

## PJC BOOK REVIEW 22

**David Parker (ed.), *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the British Communist Historians* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2008), pp. 285 ISBN 978 1905 007868 (hdbk). Price: £19.00**

**Review by: Penelope J. Corfield**

**Published in**

***English Historical Review*, 125 (June 2010), pp. 786-7**

***Text subject to minor editorial corrections since publication in 2010, although the message is unchanged.***

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Firstly, a declaration of interest: as the niece of Christopher Hill, the eminent Marxist historian, I must declare my warm affection for him. However, nieces are by no means obliged to agree with uncles over questions of historical periodisation. Hence this review is coloured by personal interest, not Hill partisanship.

The debates within the Communist Historians Group, which are recovered from obscurity in this welcome edition by David Parker, happened in the later 1940s and early 1950s. Many of those involved, Christopher Hill among them, have recorded the intense stimulus that they gained from the experience. Most of the Group were academics but they were joined by lively-minded schoolteachers, professionals, writers and trade-unionists. Their meetings were held off-campus, with rival position papers being tabled for debate, within what was then a live intellectual tradition. The common agenda was the quest to marry empirical research with an understanding of history's grand trajectory.

David Parker's excellent introduction (pp. 9-71) makes it clear that, in practice, the waters were frequently muddied by the complexities of the past rather than clarified by the application of Marxist theory. Yet he stresses the richness of the rival interpretations, as demonstrated by extensive extracts from key presentations relating to European history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (pp. 72-245).

In the long term, the Group's meetings both contributed and responded to diversification, liberalisation, and, ultimately, fragmentation within the British Communist Party. Palme Dutt, the Stalinist editor of *Labour Monthly*, who was initially benign, kept an increasingly irritated eye upon their disputations. Many of these comrades resigned in the crisis year of 1956. The immediate trigger was the failure of their campaign for internal Party democracy, in which historians like Hill and E.P. Thompson were active. After that, the Group was sundered. There were some half-hearted attempts at organising new networks, both within and outside the Party, but the collective momentum had gone. It was left to individual participants to expound (or in some cases, as in Eric Kerridge, to reject) a *Marxisant* interpretation of history.

Organisationally, the Group did have an indirect off-spring in the form of the larger and looser History Workshop movement (1967- ). That was launched from Oxford University's adult education stronghold, Ruskin College, by Raphael Samuel, who as a student had attended some of the last meetings of the Historians Group. The Workshop similarly tried to link 'workers' and 'intellectuals' in the quest to study historical memory. It quickly added 'feminists' (male and female) into the encounters too. But its discussions have also become fragmented over time. Thus, like the CP Historians Group, the Workshop found diversity and fragmentation, however fertile, rather than consensus.

How to assess the relative balance between historical change and continuity remained a continually vexed question. For the most active of the Communist

Historians Groups, focusing upon the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the debates centred around the status of the 'English Revolution' of 1640-60. The central confrontation occurred between Christopher Hill and Victor Kiernan. If the English regime before 1640 was already transformed into a 'capitalist' enterprise, then the mid-seventeenth-century crisis was no longer a 'bourgeois revolution'. That was Kiernan's starting position. Hill disagreed, stressing the retrogressive nature of the Tudor and early Stuart monarchy, as a feudal landowners' state, even if not a fully absolutist system on the continental European model. Majority opinion within the Group swung behind Hill. His supporters claimed 'a good victory', as declared by the muse of the Historians' Group, Dona Torr (who is annoyingly misnamed as Donna Torr at various points).

Nonetheless, the core issue remained obstinately unsettled. As Parker demonstrates, the rival positions were not nearly as far apart in their detail as they seemed in principle. Hill agreed that there were numerous prior changes, which put the old regime under pressure. And at a tense meeting in January 1948 (not 1648, as Parker's typo amusingly suggests), Kiernan made some concessions to the alternative view. So, while Hill's version of Marxist orthodoxy was upheld, the evidence was capable of many interpretations. The debates since the 1950s have more than confirmed that potential for diversity. Christopher Hill in particular was much attacked in the 1970s and 1980s by historical 'revisionists' like Conrad Russell, who denied the existence of anything like a 'bourgeois revolution' whether in the sixteenth century or in the seventeenth century.

Thus David Parker's documentation is doubly informative. It illuminates the continuing problems in historians' attempts at categorising significant change and simultaneously highlights both the extent and limitations of liberal debates among the pre-1956 British communist intelligentsia. Good new research will always argue with the old and complicate (enrich, fragment) history's grand story. But the quest for integrated understanding remains inescapable, as these Marxists knew.