



Pasi Ihalainen. *The Discourse on Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Conceptual Study with Special Reference to Terminology of Religious Origin.* Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1999. 375 pp. 140 markkaa (paper), ISBN 978-951-710-100-4.



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The overarching theme of Ihalainen's awkwardly titled book is the ways in which, albeit gradually and tentatively, men (and presumably women) in eighteenth-century England came to accept an increasing diversity of political views and opinions and to acknowledge that rival political groupings could exist side by side without the world being turned upside down. Although Ihalainen is careful to stress that this did not mean that modern notions of political pluralism were ever a feature of the period, nevertheless he does argue that it was this grudging recognition of differing political views in the early eighteenth century which was a major factor distinguishing England from Europe. In providing the primary evidence for his account Ihalainen has trawled through a variety of printed sources from the first half of the eighteenth century in his attempt to gauge contemporary attitudes to political diversity.

This could be regarded as an important and potentially significant theme, but in practice this is a rather problematic account. First, much of this book is merely a fairly competent summary of the recent secondary literature relating to the political and religious history of the age. Certainly scholars of the period will be surprised to see such extensive quotation from the secondary literature, and the book needs to have a greater sense of independence. Second, it could be argued that Ihalainen's

focus on the early eighteenth century as the period when political pluralism was accepted exaggerates both the extent to which political diversity had been regarded as an anathema in previous periods and the extent to which it had been normalized by 1750. Factions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had, of course, as their very *raison d'être* the expression of rival political views, and the unity and uniformity enshrined in much early modern political discourse was in practice more flexible and more tolerant of opposing views than is sometimes allowed.

Moreover, the focus on eighteenth-century political pluralism (by which Ihalainen really means the acceptance of opposing political parties) might obscure more overarching forces of political and cultural unity – such as Britishness and the stress on politeness – under which lesser political pluralism was subsumed. It may be that Ihalainen is so interested in charting the acceptance of political diversity that he misses the bigger picture and the more potent ways in which political uniformity was maintained.

Central to Ihalainen's analysis is the ways in which the language of politics gradually separated itself from the discourse of religion. Many scholars would agree with his insistence that at the start of his period politics could only be discussed through religious priorities and

in accord with many revisionist accounts he acknowledges the central role of religion in 1700. This leads Ihalainen to suggest that before political diversity could be accepted religious diversity would have to be acknowledged and he shrewdly points out that the stress of moderation and toleration in the religious sphere contained the possibility of the acceptance of alternative points of view in the political sphere. The exploration of this central point could have provided a much tighter focus for the book (and could have been used to examine J.C.D. Clark's argument that it was not until the religious changes of the later 1820s that the political *ancien regime* collapsed).

Ihalainen is particularly interesting on the ways in which political opponents were increasingly not charged with being heretics and schismatics, and the ways in which religious sects and political parties were seen by the mid century as distinct. In all this, he highlights the 1720s as a pivotal decade and as the point when an independent political language emerged, but he does not explain why this decade should have been so important. And although he warns us against pre-dating the onset of secularization, he ultimately accepts the broader paradigm by arguing for a secularization of politics by the mid eighteenth century. Yet it could be argued (as Clark surely would) that the period after 1750 saw religion playing a crucial part in politics, and thus the eventual separation of politics from religion was not perhaps as clear-cut or decisive as Ihalainen maintains.

But probably the most controversial aspect of this book is his methodology. Ihalainen trumpets the importance of what he calls the "conceptual approach." This, apparently, is a well-used form of analysis in German academic circles. For those of us unsure about what is meant by this type of historical enquiry, he explains that it "takes the changing meaning of concepts as major units of historical analysis." (p. 37) For Ihalainen "concepts" – such as "party," "faction," or "sect" – replace alternative objects of historical study and their changing meanings can be taken as a register of change in political and social history. This is of course debatable, and in making claims for the novelty of his approach he is surely claim-

ing far too much. Is the history of concepts really so very different from the history of discourse as exemplified by the writings of Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock? Ihalainen thinks it is and maintains that whereas Skinner would argue that there can be no history of concepts *per se* but only a history of their uses in political argument, he can go beyond that. Even more controversially, Ihalainen argues that his kind of history moves beyond the Skinnerian analysis of the political history of some individuals to cover the history of the political nation at large.

These are massive claims, and this reviewer was not convinced by them. The conceptual approach – at least as exemplified by this account – is liable to the charge of lumping. It misses the significant and subtle nuances of social status, gender, and region, which worked against any simple universal shift in attitudes. For instance, seeing the early eighteenth century as a period which witnessed the acceptance of political pluralism would have seemed strange for those living in Scotland, Ireland, or for those professing Jacobite tendencies.

Furthermore, the evidence which Ihalainen uses to support his claims is also problematic. The original research for this book is wholly dependent on the reading of printed material, in particular dictionaries, treatises, periodical essays, pamphlets, and sermons, all of which Ihalainen has subjected to computer analysis. But there is little understanding that these kinds of sources all have their methodological problems and have to be interpreted with care. The statements about political life which can be found in them would have been shaped by genre, audience, stereotypes and caricatures. Evidence from these sources needs to be supplemented by that from the archives to gain a better understanding of how people thought about and behaved towards their political rivals. In short, the case for a "conceptual" shift in attitudes towards political life in the early eighteenth century still has to be made.

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