

Introduction

It was Lawrence Stone who, in his *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529–1642*, staked out the era between the onset of the English Reformation and the outbreak of the English civil war as the period that generated England's bloodiest domestic conflict, its last royal execution, and its lone experiment in republican government.¹ Stone's book was seen as a late, perhaps belated product of the Whig tradition that saw modern English history in terms of a progressive constitutionalism whose first great crisis occurred between 1640 and 1660 and whose final triumph was modern representative democracy. This paradigm, long challenged ideologically if not structurally by Marxism, was newly under attack by a generation of functionalist historians generically referred to as revisionists. The revisionists taxed Whigs and Marxists alike with misreading the early modern era. Neither incipiently democratic nor capitalist, it was, they contended, a period to be understood in its own right, and one whose operational assumptions were rooted in the feudal and chivalric past. Accordingly, the great Revolution – seedbed of liberal democracy or bourgeois dominion, according to taste – was demoted to a civil war with an untidy aftermath. No longer tied to the grand narrative of modernity, it could be seen as the result of contingent circumstances, a misfortune that might well have been avoided with greater prudence, skill, or luck. Put another way, whereas weighty and unitary events seem to require great and long-matured causes, less cohesive and consequential ones, even if on a large scale, do not. As Conrad Russell puts it in his *The Causes of the English Civil War*, a work whose title deliberately echoes Stone's while purposefully deflating its argument:

A large part of the confusion on this subject results from taking the coming of the English Civil War as a single event, whereas in fact it was a some-

what unpredictable sequence of events and non-events. Since the war was the result, not merely of these events and non-events, but of the fact that they came in the order they did, it is hard to build up an orderly sequence of long-term causes for the King's raising his standard at Nottingham.²

It is to Russell's credit that, having declared his subject well-nigh incoherent at the outset, he proceeds to say many useful and perceptive things about it. His uncertainty nonetheless remains; as he says toward the end, "England in 1637 was, no doubt, a country with plenty of discontents, some of them potentially serious, but it was still a very stable and peaceful one, and one which does not show many visible signs of being on the verge of a major upheaval."³ I share what I take to be one part of his concern, namely that causes can be neatly fitted to events in human affairs, and even that the concept of "cause," as commonly understood, is one ill-suited to historical explanation in general. It is not in any event the purpose of this book to account for what I still think is best referred to as the English Revolution. Nevertheless, it seems to me impossible to speak intelligibly of the period from 1529 to 1642 without reference to the events of 1642 themselves, at least if one wishes to construe the period as a whole. If I were writing a different sort of book, I might indeed wish to contend that the entire span of English history between 1529 and 1689 constituted a single revolutionary arc, on one side of which was a polity still communitarian in its outlook, and on the other one deeply infused with the principle of personal interest. My aims, however, are more limited. What I do wish is to describe a highly dynamic society over a period of slightly more than one hundred years in terms of the changing and often conflicting self-perceptions of its elite; in short, to describe its political languages as expressed in sacred, legal, constitutional, and dramatic discourse, as well as in those of counsel and command. This is only one sort of possible description, and not necessarily the most profound. It pays little direct attention to the great economic and demographic changes that shaped these languages. My excuse for this is that I must say what I think I can say best. Others will make good my deficiencies, and many already have.

All political languages express legitimacy, the cluster of ideas, assumptions, and significations by which men explain, enact, and contest authority. Singly and collectively, these languages constitute a discourse. The discourse of legitimacy will be understood, in its broadest sense, as the sum total of articulated statements from, to, or about power and its instruments. Such statements may be intentional (a command, a petition), ritualized (bowing, kneeling, and other forms of ceremonial address; the wearing and doffing of certain articles of clothing; the taking of oaths and the recitation of prescribed texts), representational (the likeness of a ruler on his coinage; his personification in pageantry; the depiction of his predecessors on the stage), or

expressive (toasts and jests; lighting bonfires; ringing bells). The forms of discourse inevitably overlap; they are all to a greater or lesser degree expressive; they frequently carry multiple significations. Their sum is the currency of legitimacy, the form in which the daily transaction of power occurs and the shape in which it is ultimately constituted; the content of the civil culture.

Early modern England was a society in transition, and its modes of discourse were in flux, not to say turmoil. The focal point of change, and in appearance at least its most visible source, was the state and its central organ, the monarchy. The degree to which the state concentrated its authority and assimilated functions previously exercised by other power centers was revolutionary in itself—the Tudor revolution in government, as Geoffrey Elton phrased it—and also the precondition of modern revolution as such. Before the Tudors, the monarchy was a dynastic prize whose capture had, to be sure, profound civic repercussions, but did not necessarily involve the whole of society. By 1640, a successful coup or rebellion against the crown was a totalizing event that affected the religious no less than the secular allegiance of English men and women, and their livelihoods as well. In that sense, the “cause” of the English Revolution was the enlarged state itself. A breakdown in its functions or a slippage in its controls was a general catastrophe.

The expansion of the state both created and reflected an expansion of the civil public to which it was accountable. Thus, the greater claims of centralized government were matched by the greater demands made on it. It was more powerful, but also more vulnerable. This in turn made legitimation more critical to it, and more contestable. The result was that the polity itself became increasingly fissile. The fact that the official rhetoric of legitimation construed dissent as faction or disobedience complicated matters further. By the early seventeenth century, the constitutional consensus had effectively broken down, and, with it, the legal responsibilities of the subject—the terms of obedience itself—had become uncertain. At the same time, the state church, never wholly accepted by all, began to appear apostate to a significant minority. For many, political breakdown and religious disorder were entwined in the vision of a conspiracy to deprive English men and women of their civil and spiritual liberty. This was the crisis of legitimacy.

From this perspective, a series of faultlines had opened up beneath the seemingly placid surface of English life described by Russell. These faultlines were reflected in the increasingly contested discourses of legitimacy, the official discourse of the monarchy itself, the sacred discourse of the pulpit, the professional discourse of the law, the institutional discourse of Parliament, and the self-mirroring discourses of the realm at large and of its unique epitome, the stage. They gradually widened and deepened, until a chasm had opened beneath church and state. Thus, the breakdown of 1640 was overde-

terminated—not the product of any mechanical sequence of causes, but an event made cumulatively more probable by systemic stress, and finally precipitated by contingent but not unforeseeable circumstances.

The English Revolution may thus be seen as the endpoint of a complex process whose initial impulse was the profound alteration in the relationship between church and state introduced by the Reformation. If the Revolution is the climax of the story, however, it is far from the whole of it. It is a safe axiom in human affairs that nothing has to happen until it actually does, and only then does the search for process begin. The Revolution might not have occurred as it did if indeed at all, and in that case we might be telling the tale of how the English commonwealth successfully negotiated the difficult passage of the Reformation and rose to the other challenges of early modernity without a general crisis. The process, in short, is well worth investigating in its own right, and that is what for the most part this book aims to do.

Because the Revolution did in fact occur, however, the antecedent facts look differently, and bear a different signification. This is, then, a story about how early modern England deployed the languages of legitimacy, some of them common to other Reformed commonwealths, some of them unique, and all of them colored by a distinct historical background. It is simultaneously the story of how those languages came to bear increasing strain, how that strain spread across the entire discursive field as political and religious division widened, and how, finally, the legitimated order broke down.

As the governing consensus began to unravel, the story became more complex and the languages more intertwined, and Parliament took center stage as the site of conflict. It is, indeed, in Parliament that the several lines of discourse fuse into a compelling narrative of conspiracy and betrayal in which the people and their representatives stand on one side, and the forces of tyranny and sedition on the other. This narrative will find its ultimate expression in the Grand Remonstrance of the Long Parliament, but its essential framework is already fully developed in the parliamentary sessions of 1628–1629.

It is fitting, then, that our story climaxes with the great events of the Parliament of 1628, the Petition of Right and the Protestation of the House of Commons on March 2, 1629, just as it had begun with the convening of the Reformation Parliament exactly a century before. In the intervening years, the central state had both aggrandized power and lost cohesion, for its critical elements, crown and Parliament, had become radically polarized. Recent historiography has seen the matter differently. The old Whig paradigm of liberty-loving country gentlemen resisting monarchical encroachment has been gradually replaced with a view of Parliament as a dependent and declining institution that was in danger of functional obsolescence. Not by ac-

cident, it has also become more difficult to explain the breakdown of 1640–1642, or to conceptualize the English Revolution as such.

I believe this view to be mistaken. Nor is the older one it replaced sufficient. Rather, it seems to me that both crown and Parliament expanded in scope and (assumed) authority in the century after the Reformation, and that what happened in 1640 was a migration of legitimacy from the former to the latter, a revolution *within* the state. It is with that moment that our story will end, although with it the English Revolution was just begun.