2 (1952), pp. 27 and 30-1; F. D. Wormuth, *The Origins of Modern Constitutionalism* (New York, 1949), p. 135.
7. *Behemoth, English Works* (London, 1840), vol. VI, pp. 167-218, 362; *Leviathan*, pp. 140-1 and 214.
8. *Behemoth*, pp. 166-9.
9. *Oceana*, ed. S. B. Liljegren (Lund, 1924), p. 50. It was not, thus, that his friend Charles I had been *bad*, just helpless. *Works*, ed. John Tolland (London, 1771), p. 367.
10. See R. Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, tr. by T. Kilmartin (New York, 1957), *passim*, for a discussion both of the obsolescence of these ideas and the passions which they can stir among café-politicians.
11. I am happy to see that I am not alone in this suspicion, see M. Beloff, 'Another Fallen Idol?', *Encounter*, January 1959, p. 74.
12. Unlike Karl Popper, I do not regard the personification of historical categories as analogous to medieval realism. His own medieval nominalism would make the writing of any sort of history impossible. How little he has understood the real problems of historical explanation and especially those created by generalizations on different levels of abstractness can be seen by his claim that the First World War is an 'individual thing' just like Alexander the Great. *The Poverty of Historicism* (Boston, 1957), pp. 17-34, 76-83, 143-52.
13. Krieger, 'Marx and Engels', *loc. cit.*; K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (Harvard Books, New York, n.d.), *passim* and pp. 56 and 93-7.
14. C. Hill, 'Recent Interpretations of the Civil War', *History* (n.s.), vol. 41 (1956), p. 74.
15. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-7; Hill, 'Marx and Engels', *loc. cit.*, pp. 132 and

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154; *The English Revolution*, pp. 13 and 17; D. W. Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* (London, 1940), pp. 22 and 25.

16. J. H. Hexter, 'Storm over the Gentry', *Encounter*, May 1958; see also C. Firth, *Gronovell and the Rule of the Puritans in England* (Oxford, 1953), p. 71, or G. M. Trevelyan, *England under the Stuarts* (London, 1922), pp. 195-6 and 228-31, where it is said, 'in motive it was a war not like the French or American of classes or of districts, but of ideas', p. 229.

Part Two

SELECT DOCUMENTS