WHAT WAS THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION?

David Underdown...

WHAT WAS THE ENGLISH Revolution? Was it, as participants in the debate over the gentry a generation ago variously argued, a revolution generated by social tensions, confirming a changed balance of power within the elite, with a rising (or declining) gentry temporarily replacing an aristocracy in crises at the centre of power? Was it part of a European ‘general crisis’, one of many seventeenth-century ‘revolts of the provinces’ against the extravagance and assertive centralism of the new state-building monarchies? Was that general crisis the outcome of structural economic changes, the final stage in the replacement of ‘feudal’ productive relations by capitalism, the 1640s thus being in some sense England’s ‘bourgeois revolution’? Or was it perhaps not really a revolution at all, but merely a conflation of local struggles, or even, as Conrad Russell and other revisionists have recently suggested, simply a bit of bad luck, the result of, at most, short-term governmental breakdown?

As always, each historian has his or her own solution. My own starts from two innocuous premises: first, that the revolution was not a mere accident (though the fortuitous and unpredictable certainly played a part in it); secondly, that to understand it we need to look back once more over the history of the previous century. When we do so we find, I suggest, a profound division emerging among the English people about the moral basis of their commonwealth, a division expressed in a cultural conflict that had both social and regional dimensions. The revolution was an unsuccessful attempt to resolve the conflict by imposing a particular notion of moral order, articulated in the culture of the Puritan ‘middling sort’, upon the rest of the kingdom.

The Tudor state rested on a theory of order incessantly reiterated by preachers, publicists and politicians. ‘Almighty God hath appointed all things in heaven, earth, and waters in a most excellent and perfect order: the sonorous message of the Homily on Obedience was regularly dinned into the ears of English men and women throughout their lives. Society was a harmonious organism, held together by reciprocal obligations. ‘Some are in high degree’, the Homily continues, ‘some in low, some kings and princes, some inferiors and subjects, priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor’. The patriarchal authority of the father of a family was the cornerstone of order, reinforcing the corresponding layers of authority of lords over tenants, monarchs over subjects. The theory presupposed the universal existence of stable families, stable local communities, as the bases of a stable state.

But in practice England was far from stable. Excessive population growth had led to land shortage, unemployment, and ‘masterlessness’ for increasing numbers of people. Rapid inflation spawned disastrously high food prices, especially in crisis periods like the 1590s and 1620s. Some people profited from the situation: the farmer big enough to produce a surplus for the market, who
could often buy out less fortunate manorial tenants, for example. Economic and social values, too, were changing. People prospering in the marketplace had less time for the old constraints of the ‘just price’ or the co-operative ethos of the traditional open-field community. The ideal of the harmonious ‘vertical’ society in which people of different degrees worked together, was being challenged by a new world of competition. Villages became more polarised, as ‘parish notables’, minor gentry and yeomen, began to rise above the rest of their neighbours.

People like this, newcomers to wealth and status, often felt threatened by the soaring numbers of poor generated by the population explosion. They saw themselves as islands of godly virtue in a sea of sinful disorder – a disorder distressingly visible in the drinking and merrymaking that constantly undermined household discipline, particularly among the young. ‘Was there ever seen less obedience in youth of all sorts... towards their superiors, parents, masters and governors?’ asked Philip Stubbes in his *Anatomy of Abuses*, a vigorous attack on the festive culture. Protestantism, especially its Puritan variant, taught doctrines of discipline, work and responsibility, and it is not surprising that the emerging local elites found in it a convenient justification for their authority. They, after all, were God’s elect, charged with the duty of advancing godly reformation by disciplining the reprobate majority. County magistrates strove to suppress the church ales and other disorderly village festivals; in some places (Dorchester is a conspicuous example) they or their urban counterparts systematically enforced a ‘culture of discipline’ aimed at realising their ideal of a reformed Christian ‘city on a hill’. Puritanism was of course much more than a system of social control, but this aspect of it is of particular relevance to the revolution.

Of course Puritan discipline was not the only available response to the crisis of order. There were those at court and in the Anglican hierarchy who abhorred the divisive impact of Puritan preaching, who like James I feared that its insistence on the primacy of individual conscience threatened the whole system of order, even monarchy itself. Stability could best be maintained, they thought, by more traditional policies: by a paternalist monarchy, aristocracy and church protecting the lower orders from exploitation by the acquisitive ‘middling sort’. So they tried, as Robert Dover did at the Cotswold Games, to revive the old festive culture — the May games and revel feasts, and all the other calendric and religious rituals in which the values of ‘good neighbourhood’ had been affirmed. William Fennor captured the spirit of the conservative ideal in his nostalgic lines:

‘Happy the age, and harmless were the days...’ A paternalistic monarchy with an interest in tradition. Dancing by the Thames at Richmond. Flemish school, circa 1600.

Happy the age, and harmless were the days
(For then true love and amity were found)
When every village did a maypole raise,
And Whitsun-ales and May-games did abound.

The resulting cultural conflict became more intense after James I issued the Book of Sports in 1618, proclaiming the legality of innocent recreations even on the sabbath, and still more so when Charles I and Archbishop Laud reissued it in 1633. Disputes over maypoles and church ales may seem far removed from the English Revolution, but in fact their political implications were clear. When village revels were prohibited by the JPs’s people murmured, one of Laud’s bishops reported, that it was hard ‘if they could not entertain their friends once a year, to praise God for his blessings, and pray for the King, under whose government they enjoyed peace and quietness’. The hierarchy’s policy of protecting traditional culture further encouraged the suspicions, aroused in numerous other ways, of the existence of a sinister plot to restore Catholicism.

This is not to dispute the importance of the more familiar religious and political aspects of the revolution, or of the crucial role played by localist resentment of ‘Thorough’ policies. But politics and religion are part of culture, and this was a cultural as well as a political revolution: an attempt by the Puritan gentry and middling sort to impose their conception of godly order on the rest of the nation. The cultural aspect is clearly apparent in the well-known autobiography of Richard Baxter. When he embarked on his ministry at Kidderminster in 1641, Baxter encountered a situation typical of many English parishes: ‘an ignorant, rude and revelling people for the most part’, but also ‘a small company of converts, who were humble, godly, and of good conversation’. The ungodly majority resisted efforts to suppress their ‘painted forms of giants and suchlike fooleries’ and soon, Baxter recalls, ‘if a stranger passed... that had short hair and a civil habit, the rabble presently cried, “Down with the Roundheads”’. The familiar stereotypes of Roundhead and Cavalier (cultural as well as political symbols) were already emerging. Some of the local alignments in the civil war were soon to reflect earlier cultural divisions. The Welsh border counties and the downlands of southern England, always strongholds of traditional culture, were royalist in the 1640s; regions like the Essex and
Wiltshire clothing districts, where the parish notables had been more successful in imposing godly reformation, were correspondingly parliamentary.

We have been using the term 'English Revolution', but 'English revolutions' might be more appropriate, for there were in fact three distinct revolutions: a moderate, reformist one in 1641, many of whose constitutional achievements were endorsed by the settlement of 1660; a violent, republican one in 1648-9, only temporarily successful; and a third 'revolution that failed', the abortive democratic revolution whose adherents were driven into the political underground in the 1650s.

The first, reformist phase reflected the virtually unanimous rejection by 'the Country' of Charles I's 'Thorough' government; in it the Long Parliament outlawed Ship Money, dismantled the Star Chamber and punished Strafford and other agents of absolutism, all in the name of the freedoms guaranteed by the mythical ancient constitution. The cultural conflict was not a primary factor during this period of relative unity, though it occasionally surfaced in attacks on Laudian clergy and demands for 'Root and Branch' reform. Orchestrated by John Pym, a propaganda campaign also reawakened the lurking fears of Catholic conspiracy.

Parliament's reaction to those fears - its appeal to the people and its revolutionary claim to the militia power - drove moderate elements over to the King's side and precipitated civil war. In that war there were, as we have been often reminded, many neutrals, many who gave the integrity of their local communities a higher priority than the national aims of either side. But even neutrals had preferences, and not everyone was neutral. The war was not fought solely by conscripts or troops imported from Scotland and Ireland: leadership and volunteers on both sides reflected the enduring cultural split. Parliament depended heavily on Puritan reformers, the King on people who had long struggled against the socially divisive impact of godly reformation. It was, among much else, a war between adherents of two competing concepts of order.

The convoluted political struggle that followed the war contained further echoes of the cultural conflict. The Puritan minority, entrenched in the army and in Parliament's county committees, demanded further reformation at any cost. But the moderate gentry and their allies and dependants in 'the Country', even in the hitherto parliamentarian counties of the south-east, had had enough of the military burdens, taxes and other violations of ancient rights that made Parliament a far worse centralising menace than ever the King had been. Most of the propertied political nation wanted only a return to the settlement of 1641. Thanks to the disciplined power of Fairfax's army, the conservative, localist reaction was beaten back in 1648, opening the way to the second revolution in which the House of Commons was purged, the House of Lords abolished, and the King executed. The militant minority which did these things was aided, and indeed pushed onward, by adherents of the potential 'third revolution', the popular elements politicised by the war, the middle-class London Levelers and the separatists inflamed by
millenarian visions of a new Jerusalem in which the godly 'saints' would rule. This, of course, was not what the parliamentary leaders, even revolutionary leaders like Oliver Cromwell, intended. Suppression of the Levellers was to be the new republic's first order of business; constant foot-dragging to frustrate the more extreme of the sects' promised reforms (of Parliament, the law, the tithe system) was to be the second.

Even at its zenith after 1649 the English Revolution was a limited revolution, never approaching the thoroughgoing reformism of, for example, Jacobin France in 1793. The vast majority of people of all social levels retained most of an older, deeply ingrained value system - beliefs in the patriarchal family, the primacy of ancient law and custom, the virtues of the traditional, cooperative community. This is abundantly clear in the outlook of the Clubmen, the biggest mass movement of the entire period, in 1645. And even the leadership contained many who were ambivalent about the revolution. Oliver Cromwell, one half of him a zealous Puritan reformer, the other half a conservative country squire, himself personifies the ambiguities of the revolution. When, after the failure of the Commonwealth either to gain public acceptance or to retain the confidence of the army, Cromwell attained the supreme power as Protector, his regime exemplified these same contradictions: two periods of 'healing and settling', separated by the interlude of the Major-Generals, in which yet another blast of authoritarian Puritan reformation was inflicted on the nation. It is not surprising that even many of those who had yearned for godly discipline at last concluded that military rule was too high a price to pay for it, and welcomed the restoration of Charles II.

In the end, the revolution was a conflict over the moral basis of English society. Behind the clash of cultures we can detect two social ideals, even two societies, in conflict: one stressing custom, tradition, and the cooperative, 'vertical' community; the other moral reformation, individualism, the ethic of work and responsibility. The middling sort's campaign to impose theirs as the national culture failed because deep-rooted social forces were too strong for them. The great cosmic drama, the battle of good and evil, the journey towards the eternal city on the hill: all were internalised after 1660, worked out within the soul of each individual. Defeat compelled John Milton to locate paradise within, John Bunyan to allegorise the quest for a righteous society as an individual, not a national pilgrimage. The civil war had begun, says Baxter in a passage alluding to the cultural conflict, 'in our streets before king or Parliament had any armies'. It ended, for many, in disillusion. But in both its successes and its failures the revolution was as much a cultural as a constitutional or political one.

FOR FURTHER READING: