

Politics and Political Culture during the English Revolution:

A Review Essay

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Bernard Capp. *England's Culture Wars: Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649-1660*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. xiv + 274pp. ISBN 13: 9780199641789. \$125.00 (cloth).

Julia Merritt. *Westminster 1640-1660: A royal city in a time of revolution*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013. xii + 276pp. ISBN 13: 9780719090400. \$110.00 (cloth).

Jason Peacey. *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. xxii + 448pp. ISBN 13: 9781107044425. \$110.00 (cloth).

In recent years, many of the new directions in research on the English Revolution have taken the form of an attack upon older master narratives, especially those of a Whiggish or Marxist persuasion. Over the past two or three decades, the prevailing climate of work on the 1640s and 1650s has been emphatically anti-Whig and anti-Marxist. In other words, it has eschewed inevitability, teleology, and anachronism, all of which have become bogey words and, as a result, there is now much more willingness to see the revolutionary period on its own terms. The vitality and viability of these years are being stressed more than before, and the period emerges in recent writings as more positive, more dynamic, engendering a greater diversity of responses and contributions, than in earlier narratives.

A central feature of this historiographical development has been a preoccupation with the changing nature of political culture, and the three books under review all make important contributions to this trend. They show in particular that political culture during the English Revolution was immensely lively and colourful, and that in various ways it involved a huge proportion of the nation. Each of these books takes us well beyond the world of ‘high politics’ and they force us to reconsider the wide range of different forms that political action and expression could take.

In *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution*, Jason Peacey argues that the development of print facilitated the emergence of a more participatory political culture during the 1640s and 1650s that was reflected in the growth of activities such as lobbying and petitioning to Parliament. Although print did not *cause* such developments, it nevertheless ‘became integral to the political life of the nation and to the practices associated with political culture and parliamentary affairs’ (20). Peacey’s book thus establishes a fruitful dialogue between political history and the ‘new social history’. It also downplays the significance of Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the ‘public sphere’ – so influential in recent decades – and concentrates instead on exploring ‘just how participatory political life became during the English Revolution’ (21). In stressing ‘the participatory nature of political culture’, Peacey transcends traditional distinctions between high and popular politics, and opens up ‘the practices of daily political life’ (399). Within those practices, Parliament became ‘a much more important focus for political expectations’ during the course of the 1640s and 1650s (399).

Peacey’s book thus marks the convergence of two trends in the historiography of the past quarter-century, namely the continuing exploration of the nature of political groupings in the Parliaments of the Interregnum, and the study of print culture. His model of a participatory political culture helps us to integrate high and popular politics, and he draws on

a remarkable range of primary sources, in both print and manuscript, to reconstruct ‘how ordinary citizens engaged with national affairs and how they interacted with national institutions’ (14). He detects ‘broad changes in institutional practices, political culture and the mentalities associated with political participation’, and he suggests that these changes were reflected in ‘how people followed political affairs; how easy it was for them to understand what was going on; and how they could intervene’ (16).

These three themes in turn correspond to the three main parts of the book. The first, on ‘consuming print’, builds on Peacey’s earlier work by demonstrating the ready availability of cheap printed material and the range of ways in which people could gain sight of it without incurring financial expense. As a result, ‘a remarkable picture emerges about the degree to which national affairs penetrated across the country and across the social spectrum’ (88). Peacey shows how widely this extended both geographically and socially, and how contemporary readers – even if often wary about print – nevertheless made avid use of it.

The second part of the book, entitled ‘following Parliament’, examines ‘how the institution was portrayed and how its processes were analysed’; ‘the degree to which daily proceedings were made accessible, either in person or in print’; and ‘the possibility of assessing the performance of individual MPs and peers’ (130). Peacey argues that ‘cheap print encouraged and enabled direct participation at Westminster’ and ‘fostered unprecedented awareness about the performance of individual MPs’ (162). It ‘provided the public with unprecedented access to Parliament’s proceedings, and it is highly likely that members of the public came to expect extensive media coverage of its business’ (193).

The third and final segment of the book, on ‘taking part’, explores the range of ways in which contemporaries appropriated print for their own purposes. They developed ‘a spectrum of participatory tactics’ (361) and some of the most interesting chapters of the book examine the activities of lobbying and petitioning in terms of such tactics. Peacey argues

persuasively that petitioning was ‘based on enhanced awareness of political affairs and parliamentary processes’: petitioners ‘understood that there were different ways of participating’ and were aware ‘of a spectrum of tactics’ (297). Lobbying likewise became more widespread during the 1640s and 1650s, and the forms that this took again owed much to ‘the possibilities offered by print’ (300). Peacey shows that lobbying was often undertaken in conjunction with petitioning, and that a range of printed material was produced to support it. This in turn led to the development of printed lobbying and counter-lobbying. Further consequences of this much more participatory political culture included rising expectations of MPs and a greater determination on the part of constituents to hold their parliamentary representatives to account. This was associated with a radicalization of political thought, and a close connection can thus be discerned ‘between print, accessibility and accountability’ (393).

Throughout the book, Peacey convincingly sustains his key argument that during the 1640s and 1650s ‘print became centrally important to the ways in which participatory culture developed, to the ways in which contemporaries experienced and responded to political developments and to political agency’ (398). By focusing on political participation, he has reconstructed ‘the emergence of common politics’ (402), and he concludes by suggesting that ‘in combination with debates about the proper role of the press and print, about the legitimate role of popular politics, and about the relationships between MPs and the public, developments in everyday participatory practices represented one of the most powerful legacies of the English Revolution’ (413).

The importance and openness of Parliament in these years likewise form central themes of Julia Merritt’s book on *Westminster 1640-1660*. Like Peacey, she charts the growing practice of submitting mass petitions to Parliament. These were particularly numerous in 1641-2 when what ‘had initially been large and orderly processions of county

elites to accompany county petitions to Parliament' became 'rather more menacing in tone' and accompanied by 'large and angry crowds' (35). Among the most remarkable of these petitions was the Westminster peace petition, delivered in December 1642 with nearly 3,000 signatures, which called for 'a speedy, seasonable and happy Accommodation betwixt His Gracious Majesty and both Houses of Parliament' (136). Interestingly, the signatories were 'drawn from an apparently wide social spectrum, with at least 300 people signing only with their mark' (139). That the petition managed to attract such a broad 'swathe of signatories from across the social range' (141) affords further evidence of just how participatory political culture became during this period.

That culture was also deeply divided. Merritt argues persuasively that although 'direct royalist activity in the area may have been limited', nevertheless a 'more inchoate, background royalist sentiment may have been widespread' (149). It seems that 'in the aftermath of the regicide, Westminster continued to be inhabited by significant numbers of ex-royalists throughout the 1650s' (150). There were cases of pro-royalist and anti-Cromwellian sentiments being indicted at the Westminster sessions during the Interregnum, and the parliamentary elections of 1654 and 1656 were contested bitterly and violently, with no fewer than six candidates competing for the two seats in each year.

Merritt succeeds admirably in her aim of drawing 'out the dialectic between national and local history, in a place and at a time when the two were necessarily tightly interwoven' (5). In a sense, the central and the local merged at Westminster and led to the convergence of a fascinating range of cross-currents. Despite an unprecedented military presence during the 1640s and 1650s, Westminster remained a focus of fashionable society. After the economic and social dislocation of the civil-war years, forms of elite sociability re-emerged with surprising resilience during the Interregnum. Noble families resumed building projects in Westminster and in the adjacent West End parishes from as early as 1648. There was,

however, ‘no disguising the presence of those with strong royalist associations’, and ‘it was the presence of royalism that helped to problematize both the organization and the political and cultural resonances of fashionable society in Westminster’ (204). The social worlds of parliamentarians and royalists overlapped at Westminster, and this had complex consequences. On the one hand, ‘these forms of elite sociability may have served to salve political divisions’ (207), but on the other, ‘for contemporaries there was always a tendency to equate the excesses of fashionable society with royalism’ (218). As a result, mutual suspicions between royalists and parliamentarians persisted, and profound anxieties continued to lurk beneath the surface of fashionable society.

Nowhere were these cultural tensions and anxieties more clearly evident than in the area of religion. Merritt reconstructs the sheer range of religious voices that could be heard in Westminster during this period, including not just Presbyterians and Independents, but conservative supporters of the old Church of England, Roman Catholics, and Quakers. She finds ‘ample evidence that conservative voices could be heard in several of the Westminster parishes in the 1650s, most notably in St Margaret’s’ (245), next door to ‘the Independent-controlled Abbey’ (249). Survivalist ‘Anglicanism’ adopted some of the extra-parochial practices, such as private meetings, that had hitherto been the preserve of sectarian groups, and on several occasions the royalist John Evelyn recorded that he attended sermons ‘at a privat place’ (256-7). Merritt suggests that Westminster contained a ‘shifting mass of people of varying religious predispositions, who were actively sampling the various religious voices and congregations that were on offer’, and that ‘a colourful spectrum of different religious aspirations can thus be discovered living in what must have been an uneasy coexistence’ (258).

This variety of voices emerges as the dominant cultural characteristic of Westminster during these years. Merritt does full justice to ‘the survival of royalist sentiment, and the

broader climate of religious conservatism’, and argues that although ‘the number of royalist plotters and activists fully resident in the area would appear to have been fairly low’, nevertheless ‘conservative and ex-royalist social networks and religious and cultural practices still clearly persisted’ (260). Westminster thus brought together within a tight geographical space the complex and ambiguous picture that characterised the nation more widely. As Merritt writes, ‘the implicit conflicts of the 1650s – between the godly and the ungodly, the republican and the royalist, the army and civilians – were revealed in their most stark forms in the uneasy and contradictory social, political and cultural world of interregnum Westminster’ (262-3). That world was a meeting-point and a melting-pot for many different forces and ideas, and the experience of Westminster thus sheds much light on the changing nature of political culture in an age of revolutionary conflict.

The sheer vitality and diversity of this political culture also comes through very strongly in Capp’s book on *England’s Culture Wars*. Capp explores the fractured character of English culture during the Interregnum, and uncovers the wide variety of issues over which cultural conflict occurred. In reconstructing the mental world of the advocates of ‘Puritan reformation’ and ‘its enemies’, he carefully avoids any binary distinctions and shows instead how the champions and opponents of reformation were themselves internally divided. These ‘culture wars’ were fought over many different matters. They had a significant religious dimension but extended well beyond that: as Capp writes, ‘the puritan ethos of godly discipline and moral reformation, reinforced by humanist values of civility, sobriety, and good order, was pitted against a rival ethos of “good fellowship” and festive traditions’ (3). Disputes thus took place not only over the nature of religious worship and the observance of the Sabbath, but also over a large number of other practices ranging from sexual behaviour to drinking, from sports to dancing, from plays to music, and from dress to duelling. Capp argues that ‘reformers always faced widespread resentment and opposition’

(6), and that loyalty to traditional customs, and to the monarchy and the Church, persisted in many areas. It seems that these ‘political and cultural fault-lines grew steadily deeper throughout the Interregnum’ (217).

Capp’s assessment of the success or failure of ‘Puritan reformation’ during the 1650s is very balanced and judicious. He suggests that ‘the patchwork religious life of the Interregnum saw both passionate commitment and indifference, with both on a scale greater than at any time since the Reformation’ (131), and he concludes that ‘England remained a patchwork of local authorities and communities, over which Whitehall exercised only limited control’ (257). More than some other recent historians, such as Derek Hirst, he feels that ‘we should not harp on failure’: rather, ‘we need to assess the interregnum reformation on its own terms, and within the context of what was possible within the space of eleven turbulent years’ (258). The Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 should not disguise the fact that ‘godly reformation made significant advances’ (259), and ‘it proved impossible for the restored monarchy to eradicate the nonconformists’ (262). Like Peacey and Merritt, Capp underlines the importance of doing full justice to the revolutionary period and of not seeing its reforming initiatives as doomed to failure.

Capp also offers a very valuable analysis of the relations between central and local government, and of the circumstances that were most conducive to the success of godly reformation. He argues that ‘where the reformers had only a few years of influence in the 1650s, progress was predictably limited’, but that ‘they might achieve considerably more where they could build on existing foundations’ (99). Godly reformation tended to be most effective in those areas where Puritanism was already strong, and it ‘fared best when magistrates and ministers held similar values and worked closely together’ (221). Reformation was thus ‘driven forward or ignored according to the temper of local magistrates and ministers’ (239). Capp presents some striking case studies of the progress that

reformation could make, especially in urban areas. These included Exeter, the subject of the final chapter, which was a city 'where reformation was promoted with the greatest vigour of all' (239). Although there were places like Chester and Southampton where 'reformation had made very limited headway during the 1650s' (225), examples of 'substantial progress', such as Gloucester, King's Lynn, Maidstone and Rye, need to be acknowledged as well.

One of the central themes of Capp's book is that reformers were often willing to compromise and to tolerate practices such as drinking, music and dancing where these took place within 'respectable contexts' (189, 195), but that they responded more aggressively when such behaviour was associated with disorder. A key development of the 1650s was the fact that the Interregnum regimes provided local Puritans with a series of legislative weapons that could be used against their enemies when judged necessary. The vigour and effectiveness with which such measures were implemented varied greatly from place to place. In some locations the initiatives of the 1650s constituted 'the resumption of earlier local campaigns', but Capp argues convincingly that 'the Interregnum represents something more, for reformers were now working in harmony with the values and goals of central government, and often with its active support' (260). Effective co-operation between central and local government was thus crucial in determining the extent to which godly reformation could make progress.

In examining these lively and fascinating 'culture wars', Capp recaptures the vibrancy of English political culture during the 1650s, and demonstrates how wide-ranging and open-ended the cultural conflicts were. His account of the reformers is more positive than that found in many earlier accounts and in doing justice to their successes he avoids the danger of seeing the Interregnum as an inexorable drift back towards more traditional practices. He convincingly argues that the world of the Interregnum was more contested, more alive and more interesting than that older teleological narrative implies.

Current research on the English Revolution thus envisages a lively and participatory political culture that moves us beyond the old distinction between high and popular politics. Parliaments and politics still figure in the story, but they are constantly being set within wider contexts and viewed from a greater range of angles. Historians are at pains to reject teleology and anachronism, and are instead emphasising the dynamism and multi-vocality of the 1640s and 1650s. Faced with such a cacophony of voices, it is often a case of reconstructing ‘both...and’ rather than ‘either...or’, as for example in the ‘culture wars’ between different religious and political ideas. As a result, the English Revolution now appears even more complicated and more varied than it did in earlier work: it was characterised by options and possibilities that were more wide open and less circumscribed than was often previously supposed. Behind all these scholarly developments lies a continuing struggle to get nearer to the individual experiences of those who lived through the revolutionary period, and to recover as authentically as possible the richness and diversity of people’s lives, actions and beliefs during these years. As these three books amply demonstrate, new perspectives are emerging all the time, and there is much still to explore.

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