The Historical Journal, 47, 3 (2004), pp. 591–613
DOI: 10.1017/S0018246X04003875 Printed in the United Kingdom

WHAT WERE COMMONWEALTH PRINCIPLES?

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ABSTRACT. *The historiography of English republicanism is dominated by the concept of classical republicanism. Its greatest shortcoming has been neglect of that subject's religious dimension. The consequent need is not simply to recover the radical protestant republican religious agenda. It is to explain why, when classical republicanism came to England, it did so in the moral service of a religious revolution. One context for the answer lay in Christian humanism. Another was the reformation, both magisterial and radical. Both informed the practical identity of the republican experiment as an attempted reformation of manners. So did the rational Greek moral philosophy, as indebted to Plato as to Aristotle, common to certain humanist and Christian political languages. In addition many of the themes of republican writing reflect the struggle by a traditional society to respond to unsettling forces, not only of political and religious, but also social and economic, change. Drawing upon all of these contexts, republican writers attempted to oppose not only private interest politics, embodied by monarchy or tyranny, on behalf of the public interested virtues of a self-governing civic community. This was part of a more general critique of private interest society; a republican attempt, from pride, greed, poverty, and inequality, to go beyond the word 'commonwealth' and reconstitute what Milton called 'the solid thing'.*

I

We may begin, as linguistic contextualism demands, with the word, or what Thomas More called 'the name and title of the commonwealth'.[1] In early modern England the word 'commonwealth' was ubiquitous. It was also, until the mid-seventeenth century, relatively uncontroversial. Capable of referring to the public social, or political community, or both, to invoke commonwealth principles was to subscribe to the Platonic and Aristotelian commonplace that whatever its constitutional form government must be directed to the public good. In a related sense 'commonwealth' was the English rendering of the latin *res publica*, meaning literally 'public thing', and defined by Cicero as 'the concern of a people … associated with one another through agreement on law [in Augustine 'a common sense of right'] and community of interest'.[2]

[1] Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. G. M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge, 1989), p. 39.

[2] Cicero, *On the commonwealth*, in James Zetzel, ed., *On the commonwealth and on the laws* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 18; Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 73; W. K. Lacey and B. W. J. G. Wilson, *Res publica: Roman politics and society according to Cicero* (Oxford, 1970), p. 1. Most

In his consideration of what the full title of *Utopia* called 'the best state of a commonwealth' More aligned himself with Plato's treatment of this question against that of Cicero.[3] When Bodin's *Six livres de la republique* was translated into English as *Six bookes of a commonweale* it emphasized that its concern was to clarify not, with Plato and More, how commonwealths ought to be, but what they actually were, in which connection the efforts of Aristotle and Cicero left much room for improvement.[4] When Hobbes approached the same task in 1651 in his 'discourse of a Common-wealth' it began, as Bodin had, with the definition of 'a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man'.[5] Thus when, a year after the publication of *Leviathan*, Marchamont Nedham defended England's new republican government with what he called 'good *Commonwealth* Language' this was, etymologically at least, unremarkable.[6] Following a period of conflict during which the commonwealth had in fact been torn asunder, Nedham spoke for one of a variety of groups each claiming to stand for, or be solely capable of serving, the public interest. In this context his controversial claim consisted in the identification of that general moral interest with a specific political form; with what he called

> the *Declared Interest* of a *Free State* or *Common-weal* … remembring, that we are now put into a better course … I conceived nothing could more highly tend to the propogation of this *Interest*, and the honour of its Founders, then … that the People … may … understand what *Common-weal Principles* are, and thereby … learn to be true Commonwealth's men, and zealous against *Monarchick Interest*, in all its Appearances and Incroachments whatsoever.[7]

It was perhaps a measure of the success of mid-century republican writers in associating a terminology which had been universal with a particular political position that by 1681 Algernon Sidney and Sir William Jones were driven to express their indignation that to be reputed a 'commonwealthsman' had become a brand of infamy. For

> if a Common-wealth signifies the common good, in which sense it hath in all ages been used … and which Bodin puts upon it when he calls [France] a republic, no good man will be ashamed of it … It is strange how the word should so change its signification with us in the space of twenty years. All monarchies … that are not purely barbarous and tyrannical,

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broadly *res publica* denoted less a specific form of government than 'that public realm of affairs which people had in common outside their familial lives … [their] *res privata*'. Knud Haakonssen, 'Republicanism', in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds., *A companion to contemporary political philosophy* (Oxford, 1993), p. 569.

[3] More, *Utopia*, pp. 35–7; Quentin Skinner, 'Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the language of renaissance humanism', in A. Pagden, ed., *The languages of political theory in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987).

[4] Jean Bodin, *Six bookes of a commonweale*, a facsimile reprint of the English translation of 1606 by Richard Knolles, ed. K. D. McRae (Cambridge, MA, 1962), pp. 1–3.

[5] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1, 3, 9.

[6] [Marchamont Nedham], *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 79, p. 1257.

[7] Ibid., no. 92, March 1652, pp. 1457–8.

have ever been called Common-wealths. Rome itself altered not that name, when it fell under the sword of the Caesars … And in our days, it doth not only belong to Venice, Genoa, Switzerland, and the United Provinces … but to Germany, Spain, France, Sweden, Poland, and all the kingdoms of Europe.[8]

According to the famous dictum of John Pocock, 'republicanism in England was a language, not a programme'.[9] Building upon the work of Zera Fink and Hans Baron, Pocock juxtaposed what he called the language of classical republicanism to another political language of natural law, and rights, used by the Levellers and Locke, the American impact of which had, he argued, been greatly exaggerated. American critics responded by reversing these claims, emphasizing the liberal origins of American political thought, and disputing the existence of early modern classical republicanism altogether.[10] Quentin Skinner, meanwhile, has located an alternative classical republicanism, not Greek in basis as Pocock suggested, but Roman.[11] In fact concerning the importance within seventeenth-century England of a republican moral philosophy derived from Plato and Aristotle, and thereafter augmented, but not replaced, by Cicero, Livy, and others, there seems no doubt. Even some of the key features of the 'neo-Roman' theory of liberty upon which Skinner has focused, far from emanating exclusively from Roman sources, were indebted to an Aristotelian formulation itself deriving from Plato's *Laws*.[12] This was observed by Hobbes, according to whom, on the subject of 'Libertie … as *Aristotle* … so *Cicero*.'[13] Thus Sidney praised 'Aristotle … Plato, Plutarch, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, and all the ancient Grecians, Italians and others who asserted the natural freedom of mankind.'[14] At the same time, however, there were few seventeenth-century republicans who did not *also* extensively use the language of natural law and rights. Far from being mutually exclusive, classical republicanism and natural law theory shared an appeal to the faculty of human reason which was Greek in origin, but frequently in the early modern period Christian in application. Thus in America, too, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams spoke of what they 'called revolution principles. They are the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero, and Sydney, Harrington and Locke. The principles of nature and eternal reason. The principles on which the whole government over us, now stands.'[15]

[8] [Algernon Sidney and Sir William Jones], *A just and modest vindication* (1681), reprinted in *State tracts of the reign of Charles II* (1689), vol. IV, Appendix 15, pp. clxviii–clxix. For the authorship of this tract see Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the restoration crisis* (Cambridge, 1991), ch. 10.

[9] J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *The political works of James Harrington* (Cambridge, 1977), 'Historical introduction', p. 15.

[10] Paul Rahe, *Republics ancient and modern* (3 vols., Chapel Hill, NC, 1994).

[11] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997).

[12] Jonathan Scott, *Commonwealth principles: republican writing of the English revolution* (Cambridge, 2004), chs. 1, 6–7. This work examines these and other themes in more detail.

[13] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 149–50.

[14] Sidney, *Discourses concerning government*, in *Sydney on government*, ed. J. Robertson (London, 1772), p. 11.

[15] Quoted by Annabel Patterson, *Early modern liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 279.

Pocock's argument described a moment of paradigmatic breakthrough when Harrington's *Oceana* appeared in 1656 speaking the political language of Aristotle and of Machiavelli. To the extent to which we are to continue to be guided by this linguistic methodology we must at least recognize, well before this, medieval as well as classical components of what Nedham called '*Common-wealth* Language'. Secondly, however, it is necessary to notice what these writers took to be the relationship between such 'Language' and the 'Principles' which they held it to embody. As John Milton explained, in 1643

> language is but the instrument convaying to us things usefull to be known … [so] though a linguist should pride himselfe to have all the tongues *Babel* cleft the world into, yet, if he have not studied the solid things in them as well as the words … he were nothing … to be esteem'd a learned man.[16]

For the republican writers of the English revolution, the value of their (frequently glorious) words hinged entirely upon the practical realization of the 'solid things in them'. For them, that is to say, there was indeed a programme, without which the language would be no more than an embarrassing monument to a failed cause.

To identify this it is necessary to bridge one further modern scholarly distinction. This is between the classically inspired political republicanism, and the religiously inspired social radicalism of the English revolution. One reason for their historiographical disassociation has been that the major historians of classical republicanism have tended to treat it as a secular, or secularizing, ideological force. Another is that the most important historian of that social radicalism, Christopher Hill, had ideological preoccupations which led him to be less interested in classical republicans than in plebeian sectaries. The eventual exception to this rule was Milton, who, however, Hill portrayed as a plebeian 'heretic' rather than as a Christian humanist.[17] In fact, just as the revolution may be seen as a single intellectual process, so republicanism combined radical protestantism and anti-monarchical humanism.[18] We will not understand it until we reintegrate our examination of the religious, social, and political agendas of the revolution; until we combine the worlds of Pocock, Hill, and others.

Certainly the greatest shortcoming of the existing literature on English republicanism has been its relative neglect of the religious dimension.[19] The consequent

[16] John Milton, *Of education* (1643), in D. M. Wolfe et al., eds., *Complete prose works* (8 vols., New Haven, CT, 1953–82), I, pp. 369–70.

[17] Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English revolution* (London, 1977).

[18] Jonathan Scott, *England's troubles: seventeenth-century English political instability in European context* (Cambridge, 2000), chs. 10–16.

[19] A point noted by David Loewenstein, *Representing revolution in Milton and his contemporaries* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 4. Loewenstein's response is, however, to restore the missing component, rather than focus upon the relationship between Christian and classical. The most important exception to this generalization is the work of Worden (see, for instance, 'Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, and the restoration', in Gerald Maclean, ed., *Culture and society in the Stuart restoration* (Cambridge, 1995); 'Classical republicanism and the puritan revolution', in Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden, eds.,

need is not simply to recover the radical protestant republican religious agenda. It is to explain why, when classical republicanism came to England, it did so in the moral service of an explicitly religious revolution. One long-term context for the answer lay in Christian humanism.[20] Another was the reformation, both magisterial and radical.[21] Both informed the practical identity of the republican experiment as an attempted reformation of manners. So did the rational Greek moral philosophy, as indebted to Plato as to Aristotle, common to certain humanist and Christian political languages. Consequently Levellers, Diggers, Quakers, and republicans shared many aspects of a common political, religious, and social agenda. All came to oppose not only tyranny but monarchy, agreeing upon a substantially shared definition of liberty. They did so in the church as well as the state (that is to say, all demanded liberty of conscience). And all were devoted to the broader agenda of moral reformation for which certain classical as well as Christian texts furnished powerful support. It was the fact of a revolution within which the objectives of liberty and virtue had powerful religious as well as political content which required republican writers to connect a Graeco-Roman commitment to civic action to a Platonic epistemology and metaphysics. In addition many of the themes of republican writing reflect the long-standing struggle by a traditional society to respond to unsettling forces, not only of political and religious, but also social and economic change.[22] Drawing upon all of these contexts, republican writers attempted to oppose not only private interest politics, embodied by monarchy or tyranny, on behalf of the public interested virtues of a self-governing civic community. This was part of a more general critique of private interest society; a republican attempt, from pride, greed, poverty, and inequality, to go beyond the mere word 'commonwealth' and reconstitute what Milton called the solid thing.

II

For this attempt, one context lay in the double tyranny of Charles I and his clergy, over persons and consciences, with its own European context in what seventeenth-century English writers called 'the growth of popery and arbitrary government'. As Milton recorded in his *Commonplace book*: 'The clergie [are] commonly the corrupters of kingly authority turning it to tyrannie by thire wicked

History and imagination (Oxford, 1981)). Yet even Worden has done more to distinguish the humanist and 'puritan' components of English republicanism than to integrate them. For an alternative emphasis prefiguring that developed here, see Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English republic* (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 2.

[20] The term 'Christian humanism' here denotes a movement for moral reform within which, in the words of Ernst Cassirer, 'the forces of humanism work for the sake of religion'. Cassirer, *The Platonic renaissance in England* (London, 1953), pp. 12–13; Scott, *English republic*, pp. 17–30; Scott, *Commonwealth principles*, ch. 2; Margo Todd, *Christian humanism and the puritan social order* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 21.

[21] Scott, *England's troubles*, ch. 11; Michael Baylor, ed., *The radical reformation* (Cambridge, 1991).

[22] Keith Wrightson, *Earthly necessities: economic lives in early modern Britain* (New Haven, CT, 2000); Steve Hindle, *The state and social change in early modern England c. 1550–1640* (Basingstoke, 2000).

flatteries in the pulpit.'[23] According to the Greek sources upon whom Roman as well as early modern writers upon this subject drew, tyranny was a state, not simply of political government, but of soul. For a monarchy to degenerate into tyranny was to enslave to that tyrant's lawless passions the reason not only of his subjects, but of himself. In Plato's *Republic* the extreme embodiment of injustice, and therefore unhappiness, was the tyrannical man, a slave to his selfish lusts.[24] In the words of Algernon Sidney, 'as there is no happiness without liberty, and no man more a slave than he that is overmastered by vicious passions, there is neither liberty, nor happiness, where there is not virtue'.[25] According to Aristotle's *Politics*, as is well known, the difference between a king and a tyrant was that whereas the former ruled for the good of the public, the latter governed only in his own selfish interest. As Sidney put it, again, 'by lovers of Common-wealth principles, [we] mean men passionately devoted to the public good'.[26]

Liberty, by contrast, was a quality of rational self-command. Within individuals '[R]eal and substantial liberty … depends … on sobriety of conduct and integrity of life.' It was a violation of nature that one who 'is incapable of governing himself, should … be committed to the government of another'.[27] In the state, liberty was collective, rational self-government. It was because 'the main cause why Almighty God gave men reason … was that they should make use of that reason … for that end … that God gave it them' that the Leveller Thomas Rainsborough famously insisted that regardless of their material wealth 'every man born in England cannot, ought nott … to bee exempted from the choice of those who are to make lawes, for him to live under'. The present constitution 'which inslaves the people of England that they should bee bound by lawes in which they have noe voice att all … [is] I thinke … the most tyrannical law under heaven'.[28]

All republicans agreed that whatever its precise form, free government must be legal and constitutional, rather than a product of the will of a single person. As Plato had explained in *The laws*: 'Where the law is subject to some other authority and has none of its own, the collapse of the state … is not far off; but if the law is the master of the government and the government is its slave, then the situation is full of promise.'[29] Elaborated by Aristotle, this principle was taken up by analysts of the medieval constitution like Fortescue, quoted by Milton as saying that '"The king of England governs his people not by the power of an absolute king but by that of a civil government", for the people is ruled by those laws which they have themselves passed.'[30] For the idea that 'law ought to be the most

[23] Milton, *Commonplace book*, in *Prose works*, I, p. 439.
[24] Plato, *The republic*, ed. H. D. P. Lee (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 335–48.
[25] Sidney, *Court maxims* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 24.
[26] *A just and modest vindication*, pp. clxviii–clxix.
[27] Milton, *Second defence of the English people*, in *Prose works*, IV, pp. 258, 299.
[28] *The Clarke papers*, ed. C. H. Firth (4 vols., London, 1899–1965), I, pp. 304, 305, 311.
[29] Plato, *The laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 174.
[30] Milton, *Defence*, in *Prose works*, IV, p. 506.

powerful in the state', Milton referred to Plato's *Laws*, as well as to Aristotle and Cicero.[31] In both *Oceana* (1656) and *The prerogative of popular government* (1658) Harrington attributed his definition of 'ancient prudence' as 'the empire of laws and not of men' to 'Aristotle and Livy'. When Sidney made the same idea central to the *Discourses* he did so with a quotation from Book 3 of Aristotle's *Politics* ('Lex est mens sine affectu, & quasi Deus') and another from Livy's *History*.[32] Thus 'the Grecians, Italians, Gauls, Germans, Spaniards and Carthaginians, as long as they had any strength, virtue or courage amongst them, were esteemed free nations, because they … would be governed only by laws of their own making: Potentiora erant legum quam hominum imperia.'[33] It was in the fourth century BC that Thucydides put into the mouth of Pericles an account of the relationship of liberty to law which in several respects anticipated that of both Levellers and republicans.

> Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses … And, just as our political life is free and open, so [are] our relations with each other … We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law … especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed.[34]

This was the same Funeral Oration which, according to Hans Baron, had such a profound impact upon Leonardo Bruni in Florence.[35] It was thus not without reason that Hobbes, Thucydides's English translator, complained of the disastrous contemporary impact of that idea of 'Libertie, whereof there is so frequent, and honourable mention, in the Histories, and Philosophy of the Antient Greeks, and Romans … derived … not from the Principles of Nature, but … the Practise of their own Common-wealths.'[36]

Before the seventeenth century, most English defenders of these political aspects of commonwealth principles assumed their compatibility with monarchy. It was during the revolution that it became a key republican claim that the once free and legal monarchies of early modern Europe had now in practice become tyrannies. It was a short step from here to the assertion, made by Nedham in 1651, that 'there is no difference between king and tyrant'. In spirit at least this suggestion had been anticipated by Cicero, but then argued explicitly by

[31] Ibid., pp. 383, 438.

[32] Harrington, *Works*, pp. 161, 401; Sidney, *Discourses concerning government*, ed. Thomas West (Indianapolis, IN, 1990), pp. 17, 288; Sidney, *Court maxims*, p. 20.

[33] Sidney, *Discourses*, ed. West, p. 17. 'The rule of laws was more powerful than that of men.'

[34] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian war*, ed. M. I. Finley, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 145.

[35] Hans Baron, *The crisis of the early Italian renaissance* (2 vols., Princeton, 1955), I, pp. 56, 97, 194, 358–64, 374.

[36] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 149–50.

Machiavelli, in Book 2, Ch. 2 of the *Discourses*, Nedham's most important source.[37] It has recently been suggested by Blair Worden that

> Rather than seeking to introduce a new form … of government, the removers of kingship merely eliminated those features of the old constitution … which got in their way … It was principally the exploits of a parliament, not of a republic, of which members of the Rump would boast when remembering their rule.[38]

If correct this would not explain why the same regime permitted its own official weekly newspaper, *Mercurius Politicus*, to celebrate its achievements by reference to the history and theory, not of Europe's representative institutions, but of classical and contemporary republics. Yet in fact the official *Declaration of the parliament* justifying *Settling the present government in the way of a free state* explicitly defended the right of 'That same *Power* and *Authority* which first erected a *King* … for the common good, finding him perverted, to their Common Calamity … to *change* that *Government* for a *better* … from the former *Monarchy* … into a *Republique*.' In taking this step, the

> *Representatives* of the *People* now Assembled in *Parliament* … received encouragement, by their observation of the *Blessing* of *God* upon other States; The *Romans* … *prospered* far more than under any of their *Kings* … The State of *Venice* hath flourished for One thousand three hundred years; How much do the Commons in *Switzerland*, and other *Free States*, exceed those who are not so, in *Riches*, *Freedom*, *Peace*, and all *Happiness*? Our *Neighbours* in the *United-Provinces*, since their *change* of Government, have wonderfully increased in *Wealth*, *Freedom*, *Trade*, and *Strength*.[39]

In the words of Nedham, '*God hath made you Founders of the most Famous and potent Republick this day in the world, and … all your Enemies have no other Ground of quarrel, but that you are a Republick.*'[40] In September 1651 Hermann Mylius was advised by Sir Oliver Fleming that the form of diplomatic address 'about a year ago unanimously decided in Parliament once and for all time' was '*Parlamento Reipublicae Angliae*'.[41] In December 1652 an overture from the French ambassador was rejected, as lacking the word 'Reipublicae', and addressed merely to the 'Parlamento Populi Angliae'.[42]

[37] '[I]t is only in republics that the common good is looked to properly … The opposite happens where there is a prince; for what he does in his own interests usually harms the city, and what is done in the interests of the city harms him. Consequently, as soon as tyranny replaces self-government [the city] … ceases to make progress and to grow in power and wealth; [on the contrary] it declines.' Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 276.

[38] Blair Worden, 'Republicanism, regicide and republic: the English experience', in Quentin Skinner and Martin Van Gelderen, eds., *Republicanism: a shared European heritage* (2 vols., Cambridge, 2002), I, pp. 317, 327.

[39] *A declaration of the parliament of England, expressing the grounds of their late proceedings, and of settling the present government in the way of a free state* (22 Mar. 1648[9]), pp. 16, 20.

[40] Marchamont Nedham, Epistle dedicatorie, *Of the dominion … of the sea* (1652).

[41] Leo Miller, *John Milton and the Oldenburg safeguard* (New York, 1985), p. 86.

[42] *Calendar of state papers and manuscripts relating to the English affairs existing in the archives and collections of Venice*, XXVIII, 1647–52, pp. 325–6.

Moreover one of the most striking features of republican writing in general was its strident defence of rational change. Thus Milton, celebrating a 'king in all his power, ruling according to his lust … at length overcome in battle by his own people … condemned to capital punishment … and beheaded before the very gates of the palace', attacked all those who, in opposing this outcome, had been governed not 'by reason', but 'feare of change': 'a double tyrannie, of Custom from without, and blind affections within'. At any 'great actions, above the form of Law or Custom' many will 'swerve, and almost shiver … disputing precedents, forms and circumstances'. In fact 'if the Parlament and Military Councel doe what they doe without precedent, if it appeare thir duty, it argues the more wisdom, vertue, and magnanimity, that they know themselves able to be a precedent to others'.[43] Sidney exclaimed:

> The bestial barbarity in which many nations, especially of Africa, America and Asia, do now live, shews what human nature is, if it be not improved by art and discipline; and if the first errors, committed through ignorance, might not be corrected … we must return to the religion, manners and policy … found in our country at Caesar's landing. To affirm this is … to render the understanding given to men utterly useless.[44]

It was this 'art and discipline' which explained the superior success of 'Free States'. Within a republic virtue was achieved by collective submission to the rational self-discipline of the law. This was both negative: the restraint of sin or passion; and positive: a matter of harnessing the human potential for good in God-given reason. As Milton insisted: 'Nor is there any sociable perfection in this life, civil or sacred, that can be above discipline … Discipline is … the very visible shape and image of virtue.'[45] Sidney elaborated:

> The weakness in which we are born, renders us unable to attain … good of ourselves … The fierce barbarity of a loose multitude, bound by no law, and regulated by no discipline, is wholly repugnant to it. The first step towards the cure of this pestilent evil, is for many to join in one body, that … the various talents that men possess, may by good discipline be rendered useful to the whole; as the meanest piece of wood or stone being placed by a wise architect, conduces to the beauty of the most glorious building … [Men] are rough pieces of timber or stone, which 'tis necessary to cleave, saw or cut.'[46]

This was a vision, not of liberty from government, but through it. It entailed, in practice, a specifically republican contribution to the radical protestant project of reformation of manners. It was anchored, in theory, in an explicitly Platonic Christian humanist theology. As Augustine had noted in the *City of God*: 'Plato

[43] Milton, *Tenure of kings and magistrates* (1649), in *Prose works*, III, pp. 192–4; Milton, *Defence*, pp. 302–3.

[44] Sidney, *Discourses*, ed. West, pp. 357–8. 'But if it be lawful for us by the use of that understanding to build houses, ships and forts better than our ancestors, to make such arms as are most fit for our defence, and to invent printing, with an infinite number of other arts beneficial to mankind; why have we not the same right in matters of government, upon which all others do most absolutely depend?'

[45] Milton quoted in Hill, *Milton*, p. 253; for Milton on Christian magistracy see *Two books of investigations into Christian doctrine drawn from the sacred scriptures alone*, in *Prose works*, VI, pp. 794–9.

[46] Sidney, *Discourses*, in *Sydney on government*, p. 64.

defined the Sovereign Good as the life in accordance with virtue; and he declared that this was possible only for one who had the knowledge of God and strove to imitate him.'[47] In the words of Milton, 'The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the neerest by possessing our souls of true vertue.'[48] Sidney agreed:

> The misery of man proceeds from his being separated from God; his separation is wrought by corruption; his restitution therefore to felicity and integrity, can only be brought about by his reunion to the good from which he is fallen … if Plato therefore deserve credit … [no man can] perform the part of a good magistrate, unless he have the knowledge of God, or bring a people to justice, unless he bring them to the knowledge of God, who is the root of all justice and goodness.[49]

III

It is to these same contexts, of Christian humanism and radical protestantism, that we must initially look to understand the social content of republican thought. For Thomas More in the early sixteenth century, the commercialization of agriculture, enclosure, and growing social inequality and want appeared to accentuate the already painful discrepancy between a Christian ethics championing moral equality, justice, and peace, and the contemporary fact of deeply unequal, hierarchical, and warmongering aristocratic societies. Hence *Utopia*'s devastating indictment of the 'social evils' of a so-called 'commonwealth' where in fact 'money is the measure of all things … where all the best things in life are held by the worst citizens … where property is limited to a few – where even those few are always uneasy, and where the many are utterly wretched'. Such a system rewarded 'greed' and 'insatiable gluttony' with a 'wanton luxury … which exists side by side with hideous poverty'. While 'a great many noblemen … live idly like drones off the labour of others' the poor, deprived even of the opportunity to labour, are driven either 'to wander and beg' or 'to the awful necessity of stealing and then dying for it'.[50]

It was More's Christian assumption that 'Pride is too deeply fixed in human nature to be easily plucked out' that left him 'wholly convinced' by Plato's demonstration that

> unless private property is entirely abolished, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can mankind be happily governed. As long as private property remains, by far the largest and best part of mankind will be oppressed by a heavy and inescapable burden of poverty and anxieties … When I run over in my mind the various commonwealths

[47] Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 310–11.

[48] Milton, *Of education*, in *Prose works*, I, pp. 366–7, a passage described by J. C. Maxwell as 'One of the clearest echoes in Milton of a specific passage in Plato' (*Theaetetus* 176 a–c): ibid., p. 367 n. 14. On Milton's Platonism in general see Irene Samuel, *Plato and Milton* (Ithaca, NY, 1947).

[49] Sidney, *Discourses*, in *Sydney on government*, pp. 63–4.

[50] More, *Utopia*, pp. 16, 19.

flourishing today, so help me God, I can see in them nothing but a conspiracy of the rich, who are fattening up their own interests under the name and title of the commonwealth.[51]

In arriving at this conclusion More was equally impressed by the example of Christ and his apostles.[52] None of the seventeenth-century classical republicans took up his prescription of the abolition of private property. That they were all, however, influenced by Platonic Christian humanism had a powerful impact upon their economic and social, as well as their religious and political thought. That more broadly within the radical protestant literature of the English revolution the idea of community of property was common reflected the impact of another intellectual context: that of radical reformation. Equally inspired by apostolic example, pamphleteers during the German peasants revolt of the 1520s had emphasized the social obligations of practical Christianity.[53] 'As the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor', so the articles of the Swiss Brethren bound them to do the same.[54] Over a century later the Leveller William Walwyn agreed:

> Consider our Saviour saith, He that hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother lack, how dwelleth the love of God in him? … Looke about you and you will finde in these woefull dayes thousands of miserable distressed, starved, imprisoned Christians … then walke abroad, and observe the generall plenty of all necessaries … What is here aimed at? … would you have all things common? for love seeketh not her owne good, but the good of others. You say very true, it is the Apostle's doctrine: and you may remember the multitude of beleevers had all things common … feare it not: nor flye the truth because it suites not with your corrupt opinions or courses.[55]

For the 'Digger' Gerrard Winstanley, at the root of the 'bondage … of monarchy or kingly government' lay the 'inward bondage' wrought by 'covetousness'. 'True commonwealth's freedom', accordingly, 'lay in the free enjoyment of the earth'.[56] For the so-called Ranter Abiezer Coppe, 'else my religion is in

[51] Ibid., p. 39. On More's Platonism see Eric Nelson, 'Greek nonsense in More's *Utopia*', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001); Thomas White, 'Pride and the public good: Thomas More's use of Plato in *Utopia*', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 20 (1982).

[52] More, *Utopia*, p. 96: The Utopians 'were … much influenced by the fact that Christ encouraged his disciples to practice community of goods, and that among the truest groups of Christians, the practice still prevails'.

[53] Baylor, ed., *Radical reformation*; G. H. Williams, *The radical reformation* (London, 1962).

[54] Quoted by James Stayer, *The German peasants war and anabaptist community of goods* (Montreal, 1991). In the words of Hans Hubmaier: 'Concerning community of goods, I have always said that everyone should be concerned about the needs of others, so that the hungry might be fed, the thirsty given to drink, and the naked clothed. For we are not lords of our possessions, but stewards and distributors'. Quoted by P. J. Klassen, *The economics of anabaptism, 1525–1560* (The Hague, 1964), p. 32; Scott, *England's troubles*, ch. 11.

[55] William Walwyn, *The power of love*, in Jack McMichael and Barbara Taft, eds., *The writings of William Walwyn* (Athens, GA, 1989), pp. 79–80.

[56] Gerrard Winstanley, *The law of freedom in a platform* (1651), in Christopher Hill, ed., *The law of freedom and other writings* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 295.

vain, I own for dealing bread to the hungry, for cloathing the naked … for letting of the oppressed go free … And as for Community, I own none but the Apostolical … spoken of in the Scriptures.'[57] All republican writing, drawing upon classical as well as Christian sources, shared this broader commitment to greater economic equality, and social justice. For Thomas Scott, writing in 1623, it was the achievement of the Dutch republic to have solved the problem identified by More: that 'effect of privacie, whilst every man cares onely for himself, and neglects the Common-wealth', so that the rich would

rather let the poor sterve [sic], let the Common-wealth … runne to ruine, then they reforme any of their sinnes, or forbeare any of their superfluities … What need wee seeke for *Plato his communitie*, or Sir *Thomas More* his *Utopia*, when the realitie of their wishes and best conceptions are brought into action; and the best of whatever they fancied … is [there] seene truly to bee, after a most exact and Corrected Copie?[58]

For John Streater, in 1654: 'Another Rule to judge of the fitness of a person of publike … Trust, is *Whether doth he regard the Poor, or no; or the Rich more than the Poor.*' 'In this' the just magistrate 'imitateth God, who is no respecter of persons, indeed the end of Government is to protect and defend the poor.'[59]

Thus returning to the Republic's own official *Declaration* of March 1649, justifying the abolition of monarchy, we find a radicalism of social content which could easily have been lifted from a Leveller pamphlet, or from More's *Utopia*. More had explained that it was the counsel of a tyrant to believe that 'The king should leave his subjects as little as possible, because his own safety depends on keeping them from growing insolent with wealth and freedom.' In truth 'A solitary ruler who enjoys a life of pleasure while all about him are grieving and groaning … openly confesses his incapacity to rule free men.'[60] According to the 1649 *Declaration*,

In the Times of our *Monarchs* … *Injustice*, *Oppression* and *Slavery* were the [lot of] the *Common people* … it was intended for the *fate* of *England*, had our *Monarch* prevailed over us … That [we would be] *contented with Canvas clothing, and Wooden shoes, and look more like Ghosts then men* … To bring this to pass, their Beasts of Forrests must grow fat, by devouring the poor man's corn … A *Tradesman* furnishing a *great man* with most part of his *Stock* … and expecting due … payment, is answered with *ill words*, or *blows*, and the dear-bought Learning, That *Lords and Kings servants are priviledged from Arrests and Process of Law* … A poor *Waterman* … a poor *Countreyman* … must *serve* the *King* for … not enough to finde themselves *bread*, when their *wives* and *children* have nothing … [alongside the] *luxury* and *intemperance* … of … the *noblest families* … [In] *Commonwealths* [by contrast] … they finde *Justice* duly administered, the great Ones not able to oppresse the poorer, the Poor sufficiently provided for … a just *Freedom* of their *Consciences*, Persons and Estates … the *scituation*

[57] *A remonstrance of the sincere and zealous protestation of Abiever Coppe against the blasphemous and execrable opinions recited in the Act of Aug. 10 1650* (1650), in Nigel Smith, ed., *A collection of ranter writings* (London, 1983), pp. 120–2. On Coppe see J. C. Davis, *Fear, myth and history: the ranters and the historians* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 48–57.

[58] Thomas Scott, *The Belgicke pismire* (1623), pp. 31, 36–7, 89–90.

[59] John Streater, *Observations historical, political and philosophical, upon Aristotle's first book of political government* (1654), no. 2, p. 13.

[60] More, *Utopia*, pp. 33–4.

and *advantages* of this *Land*, both for *Trade* abroad, and *Manufactures* at home … better understood.[61]

The other crucial source for this critique of modern aristocracy as well as monarchy was Machiavelli.[62] In Sidney's Platonic *Court maxims*, also powerfully influenced by Machiavelli, it was the maxim of the restored Stuart court that 'as long as the people continue strong, numerous, and rich, the king can never be happy … When the people are low the king will be master of them and all they have.' For this 'work of impoverishing the people … [Charles II's courtiers] are fit [instruments] … their delight in vanity and sensuality … Their insatiable avarice … gives them a furious desire to get money … and the more oppressive such ways are to the people, the better we like it.'[63] In Sidney's later *Discourses*, 'Plato, Socrates, Epictetus, and others' furnished a warning 'with what rage avarice usually fills the hearts of men. There are not many destructive villanies in the world, that do not proceed from it.'[64]

The most famous seventeenth-century republican social proposal was James Harrington's 'Agrarian Law'.[65] 'In giving encouragement unto industry', Harrington warned, 'we [must] also remember that covetousness is the root of all evil.' Accordingly,

> your commonwealth is founded upon an equal agrarian … and if the earth be given unto the sons of men, this balance is the balance of justice, such an one as, in having due regard unto the different industry of different men, yet *faithfully judgeth the poor. And the king that faithfully judgeth the poor, his throne shall be established forever* [Proverbs, 29:14]. Much more the commonwealth; seeing that equality, which is the necessary dissolution of monarchy, is the generation, the very life and soul of a commonwealth.[66]

The classical sources for Harrington's agrarian (especially Plato's *The laws*) have recently been discussed by Eric Nelson.[67] Concerning his doctrine of the balance of dominion Harrington noted: 'You have Aristotle full of it in divers

[61] *A declaration of the parliament*, pp. 17, 19.

[62] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, pp. 245–7: 'those states where political life survives uncorrupted, do not permit any of their citizens to live after the fashion of the gentry. On the contrary, they maintain there perfect equality … where the gentry are numerous, no one who proposes to set up a republic can succeed unless he first gets rid of the lot'.

[63] Sidney, *Court maxims*, pp. 71–4.

[64] Sidney, *Discourses*, ed. West, p. 67.

[65] As is the case in *Vox plebis* (see below) in *The Common-Wealth of* OCEANA (1656) printed by John Streater, Harrington (or his printer) always uses capitals for Agrarian and Agrarian Law, and frequently italics also (see, for instance, pp. 22–3, 257). In the modern edition in Pocock, ed., *The political works*, both are rendered as roman lower case. For the interpretative significance of these and other more substantial alterations, see Scott, *Commonwealth principles*, ch. 13.

[66] Harrington, *Oceana*, in *Works*, pp. 239, 322. Drawing upon both Plato and More, Bodin had remarked that 'Among all the causes of seditions and changes of Commonweales there is none greater than the excessive wealth of some fewe subjects, and the extreme povertie of the greatest part.' Bodin, *Sixe bookes*, Book 5, ch. 2, p. 569.

[67] In his outstanding 'The Greek tradition in republican thought', Fellowship dissertation submitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, August 2000, especially ch. 3. Dr Nelson's book of the same title was published by Cambridge University Press in 2004.

places, especially where he saith that "Immoderate wealth, as where one man or the few have greater possessions than equality or the frame of the commonwealth will bear, is an occasion of sedition."'[68] Indeed 'the opinion that riches are power is as ancient as the first book of Thucydides or the Politics of Aristotle, and not omitted by Mr Hobbes [in his translation of Thucydides] or any other politician'.[69] Within English republican thought, however, these Harringtonian ideas have been treated by historians, as they were by contemporaries, as spectacularly original. In 1641 Gabriel Plattes, an associate of Samuel Hartlib, proposed in his utopia of *Macaria* a husbandry law punishing the holding by any individual of 'more land than he is able to improve to the utmost … till his lands be forfeited, and he banished … as an enemy to the commonwealth'.[70] Although this did not establish a universal limit on property ownership, Oceana would contain other echoes of this work, including an 'academy of provosts' like *Macaria*'s 'Office of Addresses'.[71] In 1656, six months before the publication of *Oceana*, there appeared R. G.'s *A copy of a letter from an officer in Ireland* (1656), which discussed agrarian laws in ancient Greece and Rome in the course of an anticipation of Harrington's broader economic analysis of the collapse of the monarchy. Unlike Harrington's formally peculiar 'Model', this pamphlet was Machiavellian commonwealth discourse of a familiar kind, arguing that

> Reason of state in Kings and Tyrants, is to keep mankind poor and ignorant … point blank contrary to the … maximes of a Commonwealth, which is the nursery of vertue, valor, and industrie … The riches of the people in general, is the natural cause of destruction to all Regal States … *if all Kingdomes be neer their period and ruine, when the subjects under them grow rich … contrariwise … Commonwealths do not decay, but when their people in general grow poore.*[72]

Most importantly, attention must be paid to a chapter in Marchamont Nedham's *The case of the commonwealth of England, stated* (1650). Not only was it the case, Nedham claimed, that in the Levellers' third *Agreement of the people* 'all persons have an equality of right to choose and be chosen without respect of birth, quality or wealth … therefore the promoters of this way are not improperly called "Levellers"'. Moreover

> [T]his term of leveling is equivalent with Aristotle's … *aequalitas juris*, the 'equality of right' … mentioned [in *The politics* Book 6]. And the same author saith, this plea for 'equality of right' in government at length introduceth a claim for 'equality of estates', and

[68] Harrington, *Oceana*, in *Works*, p. 166.

[69] Harrington, *The prerogative of popular government*, in *Works*, p. 412.

[70] *A description of the famous kingdome of Macaria* (1641), p. 4; W. Schenck, *The concern for social justice in the puritan revolution* (London, 1948), p. 148; For Plattes's authorship see J. R. Jacob, *Robert Boyle and the English Revolution* (New York, 1977), p. 17.

[71] Harrington, *Political works*, pp. 251–2; Jonathan Scott, 'The rapture of motion: James Harrington's republicanism', in N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner, eds., *Political discourse in early modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), n. 57. I am grateful to Eric Nelson for discussion of this point.

[72] R. G., *A copy of a letter from an officer in Ireland, to his highness the Lord Protector* (1656), pp. 4, 5.

the making of such laws as the agrarian laws enacted by the popular boutefeus in Rome whereby it was made criminal for any man to grow richer than ordinary.[73]

[A]nd from plundering they proceed to that flat leveling of estates as is evident by those Licinian and agrarian laws made by the populacy of Rome whereby it was provided that no man should grow too rich nor be master of above fifty acres of land. And touching this, there is an insolent passage recorded by Livy how that when the Senate seemed unwilling to permit the division of certain lands among the common sort, the tribunes … asked the Senators 'how they durst possess more than fifty acres apiece yet find fault with a division made of two apiece to the people!' … Lastly, from leveling they proceed to … an absolute community. And though neither the Athenian nor Roman levelers ever arrived to this high pitch of madness, yet we see there is a new faction started up out of ours known by the name of Diggers.[74]

In fact the limit proposed by the Tribunes Sextius and Licinius had been 500 'jugera'.[75] As far as I am aware these claims, concerning a Leveller plot to introduce an agrarian law, have not been taken seriously by historians.[76] That perhaps they should be is suggested by an anonymous Leveller pamphlet *Vox plebis, or, the people's out-cry against oppression, injustice, and tyranny* (1646).[77] Its most significant feature, noticed by Felix Raab and Samuel Glover, is to have made the first known systematic English public use of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, in the 1636 translation by Edward Dacre.[78] No less striking, from page one, was the interchangeable use of the words 'State', 'Common-wealth' and 'Republique'. In particular *Vox plebis* referred to

the case of the *Romane* State, when the *Romanes* having freed themselves of the government of the *Tarquins* their hereditary Kings; the Nobility began … the exercise of the like or

[73] Nedham, *The case of the commonwealth of England stated* (1650), ed. P. A. Knachel (Charlottesville, VA, 1969), p. 98.

[74] Ibid., p. 109.

[75] *The history of Rome by Titus Livius* (6 vols., London, 1926), II, pp. 43–4 (Bk 6, XXXV).

[76] Nigel Smith, *Literature and revolution in England, 1640–1660* (New Haven, CT, 1994), pp. 150, 183–4, relates Nedham's attack on the Levellers in *The case* to the genuine classical content of some Leveller writing, including *Vox plebis*. He does not, however, focus upon the proposal for an agrarian law, which seems to me the key issue connecting these texts, furnishing a context for Harrington's *Oceana*. Samuel Glover, who does discuss this issue in 'The Putney debates: popular versus elitist republicanism', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), does not connect *Vox plebis* to Nedham, and therefore to *The case*. Here I am, however, indebted to the work of both of these historians, and that of Nelson and Worden (see nn. 67 and 77).

[77] It seems likely that *Vox plebis* had more than one author. Authorship has been attributed by Glover to John Wildman ('The Putney debates', pp. 70–1); by R. B. Seaberg and others to Richard Overton ('The Norman conquest and the common law: the Levellers and the argument from continuity', *Historical Journal*, 24 (1981), pp. 798–9 n. 18); and by Blair Worden to Nedham '"Wit in a roundhead": the dilemma of Marchamont Nedham', in Susan Amussen and Mark Kishlansky, eds., *Political culture and cultural politics in early modern England* (Manchester, 1995). My own case for Nedham's involvement hinges upon the reappearance of specific passages adapted from Machiavelli's *Discourses* in his *The case of the commonwealth of England, stated* (1650) (see n. 85 below). Equally important is the thematic connection between certain Leveller and Nedham's later republican works (Scott, *Commonwealth principles*, chs. 7 and 11–13). This anti-senatorial Roman populism, informed by Livy and Machiavelli and focused upon the office of Tribune, is Nedham's most consistent theme.

[78] Felix Raab, *The English face of Machiavelli: a changing interpretation* (London, 1964), pp. 171–2.

greater tyrany the[n] the *Tarquins* had done; [accordingly] the people … created *Tribunes*, as *Guardians* of the publick liberty.[79]

It was the function of such Tribunes to defend the people against the 'Avarice, Pride, and Cruelty' of its 'Governours', by whose 'greed … covetousness … and violence' they had been brought to 'poverty'.

As explained by 'Sir Walter Rawleigh', following Livy, the solution was provided by 'Caius Flaminius' who, 'understanding the Majesty of Rome to be wholly in the people, and no otherwise in the Senate, then by way of delegacy, or grand Commission … taught … the Multitude … to know and use their power … in … vindicating the publike liberty of his Countrey'.[80] According to Livy it was the distinction of Caius Flaminius as Tribune to succeed where his predecessor Licinius had failed, in carrying an agrarian bill 'into a law', despite 'the resentment and terrible threatenings of the whole body of the senate'.[81] *Vox plebis*'s praise of 'C. Flaminius' had already appeared in the same words in another Leveller pamphlet a year earlier, giving as its source not Ralegh but his authority 'Titus Livius an unreproveable author.'[82] This had added: 'For this the Commons highly esteemed him, and the Senators as deeply hated him … I hope the wisdome and Providence of the Parliament will prevent these extremities; yet I cannot but put them in remembrance, that small sparkles do oftentimes occasion great fires.'[83] *Vox plebis* counselled against senatorial resistance to such tribunitial politics in England by warning that 'Contentions … upon the *Agearian* [sic] Law' were one of 'the … two … causes of that Republiques dissolution'. It referred hopefully to members of the existing House of Commons as '*you most honourable Tribunes of the People, preservators of the Common-wealth*'.[84]

It is passages taken from Machiavelli's *Discourses* which enable us to identify as one probable author of *Vox plebis* none other than Marchamont Nedham himself.[85] When Nedham attacked the Levellers for seeking to introduce an agrarian

[79] *Vox plebis*, pp. 1, 3.

[80] Ibid., pp. 61–2, 64, 68; Ralegh, *The history of the world in five bookes* (London, 1621), p. 357. *Vox plebis* follows Ralegh's wording closely. Glover 'The Putney debates', p. 65.

[81] *The Roman history by Titus Livius of Padua with the entire supplement of John Freinsheim*, III (London, 1744), pp. 437–8.

[82] *England's miserie and remedie in a judicious letter … concerning lieutenant col. Lilburn's imprisonment in Newgate* (14 Sept. 1645), p. 4. As in *Vox plebis* the wording is almost identical to Ralegh (p. 357). This and the vagueness of the reference to Livy ('*Decad.*5.of his History') suggests that the author of *England's miserie* may also have been using Ralegh.

[83] *England's miserie*, p. 4.

[84] *Vox plebis*, pp. 66, 59.

[85] Thus we read in *Vox plebis*, p. 60: '*Manlius Capitolinus*, notwithstanding that hee had valiantly defended the *Capitoll of Rome* against the invading *Gaules*, and by his virtue delivered the Citie of *Rome* from imminent danger; was, notwithstanding his good deserts, for a sedition he endeavoured to raise in *Rome* through envie to *Furius Camillus*, thrown headlong down from that *Capitoll*, which he to his great renown had formerly defended.' Nedham's *The case of the commonwealth of England*, pp. 112–13, has: 'So the famous Manlius likewise, to whom Rome owed both herself and liberty, being by him preserved against the Gauls in the greatest extremity, was notwithstanding, upon a discovery of his afterintent to surprise their liberty, thrown headlong down the Tarpeian Rock within view of the Capitol which he had so nobly defended.' The common source is E. D[acre], *MACHIAVELS DISCOURSES*.

law he apparently did so with the full authority of an author of that campaign. Nedham is known to historians as the editor of the Republic's newspaper *Mercurius Politicus*, whose pioneering use of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, partially communicated in the same period to his collegue Milton, exercised a formative influence upon English classical republicanism. Traces of Nedham's other maxims, concerning the importance of rotation, of a citizen militia, of the separation of powers, and of the propensity of '*Free-States*' to '*put … limitations to the wealth of the Senators, that none of them grow over-rich*' are visible throughout *Oceana*.[86] What has only recently become evident is the extent to which this radically populist classical republicanism had already been articulated as part of the Leveller campaign. Thus in 1646 another Lilburne-associated tract anticipated Nedham's *Excellencie of a free state* (1656) by counselling that the defence of 'Freedome and Liberty … the only Jewels in esteem with the Commonalty' involved placing in the latter

> the sole Power and Government … changing and altering your Lawes and Customes at their pleasure … [whereby] Senators … be chosen by the generall and free voyce of all, and not of a few … For, did *Rome* ever so flourish, as when, not any thing was done but by the Senate and People there?[87]

The second part of this tract defended a commonwealth 'In which the poorest that lives, hath as true a right to give a vote, as well as the richest and greatest', a precise anticipation of Colonel Rainsborough's defence of this position at Putney ten months later.[88]

IV

Nedham was not the only high-profile republican writer to turn the critical force of commonwealth principles against the oligarchical failings of the people's own representatives. As Milton bitterly recorded in his Digression to the *History of Britain*, electing the Long Parliament

> the people with great courage & expectation … chose … such as they thought best affected to the public good, & some indeed men of wisdome and integritie. [But] … the greatest part whom wealth and ample possessions or bold and active ambition rather then merit

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upon the first decade of T. Livius translated out of the Italian (2nd edn, London, 1636), p. 113 (Book One, Ch. 24). *Vox plebis* follows Dacre more closely, but makes several departures (including the substitution of 'Gaules' for 'French', of 'notwithstanding' for 'without any regard', and of 'defended' for 'deliver'd') all of which are followed by *The case*. This and other passages were subsequently reused by Nedham in *Mercurius Politicus* and *The excellencie of a free state* (1656).

[86] *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 101, 6 May to 13 May 1652, pp. 1585, 1587; Scott, 'Rapture of motion', p. 147. This is not to underestimate the more general distance between the ideology of the Levellers and of Harrington, on which see Scott, *Commonwealth*, chs. 6 and 13, and his 'The mariners and the ship: James Harrington's prescription for healing and settling' (unpublished paper).

[87] *London's liberty in chains discovered. and, published by Lieutenant Colonell John Lilburn, prisoner in the Tower of London, Octob. 1646*, pp. 1, 2, 5, 7.

[88] *The charters of London: the second part of London's liberties in chaines discovered* (18 Dec. 1646), p. 4.

had commended to the same place, when onc[e] the superficial zeale and popular fumes that acted thir new magistracie were cool'd and spent in them, straite every one betooke himself, setting the common-wealth behinde and his private ends before … Then was justice delai'd & soone after deny'd, spite and favour determin'd all … ev'ry where wrong & oppression … Thir votes and ordinances which men look'd should have contain'd the repealing of bad laws & the immediate constitution of better resounded with nothing els but new impositions, taxes, excises … not to reck'n the offices, gifts and preferments bestow'd and shar'd among themselves.[89]

Like the Levellers Milton found the seeds of the revolution's failure in the moral failings, not of the 'rabble', but those chosen in good faith to be their leaders. They, 'by so discharging thir trust … did not onely weak'n and unfitt themselves to be dispencers of what libertie they pretented, but unfitted also the people, now growne worse and more disordinate, to receave or to digest any libertie at all'.[90] One reason for these new 'impositions, taxes, excises' was that there was a war on. This remained the case, however, even when the civil wars were over: war was not a condition which the republican experiment ever outgrew.

Here it enjoyed a success, and acquired a European reputation, which stood in stark contrast to abject military failure of the early Stuarts. With singular brutality the entire subjugation of Ireland was achieved in 1649. The following year, when it looked as if Scotland might invade England, Cromwell invaded first, breaking, in Milton's words, 'in one battle … the power of Hibernia', and achieving 'in one year' that conquest which had eluded 'all our kings for eight hundred years'.[91] Consequently it was the English republic which, for the first time, united the three kingdoms into a single centrally governed commonwealth. With the passage of the Navigation Act; the subsequent defeat of the Dutch, hitherto Europe's mightiest naval power; and the acquisition of new territories on the European mainland and in the Caribbean, this military ambition quickly became imperial.[92] For this, too, there were obvious classical precedents. This was what Milton called 'that goodly tower of a Commonwealth, which the English boasted they would build to overshadow kings, and be another *Rome* in the west'.[93] As Nedham paraphrased Machiavelli's *Discourses*:

It is wonderful to consider how mightily the Athenians were augmented both in wealth and power … one hundred years after they had freed themselves from the tyranny of *Pisistratus*, but the Romans arrived to such a height as was beyond all imagination after the expulsion of their kings.[94]

[89] Milton, MS *Digression to the history of Britain*, in *Prose works*, VI, pp. 443, 445.
[90] Milton, MS *Digression*, p. 449.
[91] Milton, *Second defence* (1654).
[92] For John Streater, 'that Act for Trade … was the Glory and Top of their great Advice; if it had been continued and duly Executed, *England* had been the most happy, and most rich people this day upon the whole Earth'. Streater, *The continuation of this session of parliament justified* (16 May 1659), pp. 111–12.
[93] Milton, *The readie and easie way to establish a free commonwealth* (2nd edn, 1660), in *Prose works*, VII, p. 423.
[94] Nedham, *The case of the commonwealth*, p. 117.

According to Sidney:

Men would have the same love to the publick as the Spartans and Romans had, if there was the same reason for it. We need no other proof of this than what we have seen in our own country, where in a few years good discipline, and a just encouragement given to those who did well, produced more examples of pure, compleat, incorruptible, and invincible virtue than Rome or Greece could ever boast; or if more be wanting, they may easily be found among the Switzers, Hollanders and others: but 'tis not necessary to light a candle to the sun.[95]

In addition, unsurprisingly, republicans justified the regime's imperial mission by reference to its moral cause. Of divine authorship, commonwealth principles were universal in application. In the words of Nedham, again:

We of this Nation of *England*, do believe that there is such a Cause of God this day amongst us, that wil take off the *Burthen and the Yoak, and cause Justice to be administred equally to all, and establish Righteousness and Judgement in the Earth*: And that as it hath done much hereof in *England* already, so … God his will herein, will … proceed to other Nations, till the whole *Creation* that is now groaning under the exorbitant and wicked lusts of Kings and great ones … be delivered into freedom.[96]

This was the apocalyptic note later taken up by Harrington, for whom:

This is a commonwealth not made for herself only, but given as a magistrate of God unto mankind, for the vindication of common right and nature … Wherefore saith Cicero … of the Romans … we have rather undertaken the patronage than the empire of the world … A Commonwealth … of this make is a minister of God upon earth, to the end that the world may be governed with righteousness.[97]

Yet in this defence of war by reference to the principles of righteousness there lay deadly dangers. Concerning these, too, classical history spoke with uncomfortable eloquence. By its early success in the Peloponnesian War Athens, once 'an education to Greece', was undone, first morally, then politically, and finally militarily. Amid all the other symptoms of this downward spiral the key problem was immoderate ambition, or *hubris*. Of the Roman republic Cicero lamented: 'we retain the name of a commonwealth, but we have lost the reality long ago'. According to Augustine the words given by Sallust to Cato to explain the fall of the republic were as follows.

Do not imagine that it was by force of arms that our ancestors made a great nation out of a small community … it was other causes that made them great, causes that with us have ceased to exist: energy in our own land, a rule of justice outside our borders; in forming policy, a mind that is free because not at the mercy of criminal passions. Instead of these we have self-indulgence and greed, public poverty and private opulence. We praise riches: we pursue a course of sloth … the intrigues of ambition win the prizes due to merit.

[95] Sidney, *Discourses*, in *Sydney on government*, p. 184.
[96] Nedham, *The case stated between England and the United Provinces* (1652), p. 53.
[97] Harrington, *Oceana*, in *Works*, p. 323.

No wonder, when each of you thinks only of his own private interest; when at home you are slaves to your appetites, and to money and influence in your public life.[98]

It was surely of the relevance of this analysis that Sidney was thinking when he recalled in the *Court maxims* that:

[Rome's] valour had conquered their foreign enemies … The proudest kings had died under the weight of their chains … This success followed with a prodigious affluence of riches, introduced ambition and avarice, raising some citizens above the power of the law. Then did that victorious people turn its conquering hand into its own bowels … That unequalled commonwealth … fell under the feet of one of her wicked sons … The senate that had … had Cato for their … leader … now … depend[ed] … upon the will of a Caligula, Nero, Vitellius, or such like monsters.[99]

In the case of 'the Commonwealth of England', too, 'no man can say the power of a king subdued it; we had broken his armies, subdued his whole party in three nations, but God suffered divisions to arise amongst us for the punishment of our sins, and *so we came to be betrayed*'.[100] The 'wicked son' responsible for this betrayal was Oliver Cromwell. The basis of Cromwell's original military greatness had been his self-discipline; he was, in Milton's words, 'Commander first over himself, victor over himself.' Yet following his dissolution of the first republican government, Milton had warned all those remaining at the helm:

Many men has war made great whom peace makes small. If … putting vast sums of money into the treasury, the power readily to equip land and sea forces, to deal shrewdly with ambassadors from abroad … has seemed to any of you greater, wiser, and more useful to the state than to administer incorrupt justice to the people, to help those cruelly harassed and oppressed, and to render to every man promptly his own deserts, too late will you discover how mistaken you have been … Unless you expel avarice, ambition, and luxury from your minds … and extravagance from your families as well, you will find at home and within that tyrant who, you believed, was to be sought abroad and in the field.[101]

True liberty did not entail the military conquest of others, but the rational conquest of the self. This did not mean that Milton was simply 'a poet against empire'.[102] What he opposed was an empire of power, in place of one of justice. Should such a thing emerge, this would signify that the republican experiment had gone disastrously astray. As the republic progressively failed to make those commonwealth principles successfully defended in war a practical reality it appeared that what had been achieved was not the moral substance of an English republic, but its mere outward appearance (More's 'name and title'). As Edward Burrough put it: 'The principle of sincerity … of opposing oppression and pressing after reformation [was lost, and many] … became self-seekers [and]

[98] Augustine, *City of God*, p. 200. [99] Sidney, *Court maxims*, pp. 136–7. [100] Ibid., p. 19.
[101] Milton, *Second defence*, in *Prose works*, IV, pp. 680–1.
[102] David Armitage, 'John Milton: poet against empire', in David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Milton and republicanism* (Cambridge, 1995). See Scott, *Commonwealth*, ch. 10.

oppressors even as others before them.'[103] Nor could this failure be attributed to any one person. Of it, as we have seen, Milton had warned as early as 1649 in his *History of Britain*, observing that it had been the fate of the ancient Britons too to have

> adored the name of liberty, yet so soon as they felt by proof the weight of what it was to govern well themselves, and what was wanting within them … the wisdom, the virtue, the labour … they soon … shrunk more wretchedly under the burden of thir own libertie, than before under a foren yoke.[104]

In *Paradise lost* this and other aspects of the republic's failure are enacted by Satan, who, as many commentators have noticed, therefore deploys Milton's own republican language.[105] This is, however, in Milton's Platonic terms, mere language, empty of, indeed contradicted by, the 'solid things'. Though accorded by the fallen the 'awful reverence' due to virtue, in fact Satan possesses only 'monarchical pride … close ambition varnished o'er with zeal'.[106] The calamity to which this has led him is to choose to serve self, rather than God.

> pride and worse ambition threw me down
> Warring in heaven against heaven's matchless king
> … lifted up so high
> I'sdained subjection, and thought one step higher
> Would set me highest.[107]

Real liberty (from human will) entailed subjection (to God, to reason and the law).[108] Satan's republican rhetoric is empty because cut off from the only source of real virtue in God. 'Of good and evil much they argued then/Of happiness and final misery/Passion and apathy, and glory and shame/Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy.'[109] In the words of C. S. Lewis, discussing this moral

> blindness … What we see in Satan is the horrible co-existence of a subtle and incessant intellectual activity with an incapacity to understand anything. This doom he has brought

[103] Quoted in Christopher Hill, *The experience of defeat* (London, 1984), p. 150; Scott, *England's troubles*, p. 267. [104] Milton, *History of Britain*, Book 3 in *Prose works*, VI, p. 131.

[105] A point discussed by Worden, 'Milton's republicanism and the tyranny of heaven', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and republicanism* (Cambridge, 1993). In my view, however, this does not signify Milton's personal retreat from republican language, or any other aspect of the cause. Nor, although I agree with much of what he says about the poem, am I persuaded by David Loewenstein (*Representing revolution*, p. 205) that 'We need to be alert to the mercurial qualities of Satan's political language.' Satan's *language* is consistently republican. His disposition of soul, and actions, are tyrannical. The point being made was by this time of long standing in Milton's writing, and older still within the Christian humanist tradition (it is no accident that the besetting sin of Satan – pride – is also that which preoccupied More). This was that a cause consisting merely of words was a hypocritical abomination.

[106] Milton, *Paradise lost*, in Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, eds., *John Milton: a critical edition of the major works* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 378, 381. [107] Ibid., p. 422.

[108] Colin Davis, 'Religion and the struggle for freedom in the English revolution', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992). [109] Milton, *Paradise lost*, p. 389.

upon himself; in order to avoid seeing one thing [his dependence upon God] he has … incapacitated himself from seeing at all.[110]

Thus the inhabitants of Milton's Hell are also the denizens of Plato's cave. Cut off from the sun, they cannot tell the difference between appearance and reality. Barred from 'celestial light … cloud instead, and ever-during dark/ Surrounds …/Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair/Presented with a universal blank.'[111] It was the fatal folly of sinful man not only to prefer the empty rhetoric of virtue to its laboriously acquired substance, but to believe that rhetoric to the effect that man was the author of his own moral worth and destiny. It was the penalty of such pride to be exiled from the source of goodness and of life to a world of death in which 'all good to me is lost;/Evil be thou my good.'

> Of all things transitory and vain, when sin
> With vanity had filled the works of men:
> Both all things vain, and all who in vain things
> Built their fond hopes of glory or lasting fame,
> Or happiness in this or the other life;
> All who have their reward on earth, the fruits
> Of painful superstition and blind zeal,
> Nought seeking but the praise of men, here find
> Fit retribution, empty as their deeds.[112]

Ruined by ambition, it is Satan's fate to be plagued by precisely those 'many tyrants [within], impossible to endure', against which Milton's *Second defence* had warned. Arriving in Eden he explains that

> Honour and empire with revenge enlarged,
> By conquering this new world, compels me now
> To do what else though damned I should abhor.
> So spake the fiend, and with necessity,
> The tyrant's plea, excused his devilish deeds.[113]

As Milton noted from Augustine in his *Commonplace book*: 'If in governmental rule there is any servitude, actually the one in authority is the slave.'[114] The sign of this slavery is not simply that Satan resorts to 'necessity, the tyrant's plea'. It is that he is 'compelled' by 'revenge' to do something against even the modest moral (that is, rational) scruples that he retains. Driven by his passions, Satan has surrendered the government of himself. When he sees the 'spotless innocence' of uncorrupted man he is tormented by 'ire, envy and despair … O hell! What do mine eyes with grief behold.' Even his physical stature is cringing, Gollum-like:

> Thence up he flew, and on the tree of life,
> The middle tree and highest there that grew,
> Sat like a cormorant; yet not true life

[110] C. S. Lewis, *A preface to Paradise lost* (Oxford, 1942), p. 96. [111] Milton, *Paradise lost*, p. 403.
[112] Ibid., p. 413. [113] Armitage, 'Poet against empire', pp. 217–21 (including this quote).
[114] Milton, *Commonplace book*, p. 474.

> Thereby regained, but sat devising death
> To them that lived; nor on the virtue thought
> Of that life-giving plant,
> But only used
> For prospect, what well used had been the pledge
> Of immortality.[115]

On one level Satan is certainly Cromwell, speaking the language of a noble cause, while hypocritically leading its followers to destruction.[116] Yet the republican failure had been collective. More broadly still the power of Milton's poem is anchored in the claimed universality of its subject: the fallen moral condition of mankind.

Thus was the Republic defeated, not by any external agency, let alone by another military power. It was defeated by the impossible grandeur of its own moral ambition. In this had lain the 'solid things' informing, and judging, the words. In this may lie part of the explanation for the extraordinary subsequent impact of those words, at least. Not only Adams and Jefferson, but Montesquieu and Rousseau, Robespierre and Marx, drank at those springs. As a result, commonwealth principles – not only liberty and virtue, but equality, community and social justice – are the property of no single country or system. Moreover, in a troubled world where inequalities of wealth, justice, and power show no sign of fading away the relevance of one conclusion from the English experience seems hard to deny. Nationally, internationally, or locally, for any society to claim to be a commonwealth is to put itself to a stern practical test.

[115] Ibid., lines 194–204, pp. 425–6.

[116] In this there is an echo of Lucan's Caesar, who speaks the same republican language to the same effect. David Norbrook, *Writing the English republic: poetry, rhetoric and politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 442–3.