

**A Review of Christopher Hill's *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*
*Revisited and Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution***

by

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for

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A Review of Christopher Hill's *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revisited* and *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*

Hill, Christopher. *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revisited*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997. 400 pp.

———. *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980. 90 pp.

In a pair of books on the *Intellectual Origins* and *Intellectual Consequences* of the English Revolution, Christopher Hill attempts to explain the secondary or minor causes and consequences of the English Revolution. His method is to study not the primary, well-acknowledged causes or results of the Revolution but the many individuals and ideas that affected the average Englishman. Though Hill organizes *Intellectual Origins* around Bacon, Raleigh, and Coke, his focus is on scores of navigators, shipwrights, mechanics, doctors, inventors, merchants, astrologers and astronomers, students and professors, philosophers and simpletons, chemists and alchemists, heretics and clergymen. Hill is not so much interested in the philosophical theories that elites invented during their leisure but in the practical ideas, knowledge, and beliefs that men formed in their occupations or professions.

This focus on the intellectual currents outside the elite can also be seen in *Intellectual Consequences*. Hill views the Restoration as the choice of propertied classes of the monarch, the House of Lords, and the Bishops, all of whom would favor property, over a standing army of common men who were ideologically motivated. Hill does disdainfully state that the common man had no idea why he celebrated the Restoration. But, out of character as that remark might be, Hill recognizes the power of the common

man in his discussion of the army and pities him in his chapters on the manipulated mob. By regarding the Industrial Revolution as a product of the English Revolution, Hill is again focusing on the thoughts of the men who invented the technology that drove industrialization. In both his books, Hill is convinced that the true intellectual origins and consequences of the English revolution came not from men who thought during leisure but from men who thought to make a living.

Hill chooses not just to study secondary causes and consequences; he chooses to ignore causes and consequences historians have traditionally regarded as primary. He tries to avoid using Puritanism and politics in his explanations entirely. By calling for younger historians to continue his work, Hill is calling for a new historiography of the English Revolution that is innovative not because of what it studies but because of what it ignores.

Hill refuses to generalize so it is difficult to generalize Hill, but he does have two primary themes. First, Hill views the intellectual origins and consequences of the English Revolution as being economic. At his core, Hill is a Marxist, and his Marxist interpretations if not overt are obvious. His allusions to Marx are frequent and reverent. By studying the intellectual contributions to the Revolution that men made pursuing their economic interests and by ignoring elites, politics, and religion, Hill exalts the proletariat over the bourgeoisie. His conclusion that “the main long-term significance of the English Revolution was neither constitutional nor political nor religious but

economic,"¹ is the conclusion that the English Revolution led to the Industrial Revolution. Hill's second theme is that key to English thought in history, religion, science, and law was experience and experiment. If Hill's conclusion is concerned with economics, then experience is his general theme. But again, to make these generalizations is to go farther than Hill does.

On the surface level, a reader may criticize Hill's style and subject matter. First, Hill writes little narrative. Rather than explain the political and religious developments that led to the Revolution, Hill describes its intellectual background. But while Hill buries his reader's nose in books or sits him in a lecture at Gresham College, the main causes of the Revolution pass by the reader without remark.

Second, any reader not well-acquainted with the seventeenth century will be unable to keep up with Hill's erudition. He mentions name after name of people who had an impact on English thought and assumes that his reader is familiar with them. The average reader must constantly refer to the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Nor is Hill sparing in his use of sources. He discusses major works such as Bacon's *Novum Organum*, Raleigh's *History of the World*, Coke's *Institutes and Reports* but deals primarily with pamphlets, tracts, treatises, almanacs, textbooks, navigation guides, sermons, and other works. Each is small on its own, but together they form a ponderous mass

¹ Hill, *Intellectual Consequences*, 34. Here Hill is referring specifically to his argument in other books, but this theme does appear in *Intellectual Consequences*.

supported by some 2,069 footnotes in *Intellectual Origins*.² Hill's erudition is admirable, but the reader would be better served if it were less conspicuous.

These criticisms against Hill's style are not necessarily significant, however, because Hill uses exactly the method that he proposes in his introductions. He uses little narrative because he does not treat the main events leading up to the Revolution. He deals in details rather than generalizations because he is studying ideas that are widespread. He deals with many intellectual figures and their works because that is his subject matter. Peculiarities in the style and subject matter of the book make a good deal more sense when the reader remembers that Christopher Hill is perhaps the foremost specialist on the English Revolution, that he is writing specialist history not popular history, and that because he is a prolific author these books are but a fraction of his total work on the English Revolution.

These criticisms retain validity, however, because of Hill's most conspicuous flaw: he never generalizes. The reader justly hopes that by reading these books he will gain a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual currents flowing into and out of the English Revolution. But after the reader has worked through the mass of detail (and the 2,069 footnotes) and seen brief glimpses of how those many individuals contributed to the Revolution or were products of it, Hill's conclusion cannot fail to disappoint: "My conclusion is the banal and eternal one, that history is all very mixed up."³ Repeated

² *Intellectual Consequences*, being more of an essay than a monograph, has far fewer citations than *Intellectual Origins*.

³ Hill, *Intellectual Origins*, 266. Hill does go on very briefly to offer by quotation from another author the conclusion that "theology, natural science, and the social and political sciences . . .

several times throughout the first book, that conclusion becomes the ironic introduction to the book about the *Intellectual Consequences*: "The more I thought about the subject, the more doubtful I became about trying to isolate intellectual consequences of the Revolution."⁴ Perhaps Hill's lack of generalization is mitigated by the scope of his subject, by its need to be studied further, by continuing discoveries which make conclusions difficult, and by his evident humility in accepting historical uncertainty despite his erudition. But Hill is the victim of his own method. By choosing to examine intellectual origins and consequences isolated from the primary causes and consequences of the English Revolution, Hill threw away the means by which he could have made generalizations about his subject. Indeed, by divorcing English thought from English politics, religion, and society, he threw away the very reason for studying his subject.

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[were] utterly alike in their rejection of a middle-man of received authoritarian truth.'" That conclusion is linked to Puritanism in only one paragraph.

⁴ Hill, *Intellectual Consequences*, 6.