The Revolution of 1688–1689

Changing perspectives

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This is remarkable for both ideological and historical reasons. Burke, certainly, was concerned to insist that the British constitution contained no provision for deposing a king and no method of doing so; he therefore insisted that the Revolution had been justified by necessity and not by law, and had been an act of civil war, albeit a justified one. But this was a Tory argument, although one long since appropriated and annexed by Whig apologists. With the more authentically Whig side of his political personality, Burke desired to maintain that the necessity which justified the Revolution had been the necessity of preserving the ancient constitution, and that the Revolution consequently had been carried out within the constitution and had had the effect of preserving and not subverting it. As a further consequence, his argument in 1790 strongly implied that there had occurred in 1688 nothing like the “dissolution of government” envisaged by radical Whigs, Lockean, and commonwealthmen solace Whig, the “dissolution” of a king—certainly not one which had led to a reconstitution of government along lines including a right of “cashiering” kings. Yet, as we shall see, the concept of “dissolution” was hard to elaborate without an accompanying concept of “civil war,” and it might be thought hard for Burke to contend that there had been “civil war” in 1688 while denying that there had been “dissolution.” Because we think that Burke was propounding the historical continuity of English government, we are surprised to find him asserting a just and necessary civil war in 1688, the more so as the position that William III had asserted his rights to the crown by a just conquest had been angrily if not unambiguously repudiated by his accredited apologists.

Burke’s text is surprising for the further reason that it is a central fact of English history that there was indeed no civil war in 1688; no battle, that is to say, very little bloodshed, and no general relapse into a condition of epidemic armed violence such as had obtained in England between 1642 and 1646. The threat of a renewal of that condition had cost Charles I his head in 1649, had imperiled the life of Charles II in 1651, and had destroyed the political fortunes of Shaftesbury’s Whigs in 1681 The English governing classes had gone to war with one another with the most agonized reluctance in 1642; and their determination never to do so again, coupled with the grim knowledge that they might not be able to avoid it, is a cardinal fact of late Stuart politics. Hard as it may be to consider a non-event as a fact, it is therefore of crucial significance that James II ceased to be king and was replaced by William and Mary without the recurrence of English civil war in this sense; only because it did not recur do we appear to look upon the Highland War which ended at Glencoe and the Irish War which ended at Limerick as marginal in their significance. That Burke should declare, in a context rendered English by its
discursive structure, “the Revolution of 1688” to have been “ordained” by a “civil war” must arrest and challenge our attention.

To explain Burke’s action in 1790 is one thing; to explain what happened in 1688 in the light of concepts available both to him in 1790 and to actors in 1688 is another. Burke, as we can now see, was obliged to represent the Revolution as both constitutional, in the sense that there had not occurred a dissolution of government and its replacement by a deposable or elective monarchy, and unconstitutional, in the sense that the constitution contained no regulated mechanism for the deposition of one king and his replacement by another. He therefore represented the revolution as an armed action, an act of state and of war – necessarily of civil war – but one justified and limited by the single imperative of preserving the ancient constitution against transgression from its own king. *Quod erat demonstrandum*; the Revolution had been both constitutional and a civil war, and neither James II nor a rebellious people had dissolved the constitution. But what – may we ask – of the actors in 1688 themselves? Had they seen themselves as engaged in civil war, or as emerging from it along the lines described by Burke?

To answer this question we must distinguish between two revolutions: one a violent *peripeteia* or reversal of worldly fortunes, which occurred in the months of November and December 1688 and culminated in the second flight of James and his refuge in France; the other a *ricorso* or *ridurre ai principi*, which occurred in the early months of 1689 and consisted in the attempt to discover and establish the principles on which James had ceased to be king and might be replaced as sovereign. It was the latter of these two which was recorded and remembered as “the Glorious Revolution,” and though Burke writes “the Revolution of 1688 was obtained by a just war,” it would have been possible to state that the Revolution of 1689 was “obtained” by the “just war” which occurred in 1688. We confound the two processes, and date them by the year in which they began, because our attention is arrested by the dramatic overthrow of James II’s personal rule; yet it was only the subsequent series of events occurring in 1689 which gave a constitutional meaning to those of 1688 and made possible such legal and historical formulae as that expressed by Burke.

If there was a just war or a civil war in England in these months, it occurred in November and December of 1688. By stating the problem in these terms, we of course relegate the Highland War and the Irish War to the Anglo-Gaelic frontiers, and imply that Highland and Irish Jacobites were not members of a shared polity and war with them was consequently not a civil war. It may well be considered misleading to do this. But “England” existed as a unified polity, and when Englishmen had fought one another in decades well remembered in 1688, they had described the experience, with fear and loathing, as one of civil war. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Burke had English experience in mind when he wrote of 1688, and to ask whether there is
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The civil war was a phase of the struggle which took place between 1642 and 1651. It began with the outbreak of the Rye House Plot and ended with the execution of Charles I. The war was fought between the King's forces, known as the Royalists, and the Parliamentarians, who sought to limit the king's power and establish a constitutional monarchy.

The war was characterized by a number of campaigns, each with its own specific goals and outcomes. The most famous of these campaigns was the Battle of Naseby, which took place in 1645 and marked a turning point in the war. The Royalists were defeated, and their leader, Prince Rupert, was captured.

The war continued for another six years, during which time both sides made efforts to negotiate peace. However, these efforts were unsuccessful, and the war dragged on until 1651, when the Royalists surrendered and the Parliamentarians took control of the country.

The war had a profound impact on English society, leading to significant changes in the political and social landscape. It also had lasting effects on the English language, with new words and phrases arising from the war's events and terminology.

The war's end saw the establishment of the Commonwealth of England, which lasted from 1649 to 1660. During this time, Oliver Cromwell became the de facto ruler of the country, and the country was governed by a council of ministers. The Commonwealth was eventually replaced by the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, with Charles II returning to the throne.

The war's legacy continues to be felt in modern-day England, with various memorial sites and museums dedicated to the events of that time.
The Fourth English Civil War

had destroyed both constitutionality and sovereignty in England, leaving it unclear where they resided in principle and a long and agonizing business to recover them in practice. In 1688 too, a king abandoned his capital, his parliament, and the seat of his administration; but he did not gather an army within the kingdom as an instrument to his return. The remaining legally constituted organs of government were able to gather without drawn swords in their hands, and make provisions for replacing him if he did not himself return (as they feared by now that he might). It was James's flight abroad, repeated after a first failure, that ensured the deepest belief of eighteenth-century Englishmen: less that the constitution limited sovereignty than that it contained sovereignty and was capable of renewing it. James in his own way testified to this principle by throwing the Great Seal into the Thames; his father would have kept it with him.

Not because James left his capital, but because he left his kingdom without setting up his standard within it - one can argue that it was impossible, but not that it was unthinkable, for him to do this - the proposition could be put forward that he had deserted his government, but that the "government" in the sense of "constitution" was not thereby dissolved. The difficulty next encountered was that of contending that he had thereby ceased to be king. On how this was achieved a great deal has been written; but this article is an exploration of counterfactuals, and from investigating the civil war which did not take place it will now proceed to investigate the dissolution of government that did not happen.

The phrase "a dissolution of government" has acquired, especially in the memory of historians, meanings derived from a certain way of reading John Locke's Second Treatise of Government: that is, we think of it as a juridical transaction, taking place in a universe of right and nature; a people has entrusted the "government" or regulation of their rights to others, and by verbal transference the term "government" has come to be used of these others and of the formal structures by which authority is distributed among them. But the "government" has failed in discharging the trust laid upon it, and in consequence the "government" is "dissolved": the "power" to regulate and protect "reverts" to the "people," who are now entitled to renew "government" or-not, in the same hands as before or not, according to the same formal structures of distribution or not, "as they list." Because the whole transaction takes place in "nature," where "rights" exist, it is thought that what the people are doing is natural, rightful, and as it were benign; they are not engaged in dissolving the ties that bind men in society.

But this was not how English people in 1688 necessarily employed the phrase "a dissolution of government," nor was it at all what John Locke had to say on the subject. Dissolution of government had actually occurred in England...
some forty years previously, and those who did not remember it had heard much about it from their elders. The phrase recalled an actual collapse and destruction of governing institutions; if we may use some of the titles of tracts of the times, it is “the confusions and revolutions of government,” “the anarchy of a limited or mixed government,” which should be allowed resonance. “Dissolution of government” connoted a state of anarchy and anomy, in which right and liberty were uncertain because it was uncertain where the right to protect them lay or in what it was grounded. There had been revolutionaries— their memory was kept alive in such phrases as “the good old cause”—who had seen in this the opportunity of a better government or the millenarian need of none; but their memory was execrated by the governing classes and by those who obeyed their government, and unless one still shared such hopes, it was the fear, guilt, and insecurity of confusion and revolution that came readily to mind. Hobbesian politics were well entrenched in English historic memory, and the reign of Charles II had been a not un-Hobbesian scene; or we may cite the highly un-Hobbesian writings of James Harrington to the effect that “a people under deprivation of government” was “a living thing in pain and misery.” When power reverted to the people, it was not a revolutionary opportunity to renew nature and rights, but an agonizing obligation—almost impossible to perform without divine aid all too evidently withheld—to renew, not rights, but the structures of constituted and legitimized authority without which rights could not be ensured.

Dissolution of government, as the frontispiece to Leviathan makes clear, was the consequence of civil war; and civil war meant not only battles in the field, fighting in the lanes, soldiers quartered on the villagers, and families by the sword divided, but the actual collapse of legal government, because civil war was one thing which sovereignty could not contain. Civil war was a consequence of the drawing of the sword, and an alternative phrase for the drawing of the sword was the “appeal to heaven.” When John Locke’s “people” declare their government dissolved— it is only at their initiative that it can be so declared— they appeal to heaven; the phrase is repeatedly used. That is, they pronounce law and authority at an end, and submit themselves to divine judgment; but their God is a God of Battles, and all the literature of the 1640s—so much of which was reprinted in 1689— together with the whole weight of English historic memory, pronounced that heaven responded to appeal by judgment delivered in the event of battle. The appeal to heaven was an appeal to civil war, and such a war would not be fought between the “people” on one side and the erstwhile “government” on the other. In civil war the “people” were by the sword divided; this was not something of which the seventeenth-century English needed to be reminded.

We are now sure that Locke wrote his Second Treatise somewhere between 1680 and 1689; the later the more plausible, since writing it needs to be situated in the process of the Whigs’ turning to desperate courses in the experience of defeat. There is no way of reading Locke’s scenario of appeal to heaven, dissolution of government, and reversion of power to the people, except as a scenario of civil war. The appeal to heaven meant the drawing of the sword; the only alternative for us to imagine is some Tolstoyan or Gandhian process whereby the people dissolve government and revert to natural society by means of purely passive disobedience, and this was not available in an England where subjects possessed arms and were expected to use them. Shelley’s Men of England could be written only when the people had been effectively disarmed, and the Revolution of 1688 was indeed a move in that direction. Legislation was already in force restricting the possession and use of weapons by the lower orders, and the gentry might have found it hard— as they would have been deeply unwilling—to arm their tenants for civil war in 1688 as they had in 1642. Perhaps this is why Richard, Lord Lumley, entered Oxford at the head of a body of clubmen. The importance of the bloodless campaign of 1688, however, is that the appeal to heaven did not occur and never did again. England and Scotland were to be both shocked and comforted by their disarmed condition in 1745.

This essay has been concerned with alternative histories and the possibilities of civil war, and the Second Treatise is richly illustrative of both. It was published in an England recognizably different from that in which it was written; and the difference is precisely that at the earlier date the Treatise called for an appeal to heaven which would result in civil war, whereas by the later the appeal had been made, the sword had been drawn, and civil war had not resulted. The events of November–December 1688 could not have been predicted at any moment before they occurred, and therefore it was not possible for the readers of the published Treatise to read the work as it had been written. The text and its readers— or rather Locke writing the Treatise and Locke sending it to the printer— existed, it is hardly too much to say, in histories which were alternative to one another. The difference, once again, is that between the civil war which many could remember and everyone foresee in 1681–83, and the civil war which everyone could see had been miraculously averted (for the present) in 1688–89. It is not the least of the myriad improbabilities of English history in the 1680s that one of Europe’s great philosophers, who was a deeply political man, should have written a program for civil war and dissolution of government shortly after the shattering defeat of his party by the cry “forty-one is come again”; but it pales before the improbability that by the end of 1688 civil war should have begun and ended before it could begin. The actual history is far more improbable, and far less foreseeable, than any of the alternative scenarios we have considered. In history, the thought arises, we are often engaged in ensuring that the predictable does not happen and only the improbable does.

The Fourth English Civil War ended before it began—and in that sense
adversaries broke one sovereign's nerve and caused him to desert his kingdom. For this reason a dissolution of government did not occur, and no more did a reversion of power to the people. The constituted bodies of government were able to come together and provide for filling the space left vacant by James; though, because one of them — considering the Church to be such — was in a specially exposed position, they paid a heavy price in destabilizing for doing so. But it was possible to maintain — and the Church did not oppose maintaining — that the fabric of government had not been dissolved, though it had been preserved by actions for which it could not have made legal provision. In these circumstances, Locke's Second Treatise, which does envisage a dissolution of government, could be published and seem to reinforce the view that the Revolution of 1688 (of which it now became possible to speak) had been a legitimate process in English civil politics, and the sequence of appeal, dissolution, and reversion (of which the Treatise speaks) a legitimate process in natural politics.

The invention of the Glorious Revolution was now beginning. American historians habitually speak of the events of 1688–89 by that title, though British historians no longer do so, and it is amusing to suggest that they must be distinguishing it from some other revolution deserving a different epithet. Those who called the Revolution "glorious" in the centuries of Whig supremacy and Whig interpretation meant to suggest that it had preserved the constitution by constitutional means; even those like Burke, who insisted on the element of extrametropolitan necessity, did not deny the major premise of the assertion. John Locke, who used the phrase "our great restorer the present King William" in publishing his Treatise of Government, could claim to be upholding this complex of attitudes and was read as doing so; though the intention with which he published the text could not be identical with that with which he had written it. A civil war which may happen in a future is far removed from one which has not happened in a past. One meaning of "glorious" as applied to the Revolution of 1688 was "providential," and one meaning of "providential" was that civil war had providentially not happened. Locke could claim no credit for this, because he had argued for a dissolution of government; indeed, one of his purposes in publishing was to argue that "the present King William" owed his crown to "the consent of the people," the only lawful title to government, and another was to urge that the Convention should remain one and not become a parliament, with the implication that the government was in fact dissolved and a new one in process of construction. It is at this point that we can distinguish between "conservative" and "radical" interpretations of the revolution, and observe how the meaning of "dissolution of government" had altered in the wake of James II's desertion.

The original meaning of the term had been civil war, followed by the anarchy of not knowing where government lawfully resided; an experience so could lead them as far as some of them had gone in 1688: i.e., to the point of risking civil war and "dissolution" again. But a few there were who had welcomed, or at least embraced, the anxiety of 1647–49 as an opportunity to construct a better government; they had not experienced the "reversion of power to the people" as a dreadful obligation, so much as a revolutionary liberation. Some of these were still active in 1689 and had aims to pursue in a second dissolution and reversion; Locke knew some such men and may have shared their aims, though there is evidence suggesting that he had aims which were different. When he wrote the Second Treatise and envisaged civil war, he may have had aims which were worth pursuing at such a price, or he may have been so desperate that he thought nothing less could avert the evils he feared. When he published the Treatises and suggested that dissolution had occurred and should be pursued as still in effect, he may have had aims identical with those of the "good old cause men" like Wildman and Hampden, or aims which were different from theirs, extending perhaps no further than the proscription of his enemies called for in some of his papers. The question is not that of Locke's intentions, but of the context in which they were situated. Thanks to the flight of James II and the non-occurrence of the Fourth Civil War, the concepts "dissolution" and "anarchy" are now separable. The kingdom was settling itself under a new king, and it could be peaceably debated whether this king owed his crown to a dissolution of government and a reversion of power to the people, or — as Edmund Burke was to insist a century later — to the resolute decision of the governing classes that no such possibilities should be entertained for a moment. In the presence of an established "conservative" reading of the "Glorious Revolution," a "radical" alternative might be tolerated rather than repressed. Those who refused in 1689 to pay attention to Locke and others arguing that a dissolution had occurred may have entertained the conviction that if the "government" were declared "dissolved," civil war would not be long in following; they may even have feared the turbulence of the "lower orders." There is not a great deal of evidence on the point. What we do know is that there continued to be minority opinions averring either that a reversion of power to the people had occurred in 1688–89, or that it should have occurred. Edmund Burke confronted such an opinion in 1790, and informed those who held it that what they envisaged was in fact civil war: that such a civil war had both occurred in 1688 and not occurred.

We must dig deep in Burke's text to find him saying this, and we must dig deep in our own minds. In all probability, the members of the Revolution Society who heard Richard Price's sermon, and Richard Price himself, would have had to dig deep in their minds before realizing that they were debating the reality of civil war; they thought of revolution as a glorious, popular, and peaceful event, and it was this perception that Burke desired to contradict.
We may or may not agree with them. During 1989 the world held a series of apparently genuine Lockean revolutions in Eastern Europe, where peoples massively but peaceably withdrew their support from their governments and these in consequence dissolved. Against the glorious revolutions of Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia we ought to set the far more bloody and enigmatic events in Rumania—a revolution of a kind belonging to the world of Tacitus and Machiavelli rather than to that of Locke. But the effects on British and American minds of the original “Glorious Revolution” of 1688—in the terms presented here of the instantaneous character of the Fourth English Civil War—have been to exile altogether the notion that civil war could have occurred in England after 1660. Even Monmouth’s expedition and the battle of Sedgemoor count as a “rebellion,” not as a “civil war.”

In 1703 an anonymous Jacobite writer made a subversive comparison between the events of 1688 and those of 1649. Speaking of the allegations that the son born to James II in 1688 was supposititious, he ridiculed the claims of skeptics that the birth of the Prince of Wales had not been well enough witnessed by offering a reductio ad absurdum of their position. “I cannot imagine what you would have,” he wrote, “unless you would either have had ye Qn delivered, as her father-in-law [i.e. Charles I] was beheaded, at her Palace gate on a scaffold, or else have had her discharge all her Lady’s of honour and persons of Quality and send for ye Good women out of St. James market to come to her labour.”

In a sense, these images of the queen’s body being exposed to public view came uncomfortably close to the truth. The warming-pan scandal—so called because it was often alleged that a supposititious Prince of Wales had been smuggled into the queen’s bedchamber in a warming pan as she pretended to give birth—became the subject of numerous rumors, pamphlets, and satirical lampoons in the summer and autumn of 1688. These played an important role in the propaganda campaign and the politics of the Glorious Revolution, and brought the physical details of the queen’s pregnancy and labor into the public eye (plate 1). But did this public scrutiny of the queen’s body constitute, as the Jacobite writer implied, a desecration of the dignity of monarchy, a breach of social hierarchy, and a metaphorical regicide? Or did it represent the triumph of the rule of law and of the principle of hereditary succession to kingdoms and property? Implicit in this question were the issues that lay at the heart of the debate over the birth of the Prince of Wales: Could the legitimacy or the authenticity of heirs be proven? Who had the authority to decide? How public or private should a royal birth be? The debate about the authenticity of the Prince of Wales was not simply about the royal succession.

1 BL, Add. Ms. 32,486, fol. 20.
2 I shall use the phrase “warming-pan scandal” to refer to any story that the Prince of Wales was supposititious or spurious, whether it involves a warming pan or not. For one treatment of this affair, see J. P. Kenny, “The Birth of the Old Pretender,” History Today 15 (1965), 418–26.