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**Review Article**
**Continental Rebellions and the English Revolution**

P. Zagorin: *Rebels and Rulers, 1500-1660.* Volume I: *Society, States and Early Modern Revolution.* Volume II: *Provincial Rebellion, Revolutionary Civil Wars, 1560-1660.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Perez Zagorin has written two fine books on the English Civil War: *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution* (London, 1954), and *The Court and the Country* (London, 1969). It is therefore with a sense of excitement that one picks up his new two volume study of early modern revolution. Alas, where *The Court and the Country* was a delight to read, this new work is not. This is primarily because the earlier work had a novel thesis to argue, a thesis born of an intimate acquaintance with primary sources. This new work is very much a summary of secondary authorities, a summary which lacks, unlike a survey such as Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, an overarching thesis which might give point and purpose to the particular examples.

Zagorin's purpose is to undertake a comparative study of revolutions in the early modern period. There is nothing new about this project: it brings to mind immediately Merriman's *Six Contemporaneous Revolutions* (Oxford, 1938), Forster and Greene's *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, and Elliott's classic essay, "Revolution and Continuity in Early Modern Europe" (*Past and Present*, no. 42). The problem with such projects is that they tend to be involved in comparing dissimilar phenomena: until recently only Elliott had successfully bypassed this problem by taking as his starting point the common culture of the European ruling classes, a culture which lacked any conception of "revolution" in our sense of the term, which stressed traditional and collective rights, which could see revolt

only as a means to restore the virtues of the past, not as a method to inaugurate the glories of the future. Elliott's argument does not fully account for the English case, but at least it does identify genuine similarities between a range of apparently contrasting revolts.

Most recently this difficulty has been overcome to a surprising degree in a book which evidently appeared too late to be consulted by Zagorin, Yves-Marie Bercé's *Révoltes et Révolutions dans l'Europe moderne* (Paris, 1980). Bercé's book is lively, entertaining and provocative. Moreover, in the space of 250 pages, he manages to cover a longer chronological and wider geographical span than Zagorin, for Bercé extends his range from 1500 to 1800 and crisscrosses the length and breadth of Europe, where Zagorin confines himself to England, France and Spain, with the German Peasants' Revolt thrown in for good measure. Two things perhaps particularly account for Bercé's success. The first is that, like Elliott, he makes skillful use of the accounts of cosmopolitan contemporaries, such as Naudé and Botero, ennabling us to see revolts and revolutions through their own eyes. The second is that he has an eye for the illuminating detail which serves to link the world of revolt to the world of everyday life. Thus he seizes in passing on the trades of butcher and tanner: trades which inure men to the sight of blood and require the daily employment of cold steel. Butchers and tanners are generally, despite their relative wealth, relegated to a low social status. In civic ceremonies their guilds are placed last in the order of precedence. They are forced to marry within their trades, for outsiders shy away from their advances. Is it surprising that they often provide leaders, both for religious riots and peasant revolts? Arguments of this sort are suggestive because they cry out to be localised in time and space. Bercé could have gone back in time and noted the central role of the butchers in the Sienese revolt of 1318. But could he have found any revolutionary butchers in England? And if not, why not?

Bercé overcomes the difficulties of his subject to a remarkable extent. Others have sensibly chosen more limited subjects: one thinks of Mousnier's *Peasant Revolts* or the volume edited by Pocock on *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*. Zagorin, unfortunately, fails to find either a coherent subject, or a suggestive way of treating diversity. At fault is, in part at least, Zagorin's definition of revolution as "any attempt by subordinate groups through the use of violence to bring about (1) a change of government or its policy, (2) a change of regime, or (3) a change of society, whether this attempt is justified by reference to past conditions, or to an as yet unattained future ideal." (I, p. 17). This definition includes within its scope not only *coups d'état* and rebellions, but almost any extensive movement of social protest:

revolution shades imperceptibly into riot. The consequence is to include within the category of revolution movements which had no intention of seizing state power, no intention of transforming the social order, and no prospect of success. It seems to me that some crucial distinctions are blurred by such a definition, but Professor Zagorin would not agree: "The attempt to distinguish revolution from rebellion . . . is misconceived because it is based on a logical blunder or category mistake. It would distinguish the whole from one of its parts (and an ill-defined part at that), as one might try, for example, to distinguish violence from war or mammals from whales" (I, p. 24). This, however, is to misrepresent the problem. The question is properly whether revolution is a generic category like violence or a specific category like war: the danger of Zagorin's formulation is that it could lead one to conflate war into violence and whales into mammals, blurring the important differences between man and a mouse.

Zagorin seeks to overcome this problem by introducing a number of species within the genus of revolution: viz. agrarian rebellion, urban rebellion, provincial rebellion, and revolutionary civil war. However he is unable to avoid paying his respects to a more traditional concept of what constitutes a revolution: not only does the word appear in the definition of his last species, but the book ends with an invocation of the French revolution, whose paradigmatic status he had begun by denying, which is presented as the first revolution which had consciously seen itself as constructing a new order, symbolised by its restarting of the historical clock at the Year One. Here we are back with a view of revolution which stresses the intentions of political agents. Early on Zagorin dismisses John Dunn's claim that "Revolution is an actors' concept, not a purely external, naturalistic identification", and one can see that he has an interest in doing so, for it is a claim which could lead one, following Elliott, to deny the existence of any early modern revolutions. This would be no bad thing if it encouraged the recognition that the past is different from the present, and that history cannot be telescoped into the world of contemporary political science.

Zagorin, of course, is an historian, and while he seeks an avowedly ahistorical definition of revolution, he is yet concerned to stress the differences between past and present. Crucially, early modern societies were societies of orders, not classes. Consequently Marxist theories of class struggle are totally inapplicable to early modern revolts and revolutions. Zagorin himself in his preface identifies his recurring attacks on Marxism as one of his book's most striking characteristics. Unfortunately on occasion this leads him either to distort or else to directly deny the evidence. It is instructive to compare his account of

the Peasants' Revolt in Germany or the revolt of Naples in 1647 with those of Bercé. Both revolts were, it seems clear, responses to an aggressive feudal reaction, despite Zagorin's attempts to suggest the contrary. One feels that on occasions such as these Zagorin's arguments are guided not by the evidence but by his determination to refute Marxism, and one is driven to conclude that at times anti-Marxists can be as doctrinaire as any of their opponents.

Zagorin's book covers a vast territory. Since it lacks an overarching argument of compelling strength it will be most valuable neither for its general approach to the problem of early modern revolution, nor for its typology, but for its account of individual revolts and revolutions. Of these the most interesting is the account of the English Civil War, to which Zagorin devotes most space, both because it has been most intensively studied, and because it of all early modern political conflicts comes nearest to being a true revolution. As Zagorin himself puts it: "The English revolution of 1640-60 in its more radical manifestations had come closest to the achievement of an ideology welding past and future and looking toward the establishment of a future new order on universal principles of natural rights." (II, p. 224). Symptomatically, this is the only "revolution" to be called as much in Zagorin's table of contents.

Why did the English in the mid-seventeenth century so remarkably anticipate the rest of Europe in seeking to transform their political order in the name of universal natural rights? Zagorin is unable to tackle this question head on, because it involves accepting the paradigmatic character of the French Revolution. But it is, it seems to me, a question of great importance, and one which has largely been ignored by recent "revisionist" scholars, whether historians of parliament or of the county communities, whose arguments Zagorin, no doubt justifiably, but somewhat contemptuously, rejects. Nor is it a question which can be answered, as Professor Hexter seems to believe, primarily by reference to the history of parliament.

The beginnings of an answer to this question are to be found in some of the "peculiarities of the English" (to adopt Edward Thompson's phrase) of which Zagorin himself takes note. In the first place England was, for governmental purposes, highly unified. An index of this is the fact that in Zagorin's period there was not a single urban rebellion in England, and only one provincial revolt whose objectives were particularist rather than national: the one exception being the Prayer Book revolt of 1549, which was in part a rebellion of Cornish speakers against the imposition of an English-language prayer-book. As Zagorin points out, the English ruling establishment shared a common education at

Oxford and Cambridge and the Inns of Court, and a common social life in London.

Secondly, although the English polity was unified, and English kings laid claim to an absolute prerogative, English rulers were handicapped by their inability to tax without consent. It was greatly to their disadvantage that the English gentry and aristocracy were themselves taxpayers and lacked many of the legally defined privileges enjoyed by their continental counterparts, so that they were consequently quick to identify the nation's interests with their own. Despite this, and despite the fact that parliament was not organised on the basis of orders and Estates, Zagorin wants to insist that England was a society of orders, like France or Spain, not a class society. It is true that the right to call oneself "gentleman" in England was technically hereditary, but Sir Thomas Smith, whom Zagorin quotes, describes the real situation perfectly clearly: "gentlemen ... be made good cheape ... For whosoever ... can live idly and without manual labour, and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman ... shall be taken for a gentleman." It was possible to buy patents of nobility elsewhere in Europe, but nowhere else could one obtain gentility "good cheape", and nowhere else did it carry with it so few advantages (seigneurial jurisdiction being of limited value and tax-exemption supposedly non-existent) or so few restrictions, for English gentlemen were free to invest in trade, and English agriculture was more commercialised than any other in Europe, after the Dutch.

Just as Zagorin fails to fully draw the contrast between the English and other European nobilities, so he fails to stress the weakness of the English state, a weakness which derived above all from its inadequate tax revenue. In the first place, the monarchy had to all intents and purposes no army, a side effect of which was that English gentlemen were by and large amateurs when it came to military matters. Secondly it had only the smallest of professional bureaucracies, being dependent in large part upon the voluntary assistance of J.P.s, sherrifs and other unpaid and amateur administrators. In England there was no large class of office-holders because the sale of office had never been a source of government finance, and because office provided neither nobility nor exemption from taxation. Against this peculiarly weak government stood a parliament which was, as Zagorin states, "the most representative body of its kind in Europe". Nevertheless, he fails to stress the extent to which parliament was the representative not just (as he puts it) of the realm, but also of the people: in disputed borough elections the House of Commons had developed a clear policy of extending the vote to almost every adult male, laying the foundation for Leveller arguments on the franchise.

Finally, while considering these institutional factors which facilitated revolution, it is important to give consideration to the peculiarities of the English legal system. Lilburne's revolutionary career centered on the defence of the legal rights of free-born Englishmen. What were those rights? Above all the right to trial by jury, a peculiarly English practice, and secondly, the right not to incriminate oneself. Lilburne's view of these rights was a novel one, for he maintained that the jury was the judge of law as well as fact, and his claim that he should not be required to testify against himself was without solid precedent. It was however a claim which came easily in a country in which judicial torture had never been allowed, for it was a bold extension of the right not to be "put to the question", as subjection to torture was euphemistically termed. Armed with these two principles Lilburne could defy not only Star Chamber, but also both Houses of Parliament, the highest courts in the land.

We might summarise these points by saying that England was a precocious nation state, with an exceptionally weak governmental apparatus, an embryonic system of universal legal rights, and a social order which was closer to that of a society of classes than to that of a society of orders. These factors go a long way towards explaining the fact that the English Civil War was so nearly a true "revolution". Was it also, perhaps, a class conflict? Zagorin is emphatic it was not: it had indeed no social causes. The arguments of Lawrence Stone and others are dismissed with the statement that "it is fairly apparent that English society in the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries remained fundamentally stable amid the changes it experienced: It certainly suffered no significant structural modifications or displacements, nor any disruptive innovations, to sow the seeds for the assault upon the Stuart monarchy." (II, p. 138) As a natural consequence there was "no preponderant socioeconomic differentiation" separating the two sides which fought the Civil War.

The last three decades have certainly seen repeated, and in many respects successful, attacks upon Tawney's account of the expropriation of the peasantry and the rise of the gentry, and upon Christopher Hill's contention that the Civil War was fought between "feudal" and "bourgeois" forces. But the results of more extensive research have not led, as Zagorin seems to imagine, to the conclusion that English society was essentially static. Margaret Spufford, Joan Thirsk, and Alan Everitt have shown that English society was being rapidly polarised in two directions. In the first place, in arable areas the peasantry were disappearing, if not as a consequence of the legal authority of landlords, then as a consequence of economic pressures. The result of this was an increasingly polarised village society, in which a growing army

of wage-workers faced a rising class of yeomen and minor gentry. Wage-workers, however, had little political (or, as Baxter lamented, religious) independence. A more important source of radicalism was the increasing polarisation of the country on geographical lines. For while arable areas evolved in one direction, pastoral areas developed quite differently. It was they who absorbed the rapidly increasing population, providing employment in the rural industries which supplied an increasingly commercialised society, and thus enabling the peasantry to maintain small plots of land, often enclosed from the waste or common, and leaving them with a large measure of political and religious freedom. Contemporaries such as Aubrey were convinced that such areas were the bedrock of parliamentary support, and a similar case has been made by scholars such as Brian Manning, Christopher Hill, and, most recently, David Underdown.

Was the Civil War a conflict between two different types of rural society? The first Civil War was of course not a conflict of this sort in its inception. The two sides which faced each other in 1642 were socially very similar, although they differed markedly in their perception of the social order. Convinced that it was under threat, men like Dering and Falkland abandoned their religious principles in order to defend episcopacy as the embodiment of social order, while the Parliamentary leaders such as Pym were happy to rely upon the support of the unruly London mob.

It matters a great deal, however, whether one is trying to explain the revolution of 1640-2, the bloodless constitutional revolution, or the revolution of 1645-9, the New Model Army's revolution. Zagorin, for example, states that both sides were "led by aristocratic elites". This is true, of course, of the early stages of the conflict. But the Self-Denying Ordinance, which opened the way to the radicalization of the revolution, expelled the aristocracy from positions of military command under the parliament, and the Commonwealth later went on to abolish the House of Lords. Meanwhile the political leadership in the counties had increasingly been taken out of the hands of the old established gentry families and had been seized by men of newer wealth or lesser fortune. At the same time too parliament had come to be more and more dependent upon its cavalry rather than its infantry: - the former volunteers, better paid, often of better fortune; the latter conscripts, ill-paid and fed, drawn from the landless classes and quick to desert. Finally of course this same period saw the emergence of the Leveller movement—for surely, despite recent revisionist claims, it was a movement, and one of some significance. It was the Levellers together with the army agitators who made the English Civil War into a revolution, both by laying claim to inalienable natural rights and by

pushing Cromwell forward towards the execution of the king and the establishment of a republic. Historians, it is true, have managed to identify a few "gentlemen" Levellers, and the Levellers had the sympathy of a few men of standing, such as Colonel Hutchinson. But this need not surprise us: there were aristocrats who supported the French Revolution. It was not the gentlemen on whose behalf the Levellers spoke, even if they were Levellers of the right, such as Lilburne; even less if they were Levellers of the left, such as Walwyn. It is this radical revolution of 1645-9 which will, it seems to me, remain inexplicable without reference to social tension and social conflict and to the emergence of a new class of "masterless men".

If the English Civil War came close to being a true revolution perhaps this was in part because society's growing dependence upon the impersonal forces of the market (which, as Joan Thirsk and Joyce Appleby have shown, contemporaries had progressed remarkably far towards analysing) gave new legitimacy to claims, not only to freedom of trade, but also to freedom of thought and religious and political expression. Adam Smith, of course, believed that there was a natural connection between these freedoms, but so did the men of the English revolution: Henry Robinson, for example, defended freedom of religion as an encouragement to trading prosperity. Perhaps, as Marxists would say, it is no coincidence that Milton's *Areopagitica* argues against religious and political censorship in terms which could also be employed to defend freedom of trade against guild restrictions and government monopolies. A new vision of the market as regulated by the wishes of vast numbers of independent, interdependent consumers could easily be extended to demand a democratic political order and a right to freedom of conscience. Only in England and Holland, after all, were people willing to defend the notion of a free market in ideas.

Zagorin is not to be blamed if questions such as these lie aside from his main area of concern. But he is culpable, I would argue, in having presented the English revolution as if it were a battle merely of arguments and armies, with no bearing upon daily life and few roots in the social circumstances of the times. He is culpable, in short, for having given us an account of early modern revolts and rebellions, under the guise of a history of revolution, when he could have offered us an account of the first modern revolution, which would have required an analysis of the peculiarities of the English. After all, it is not only hindsight that the English revolution appears as an event without parallel in its own day. Of the execution of the king, the Venetian ambassador wrote, "history affords no example of the like." But some at least of the English revolutionaries believed that history was about to change. Clarendon, then Edward Hyde, wrote from Spain in 1651:

"That you may see how brave and open dealing men your friends of the new commonwealth are, Blake, at his late being at Cadiz, said openly, that Monarchy is a kind of Government the world is wary of: that it is past in England, going in France, and that it must get out of Spain with more gravity, but in ten years it would be determined there likewise." Blake was wrong to think that circumstances in England, France and Spain were similar; but he was right to be convinced that the English revolution was the first, but not the last, event of its kind.