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## THE PUTNEY DEBATES: POPULAR VERSUS ÉLITIST REPUBLICANISM\*

Between 1651 and 1653, John Lilburne immersed himself in English-translated editions of classical and republican works, including Plutarch's *Lives*, Polybius' *History*, Machiavelli's *Prince* and Milton's *Defensio*. He saw parallels between revolutionary, republican England and classical civilizations, and likened himself to classical exiled patriots, including Alcibiades and Coriolanus. According to Lilburne, England under 'the new triumvirate' of ('the Caesar-like' and Machiavellian) Cromwell, Lambert and Harrison had degenerated into a mock republic, a tyranny lacking virtue, ruled by the sword. Lilburne wanted England to model itself upon the republics of Athens, Corinth, Thebes and Rome, where the *demos* and the *plebs* 'practised their supreme power upon many ocasions, even upon the greatest Generalls, Patricians, Noblemen, Senatours or Parliament-men'. The English people, he believed, should elect tribunes as protection from tyranny and introduce a *Lex Agraria*, giving land worth between ten and fifteen pounds per year to each soldier and 'poor decayed house-keeper' to eliminate begging and establish a strong militia resting on the independence and virtue of its small landowners.<sup>1</sup> Lilburne's reaction to reading classical texts alerts us to the potential appeal to the Levellers of a radical version of republicanism.

Nigel Smith has recently investigated this Leveller republicanism of the 1650s. He argues that the Levellers' use of republican ideas was of only minor importance in their pamphlets of the 1640s and that, in any case, the key examples were probably the work of the Levellers' confederate, Marchamont Nedham. According to Smith, Leveller republicanism only reached

\* I would like to acknowledge the help of Richard Tuck of Jesus College, Cambridge, and the comments of colleagues in the Early Modern European History Seminar at Cambridge and the Department of Politics at the University of Western Australia, where earlier drafts of this paper were presented. Quotations are provided in original spelling and incorporate original capitalization and typographical errors.

<sup>1</sup> L. *Colonel John Lilburne Revived* [23 Mar. 1653], 6–23: British Library, London, Thomason Tracts (hereafter Brit. Lib., E.), E. 689 (32); *The Upright Mans Vindication* [5 Aug. 1653], 6–22: *ibid.*, 708 (22).

maturity in the anti-protectorate republicanism of the 1650s.<sup>2</sup> Blair Worden has argued that serious classical republicanism — in the sense of providing a *model* for government — did not emerge until the winter of 1649–50 in the work of Nedham and John Milton and that only at this time did Machiavelli's republicanism break into the foreground of English political thinking.<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Scott has similarly claimed that Nedham, not the Levellers, was the first English writer to advance a radical, popular and militarist Machiavellian republicanism.<sup>4</sup> All would imply that republican political theory had little influence upon the development of Leveller thought during the 1640s, including upon their arguments at the Putney Debates. These famous debates between the elected representatives of the soldiers of the New Model Army, ('the Agitators') and their officers (the 'Grandeers') between 29 October and 1 November 1647 have long fascinated historians. The participants in the Debates were attempting to reach agreement on the New Model Army's political demands for the settlement of the First Civil War. The Debates are a key text for understanding the roots of the formulation of our modern concepts of democracy and liberalism, particularly because they appear to be the first recorded expression of demands for universal manhood suffrage within a representative system of government.

Leveller rhetoric from the 1640s certainly suggests a strong familiarity with republicanism. Many Leveller pamphlets were in the form of classical republican speeches, addressing themselves to the soldiers and MPs as 'most noble and worthy Senators', 'noble patriots' and 'most honourable tribunes of the people'. In March 1647, the author of *A Warning for all the Counties of England*, probably Richard Overton, asked: 'Is there never a Roman spirit left, that dare interpose, and protest for his Country?' Elsewhere, Overton claimed that Lilburne deserved to wear a laurel for standing on equity, honesty and truth.<sup>5</sup> Many

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Smith, 'Popular Republicanism in the 1650s: John Streater's "heroick mechanicks"', in David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1996), 147–8, 154–5.

<sup>3</sup> Blair Worden, 'Milton and Marchamont Nedham', in Armitage, Himy and Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism*, 167–8.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Scott, 'The English Republican Imagination', in J. S. Morrill (ed.), *Restoration and Revolution: England in the 1650s* (London, 1992), 42–4.

<sup>5</sup> *The Reasons of Lieu. Col. Lilbournes sending his letter to Mr. Prin* [13 Jun. 1645], 7: Brit. Lib., E. 288 (12); *Vox Plebis: or, The People's Out-Cry Against Oppression, Injustice and Tyranny* [19 Nov. 1646], 13, 59: *ibid.*, 362 (20); *A Warning to all the*

of the Levellers' pleas for the release from gaol of their leaders bear the stamp of classical forensic oratory, including references to the trial speeches of Cicero and Pliny.<sup>6</sup> A contemporary critic of the Levellers recognized the classical style of their pamphlets when he described them as long-practised orators and called Overton and Lilburne 'the Professors of Rhetorick in Newgate or Ludgate' gaols.<sup>7</sup> These republican rhetorical flourishes pre-date the similar wrapping of Englishmen in togas that Worden has found in the works of Milton and Nedham.<sup>8</sup>

There can be little doubt about the influence of republican rhetoric on the Levellers in the 1640s, but did their republicanism go deeper? Did they have a republican theory of liberty and did republicanism strongly influence their constitutional programme?

The origins of the Levellers' ideas has long fascinated historians. North American scholars, particularly the disciples of William Haller, saw the Levellers as the radical democratic edge of the puritan movement, who developed their political theory through a process of analogy from the religious to the secular sphere. According to this interpretation, the organizing principles of the religious sects to which the Levellers belonged, particularly the idea of a covenant, provided a model for society: the concepts of the equality of all believers and universal redemption led logically to the equality of all citizens; and 'the golden rule' provided the basis for Leveller social theory. Marxist historians, most notably Christopher Hill, have also stressed the importance of religious ideas on the Levellers, pointing to the radical inheritance of Lollardy and Anabaptism.<sup>9</sup> Yet a different interpretation

(n. 5 cont.)

*Counties of England* [29 Mar. 1647], 10: *ibid.*, 381 (13); Richard Overton, *An Appeale from the Degenerate Representative Body* [17 Jul. 1647]: *ibid.*, 398 (28), in *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution*, ed. D. M. Wolfe (New York, 1944), 171–2.

<sup>6</sup> For references to Pliny's *Panegyric ad Trajanam*, see *England's Miserie and Remedie: In a Judicious Letter from an Utter Barrister to his Special Friend* [19 Nov. 1646], 6: *Brit. Lib.*, E. 302 (5); see also *England's Birthright Justified* [10 Oct. 1645], 37: *ibid.*, 304 (17). For references to Cicero, see *Liberty Vindicated against Slavery* [21 Aug. 1646], 9: *ibid.*, 351 (2); *Vox Plebis*, 23; *England's Birth-Right Justified*, 35–6 (where the author, probably Overton, paraphrased from *Anti Verres*).

<sup>7</sup> *Leveller Manifestoes*, ed. Wolfe, 274 n. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Worden, 'Milton and Marchamont Nedham', 166.

<sup>9</sup> *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647–9)*, ed. A. S. P. Woodhouse (London, 1966), 71–80; William Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (Columbia, 1955), xiii, 300; D. B. Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy* (Columbia, 1951), 28–9; M. Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints* (Cambridge, 1977); J. C. Davis, 'The Levellers and Christianity', in Brian Manning (ed.), *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War* (London, 1973); J. F. McGregor,

(cont. on p. 50)

focused on the example for the Levellers of the surprisingly widespread involvement of ordinary people in local government in the seventeenth century. Giving the franchise to the lower classes for parliamentary elections is seen as a logical extension of this.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of secular political philosophy on the Levellers was stated by C. B. Macpherson who argued that the Levellers claimed rights through their belief in 'possessive individualism'.<sup>11</sup> Hill also identified the influence of natural law on the Levellers' writings, arguing that the common law had been brought in by the Norman Conquest and had to be replaced by natural law, which was based on reason, not history. Glenn Burgess has rejected this, claiming that by the 1640s arguments based on 'necessity' had become the most common justification for radical political action.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Sharp and David Wooton have recently recognized that the Levellers' ideas owed much to the intellectual debates among political theorists during the First Civil War, particularly the concepts of *salus populi* and popular sovereignty.<sup>13</sup>

There are elements of all of these positions in the Levellers' political thought. The influence of religious ideas, natural law and arguments from necessity varies from Leveller to Leveller, but, until recently, the influence of republicanism upon the

(n. 9 cont.)

'The Baptists: Fount of all Heresy', in Barry Reay (ed.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984); Christopher Hill, 'From Lollards to Levellers', in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes* (London, 1978); also his 'From Marprelate to the Levellers', in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill*, 3 vols. (Brighton, 1985-6), i.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Thomas, 'The Levellers and the Franchise', in Gerald Edward Aylmer (ed.), *The Interregnum: The Quest for a Settlement, 1646-1660* (London, 1972); J. S. Morrill (ed.), *Reactions to the English Civil War, 1642-1649* (London, 1982), 22-3; also his 'The Army Revolt of 1647', in A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse (eds.), *Britain and the Netherlands: Papers delivered to the Sixth Anglo-Dutch Historical Conference*, (The Hague, 1977), 55-6.

<sup>11</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (London, 1962), 107-52.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in his *Puritanism and Revolution* (London, 1958); R. Seaberg, 'The Norman Conquest and the Common Law: The Levellers and the Argument from Continuity', *Hist. Jl*, xxiv (1981); Glenn Burgess, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution: An Introduction to English Political Thought, 1603-42* (London, 1992), 90-3, 223-5.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Sharp, 'John Lilburne and the Long Parliament's *Book of Declarations*: A Radical's Exploitation of the Words of Authorities', *Hist. Political Thought*, ix (1988); David Wooton, 'From Rebellion to Revolution: The Crisis of the Winter of 1642/3 and the Origins of Civil War Radicalism', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, cv (1990); David Wooton, 'The Levellers', in John Dunn (ed.), *Democracy the Unfinished Journey, 508BC to AD1993* (Cambridge, 1992).

Levellers has been almost totally neglected. This article investigates the influence of republican political theory on the writings of the Levellers in the 1640s, with particular emphasis on the key texts of the movement, the *Agreements of the People* and the Putney Debates. It proposes a new reading of these texts and contends that the influence of republicanism on the Levellers has been underestimated.

## I

Before outlining this case, it is necessary to redefine the boundaries of seventeenth-century republicanism. Quentin Skinner has emphasized the centrality of consent and election to the early modern understanding of republicanism. While mixed monarchical states in early modern times were sometimes labelled 'republics', the elective principle was regarded as the key that ensured that governors obeyed the law and administered justly and without the corruption which, if left unchecked, would lead to decline and foreign domination.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Skinner has argued that during the 1650s a number of republican theorists adopted a neo-Roman theory of liberty, which held that the enjoyment of lives, liberties and property were dependent upon the consent of the citizenry. When constrained or even potentially constrained by a negative voice not freely chosen by the people, this liberty became slavery. These ideas were heavily indebted to Machiavelli, Livy and Sallust, in particular.<sup>15</sup>

Despite their emphasis on consent and elections, early modern republican thinkers denied that republican states were to be 'democratic' in the broad sense of being genuinely *popular* (where practically every adult male, no matter how poor, would be enfranchised). While they could agree that republicanism meant government by the people, they disagreed over who constituted 'the people'. It was generally held in early modern times that 'the people' were the 'virtuous' — men of independent means who were not beholden to the influence of other men. In short, the virtuous were property-holders or masters of households or

<sup>14</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978), i, 69–112; also his 'Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Pre-Humanistic Origins of Republican Ideas', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), 1–57.

businesses. This, by definition, excluded the poor: peasants, household servants and wage-labourers. It was, however, certainly the definition of republican citizenship held by many of the chief republican theorists of the English revolutionary period. James Harrington, Milton and even Nedham all proposed models of government which excluded the common people from meaningful participation.<sup>16</sup>

But was this the only possible reading of classical texts in the 1640s? Most of the major classical authors, including Livy, Thucydides and Aristotle, provide evidence that the ideas and actions of the élite of Rome and Athens met with constant opposition from the *plebs* and *demos*, who countered with a more radical, popular strain of republicanism. One of the central themes of Livy's history of Rome, recognized by Machiavelli, is the incessant struggle for political supremacy between the senate and the *plebs*. The *plebs* were constantly trying to extend the powers of the tribunes, restore the right of intermarriage between the classes, end debt-bondage and force through the adoption of the agrarian laws. In Athens the conflict between the classes was most dramatically illustrated by the revolutions at the end of the Peloponnesian War, when the oligarchy of the four hundred overthrew and were in turn overthrown by the supporters of democracy. Aristotle recognized this class conflict by defining oligarchy and democracy as the rule of the rich over the poor and *vice versa*.<sup>17</sup>

Classical histories could be ransacked for examples of rhetorical tropes and arguments which justified political equality for the poor. Appian, Sallust and, later, Florus and Machiavelli had argued that the decline of the Roman and Florentine republics had been caused by the growth of faction and the concentration of land and wealth in the hands of an untrustworthy and unpatriotic aristocracy, as well as by the attendant decline of the class of sturdy freeholders who had formed the backbone of their commonwealths. Classical histories also contained numerous examples of constitutional devices aimed at enhancing the power of the *plebs* and *demos* against their rulers. These included a wide franchise, systems of rotation of office, *ostracism* and laws of recall, such as the *Lex Repetundarum* of Rome. These devices

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–6.

<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, i.4; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, viii; Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1280<sup>a</sup> I.

could be models for those advocating greater popular sovereignty. It is, I want to emphasize, this more radical republican tradition and set of constitutional proposals which became an important and, to date, largely overlooked, source of inspiration and ideas for Leveller theorists.

The question arises as to the popular availability of such ideas about republicanism. Was it likely that men such as the Levellers would have been familiar with them? Perhaps one reason for the failure of historians to investigate the humanist origins of the Levellers' ideas is the false assumption that republican texts and ideas were available only to those from the social and educational élite. In fact, republican texts had a very wide vernacular circulation in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe: all of the major republican writers were freely available in English translation.<sup>18</sup> During the 1640s and 1650s these books were supplemented by pamphlets containing extracts from classical sources, including, most notably, the parliamentary *Book of Declarations* and William Prynne's *The Sovereign Power of Parliaments*, which contained a 218-page appendix listing examples from Roman, Athenian, French, Spanish and other histories to prove the contention that 'the supreme sovereignty and power resided not in Emperours and Kings themselves but in their Kingdomes, Senates, Parliaments and People'.<sup>19</sup> These tracts helped popularize the arguments of virtually the entire republican canon. They attested to the existence of a market of English readers hungry for inexpensive and readily available sources of republican ideas. Classical texts were also widely available in Latin for those with grammar-school education who could have come from relatively humble backgrounds.

The translators of these texts often had the very aim of making the ideas of classical civilization available to a wider audience than the Latin- and Greek-speaking minority. The desire to avoid 'inkhorn terms', to write in 'a meane and popular style' and to introduce classical civilization to 'a meane sort of men' was expressed over and over again in the prefaces to such works. Thomas Wylson perhaps expressed this most clearly in his

<sup>18</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996), 51.

<sup>19</sup> William Prynne, *The Fourth Part of the Sovereign Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes: Together with an Appendix* [Aug. 1643], appendix: Brit. Lib., E. 248 (4). For the influence of the parliament's *Book of Declarations* on the Levellers, see Sharp, 'John Lilburne and the Long Parliament's *Book of Declarations*'.



translation of Demosthenes' *Orations*, when he wrote that his translation spoke 'plainly and nakedly after the common sort of men in few words', because Demosthenes, who addressed popular assemblies, had been 'inclined to applye himselfe to the playne and familiar speech of the vulgar people'. There was clearly nothing odd about the idea of mean men reading republican texts.<sup>20</sup>

Quentin Skinner has recently remarked that the early moderns approached classical texts as if they had 'an almost wholly unproblematic relevance to their own circumstances'.<sup>21</sup> The way in which the texts of classical Greece and Rome were translated in the early modern period tells us much about contemporary political thought. Translations often provided a picture of ancient and modern republican politics as an ongoing conflict between the propertied and the propertyless, the rich and the poor, employers and wage earners, creditors and debtors. Political conflict, usually between the 'nobility' or 'gentry' and the *plebs* or 'common people', often had an economic dimension, which was expressed in earthy seventeenth-century language. Probably the clearest expression of this early modern 'class' element of classical history was in Machiavelli's *Florentine History*, most specifically Book III, which focused upon the Ciompi revolt of 1378. Thomas Beddingfeld's 1595 translation rendered the complexity of this struggle between differing social classes thus: '[i]f the divisions of any Common-weale have ever bene notable the divisions of Florence, are of all others the most notable'. Most commonwealths, such as Rome and Athens, had only one division after the expulsion of their Kings — that between the 'Nobilitie' and 'the Multitude': 'But Florence, not content with one, had many divisions . . . first the noble men became divided among themselves. Then the nobilitie and the people. And at last the people and the multitude'.<sup>22</sup> The rioting of the wool workers ('the basest sort of people') at the height of this revolt, was fuelled by 'a

<sup>20</sup> Demosthenes, *The Three Orations in Favour of the Olynthians with Fower Orations against King Philip*, trans. Thomas Wylson (London, 1570, STC 6578), sig.\*.iij2v. For similar arguments, see 'Preface', in Pliny, *The Historie of the World*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1601, STC 20029); also 'To the Reader', in Pierre Charon, *Of Wisdom: Three Bookes*, trans. S. Lennard (London, 1606, STC 5051). On this point see Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Florentine Historie*, sig. A3 (trans. T. Beddingfeld, London, 1595, STC 17162).

hatred of the base people, towards the rich Citizens and heads of the mysteries, judging themselves not so well paid for their labours, as they had deserved'.<sup>23</sup>

Such texts also reveal a number of interesting parallels with arguments used later by the Levellers, particularly about the role of the citizen-soldier. One interesting example of this was the theme of the political power of ordinary citizen-soldiers. This is a theme which ran through the works of Livy and Tacitus. One of the central and recurrent themes of Livy's history was the refusal of the *plebs* to fight Rome's enemies until their own demands for political reform had been met. The key example of this use of plebeian political leverage was the 'succession of the *plebs*' of 494BC which led to the establishment of the tribunes of the people. In Philemon Holland's translation of Livy's *History of Rome*, the soldiers complained as follows: 'Let the Nobles . . . serve as soldiars; let them take weapon in hand, and abide the brunts and hazzards of war, who receive the profits, the prizes and rewards therof'. In Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's account of this episode (in his life of Coriolanus) the *plebs* complained that 'to dwell at Rome was nothing els but to be slaine, or hurte with continuall warres, and fighting for defence of the rich mens goodes'. Tiberius Gracchus too had argued that the citizen-soldiers who had fought to maintain the republic should benefit from the spoils. In truth, he said, 'poore men doe go to the warres, and be slaine for the rich mens pleasures and wealth'. A similar trope can be observed in Tacitus' accounts of soldier mutinies, where they were combined with complaints about the troops' professional grievances.<sup>24</sup> This illustrates the possible existence of a tradition of citizen-soldier rhetoric and activism which had been handed down through classical texts to the early modern period.

What likelihood was there that Leveller arguments and behaviour may have been indebted to these sources? Contemporaries of the Agitators were certainly able to observe strong parallels between their behaviour and that of mutinying soldiers in classical

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *The Romane Historie Written by T. Livius*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1600, STC 16613), 59; Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, trans. Thomas North (London, 1579, STC 20065), 239, 879. The works of Tacitus are littered with accounts of mutinies: see, for instance, *Annales*, bk I, 16–30, 31–52. These speeches were available in English in *The Annales of Cornelius Tacitus*, trans. Richard Grenewey, 5th edn (London, 1622, STC 23646), 8, 14–15.

times. One pamphlet from 1648 reprinted an account from Livy of a mutiny under Publius Scipio, in which the soldiers, demanding arrears of pay, displaced their officers and 'elected' two commanders from among their own ranks — 'two of the most seditious common souldiers among them' — who, along with a 'Councill of War' sent commissioners to negotiate with Scipio.<sup>25</sup> This is remarkably similar to the method of election of the Agitators in 1647. In early modern texts plebeian political radicals were referred to as 'stirrers'. In contemporaneous dictionaries, 'stirring' was a translation of the Latin term *agitare*, from which the word 'agitator' was derived, giving us further evidence of the way in which the Agitators' contemporaries were able to recognize the classical precedents for their behaviour.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps our best evidence for the existence of this tradition is the widespread knowledge that existed in the early seventeenth century of the behaviour of the troops of the Spanish Army of Flanders. Of the many accounts of this behaviour which were in circulation,<sup>27</sup> the fullest appeared in Edward Grimestone's *General History of the Netherlands*. Like the soldiers of the New Model, these troops elected their leaders, including an *Electo* and 'two deputies out of every companie' to represent them in their pay negotiations. They also issued pamphlets which were extraordinarily similar to those produced only a couple of generations later by the Agitators. Grimestone reprinted one of these in full. In it we find the soldiers, clearly basing their arguments upon passages from Tacitus, complaining about matters such as arrears of pay, harsh discipline and longevity of service, and arguing that their activities were justified by the law of necessity. The soldiers also claimed that because they were 'citizens' they had the right to fair dealing from their commanders and political masters, as had

<sup>25</sup> D. P. Gent (pseud.), *The Severall Politique and Militarie Observations upon the Civil and Militarie Governments . . . Collected out of the best Ancient and Modern Authours* [3 May 1648], 38–41: Brit. Lib., E. 438 (9).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, references to *agitare*, *agitatio* and *agito* in Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (London, 1565, STC 5686), unpaginated.

<sup>27</sup> Sir Roger Williams, *The Actions of the Lowe Countries* (London, 1618, STC 25731), 100–4; Emanuel van Meteren, *A True Discourse Historically of the Succeeding Governours in the Netherlands, and the Civill Warres there*, trans. Thomas Churchyard (London, 1602, STC 17846), 110; Philips van Marnix van Sant Aldegonde, *A Tragical Historie of the Troubles and Civile Warres of the Lowe Countries*, trans. Thomas Stocker (London, 1583, STC 17450.3), 100, 101<sup>v</sup>, 103<sup>v</sup>, 137<sup>v</sup>–138<sup>v</sup>, 139<sup>v</sup>.

the soldiers of classical Greece and Rome.<sup>28</sup> Such erudition probably emanated from one of the gentleman rankers, who were common in this army and whose humanist education would have been similar to that of many soldiers in the New Model.<sup>29</sup>

Contemporaries of the Levellers, such as Thomas Hobbes, were well aware of the motivational power of classical history and rhetoric. Hobbes had himself translated Thucydides in order to teach men of the turmoil which inevitably followed from popular government. But he was aware also that such books could be read in a different way by the disaffected — as a source of revolutionary inspiration and as a source of information about how the *plebs*, *demos* and *popolo minuto* of Rome, Athens and Renaissance Florence had had a far greater involvement in the political life of their cities than the common people of his contemporary England. In fact, Hobbes was to claim that the cause of the Civil Wars in England was the reading of translated editions of classical books by poorly educated fanatics who learned the wrong lessons.<sup>30</sup>

These radical aspects of early modern republican theory have, I believe, been neglected by modern historians of republicanism. They demonstrate clearly how it would have been possible for early seventeenth-century political theorists to have understood politics as a struggle between the rich and the poor, to have promoted a model of republicanism designed to provide genuine popular sovereignty and to have justified the right of common soldiers to defend their political interests. This type of popular republic was precisely what the Levellers set out to create.

## II

How probable was it that the Leveller leaders were familiar with republican political theory? Evidence of the leadership's education reveals that it would be surprising indeed if they had not been familiar with the republican ideas which formed the backbone of a contemporary humanist education. Richard Overton had been a sizar at Queen's College, Cambridge. William Walwyn,

<sup>28</sup> Edward Grimestone, *A Generall Historie of the Netherlands* (London, 1608, STC 12374), 1284–9. The soldier's pamphlet takes its theme from the *Annales of Cornelius Tacitus*, bk I, 42.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road* (Cambridge, 1972), 40–1.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth*, ed. F. Tonnes (London, 1969), 56.

grandson of the bishop of Hereford, had a brother who attended Oxford and was himself educated by humanist tutors. John Lilburne bragged at length about the quality of his education at Newcastle Grammar School. Many of the Levellers and Agitators who participated in the Putney Debates also evidently had humanist educations or self-taught appreciation of republican political vocabulary. Although there is no extant proof from college registers, it does seem probable that John Wildman had, as was claimed at the time, attended Cambridge and one of the Inns of Court. As a naval officer, Thomas Rainsborough most likely had a solid grammar-school background.<sup>31</sup> Edward Sexby's writings show a strong grasp of Latin and French, and a widely cast intellectual net. Maximillian Petty was a member of John Harrington's republican discussion club, the Rota.<sup>32</sup> The signed writings of William Bray also show a knowledge of republicanism. In 1659, he even entered into a political debate with Harrington.<sup>33</sup> Other agitators, including John Harris, later published tracts containing republican ideas.<sup>34</sup> This degree of education for men from relatively humble backgrounds should not be considered unusual. Richard Tuck has recently reminded us of the surprising ease with which the sons of the lower classes could gain access to a good grammar school or even to university education in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Thomas Hobbes,

<sup>31</sup> For educational details of these figures, see entries in Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicalism in the Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols. (Brighton, 1982–4); John Venn and John Archibald Venn, *The Book of Matriculations and Degrees* (Cambridge, 1913); Marie Gimelfarb-Brack, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité, justice! La Vie et l'œuvre de Richard Overton, niveleur* (Berne, 1979), 4–6; Maurice Ashley, *John Wildman: Plotter and Postmaster* (London, 1947), 9; *The Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. Jack. R. McMichael and Barbara Taft (Athens, Ga, 1989), 1; Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John* (London, 1961), 31–2.

<sup>32</sup> W. Allen (pseud.), *Killing Noe Murder* [May 1657]: Brit. Lib., E. 501 (4). Although authorship of this pamphlet has been disputed, the evidence does suggest that Sexby had a strong hand in it: see Charles Harding Firth, 'Killing Noe Murder', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xvii (1902), 308–11.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Bray's reference to 'the Presidents [precedents] of the Athenians, the Romans or the United Provinces', in *A Plea for the People's Good Old Cause by Way of an Answer to Mr James Harrington his CXX Political Aphorismes* [Oct. 1659], 12: Brit. Lib., E. 763 (7); also his understanding of the Aristotelian concepts of 'Monarchie, Aristocracie or Democracie', in *True Excellency of God and His Testimonies and our National Laws against Titulr Excellency* [28 Aug. 1649], 4: *ibid.*, 571 (32).

<sup>34</sup> For John Harris's republican allusions and the use of republican concepts in *Mercurius Militarus*, which he edited, see *Mercurius Militarus or the Army's Scout*, i [10–17 Oct. 1648], 5–6: Brit. Lib., E. 467 (34); iii [24–31 Oct. 1648], 21: *ibid.*, 469 (10); v [17–24 April 1649], 4: *ibid.*, 551 (13).

after all, was probably from even more humble stock than John Lilburne and William Walwyn.<sup>35</sup> The leaders of the Levellers were in fact comparatively highly educated men in an era when being well-educated was synonymous with having an understanding of classical rhetoric and republican history. If the English Civil Wars were fought by humanists, as Tuck has claimed, then the Levellers and Agitators were no exception.<sup>36</sup>

If we look at the early writings of the Leveller leadership, then the influence of republican and humanist ideas becomes more obvious. Overton's early satirical works from the period 1640–2 were overflowing with learned references to classical history and mythology. *Mans Mortalite* of 1644 alone cited more than two dozen classical authors.<sup>37</sup> William Walwyn freely admitted to having read Montaigne's *Essays*, Charon's *Of Humane Wisdome* and Plutarch's *Lives and Morals*, as well as works by Seneca, Lucian and Thucydides — all in translation. Walwyn did not read Greek or Latin, but he defended the right of common people to learn the lessons of the commonwealths of classical antiquity through translations. (This argument was a humanist commonplace by the late sixteenth century; Walwyn took it from Montaigne.) From 1643 onwards, Walwyn even conducted a weekly discussion group on republican politics and other humanist themes and circulated books from his library among his friends.<sup>38</sup> The early writings of Overton and Walwyn on the theme of religious toleration also seem to have been heavily influenced by the continental neo-Stoic ideas of Montaigne, Lipsius and Charon, the *politiques* of the French Wars of Religion

<sup>35</sup> Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge 1993), 2–3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, [Richard Overton], *The Late Will and Testament of the Doctors Commons* [26 June 1641], unpaginated.: Brit. Lib. 669.f.4.18, for references to Cicero; his *Canterburies Dreame* [14 May 1641], sig. A3<sup>v</sup>: *ibid.*, E. 158 (3), for references to Alexander and Aristotle; also his *A Description Of the Passage of Thomas late Earle of Strafford, over the River of Styx* [May 1641], sig. A3<sup>2v</sup>, A2<sup>v</sup>: *ibid.*, E. 156 (21), for references to Lucian and to the tyrants of the Roman empire. For attribution of these anonymous pamphlets to Overton, see Gimelfarb-Brack, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité, justice!*, appendix; D. M. Wolfe, 'The Unsigned Pamphlets of Richard Overton: 1641–1649', *Huntington Lib. Quart.*, xxi (1958).

<sup>38</sup> *Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. McMichael and Taft, 397–401. Cf. Walwyn's arguments about translations with those in Montaigne's essay, 'Of Pedantism', in *The Essayes: or, Morall, Politike an Millitarie Discourses of Lo: Michaëlle Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (London, 1603, STC 18041), 61–6; cf. also Walwyn's criticisms of Cicero to Montaigne's in *Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. McMichael and Taft, 410; Montaigne, 'A Consideration upon Cicero', in *Essayes*, 61–6, 124–7, 240.

and the political theorists of the Dutch Revolt.<sup>39</sup> Toleration, Walwyn claimed in 1641, 1642 and, again, in 1644, was the key to political unity and military success against the king, as had been displayed in the Low Countries against the Spanish. Similar arguments appeared in one of Overton's best pamphlets, the Martin Marpriest tract, *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution*. Intolerance, Overton wrote, led only to misery, poverty, beggary and defeat. Better to emulate the tolerant Dutch, who lived in peace and prosperity.<sup>40</sup>

The writings of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn contain numerous references to classical history and political theory, but the Leveller most interested in republican political arguments was John Wildman — the author of *Agreement of the People* and the chief Leveller spokesman at Putney. It is to Wildman that we must turn to understand the impact of classical ideas on the Levellers' formal constitutional proposals.

### III

What were the conceptual languages used by the opposing groups at Putney? Historians have, to date, explained the activities of the Agitators and the Levellers in the New Model Army in a variety of unsatisfactory ways. Socialist historians such as H. N. Brailsford and Christopher Hill compared them to the military soviets of 1917, describing them as masterless, itinerant men preaching radical, even communist, ideas. In the 1970s, John Morrill, Geoffrey Parker and Ian Gentles drew analogies between the Agitators and militant economist trade unionists conducting strikes and pursuing inflationary wage claims: it was a matter of 'beer and sandwiches' at Putney. Mark Kishlansky, however, claimed that the soldiers of the New Model had been motivated by assaults on their military honour by the Presbyterians in the Long Parliament, while Austin Woolrych, perhaps with an eye to the 1980's Labour Party, explained the troop's radicalization partially by the infiltration of outside militants.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Martin Van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt, 1555–1590* (Cambridge, 1992), 217–18.

<sup>40</sup> *Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. McMichael and Taft, 57–8, 69, 114–15; Richard Overton, *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution* [8 Apr. 1645], 5, 10: Brit. Lib., E. 276 (23).

<sup>41</sup> H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, ed. Christopher Hill (London, 1961), 181; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London,

No one has yet satisfactorily investigated the intellectual heritage of the Agitators. J. G. A. Pocock argued that while the radical officers of the New Model were conscious that they were Machiavellian citizen-soldiers, the Agitators saw themselves as millennialist saints in arms: 'the articulations of democratic consciousness by Agitators and Levellers in 1647 were not initially founded on any Roman or Machiavellian sense of being a *comita centuritata* or *popolo armato*, but were thoroughly English and Puritan, critical and millennialist in character'.<sup>42</sup> The evidence from Putney actually suggests the opposite — that the Agitators were indeed more willing to think of themselves in Florentine terms than were the officers.

Certainly Wildman was heavily interested in republican politics. His knowledge of republican political theory was already present in his work at the time of the Putney Debates, as can be seen in a number of signed and unsigned texts of this period. In January 1648, he published *Putney Projects*, which was his analysis of the events within the General Council of the Army in late 1647, including the Putney Debates. The pamphlet attacked the grandees for plotting to settle the government and control of the militia on Charles and an oligarchic council of state; it also accused them of conspiring to return the king's veto over the enactment of laws, and to allow delinquents to hold public office after five years had elapsed, if the council of state so desired. The central argument of *Putney Projects*, which is heavy in classical allusion and rhetoric, was similar to the neo-Roman theory of liberty outlined by Skinner — that the people through their elected representatives were sovereign and that the retention of the king's negative voice would turn the people into slaves. 'All power', Wildman declared, 'is originally in the people . . . no authority

(n. 41 cont.)

1972), ch. 4; Geoffrey Parker, 'Mutiny and Discontent in the Spanish Army of Flanders, 1572–1607', *Past and Present*, no. 58 (Feb. 1973), 41; also his *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567–1659* (Cambridge, 1972), ch. 8; J. S. Morrill, 'Mutiny and Discontent in English Provincial Armies, 1645–1647', *Past and Present*, no. 56 (Aug. 1972); Ian Gentles, 'Arrears of Pay and Ideology in the Army Revolt of 1647', in Brian Bond and Ian Roy (eds.), *War and Society: A Yearbook of Military History*, 2 vols. (London, 1975–7), i, 61; Mark Kishlansky, *The Rise of the New Model Army* (Cambridge, 1979), 180–2; also his 'Ideology and Politics in the Parliamentary Armies, 1645–9', in J. S. Morrill (ed.), *Reactions to the English Civil War, 1642–1649* (London, 1982); Austin Woolrych, *Soldiers and Statesmen: The General Council of the Army and its Debates, 1647–1648* (Oxford, 1987), 204–6.

<sup>42</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975), 381; see also *The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1977), 25.



whatsoever hath an image of justice upon it, which is not derived from the People, either immediately by their personall consent, or agreement, or mediately by the mutuall consent of those, who are elected by the People to represent them'.<sup>43</sup> He returned to this point again later: 'What would such an agreement with the king amount to lesse, then boring of our eares for perpetuall vassallage to his will, or lust?'<sup>44</sup> By returning to the king the right to reject legislation, the *Heads of Proposals* trampled upon the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, which the Civil War had been fought to establish: 'Is this I say the peoples right to have 500 Senators sit like prometheus pictures, only fit to be gazed upon?'<sup>45</sup> Wildman also demonstrated in *Putney Projects* that he regarded the New Model as a citizen-soldier army. At Putney, he wrote, the grandees had cajoled the army 'to act only in their own speares, as Soldiers; and not to intermedle with the matters of State', turning such 'gallant heroic English-men' into 'Mercenaries'.<sup>46</sup>

His next tract, *The Lawes Subversion*, further illustrates the influence of republican ideas and the neo-Roman concept of liberty. It was written as a legal opinion on the imprisonment of Sir John Maynard by parliament. Wildman argued that Maynard had been imprisoned contrary to Magna Carta and the Petition of Right. By continuing to ignore the law in this fashion, parliament was subjecting society to arbitrary rule, which was contrary to liberty. 'Much admired Aristotle', wrote Wildman, 'was of opinion, that the Lawes, & not King's Princes or Magistrates, be they one or more or never so good, ought to be sole Lords or Rulers of the Common-wealth, and that Princes and Governours ought to governe by the Lawes, and cannot command what the Lawes do not command'.<sup>47</sup>

Wildman provided examples from the histories of Polybius, Diodorus Siculus and Xenophon of how governments had been originally established by 'the free voluntary joynt-consent of the people, and confirmed by Customes and Lawes of each Country'.

<sup>43</sup> John Lawmind (pseud.), *Putney Projects* [30 Dec. 1647], 44: Brit. Lib., E. 421 (19).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> J. Howldin [John Wildman], *The Lawes Subversion* [6 Mar. 1648], 1: Brit. Lib., E. 431 (2). That Howldin is Wildman is confirmed by John Lilburne in *The Picture of the Council of State* [4 Apr. 1649], 8: *ibid.*, E. 550 (14).

He was particularly attracted to the constitution of the Roman republic, because it was based on popular sovereignty and allowed participation from even the most plebeian elements of society. Citing Cicero from *pro Rabirio*, Wildman argued that 'the people gave Lawes to all their Magistrates, by which they should order their Government, thus much may be deduced from these words, *Imperium in Magistratibus, Authoritatem in Senatum, potestatem in plebe, Majestatem in populo*, command was in the Magistrates, Authority in the Senate, power in the meniall people and majesty in the People in generall'.<sup>48</sup> Thus, replacing the certainty of the laws agreed to by the people with the will of magistrates endangered every man's freedom. If the laws could be disregarded in this fashion, 'what Basis or foundation of Freedom remains firme? what security to the life of any commoner of England, more then the goodwill of the prevailing party'?<sup>49</sup> These classical references were lifted directly from the glosses provided in the 'Appendix' to Prynne's *Sovereign Power of Parliaments*. This illustrates well the Levellers' reliance upon inexpensive translated sources of republican history and policy.

These tracts appeared just after Putney. To prove that Wildman was thinking in republican terms before Putney, it is necessary to establish the likely authorship of some key pre-Putney Leveller pamphlets which show the strong influence of republican and specifically Machiavellian political ideas — *England's Miserie and Remedie*, *Vox Plebis*, *London's Liberty in Chains Discovered* and *The Charters of London*.

#### IV

*England's Miserie and Remedie* appeared on 14 September 1645. It was one of the first publications of the key 1645–9 phase of the Levellers' history, which began with the campaign to free and vindicate Lilburne after his imprisonment in Newgate on 11 August 1645 for illegally published attacks on the House of Lords. The pamphlet contained a number of arguments which recurred throughout the Levellers' later works. It argued that members of parliament were agents of the people, but, by their illegal and arbitrary treatment of Lilburne, had gone against the

<sup>48</sup> Howldin, *Lawes Subversion*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

wishes of the people and had degenerated into tyranny.<sup>50</sup> This turned the arguments that parliament had originally used against the king against parliament itself. Although these more radical arguments had been first employed in the winter of 1642–3, by Henry Parker and others,<sup>51</sup> and had undoubtedly influenced the Levellers, the Levellers also justified their political demands by direct reference to classical authorities and their Renaissance interpreters.

In *England's Miserie and Remedie*, the power of the Commons was expressed in a strikingly republican way. The Commons was the servant of the people, 'elected by them to provide for their welfare and freedoms, against all in-bred tyrannie or Foraigne invasion, which by reason of their numbers, they cannot conveniently doe in their owne persons'.<sup>52</sup> The pamphlet argued on the basis of the example of the Roman republic that the people had the right to overturn unjust government because they were sovereign. To regain his freedom, therefore, Lilburne should have the right to appeal to the people over the head of the parliament. This guarantee of the rights of the freeborn was a key Leveller argument; what is more, it came directly from classical and Renaissance republican sources.

The authority for this argument was the Scottish republican author, George Buchanan: 'For Buchannan an Author without reproach in his Booke (*De jure regni apud Scotos*) doth boldly and positively affirme, *Supremam potestatem esse in Populo*, the Supreame power to be in the people'.<sup>53</sup> Livy ('an unreprouable Author') had also argued for the right of an appeal to the people: 'And before Buchannan, the Common-wealth of Rome (*which remaineth a patterne and example to all ages both for civill and Military government*) say this Common-wealth in its best perfection did allow of this last refuge or appeale to the People' (added emphasis).<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Gaius Flaminius was proposed as providing a model for the parliament and common people. He had understood 'the Majestie of Rome to be indeed wholly in the people, & no otherwise in the Senate then by way of delegacy'. He had 'made his addresse to the multitude, and taught them to

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Sharp, 'John Lilburne and the Long Parliament's *Book of Declarations*'; Wooton, 'From Rebellion to Revolution'.

<sup>52</sup> *England's Miserie and Remedie*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

know and use their Power over himselfe, and his fellow Senators in reforming their disorders. For this the Commons highly esteemed him, and the Senators as deeply hated him'.<sup>55</sup>

The choice of Caius Flaminius, the initiator of the agrarian laws, as an example for Englishmen was highly revealing. All of the sources available in the mid-seventeenth century held Flaminius to be a notorious demagogue.<sup>56</sup> In challenging parliament and the common people to imitate his actions, the Levellers were not only associating themselves with a highly radical and unfashionably controversial figure, but also presenting themselves symbolically as the champions of the *plebs*.

In November 1646 the Levellers published *Vox Plebis*, which was most almost certainly by the same author as *England's Miserie and Remedie*. This was one of a large number of pamphlets arguing for the release of Lilburne and Overton from Newgate and the Tower, respectively. As in *England's Miserie and Remedie*, *Vox Plebis* asserted that the people (more precisely, the *plebs*) were sovereign and that Lilburne had the right to appeal over the heads of the Lords and Commons to the people to have his common-law rights re-established. By imprisoning Lilburne against the law, parliament had degenerated into tyranny. What is most notable about *Vox Plebis* is that its key sections consist of a collection of maxims and examples lifted, often verbatim, from the 1636 English translation of Machiavelli's *Discorsi* by Edward Dacres.<sup>57</sup> In Book I, discourse 4, Machiavelli had argued that Rome's greatness had been due to a combination of the political power of the *plebs*, the constant tension between them and the nobility, and the restrictions which the Roman constitution placed on office-holders by means of various constitutional devices.<sup>58</sup> The author of *Vox Plebis* used many of the same arguments to

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> *Romane Historie Written by T. Livius*, trans. Holland, 429. Cicero wrote 'when Tribune of the people [he] seditiously proposed an agrarian law to the people against the wishes of the senate and in general contrary to the desires of the upper classes': Cicero, *De Inventione* (London, 1968), 212–15; *The History of Polybius*, trans. E. Grimstone (London, 1634, STC 20099), 72, 149. According to Raleigh, Flaminius had 'sided in faction with the Commonaltie, though a man of greater nobilitie': W. Raleigh, *The History of the World in Five Bookes*, 4th edn (London, 1614, STC 20637), 419.

<sup>57</sup> This has been noticed previously only by Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London, 1964), 171–2.

<sup>58</sup> *Machiavels Discourses upon the First Decade of T. Livius*, bk I, discourse 4 (trans. E. Dacres, London, 1636, STC 17160), 20.

justify popular sovereignty. He also draws an explicit direct parallel between the House of Commons and the Roman tribunes of the people. This provides compelling evidence of the important influence of republicanism upon the formation of Leveller thought and the presence of Machiavellian republican ideas in English political discourse prior to 1649.

The pamphlet opened with the claim 'All States in the beginning are venerable: That Republique which would keep it selfe from ruine, is above all other things to keep their religion uncorrupted, and their Lawes from violation'. This is a paraphrase from the translation of the *Discorsi* by Dacres.<sup>59</sup> Unwisely, parliament had introduced a number of tyrannical innovations which, also according to Machiavelli, would inevitably 'draw the Odium of the people upon them: and incite the people to find out and invent wayes unusuall, and of innovation, to free themselves from their oppressors, and the execution of such tyrannicall power'.<sup>60</sup> As Machiavelli had argued, this disagreement between the people and their rulers was the source of all liberty; it had to be guarded by constant struggle by the people: 'It is a most sure Rule in State policy, That all the Lawes that are made in favour of liberty, spring first from the disagreement of the people with their Governours'.<sup>61</sup>

England under the Long Parliament was likened to Rome after the banishment of the Tarquins — when the nobility began to exercise 'the like or greater tyranny then the Tarquins had done'.<sup>62</sup> In Rome, in response to the tyranny of the Senate, the people 'by a necessity of their preservations created Tribunes as Guardians of the publick liberty, whereby the insolence and Arbitrary power of the Nobility was restrained and the people reinstated in their ancient liberty'.<sup>63</sup> The House of Commons, the author claimed, should imitate the tribunes of the people. It had been 'chosen & betrusted for us to be at Westm[inster] as Guardians of our Birth-rights, and most powerfull Tribunes of the peoples liberties', and, although members of the Commons had made many 'pious and feeling Declarations of their mindes now in print' [a reference to the *Book of Declarations*], they had

<sup>59</sup> *Vox Plebis*, 1; *Machiavels Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 65–6.

<sup>60</sup> *Vox Plebis*, 2–3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 (a paraphrase from *Machiavels Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 20).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* (a paraphrase from *Machiavels Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 18).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* (a paraphrase from *Machiavel's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 8–27).

yet to protect the people from the 'lordly, illegall sentences, and tyrannicall powers and executions' of the House of Lords.<sup>64</sup> The Commons should deliver Lilburne to justice, the pamphlet argued, because (as Machiavelli had claimed) 'a Republique that is well ordered, ought to give easie accesse to those that seek Justice by publique means'.<sup>65</sup> The inference was that in the absence of such justice, innovation and rebellion would take place and the *plebs* would have their tribunes replaced.

One of the practical aims of *Vox Plebis* was to press the Commons to prosecute the charge of treason made by Lilburne against Colonel Edward King. (Lilburne's accusations against King had been one of the causes of his imprisonment.) Once again, the argument was constructed from a series of quotations and paraphrases from Book I, discourse 24 of the *Discorsi*, where Machiavelli had argued that 'the wisest and best governed States in the world, never yet pardoned any man for a notorious crime committed against the Common-wealth, for any good services before done to it'. A similar maxim was also cited from Clement Edmund's *Observations Upon Caesar*, along with copious illustrations from the *Discorsi* and classical sources.<sup>66</sup>

*Vox Plebis* had one further aim — to denounce the county committees as oppressive and counter-productive to the parliamentary cause. Their suppression was also argued by reference to Machiavelli: 'a State or Common-wealth, that will keep it selfe in good order, and free from ruine; Must cherish impeachments and accusations of the people against those that through ambition, avarice, pride, cruelty, or oppression, seeke to destroye the liberty or property of the people'.<sup>67</sup> The county committees damaged the parliamentary cause by making a few rich and many poor. The first sort of people, 'when they are grown wealthy, will think of nothing more then to preserve their ill-gotten treasure, and will never venture . . . one drop of blood in your cause'. The second sort, 'who by their poverty are assured to lose nothing', were by nature always desirous of innovation.<sup>68</sup>

The author of *Vox Plebis* lamented that Rome had eventually declined into tyranny even though 'there was never any State,

<sup>64</sup> *Vox Plebis*, 58–9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 59 (a paraphrase from *Machiavel's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 37–42).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–1 (a paraphrase from *Machiavel's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 111–13).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 61 (a paraphrase from *Machiavel's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 37–42).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

more glorious, more free, more carefull of preserving it self'. The reasons were, as Machiavelli had written, the combination of the contentions that arose over the agrarian laws and 'the prolonging of Governments, viz. Dictatorships, Consulships, Generalships, Tribuneships of the people, and such like great Offices: for, by these meanes, those great Officers had meanes and power to raise armes against the liberty of the people: Sylla and Marius by this meanes could find Souldiers to take their part against the Publique; and Julius Caesar could find meanes hereby to make himself Lord of his native Country and Country-men'. Even the 'Law *de repetundis*, or of recovery against extorting Magistrates', had not been enough to prevent Rome's leaders from becoming tyrants. The author of *Vox Plebis* believed that unless England heeded the lessons of the fall of the Roman republic — which had proceeded from 'the oppressions and avarice of her Gouvernours' — it too would end in tyranny. The answer for the parliamentarians was 'to increase the number of their free subjects, and to make them as their Associates, and not Vassals', and, as in *England's Miserie and Remedie*, to imitate Gaius Flaminius and teach the multitude 'to know and use their power over himself and his fellow-Senators, in reforming their disorders'.<sup>69</sup> For the author of *Vox Plebis*, gaining liberty increased popular sovereignty. The central argument of *Vox Plebis* was, therefore, the same as that of Machiavelli in Book I, discourse 5 of the *Discorsi*: that liberty is safer in the hands of the common people than in the hands of the nobility. A political role for the plebeian classes — 'the multitude' — with the Levellers or independent parliamentarians as their tribunes, had been established.

In late 1646, Lilburne published two pamphlets arguing for a dramatic extension of the franchise for the elections to the Presbyterian-controlled London Common Council: *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, and its second part, *The Charters of London*. They were collections of ancient city charters, in both English and Latin, and they contained introductory essays written by one of Lilburne's associates. These essays were, like *England's Miserie and Remedie* and *Vox Plebis*, based on Machiavelli's argument that the liberty of republics required increased popular sovereignty. In well-ordered republics, the author claimed, the people 'reserved to themselves the right and free-election of the

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–8 (a paraphrase from *Machiavel's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 560).

greatest Ministers and Officers of State'.<sup>70</sup> To protect London's liberty from the tyranny of an oligarchy, the lord mayor, sheriffs and aldermen of London should therefore be elected annually by all of 'the freemen' and 'commoners' of the city, 'as with the Annual consuls of Rome'.<sup>71</sup> In these elections, 'the poorest that lives, hath as true a right to vote, as well as the richest and greatest'.<sup>72</sup> The similarity between the rhetoric of these pamphlets and the Agitators' and Levellers' later rhetoric at Putney is striking, and it is difficult to see how the influence of republicanism, particularly that of Machiavelli, upon the Levellers, could have been more clearly expressed.

Important arguments derived from Machiavelli which were to be found later in the *Agreements* and at Putney appear in these four pamphlets: that the people, including the poorest, were sovereign, were the source of justice and political virtue and should have the vote; that all, no matter how great, should be equally answerable to the people and the law; and that offices should be limited by rotation through annual election and removal for misconduct, as in Rome, to prevent the longevity of office leading to corruption and tyranny. This use of the *Discorsi* had added relevance for Leveller thought. In Machiavelli's popular republic the citizen was also a soldier. Needing allies in the parliamentary armies, this argument for a political role for the soldiery would have had obvious appeal for the Levellers.

Significantly, the evidence for authorship of these four pamphlets points towards John Wildman, the Agitators' chief spokesman at Putney and the probable author of the *Case of the Army* and the first *Agreement*, which were the subject of debate there. The first, *England's Miserie and Remedie*, was anonymously signed by 'an Utter-Barister' and was in the form of a legal opinion to 'his special friend', John Lilburne. The second, *Vox Plebis*, was also anonymous. It has been variously accredited to, in differing combinations, Overton, Walwyn, Henry Marten and Nedham. The author was, however, identified by John Lilburne in September 1647 as 'a profess'd, learned and judicious Lawyer'.<sup>73</sup> This points heavily towards Wildman, who was keen to portray himself as

<sup>70</sup> *London's Liberty in Chains Discovered* [Oct. 1646], 2: Brit. Lib., E. 359 (17).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Charters of London* [18 Dec. 1646], title page: Brit. Lib., E. 366 (12).

<sup>72</sup> *Charters of London*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> John Lilburne, *Two Letters Writ by Lieut. Col John Lilburne* [13 Sept. 1647], 3: Brit. Lib., E. 407(41).



the Levellers' legal authority — signing himself 'John Lawmind' in *Putney Projects*, writing *The Lawes Subversion* as a legal defence of Sir John Maynard in 1648, and appearing as legal 'Councell' to the radicals arguing for reform to the franchise of the London city government in 1650.<sup>74</sup> His role at Putney also seemed to have been that of an advocate. His first intervention in the debates was to announce that 'divers country gentlemen and soldiers and others amongst the rest of the Agents of the five regiments' had 'desired me that I would be their mouth, and in their names represent their sense unto you'.<sup>75</sup> Wildman's obvious capacity for legal argument and the encyclopaedic knowledge of republican political theory and history found in his signed works made him the obvious penman of these tracts. Corroborating evidence can be found through an examination of the essay in *London's Liberty in Chains*. This essay, which contained the same Machiavellian arguments that had appeared in *Vox Plebis*, and was by the same author,<sup>76</sup> was written by a friend of Lilburne's who was obviously a lawyer and who could read both Latin and French. The author of *Vox Plebis* was also a reader of Latin and French, as was shown by the pamphlet's copious Latin passages and by the author's own translations from the 1642 French-language edition of Andrew Horne's *La Somme appelle Mirroir des Justices*, which differ from the contemporary English translation.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the evidence and arguments used by the author of this essay are almost identical to those used by Wildman in a debate over the

<sup>74</sup> *London's Liberties: or, A Learned Argument of Law and Reason* [14 Dec. 1650], title page: Brit. Lib., E. 620 (7).

<sup>75</sup> David Underdown, 'Honest Radicals in the Counties, 1642–1649', in Donald H. Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries* (Oxford, 1978), 198, suggests that Wildman may have been acting as spokesman for the civilian radical party in Berkshire, hence 'a stranger to London'; *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 10.

<sup>76</sup> The author of *London's Liberty in Chains* told his readers to 'expect a larger Discourse' about how Rome flourished when the senate and people ruled: *London's Liberty in Chains*, 7. *Vox Plebis*, which was an extended analogy between England and Rome, taken from *Machiavel's Discourses*, was published on 19 November 1646, less than three weeks after *London's Liberty in Chains*, making it the likely discourse being referred to, and also suggesting that the same person was the author of all four of the pamphlets discussed in this section.

<sup>77</sup> The citations of Andrew Horne's *Mirror of Justice* in *Vox Plebis* are clearly from the French-language edition of 1642. Cf., for example, *Vox Plebis*, 55, with Horne's *La Somme appelle Mirroir des justices* (London, 1642), 288. For the English-language edition, which is clearly different to the translations in *Vox Plebis*, see Andrew Horne, *The Booke called the Mirrour of Justice* (London, 1646).

reform of London's constitution in 1650.<sup>78</sup> Although the exact authorship of these pamphlets cannot be known for certain, they were clearly Leveller documents. They argued for the release from gaol of Leveller leaders, or were edited and published by Lilburne to back his case for reform of the London Common Council. For this reason, they are a strong guide to the Levellers' developing political position prior to Putney.

## V

How do we then interpret the Putney Debates, given the Levellers' knowledge of Florentine civic humanism? What first becomes apparent is that the Levellers' and Agitators' arguments, with the exception of those of Col. Thomas Rainsborough, were consistently more secular and republican than those of the officers' representatives. In fact, in opposition to Pocock, it was the Grandees, not the Levellers, who saw the New Model Army as 'saints-in-arms', and who wanted to represent the Debates as an attempt to discover the will of God. On the first day of the Debates, Cromwell was adamant that their aim was 'to lay this as the foundation of all our actions, to do that which is the will of God'. He wanted both sides to the discussions to 'seek God together, and see if God will give us an uniting spirit'.<sup>79</sup> Later that same day, it was Lt.-Col. William Goffe who moved that there should be a prayer meeting for 'a seeking of God in the things that now lie before us'. Goffe believed that 'there hath been a withdrawing of the presence of God from us that have met in this place' and he wanted the discussion to be more explicitly religious in tone than it was: 'let us not be ashamed to declare to all the world that our counsels and our wisdom and our ways, they are not altogether such as the world hath walked in; but that we have had a dependency upon God, and that our desires are to follow God'.<sup>80</sup> These sentiments were enthusiastically endorsed by Henry Ireton and Buff-Coat,<sup>81</sup> but not by Petty and Wildman, who had more secular concerns. Petty declared that he was not delegated by the Agents, who sent him to attend a prayer meeting, and snapped back at Ireton (who was accusing

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *London's Liberties*, 8–12, with *London's Liberty in Chains*, 3–4.

<sup>79</sup> Oliver Cromwell, 28 Oct., in *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 15, 17.

<sup>80</sup> William Goffe, 28 Oct., *ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>81</sup> Henry Ireton and Buff-Coat, 28 Oct., *ibid.*, 21–3.

the Agitators of behaving as a separate caucus) that he was 'utterly unconcerned in the business' of the prayer meeting.<sup>82</sup> Wildman immediately signalled his impatience with this detour in the debate and dismissively stated his 'desire to return a little to the business in hand'.<sup>83</sup> Few or none of the soldiers' representatives appear to have attended the prayer meeting which followed on the second day (29 October); they seem to have arrived as the meeting was concluding.<sup>84</sup> Goffe's contribution to the beginning of the recorded discussion on this second day was the most explicit example of the millenarian saints-in-arms rhetoric of the entire debate: 'Now the word doth hold out in the Revelation, that in this work of Jesus Christ he shall have a company of Saints to follow him, such as are chosen and called and faithful. Now it is a scruple among the Saints, how far they should use the sword; yet God hath made use of them in that work. Many of them have been employed these five or six yeares'.<sup>85</sup>

The only comparable piece of chiliastic rhetoric from the Agitators' side came from Robert Everard, who claimed that God had sent him with the message that there was 'great expectation of sudden destruction' and that some speedy way of relief for the kingdom was therefore needed.<sup>86</sup> There were only a few additional examples of religious argument from the Agitators' side of the debate: Goffe's arguments were endorsed by Rainsborough; William Allen claimed that his thoughts had been with those seeking God at the prayer meeting; and Sexby made a single, short theological contribution.<sup>87</sup>

Wildman was dismissive of any attempts to reach a unified position by reference to the word of God. He declared his reverence for anything which had the image or spirit of God upon it, but stated that it was impossible to demonstrate conclusively that any argument which was claimed to have resulted from a spiritual experience was in fact from God. Even in purely spiritual matters, he declared, God's authorship was difficult to determine by reference to the scriptures, because the scriptures themselves could not be proved conclusively to be the word of God. This was even

<sup>82</sup> Maximillian Petty, 28 Oct., *ibid.*, 22–3.

<sup>83</sup> John Wildman, 28 Oct., *ibid.*, 24.

<sup>84</sup> For 29 Oct., see *ibid.*, 38–42.

<sup>85</sup> William Goffe, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Everard, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 42.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Rainsborough, 29 Oct., William Allen, Edward Sexby, 1 Nov., *ibid.*, 43, 98–9, 102.

more difficult in matters of policy: 'we cannot find anything in the word of God [of] what is fit to be done in civil matters'. Wildman believed that the only definite sign of the word of God was in the conformity of a proposition to the rules of reason and justice. Reason demanded that when dealing with the king and the lords, the army should be guided by arguments from safety.<sup>88</sup> These are the arguments of a humanist and sceptic. The Agitators and Levellers certainly used religious language, but religion was never the bedrock of their arguments or rhetoric.

Perhaps the most succinct way of expressing the dynamics of the Putney Debates is to focus upon the dichotomy between the different constitutional models or variants of republicanism that were proposed by the two parties. This has the danger of removing from view the practical political issues at stake, but the theoretical and constitutional proposals that were debated were intimately linked with these pressing problems of action.

The competing documents debated at Putney were Ireton's *Heads of Proposals* and the Levellers' and Agitators' *Agreement of the People*, which was a refinement of *The Case of the Army Truly Stated*. Both of these Leveller and Agitator pamphlets were most likely the work of Wildman.<sup>89</sup> The two documents differed markedly over the degree of popular sovereignty they allowed. As Tuck has argued, Ireton's proposals would, for a period of at least ten years in which most powers were vested in the council of state or other officers chosen by the parliament, have created an oligarchic republic, with a weak king, a strong council of state, a House of Lords, and a House of Commons elected by a basically unreformed forty-shilling freeholder franchise. The oligarchic nature of this model was enhanced later when the *Heads of Proposals* were modified in the *Remonstrance* of November 1648, which became the constitutional basis of the new republic.<sup>90</sup>

The *Agreements of the People* are usually characterized as models for a radically decentralized state, taking their primary inspiration

<sup>88</sup> John Wildman, 1 Nov., *ibid.*, 107–8.

<sup>89</sup> Wildman did not deny Ireton's accusation at Putney that he was the author of *Case of the Army Truly Stated*: *ibid.*, 92, 95. The 'Postscript' to the first *Agreement* acknowledges that it was taken largely from *Case of the Army Truly Stated* — it was, it stated, constructed by the Agents of the five regiments (undoubtedly with the drafting assistance of an educated Leveller figure), 'extracting some principles of common freedom out of those many things proposed to you in the Case truly stated': *Leveller Manifestoes*, ed. Wolfe, 233.

<sup>90</sup> Tuck, *Philosophy and Government*, 243, 248–53.

from traditions of local and village government.<sup>91</sup> While it is correct that the Levellers consistently argued for the decentralization of the administration of justice, it is doubtful whether this was the central thrust of their constitutional proposals. Their key aim was, rather, to define and limit the power of the House of Commons and secure certain individual rights against arbitrary government. If, as can now be assumed, the author of the *Agreements of the People* was a student of republican (and, more specifically, Machiavellian) political theory, the franchise requirements become understandable as an attempt to entrench the political power of the common people in a virtually unfettered unicameral legislature.

This overall aim was complemented by a number of additional republican proposals designed to prevent the corruption of state power by 'great men', as Machiavelli had proposed in the *Discorsi*. The first of these proposals is the insistence on the limitation of terms of political office. In justifying the termination of the Long Parliament, the first and second *Agreements* had noted 'the many inconveniences apparently arising from the long continuance of the same persons in authority'. This conforms with Machiavelli's complaint, which was echoed in *Vox Plebis*, that one of the reasons for the downfall of the Roman republic was 'the long continuation of governments'.<sup>92</sup> To combat this, the first *Agreement* had prescribed limiting parliamentary terms to two years, although the second omitted any reference to the length of terms.<sup>93</sup> In the petition of January 1648 this provision was extended to local magistrates and was reduced to only one year, with judges' terms limited to a maximum of three years.<sup>94</sup> By the third *Agreement* this had developed into an elaborate constitutional measure that would have been at home in James Harrington's works. No member of the present Parliament, it stated, 'shall be capable of being elected of the next Representative, nor any member of any future Representative shall be capable of being chosen for the Representative immediately succeeding: but are free to be chosen, one Representative having intervened: Nor shall any Member of any Representative be made either Receiver, Treasurer, or other

<sup>91</sup> Brian Manning, *The English People and the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 302 ff.

<sup>92</sup> *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 444, 356; *Machiavelli's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, 560.

<sup>93</sup> *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 444, 356.

<sup>94</sup> *Leveller Manifestoes*, ed. Wolfe, 269–70, 267.

Officer during that employment'. Additionally, the terms of each Representative were to be limited to one year. These provisions were also extended to local government officers.<sup>95</sup> This is, of course, a classical republican system of rotation of office, incorporating annual elections, as in the Roman model — as had been proposed by Wildman in *Vox Plebis*, *London's Liberties in Chains* and *The Charters of London*.

Another important feature of the Levellers' constitutional proposals was their insistence on the right of the Representative to remove executive office-holders who had betrayed their trust. This was one of the reserve powers of parliament given in the first *Agreement* (rendered unnecessary in the third by its insistence of strict rotation and annual appeal to the voters).<sup>96</sup> Again, this was a notable feature of republican political thought, based on the models of the *Lex Repetundarum* of Rome and the *ostracism* of Athens. Such proposals had featured heavily in the *Discorsi* and in *Vox Plebis*.

This disagreement over the degree of popular sovereignty contained in the opposing republican models was a central focus of the debates at Putney. It was reflected in one of the key arguments used by the Grandees, which was to label the Levellers' franchise proposals as 'democratic'. To understand the significance of this, it is necessary to examine the connotations of the term at this time. In the 1640s 'democracy' was still held in suspicion, understood by the definitions provided by Aristotle, Thucydides, Polybius and Machiavelli.<sup>97</sup> Aristotle had defined democracy as the rule by the propertyless over the propertied, leading to inevitable redistribution or abolition of private property.<sup>98</sup> The histories of Thucydides and Polybius illustrated this definition by demonstrating that democracy inevitably degenerated into civil war, 'anarchy' and mob rule. Commenting upon Roman and Florentine history, Machiavelli also characterized mass participatory politics as a constant state of turmoil and class conflict, which led inevitably to the Caesarization of Rome and, in Florence, the

<sup>95</sup> *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings*, ed. Arthur Leslie Morton (Berlin, 1975), 269–70, 275.

<sup>96</sup> *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 444.

<sup>97</sup> Russell L. Hanson, 'Democracy', in Terrence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989), 68 ff.

<sup>98</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1317<sup>a</sup>40–1318<sup>a</sup>10 (ed. Steven Everson, Cambridge, 1988, 144–5).

rise of the Medici.<sup>99</sup> By the 1600s these definitions provided a framework by which people understood contemporary demands for a wider franchise. Although parliament was a system of elected representation rather than of direct participatory politics, and the courts were presided over by judges and juries rather than open assemblies, both could still evoke parallels with classical times. Parliamentarians were still elected in open assemblies, which raised the spectre of 'the mob'. It was still feared that representatives of the propertyless, if elected through universal suffrage, would vote the abolition of property. Parliament too could still be used as a political court, as in classical times, through bills of attainder and impeachment. In this way, by the time of the English Civil Wars, universal manhood suffrage was easily identified with classical 'democracy'.

When the *Agreement* was finally read at Putney, Ireton immediately attacked the Levellers' franchise proposals. The underlying theme of his comments was the linkage between democracy and communism. His argument reached its height when he stated that giving votes to the propertyless would ultimately lead to a denial of all property:

by that same right of nature (whatever it be) that you pretend, by which you say, one man hath an equal right with another to the choosing of him that will govern him — by the same right of nature, he hath the same [equal] right in any goods he sees — meat, drink, clothes — to take and use them for his sustenance. He hath a freedom to the land [to take] the ground, to exercise it, till it; he hath the [same] freedom to anything that anyone doth account himself to have any propriety in.

If the propertyless were elected to parliament, Ireton was to add later, and more directly, '[w]hy may not those men vote against all property?'<sup>100</sup> Col. Nathaniel Rich argued in a similar vein that it would be in the interests of the propertyless majority to elect other men without property who would legislate 'that there shall be an equality of goods and estates'.<sup>101</sup> Rainsborough's reaction to this line of argument was to recognize that Ireton was accusing them of 'anarchy'.<sup>102</sup> Cromwell reiterated this connection in replying to the offended Colonel: 'No man says that you

<sup>99</sup> *Machiavel's Discourses*, trans. Dacres, bk I, discourse 37.

<sup>100</sup> Henry Ireton, 29 Oct., *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 58, 62.

<sup>101</sup> Nathaniel Rich, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>102</sup> Thoms Rainsborough, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 59.

have a mind to anarchy, but [that] the consequence of this rule tends to anarchy, must end in anarchy'.<sup>103</sup>

The reactions of the Levellers and Agitators to this line of argument took two forms. The first, implied in the reaction of Rainsborough, was to deny that they sought the abolition of private property, even though they held to the proposition that all, or virtually all, men should have a vote. Rainsborough claimed that, regardless of the electoral system, all men were bound to respect property by God's commandment, 'Thou shalt not steal'.<sup>104</sup> Petty argued that, as government was first chosen by all men to preserve the property of all, giving the right to choose to all would be an even greater protection to property.<sup>105</sup> Wildman's response was to change the direction of the debate, making the argument not about the possible future 'consequences' of the proposed reform, but about the 'rights' of it. Here, once again, Wildman's mind worked as would be expected for a humanist and Machiavellian scholar. He wanted the debate to focus on principles and maxims: 'That's the end of Parliaments: not to constitute what is already [established, but to act] according to the just rules of government. Every person in England hath as clear a right to elect his representative as the greatest person in England. I conceive that's an undeniable *maxim* of government: that all government is in the free consent of the people' (added emphasis).<sup>106</sup> On the third day of the Debates, Wildman restated his desire to reduce the debate to the discussion of maxims: 'I could wish we should have recourse to principles and maxims of just government' [by these principles, government by King and Lords is seen to be unjust].<sup>107</sup> Although the radicals may have anticipated the charge of democracy, anarchy and communism, they had not made concrete provision for property ownership a distinct plank in the first *Agreement*. Moreover, in the debates they strenuously denied such claims. They appear to have noted these arguments, however, because their later *Agreements* and manifestos included planks outlawing any proposals aimed at making all land in common.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Oliver Cromwell, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>104</sup> Thomas Rainsborough, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>105</sup> Maximillian Petty, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>106</sup> John Wildman, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 66.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>108</sup> *Leveller Manifestoes*, ed. Wolfe, 288, 301, 409. The latter example, from the third *Agreement*, was specifically inserted, as the document itself stated, to prevent the overturning of 'all things into Anarchy and Confusion'.



The second of the Levellers' and Agitators' defences of a popular franchise was that of the radical citizen-soldier: that even the most plebeian of the soldiers had fought to establish their rights as citizens. They had not fought merely to defend the property of rich men. This aspect of the debate was opened by Rainsborough: if common soldiers were not to get the vote, 'I would fain know what we have fought for'.<sup>109</sup> The Roman, republican nature of this line of argument was immediately recognized by Rich, who drew an explicit parallel between the Levellers' proposals for universal suffrage and the causes of the decline of the Roman republic:

I remember there were many workings and revolutions, as we have heard, in the Roman Senate; and there was never a confusion that did appear (and that indeed was come to) till the state came to know this type of distribution of election. This is how the people's voices were bought and sold, and that by the poor; and thence it came that he that was the richest man, and [a man] of some considerable power among the soldiers, and one they resolved on, made himself a perpetual dictator. And if we strain too far to avoid monarchy in kings [let us take heed] that we do not call for emperors to deliver us from more than one tyrant.<sup>110</sup>

This provoked an avalanche of classical citizen-soldier rhetoric. Sexby claimed:

There are many thousands of us soldiers that have ventured our lives; we have had little propriety in the kingdom as to our estates, yet we have had a birthright. But it seems now, except a man hath a fixed estate in this kingdom, he hath no right in this kingdom. I wonder we were so much deceived. If we had not a right to the kingdom, we were mere mercenary soldiers.<sup>111</sup>

And Rainsborough, in an even clearer exhibition of this type of rhetoric, proclaimed:

I see that it is impossible to have liberty but all property must be taken away . . . I would fain know what the soldier hath fought for all this while? He hath fought to enslave himself, to give power to men of riches, men of estates, to make him a perpetual slave. We do find in all presses that go forth none must be pressed that are freehold men. When these gentlemen fall out among themselves they shall press the poor scrubs to come and kill [one another for] them.

For this speech, Ireton accused Rainsborough of making rhetorical 'flourishes'.<sup>112</sup> The rhythm of these passages give us a feel for the short-hand nature of William Clarke's transcripts of the

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Rainsborough, 29 Oct., *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. Woodhouse, 61.

<sup>110</sup> Nathaniel Rich, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 64–5.

<sup>111</sup> Edward Sexby, 29 Oct., *ibid.*, 69, 74.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Rainsborough and Henry Ireton, *ibid.*, 71.

Putney Debates. Clarke summarizes arguments that are commonplace in seventeenth-century republican discourse. The similarity between these flourishes and those of the citizen-soldier *plebs* in the republican histories outlined above is striking. They are both examples of demagogic citizen-soldier rhetoric. In fact, each of the sentences is made up from radical republican clichés scattered throughout the widely available histories of republican Greece, Rome and Florence. They show an underlying republican rhetoric was used at Putney alongside puritan, common-law and conquest rhetoric. They endorse the concept central to the neo-Roman idea of liberty — that a man cannot be free unless he is able to participate in the government of his state. The Agitators at Putney were to go further than later Machiavellian scholars such as Nedham and Harrington by including all men, including the poorest, in the definition of who should exercise this liberty. They saw themselves, at least partly, as citizen-soldiers who were fully justified in using the sword to establish a republic to ensure their rights and liberty, and to ensure, as had the soldiers in Livy and Plutarch, that a republic did more than merely substitute the rule of the few for the rule of the king.

## VI

There is thus an added dimension to our interpretation of the Putney Debates. Among other things, Putney was an argument about alternative versions of republicanism — one oligarchic and exclusive, and the other popular and democratic. The radical republican influence upon the Levellers' constitutional proposals was well-recognized by their contemporaries. In *The Case of the Common-Wealth of England Stated* (1650), Marchamont Nedham accused the Levellers of copying various aspects of their constitutional proposals directly from the Roman and Athenian constitutions, and he implied (accurately, if this analysis is correct) that this was the source of their franchise proposals, their proposals for rotation of office and their opposition to the council of state. Nedham's identification of the Levellers and the 'True Levellers' or Diggers with the popular leaders of classical Athens and Rome was so explicit that he compared them to 'Greek' and 'Roman Levellers'.<sup>113</sup> As an engagement tract, Nedham's *Case of the*

<sup>113</sup> Marchamont Nedham, *The Case of the Common-Wealth of England Stated* [8 May 1650], 69–79, 79: Brit. Lib., E 600 (7).

*Common-Wealth* was one of the first theoretical defences of the legitimacy of the new republic. What is often forgotten is that it defended the new republic not only from the royalism of the Presbyterians, Scots and royalists, but also from the more inclusive and popular republicanism of the Levellers. In this sense, Nedham's writings show that the oligarchic republicanism of the 1650s was in part a response to a more representative and popular republicanism that had been advocated by the Levellers in the previous decade.

The Levellers, I believe, recognized that there was nothing inherently egalitarian or democratic about republicanism. Republicanism was, in fact, often associated with a highly aristocratic and élitist political culture. The Levellers were wary of the motives of their republican allies, particularly Ireton and Cromwell, and suspected (correctly, as it turned out) that they would attempt to settle the peace by establishing a version of republicanism which was oligarchic and less attuned to protecting the ancient rights of Englishmen than even the preceding constitutional monarchy had been. In response to this, the Levellers, and John Wildman, in particular, drew upon their humanist education, especially their reading of Machiavelli, and rediscovered a suppressed language of popular republicanism which had originally been voiced by the common people of classical civilization. They adapted to their own constitutional models aspects of classical republican constitutions which had been designed to counter the tendency towards oligarchy and stagnation that had destroyed the liberty of ancient republics. Their model was that of a rough-and-ready commonwealth which embedded the hegemony of the common people. Later, in order not to alienate the propertied classes, who equated democracy with mob rule and communism, they countered with the guarantee of the ownership of private property. In this way, they orientated the lower classes towards parliamentary politics and away from the naïve and doomed communistic uprisings, which had characterized lower-class politics until this time, as a means of guaranteeing their rights. In this way they invented the modern concept of liberal and truly representative (for males at least) democracy.