

THE COLLECTED ESSAYS OF CHRISTOPHER HILL*

HILL, CHRISTOPHER. *The Collected Essays of –*. Vol. I. *Writing and Revolution in 17th Century England*. Vol. II. *Religion and Politics in 17th Century England*. Vol. III. *People and Ideas in 17th Century England*. The Harvester Press, Brighton 1985; 1986; 1987. xi, 340 pp.; xi, 356 pp.; 352 pp. £ 28.50; 28.50; 26.50.

It is well known among British historians that the civil wars of the seventeenth century are fought anew by each generation. As Veronica Wedgwood wrote over thirty years ago:

We are still so much involved with this conflict that passion and propaganda colour all that has been written about it [. . .]. The final, dispassionate history of the Civil Wars cannot be written until the problems have ceased to matter; by that time it will not be worth writing.¹

Yet the controversies of the 1950s were mild by comparison with those of today. All serious historians accepted that the Civil War was an important event with significant consequences, though there was disagreement as to whether its causes were questions of principle transcending the circumstances of seventeenth-century Britain (as Wedgwood argued) or economic change and social conflict. Leading non-Marxist as well as Marxist historians were agreed “in assuming that the causes of the civil war are to be sought in economics rather than in religion” (III, 70).

Since the early 1970s, however, we have seen the rise of the more negative school of thought known as revisionism, according to which the English Civil War had no long-term causes – whether of a principled or a social nature – and no significant consequences. It was, rather, an acciden-

*All references to the work reviewed here are given in the text and footnotes by volume and page number.

¹ C.W. Wedgwood, *The King's Peace, 1637-1641* (Fontana edn, Glasgow, 1966), p. 14.

tal event brought about by misunderstanding, mistrust and even paranoia;² and it left traditional society and even the constitution at the end of the seventeenth century much as they were at its beginning.³

The years of Margaret Thatcher's government have seen an intensification and politicization of this conflict. The approach of several anti-Marxist historians, publicized in the national press, starts from the assertion that the study of history in Britain has for too long been dominated by Marxist orthodoxy, foisted on to the academic world by an organized conspiracy of Communist Party members and ex-members.⁴ (Speaking from personal experience of British academic life over thirty years, I cannot remember a time when the Marxist view of the civil war was ever established as the dominant view – it has always been vigorously combatted by leading academics with wide influence, from Trevor-Roper and Stone in the 1960s through Conrad Russell and Alan Everitt in the 1970s to John Morrill and Anthony Fletcher in the 1980s.) It is time, they say, to banish these grand theories of sinister origin in favour of a pragmatic approach based on such profound generalizations as “Conflict, as has been said elsewhere, is a common enough form of social interaction”, or “All elements in society are subject to continual change, decay and renovation.”⁵

At the heart of the Marxist “Old Guard” coming so heavily under fire from the Thatcherite right stands Christopher Hill, long regarded by both left and right as Britain's leading Marxist historian. Though Hill left the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1957 and has apparently belonged to no political organisation since then, has had a conventional and successful academic career including the mastership of one of Oxford's most prestigious colleges, and has founded no distinctive group of Marxist followers,⁶ he infuriates the right, the revisionists and the pragmatists. Perhaps it is because, as one of his most intemperate critics remarked in 1984, he simply will not admit defeat, despite having undergone a level of “assault upon his historical method, his historiographical achievement, and his intellectual integrity that would have stilled most other scholars”.⁷

² Anthony J. Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (London, 1981), pp. xix-xxx, 407-419.

³ Alan Everitt, *The Local Community and the Great Rebellion* (London, 1969).

⁴ J[onathan] C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: state and society in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Cambridge, 1986); J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: the Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 126-137. Kenneth Baker, Conservative Minister of education, has told the press that the latter was his favourite book of 1986.

⁵ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost – further explored* (London, 1983), p. 198.

⁶ For an account of the circumstances in which Hill left the Communist Party, see M. MacEwen, “The day the Party had to stop”, *Socialist Register*, 1976.

⁷ Mark Kishlansky, “Desert Island Radicals”, *Times Higher Education Supplement* (London),

It is therefore particularly valuable and interesting to have these three volumes of essays by Hill published now. For this collection is far from being the warmed-up dish of reprints and outdated ephemera so often served up as “Collected Essays” towards the end of a distinguished academic’s career. Though they include material from as far back as 1958 (an essay on Cromwell which has stood the test of time remarkably well), most of the pieces reprinted here are recent responses to revisionist arguments, some with new passages or postscripts and almost all with carefully updated footnotes. Some are rewritten, often from a series of book reviews (on the works of Patrick Collinson and Fernand Braudel, for example). All three volumes show that Christopher Hill has continued to respond, to develop his ideas and to open up new perspectives on history long after his shallower critics have left the field mistakenly supposing themselves to have won some kind of victory.

In these *Collected Essays*, Hill defends his basic Marxist interpretation of the English Revolution vigorously and competently. There was a real revolutionary transformation of England in the mid-seventeenth century – economic, social, political and cultural – which could not have happened without the civil war and the abolition of monarchy (I, 319-334; III, 94-124). The war and its outcome were no accident, no irrational disaster or product of misunderstanding and obstinacy, but the result of real conflicts of social forces and the ideas which reflected them, and these had been developing for decades (I, 3-31; II, 19-86; III, 21-67). The course of the conflict and its results were determined by a complex interplay of classes and ideas: the gentry with their hostility to absolutism and preference for local independence; the “middling sort” of property owners with their desire for economic freedom coupled with a strong fear of disorder arising from below; the artisans and peasants to whom radical religion and politics made their strongest appeal; and the propertyless poor, excluded from almost everyone’s definition of “the people” but seen as the solution rather than merely a problem by Gerrard Winstanley the Digger (III, 21-67, 94-124, 247-273). The significance of the radicals is shown again and again to have been the pressure they put on moderate revolutionaries and would-be reformers to make up their minds what they wanted and within what limits they were willing to act; to define and redefine liberty, salvation, and popular sovereignty; to ensure that England had a revolution and a capitalist, imperialist future rather than an indefinite absolutist stalemate or a Prussian-style

7 September 1984. The tone of this review of Hill’s *The Experience of Defeat* (London, 1984) may be gathered from the following quotation: “But the centre of the book remains the cranks, crackpots, screwballs and fanatics, the nutters and kooks who appear in the wake of every genuine movement for social reform and who become the principal barrier to lasting change.”

transformation from above (II, 117-161, 321-342; III, 21-67, 94-124).⁸

But there is more to these volumes than defence, or even than development, of Hill's basic positions. The second volume, *Religion and Politics*, is a series of analyses of the role of religious ideas in society which goes far beyond the methods, and radically modifies the conclusions, of Hill's earlier works such as *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964). Central to this rethinking is an examination of the importance of the idea of a single national church controlled by the state. Many Puritans held to this idea not only before and during the revolution, but up to and beyond 1688. Hill shows this by explaining the practice of "occasional conformity" as an attempt to reconcile the separation enforced by the state after the Restoration with the ideal of a comprehensive national church (II, 3-18, 63-86, 301-320). Viewed from this perspective, religious radicalism with its central demand of toleration for the sects was not simply a spin-off from mainstream Puritanism but a movement with very different social and intellectual roots (II, 89-252).⁹

Hill also examines the social and political implications of predestination and free will with a sharp eye for paradoxes and social divisions; at one point he describes the popularity of doctrines of universal salvation or "rustic Pelagianism" among lower-class sectarians as a demand for the democratization of salvation (II, 131). He examines the perennial problem of antinomianism within the Protestant tradition, and shows how, with "covenant theology" the English Calvinists attempted to have it both ways, God's absolute decrees being offset by his covenant guaranteeing salvation to his elect in return for their faithfulness (III, 300-324). In the longest piece reprinted here, Hill shows how inseparable religion was from revolution in this world in the thought of Gerrard Winstanley, ably replying to those who have argued that Winstanley was a mystic taking purely symbolic action (II, 185-252).

This whole volume justifies very thoroughly Hill's opening warning against "isolating 'religion' as a self-sufficient factor unrelated to this-worldly concerns", and illustrates in innumerable ways his statement that "'putting religion first' might mean many things which are not 'religious' in the modern sense". (II, vii, 57) By comparison, Jonathan Clark's call for "renewed attention to religion *as religion* rather than as a sublimation of something else" looks both shallow and sterile.¹⁰

Hill himself, unlike many of his opponents, is a good-humoured and

⁸ Though Hill refers to the outcome of the English Revolution as "closer to the Prussian model than the French" (III, 113), he recognizes elsewhere that the Prussian and Japanese revolutions "from on top" could only happen after capitalist dominance had first been established in other countries "from below" (III, 123).

⁹ For a similar interpretation, see Michael Mullett, *Radical Religious Movements in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1980).

¹⁰ Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion*, p. 108.

effective polemicist. He makes short work of the exponents of aristocratic conspiracy as an explanation of the disturbances leading to war by visualizing Warwick and Vane sending client MPs to knock on the doors of seamen in London's East End (III, 27). He demolishes Peter Laslett's view that there was effective Puritan control over popular sexual morality by a careful explanation of what parish registers of the mid-seventeenth century do not tell us, and points out that these registers may have had a political purpose which is being ignored by demographic historians: to impose officially approved modes of family formation on a population whose customs varied, and to label as deviant those who did not conform to these modes (III, 188-225). He identifies Braudel's major weaknesses as a failure to grasp the significance of the state (and hence of revolutions) for economic development, and a definition of capitalism as a permanent feature of human societies above the level of the primitive by which he "deprived himself of a way of escape from economic determinism". At the same time, he is amusingly critical of Braudel's arrogance and Francocentrism (III, 125-142).

In addition, some of the essays provide us with a brilliant broad sweep over a new field, or over an old one from a new perspective, piling scores or hundreds of references up before us in a dazzling display; few people can have read as much from or about the seventeenth century as Hill. Such are the essay on "Censorship and English Literature" (I, 32-71), and the establishment of a continuity "From Lollards to Levellers" (II, 87-116). Most intriguing of all is "Radical Pirates?", in which Hill shows that behind the eighteenth-century legends of egalitarian and freedom-loving pirates there is an interesting element of historical fact, for the Caribbean Islands and Sea were briefly, from the Protectorate until the full establishment of the plantation economy, the haven of radical and other exiles from the British Isles. Among the gems turned up by Hill from under the most unlikely stones are the information that the settlers on Antigua were (according to an unnamed lady) "all a company of sodomists", and that in 1655 Irish bondservants joined with black slaves in rebellion on Barbados (III, 161-187).

Hill's readiness to incorporate new ideas into his vision of the seventeenth-century revolution is shown in the remarkable essay, "Science and Magic" (III, 274-299). The part played in the emergence of modern science by ideas which are to a modern scientific mind irrational, such as Hermeticism, was already hinted at in Hill's *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* in 1965. But in trying to prove that there was a particular association between natural magic and religious or political radicalism and that this was a factor in the eventual rejection of magic and emergence of modern science, Hill overreaches himself and falls into manifest contradictions and absurdities. (Among these is the assertion that mortalism, as held

by Milton, made it difficult to accept the existence of spirits; the poet who could discuss at some length whether angels experience physical love does not seem to have found it insuperably difficult!)

Despite Hill's competent defence of the Marxist analysis of the English revolution, his effective critique of opponents and his capacity for new and valuable insights, he has many weaknesses. These are perhaps most irritating to his supporters, for they make it difficult at times to defend him. Most interestingly, however, Hill's weaknesses have changed over the years, as he has grown away from the mechanical, Stalinist Marxism that dominated his 1940 essay *The English Revolution, 1640* (not reprinted here) and was still visible as late as *God's Englishman* (1970). Unfortunately, what he has moved towards sometimes seems to be woolliness and eclecticism.

One of the most interesting pieces in this collection is "A Bourgeois Revolution?", a major interpretive essay first published in 1980 but here brought up to date with new passages, references and a postscript (III, 94-124). In this, Hill seems at first sight to be taking an extremely mechanical position, insisting that the term "bourgeois revolution [. . .] in Marxist usage does *not* mean a revolution made or consciously willed by the bourgeoisie", and that "it was 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". (III, 95-96) He goes on to claim that "No Marxist to my knowledge has ever suggested that the ideas of individual men and women are determined by their class origins or class interests", and restates his position as, "At all points, then, I wish to disclaim the imputation of conscious will." (III, 97, 113) These would seem to be rather extreme statements of the view that history moves by impersonal forces rather than human action. Yet he shows quite dramatically, in the rest of this essay and elsewhere, that the development and outcome of the revolution were very much the product of human action, above all the interaction between large and small property owners, inspired by ideas which he is very far from ignoring in the rest of these three volumes.

In Marxist terms, the relationship between consciousness and reality in a bourgeois revolution is not transparent – if it was, there would have been no need for Marx to argue that a bourgeois revolution was what had taken place in England and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and what was happening in the Germany of his own time. Of necessity, the bourgeoisie appears in the realm of ideas as the embodiment of liberty, reason, godliness, the general will or some other universal principle; in political action it fights for its own interests both against feudal absolutism and against the possibility of more radical revolt from below. There should be no difficulty for Hill in saying that the English Revolution was made by the bourgeoisie, though in alliance with other classes.

"A Bourgeois Revolution?" is also one of the many essays in which Hill

uses the term “natural rulers” (or “natural rulers” – he is never quite sure whether it needs inverted commas) to refer to the gentry and merchant oligarchies of seventeenth-century England. But if the Restoration of 1660 was, as he claims, a return to power of these “natural rulers” who had faced and fought the threat of being ousted by absolutism, and the events of 1688-89 further confirmed their power, then in what sense was there a revolution? As fast as Hill tries to justify the term, the more he seems to get into a muddle. At one point he refers to the existence of a “rural bourgeoisie” of gentry and yeomen participating in production for the market from the sixteenth century onwards (III, 97). At another, the gentry was transformed by a “breakdown of traditional patriarchal relations between landlord and tenant” *during* the revolutionary decades (III, 103). After 1688, “the peerage was sociologically a very different class from the hangers-on of James I’s court” – whatever “sociologically” may mean in this context – and he claims that Marx recognized that at some point “the English gentry became a bourgeoisie of its own particular kind” (III, 105, 112).

It would be quite possible for a Marxist to resolve this dilemma – was it or was it not the same class which ruled after the Revolution as before? – by looking at the changing economic base of the English gentry *as landlords* from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, rather than supposing that participation in production turned them into a rural bourgeoisie. Most historians are agreed that there was a massive shift in the source of landlords’ rent income in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, from late feudal copyhold to market-based leasehold rents.¹¹ This meant that production was increasingly being carried on by yeomen farmers hiring labour and producing for the market instead of by subsistence peasants.¹² It would be appropriate to call these capitalist farmers a rural bourgeoisie. The landlords were not usually active capitalists themselves, but they were increasingly dependent *as rentiers* on the existence of rural capitalism. Ironically, it is in another essay in the same volume, a fairly lightweight piece of journalism written for the centenary of Marx’s death, that Hill quotes Marx on the English landowning class, which

always lands on its feet – thanks to the capital invested by other people in the soil, whereby the landlord collects a rent which stands in no proportion to the profits to be drawn out of the soil by the capitalist.¹³

¹¹ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982), p. 131.

¹² For detailed examples, see Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 3-164; Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village; Terling, 1525-1700* (London, 1979), pp. 19-42.

¹³ Hill does not give the source. But the question of the transformation of feudal rent into capitalist rent is discussed by Marx in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (ed. Dirk

The old feudal aristocracy had held one kind of power in society; rentier landlords in the epoch of agrarian capitalism held quite another kind. It was the fact that on the whole, landed property did not change hands although the nature of production was transformed that explains the continuity, not some inherent “naturalness” of gentry rule.¹⁴

There are weaknesses too, as well as great strengths, in Hill’s treatment of ideas, especially religious ideas. The second volume here shows an interesting but disappointing progression from a mechanical concept of ideas having a “logic” of their own (more Weberian, perhaps, than Marxist) to an apparent rejection of all systematic analysis of ideas as such.

In “The Problem of Authority” (II, 37-50), Hill tries very hard to define the essence of Protestantism as anti-authoritarian. With the cry of “Here I stand”, Luther “rejected the authority of Pope, church and secular power”. But in the very next paragraph he has to recognize that Luther called upon the secular power to intervene in spiritual affairs: “The road runs straight from Luther to *Leviathan*.” (II, 38) If this is so, how can the nature of Protestantism be anti-authoritarian? It is a paradox, says Hill; the reformers’ recourse to strengthening the secular power was “a political necessity, not a logical consequence of the reformers’ teaching”. (II, 39)

As Hill further explores the paradoxes of predestination and antinomianism, salvation by faith and free will, he begins to argue that the same ideas might have a different logic for different classes. For example, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers “became subversive when taken over by groups normally excluded from political life”. (II, 126) The supremacy of individual conscience meant at first that hard work, frugality, accumulation and monogamy seemed to the bourgeoisie in the centres of commerce and manufacture to be God-given since they found them inscribed on their own consciences. “It was to be different later”, Hill goes on, “when lower-class consciences established a direct link with God.” (II, 162)

The final essay in this volume, “God and the English Revolution”, begins with a brilliant account of the “Trinity”: the God of the king and bishops, the God of the Parliamentary propertied classes, and the God of lower-class radicals. But Hill moves to a throw-away conclusion:

One conclusion we may perhaps draw is that any religion can serve any social purpose, because of the ambiguity of its basic texts. Enemies of the revolutionary radicals noted the similarity of many of their theories to those of the Jesuits. (II, 338)

J. Struik, New York, 1964), pp. 92-105, 120-127; and in *Capital*, Vol. III (Moscow, 1966), pp. 782-813.

¹⁴ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (Panther edn, London, 1968), pp. 154-193.

Can Hill be serious? Is his tongue in his cheek here, or could he simply not be bothered to give this immensely interesting and valuable collection of studies of religion a conclusion worthy of the work that had gone into it? Perhaps Hill is still inhibited by Tawney's long-ago remark, "I don't mind Hill being a Marxist, but I do wish that he wouldn't sing the doxology at the end of every piece he writes."¹⁵ Surely the shade of Tawney would be distressed to see that he had triggered in Hill a lifelong weakness for frivolous conclusions!¹⁶

There are other conclusions in these essays with which I suspect few Marxists would agree. One is that a socialist transformation of society was more possible in Gerrard Winstanley's day than ours (II, 235, 339). Another is his suggestion that disputes over the history of the family may be resolved by supposing "continuity of lower-class attitudes towards the relation of the sexes, whose evolution is quite distinct from that of their betters". (III, 202) The problem with this is that it is uncomfortably close to the view of the fashionable right wing as expounded by Ferdinand Mount.¹⁷ References to beavers forming working couples and chimpanzees who "establish continuing sexual preferences, which might or might not be called love" suggest an old-fashioned essentialism lurking beneath Hill's appreciation of recent contributions to the history of sexuality (III, 199, 203, 226-235).

If Hill, despite his many strengths, sometimes falls into confusion or avoids carrying his Marxist analysis to appropriately serious conclusions, it is partly a reflection of the weakness of Marxist history in Britain today. This is not to say that Hill does not have his supporters – he has, fortunately for historical education in Thatcher's Britain, very many. But few of them are Marxists, and some take special pride in the fact that they are not; William Lamont recently claimed that "it is Hill's particular glory *not* to have established a recognisable school".¹⁸ There are in Britain many "left wing historians" but (ironically in the light of what the right believe about Marxist conspiracy) most of them keep their distance from Marxism. Many of those who do think of themselves as Marxists have a populist rather than a class approach to history, a tradition going back to the Communist Party

¹⁵ R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution* (London, 1977), p. 97.

¹⁶ For another example, see III, 118.

¹⁷ Ferdinand Mount, *The Subversive Family: an Alternative History of Love and Marriage* (London, 1982).

¹⁸ William Lamont, "The Left and its Past: revisiting the 1650s", *History Workshop* 23 (1987), p. 162. This is borne out by the contents of Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas, *Puritans and Revolutionaries: essays in seventeenth-century history presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford, 1978).

Historians' Group in the period 1946-56.¹⁹ Hill's reluctance to appear too consistent a Marxist will undoubtedly appeal to many of his followers. But there will be some, committed to Marxist history and politics, who think that his contribution to understanding the English Revolution, magnificent and impressive as it is, would be even better if he had more explicitly Marxist followers to take up, develop, and argue back about his ideas.

¹⁹ For the history of left groupings in British historiography, see Eric Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party", in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes: essays in honour of A. L. Morton* (London, 1978); B. Schwartz, "The 'people' in history: the Communist Party Historians' Group", in R. Johnson *et al.*, *Making Histories* (London, 1982), pp. 44-95; C. Hill *et al.*, "Past and Present: origins and early years", *Past and Present*, 100 (1983), 3-14; Raphael Samuel, "History Workshop, 1966-80", in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), pp. 410-417.