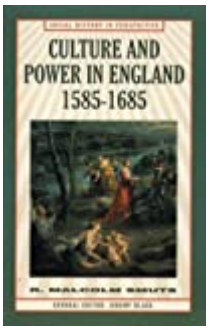
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



R Malcolm Smuts. *Culture and Power in England, 1585-1685.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. xi + 201 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-22328-1.

Reviewed by Roger Manning (Department of History, Cleveland State University)

Published on H-Albion (June, 2001)

Political Cultures and Historical Contexts

Political Cultures and Historical Contexts

Cultural history is not new; it has been written by the practitioners of *Kulturgeschichte* to explicate the more aesthetic aspects of high culture, but with the politics left out. More recent varieties of cultural history, written within the last generation or so, attempt to reintegrate politics and cultural phenomena, usually attempting to include both high and low cultures. Although some of the practitioners of cultural history have come from the historical profession, more have come from the fields of literary studies and art history as literary specialists and others have rediscovered that works of literature and artistic creations all had historical contexts–an idea which would have astounded some of the English professors I had as an undergraduate. Fortunately, the growth of interdisciplinary studies has banished the old orthodoxies, and historians now understand that they must also explore the works print culture as well as delving into the archives–although literary folk sometimes continue to be timid about venturing into the archives.

Malcolm Smuts has written a very useful introduction to the political culture of late-Elizabethan and Stuart England. I use the term "political culture" in the singular deliberately because he really concentrates on the politics of the court–the subject that he does so well. Professor Smuts notices the other cultures such as urban, provincial, and martial cultures, but he regards them as peripheral. Although one might quibble about his conceptualization concerning the varieties of political cultures, it is difficult to disagree with his advocacy of a broad-based assault on the archives as well as a thorough examination of the many items catalogued in *The Short Title Catalogue of Early English Printed Books.* However, as a certified cultural historian, he ought to be wary about expressing the belief that such a methodology will banish all ideological taints, such as Whiggism and Marxism from the minds of historical investigators. This assertion is based upon Smuts's assumption that as historical explanation becomes more complex, particular ideological biases become less tenable. As one comes to understand that cultural norms, religious sanctions, customs, traditions, and views of the past determined belief and supported political authority in the state as well as in the family and household, one cannot continue to sustain the assumption that only market forces, concepts of property rights

and class conflict shaped historical change. But, the danger remains that all aspects of this complex political culture can ultimately be reduced to questions of who is it that possesses and exercises power and who owes allegiance and obedience. It is difficult to purge historians of the tendency to over-simplification.

The chronological limits of *Culture and Power in England* are the death of Sir Philip Sidney (1586) and the death of Charles II (1685). The discussion is focused largely on the national level. Although the author states that he is attempting a synthesis of Elizabethan and Stuart political culture, he modestly states that this will not always be possible, and he will sometimes have to pose a question rather than stating a generalization. Thematically, this study of political culture is organized around four topics: concepts of honor, the common law in theory and practice, perceptions of the operation of Divine Providence, and classical humanist tools of political analysis.

In his discussion of honor, Smuts has probably underestimated the influence of the chivalric revival in England. While he does recognize that many English aristocrats served in the continental wars, he misses the opportunity to connect that chivalric revival with the official English intervention in the Netherlands in 1585, preferring instead to emphasize the symbolism of Sidney's death at Zutphen. Although stay-at-home peers and gentry commissioned architects and artists to celebrate the deeds of warrior ancestors, increasingly it was believed that honor had to be validated in every generation by feats of arms and valor on the battlefield, and this could not be done by remaining at home upon one's estates or in constant attendance at court. Smuts is right in emphasizing the persistence of dueling in aristocratic circles, but perhaps exaggerates the extent to which the tiltyard provided an outlet for aggressive behavior. Dueling long outlived jousting, and presented a fundamental challenge to the exclusive claim of the sovereign to wield the sword of justice. The sale of honors and peerages by the early-Stuart monarchs also raised the question whether the king was the sole fount of honor, or whether he could merely recognize that honor which had been earned elsewhere by the display of virtue through valiant and noble deeds.

Smuts shows much greater subtlety in discussing the ambiguities present in English legal discourse than he does in attempting to fathom the many and diverse concepts of honor. He presents a valuable synthesis of the recent findings of legal historians concerning the ancient constitution and the Stuart royal prerogative, showing that Sir Edward Coke was less representative of the so-called "common-law mind" than previously supposed, that many English jurists were insular, and that the quality and quantity of legal knowledge acquired by the country gentry while biding their time at the Inns of Court has been exaggerated. The "artificial reasoning" of the common lawyers was comprehensible only to a few, and most thought Law French was gibberish. Legal thought was dense enough to be accessible only to a few, and its face brutal enough that one can raise the question of how widely it was respected in late Elizabethan and Stuart England. Certainly, James VI and I had little regard for English common law when he thought about his projects for uniting the Three Kingdoms. However, the encroachment of the royal prerogative upon what were conceived of as the liberties of the subject were productive of a combative kind of popular discourse that was more comprehensible when lesser men of property and even ordinary villagers picked up enough of the law of customary use-rights and tenures to take on their landlords in courts of law or in popular demonstrations. Thus, while more abstruse legal theories were accessible only to a few, the commonalty could make good use of particular legal arguments against attacks from rapacious neighbors or tyrannical monarchs.

While providential explanations of the unfolding of history as sacred drama could be used to uphold patriarchal authority (like the popular exploitation of particular legal arguments), providential explanations could be used in popular as well as learned discourses to subvert one authority, such as that of a king or bishops, in favor of other sources of authority, such as the Bible, conscience or interior revelation.

A classical humanist education provided linguistic and analytical tools for guiding individual behavior, for understanding politics, and, together with the study of the Bible, it provided a yardstick for looking beneath the surface and measuring contemporary political and ecclesiastical societies by the standards of those of the ancient world. Excessive doses of Taciteanism–brilliantly discussed by Smuts–could breed skepticism and develop a taste for oligarchical republicanism like that displayed by Algernon Sidney. In short, concepts of honor, as promoted by the chivalric revival, when combined with discourses learned from theology, Biblical studies, law and classical studies stimulated the political imagination in new and revolutionary ways. Smuts's concern with courtly culture and politics might seem excessive to some, but his excellent analysis of courtly poetry

does demonstrate that poets, within and on the fringe of courtier circles, not only engaged in panegyrics of royal authority but also, following classical models, employed their subtle literary talents to criticize the exercise of authority by monarchs and their ministers of state. Smuts sees this discourse as having entered the public sphere much earlier than has been supposed. Although partly dependent upon a combination of print and discussion in forums such as taverns, coffee houses, and country house gatherings, this public discourse needed to be more cryptic and so diffusion by manuscript circulation was resorted to, as well as gossip, plays and sermons. One form the poetic discourse took was a nostalgia for Sir Philip Sidney and the imagined golden age of Elizabeth, which looked back to a chivalric hero and the idealized queen that Sidney and the second earl of Essex would have liked to have served. Although eventually finding its way into print, this highly political poetry for a long time circulated only in manuscript and was largely confined to aristocratic circles.

In the next section, Smuts tells us that studies of ideology and high politics during the period of the civil wars have not proved very helpful in explaining the choice of allegiances by participants–especially where individuals changed sides several times. An exploration of the problem of allegiance through social and cultural studies promises better tools of analysis, but the problem remains formidably complex–especially as it comes to be accepted that the civil wars can only be understood in a wider British and Irish context (which means that some of us historians of England are going to have to retool!).

Explaining the growth of republican thought in England before the execution of Charles I in 1649 has remained a challenge to historians of Stuart England. Hobbes in his *Behemoth* had attributed this phenomenon to the classical humanist education of the gentry and aristocracy. Although this classical republicanism never constituted an ideology before the execution of Charles I , recent historians of political culture have demonstrated that the existence of republican ideas, which perceived the origin of nobility in virtue and merit rather than royal favor, were already widespread among the educated. However, such classical influences probably converted very few members of the aristocracy to a republican ideology, and, in any case, the nobility had already lost political power by the time of the king's death.

Smuts sees sectarian religious thought as a more likely source of republican ideology than secular humanism. The English republicanism which emerged in the Commonwealth originated in the claims for liberty of conscience which emanated from religious radicals. The argument that the political nation (or, at least the godly) should be free to elect their own governors was closely bound up with the claim from radical sectarians that they should be free to erect their own gathered congregations.

Influential republican theorists, such as Marchamont Needham, were also advocates of military expansion and an armed citizenry which was compatible with the assumption of English martialists that honor and virtue must be displayed on the battlefield and in vindication of Protestant liberties–whether in mainland Europe or on the high seas–in ways that the early-Stuart monarchs had neglected to do. This justified, for example, attacks on both the Spanish, who were viewed as the international fomenters of popery, and upon the Dutch who had abandoned their advocacy of Protestant freedoms and republicanism by their embracing of a semi-monarchical state dominated by the House of Orange and supportive of and allied to the exiled Stuarts. It also became necessary to chastise the Scots for "similar vices." "All British governments of the 1650s sought to justify themselves through a blend of religious and republican rhetoric, involving godliness, liberty and military success" (p. 130). Cromwell was successful, of course, because he followed this same formula. The difficulty was that the the Commonwealth and Protectorate governments never enjoyed wide support and the taxpayers grew tired of supporting the fighting forces and paying for the costs of war.

The Restoration which followed was less a repudiation of republicanism than a rejection of soldier politicians and religious radicals. This dislike of sectaries grew into a more general dislike of Puritans in general. Yet the failure of the Restoration monarchy to remain militarily assertive in the international sphere was not just a matter of the financial inability of Charles II's government to compete with the military successes of the Commonwealth and Protectorate; it was also perceived (as Marchamont Needham had asserted) that "republics are virtuous and militarily strong while monarchies are naturally corrupt, extravagant and weak" (p. 148).

As might be expected from a historian who has published important and influential studies of the English court [1], Smuts's book provides a superb introduction to the cultural history of court life for undergraduate and beginning graduate students. That was, after all, where most of the political power was concentrated. Smuts's discussion of urban and provincial cultures is less thorough, and he barely acknowledges the existence of a

martial culture whose values sent thousands of aristocratic volunteers to the wars of mainland Europe–not to mention the tens of thousands of ordinary soldiers who were impressed for service overseas from the British Isles. Many of the surviving veterans of these European wars would return to fight in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.[2]

NOTES

[1]. *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England* (Philadelphia, 1987); (ed.), *The Stuart Court and Europe: Essays in Politics and Political Culture* (Cambridge, 1996).

[2]. Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The Experience of the British Civil Wars* (London, 1992), esp. p. 19.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Roger Manning. Review of Smuts, R Malcolm, *Culture and Power in England, 1585-1685.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5226