

The London Revolution
1640-1643

Class Struggles in 17th
Century England

Michael Sturza



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PREFACE

And thus I hope even British respectability will not be overshocked if I use...the term "historical materialism," to designate that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another.

~Frederick Engels¹

The diminishing band who continue to write about the period have largely discarded the grand narratives of liberty and revolution. They no longer believe that two sides in the war were divided by great differences, whether social or ideological. Clear-cut interpretations of the conflict have given way to a complex and confusing story of contingency, accident, and unintended consequences.

~Keith Thomas²

The history of the English Revolution, Civil War, unsettled Commonwealth and degenerating Protectorate took place during the years 1640-1660. The period remains a divisive line in English history, despite less notice being taken of it in British schools and the popular press than was the case not so long ago. Just as the effects and controversies of the American Civil War are still extant, those of the English Civil War in Britain (and also Ireland) remain alive today.³ "The past is never dead," William Faulkner famously wrote, "it's not even past." By abolishing slave labor in favor of capitalist wage labor, the defeat of the Southern plantation owners made the U.S. Civil War the last progressive bourgeois revolution to occur. Two hundred years earlier, the English Revolution destroyed the absolutist feudal political system in the British Isles. The epoch of capitalist society under the rule of the bourgeois class had begun, even if only tentatively. The issues at stake in the struggles of 1640 and after were not only whether sovereignty, that is, political power, resided in the monarch or Parliament; or whether there would be freedom of religion, how much and for whom; but whether the entire social and political system would be modified to allow for a greater possibility of better living for the masses, and the greater democracy needed to achieve it.

The Magna Carta of 1215 had led to a monarchy attenuated by a Parliament, and the 1530s Reformation of Henry VIII denuded the Church of its eternal inviolability. These rich traditions imbued the English events with

1 Introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1892, 1970), 386-387

2 "The Truth About Oliver Cromwell," *New York Review of Books* 59, no. 17 (November 8, 2012), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/nov/08/truth-about-oliver-cromwell> Accessed June 20, 2013

3 In 2016, Her Majesty's government argued in court that foreign affairs were the royal prerogative! Stephen Castle, "Without a Constitution, 'Brexit' Is Guided by a Prerogative. But Whose?," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/17/world/europe/without-a-constitution-brexit-is-guided-by-a-prerogative-but-whose.html?searchResultPosition=1> Accessed April 25, 2017

a political and religious background that simultaneously encouraged and misled the aroused populace. The issues they fought over, what we today call democratic rights, would eventually be codified in the 1689 Bill of Rights, and the initial amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Their origins, however, lie here in the mid-17th century.⁴

The great French Revolution is conventionally considered the start of the modern, i.e., capitalist, age. The English Revolution, in comparison, was an even more ambiguous, partial, and contradictory affair. This complexity was captured by the socialist Oxford historian R. H. Tawney, who when asked whether the English Civil War was a bourgeois revolution replied, "Of course it was a bourgeois revolution. The problem is the bourgeoisie was on both sides."⁵ Unlike France in 1789, during the 1640s in England there were no scenes in Parliament declaring feudalism abolished wholesale, no Terror unleashed against the aristocracy, no land redistributed to the peasantry. And while Oliver Cromwell was as iron-willed and decisive as Robespierre in pursuit of the military defeat of the king, he was a most inconsistent revolutionary in its aftermath.

Thus the prominent issues of the period, and the way they were resolved at the time, continue to give rise to fierce partisan debate. Many historians, beginning with the royalist Earl of Clarendon, have been unhappy with the way matters turned out, or, with a jaundiced eye on current political conflicts, wished to deny the revolutionary nature of the changes that occurred.⁶ Particularly over the last fifty years, as the post-WWII order has been slowly crumbling, the topic once again became extraordinarily contentious among historians, necessarily reflecting the political leanings of the contenders. As one rightwing Revisionist historian put it, "We are all at heart either Royalists or Roundheads."⁷ By the early 1980s, Revisionist historians had virtually drowned out the Marxist class analysis.

What many historians (both pro and con) regarded as the Marxist view of English events was predominant in British academia during the mid-20th century. Its prevalence was largely due to the efforts of the English historian

4 In 2015, the spate of articles in the popular press insisting on the irrelevancy of Magna Carta at its 800th anniversary only further demonstrated how at least a major section of the bourgeois class had freed itself from any moral compunctions regarding the welfare and rights of the people at large, so much so that it spit on a primary source of its own history. See e.g., Tom Ginsburg, "Stop Revering Magna Carta," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/15/opinion/stop-revering-magna-carta.html?searchResultPosition=1> Accessed June 15, 2015. Cf. Ferdinand Mount, "Back to Runnymede," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 8 (23 April 2015), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n08/ferdinand-mount/back-to-runnymede> Accessed 1 July 2016 for a more mainstream, Tory view.

5 Christopher Hill, "Conclusion," in *Change and Continuity in 17th-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, 1991), 281; R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 124

6 Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, an advisor to both Charles I and II, wrote the first history of the Revolution and Civil War.

7 Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution*, 239, quoting Kevin Sharpe, who "...sided relentlessly with the people in power." David Cressy, "The Blindness of Charles I," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 640, 653, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.637> Accessed February 13, 2019

Christopher Hill. His very short first book, *The English Revolution 1640*,⁸ provides a concise analysis that completely rejects and replaces the portrayals of his predecessors, whether royalist, Tory or Whig (liberal).⁹ To one degree or another, bourgeois historiography told a Civil War story of politicized religious fanatics who first aided and then usurped Parliament's fight for democracy, murdered the king, and established an aberrant theocratic state.¹⁰ Hill presented the Revolution and Civil War as a conflict between *social classes*. Underlying his oeuvre was the basic Marxist tenet that the ideas and outlook of individuals were firstly impacted by their economic position, and he identified the petty bourgeois rural yeomen and urban artisans as the social basis of Parliament's New Model Army.¹¹ All attempts to study this period must begin with Hill's work.

A member of the Communist Party from 1935-1957, Hill was prolific, turning out numerous essays and reviews in addition to major interpretive studies, most of which are still in print or available. Much of his work concentrated on the more radical and democratic aspects and individuals of the general Puritan movement. In particular, he revived interest in the "far left," i.e., most radical, separatist religious sects, especially the early communist Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the Diggers.¹² His most thorough exposition of such groups is *The World Turned Upside Down*.¹³ If he bent the stick too far in his imputation of revolutionary potential to such forces this was a small price to pay for demonstrating their influence on 17th-century society and later political thought. Hill also used the cultural history of the period to illuminate it in a broader context. His book *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714*,¹⁴ spanning the entire Stuart era, remains the best introduction to the topic, although in one or two places it strays from the earlier analysis of *The English Revolution 1640*, to take account of some conservative historical claims current at the time.

While *The Century of Revolution* unavoidably treats many events in brief, more unsatisfactory is Hill's scant mention of the initial revolution in London described here.¹⁵ This singular omission is also true of his similar work, published a few years later, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution 1530-*

8 Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940, 1985). Also available at Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/hill-christopher/english-revolution/index.htm> Accessed 15 May 2016

9 Hill wrote it just before he went to serve in WWII, in case he did not return.

10 This view began as official Restoration state policy with the 1660 Act of Indemnity and Oblivion. "The conflict and the Commonwealth were to be seen as an aberration, an eclipse..." Jesse Childs, "Reduced to Ashes and Rubbage," *London Review of Books* 41, no. 1 (3 January 2019), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n01/jessie-childs/reduced-to-ashes-and-rubbage> Accessed 18 January 2019

11 Hill, *1640*, 59, 62, 63

12 The Diggers, or True Levellers, were poor people who attempted to plant crops on common or unused land. They were easily and cruelly attacked and dispersed.

13 Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1980)

14 Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961, 1980)

15 Hill, *Century*, 102-103

1780,¹⁶ an even wider-ranging, somewhat more leisurely introductory social history centered around the Civil War period. Both of these are basic texts, invaluable for their high-level and comprehensive view of the era, but notably lacking in material on the 1640-1643 mass movement in London.

It is necessary to bear in mind that Hill's politics had been formed in a party loyal to Moscow at a time when it was moving in an overtly reformist direction under Stalin (known as the "popular front" period).¹⁷ Thus he saw Danton, rather than Robespierre, as Cromwell's later historical analog,¹⁸ and he regarded the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and February 1917 as bourgeois rather than workers' revolutions, despite the presence of councils (*soviets* in Russian) formed by workers and soldiers.¹⁹ It is never easy to learn that the political tool for one's aims and ideals has been found wanting. Without an understanding of why and how the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution degenerated, not a few ex-Communists arrived at a cynical view of "the god that failed." Hill was very far from these, but he did make a certain peace with bourgeois academia. His post-1957 writings, erudite and valuable, lack his earlier militant edge, while remaining informed by his political past.

Of greatest consequence was the view Hill and Tawney held in the 1940s and '50s conflating a misconstrued "progressive gentry," with the bourgeois revolutionary leadership.²⁰

Professor R. H. Tawney and others have analyzed the cleavage *within the landed class*, between what Marxists would call "feudal" and "bourgeois" elements, which developed in the decades before 1640 and *which underlay the divisions in the civil war*.²¹ [Emphasis added]

Tawney's purposeful but flawed 1941 essay, "The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640"²² kicked off a major, but inconclusive, academic controversy over the gentry that lasted into the early 1960s. Hill's view of a progressive gentry, distinguished from its "feudal elements," often cited Tawney's work, but was schematic to begin with. On the one hand, the basis for this distinc-

16 Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1967, 1992)

17 The "popular front" (aka "people's front") was (and sometimes still is) a collaboration between capitalist and reformist workers parties for electoral purposes, running on a common, watered-down, i.e., non-revolutionary, program acceptable to the bourgeois elements in it.

18 Christopher Hill, "Political Animal," *New York Review of Books* 24, no. 10 (June 9, 1977), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1977/jun/09/political-animal/> Accessed September 15, 2013

19 Christopher Hill, "The English Civil War Interpreted by Marx and Engels," *Science & Society* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1948): 135, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40399879> Accessed 20 November 2016

20 Hill, 1640, 29, 35, 38, 54, 59; *Century*, 87; Christopher Hill, "Lord Clarendon and the Puritan Revolution," in *Puritanism and Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 1958, 2001), 192. This was despite Hill's own earlier statements: "But the House of Commons did not make the revolution: its members were subject to pressure from outside, from the people of London, the yeoman and artisans of the home counties." 1640, 52; "The House of Commons elected in the autumn of 1640 was not a revolutionary assembly. Elected on the traditional propertied franchise, the M.P.s were a cross-section of the ruling class." *Oliver Cromwell 1658-1958* (London: The Historical Association, 1958), 12. Reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill* Vol. 3 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981, 1986)

21 Christopher Hill, "Historians on the Rise of British Capitalism," *Science & Society* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1950): 308, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40400023> Accessed 15 December 2016

22 *The Economic History Review* 11, no. 1 (1941), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2590708> Accessed 20 November 2016

tion within the gentry was unwarranted — land in the 17th century was no longer governed by feudal economic relations, however much feudal rank and patriarchal attitudes continued. On the other, it collapsed any disparities between two *different* classes, the gentry and the rapidly developing bourgeois, or capitalist, class that were acting in concert. This collapse flowed from Tawney's assertion that "The landowner living on the profits and rents of commercial farming, and the merchant or banker...represented, not two classes, but one. Judged by the source of their incomes, both were equally *bourgeois*."²³ Although commercial leasing of farms by the upper class was far from unknown at the beginning of the seventeenth century, copyhold tenantry was still preponderant, and a source of wide conflict.

Pressed by anti-Marxists, Hill began to retreat from the notion that a section of the gentry had led the revolution.²⁴ But he appears to have been unable to present any good alternative to it, despite Valerie Pearl's seminal account of the London revolutionary bourgeois leadership in her 1961 study.²⁵ Forced to acknowledge the untenability of his position,²⁶ the muddled argument left Hill open to attacks pointing to an alleged lack of clear-cut class divisions in the anti-absolutist struggle.²⁷ By 1974, and again in 1980, he attempted to answer his critics by one-sidedly stressing the revolution as an objective fact or unconscious process.

...the phrase [bourgeois revolution] in Marxist usage does *not* mean a revolution made by or consciously willed by the bourgeoisie. ... The English revolution, like all revolutions, was caused by the breakdown of the old society... The hypothesis is that this outcome, and the Revolution itself, were made possible by...the structures, fractures, and pressures of the society, rather than the wishes of leaders, which dictated the outbreak of revolution and shaped the state which emerged from it. ... Once the old constraints had broken down, or been broken, the shape of the new order was determined in the long run by the needs of a society in which large numbers of unideological men minded their own business.²⁸ [Emphasis in original]

23 Tawney, "Rise of the Gentry," 18 [Emphasis in original]; Hill, *Century*, 87

24 Christopher Hill, "Recent Interpretations of the Civil War," *History* 41, nos. 141, 143 (February, October, 1956): 70-71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24402908> Accessed 25 April, 2020. Reprinted in *Puritanism and Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 1958, 2001)

25 Valerie Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). Hill's avoidance of the London events is especially odd given that Pearl's book, published the same year as Hill's *The Century of Revolution* and listed in its bibliography, was based on her Ph.D. thesis reportedly supervised by Hill. Her thesis is cited in *Oliver Cromwell 1658-1958*, 13 fn. 9. The reprint in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill* Vol. 3 cites Pearl's book instead.

26 Christopher Hill, "Parliament and People in 17th-Century England," *Past & Present*, no. 92 (August, 1981): 101, 118, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650751> Accessed 26 November 2016. Revised and reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill* Vol. 3. See the section in Chapter 7 below "The English gentry, an anomalous class."

27 See J. H. Hexter, "Storm Over the Gentry" (1958), and "Personal Retrospect and Postscript" (1961), in *Reappraisals in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 117-162, 255-258; Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (London: Verso, 2003), 640-641; Henry Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism: A 21st Century Perspective* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 119, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183p671.8> Accessed 16 December 2018

28 Christopher Hill, "A Bourgeois Revolution?," in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 110-112, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zvts5.7> Accessed 25 April 2020. Reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill* Vol. 3

His opponents further seized on this as a blow to Marxist theory, as indeed it was.²⁹ It is flesh and blood human beings who make history, and revolutions, at least successful ones, don't occur without a leadership.

So who *did* lead the revolution in London? Puritan clergy played a considerable role, and well-off middle layers of the guild memberships were drawn into it by events, but the key answer comes from Robert Brenner's convincing work on the free-trading Atlantic merchants in his study *Merchants and Revolution*.³⁰ This book was not published until 1993, although a 50-page article by Brenner on the topic was published twenty years before in Hill's own journal.³¹ While Hill was clearly aware of the importance of this new group of English merchants to the post-Civil War regimes,³² he appears never to have commented on their leading political role during the 1630s and early 1640s.³³ He did recommend Brenner's book, along with those of others, in the preface to a reissued edition of his essays,³⁴ but if he reviewed or wrote about it in the last decade of his life I am unaware of it. Even in retreat he could elegantly refute conservative critics at times, but he was a poor polemicist, too polite and too often advancing weak or vague arguments. Nevertheless, he supplied a comprehensive explication of the period that in fact very largely holds up. His great credit was in pointing out and stubbornly adhering to the enormous advances made as a result of the revolutionary decades, and his identification of ordinary people from the lower classes brought into active political life. More than anyone else he astutely asserted, not least through repeated analyses of Puritan ideology, the understanding of the mid-17th century events as a *social* revolution, in place of a religious or "Puritan" revolution.

During the 1940s and 1950s Hill had to contend with conservative historians, particularly Hugh Trevor-Roper.³⁵ Beginning in the 1970s, however,

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, 1986); Hill, "Conclusion," 279. See also David Underdown, "Puritanism, Revolution, and Christopher Hill," *The Teacher* 22, no. 1 (November 1988): 69-71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/493099> Accessed 22 November 2017

29 See in particular the slippery article by the liberal Lawrence Stone, "The Bourgeois Revolution of Seventeenth-Century England Revisited," *Past & Present*, no. 109 (November 1985), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650609> Accessed 10 August 2015

30 On the Atlantic merchants see Chapter 8 below. Hill himself had mentioned a distinction between "big trading bourgeoisie" and "free-trade bourgeoisie": 1640, 59

31 Robert Brenner, "The Civil War Politics of London's Merchant Community," *Past & Present*, no. 58 (February 1973), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650257> Accessed 19 November 2016. For the magazine's history see Christopher Hill, R. H. Hilton, and E. J. Hobsbawm, "Past and Present. Origins and Early Years," *Past & Present*, no. 100 (August 1983), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650618> Accessed 10 August 2015

32 Hill, *Reformation*, 156-157

33 The closest reference Hill seems to have made about the Atlantic merchants prior to the Civil War is a comment in passing: "A break-through came with a combination of religious dissidents (Puritan and Catholic) as settlers [in North America] with sympathetic merchants who were prepared to forego immediate profit..." Christopher Hill, "Plain Sailing," *New York Review of Books* 21, no. 18 (November 14, 1974), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1974/nov/14/plain-sailing/> Accessed September 15, 2013

34 Christopher Hill, "Preface to the Revised Edition," *A Nation of Change and Novelty* (London: Bookmarks, 1993), 11

35 Who once denigrated the Civil War period as "an untidy interruption." Robert Ashton, "The Civil War and the Class Struggle," in *The English Civil War and After 1642-1658*, ed. R. H. Pary (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 93

a more deliberate backlash began. Geoffrey Elton had provided an inverted paradigm in 1965,³⁶ but it was Conrad Russell (son of Bertrand by his third wife and later 5th Earl Russell) who first attracted wide attention. Like Elton, he attacked what was alleged to be the prevailing Marxist orthodoxy of a “high road to civil war,”³⁷ i.e., that it was inevitable. “Before we explain why the English Revolution happened, we should ask again whether it ever did happen,” Russell wrote in 1974.³⁸ To pose the question this way was to take aim at, not just an interpretation, but the complex of facts themselves.

Much of Russell’s broad account...rests on the claims that virtually all Englishmen believed in ‘the rule of law’ and that no profound differences of political principle divided them before the Civil War. ... For Russell and Elton, virtually everyone held that the country was a limited monarchy. Since there was practically no dissension on this question, the war could not have been about it.³⁹

Russell’s challenge was soon taken up by an increasingly reactionary group of younger historians self-consciously calling themselves Revisionists. With the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and the political wrench toward conservatism in 1980, this tendency gathered steam, heaping scorn and calumny upon any work even hinting at a class analysis, or indeed any analysis at all. “Revisionism was a revolt against materialist or determinist histories and historiographies...” wrote an English participant much later, “...a rejection of the social history of politics but also a rejection of the relevance of social change.”⁴⁰

36 Geoffrey Elton, “A High Road to Civil War?” reprinted in *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government: Papers and Reviews 1946-1972* Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Robert Zaller, “The Concept of Opposition in Early Stuart England,” *Albion* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 220-223, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4049254> Accessed 25 February 2019

37 Conrad Russell, “Parliamentary History in Perspective 1604-1629,” *History* 61, no. 201 (1976): 2-3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24409552> Accessed 26 December 2016; Robert Zaller, “What Does the English Revolution Mean? Recent Historiographical Interpretations of Mid-Seventeenth Century England,” *Albion* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 618-620, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4050133> Accessed 11 November 2018. Zaller, “The Concept of Opposition,” 223-228

38 Conrad Russell, “Was there an English Revolution?: The Rump Parliament, 1648-1653,” *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 8 March 1974, quoted in J. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution* (London: Methuen & Co., 1977), 146

39 Johann Sommerville, “English and European Political Ideas in the Early Seventeenth Century: Revisionism and the Case of Absolutism,” *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 2 (April 1996): 170, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/175798> Accessed 13 May 2019; Peter Lake, “From Revisionist to Royalist History; or, Was Charles I the First Whig Historian,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 676 fn. 63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.657> Accessed December 20, 2019; Mark E. Kennedy, “Legislation, Foreign Policy, and the ‘Proper Business’ of the Parliament of 1624,” *Albion* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 41-42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4050541>, Accessed 1 August 2019

40 John Morrill, “Revisionism’s Wounded Legacies,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 577, 583, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.577> Accessed February 13, 2019; John Walter, “Kissing Cousins? Social History/Political History before and after the Revisionist Moment,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 703, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.703> Accessed June 6, 2019; John Sanderson, “Conrad Russell’s Ideas,” *History of Political Thought* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26214422> Accessed 31 December 2018; Anthony Milton, “Arminians, Laudians, Anglicans, and Revisionists: Back to Which Drawing Board?” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 729, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.723> Accessed February 13, 2019; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 644-647. See also Derek Hirst, “Of Labels and Situations: Revisionisms and Early Stuart Studies,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 596-598, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.595> Accessed April 2, 2019

Attempts to summarize trends or generate theory were denounced as illegitimate inventions, divorced from and imposed on facts in hindsight.⁴¹ Events occurred only by accident or coincidence, or at most because of free-standing choices made by high-ranking individuals: “the people who count,” to use Mark Kishlansky’s phrase.⁴² Such a focus by reactionaries like Kishlansky was a deliberate attempt to eliminate class conflict. Any exception to general trends could be used to invalidate social analysis, and of course one could always be found. With so much turmoil in widely different parts of the country during that time only localized studies had any reliability or legitimacy, they claimed.⁴³ Within the field,

...revisionism became more than an interpretation of a particular time and place in history; it laid claim to a way of doing history. And it is as a methodological agenda rather than as a particular version of events that revisionism has enjoyed the greatest influence.⁴⁴

As such it was primarily a pragmatic effort to find some way to counter the Marxist philosophy of history. E. H. Carr described the view that, “Knowledge is knowledge for some purpose. The validity of the knowledge depends on the validity of the purpose,”⁴⁵ and the Revisionists’ purpose was perfectly clear. Their virulent repudiation of revolutionary history led to, as John Morrill admitted, a colleague once congratulating him for “explaining why no civil war broke out in England in 1642.”⁴⁶

One method Revisionists attempted was to invert historical reality:

...Parliament was not gaining in importance but was actually becoming less important; the court was not politically insignificant compared with Parliament but was actually more significant than Parliament; the Crown’s opponents were not innovators but were actually conservatives; and so on.⁴⁷

As David Underdown noted, some Revisionists heavily stressed an alleged consensus within the ruling class:

41 This spurious argument was anticipated in a furious 1975 attack on Hill by Hexter. See William G. Palmer, “The Burden of Proof: J.H. Hexter and Christopher Hill,” *Journal of British Studies* 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1979), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/175685> Accessed 19 April 2020

42 Tim Harris, “Revisiting the Causes of the English Civil War,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 618, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.615> Accessed December 31, 2018

43 Thomas Cogswell, “Coping with Revisionism in Early Stuart History,” *The Journal of Modern History* 62, no. 3 (September 1990): 546, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1881176> Accessed 25 April 2019

44 Cynthia Herrup, “Revisionism — What’s in a Name?,” *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 2 (April 1996): 137, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175796> Accessed 27 November 2016; Hill, “Parliament and People in 17th-Century England,” 101; John Kenyon, “Revisionism and Post-Revisionism in Early Stuart History,” *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 4 (December 1992): 692, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2124903> Accessed November 27, 2016

45 Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 31

46 Mary Fulbrook, “The English Revolution and the Revisionist Revolt,” *Social History* 7, no. 3 (October 1982): 252, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4285188> Accessed 30 July 2019; Hirst, “Revisionisms and Early Stuart Studies,” 595

47 Milton, “Back to Which Drawing Board?” 724

By marginalizing the parliamentary texts and defining the Court as the only public arena worthy of study, the earlier revisionists were able to depict a political nation that until 1640 was almost universally deferential and harmonious, and then suddenly exploded in rebellion. We might perhaps call this the big bang theory of the Civil War.⁴⁸

With their heads in the sand, many Revisionists argued there was no relationship between the Parliaments of 1604-1629 and 1640,⁴⁹ disparaging any attempt to offer a synthetic account. “Is it right to assume, as always seems to be assumed, that a long-term, overall explanation is necessarily called for?”⁵⁰ Behind Peter Laslett’s innocent-sounding question lies a sneer and a falsehood: that all history is merely a matter of events that happen to happen. “Conflict is a common enough form of social interaction,” he maintained, “there is nothing special about the things that bring it about.”⁵¹ Perry Anderson rightly ascribed this to the “one-damn-thing-after-another view of the past.”⁵² The eminent historian of English agriculture, Joan Thirsk, could have been writing in answer to this sophistical assertion in a 1977 review:

Economies, small or large, compete with one another, make demands on each other, and thereby drive each other to adopt new economic expedients having their own distinctive social repercussions. This constitutes the dynamic process of economic and social change. And the historian’s herculean task is to trace and describe ever more exactly this perpetually spiraling movement, which carries distinctive regional economies forward along fresh paths, partly at their own choice, partly under the force of circumstances created outside them.⁵³

The “herculean task” of local or regional studies can produce rewarding results, but they cannot by themselves answer the question of what caused the English Civil War; nor did early Revisionists try to.

...revisionism directly challenges the assumptions of the traditional schools in all of its key arguments: a rejection of teleological history; a refusal to accept uncritically the role of ideas and ideology as carriers of political principle (focusing instead on personality, faction, patronage, and high politics); a denial of long-term causation rooted in social or economic

48 David Underdown, *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 6

49 Charles I called no parliaments between 1629 and 1640. See the section in Chapter 7 below “Personal Rule of the 1630s.”

50 Peter Laslett, Forward to Hexter, *Reappraisals in History*, ix

51 Laslett, Forward, *Reappraisals in History*, x

52 Perry Anderson, “Maurice Thomson’s War,” *London Review of Books* 15, no. 21 (4 November 1993), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v15/n21/perry-anderson/maurice-thomson-s-war> Accessed 4 March 2019. See also David Underdown, “Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550-1653 by Robert Brenner,” *Albion* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1994), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4052332> Accessed 22 November 2017; Brian Manning, “The English Revolution and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,” *International Socialist Review* 2, no. 63 (Summer 1994), Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/manning/1994/xx/engrev.htm> Accessed 1 June 2016

53 Joan Thirsk, “Economic and Social Development on a European-World Scale,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 5 (March 1977): 1099, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2777816> Accessed October 12, 2018

change. The revisionist view of seventeenth-century England sees a world where...order, unity, and consensus were the dominant political values...⁵⁴

To support their atomization of history Revisionists attempted to substitute various constructs to blame for the Revolution: bad decisions by the king; the court's conflicts with some of the nobles; either the unimportance of the House of Commons (!) or its alleged unanimity; the local interests and/or opportunist appetites of MPs; or, later, religious enthusiasm,⁵⁵ thereby imitating the Whig narrative of a "Puritan revolution." Whatever kernels of truth existed here or there, these feeble or exaggerated explanations uniformly excluded any view of revolution, eliminating the possibility of any coherent progress whether in political or economic history.

Any attempt to replace the model of a consensually unified, early modern world-view with one containing meaningful differences, even self-conscious opposition, will soon draw a revisionist charge of *anachronism*: forcing modern categories onto a premodern society. Revisionists rigorously police contemporary historical writing for interloping modern phenomena, social models, and schemes of analysis. ... This prerogative rigor regarding terminology and concepts aims not to keep the empirical discussion of historical change from starting off on the wrong foot, but to throttle it in its crib.⁵⁶ [Emphasis in original]

An example of the narrowness of the Revisionist outlook was described in a 2012 review:

"Politics" is absent from [poet John] Milton's deeply political oeuvre because, for [Blair] Worden, politics is synonymous with the constitution. For Worden, it is only when Milton began writing explicitly about constitutional matters...that he became a political writer.⁵⁷

A particular travesty in their campaign of vilification is their common amalgamation of the Whig and Marxist viewpoints, seeing the latter as only a more militant or more superficial version of the former, a conflation that became all too generally accepted.⁵⁸ That both Whigs and Marxists posit certain teleological views of history does not make them the same. Quite the contrary, there is an epic gulf between the condescending bourgeois nationalism of Whigs, with their mystical talk of "national character" and "spirit

54 S. K. Baskerville, "Puritans, Revisionists, and the English Revolution," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1998): 151, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3817796> Accessed November 11, 2018

55 Theodore K. Rabb, "The Role of the Commons," *Past and Present*, no. 92 (August 1981): 59-60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650749> Accessed 7 February 2019; Nicholas Tyacke, "Revolutionary Puritanism in Anglo-American Perspective," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 746, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2015.78.4.745> Access May 30, 2019

56 James Holstun, *Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution* (London: Verso, 2002), 21

57 Phil Withington, "Past v. Present," *London Review of Books* 34, no. 9 (10 May 2012), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v34/n09/phil-withington/past-v.-present> Accessed August 9, 2013. This is an insightful critique of essays by Blair Worden, Trevor-Roper's protégé and literary executor.

58 "Was marxism ever anything more than whig history with statistics?" Glenn Burgess, "On Revisionism: An Analysis of Early Stuart Historiography in the 1970s and 1980s," *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 3 (September 1990): 609-610, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2639733> Accessed 22 November 2018; "the long reign of Whig historiography and its Marxist variant..." Zaller, "The Concept of Opposition?" 220; Cogswell, "Coping with Revisionism," 545

of the times,” versus the historical materialist, egalitarian internationalism of Marxism. “. . .the word materialism grates upon the ears of the immense majority of British readers. ‘Agnosticism’ might be tolerated, but materialism is utterly inadmissible,”⁵⁹ Engels wrote at the end of the 19th century. The liberal historian Lawrence Stone neither claimed nor was ever considered to be a Marxist, but Revisionists attacked him because he “adapted” Marx in his defense of a revolutionary view. Their inflated claims to have thus refuted Marxism were at best self-delusion.⁶⁰

Revisionist historians certainly argued among themselves, but the tendency as a whole was only able to exist and become predominant due to the harsh rightwing program of strikebreaking and union-busting by Thatcher and Reagan, and the consequent body blow to the working class caused by de-industrialization, implemented by each country’s ruling capitalists. In their desire to support this reactionary program, Revisionism rushed to extend conservative ideology into history itself. (A similar academic trend developed in France attacking the class analysis of the French Revolution.)⁶¹ The collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR in 1991 set off an orgy of triumphalism by the imperialist powers, making it appear that Marxism and communism had “failed.” In fact, despite its qualitative bureaucratic deformation, the Soviet Union had remained a fortress against the unrestrained imperialist mayhem that occurred after its fall. At the same time, though the heirs of Stalin in Moscow falsely claimed the mantle of the Russian Revolution, the obvious noncapitalist operation of the economy and society, along with, for example, the dissemination of the works of Marx and Lenin, left an imprint for all the struggling, exploited and oppressed laboring peoples of the world to look to. Cromwell’s Protectorate played a similar role, for a shorter time, with regard to royalism.

The Revisionists had their effect, however, and they are not the only ones who seek to undersell the revolutionary nature of the period. With few exceptions, mainstream historians of all persuasions today regard the Marxist paradigm as disproven and useless.⁶² This is largely based on the erroneous idea that Marxism constitutes “economic determinism,” a purely objectivist accusation, which is treated as little more than a secular version of Calvin’s predestinarianism.⁶³ Had it actually been so, the revolutionary classes would

59 Engels, Introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 381

60 Morrill, “Revisionism’s Wounded Legacies,” 578-579, 582-583; Burgess, “On Revisionism,” 612

61 See Eric Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Bryan D. Palmer, “The Eclipse of Materialism: Marxism and the Writing of Social History in the 1980s,” *Socialist Register* 26 (1990): 121, <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5577> Accessed 14 November 2020

62 “But really, the important lessons had been learned by all, and at least down to the present, class war and the strangled triumph of liberal democracy are off the mainstream agenda.” Morrill, “Revisionism’s Wounded Legacies,” 592. “. . .the 1640s witnessed a bourgeois revolution; while it is of course possible to make such an argument. . .sharp criticism of this mode. . . has led to its near total disappearance from recent history.” Cogswell, “Coping with Revisionism,” 541. “. . .the long out of fashion notion that the English Revolution was a bourgeois revolution.” Buchanan Sharp, “The Place of the People in the English Revolution,” *Theory and Society* 14, no. 1 (January 1985): 104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657400> Accessed 16 June 2019

63 Morrill, “Revisionism’s Wounded Legacies,” 582

presumably never have suffered any defeats. “It should be noted that it was the Puritan ministers who did most to popularized (sic) teleology by insisting that their ‘cause’ was precisely what revisionist scholars deny it was: predestined.”⁶⁴

The Revisionist charge that Marxism reduced events solely to economics, and ignored purely political factors, is almost funny applied to the most consequential, and most feared, *political* movement in two different centuries. If there was reductionism at work, it was the Revisionists who were busy at it. No serious person could imagine giving credence to such a truncated, mechanical and linear method, and neither did Marx and Engels. Once the shibboleth of determinism is disposed of the enormous contributions of the 20th century leftwing historians come into focus.

The Marxist understanding of the English Revolution and Civil War as the result of a *class* conflict that overthrew the feudal political system and brought the bourgeoisie to power is correct.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.⁶⁵

Those circumstances are firstly dictated by the technical level of a given society. They are the context that all economic and social interactions, of any kind, take place in, and no individual, organization, party, movement or class can escape from it. We may wonder at the advances of modern science, but those advances are also the limitations that modern society operates within.

History does have a materialist base for Marxists but this does not mean that extra-economic or non-material forces can be ignored. In fact, the Marxist approach compels one to analyze social forms as totalities and to integrate economic with non-economic factors.⁶⁶

This contradicts the normal bourgeois method of examining historical phenomena in isolation from each other. For Marx and Marxists, social classes are defined by their role in the economic production of goods. They are historically evolved structures one is born into, and may or may not (more often not) be able to transcend, depending on the obstacles and opportunities in a particular society.⁶⁷ The types of goods a society produces, who labors (or doesn't) to produce them, under what conditions and for whose benefit, must be the prerequisite questions for any historian. All other social, cultural, and ideological trends must be carefully analyzed in this light, otherwise history becomes a disembodied, idealist construction. “The intellectual historian

64 Baskerville, “Puritans, Revisionists, and the English Revolution,” 157

65 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1852, 1970), 97

66 Jon S. Cohen, “The Achievements of Economic History: The Marxist School,” *The Journal of Economic History* 38, no. 1 (March 1978): 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2119314> Accessed 16 June 2019

67 This abbreviated description should not be taken to mean all classes in society are equally stable, carry the same weight, or remain internally unchanging over time.

may (at his risk) pay no attention to economics, the economic historian to Shakespeare, but the social historian who neglects either will not get far.” The understanding of the foundational aspect of economics was quite common among Continental European historians prior to WWII.⁶⁸

That the bourgeois revolution occurred as it did in 17th century England was not foreordained; it could have developed differently (just as it did in France). But since it *did* develop as it did, tracing the historically specific, long-term process offers the best method to understand it. The snobbish focus of Revisionists on social consensus is merely a smokescreen. Whether open or not, there are always frictions and antagonisms in a class-divided society, even within classes. Their argument is a self-evidently conservative bias to reinforce the political status quo. In actuality, people simply make the best lives they can within the social system under which they live. It is therefore not the ordinary day-to-day workings of a society that are the most momentous, necessary as it is to understand these, but the exceptional, unordinary events that disturb its tranquility, often in complicated ways. Revolutions occur when the social class that rules society is overthrown by a lower class, permanently realigning the economic and legal systems to suit the requirements of the new ruling class. Such turnovers are progressive when they facilitate, sooner or later, an unmistakably higher level of economic production, and a corresponding expansion of political freedom. The Revisionists’ opposition *on principle* to the idea of history as a process voids this essential aspect, substituting a very static, laboriously atomized view that directs their work; one that is simply unable to explain how or why societies change over time.

The purpose of the current work is to resurrect the events of the early to mid-17th century in England, centered in and around London, and examine the development of the factors that constituted those events a revolution. In the process how the young English class of bourgeois entrepreneurs grew, and came to replace the feudal monarchy and aristocracy in power, will be shown. Much as Marx sketched out,⁶⁹ one of the unique factors in England’s case, enabling the bourgeoisie’s advance, was an *alliance* between its vanguard elements, and a section of the aristocracy whose interests paralleled its own. The London mass movement and its bourgeois leadership

carried out a revolution in London itself. The municipal revolt of 1641–1642 involved no mere replacement of “ins” by “outs.” The citizen militants shattered the old oligarchic constitution; in the process, they achieved at least a partial transformation in the social foundations of political power in the City.⁷⁰

68 Eric Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (Winter 1971): 21–22, 25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20023989> Accessed 4 April 2020. Reprinted in *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997)

69 Karl Marx, “A Review of Guizot’s Book ‘Why Has the English Revolution Been Successful?,” in *Marx and Engels On Britain* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1850, 1962), 347. A different translation, with the title “England’s 17th Century Revolution,” is at Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/02/english-revolution.htm> Accessed 4 April 2017.

70 Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 373

In revolutionary politics, it is the relationship of forces, most decisively class forces, that is ultimately determinative. "The test of any such analysis is not whether or no it sounds convincing, but whether it helps to interpret the facts and solve some of the problems which confront the historian..."⁷¹ The social class analysis meets the criteria of scientific hypotheses: it cogently accounts for the known facts in the simplest way possible. This does not imply that there are no other contributing (or detracting) factors, that leading individuals have no importance, or that there is nothing more to be discovered or said. The clash of unfolding events offers a sufficient number of contradictions to unravel, and it is in these events that the subjective factor of history comes to the fore. (In Part Two of *The Century of Revolution*, covering 1640-1660, Christopher Hill reversed the order of his chapters, putting "Politics and the Constitution" ahead of "Economics.") What economic class analysis provides is a *fundamental* explanation of historical dynamics on which to build, a guide to evaluation, which is exactly what the Revisionists (and conservatives before and since) are at such pains to attack and discredit in their hurry to fragment events, and write mass action (and even Parliamentary action!) out of history.

To establish the thesis I have relied mainly on Marxian or leftwing historians whose contributions, all too often, have been largely ignored, dismissed, or distorted by bourgeois detractors who would prefer to forget or explain away the revolutionary origins of their own class history.⁷² Critically read, these left historians go a long way toward solving the puzzle that was the English Revolution. From their work I have attempted to build a coherent account, reinforced where applicable by a wider selection of writers, few of whom would likely be sympathetic to my viewpoint. It behooves me to acknowledge the overwhelming amount of material that exists on this subject, not always accessible or affordable by a non-academic such as myself. Much of it would doubtless help flesh out and refine what is essentially an elaborated outline.

My own argument rests on 1) the *contradictory* social position of the reforming gentry in the House of Commons, and 2) the critically important component of the revolutionary London Puritan leadership provided by the free-trading bourgeois Atlantic merchants. The first argument redresses a flaw in the writings of Christopher Hill, described above, of which prodigious advantage was taken by his opponents; the second refutes those modern day historians who claimed, as a result of this weakness, that the bourgeois class was either "missing" from the Marxist description of the English revolution, or was uniformly conservative.⁷³

71 R. H. Hilton, "Capitalism — What's in a Name?," *Past & Present*, no. 1 (February 1952): 36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/649987> Accessed 7 December 2016. Reprinted in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978)

72 "Manning had been working on *The English People and the English Revolution, 1640-1649* for twenty years, but its appearance in 1976 meant that it was swept away by the flood tide of Revisionism." Morrill, "Revisionism's Wounded Legacies," 584

73 See J. H. Hexter, "A New Framework for Social History," in *Reappraisals in History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 16; Zaller, "The Concept of Opposition," 213-214

Certainly in America, and perhaps also Britain today, an educated and/or politically aware audience is unlikely to be familiar with even the major events of this time, fascinating and original as they are.⁷⁴ (See the high-level time line in the Appendix for reference.) Whereas the vast majority of historical writing concentrates on the House of Commons, this book seeks to provide the most detail in regard to the actions of the masses, and the political changes that occurred in London in 1641-1642, surely the least well-known aspects of the revolution. "...most histories tended to treat such [popular] interventions as incidental to the real history of the period..."⁷⁵ It was the radically Puritan petty bourgeois artisan craftworkers, shopkeepers, early manufacturers, domestic traders, and mariners who provided the horsepower of the revolution, and not the moderate gentry. As with all "history from below," the "common people" tend to be the least documented⁷⁶ and written about,⁷⁷ but it is the participation of these sectors as a body, more or less consciously led, and in support of a program incompatible with feudal social relations, that indeed constitute these events a revolution. However, in the lead-up to and early conduct of the Revolution and Civil War, a section of the reformist gentry in the House of Commons inarguably played a very considerable role, for better and worse, *in tandem* with the petty-bourgeois popular movement in London. Their activities therefore cannot in any way be ignored. In this fact resides the partial nature and short-term failure of the revolution in these decades, and the hybrid result of the revolution in 1688.

A truly useful understanding of the English Revolution is impossible without regard to the history which led to it. The much debated issue over many decades, in and out of the Marxist movement, of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England would ideally be the place to start. That extensive topic, however, is properly outside my scope, and would require a separate study of its own.⁷⁸ So let us initially just observe that

74 "The peak year for the study of history in Britain at A-level was 1976, when 149,000 students took History or Economic History. The number fell by roughly two-thirds over the next twenty years." Dave Renton, "Marxists and historical writing in Britain," Making History - Institute for Historical Research, 2008, https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/marxist_history.html Accessed 29 October 2019

75 John Walter, "The English People and the English Revolution Revisited," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 61 (Spring 2006): 171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25472843> Accessed June 15, 2019

76 To the singular far-sightedness of one George Thomason, Puritan bookseller and member of the Stationers Company, we owe a collection of 22,000 pamphlets and other materials from all sides published during the period 1640-1661, now in the British Library.

77 It is an indictment of bourgeois historiography as a whole that "The power and significance of this Committee [of Safety] in the early months of 1642 has never been commented on by historians." Pearl, *London and the Outbreak*, 146. Twenty years earlier an American historian wrote, "One political problem after another remains insoluble because of our ignorance of what actually went on in the councils of the City." J. H. Hexter, *The Reign of King Pym* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941, 1968), 95-96 fn. 76.

78 For a summary introduction to the historiography of the debate in the Marxist movement that began in the 1940s, see Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism*, 23-50. *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978) contains the original contributions to the 1940s-50s debate among Marxist academics, plus reprinted essays including: Hilton, "Capitalism — What's in a Name?"; John Merrington, "Town and Country in the Transition to Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 93, (September/October, 1975), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1301995994/fulltextPDF/B88F766F4E4741DCPQ/1?> Accessed 23 September 2020. Among others on the topic see: E. J. Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century" and "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century — II," *Past & Present*, no. 5, 6 (May, November 1954), <https://www.jstor.org/>

...gradually from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries a change began to come over the structure of this agricultural community. The food and wool from the village began to sell far afield: the spinsters and the husbandmen were turned into commodity-producers for a national market.⁷⁹

One feature beyond debate is the sudden rise in economic activity that occurs in the second half of the 16th century. After a brief review of some earlier formative events in England's history, it is here that our story must really begin.

stable/649822, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/649814> Accessed 4 April 2020. Reprinted as "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century" in *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660*, ed. Trevor Aston (New York: Anchor Books, 1967); Robert Brenner, "Dobb on the transition from feudalism to capitalism," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 2, no. 2 (June 1978), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23596403> Accessed 8 October 2015.

⁷⁹ Hill, *1640*, 21

NOTES ON NOMENCLATURE

The term “gentry” as used in England is somewhat vague, and used either broadly or narrowly by different historians at different times.¹ Here I use the term to refer solely to the knights and squires (aka “the squireocracy”), who owned land in the countryside and ran local affairs, populated the House of Commons, and were the junior partners in the ruling class. This differentiates them from the nobility, mainly dukes and earls, who as peers of the realm traditionally held hereditary seats in the House of Lords.

Similarly, the term “aristocracy,” which at least in America is usually synonymous with nobility, is sometimes used by academics to include the “commoners” of the gentry, and here I use it in this latter collective sense of the entire ruling class, along with the terms “landlords” or “landowners.”

Note also that in this period the term “gentleman,” which meant someone who did no physical labor, applied to all of the foregoing, but did not always imply direct land ownership. Younger sons of the gentry or nobility who inherited no land were nonetheless considered gentlemen, which gave them the legal right, for example, to wear a sword. (Women of course didn’t own land, unless they were widows with no male relatives to take it away from them, and even then the crown could, and often did, impose itself on them.) Younger sons retained their status until such time as, failing to make, marry, or inherit their own fortunes, or be provided for by their families, they found a niche for themselves in another social group (such as lawyer, clergy, doctor, merchant, mercenary, mariner, master craftsman or colonist).² Rich merchants, on the other hand, might be treated as gentlemen by the lower classes, but not the higher, although some bought themselves country estates in the hopes of becoming respectable and accepted as such.

1 See the discussion in P. R. Coss, “The Formation of the English Gentry,” *Past & Present*, no. 147 (May 1995), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651039> Accessed 24 January 2019

2 Richard Grassby, “Social Mobility and Business Enterprise in Seventeenth-century England,” in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, eds. Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 372-375. See also Joan Thirsk, “Younger Sons in the 17th Century,” *History* 54, no. 182 (October 1969), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24407104> Accessed 31 October 2018

1) INTRODUCTION

Cromwell is Robespierre and Napoleon rolled into one; the Presbyterians, Independents and Levellers correspond to the Gironde, the Montagnards and the Hébertists and Babeuvists; in both cases the political outcome is rather pitiable, and the whole parallel, which could be elaborated in much greater detail incidentally also proves that a religious and an irreligious revolution, as long as they remain political, will in the final analysis amount to the same thing.

~Frederick Engels¹

The central political issue in 17th century England was the struggle against monarchical absolutism. The Stuart dynasty's attempts to consolidate its absolute rule over a changed and changing society, and its failure to do so, unlike the monarchies of Spain and France, reflected specific economic, historic, political and geographic factors of England. Government-fostered domestic manufacture and commercial capitalism measurably expanded in the second half of the 16th century, intensifying the contradictions with the rigid hierarchy of the feudal system. The overall rise in economic activity gave force to the Puritan movement in the Church of England. Puritan demands for religious reform against anything that smacked of Catholicism were an only partially disguised argument for a more rational and democratic society. By the early 17th century, the conflicts caused by a capitalist economy held within the bounds of feudal social and political relations were on open display for all to see.

While Puritanism was a trans-class movement, it appealed most widely, and in its most radical forms, to the large stratum of London's "middling people," petty-bourgeois craftworkers, shopkeepers and domestic traders. They formed a popular democratic movement which both supported and pressured the reform-minded gentry in the House of Commons. Their organization was supported and led in good part by pro-free trade Puritan merchants. These new or Atlantic merchants had only recently made their fortunes in Virginia during the late 1620s and 1630s, and were in the main more religiously and politically radical than most other Puritans at the time.

As London overwhelmingly dominated the country economically and politically it was the key to revolution in the country at large. Thus the developed south and east were strongly for Parliament, whereas the far less industrial parts of the country, which were also the less solidly Protestant and Puritan parts, in the north and west of England and Wales supported the king.² During the Civil War, both sides fully understood that the retaking

1 "The Condition of England, Part I The Eighteenth Century," Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1844, 1975), Marxists Internet Archive, <https://marxists.architexturez.net/archive/marx/works/1844/condition-england/ch01.htm> Accessed 28 July 2019

2 Hill, Century, 103-104; Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War* Vol. I 1642-1644 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1886), 23, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.505225/mode/1up?view=theater> Accessed 5 August 2019

of London by royalist forces would put an end, not only to the war, but to Parliament's political program, and perhaps to Parliament itself.

Significant outposts of parliamentarianism in the more remote areas existed, however, in the manufacturing towns and their environs, most of which depended on the cloth and clothing trade.³ In addition, a great deal of support for Parliament came from large and small yeomen (freeholders) who owned and worked their own land, and were therefore their own masters,⁴ along with the larger portion of the peasantry who held their land by copyhold ("tenure by copy of the court roll according to the custom of the manor").⁵ But the rights of copyholders to the land they worked were under threat from "improving" aristocrats, those who were seeking to enhance their livelihoods through coercive methods such as enclosure.⁶ The many thousands thrown off the land were mostly forced to become impoverished wage-workers.

In the century beginning with Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate (1653-1658) and Charles II's Restoration in 1660,

Many copyholders and small freeholders either lost claims to their land or sold out. This was the period during which large landowners, capitalist tenants, and agricultural laborers became the dominant figures in agriculture and the small, independent farmers shrank in importance.⁷

Similarly, in the cities and towns

...when expanding markets and improved methods of production gave rise to a more complicated type of industry, the small master craftsman was gradually displaced by the capitalist trader and manufacturer on the one hand, and by the mere journeyman on the other.⁸

In the pre-Civil War decades, however, these trends were just beginning to take hold. Here we are concerned with a more embryonic state of society, when the process of capitalist development was only beginning to cause substantial dislocation to, and conflict with, the feudal state power, itself mirrored and interpenetrated with the established state church.

The revolutionary break came in London in the weeks before and after Christmas 1641. During this time, "The alliance of the parliamentary Puritans...enjoyed the overwhelming support of the middle and lower ranks of the London citizens, men by no means to be dismissed as a mere 'rabble'

3 Hill, *Century*, 103-104; Austin Woolrych, "The English Revolution: an introduction," in *The English Revolution 1600-1660*, ed. E. W. Ives (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), 22

4 Brian Manning, *Aristocrats, Plebeians and Revolution in England* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 67-68

5 R. H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 48

6 Hill, *1640*, 25 fn. 1; *Century*, 13; Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 58-59. See the section in Chapter 7 below "Social consequences of growth in the capitalist economy."

7 Cohen, "The Marxist School," 49-50

8 Margaret James, *Social Problems and Policy During the Puritan Revolution 1640-1660* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 193

or ‘mob’...”⁹ The respectable, petty-bourgeois middling people, were the bedrock supporters of the revolution.

By the end of 1643, however, the revolutionary tide in the city had ebbed; the reasons are analyzed in Chapter 15. But by then it was too late. The question of power had been posed point blank, the feudal system had already been dealt a near-fatal blow. The House of Commons and the London government were committed to preserving their gains (and themselves), and war was the preeminent concern of both.

⁹ Pearl, *London and the Outbreak*, 279

2) HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (Pre-1500)

Of course, the struggle of the Long Parliament with the autocracy of Charles I, and Cromwell's severe dictatorship, were prepared by the previous history of England. But this simply means that revolutions cannot be made when you want them, but are an organic product of the conditions of social evolution...

~Leon Trotsky¹

Prior to 1500, three pivotal events in English history helped to transform English society and prepare the way for the success of the 17th-century revolution. The first was the early unification of England. Six hundred years before Ferdinand and Isabella completed the reconquest of Spain, Alfred the Great created a single Saxon kingdom through his military victories at Ashdown (871) and Edington (878) over the Danish Vikings, who continued to occupy the east of England.

Alfred's peace settlement laid the basis, through later battles and royal intermarriage, for the union of Saxon and Danish territories, prior to the Norman invasion in 1066. Having won the day-long Battle of Hastings, William the Bastard obtained the entire country in one fell swoop, making his bloody imposition of a French-speaking ruling class that much simpler. The early establishment of central government united England to a degree then unknown in the countries of Western Europe, where multiple territories and jurisdictions significantly hindered their development.

The struggle between the Anglo-Norman nobility and the all-powerful and abusive monarchy took a forceful turn early in favor of the former with the Great Charter of the Barons' Rebellion in 1215. Magna Carta is rightly remembered for its enunciation of some important democratic rights, established in law, however limited their applicability or reinterpretation by posterity.² Earlier charters had come to naught, but what made Magna Carta different was the famous "security" clause (Article 61) which, for the first time, provided for a council of barons to "advise" the king and enforce the Charter's provisions.³ This put a significant brake on the monarchy's power; any transgression would presumably run up against the brick wall of the united nobility.⁴ Magna Carta "made it the duty of the senior nobles to discipline a king who ruled in his own interest and not those of the *communem utilitatem regni*" ("common utility of

1 "Mr. Baldwin and 'Gradualness,'" in *Leon Trotsky on Britain* (New York: Monad Press, 1925, 1973), 45

2 See Charles Rembar, *The Law of the Land: The Evolution of Our Legal System* (New York: Touchstone, 1981), 167-171

3 "Magna Carta 1215," Yale Law School, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/magframe.asp> Accessed 1 June 2017; "The Articles of the Barons," British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-articles-of-the-barons> Accessed 17 September 2018; "A Brief History of Magna Carta," House of Lords, UK Parliament, 8-9, 14, researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2015-001/LLN-2015-001.pdf Accessed 7 May 2015

4 Rachel Foxley, "More precious in your esteem than it deserveth?" Magna Carta and seventeenth-century politics," in *Magna Carta: History, Context and Influence*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (London: University of London Press, 2018), 68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5136sc.12> Accessed 1 December 2018.

the realm”).⁵ This security clause was eliminated in later revisions, but repeated clashes of rival noble and royal factions kept the idea alive.

By the end of the 13th century (after further bloody conflicts), an operational structure for Parliament had been worked out.⁶ Representatives of gentry and town burgesses were eventually included, at first episodically. But beginning in 1341 they met separately as junior partners in a second, lower House of Commons.⁷ Thus, Parliament became “an assemblage of the ruling elite, the national synod of the gentry.”⁸ Parliament was not originally intended to be a legislative, but a judicial body to hear petitions, to debate and advise the king on “good” laws for him to make. This rather quickly became an established requirement of Parliamentary approval for new statutes. Later monarchs gave formal acknowledgment of Parliament’s control over finances: no tax could be imposed without the landowners’ consent (most especially on the landowners themselves). This clumsy arrangement tied King, Lords, and Commons together in an uneasy, unequal and unstable power-sharing relationship. It thereby provided a chink in the royal armor, giving initial leverage to the early 1600s radicals who, working together in and out of the House of Commons, were able to use it to their advantage.

No such *modus vivendi* was permanently reached on the Continent. As modern nations emerged with the recovery of commodity production and the extension of international trade, absolutism became successfully established in Spain and France. A powerful centralized government was needed to defend the emerging nations’ borders from foreign enemies, and to subdue the commercial bourgeoisie, whose growing wealth threatened the rigid social order of the feudal system itself. The rise of autocratic power also negated the political rights of the nobility, while preserving their economic privileges against peasant revolts and pressures for better terms.⁹

To these ends the monarchs established a standing army and a centralized state bureaucracy,¹⁰ which they used to extend their military rule or influence over much of the rest of Europe and the Americas. The result was retrograde stagnation, with a feudal political system that severely inhibited economic progress. (In the 17th century, Spain’s population fell 18%.)¹¹ England, however, had no foreign borders (except the small one with Scotland, traditionally policed by the powerful northern lords). The twin notions of a

5 David Rollison, “The Specter of the Commonalty: Class Struggle and the Commonweal in England before the Atlantic World,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (April 2006): 233, 245, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877352> Accessed 31 December 2018

6 “A Brief History of Magna Carta,” 16-17

7 Rollison, “The Specter of the Commonalty,” 225-226; “Rise of the Commons,” UK Parliament, <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originsofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/riseofcommons/> Accessed 3 July 2016

8 Zaller, “The Concept of Opposition,” 229

9 Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), 19-20, 22-24; Christopher Hill, “Land in the English Revolution,” *Science & Society* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1948/1949): 24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40399929> Accessed 15 December 2016

10 Anderson, *Absolutist State*, 52-53, 65-66, 86-87, 95-96, 100-102

11 Anderson, *Absolutist State*, 82

standing royal army and an interfering central bureaucracy were anathema to the English aristocracy, who reasonably feared they would be used against themselves. The early unification of England meant they felt no imperative to make concessions to the monarchy, and they used their power in the state to prevent such developments.¹² This ensured the aristocrats' own free dominance in their localities, making the government dependent on local Justices of the Peace (JPs), invariably landowners and employers themselves, to enforce the law. The central government also relied on informers, "an unpopular and bribable class."¹³

His majesty had any number of ways of controlling Parliament, which could not sit unless the king called it. He could veto its acts, and prorogue or dismiss it at will. The Good Parliament of 1376 passed several acts to curtail corruption in the government, after which the magistrates returned to their localities while the government simply carried on as before.¹⁴

Parliament, however, could place limits on the king. Foreign affairs were wholly the prerogative of the monarch, but Parliament had to authorize funds for any army.¹⁵ This did not much inhibit the crown as it could normally count on the support of the nobles especially when it came to waging war (usually in France.) This changed when money replaced land in importance, and conquering territory or plundering was no longer necessary to gain wealth. After that, Parliament's power to authorize funds became a major detriment to the monarchy.

The third event of moment, and one most under-appreciated, was the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Despite being short-lived, this uprising was as significant as the later Peasants' War in early 16th century Germany. It covered virtually the whole of southern and eastern England, reaching as far north as southern Yorkshire.¹⁶ Despite its historical name, early artisans made up a large proportion of the peasant army, the poor of London supported it, and in some places lower clergymen or better-off yeomen provided leadership.¹⁷

In the decades before the Revolt, plague had so reduced the population that peasants often refused to provide services unless they were paid;¹⁸ the labor shortage thus undermined their feudal economic relationship with the landholders. The Revolt began in Essex and Kent, where it seems to have been well organized. As the peasantry would do again in 1642, they destroyed manor records of station, taxes, tithes — the personal information of the

12 Anderson, *Absolutist State*, 121 fn. 11, 122-123, 125, 127

13 Hill, *Century*, 23; *Reformation*, 31

14 George M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe 1368-1520* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1899, 1963), 30-31

15 Conrad Russell, "Parliament and the King's Finances," in *The Origins of the English Civil War*, ed. Conrad Russell (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Education, 1973), 91-92

16 Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, 254-255 (map)

17 Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1973, 2003), 154, 158-160, 173-174, 181-185; Rollison, "The Specter of the Commonalty," 234-235

18 Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, 193

age.¹⁹ Having gained entrance to London, the first thing the rebel army did was proceed to the houses of the most hated government officials and, without looting them, burn them down. This conscious discipline did not last, but it shows that this was no mere mob. At every prison they came to they freed the inmates.²⁰ The militants' demand for freedom hastened the subsequent demise of villeinage (serfdom), freeing the villeins from bondage to the land; they now had the legal right to move if they so chose. The assertion that no connection existed between these two developments is preposterous.

The continuation of local revolts for at least a couple of decades after 1381 is well known and this in itself is evidence of the continued self-assertiveness of the English lower classes. The upper class was clearly very apprehensive about popular sedition... In spite of the strengthening of labour legislation in the statute of Cambridge of 1388, wages went up; and in spite of the threats to intensify the conditions of villeinage these were, in fact, considerably relaxed.²¹

As villeinage died out, a new arrangement conditioned by the peasant class struggle led to material improvements in the peasants' well-being through copyhold: a quantity of land leased for a low money rent. Peasants were mostly no longer required to provide labor service to the lord, and could now sell any surplus they were able to produce. The lease was often for life, and their descendants had the right to inherit the copyhold upon payment of a substantial fine (fee). Thus, copyhold was a form of "customary tenure... without the taint of servility..."²² This transformed the landlord-peasant relationship from one based on medieval *obligation*, to one based purely on *payment* (rent), in essence a capitalist contractual relationship. Tenants were now given written title to the land. It gave the copyholder a substantial claim on the holding, a necessary prerequisite to opening the way for market relations to further develop.²³ Consequently, by 1640, generations of the same family might, in theory, have occupied a farm for as much as two centuries.

The production of wool, England's first and longest-lasting export, also began around 1400, facilitating aristocratic acquiescence by providing them an alternative source of income.²⁴ "The commutation of peasant labour services... was part of the process of withdrawal by the bigger landlords from agricultural practice."²⁵ Copyhold was a compromise, an intermediate form of capitalist social relations at a time before a capitalist economy had become

19 Mark O'Brien, *When Adam Delved and Eve Span: A History of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2016), 45-46

20 O'Brien, *When Adam Delved*, 60, 62, 64

21 Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 206; Rollison, "The Specter of the Commonalty," 236-238.

22 Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 44

23 Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 807; Rodney Hilton, "Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism," *History Workshop*, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 20-21, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4288032> Accessed 3 July 2020. Reprinted as "Introduction," in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*.

24 Hill, "Land in the English Revolution," 23

25 Rodney Hilton, "The Content and Sources of English Agrarian History before 1500," *The Agricultural History Review* 3, no. 1 (1955), 14-15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40272749> Accessed 13 April 2020

general. Copyhold stopped short of making the peasants freemen; they still had to pay a nominal rent on land they did not own outright. But a qualitative advance had taken place in their relationship to the lord. The protections they achieved had been won through struggle; for just this reason however it was a legal gray area and insecure status.²⁶

The early decline of serfdom and labor service removed a major obstacle to the development of capitalist market relations in the countryside of England. This situation contrasted markedly with other European countries. Despite occasional peasant *jacqueries* on the Continent, absolutism and the *seigneurial* system were on the whole able to maintain feudal relations in the countryside. The implementation of copyhold in England was uneven, and terms varied, but its spread continued during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, making it the normal custom.²⁷

At a certain point, when landlords needed to increase production of food and wool, copyholders' rights (low rents, right of inheritance) came to place intolerable limits on market agriculture's forward advance.²⁸ This led to new conflicts as landlords attempted to overcome the limitations of copyhold in their own favor by attacking tenants' rights, and throwing them off the land. As the price of wool rose in the late 15th century, a wave of land conversions from crop production to raising sheep was carried out by aristocrats for the more remunerative export of wool to Flanders. This caused government worries about what they called "depopulation" (unemployment and homelessness) and food supply. The conversion process often involved enclosure of land for larger flocks and greater efficiency.²⁹ The enclosures cut off access to commons, land where small peasants historically pastured their few animals on which they depended to live, or sometimes flooded them with an excess number of sheep.³⁰ (Commons were also a source of fuel and building material.)³¹ Either way, small peasants were forced to abandon their farms. While some might eke out a living on "waste" (unused) or forest lands where these were available further out in the country,³² most were forced to become wage workers if they were not to starve.

26 Hill, *Reformation*, 54-55; Marx, *Capital* Vol.3, 798-799

27 Mark Bailey, "The transformation of customary tenures in southern England, c.1350 to c.1500," *The Agricultural History Review* 62, no. 2 (2014): 220, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43697978> Accessed 11 August 2020; Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 48-51

28 Hill, 1640, 35; *Century*, 127; Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 58-59

29 Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 718-720. "It was a commonplace of the age that English commerce was overwhelmingly dependent upon the Low Countries and that economically London was a satellite of Antwerp." F. J. Fisher, "Commercial Trends and Policy in Sixteenth-Century England," *The Economic History Review* 10, no. 2 (November 1940): 97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2590787> Accessed 24 February 2017

30 Joan Thirsk, *Tudor Enclosures* (London: The Historical Association, 1959), 13-14

31 Brian Manning, *The English People and the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 133, 134; Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, 717; Hill, *Reformation*, 70

32 Brian Manning, 1649: *The Crisis of the English Revolution* (London: Bookmarks, 1992), 77, 99; Thirsk, *Tudor Enclosures*, 7-8

