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1
Introduction: Pasts and Presents

The danger of jettisoning the past. Inapplicable modes of thought. The divorce from context. Historians and the devaluation of the democratic tradition.

This volume seeks to describe how ordinary people in the English localities in the first half of the seventeenth century could set a value on the services of parliament which heralded a change in the political position of the representative assembly. The evidences and characters relate to two distinctive regions of the kingdom – the West Country (with particular reference to Devon and Somerset) and the East Midland county of Nottinghamshire. There is also a thematic core in the tracing of concepts of representation. Thus, in various ways a combination of balance and focus is attempted. The study describes the purposes for which the people of these areas and their representatives sought to use parliament, the perspective in which they perceived their parliamentary interests, and the significance of their attempts to obtain a documentary record of parliament's activities and powers and maintain the facility of parliamentary services. It suggests a reciprocal relationship between locality and centre and between the economic and the political spheres. It illustrates the discourse through which a growing public estimation of the usefulness of representative rights was expressed, and on the basis of which people came to project an enhanced political role for parliament. Ultimately, it reveals the kind of positive momentum that underlay the development of parliamentary institutions.

This might seem an unsurprising line of approach, but in fact it is an interpretation of the period which runs counter to the most powerful

"revisionist" trends of recent historical writing, which have tended to deny that there was any definite motive behind the first steps towards a representative polity. This study thus has more in common with what may be called the "progressive" views, which were the dominant influences up to the middle of the twentieth century, until the revisionist challenge was launched some three decades ago. The most enduring strand in traditional history was the "Whig" interpretation, which was the prevailing orthodoxy for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Whig thesis held in essence that the disputes of the seventeenth century did reflect an inclination for constitutional change and the establishment of a representative element in political affairs. It was also assumed that this could be seen as progress towards a more enlightened form of government. It was an assessment which the reading public seemed to share. The Whig interpretation was notable for its broad popular reception, as well as its academic authority.[1] In the circumstances of the Second World War, it was aptly characterised as an alliance between the British people and their history,[2] resting ultimately on the notion that parliamentary institutions had been fought for in the seventeenth century, and were worth defending now in the face of an assault from an extreme, anti-pluralist regime. It is true that the Whig school sometimes exhibited its own brand of chauvinism in the supposition of a special inclination to liberty in the Anglo-Saxon character, and this nationalistic aspect of its appeal should be treated with caution. It would also be extremely unwise to assume that progress is in any sense inevitable. But neither should we allow the over-reaction of some modern historians to create the impression that any history of traditions is to be distrusted, as a "drums and trumpets" affair. One thing at least should make us hesitate before discarding the Whig view – it underpinned a democratic perspective, and in so doing, gave the study of history an unusual degree of constructive force.

Ironically, while the Whig interpretation has been losing its historical status, it seems to have been vindicated geographically. The second half of the twentieth century has seen the widespread supplanting of totalitarian and imperial regimes by representative governments of some kind. And like the Whigs, modern day liberal opinion would see this as progress towards the only really legitimate form of polity. This may seem a contradiction in view of the revisionist tendency to deny a similarly positive momentum in earlier periods. But democratic concepts have always been open to selective application in accordance with the changing opportunities and dangers, theoretical or practical, for the forces of hegemony in the West. Traditional liberalism could still

define itself in opposition to the autocracies of the past. But modern liberals, facing different challenges, have usually preferred to think that the personal monarchies of the seventeenth century were quite acceptable to their people, since to suppose otherwise would seem to support the revolutionary ideas of Marxist history, which became prominent in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, it can be suggested that Whig constitutionalism was not the revisionists' principal target. It was rather the victim of collateral damage. For it was really the Marxist view of progress (as determined by the force of the economic dimension, and leading, in crude summary, to the dictatorship of the proletariat) that revisionists wanted to rebut. And since Marxism could comfortably accommodate the "rise of parliament" in seventeenth-century England as the bourgeois stage of the revolutionary process, the revisionists had to reject any such notion. Thus, paradoxically, it was in the liberal pursuit of a dispute with twentieth-century totalitarianism that a long accepted and constructive view of our parliamentary past was in danger of being jettisoned. This perhaps goes some way to explain the peculiar willingness of modern historians to assume a negative attitude towards the development of parliamentary institutions.

It is part of the contention of this study that our view of parliamentary history has been distorted by a "technical" failure to clarify or disentangle the balance of relationship between past and present. The illusion has grown that when we reject a particular interpretation as the product of theory, we free ourselves of bias; whereas in truth we may be burying it deeper. The way that we think about the present always reflects and influences our opinion of the past, and what we hope the past will become. An aversion to the Marxist model may not have been the only factor prejudicing the revisionist view. It may also have been a reaction against the prospect of "real" or direct democracy, which seemed to be a serious possibility for a while in the 1960s. It is certainly likely that the negative assumptions of recent historians have contributed something to our increasingly neglectful or cynical attitude towards the democratic practices that we do possess. For even as the representative theory is projected across the globe, the domestic evaluation of the parliamentary form appears to have reached an all-time low. The peak of voter involvement was in 1950, when the general election turnout was 83.9 per cent. There was then a gradual though uneven falling away, and a dramatic dip to 59.4 per cent in 2001. It was a sharp enough drop to indicate a step-change in the degree of importance that people attached to representative democracy. This seemed to be confirmed in 2005, when despite

the wider resort to easily abused forms of postal voting, the figure rose only to 61.4 per cent.

So how far is this kind of disengagement from parliamentary traditions associated with fading historical perceptions? Historians clearly do have an important role to play in these matters. Our sense of the value of political institutions as a developing process must depend in large part on a historical perspective. Equally, there is no doubt that, in a general sense, this dimension has been seriously undermined in recent years. Eric Hobsbawm has pinpointed one of the most "characteristic and eerie phenomena" of the last few decades – what he calls "the destruction of the past". He sees a danger that people now grow up "in a sort of permanent present, lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in".[3] It is a very troubling insight, all the more so because permanent is probably not quite the right word. For the same kind of insouciance that is dividing us from a lively appreciation of the past may also be denying us a viable future.

In part we are contending with the pace of technological change, which is making the modern way of life rather different from anything that has gone before, with forms of culture and communication so self-contained that history might cease to appear relevant. But this of course is a reason for reinforcing our consciousness of the past, and maintaining an awareness of the basic conditions on which human life still depends. The increasingly critical problem of sustaining the viability of the natural environment is the most obvious way in which the study of history has become peculiarly urgent. Historians ought to be performing a crucial task by highlighting these relationships. Instead, again for the largely tangential reason of its association with Marxism, they have neglected the concept of connection to an economic or ecological context.

Eric Hobsbawm represents a more inclusive approach. To counteract the problem of the permanent present, he stresses that historians need to be "more than simply chroniclers, remembrancers and compilers", and that the aim should be to explain *why* things happen, and how they are linked together.[4] To an objective view, it might seem very evident that the idea of chronological linkage must constitute the essential working character of history. One might suppose that it could not be otherwise. Yet this is precisely what has been lost. In the teaching context, the problem has been exacerbated by the trend to modular courses, which encourage a focus on isolated topics at the expense of a broader perspective. But of greatest concern again is the extent to which historians themselves have directly contributed to the diminishing relevance

of the subject. Hobsbawm is something of an exception in his willingness to see the past in terms of a connection with the present. Many of the most influential historians of recent decades have specifically set out to do the opposite. They have assumed that scholars have the capacity and obligation to look at the past as a discrete factual entity, completely without reference to the present. This is indeed the chosen methodological basis of modern revisionist history. It has proved surprisingly influential, and some of its main tenets have gone largely unchallenged.

It may also have proved very damaging. To deliberately separate past and present obviously reduces our ability to *use* historical understanding for practical benefit. And this has particular implications in the modern context, where a serious environmental imbalance seems to have arisen from a failure to monitor the results of our actions. Dis-applied history is the background motif for a generation which actually seems incapable of conceiving a rational response to the ecological endgame that threatens it. If we are without the means of adjusting our lifestyle, or recognising a link between cause and effect, this is in part because we have been deprived of the model for evaluating change. Our capacity to think in terms of causation has been discouraged by the very discipline that ought to promote it. A historical perspective should offer the facility of identifying trends and tensions, balances and connections, over the course of time. But the modern historical approach has favoured a kind of chronological segregation. This at the very least has failed to help with the difficulty we have in thinking outside the immediate dimension. Our near-sighted view of time is encapsulated in the way that we define and defend our prospects in the short term, even though it may be destroying our prospects of long-term survival. Part of the conceptual restriction is our dependence on "mechanical" modes of thought. At the level of specific technological ingenuity our powers are undoubted. They have developed to the stage where we are in the process of altering the climatic conditions of the planet. But we appear to lack the general or rounded intelligence to adapt when we see the harm done. And once again, empirical methods in history reflect the same limitations. Our problems are compounded when historians embrace an artificial and restrictive concept of precise knowledge, and discard the kind of inclusive, connected forms of analysis that are obviously required.

In a historiographical sense, the negative and disintegrative effect can be quickly illustrated. At the end of the 1960s the revisionists began to develop an assault on Whig and Marxist interpretations, seeking to rebut the idea that there was any positive or popular impetus for

the advancement of parliament in the seventeenth century.[5] Although they did not actually deny that parliament *had* acquired a significantly enhanced political position by the end of that century, they explained it in terms of accident rather than design – the unlooked for result of extraneous circumstances. At the risk of caricature, the "revised" seventeenth century may be outlined as follows. There was no constitutional ambition in parliamentarianism. It was only the Bishop's wars with Scotland that brought parliament to the front of the political stage in 1640 – and if for a time the Commons became the focus of social and political revolution, this was merely "functional" radicalism, induced by the pressure of events or by religious motivations. By the same token, the Restoration simply returned the nation to a previously satisfied state of personal monarchy; and although there was another revolution in 1688, this had more to do with the foreign-policy needs of William of Orange than the domestic demands of the English political nation. Finally, although parliament had, in the event, acquired a permanent place at the centre of affairs and a position of residual sovereignty by 1700, this was only because the financial pressures of the wars of the 1690s obliged the new king to accept the Commons as a necessary feature of government. The kingdom had thus taken a definite but, in revisionist terms, unintentional step towards a representative form of polity.

The revisionist view has not gone entirely unchallenged. In the 1990s, "counter-revisionists" began to react against some aspects of the interpretation, and sought to revive the idea that there *was* constitutional tension and conflict between crown and parliament in the early seventeenth century.[6] But they did not treat this as a basis for radicalism, or a platform for progressive political demands in 1640. They still tended to interpret the struggle for parliamentary liberties in a conservative light, as a defence or confirmation of *existing* liberties, rather than an impetus for change. In other words, they did not really confront the real force of the revisionist proposition that the further development of parliament was essentially negative or accidental.[7]

The difficulty of breaking away from this view arises in part from the methodological constraints that the revisionists managed to impose. They condemned Whig historians for employing the mirror of "hindsight", and allowing a sentimental attachment to modern parliamentary institutions to delude them into thinking that the people of the seventeenth century were working towards that end. The revisionists claimed that, by contrast, their own conclusions were based on studying the period purely in the light of its own evidences. No generation of historians had ever sought to discredit another in quite the same

comprehensive fashion, or put so much weight on the assertion of empirical method. It might have been thought that the stance was somewhat exposed. For even a cursory consideration indicates that the methodological claim is not a realistic one. A scientist friend, when told that historians seemed to believe that they could look at the past empirically, said simply – "but how can that possibly be?" He meant that the study of history is by definition incapable of satisfying the basic requirements of empirical practice – that is, observation and experiment. Historical empiricism can thus be seen as an anomaly in terms of concepts of knowledge. We can justifiably suggest that it only appears as a viable proposition where there is a powerful vested interest in wishing it to be so.

The motives did of course include an element of politics. As E.H. Carr noted, those who levelled the charge of "determinism" could have a specifically subjective intent, seeking to discount in advance historical developments which they preferred not to recognise.[8] Revisionists could use empiricist assumptions to dismiss as preconceived the interpretations that they found politically unwelcome. Thus the invocation of the empirical mode often concealed an especially sharp polemical aim. But there were also more neutral, cultural factors that tended to encourage the trend to empiricism. Perhaps most important was the premium that modern society places on scientific and professional status. Michel Foucault saw it as a change in the dominant character of intellectual activity. After the middle of the twentieth century, the "universal" intellectual (who sought to counter-pose the idea of justice against power and the abuse of wealth) was supplanted by the "specific" intellectual, whose work emphasised instead "a direct and local relationship to scientific knowledge".[9] So historians began to favour the restricted and technical rather than the evaluative forms of analysis.

There were strong professional temptations for historians to seek to associate themselves with the scientific axiom of studying the physical character of things as they are. In the context of the natural sciences this is a valid definition and a realistic aspiration. In the historical field the principle can be stated with the same simple power, and purely as a sound-byte, it may seem unexceptionable. Moreover, the idea of accumulating and analysing factual information can be presented as a convenient, practical modus operandi – something that is much more difficult to formulate if the real limitations of the historical discourse are taken into account. Historians have therefore found it all too easy to forget that the empirical mode has no true application in their own discipline. The revisionist trend brought with it a tendency to act as if

historical method was no longer problematic, and empiricism could be unreservedly embraced as the true, objective way. Even those who do not fully share revisionist interpretations are still happy to assert that the Whig "error" has been eliminated, and each historical period is now studied purely in its own light.[10] Thus most historians have come to operate under the false prospectus of looking at the past "as it was". A rare doubting voice, Simon Schama, once pointed out that the quality of distance or objectivity is one of those "unattainable values in which historians have put so much faith".[11] The word faith does indeed apply here perhaps more literally than he intended. It is both striking and unsurprising that the empirical mode has usually been articulated as a kind of dogma – something that was not really open to discussion. It is a revealing paradox that the force of historical empiricism rests on its assertion as an idea, rather than its factual feasibility.

The limits of empiricism

We can suggest then that to define the discipline on the basis of an empirical premise is a rather bigger error than anything of which the Whigs may have been guilty. Partiality is inherent and inevitable in every aspect of historical study, and to specifically proceed as if it can be otherwise adds a new level of delusion, and often precludes the more open, balanced insights that we can obtain. This chapter seeks to outline the variety of ways in which empirical practice presents the *appearance* of fact, rather than the reality. And it indicates that in focusing and depending on an assumption of knowledge that is not truly valid, we tend to neglect the more consistent and constructive processes of thought that are available.

The conceptual weaknesses of empiricism in history have often been recognised, though usually by writers from outside the profession. E.H. Carr, whose background was in politics and journalism rather than academic history, said simply that it was a "preposterous fallacy" to work on the basis that historians really can act as objective observers reflecting autonomous evidences.[12] "Post-modern" theorists, though operating in rather different perspectives from Carr, would share his general doubts about the possibility of applying empirical principles in the field of history. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, historical empiricism is a sleight of hand, whereby from within the discourse historians refer to their evidence as if it were still outside the discourse.[13]

The force of this logic has not deterred historians from attempting formal justifications of empiricism, though they have relied heavily on

that capacity for simple assertion, which is the real tactical strength of the mode. The best known such defence, by the leading revisionist Geoffrey Elton, acknowledged the inevitable problem of selectivity which confronts all historians, but suggested that, somehow, this can be overcome by rigorous methods of scholarship, making sure that all the evidence is scrutinised, and, of course, looking at the past "in its own right".[14] This plainly sidestepped the real difficulty that even when "all" the evidence has been gathered in, it remains nothing more than fragmentary hints of the actual character of the past. The circumstances are not in any case of a nature that could ever be reduced to fact in the way that empiricism presupposes. The past is only given substantial or coherent form by the intervention of historians, with all their professional, personal and political partialities.

A more recent survey of historical theory by Richard Evans acknowledges the inadequacy of Elton's position, but at the same time rejects the post-modernist view that the writing of history is essentially no different from the writing of fiction. This is a difficult circle to square. Evans says that the writers who have railed against "documentary fetishism" have been wrong to suppose that Elton's assumptions are a universal orthodoxy among political historians.[15] Yet, in a disappointing conclusion, he comes close to simply reaffirming Elton's stance. He asserts that history *is* an empirical discipline, and that by adopting an approach that is "thorough" and "scrupulous", the historian is capable of producing "a reconstruction of past reality" that can be regarded as "true". Then he adds, "even if the truth is our own".[16] The post-modernists could be forgiven for thinking that their case had been made for them.

It has generally, and perhaps understandably, been difficult for historians to chart a middle way between the desire to be factual and the acknowledgement of partiality. The fallback position has been the restatement of the empirical goal, even when the confusions and contradictions are most glaring. Thus, the counter-revisionist Ann Hughes can berate her opponents for not *admitting* their anti-Marxist and anti-sixties prejudices, while almost in the same breath she repeats the mantra that historians ought to try to keep their prejudices *out* of their work.[17] In this instance the revisionists have logic on their side, they are keeping their prejudices out of their work in the only way possible, by pretending that they do not have them. Another prominent counter-revisionist, Tom Cogswell, specifically accepts the revisionist insistence that they can only be answered "evidence with evidence", neither side seeming to notice a tension between the assumption of different polemical positions and the supposition of a common empiricist method.[18] A great

friend in the historical profession (who I hope will remain so even after the telling of this anecdote) once came to me in some dismay after a quarrel with his editor. They had reached completely opposite conclusions from a particular piece of evidence. "But my opinion is just as valid as his," insisted my friend, "I mean, we are all empiricists now, aren't we?"

The tale seems to reveal the character of historical empiricism as a flag of convenience rather than a true state. The inner contradiction is manifest. Historians claim to be looking at the past as it was, even while in the process of reconstructing it to what must necessarily be their own design. This also indicates the practical dangers and disadvantages of proceeding under the misapprehension of objectivity. We are led into the trap of simply accumulating studies as if they are part of a pure historical knowledge, when what we really require is a framework of analysis which recognises that they are not. Empirical practice prescribes a rigorous attention to particulars, as if this guarantees a factual result. But since the evidences and their treatments are endlessly variable and fragmented, a restrictive viewpoint actually creates an environment in which every kind of prejudice and spin can find refuge. There is thus a stage at which an exclusively close focus becomes counter-productive in its own terms, and we face the depressing prospect that the more work that is done, the greater the confusion becomes – which is the very opposite of what empiricism is supposed to promise.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the state of writing on the history of the English Revolution. Civil War scholars notoriously conduct ferocious personal feuds over differences of interpretation, finding common ground only in the somewhat incongruous claim to empirical method. The result seems to defy synthesis. Norah Carlin has made a recent and perhaps the best and most clear-sighted attempt to chart a way through the labyrinth of seventeenth-century historiography. She acknowledges that "certainty can never be achieved", but nevertheless believes that historians can "continually try to improve or refine our historical studies". In truth, however, her survey of the field indicates that although we may well be refining the period in terms of dissecting it into smaller and smaller pieces, we are getting steadily further away from refining it in terms of a clearer understanding. She notes that even among revisionists themselves there is no consensus. She describes some interpretations as "wishful thinking", and believes that others, though persistently influential, "can only be sustained by ignoring most of what went on in the Long Parliament".[19]

What is of special interest here is the way that the empirical mode actually encourages and consolidates blinkered interpretations. For the anomaly is that all such theories march under the banner of detailed, objective scholarship. They are in fact sustained by the license to assume an empirical perspective, without the need to satisfy any broader requirement of balance and logic. There is a danger that we rest content with the semblance of factual authority created by the use of documentary sources, and a close reference to other such analyses. Thus too often academic studies come to be evaluated not in terms of the actual, rational force of argument and evidence that they present, but rather on the basis of whether they *appear* to carry the weight and substance of empirical form. Paradoxically, the question of whether they do formally prove what they claim is often obscured. And the fact that there may be more general arguments, general connections, and general evidences that do hold water is discounted in favour of the illusion of depth. So the permutations and contradictions tend to proliferate. The irony is that once again historians are simply providing a justification for the post-modern relativist critique that historical writing can never be anything more than an interesting collection of equally valid (or invalid) subjectivities, with no independent worth as judgements of context or causation.

Broader perspectives

So the starting point for this study is the need to acknowledge the problem. It cannot be a valid perspective to proceed as if history is a matter of gathering all the specific evidence for objective assessment, when in truth none of the conditions necessary for that purpose can be fulfilled. The post-modernists are right to tell us that the discourse cannot properly aspire to empirical integrity, and they deserve a more substantial response than they have usually received. Ironically, it may be that historians have not been doing justice to their own cause, for it is possible to suggest that a more sustainable concept of objectivity can be attained by freeing ourselves from empirical assumptions. In fact, it may be more efficient to define the discipline from the other direction, that is, as a deductive exercise – taking general analyses, general evidences, general events and general connections as the guiding character of the subject.

The particularist focus of empiricism has imposed something of a barrier between the assumptions of scholarship and the deployment of broad, deductive reasoning. In a sense, they have come to be seen

as opposites. The historian's favoured self-image is as an expert in a restricted field of study, carving out "building blocks" of pure knowledge. The implication is that the blocks will simply flip into place, and fit together of their own accord. But this, of course, can never happen in actuality. It creates a structural illusion, like the film of a building demolition run backwards. The past does not reconstitute itself. Any notion of objectivity must take account of that condition.

Can we identify an approach that would avoid the mistaken assumption that particulars are going to add up automatically? An alternative balance would pay greater attention to the structures of argument through which cogent and coherent conclusions may be reached. It could be best characterised as a process of reasoned association. We would be asking how connections could be more clearly validated. We would be less inclined to give unquestioned authority to the weight of information, and more inclined to ask whether the conclusions fit with other circumstances. The most distinctive difference would be in the breadth of perspective. Context would be taken in its fullest (and perhaps truest) sense. The frame of reference would not be restricted to what could be presented as detailed and empirical, but would incorporate whatever could be regarded as related to the topic. The assumption would be that coherent judgements are best obtained by embracing an explicitly cohesive or inclusive view.

This study seeks to apply and substantiate that approach throughout. It highlights various instances where a restricted focus has produced interpretations noticeably out of line with other general evidence. One example central to the theme is the question of the political inclinations of seventeenth-century towns. Close research on specific urban localities has tended to emphasise the privileged status and conservative mindset of the leading merchant bodies.[20] This has become the consensus among historians. It is however in some degree of conflict with the known circumstance that the great majority of substantial towns supported parliament during the Civil War. This is probably as near as we can get to a historical fact – something which is of active and general significance, and which is not really in question. Yet most modern historians have been inclined to deflect the force of it and base their assessment on the particular ways in which towns can be seen as conservative. It illustrates how an empirical position can detract from a coherent view.

But to favour a wide lens is not to accept the distinction that is often made between general historical writing and research-based history. It is part of the intention here to challenge that contrast. This volume is indeed not above indulging in a little documentary fetishism on its own

account. It seeks to bring to light some important local sources which seemed in danger of going unnoticed. The study only diverges from the academic norm in the weight and precedence that it gives to more general factors. Chapters 2 and 3 offer an example of setting primary research against a background of broad evidence in a way that has not been usual. Here, the specific practical interests and initiatives of the constituencies are looked at in the light of the central development of the concept of sovereign representative legislation. The greatly enhanced technical status of parliamentary law and the greatly increased public demand for it are two of the most undoubted facts of the period. But their logical force has been minimised because they have usually been viewed in distinct compartments. This study takes the position that the significance of these matters can best be seen by elucidating the context that they shared.

All in all, we might be advised to put less trust in our building blocks, and consider an alternative construction industry analogy. It may be that the best working basis for historians is a sustained and extended framework of general evidence and associations. It has come to be supposed that the study of the particular is the only legitimate starting point, and that general history is a less authentic medium. It is here proposed that, on the contrary, a general perspective is the most genuine form of academic discipline available in historical discourse.

A more inclusive approach can also help to compensate for the inevitable unevenness in documentary survival rates. The problem of the inconsistencies in the range of evidence available shows the fallacy of assuming that a close and narrow focus will produce a true, balanced view. It will be seen, for instance, that little of the early evidence of local parliamentary initiatives comes from Nottinghamshire. This might have various explanations. It might have been because the county had different interests, or chose to pursue them in other ways. But of course it may also be because the kinds of sources from which this information is obtained in the West Country have simply not survived in the Midland county. And in fact this is very often the case. It thus becomes all the more important to include in our account the rather different kind of evidence that does exist – that is, references in central records, and the powerful, general statements later made by leading Nottinghamshire activists and representatives which bear on the same issue, but might not conventionally be considered in the same light.

The assumption is then that the full and unfettered use of general, coordinating and comparative perspectives provides the most effective check on the natural partialities of historians and their sources. This may

indeed offer a means by which the unavoidable political aspects of the subject can be actively involved in the process of historical reasoning. The identification of bias is usually presented in terms of study skills – encouraging an awareness of factors which may colour our assessment of the past. But this rightly critical stance should not lead us to suppose that there is an ideal, apolitical form of history. The real distortion lies in the concealment of our prejudices. There is no greater misapprehension than the frequently repeated assertion that the problem for historians is how to keep their opinions out of their work. On the contrary, the real problem for historians is how to engage their prejudices in an open and constructive manner. All historical judgements have political implications – that is their essential character. The task is to establish what is positive and plausible in our political relationship with the past. When we hide our opinions behind a claim to empirical rectitude, the exercise is doubly falsified. But if we acknowledge, with true honesty, our position within the discourse, it can only clarify our view of both past and present. Then the subjectivities inherent in historical study might even be brought into some degree of constructive resolution.

Reconnecting

Thus one advantage of adopting a more open perspective as the basis of historical objectivity is that it offers ways of dealing with the extra dimensions of the subject, the parts which empiricism fails to reach. For instance, it can at once be indicated how a deductive rather than a particularist approach may enable us to reinvolve the present in the historical equation, while nevertheless providing a *clearer* view of the historical evidences. Modern historians have been wrong to follow Elton in supposing that by directing ourselves to look at the past “in its own right” and avoid “hindsight” we necessarily obtain an objective view. Carr identified the specific danger of political subjectivity entailed in these empiricist claims. Parallel to this runs a basic, structural flaw. It is, of course, quite impossible to look at the past “in its own right” – because this is precisely what is no longer there. The injunction against hindsight becomes a means of creating the *impression* of looking at the past “as it was”, by the expedient of ruling out in advance any circumstance that may appear to be forward-looking. For it is in *not* seeing signs of the future that the empirical illusion is best maintained. This is to artificially discount a perfectly valid category of evidence, which might have real, constructive significance, and is surely the most debilitating error that historians can make. There is a tendency to circumvent the force of

such occurrences, and try to explain them away. Chapter 6 of this study describes a particular instance, where the denial of a forward-looking development has created a very misleading view of the past.

So the prospect of making history more relevant need not be regarded as a matter of drawing forced analogies between past and present. On the contrary, it may simply be a case of removing the arbitrary hard breaks which have been put in place under the influence of empiricist formulae. A central feature of this volume will be to challenge the various kinds of disconnection which have characterised revisionist history, and of which the dissociation between past and present is one. It should be said that this disjuncture is not restricted to the empiricists. Historians of various persuasions have found it advantageous to isolate "the past" as a convenient means of studying it, even those, like Michel Foucault, with a relatively unconventional view of the academic project. Foucault is in general terms to be numbered among the post-modernists, and would reject empiricism in as far as it involves a claim that the individual consciousness can establish a "truth" from the traces of history. Indeed, he has described more clearly than anyone how the concept of "truth" is in itself a form of power: the way that truth is defined, the very mechanisms and procedures by which it is pursued and sanctioned, inevitably serves the vested interests of status and position in the present. It is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces". There is always, as he says, a "regime of truth".[21]

Foucault brings out the full dimensions of subjective authority. But the clear understanding of the connection between discourse and power raises in even more direct form the question of how historians deal with their own very powerful presence in the text. The assumption of empirical objectivity is conclusively denied to us. But Foucault's own solution also involves in practice an element of attempting the impossible. We can readily applaud his intention to "dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself".[22] But ironically, this determination seems to produce its own very pronounced problems of selectivity. He favours a history of discontinuity, of divisions and limits, of other times, so out of phase as to be almost beyond comprehension. The particular interest of this idea to the study in hand is what it implies for our view of the balance of evidence. In one sense, Foucault is recognising and reflecting what he calls the dispersed or fragmented nature of the historical sources. But in another sense, like the empiricists, he is overlooking the *balance*. The great bulk of silent, unformed sources, which fill the gaps, and make up the hinterland of history, again seem

to go unacknowledged. Foucault uses the idea of separateness to define or select the past. Thus the archive is not to be seen as something which historians can recover for themselves, but rather as the process of its own functioning: "it is that which differentiates discourses . . . and specifies them in their own duration".[23] Similarly, in his work on penal systems he establishes his field of enquiry by tracking back until he finds a context which he can characterise by its sheer unfamiliarity to the present. Foucault has protested against the general perception of him as a historian of discontinuity.[24] But he accepts that he is suspicious of "smooth, continuist schemas of development", and that he prefers to focus on the significance of dramatic "transformations".[25] This study would not necessarily disagree with that position, only with the danger that we end up making arbitrary assumptions of "difference" as a way of separating out the past, and thus artificially preclude the possibility of causative relations between periods.

Thus the premise here is that the object or field of historical discipline, seen whole, must necessarily include the present, or the outcomes of the past. The empiricists (and Foucault in his own way) warn that we should not prejudge the past by seeing it as a preparation for what comes next. Yet of course the past is necessarily, *in some sense*, a preparation for what comes after it. We live today in the constant awareness that what we do now is a preparation for what will follow. Some of us fear that it may not be a very positive kind of preparation, and indeed that it may not lead to much of a future at all. But we know nevertheless that what we are doing, or failing to do now, will have paved the way for it. The course that such sequences took in the past is surely the essential topic of historical study and debate. To begin from the assumption that the past is not a preparation for the present is to deny ourselves the chance to draw rational and useful conclusions from our historical studies. It is also to defy the nature of chronological form.

It is indeed another paradox for empiricism that the outcomes of history, or what the past has *in fact* become, are all that can actually be experienced about it. To this extent, when we deliberately exclude these outcomes from the equation, we reject the only empirical knowledge of the subject that we possess. So how can we use our observations of what has actually happened? What we should not do is simply discount it, in the way that historians often seem to suggest, as if it can only mislead us about the reasons behind it. The nature of outcomes is a vital indicator of the balance of causes, and is often the only available source of light on hidden areas of history. Far from ignoring outcomes, we need to give full weight to their logical force. To take a relevant example, historians

have sought to illustrate the pitfalls of hindsight by warning that we should be careful not to suppose that republican sentiment was one of the causes of the Civil War because it emerged during the conflict. It is pointed out that republicanism is not in evidence before the war. On the surface this is true, and seems to present a powerful argument. But of course there are good reasons to suppose that such sentiments may have been submerged. We would hardly have expected to find people holding up banners proclaiming their republican beliefs. In other words, there is a danger of making a negative judgement because the evidence is not accessible. In fact, such developments tend to be submerged in more ways than one. We can never really *know* what were the deep socio-psychological preconditions that underlay the change in peoples' beliefs. But the outcome clearly implied a vigorous process of transition, and it is wrong to assume that nothing of the sort was taking place. In this sense, the fact that republican sentiment did appear during the Civil War may after all be a more accurate reflection of its status before the war than the supposition that it was not present in any shape because it was not visible to the naked eye. The following chapters offer various examples of the form that psychological precursors to republicanism might take – that is, the halfway stages between a free monarchy and a republic This kind of analysis may save us from the rather unlikely proposition that these things appear out of nowhere.

This is all to say that there is a more open, but connected perspective which makes it possible to take account of (or at least avoid excluding from our account) all the various elements of the historical balance: the present, the documented past and the vast areas which can never be reflected as factual evidence. It enables us to take a view which may be described as organic: or "of the whole". To suggest a fully integrated concept of history is not to propose eradicating the idea of difference. On the contrary, it may readily be supposed that *contrasts* will be among the most enlightening aspects of a broad comparative viewpoint. But it may at least avoid the kind of artificial disconnection to which the close focus of empirical practice lends itself. Just as this encouraged the dissociation of past and present, so it helped some historians to isolate the various elements of historical development in the period leading up to the Civil War. Thus, although contemporary commentators often noted the socio-economic aspects of Civil War allegiance, revisionists have specifically tried to exclude them from their analyses of causation. Anthony Fletcher, in his study of seventeenth-century Sussex, noted that Civil War divisions in the county did indeed correlate with differing economic contexts, but he nevertheless chose to assume

that the economy was just "the backcloth to the drama of religious and political disruption rather than the substance of the plot", thus quietly discounting the possibility of a causative connection.[26] Here again, the assumption rests on making an arbitrary separation of factors where in reality no line of division can be perceived. Similarly, the two senior revisionists, Geoffrey Elton and Conrad Russell, endeavoured to construct a definition of parliament's function based on a strict demarcation between the local and national perspectives. They asserted that parliament's proper role and perceived value was "to transact ordinary, minor public business", and that this was a different dimension from national politics, in which parliament was not regarded as having any kind of initiating or independent part to play.[27]

Counter-revisionist historians like Tom Cogswell and Mark Kennedy have looked again at the course of foreign policy in the 1620s and successfully reinstated the traditional view that in this respect people *were* looking to parliament to take a positive, initiating role in national affairs.[28] But they left intact the basic revisionist distinction between the national-political sphere and the local-economic sphere. A more penetrating counter-revisionism is found in the work of historians who have re-affirmed that there is substance in the link between parliamentarian allegiance and a "middling sort" of socio-economic context (again, as suggested by contemporaries), and concluded that this did in some sense make possible the Civil War and English Revolution. Thus local studies by Ann Hughes and Jill Dias have found that popular support for parliament depended on a lively, "industrialising" economic context.[29] And recently, Norah Carlin has endorsed social change theory as "an attempt to bring together the different strands of explanation", echoing Christopher Hill's thought about the "impossibility of shutting off 'religious', 'constitutional' and 'economic' causes of the Civil War". Accordingly, she "tends towards one thesis more than any other, that of the importance of the middling-sort as a catalyst which polarised the divisions over religion, politics and government". Their expanding strength acted as a powerful incentive and rationale for parliamentarianism.[30] The present study deals with the same kind of phenomenon from a slightly different angle, and suggests a yet more specific connection between the economic and the political spheres. It is argued below that the general estimation of parliament's importance grew in line with the local demand for its legislative and regulatory services in social and economic affairs. This can also be characterised as a "middling-sort" perspective, though it could be embraced by all sections of society. It was the basis on which people came to project an enhanced political role

for parliament, and it may be seen as the most significant underlying cause of the English Revolution.

This is not to propose a crude economic determinism, or reductionism of the kind of which Marxist history has sometimes been accused. To make the perfectly reasonable supposition that economic or geological factors play a fundamental and inescapable role in human affairs is not to say that this dictates a particular course of history. Nor is it to exclude other elements of motivation. The emphasis of twentieth-century philosophy on the field of linguistics has been useful in raising our awareness of the effects of systems of communication, which Marx rather tended to neglect. This study accords a prominent place to the realm of discourse, and perhaps even contributes something to reducing the role of the constituent subject, in favour of a more connected viewpoint. But it does not follow structuralist theory into that inner world where text is everything, and is credited with an internal dynamic so strong as to deny us any power to produce concrete or discrete meaning.[31] This volume assumes that, on the contrary, the sense of language, as of history, can be elucidated from the context in which it operates.

These pages examine the kind of structures through which the conventional categories of history could be associated. In this instance, the economic and political spheres were linked through a medium of ideas, in which the interplay between parliament's capacities in both fields was forged and reinforced. The discourse did not necessarily take the form of an explicit "ideology". It is often supposed that the influence of political consciousness can take place only in the shape of a fully articulated or formally expressed theory. A recent example is found in the revisionist work of Glenn Burgess, who suggests that the Whig interpretation would have required a theory of parliamentary constitutionalism, and then purports to show that such a concept did not exist before the Civil War.[32] The demand to see a constitutionalist ideology is in part a failure to engage with the nature of the representative function. Revisionists will sometimes assert that parliament was valued merely as a vehicle for other interests, and not desired constitutionally as an end in itself.[33] But of course the potential to act as a vehicle is precisely the essence and strength of a representative institution. And it was naturally in the development of its capacity in that form that parliament's political importance grew. The finding of this study is that political consciousness operated in a way which was at once more subtle and more direct than an explicit ideology. There was a framework of practical ideas about the nature and capacities of the representative function. At times, representative concepts could indeed appear in association with

formally expressed theories about the source of political authority, or commonly received notions about the definition of sovereignty. But they could also take the form of a more immediate, working philosophy based simply on the day-to-day assumptions of ordinary people about their representative rights, and what this meant to them in both economic and political terms.

This can be seen in respect of the process of parliamentary legislation. It was in this area that the public demand for parliament's services was most apparent. All historians recognise that from the mid-sixteenth century, the English political nation developed what may fairly be described as an insatiable appetite for parliament's legislative service. Statute law was valued because it had a distinctive dual action: it was responsive to local needs and preferences, and yet could offer definitive national judgements. Both of these capacities derived from the representative function of the House of Commons. The localities made their legislative initiatives with a necessary awareness of what it was that gave statute law its unique force. They gave their power of consent, and in return could hope for the provision of binding, sovereign legislation to benefit their interests. This was a context in which parliament's economic functions could naturally take on a national-political dimension.

The revisionists dealt with these possibilities by once again simply interposing a disconnection between the factors in question. They specifically restricted the demand for legislation to a local sphere, as reflecting nothing more than peoples' pre-occupation with the "bread and butter" issues of particular and private economies.[34] The notion has found a surprising degree of acceptance. Derek Hirst, for instance, while confirming that by 1628 parliament was finding a political place in public consciousness, deliberately distinguishes this from the "bread and butter matters of legislation".[35] And David Dean has proclaimed that "a study of legislation is necessarily a revisionist work", dealing with uncontroversial, day-to-day business.[36] It will be suggested below that on the contrary, a study of parliament's legislative function, roundly perceived, need be anything but a revisionist work. In the period in question, the character of statute law, the public demand for it and the nature of the ideas behind it had the most profound national-political consequences.

The importance that people attached to the legislative process could also influence how they regarded the work of government as such. The way that people characterised the activities of government was indeed another kind of practical political idea. The question of what

they wanted from government, socially and economically, affected the way that they defined it, just as much as the (associated) question of what powers of regulation they believed it should possess. Most modern historians would probably assume that seventeenth-century government should be seen simply as the (royal) executive, and that the process of legislation, which has now become the most permanent and indispensable tool of government, would not have been regarded in the same light then. It will be suggested in this study, however, that already in the early seventeenth century people were beginning to project the legislative service as a crucial part of the governmental process. This was the measure of the status that the facility had acquired in the public mind, and indicates one important way in which socio-economic requirements could come to entail a political perception.

At another level this involves the question of what comprised a "state". John Pym, in the words of the quotation at the head of Chapter 6 of this study, had come to regard the legislative function as "that which makes and constitutes a kingdom". It was, in a sense, the service which the kingdom could no longer exist without. This casts an unflattering light on our usual idea of the kind of process that leads to the creation or consolidation of a state structure. It has been a fairly common assumption among historians that in the early modern period the process of state creation would be determined by the strength of bureaucratic organisation from the centre. In that view, the localities, or the people, play a passive or obstructive role. The most extreme version of the theory supposed that a county like Kent was so localist in its identity and administration as to be almost a separate province.[37] But in truth this focus does not offer an accurate guide to what was taking place in seventeenth-century England. As Ann Hughes has pointed out, one of the most distinctive features of the English kingdom at this time (and for some centuries past) was that it manifested forms of unity which did not depend on the crude extension of government power.[38] This would always have been apparent (and the localist diversion avoided) if historians had taken more care to maintain a comparative perspective with the situation in other European kingdoms, where truly semi-independent provinces did continue to exist in the seventeenth century. In England this was manifestly no longer the case. In fact, we might say that the last time Kent could meaningfully be described as a semi-autonomous political unit was just before the West Saxons conquered it from the Mercians in the ninth century. By the end of the medieval period, the position of parliament as the equal representative of a uniform structure of counties and boroughs made it the symbol and essential basis of

centripetal movement. In part then, what is described below is a form of developing political homogeneity that was not essentially a creation of bureaucratic activity from the centre, but was, on the contrary, a process in which initiatives and demands from people in the localities played a full and sometimes leading role.

The danger of irreversible diversions is a particular hazard in the context of revisionist-empiricist practice. Notably, in recent years, seventeenth-century historians have become preoccupied with the so-called "problem of multiple kingdoms". This study would not wish to discourage a focus on societies beyond the "Anglo-Saxon" realm. And in fact the obvious importance of the interaction with Irish and Scottish affairs in the Civil War was given detailed attention by S.R. Gardiner many years ago. But he did not fall into the trap of assuming that in order to give full weight to the Celtic lands they had to be incorporated as a primary cause of the English Civil War. The purpose of later historians in conceptualising a problem of multiple kingdoms was to divert attention from the political challenge that Charles I faced in England. This theory has thrived in part through a displaced political correctness. The genuinely constructive aspects of English parliamentarianism have been neglected, while positive discrimination has been exercised on behalf of the other nations. Many historians seem to have worked on the basis that any Irish or Scottish involvement, however incidental, acquires some magical new significance when hailed as part of the "British Context". In truth it may be doubted whether there actually were three kingdoms in the sense that could pose a symmetrical problem. Ireland was not an established realm like its neighbours, but a loose assemblage of local powers, subject to varying degrees of colonial intrusion from across the sea. The situation was summed up by the Irish chiefs seeking Habsburg help in Elizabeth's reign: "Because we have not a king and are divided among ourselves the English attack and rob us daily."[39] The northern kingdom was in a different position, and there are certainly important questions regarding the relationship between the radical challenges that Charles faced in Scotland and England respectively, an issue touched on in Chapter 6 of this study. But the duality of the crown was not in itself the problem. The more significant clues are to be found in distinctive developments within each community.

When James I floated the idea of a formal union of the English and Scottish crowns in 1606, it was a limited measure essentially to regularise certain rights which the natives of each kingdom were to hold in the other. James found it easy to obtain approval in the Scottish parliament, over whose deliberations he had effective command. But gaining the

support of the English parliament was more problematic. Sir Edwin Sandys, on behalf of the Commons committee, presented the counter-proposal of a perfect union. By this, the Scottish legal system would be made subordinate to the English – and brought under one parliament. This certainly reflected a determination that the Scots should not simply be granted free and equal rights in England. But it was also an expression of the special importance that the concept of representative law had acquired for the English parliamentary classes. Sandys spoke lyrically of how the strength of statute law derived from the elected consent of the whole kingdom, and created a public trust. James, however, did not think it necessary (or perhaps desirable) to establish this common system of parliamentary law. He could resolve any anomalies himself, he said, since he supposed that in the final analysis "rex est lex".[40] It was a vital difference of emphasis, and as we shall see, it offers a truer guide to the relative significance of English and "British" affairs in the causes of the Civil War. Sandys was describing a developing unity with a dynamic of its own. The force of this is obscured by the focus on the supposed difficulties of coordinating power in the "British" dimension. We need to ask whether the problem of multiple kingdoms would ever have arisen had it not been required by historians seeking explanations for the crisis that did not involve them in recognising any popular momentum behind the crucial political changes that were taking place within the English kingdom.

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