

Historiography of the Leveller Movement

Michael Schearer

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Introduction

While historians have recognized the contributions of various radical groups to political thought during the English Civil War, it was not until the professionalization of the history discipline in the latter half of the 19th century when trained scholars began to understand the primary sources in their context. One political movement in particular, the Levellers, has gained additional scholarly scrutiny not only for their impact during the English Civil War itself but for the influence of their ideology both in England and beyond. While the ideas of the Levellers were out of time and out of place in 1640s England, scholars have increasingly recognized their influence in the later development of both libertarian thought and liberal political economy.

The Levellers were a radical political group within the Parliamentarians' New Model Army that rose to prominence during the Putney Debates of 1647 over the nature of proposed changes to the English constitution. The foundation of Leveller beliefs was that the origin of political power lay with the consent of the people and that Parliament exercised the people's power on their behalf. The recognized Leveller leaders were John Lilburne, William Walwyn, and Richard Overton. These leaders came into increased conflict with Oliver Cromwell and were eventually imprisoned, which helped to snuff out the radical movement by 1649.

One of the essential characteristics of Leveller historiography and our understanding of the Levellers in general is just how much scholarship has been driven by Marxist historians or those in close sympathy, i.e., leftist and socialist methodologies. Among those covered in this examination, H.N. Brailsford, C.B. Macpherson, Christopher Hill, Pauline Gregg, A.L. Morton, and John Rees all fit the mold. This is not to suggest that this methodology is inherently flawed or otherwise unreliable. Instead, understanding the weight of such contribution to the Leveller

historiography is essential in contextualizing the impact of Leveller ideology within the broader English Civil War, the concept of liberty, and beyond.

Historiography

The first professional to devote scholarly attention to the Leveller movement was the English historian Samuel Rawson Gardiner, who devoted a chapter in his five-volume *History of the Great Civil War* to the New Model Army debates and the Leveller manifestos known as *An Agreement of the People*.¹ Gardiner's work was enhanced by his colleague Charles Firth's discovery of the papers of William Clarke, secretary to the General Council of the New Model Army.² Among English historians, Gardiner and Firth's scholarship established the liberal-Whig tradition in English Civil War historiography that saw the conflict as a political, constitutional, and religious struggle on the inevitable path toward greater liberty. But the role played by the Levellers in the liberal-Whig story was minimal, as evidenced by the sparsity of references in otherwise significant works such as J.R. Green's *A Short History of the English People* and G.M. Trevelyan's *England under the Stuarts*.³ American historian Theodore Pease extended the liberal-Whig methodology to an explicitly American context, arguing that "the Levellers developed a body of constitutional and political doctrines that suggest the main theories of American constitutional law."⁴ Joseph Frank, better known as the preeminent biographer of

¹ Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War, 1642-1649*, vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1893), 375-391 ("The Agreement of the People") and 392-394 ("Appendix").

² C.H. Firth, ed., *The Clarke Papers. Selections from the Papers of William Clarke, Secretary to the Council of the Army, 1647-1649, and to General Monck and the Commanders of the Army in Scotland, 1651-1660*, 4 vols. (Camden Society, 1901).

³ J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan, 1874), Short History; G.M. Trevelyan, *England under the Stuarts* (London: Methuen, 1904).

⁴ Theodore C. Pease, *The Leveller Movement: A Study in the History and Political Theory of the English Great Civil War* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1916), 363.

Dostoevsky, continued the American liberal-Whig interpretation of the Leveller movement into the middle of the 20th century.⁵

The major shift in Leveller historiography came about due to the impressive volume of scholarship on the English Civil War by Marxist and other leftist and socialist historians. The most influential was undoubtedly Christopher Hill, author of *The English Revolution, 1640*, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, and *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*.⁶ Hill wrote in reaction to the then-dominant liberal-Whig methodology and brought radical factions and radical ideas to the center of scholarly debate. Hill's argument about the Levellers was that they were not radical enough: they "were not in fundamental disagreement with the type of society that was being set up by the English Revolution."⁷ H.M. Brailsford lamented that the liberal-Whig historians regarded the Levellers as "rather less than nothing" and delighted at his generation having "the good fortune of re-discovering the Levellers."⁸ Other significant contributions to Marxist and socialist historiography came from Pauline Gregg, who wrote a biography of John Lilburne; C.B. Macpherson, who questioned the political egalitarianism of the Leveller ideology; A.L. Morton, who edited a collection of Leveller pamphlets; and most recently, John Rees, who edited a 21st-century scholarly reappraisal of English radical thought.⁹

⁵ Joseph Frank, *The Levellers: A History of the Writings of Three Seventeenth-Century Social Democrats: John Lilburne, Richard Overton, William Walwyn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

⁶ Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution, 1640* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940), Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); and Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

⁷ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 123.

⁸ H.N. Brailsford and Christopher Hill, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), v.

⁹ Pauline Gregg, *Free-born John: A Biography of John Lilburne* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1961); C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 107-159; A.L. Morton, ed., *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1974); and John Rees, ed., *John Lilburne and the Levellers: Reappraising the Roots of English Radicalism 400 Years On* (London: Routledge, 2017).

A third major phase of the English Civil War and Leveller historiography began in the 1970s. This revisionist school did not necessarily share any consistent theories but rather was characterized by its responses to both the liberal-Whig and Marxist interpretations. John Rees wrote that “[r]evisionism was essentially a negative intellectual trend in the sense that its leading figures could find broad agreement on what they were against but had no common account of the English Revolution that could replace those that they criticized.”¹⁰ For example, British historian J.C.D. Clark criticized the liberal-Whigs (“Old Hat”) and the Marxists (“Old Guard” and “Class of ’68”) and instead placed religion as the central cause of the 17th-century struggles.¹¹ Murray Tolmie focused on the successful establishment of protestant nonconformity in the decades before the English Civil War.¹² Tolmie argued that liberal-Whig historians ignored the Levellers and that Marxists like Christopher Hill ignored the “sectaries.”¹³ Mark Kishlansky sought to disconnect the Leveller leadership from the soldiers of the New Model Army, calling them “separate and fundamentally divergent movements.”¹⁴ To the extent that revisionism dealt with the Levellers, scholars in this tradition tended to diminish their contributions.

A final phase of post-revisionist scholarship has emerged in recent decades. These works are characterized by scholars who have re-emphasized Leveller contributions while largely eschewing the need to fit their accounts into the ideological and historiographical debates. Representative works of post-revisionism are Sarah Barber’s biography of Henry Marten,

¹⁰ John Rees, “Leveller Organisation and the Dynamic of the English Revolution,” (Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014), available at http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/10465/1/HIS_thesis_Rees_Thesis_2014.pdf, 50.

¹¹ J.C.D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹² Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London, 1616-1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹³ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁴ Mark A. Kishlansky, “The Army and the Levellers: The Roads to Putney,” *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 4 (1979): 796.

Antonia Southern's *Forlorn Hope*, and Rachel Foxley's *The Levellers: Radical Thought in the English Revolution*.¹⁵ Post-revisionism, then, seeks to elevate the significance of Leveller ideology without attempting to shoehorn their story into a grand narrative.

Modern Relevance

An essential component of the historiography of the Leveller movement is an understanding of its relevance to modern society. A review of the relevant scholarship identifies two dominant themes that permeate the historiography and cross boundaries of historiographic schools of thought.

The first theme is an understanding that Leveller ideology was out of place in its time. This idea was first recognized by Samuel Rawson Gardiner when he wrote that “the *Agreement of the People* was but the dream of a few visionaries.”¹⁶ According to Gardiner, “the English people were irreconcilably hostile to [the Levellers] and to their teaching.”¹⁷ Joseph Frank's *The Levellers* argued that the Leveller ideology was rejected at the time but found acceptance 200 years later when it served as the basis for constitutional democracies.¹⁸ Gerald Aylmer explained that the economic ideas proposed by the Levellers were “unconstructive.”¹⁹ According to Aylmer:

Their opposition to monopolies and special privileges, coupled with their strong defence of private property, pointed to an ideal world of owner-occupiers on the land, plus self-employed craftsmen and independent traders. They had little to

¹⁵ Sarah Barber, *A Revolutionary Rogue: Henry Marten and the English Republic* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000); Antonia Southern, *Forlorn Hope: Soldier Radicals of the Seventeenth Century* (Lewes: Book Guild, 2001); and Rachel Foxley, *The Levellers: Radical Political Thought in the English Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War*, 3:388.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Frank, *The Levellers*.

¹⁹ G.E. Aylmer, *The Levellers in the English Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975),

offer the landless peasants, or those whose holdings were simply too small for them to subsist upon, on little too for the urban wage-earners.²⁰

Moreover, Aylmer found even the moderate political proposals of the Levellers revolutionary.²¹

Marxist historian Christopher Hill agreed that the Levellers “had no basis on which to appeal to the peasant majority of the population.”²² The problem, then, was two-fold. Their ideas were too radical for their time and lacked popular appeal.

The second theme recognizes that Leveller ideology is one of the key origin points of libertarian thought and liberal political economy. Economist and historian Murray N. Rothbard referred to the Levellers as “the world’s first self-consciously libertarian mass movement...upholding the rights of ‘self-ownership’, private property, religious freedom for the individual, and minimal government interference in society.”²³ Rothbard’s multi-volume history of the American colonial period, *Conceived in Liberty*, repeatedly cites to Leveller ideology as a libertarian movement.²⁴ The most important contribution of the Levellers (together with John Locke), according to Rothbard, was the transformation of “classical natural law into a theory grounded on methodological and hence political individualism.”²⁵

Philosopher and political economist James R. Otteson found the source of liberal political economy not in Adam Smith, David Hume, or John Locke, but in the Levellers.²⁶ Otteson found in Leveller ideology three ideas central to the development of modern liberal political economy:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 122.

²³ Murray N. Rothbard, *An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, vol. 1 (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1995), 313.

²⁴ Murray N. Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty*, vol. 1 (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1999), 200.

²⁵ Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 21.

²⁶ James R. Otteson, “The Levellers and the Birth of Liberal Political Economy,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 37, no. 1 (Summer, 2020): 170-189.

equality, residual liberty, and free commerce.²⁷ He also argued that John Lilburne’s assertion of individual liberty helped to change the conception of morality in politics which (eventually helped lead to the abolition of slavery.²⁸ The most recent attempts to place the Levellers within the libertarian context are the seven-volume collection of Leveller tracts published by Liberty Fund, and Gary De Krey’s *Following the Levellers*, a two-volume collection that traces the post-English Civil War legacy of the Leveller ideology.²⁹

I encountered both themes in the context of a previous research assignment where I explored the ideological origins of William Penn’s “Holy Experiment.”³⁰ In that paper, I found that the political and religious upheavals of the 17th century molded Penn’s ideas about religious freedom, trial by jury, and expanded suffrage. The ideological origins underpinning William Penn’s Pennsylvania colony were derived primarily from the radical English Leveller movement. Although the intent of my research at the time was not to address these two themes of Leveller historiography, Penn’s “Holy Experiment” demonstrated how ideas that were out of place and time in the 1640s ultimately found a home in one of the most liberal (and even libertarian) colonies in British America. It is probably going too far to declare William Penn a full-fledged libertarian, and Pennsylvania’s colonial government was not a fully developed libertarian experiment. But the broad themes endorsed by the Levellers in the 1640s saw their reality in William Penn’s colonial Pennsylvania.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. Otteson recognizes that “of course neither Lilburne nor the Levellers were solely responsible for this—and in any case it is extremely difficult to establish causal links, in part because the historical record is incomplete—but their example was emblematic of a changing conception of morality and thus politics.”

²⁹ David M. Hart and Ross Kenyon, eds., *Tracts on Liberty by the Levellers and Their Critics, 1638-1660*, 7 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund: 2014-2018); Gary De Krey, *Following the Levellers*, 2 vols. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

³⁰ Michael Schearer, “Ideological Origins of William Penn’s ‘Holy Experiment’” (May 5, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3382918>.

Although the historiography of the Leveller movement is primarily a subset of the English Civil War and early modern European history, one area of interest for future research is the application of Leveller ideology toward the application of an American Revolution synthesis methodology. In the seemingly mutually exclusive debate among historians about whether the American Revolution was conservative or radical, perhaps the Leveller ideology, based the strategy of the English jurist Sir Edward Coke to “uncouple” the authority of the common law from the Crown as a lawgiver, has something for both sides. A possible synthesis thesis of these two diametric approaches would be that the aims of a conservative revolution and the aims of the radical “neo-Whig” have considerable overlap and might even share the same goals—if one sees those goals as consistent with the out of place and out of time ideas of the 1640s Leveller movement. In other words, if what William Penn and others in colonial America did was to give space to ideas to breathe that never had room to grow in England, then the preservation of this uniquely colonial American culture would have seemed both conservative to colonial Americans in the 1760s but also radical to those in England at the same time. In this way, perhaps the arguments of scholars like Daniel Boorstin and Bernard Bailyn aren’t as far apart as they seem.

Conclusion

The Levellers were a radical political group that rose to prominence during the English Civil War. As we have seen, the historiography of the Leveller movement has moved through four distinct phases: liberal-Whig, Marxist/socialist, revisionism, and post-revisionism. Despite their historiographic differences, the scholarship across these methodologies has increasingly recognized their influence in the later development of libertarian thought and liberal political economy.

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