'We Still Have Much to Learn from the Seventeenth Century' [1]

Following as it does from that of Rodney Hilton last June, the recent death of Christopher Hill at the age of 91 marks the passing of another important member of that remarkable levy of twentieth-century British Marxist Historians (prominent in whose ranks stand, amongst others, Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm, Victor Kiernan, George Rudé, Dorothy Thompson, E P Thompson, Raphael Samuel, John Saville and Raymond Williams).[2] Hill, however, uniquely among this pantheon, was able to win an unprecedented hearing and an acceptance within mainstream academe on his own terms as a serious historian in his own right; unlike, for example, E P Thompson, who shunned the pursuit of academic glory, preferring in its place a lifelong commitment to active politics (for which he deservedly won the respect of generations of footsoldiers of the left), or Hobsbawm, whose florescent reputation these days is rather more of the Sunday-supplement variety. In fact, such was Hill's mainstream prestige within British – or rather English – academia that his interpretation on his speciality subject – seventeenth-century England, or, to put it another away, the English Revolution and civil war – although not nowadays accepted as the near orthodoxy it once was, is still for many entering the fray of debate around this period a necessary starting point, even if a starting point from which to develop a critique. Thus any assessment that is drawn up of Hill's intellectual career must take account of both of the elements that make up the double-handed adjective 'Marxist historian': how did Marxist theory affect Hill's work, and to what degree was he as a historian successful in developing a Marxist account of English-British history within a non-Marxist, if not actively anti-Marxist, academic milieu?

Born into a northern English Methodist family, Hill began to read history as an undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford, where he was to remain, with the exception of one year in Moscow in 1935, and two years teaching in Cardiff, for his entire academic life, finally successfully standing for the position of Master, which he held from 1965 to 1978. By graduation, he had already joined the Communist Party: he was to remain a member until the exodus precipitated by the crisis of 1956, finally leaving in 1957.

In 1940, Hill published the short work *The English Revolution 1640*, in which he argued that

> the English Revolution of 1640-60 was a great social movement like the French Revolution of 1789. The state power protecting an old order that was essentially feudal was violently overthrown, power passed into the hands of a new class, and so the freer development of capitalism was made possible. The Civil War was a class war, in which the despotism of Charles I was defended by the reactionary forces of the established Church and conservative landlords. Parliament beat the King because it could appeal to the enthusiastic support of the trading and industrial classes in town and countryside, to the yeomen and progressive gentry, and the wider masses of the population whenever they were able by free discussion to understand what the struggle was really about.[3]

Who were these classes that fought the revolution, and what propelled them towards conflict?

> England in 1640 was still ruled by landlords and the relations of production were still partly feudal, but there was this vast and expanding capitalist sector, whose development the Crown and feudal landlords could not for ever hold in check. [...] There were really three classes in conflict. As against the parasitic feudal landowners and speculative financiers, as against the government whose policy was to restrict and control industrial expansion, the interests of the new class of capitalist merchants and farmers were temporarily identical with those of the small

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[1] Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640* (London, 1955), (3rd edition), 62.

[2] It is interesting to note – and sad that it has been largely unreported – Hill's wife, Bridgit Hill, who died in August last year, was a respected and well-published historian in her own right. See her obituary in *The Guardian* (13 August, 2002).

[3] Ibid., 6.

> peasantry and artisans and journeymen. But conflict between the two latter classes was bound to develop, since the expansion of capitalism involved the dissolution of the old agrarian and industrial relationships and the transformation of independent small masters and peasants into proletarians.[4]

Curiously, for he was never to state it again in such terms, this is the model of the English Revolution that Hill is remembered for. In substance, however, Hill was not saying anything dramatically new. The notion that the Revolution had occurred as a result of prior economic development, and that its leading force had been a social layer in some sense socially capitalistic – the 'gentry' – had already been established by R H Tawney. Tawney, a Christian socialist and social democrat, had effectively laid down the outlines of what was to be known as the 'social interpretation' of the revolution, an interpretation which broke from the dominant interpretation of previous English historiography, chiselled out in the nineteenth century by S R Gardiner, and maintained in the twentieth by G M Trevelyan, that the revolution was purely an ideologico-political event. In his *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, written in 1912, Tawney had argued that the redistribution of monastic lands in the sixteenth century unleashed an aggressive rural capitalism. The 'rise of the gentry' thus triggered was in turn in part predicated on a collapse in the fortunes of the aristocracy, who stood thus exposed and historically anachronistic. The Civil War was nothing more than a process of readjustment, a political settling of socio-economic accounts, whereby the imbalance between the declining aristocracy and rising gentry at the level of the state could be corrected, and it was this latter force, for good or ill (and for Tawney it was a mixture of the two), that had triumphed with the settlements of 1660 and 1689.

Thus in essence all that Hill had done that was new was to restate Tawney's social interpretation with explicit Marxist terminology. For Hill, what had happened in seventeenth-century England was specifically a *bourgeois* revolution, in which a social class based on capitalist social relations, temporarily allied with a more or less plebeian mass, pitched itself and overthrew and outmoded, historically regressive class of feudal aristocrats. The comparison Hill made here with France was telling. Equally telling was Hill's assertion that

> The seventeenth-century English revolution changed the organisation of society so as to make possible the full development of all the resources of that society. A transition to socialism will be necessary to win the same result in England [*sic*] today.[5]

(Interestingly enough, Hill's essay was the subject of a most unfavourable review in the *New Statesman* at the hands of none other than George Orwell, who saw in Hill's account the heavy hand of what he, Orwell, called 'official Marxism' (and what many others would label 'Stalinism'). 'A "Marxist" analysis of any historical event tends to be a hurried snap judgement based on the principle of *cui bono?*' Orwell snapped. 'Something rather like the "realism" of the saloon-bar cynic who always assumes the bishop is keeping a mistress and the trade union leader is in the pay of the boss.'[6])

But the fundamental difficulty with Hill's (and Tawney's) interpretation was that, in the light of the wave of 'revisionist' historiography which it provoked, it was to be proved false in practically every respect. Most damagingly, it has subsequently been impossible to sustain the notion that there existed two distinct social classes of 'gentry' and 'nobles' either prior to or during the Revolution. What *can* be determined is the existence of a single socio-economic elite of large landowners, both ennobled and not – and there was much social traffic between the two categories – whose incomes came in major part from the leasing of property. Moreover, this group did not suffer a decline prior to the Revolution: rather than there being a 'decline of the aristocracy', the last quarter of the sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth was a period of agricultural improvement in which both rents and food prices rose to the benefit of both 'nobles' and 'gentry'. It is fair to say that, after the assault of the revisionist historiography of the 1950s and 60s, the 'social interpretation', in both its social-democratic (Tawney) and Marxist (Hill) guises, lay in ruins.[7] Indeed, as Tawney himself was subsequently to

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[4] Ibid., 26-7.

[5] *The English Revolution 1640*, 19, n. 3.

[6] *The Guardian* (9 March, 2003).

[7] It is not possible here to go into more of the details of these debates. For further reading both of the most satisfying summary accounts come from the pen of Robert Brenner: see the Postscript to his *Merchants and Revolution* (Cambridge,

comment on the Civil War: 'Was it a bourgeois revolution? Of course it was a bourgeois revolution. The trouble is the bourgeoisie was on both sides.'

What was Hill's response to this state of affairs? Curiously, it was one of effective retreat. Although a great deal of what he subsequently wrote is indeed of real value (taken on its own terms, for example his 1972 study of radical ideas within the revolutionary movement *The World Turned Upside Down* is a wonderfully fascinating book, even if it is true that, and this is symptomatic of Hill's difficulties, that the ideas dealt with are done so if not outside of the realm of social consciousness then at least separated from their roots in the dynamics of the social – economic – relations that produced them), it lacks the earlier intention of explaining and interpreting the motor forces of the Revolution: not only did Hill not restate the outline interpretation developed in *The English Revolution 1640*, he did not seek to develop it in the light of the revisionist critique either. He simply abandoned it; as he turned his attention away from the study of classes in the revolution, he concentrated on the role of ideas, with a special fixation on the conception of Puritanism ('The Civil War was largely fought by Puritans,' as he would subsequently write[8]). In fact, the closest that Hill would get to addressing the concerns he first raised in 1940 was during a BBC talk given in 1973:

> I certainly think it was a revolution [...]. I would see the English Revolution of the seventeenth century as clearing the path for the sort of economic development which made the industrial revolution happen in England first. [...] I would think of what happened in the seventeenth century as being, in a Marxist sense, a bourgeois revolution. I don't think the two classes lined up to fight [...]. There were members of all classes on both sides. But what I think I understand by a bourgeois revolution is not a revolution in which the bourgeoisie did the fighting [...] but a revolution whose outcome is the clearing of the decks for capitalism.[9]

However one takes this assessment (and for my money it is both circular and question-begging: that a bourgeois revolution 'clears the decks' for capitalism is surely to state the obvious, but why and how this would come about if the 'bourgeoisie' remained marginal to proceedings surely merits more discussion) it is clear that it marks a significant shift from the position of 1940. All the more strange, therefore, that – whatever other merit Hill's work may contain – he never successfully pursued this central problem of historical methodology.[10]

Croce once famously remarked that 'all history is contemporary history', and we can read more than one inference into this aphorism. It is noticeable that, with the exception of the *The English Revolution 1640* and his first major research work *Economic Problems of the Church* (1956), all of Hill's significant published work was undertaken after his break with the Communist Party. Could it not be the case that the unworkable model developed earlier was abandoned alongside his party membership? That Hill discarded the 'official Marxism' demanded by the Party when he was no longer obliged to propagate it?

Even though unfortunately all we can do here is speculate as to the nature of Hill's thinking on this matter these are not idle questions. The failure of the 'social interpretation' of the English Revolution has had a deleterious effect not only on the study of history itself but on the reputation of Marxism as a serious tool of historical analysis. While the Tory Anglicans of the 1950s only sought to debunk the concept of social class as a tool of analysis of the English Revolution, the 'punk-Thatcherite' generation which followed (Conrad Russell and J C D Clarke in the van) has questioned whether the whole idea of an English 'Revolution' itself is a myth. Since it is clear that for both Hill and Tawney their interpretation of the past was also designed to serve as an analogy for the future the stakes raised by these debates are high. But it is also clear that any attempt to resurrect the notion that class struggle and social revolution are the levers of social change will necessarily have to begin with a rejection of the model of the English Revolution advanced by Hill. It is thus sad to conclude that while in its

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1993) and the article 'Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism' in A L Beier et al (eds.) *The First Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989).

[8] *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), 314.

[9] *The Listener* (4 October, 1973), 448-9.

[10] Space precludes a textual analysis of the different characterisations of the Revolution that Hill deployed, a task however already skilfully performed by Brian Manning in 'God, Hill and Marx', *International Socialism* 59 (Summer 1993).

marginalia we can find useful and interesting insights, at the heart of Hill's work all we see is a gaping methodological void. Now this, for a Marxist historian, is indeed a most disappointing legacy.

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