Participation, Democracy, and the Split in Revolutionary Calvinism, 1641 – 1646.

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Abstract

During the early phase of the revolutionary period in Britain (1641-46) an ideological divergence took place between fractions labelled Independent and Presbyterian. Our study of printed sources for this period uses debates over the meaning and relevance of the Greek term 'democracy' to attempt a mapping of these emergent ideologies within revolutionary Calvinism. We find a contested social terrain with the Presbyterians supporting the revolutions from a socially conservative position and the Independents favouring radical social change.

The years 1641 to 1646 saw "a transformation of the political nation, the beginning of mass politics, and a rapid and revolutionary expansion of what is sometimes called the 'public sphere' [which] brought "men that do not rule" (and sometimes women too) into active engagement with public affairs" (Cressy 2003: 68). In particular there were a great number of books and pamphlets written by the leading Calvinists and these reveal a surprising amount of interest in democracy. A modern consensus that democracy did not come into fashion as an idea until the mid-nineteenth century is questioned by the prominence given to democracy in the controversy over the reconstruction of the church between the Presbyterians and the Independents in the 1640s. We know that "democracy" survived from ancient times within the "mixed constitution," where it was blended with monarchy and aristocracy. We ask whether the strains of conflict, especially the attitudes and practises of the Independents, loosened the internal bonds of the mixed constitution, undermining claims of kingship and challenging elites.

We propose the subdivision of Calvinist political theory according to a simple bipartite model derived by analysing the pamphlet wars which took place in Britain and New England roughly from 1641 to 1646. Specifically, these groups were known to each other and to subsequent history as the Independents and the

Presbyterians. We therefore name our variants of Calvinist political thought "Independent," "Presbyterian," representing the ideas typically found in writings clustering around the "Grand Debate" of the Westminster Assembly (Paul, 1985). It is important to stress that these are typologies — abstractions of the principal features of the ideas of the two groups. We acknowledge the limitations of such abstractions, yet seek to impose some order on the political orientation of Cavinists out of the "jungle growth of opinions" in this period (James 1999: 39). These categories do not necessarily apply perfectly to the political thought of every Independent or Presbyterian writer. The most distinctive differences among the types are in their approaches to the idea of democracy, and the position within the Reformed tradition from Luther to Calvin the synthesizer, and later Reformed writers like Theodore Beza, William Perkins, and William Ames. Independents emphasised the New Testament and Ames and Perkins, whereas the Presbyterians, while still focused on the Bible (Old Testament), placed particular stress on the later theologians of "High" Calvinism. Combined with this theological divergence we find a variation in political trust, leading the Independents to a more positive view of participation than the more elitist and sin-obsessed Presbyterians. These fractions had much common ground, for example the belief in the right and duty to resist tyranny, a distinguishing feature of later Calvinism (McNeill 1949; Eales 1996; Coffey 1997: 177; McLaren 2006: 23), and the characteristic protestant idea, from Luther's priesthood of all believers, that the individual conscience is supreme, and that the personal spark of divinity can only be restrained by God, itself a democratic notion (Maddox 1996: 149, 262 n. 40; Perry 1964: 107).

Calvin himself recommended no form of polity, arguing that the model ought to vary according to circumstances, basing political considerations on the reality of original sin. The human propensity to take advantage of power in order to dominate others makes all power relations dangerous: "The fall from kingdom to tyranny is easy; but it is not much more difficult to fall from the rule of the best men to the faction of a few; yet it is easiest of all to fall from popular rule to sedition," (Calvin 1960: 1493; Hancock 1989: 69). This creates a tension between following the

injunction in Romans 13 to obey the powers that be, and the fear of sin's taking hold of those same powers, especially where this would "lead us away from obedience to [God]" (Calvin 1960: 1520). Calvin did not attempt to resolve this dilemma, but he did say that it is "safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government," asserting that "if the three forms of government ... be considered in themselves ... aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others," in the absence of complications arising from sin (ibid: 1493).

Independent Calvinism

Independents favoured the use of covenants voluntarily to establish individual parish churches, leading each congregation to organise along arguably democratic lines. The testimony of the New England churches, set up as such congregations by exiles who sailed to Massachusetts Bay in the early 1630s, became an important element in the debate, even though their delegates were unable to attend the Assembly (Paul 1985: 125). The positive attitude toward democracy, which according to Russel L. Hanson (Ball 1989: 68) is nearly unique for early modern writers, is construed by Thomas Goodwin (1641: 4-5) as a preference for the poor, so that "when *Christ* came at first, the poore receive the Gospell; not many Wise, not many Noble, not many Rich, but the Poore." Richard Mather, and other (unnamed) ministers (1643: 53-57), argued that in New England "Church government is in part Democraticall or popular," and that it is "in respect of the people a Democratie." The leading New England theologian, John Cotton, was initially content with the mixed nature of congregational government (1645: 100), but later (1648: 97) declared that as far as the church of the New Testament was concerned, "their Form of Government was like ... to a Democracy." The democratic tendency of the Independents existed within the mixed form of aristocracy plus democracy, familiar from Calvin (above), and endorsed by Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye in their Preface to *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644: A4 recto-A4 verso).

While both fractions placed great stress on the Bible and Calvin, the Independents tended to emphasize Scripture (Cotton 1643: 1; Cotton 1644; Goodwin 1641; Anon. 1641), and they not only stressed the New Testament, but also the benefit of insights or "new light" which post-dated Calvin (Goodwin 1643: 4, 23). Their reading of passages in the Gospels, Acts and the Pauline Epistles suggested a congregation which was more autonomous than those following a Genevan model, with a power to expel minister and member alike as in Cotton's *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644: 12-16), where we see Acts 15, Acts 14 and Galatians 5 used to support the idea of "the votes of the people [being] needfull in all admissions and excommunications" (Cotton 1644: 8). This model gave the Independents a strongly local bias, enshrined in the town meeting, and a suspicion of overarching institutions, although Cotton (1644: 15-16, 28-29) allows the holding of rare synods for the discussion of urgent matters, provided these rely on the congregations for action. Independents condemn the permanent institution of powerful presbyteries and synods (Bradshaw 1641 [1605]: 7; Anon. 1641: 1; Woodward 1644: 13; Holmes 1644: 13; Anon. 1644a: 45; Goodwin 1644: 9; Goodwin 1645: 7). The congregational model not only emphasizes the role of the laity, but also has a problematic relationship with rulers, especially monarchs. Calvin himself was anti-monarchical (McNeill 1949), and mistrust of monarchy is also expressed by John Cotton (1656: 72):

> A Prince himselfe cannot tell where hee will confine himself ... But if he have liberty to speak great things, then he will make and unmake, say and unsay, and undertake such things as are neither for his owne honour, nor for the safety of the State.

There are examples, from 1645, of the direct election of elders by many London congregations including St Peter Cornhill, where the laity voted "by placing strokes by the names they favoured" (Lindley 1997: 277). But it is not our intention to attribute modern democratic thought and practice to the Calvinists of New England. Nevertheless, the godly of Massachusetts were scarcely more exclusive than the ancient Athenians, who gave democracy its name and basic form and their legacy

involves faith in the worth of the ordinary person, even if that person had to be a believer.

Presbyterian Calvinism

Presbyterianism was the preferred form of Calvinism among elites in the era that Coffey (1997) terms the British Revolutions, and when the Westminster Assembly met in 1643 it was a foregone conclusion that the English and Scottish ministers would endorse a Presbyterian system. In the pamphlet war, the Presbyterians frequently take their Independent opponents to task for giving power to the laity. George Gillespie defended the Scottish Kirk against the Independent alternative, because "the exercise of Ecclesiasticall power and jurisdiction in a particular Congregation, ought not to bee committed to the whole collective body thereof" or else "the Government of the Church must needs be popular," exposing the godly to "the rudenesse of the vulgar sort" (Gillespie 1641: 109, 114). Samuel Rutherford (1642: 16) stated bluntly that "[t]hat which maketh the government of Gods house Democraticall and popular is not to bee taught," and Adam Steuart (1644: 43-45) argued against autonomous congregations which "excitate the ignorant people" and give power to the untrustworthy "ordinary Mechanick." The frequency of statements similar to these can leave us in no doubt about either the Presbyterian position on democracy, or their sincerity in maintaining such a position (Edwards 1641: 16; Steuart 1644: 46; Rathband 1644: 26; Gillespie 1644: 1; Forbes 1644: 39; Edwards 1644: 92; Rutherford 1644: 480; Baillie 1645: 125). In keeping with the tenets of "High" Calvinism, they expected all ministers to be educated as well as called, and the basis of ministerial education was fluency in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew (Anon. 1644: 2). Their erudition bred contempt for the "illiterate" (Edwards 1644: 79; Rathband 1644: 23).

Presbyterians insisted on the need for permanent representative institutions (Herle 1643: 11) based on the ministers and elders of a locality, region, and ultimately the nation itself, to decide all controversies of religion and to present potential ministers to congregations (Anon., 1644b). This system, established in Scotland by

John Knox and Andrew Melville as a national equivalent of the Genevan Consistory, was subsequently defended from attempts to introduce bishops via the national Covenant, a perpetual oath given before God in imitation of Old Testament Israel (Vallance 2001; Coffey, 1997). Presbyterians emphasised the need to be able and ready to resist the secular powers, accusing the Independents of tying their own hands by failing to establish a strong institutional framework above their congregations (Gillespie 1641: A4 recto; Steuart 1644: 10; Prynne 1644a: 9). One consequence of the system of presbyteries was the intolerant attitude the Presbyterians displayed toward any whom they regarded as failing to conform to Calvinist theology as they defined it (Gillespie 1644: 31; Prynne 1644b: 12), although it should be noted that the New England churches were also less tolerant than the Independents in England.

Presbyterian republicanism partly emerged from the theory of resistance, but was also developed from ideas of natural law and civic humanism, although even here it was the spark of divinity which gave the people an irresistible prior right to determine and to unmake the constitution (McLaren 2006: 32). Popular sovereignty is affirmed by Rutherford (1644: 66), who asserts that "there is an absolute Majesty in the people" (391) which underpins every government. Particular regimes need only be supported as long as they maintain good laws for the defense of life and religion (106), based on an initial contract to establish society (4), and a second contract to establish the regime (p. 399). The Presbyterian writers show a clear preference for limited monarchy (Herle 1643: 7; Rutherford 1644: 8, 17, 387), and so they were not republicans in the sense of opposing *all* forms of monarchy. Presbyterians use of a wide array of civic humanist sources, including Aristotle (Steuart 1644: 16; Rutherford 1644: 65), and Tacitus (Cheynell 1643: A4 recto; Gillespie, 1644: 3, 38; Rutherford 1644: A4 verso) as well as contemporary sources. Generally the Presbyterians combine Old Testament Scripture with secular citations. Presbyterian natural law is Calvinist, as natural reason has been clouded by sin (Calvin 1960: 368) and is therefore not to be relied upon in the same sense as Scripture, yet they do use such arguments, as when Edwards (1641: 13) rejects

Independency as being "against the light of Nature and right reason." Pure reason remains suspect and confirmatory empirical evidence is therefore necessary, a point developed by Robert Greville (1641).

Discussion

Historical scholarship of the British revolutionary period has undergone many episodes of revisionism since the days of ASP Woodhouse (1938), Ralph Barton Perry (1944), and AD Lindsay (1943), when Independents were seen as democrats. Reacting to linear "Whig" history and the use of non-archival printed sources, scholars have silenced these voices from the revolutionary era. John Morrill (2001: 27) for example portrays the Independents and Presbyterians as completely unrepresentative of public opinion. In parallel with this view of the Independents and Presbyterians as bloody minded revolutionary elitists, there has been much writing on the least numerous of all of the revolutionaries, the later sectaries and separatists. The Levellers and the Diggers have had their enthusiasts, and even the Ranters have been celebrated (Smith 1983). It is our contention that this period needs to be understood as a revolutionary one, which means taking seriously the ideas of the two main revolutionary fractions.

Until we can learn more about the social bases of the Independent congregations especially (see Seaver 1985) the question of social causation is best left alone, although there is some evidence that the causes were not entirely theological, as seen in participatory practices of such parishes as Swallowfield (Hindle 1999). The theological and Biblical setting of these ideas about radical social equality is significant however for the more recent phenomenon liberal democracy. The Bible is unlike the body of writings available from ancient Rome, in the sense that it contains passages which can easily be used to buttress such radicalism, whereas no such writings are to be found in the Latin canon. Quentin Skinner, by contrast, has claimed that it was the emergence of a secular and neo-Roman political culture that paved the way for modern modes of politics, including the democratic: the seeds of modernity are to be discovered in the early-modern era, in the autonomous activity

of politics categorically removed from religious life (Skinner, 1978). Whatever the social origins of the ideas we have been considering, it is hard to see how they could have been pursued in the absence of the theological and Biblical apparatus. In his latest history of democracy John Dunn (2004) tends to by-pass the British revolutions, although he concedes that the door opened a crack to democracy. He argues that the radicalism of the Levellers offered no public role to "democracy," although he notices Hobbes's complaint that English radicalism was boosted by the translation of the Bible.

The suggestion is that the democratic discourse in Calvinism and associated democratic impulses and precedents tended to be eclipsed but were never entirely forgotten. Revolutions are bound to be followed closely by division of the revolutionary party into a less and a more radical fraction, just as they are bound to tumble forward under their own momentum, well past the initial goal of many of their supporters. If we learn anything from the precocious emergence of democracy in the 1640s it might be that the seeds of quite distant political futures can be planted in the disintegrating ground of a revolutionary movement which is itself destined to fail.

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