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Review of Explaining the English Revolution: Hobbes and His Contemporaries

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Explaining the English Revolution: Hobbes and His Contemporaries. By

Mark Stephen Jendrysik. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 200p. \$65.00.

— 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 doty 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 blunder-

ing 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 Procrustes' 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 Coppe, published in Jendrysik's chosen time frame. You can get a sense of what Coppe 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 Ways of Truth: in a Zealous and Sincere Protestation against Severall Errors; and in a Sincere and Zealous Testimony to Several Truths: or, Truth Asserted against, and Triumphing over Error; and the Wings of the Fiery Flying Roll Clipt, &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 lapsing 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 lucidity at the price of making things too elementary, of refusing to pursue some of the mischievous complications and nuances that his own agenda demands. So, for instance, he rightly insists that Winstanley's searing indictment of contemporary England focuses on covetousness, manifest, for instance, in the oppressive behavior of landlords and legislators. But this attempt to explain contingent political developments by appealing to ongoing psychological traits raises familiar difficulties. People did not suddenly become covetous in the 1640s, and Winstanley did not think they did. So how could covetousness explain civil war or regicide? There are materials in Jendrysik's account that one could enlist to

assemble an answer. Yes, the imposition of the Norman yoke was an infamous moment in English history. But, Winstanley might be arguing, it was also just the same old same old—and the crushing accretions of covetousness over the centuries finally reached some tipping point. Maybe that is what Winstanley argues, and maybe the argument is plausible or even true: but Jendrysik himself does not assemble the argument and probe its textual and logical credentials.

Or again: Jendrysik generously adopts a stumbling formulation of my own about what is wrong with the fact/value gap in political theory (pp. 5, 16). But his focus on explanation might well trigger a commitment to just that picture in his readers: “Ah, I get it, these political theorists weren't just being normative, they were also fledgling political scientists with descriptive accounts of causation.” So 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.