

CHRISTOPHER HILL: METHODISM AND MARXISM

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Christopher Hill, the eminent historian of seventeenth-century England, was a convinced Marxist throughout most of his long and productive life. He embraced this secular world-view when he was a young History student at Oxford in the polemical 1930s and never lost his ideological commitment, even though he resigned from the British Communist Party in 1957, after the defeat of an internal party reform group to which he had devoted his energies.

Marxism as a model of theory and practice provided for him both a framework of past history and a promise of a future equality. It also identified class struggle as the motor force for revolutionary change. These ideas formed the basis of the Marxist interpretation of seventeenth-century English history that he developed and refined over many years.

Writing at the age of 80, Hill plainly reiterated the continuity of his views: *'I have changed my vocabulary but I do not think I have shifted very far on my main "Marxist" point about seventeenth-century England. I still think that the events between 1640 and 1660 are aptly described as a revolution, since they led to vast changes in the history of England and of the world.'*

Accordingly, there is no doubt about the strength of his commitment. Moreover, Hill often declared that his 'second university' was provided by the fruitful debates held in the postwar years between the numerous members of the Communist Party's Historians Group. He greatly valued these discussions not only for their intellectual buzz but also for the enduring friendships that developed with magnetic historians on the left, such as Eric Hobsbawm, E.P.

Thompson, Dorothy Thompson, and Rodney Hilton.

At the same time, however, Hill had an early life before Marxism. There was a ‘conservative Christopher’, whose arrival at Balliol as a brilliant but painfully shy young man was recalled by some of the older dons. At that point, he was a regular chapel-goer. He was supremely well versed in theology and the Bible, being steeped in a strong family tradition of staunch Yorkshire Methodism. Oxford and student life quickly liberated him from all religious observance. Nonetheless, when reviewing Hill’s work and lifestyle as a whole, after his death in 2003, I was struck by the echoes of his upbringing that remained manifest throughout his long life. The links, however, were not spiritual or theological. Instead, they took the form of moral and intellectual values that appealed to his own cast of mind. Thus his story is very much a personal one, but it also throws light on the often-observed strand of connection between religious nonconformity and left-wing politics.

For example, much of the simplicity of ‘plain living’ dissent remained deeply congenial to Hill. Like his parents, he valued hard work, uprightness, decency, truthfulness, sincerity, moral commitment, care for others, lack of ostentation, and personal stoicism. ‘No fuss’ was the instinctive family motto. Of course, these values are not unique to Methodism; but it was the specific Methodist ‘package’ of respectable but Dissenting ‘outsiderdom’ that was imbibed by the young Hill.

It was often remarked that in his own manners and lifestyle, Hill retained much of the aura of a dignified Puritan, while being unfailingly tolerant of other people’s alternative options. He cherished the spirited willingness to challenge orthodoxy that was the hallmark of seventeenth-century Dissent. It was like wine, he wrote in a telling phrase, while the censoriousness of Victorian nonconformity had turned the wine into bitter vinegar. For himself, he sought an updated version of that intoxicating independence, which sustained him in his controversial unorthodoxy as a Marxist in twentieth-century Britain.

Hill: Marxism and Methodism

As well as underpinning his personal morality, Methodism also gave the young Hill a confident trust in a holistic world-view. That too appealed to something within his own personality. When he left Methodism, he was not looking for an alternative religion. He was, however, attracted by the prospect of a secular ideology that would link everything together into a coherent whole.

Later in life, he was often questioned ‘Why did you become a Marxist?’, to which he would answer gravely: ‘Through reading the metaphysical poets’. His reply, which was highly characteristic of the reticent Hill, usually succeeded in silencing his questioners.

Nonetheless, his cryptic comment had an inner meaning. It referred to a dictum from T.S. Eliot, who declared that the great religious poets of the early seventeenth century, such as John Donne and Henry Vaughan, were the last in English history to fuse thought and feeling integrally together. After them, there was instead a ‘dissociation of sensibility’. Whether Eliot was correct in his literary analysis or not, the metaphysicals for Hill represented an admired fusion of head and heart. That emotional and intellectual synthesis he found in Marxism.

Above all, Hill as a questioning teenager had also gained a key inspiration from one charismatic Methodist circuit preacher, named T.S. Gregory. He thundered from the pulpit a passionate message of theological egalitarianism: ‘We are all one in the eyes of the Lord’. The poorest and meanest beggar outside the doors was the spiritual equal of every person within the respectable York congregation.

‘God is in man - in the vilest of men - or else He doesn’t matter’, wrote Gregory provocatively, in the published text of one sermon. Many of his listeners were rather shocked at this formulation. Hill, however, remembered being fired with enthusiasm at the sentiment and with doubt as to why a loving God should permit so many injustices to prevail in the world.

The two men spent hours talking intently together. T.S. Gregory was also

in quest, critical of established religious forms. Outward structures had no truth without inner meaning, he warned Hill. A few years later, Gregory found his own answer in a move from Methodism to Catholicism, not for its Popish ritual but for its historical claims to spiritual universality.

For Christopher Hill, however, the outcome of his intellectual questioning led to a loss of faith. Instead, it was Marxism that for him explained why equality was not possible in either past or present eras of class conflict. Yet the cause of justice was not lost. Marxism also predicted that the revolutionary dynamic of history would eventually produce an egalitarian alternative. ‘In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms’, the *Communist Manifesto* foretold, ‘we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’.

Hill became a Marxist because he was an egalitarian, rather than *vice versa*. His credo was not a spiritual assertion that ‘We are all one in the eyes of the Lord’ but, simply, ‘We are all one’. He loved the greeting adopted by the Ranters, the seventeenth-century religious and sexual free-thinkers, who saluted one another with the phrase ‘My one flesh’, indicating that all humans are brothers and sisters under the skin. This view could readily transpose into a secular message of international cooperation, to be applied not in the next world but in this.

True, the communist alternative did not materialise as he expected. We have not yet found a way to live together freely, fairly, and equally. But Hill believed that, through the dynamics of history and struggle, one day we will.

Note on the author:

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