2003

Review of Explaining the English Revolution: Hobbes and His Contemporaries

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— Don Herzog, University of Michigan

The explosion of primary texts from seventeenth-century England continues to trigger an explosion of scholarly treatments today. For good reason, too: Lots of the primary texts are amazing, and not just those tired old warhorses, Hobbes’s Leviathan and Locke’s Second Treatise. As fun and challenging as the primary texts are, you are forgiven a touch of skepticism if you wonder just what the latest author has to add to our understanding. You might redouble your skepticism if you just glance at Mark Stephen Jendrysik’s table of contents, offering chapters on Winstanley, Milton, Cromwell, Filmer, and Hobbes, and zeroing in on the spectacular years of 1649–53.

Those chapters are bracketed by two overview chapters on order and disorder that frame Jendrysik’s interpretive or theoretical agenda—as does the title to the book, Explaining the English Revolution. Living through a civil war, the execution of Charles I, and the erratic and sometimes dotry rule of Puritan fanatics led by Oliver Cromwell, writers had a pressing need to define disorder and explain its causes. (One might add that even those writers believing, or wishing others to believe, that order was “natural,” whatever that might mean, had to concede that nature seemed to be asleep at the switch.) And—you can imagine running a “discovery of the social” riff here, though Jendrysik doesn’t put it that way—they figured out that there could well be more wrong with the world than the blunderingly decisions of particular political figures. Maybe the church needed further reformation; maybe the English needed more providential guidance; maybe the very language of morals and politics needed restructuring. Once writers had their pet explanations for how things went so badly awry, they could make sensible proposals for what to change to get things back on a decent footing.

Jendrysik’s official agenda is promising, even if he claims more for it than he needs to. Sometimes it begins to feel like a straitjacket or Proverbs’ bed, or worse yet an imperialist agenda: “All political theory in these years was definitional, educational, and historical” (p. 7). I have my doubts. Take the wondrously weird raptures of Abiezer Copp, published in Jendrysik’s chosen time frame. You can get a sense of what Copp was up to just from his delicious, delirious titles: A Second Fiery Flying Roule or (a partly shamefaced, partly belligerent retraction of his earlier ecstatic flights) Copp’s Return to the Wipes of Truth: in a Zealous and Sincere Protestation Against Several Errors; and in a Sincere and Zealous Testimony to Several Truths: or, Truth Asserted against, and Triumphant over Error; and the Wings of the Fiery Flying Roll Clip, & c. The only way to save Jendrysik’s claim is to adopt an invidiously narrow conception of what counts as political theory or an implausibly expansive conception of what counts as “definitional, educational, and historical.” It is enough, surely, to say that his promised focus will illuminate some stuff, even if it cannot get everything we care about into sharp focus.

When Jendrysik turns to his chosen authors, the agenda wobbles, or comes in and out of focus; sometimes he seems to be lapping into mere plot summary of what they say. What he says is always lucid and, in registering his points of disagreement with previous interpretations, always sensible (even if, curmudgeonly reader that I am, I am not always persuaded). But I am afraid he purchases his guidance; maybe the very language of morals and politics needed restructuring. Once writers had their pet explanations for how things went so badly awry, they could make sensible proposals for what to change to get things back on a decent footing.

Jendrysik needs to say something sustained in his own voice about the philosophy of science, about what sorts of critters the explanations on offer here are, and precisely how they link up with criticism and justification. Perhaps he does not want to be skeptical about the fact/value gap. Perhaps the picture is as simple as this: Filmer, say, thought that intoxicated talk of natural liberty produced disorder; if you dislike disorder, then get rid of that talk; then the dangerous means will no longer produce the repulsive end. Perhaps. Perhaps not.

I do not mean to sound like the churlish reviewer who complains that the author did not write the book that he, the reviewer, would have written on the subject. My worry is, rather, that Jendrysik did not write the book he promises, that his interesting material remains tantalizing but underdeveloped.