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Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680): Absolute Power, Political Patriarchalism and Patriotic Language

Cesare Cuttica

*An implicit faith is given to the meanest artificer in his own craft. How much more is it, then, due to a prince in the profound secrets of government. The causes and ends of the greatest politic actions and motions of state dazzle the eyes and exceed the capacities of all men, save only those that are hourly versed in managing public affairs. [...] I am not to question or quarrel at the rights or liberties of this or any other nation. My task is chiefly to inquire from whom these *first* came, not to dispute what or how many they are, but whether they are derived from the law of natural liberty or from the grace and bounty of princes. My desire and hope is that the people of England may and do enjoy as ample privileges as any nation under heaven. The greatest liberty in the world (if it be duly considered) is for people to live under a monarch. It is the Magna Carta of this kingdom. All other shows or pretexts of liberty are but several degrees of slavery, and a liberty only to destroy liberty. [...] Late writers have taken up too much upon trust from the subtle schoolmen, who to be sure to thrust down the king below the pope, thought it the safest course to advance the people above the king, that so the papal power may *more easily* take place of the regal. *Thus* many an ignorant subject hath been fooled into this faith, that a man may become a martyr for his country by being a traitor to his prince; whereas the new coined distinction of subjects into royalists and patriots is most unnatural, since the relation between king and people is so great that their well-being is reciprocal.¹*

Notorious as the arch-villain of the history of early modern political thought whose sole merit was to have been picked by the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) as the main target in the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), the author of these lines is the Kentish gentleman and scholar Sir Robert Filmer (1588–1653). Filmer has been depicted as a narrow-minded representative of a

patriarchal society; as a conventional absolutist; or, simply, as the exponent of archaic beliefs which failed to succeed in the theatre of ideas when confronted by the *typhoon* of modern philosophy, empirical science and social change. His best-known work is *Patriarcha* (published in 1680, but ready for publication in the early 1630s), which was vehemently attacked at the time of the Exclusion Crisis (1679–81) not only by Locke, but also by the republican writer Algernon Sidney (1623–83) and the Whig thinker James Tyrrell (1642–1718). The list of Filmer's later detractors includes minds of the calibre of the natural-rights theorist Jean Barbeyrac (1674–1744), the highly influential *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), the jurist John Millar (1735–1801) as well as sundry modern commentators.²

The name 'Filmer' came to be associated with the patriarchalist theory since he insisted on the political role of Adam as first king on earth to whom God had assigned absolute power over all creatures and from whom power had then passed to kings through the ancient patriarchs. In consequence, *Patriarcha* was considered as the ideological bedrock of patriarchalism with its strenuous defence of the superiority of monarchy. In addition, the text was seen as a strong justification for the dominion of fathers/husbands over their children/wives and of masters over their servants. Filmerian patriarchalism was also portrayed as the epitome of a personal and personalized authority antithetical to an artificial and liberal conception of politics; as the quintessence of women's subjugation to men; and as a specific structure of production and labour characterizing the household.³

Given these considerations, it might seem odd that, at first sight, the passage here presented does not appear to have much to do with any explicit patriarchalist agenda. There is no mention of Adam's power nor reference to ancient patriarchs. And yet these lines take us to the core of *Patriarcha*'s message, goals and targets as set out by Filmer in early seventeenth-century England. The reason for choosing them is that their author's ideas have for a long time been interpreted out of context, as if they belonged to the empyrean world of eternal philosophical problems. In fact, this paragraph plunges us in the midst of the debates and controversies around which Filmer conceived his treatise. In turn, this contextual approach enables us to revise the key aspects of the language of one of the most important – but often misread – political theories adopted in early modern European culture.

Patriarchalism articulated a specific vision of politics through rational arguments, historical research and analogical reasoning. Filmer did not transpose social prejudices into his political theories. Rather, he employed a

conservative vocabulary with a radical meaning. In substance, 'anthropological' and 'ideological' readings of patriarchalism need to be replaced with interpretations that highlight its *political* dimension. And it is from this angle that the following pages consider this intellectual category. By focusing on its specifically political features, patriarchalism emerges not simply as a strong reaction to the idea that a voluntary contract formed civil society or merely as a fierce rejection of the concept that human consent was the wellspring of government. This was the theoretical performance that patriarchalist theorists played when it came to analysing the origins of political society. In fact, what was fundamental for Filmer was the method of governing a polity, which entailed a different representation of power. Patriarchalism as a forceful theory of absolute and arbitrary government was a version of the theory of the divine right of kings, but it was not the same as frequently and wrongly claimed. In this respect, while the latter doctrine argued that kings had been entrusted with power either directly by God or indirectly through the irrevocable mediation of the people, the patriarchalist Filmer rejected all forms of popular participation in politics and made Adam the exclusive founder of political authority. Moreover, if contemporary royalist thinkers like John Hayward (1564?–1627), Adam Blackwood (1539–1613) and John Barclay (1582–1621) admitted that men had originally been free and had, therefore, set up different kinds of government, Filmer denied that a state of nature had ever existed (3). Likewise, he rejected Thomas Hobbes' (1588–1679) claims that in the beginning people had been free of government and that as such polities stemmed from a contract.

Contrary to received scholarly views, contractualists were not the sole target of patriarchalists. A major part of their criticism in early seventeenth-century England discredited claims that Parliament was the true representative of the people. This conflict centred on the identity of the nation. Its key element was the identification of the head of the nation either with Parliament as the cornerstone of liberties or, instead, with the absolute monarch as *pater patriae*. This last image is here taken as the theoretical fabric of what we call *political patriarchalism*. The extract above captures very well the nature of this paradigm. Indeed, it encapsulates its pivotal features. To its analysis we now turn.

Written at some stage in the 1620s,⁴ namely at a time of conflict between King Charles I Stuart (who reigned between 1625 and 1649) and an increasingly defiant Parliament whose Petition of Right (1628) tried to limit the monarch's prerogative, these lines – which did not appear in print for another fifty years given that in 1632 *Patriarcha* was refused the licence to be published – express Filmer's preoccupation with (what he and many monarchists perceived as)

growing opposition to monarchy in the country. A number of MPs – encouraged by monarchomach literature and Dutch ideas of resistance – became more vocal about kingly abuses such as imprisonment without cause shown, billeting of troops, heavy and unjustified taxation. In brief, many representatives of the so-called ‘common people’ began to contest the *absolute* policies enacted by Charles and his dismissal of the rule of law, especially his trampling upon the rights and liberties of freeborn Englishmen. Often depicting themselves as true patriots, whose objective was to protect England and its immemorial customs from arbitrary power and royal conduct now seen as popish (Catholic), a significant portion of the politically active nation advanced a more controlling role for the parliamentary assembly. With *Patriarcha*, Filmer formulated one of the strongest responses to this discourse and, notably, to the rhetoric of civic participation voiced by the self-appointed patriotic stalwarts.⁵ Our passage exemplifies this Filmerian strategy.

In stark contrast to what he saw as the inflammatory propaganda of rebellious hotheads, Filmer maintained that the absolute monarch made everyone equal because he was the only superior in the body politic. For this reason, the nation was and ought to be powerless to control and judge his decisions. Politics was not for all. It was a complex domain that required specific competence. Both the *separateness* of the monarch and the *separateness* of power were indispensable and irrevocable conditions for the working of all good politics. Dismissing the role of Parliament as the main defender of the English people, Filmer aimed at demonstrating that in any nation it was kings who conceded rights and liberties to the people. And this was so because the will of the sovereign not only gave being to the law, but coincided with the law. Absolute monarchies were superior because in them the king was ‘*lex loquens* – a speaking law’ (40). The patriarchal monarch was also *legibus solutus*, that is unrestrained by external or internal authorities: in the former case, Filmer had in mind the Pope, while in the latter he referred to intermediary bodies or (worse) the people through their representatives.

To further clarify Filmer’s position with regard to these issues, it is important to remember that the principal goal of *Patriarcha* was to assert ‘The *Naturall* Power of Kinges Defended against the Unnatural Liberty of the People’ (1). Completely at odds with natural rights theorists, for him men were born dependent on those who had begotten them. The ‘tenet’ that mankind was ‘naturally endowed and born with freedom from all subjection, and at liberty to choose what form of government it please [...] according to the discretion of the multitude’ was ‘first hatched in the schools [of the

Jesuits] and hath been fostered by all succeeding papists for good divinity'. Yet Filmer was quick to add that also the 'divines [...] of the reformed churches have entertained it, and the common people everywhere tenderly embrace it as being most plausible to flesh and blood, for that it prodigally distributes a portion of liberty to the meanest of the multitude' (2). Filmer not only criticized Catholic and Protestant thinkers, but targeted the 'common people'. These were urbanized parliamentary countrymen who, on Filmer's account, represented a much threatening category of subjects since, following their immoderate love of liberty, they irresponsibly conceded political space to the rabble. In choosing these targets Filmer articulated his discourse on two different levels. First, he engaged in a well-established philosophical dispute on the origins of government and the natural role of men in assigning power to governors. Second, he addressed his critique to a 'vulgar opinion [that] hath of late obtained great reputation' and of which '[i]t is hard to say whether it be more dangerous in divinity or dangerous in policy' (3).

Thus, in the first case Filmer attacked those who spread the 'pestilent' theory of 'the supposed natural equality and freedom of mankind'. Among these were 'both Jesuits and some over zealous favourers of the Geneva discipline'. He singled out Robert Parsons (1546–1610), George Buchanan (1506–82), Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) and John Calvin (1509–64) as supporters of the right of the people to depose and punish their rulers in case the latter bypassed the law. In substance, these two groups enslaved kings by giving them two awful masters: the Pontiff and the people. In the second case, Filmer did not need to look for sophisticated treatises to discover how widespread 'the whole fabric of this vast engine of popular sedition' had become (3). It was, in fact, sufficient to pay attention to one particular opinion held by many people in England (5). This was the conviction that to sacrifice oneself for one's country was the highest action, even when this meant to justify the killing of evil fathers on the basis of the formula *pro rege et patria*. Against such subversive contentions, Filmer carved out an image of the monarch, which, by relying on the socially and emotionally powerful motifs of family and fatherhood, made of him the protector of the fatherland. After all, '[a]s the father over one family, so the king, as father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole commonwealth' (12). Its calling on this persuasive rhetoric demonstrates that *Patriarcha* was a vigorous attempt to regain for the monarchical cause those who had become dissatisfied with Charles I's policies. Moreover, the theoretical medium of the family as the entity where social life had at

first originated constituted the antithesis of the bellicose condition of total anarchic freedom to be found in the state of nature. The Adamite narrative of the origins guaranteed a safe platform from which man's polity had stemmed and developed.

Turning more directly to the disputes afloat at his time in England, Filmer viewed the idea that somebody might become a martyr by posing as the guardian of the nation against its king as poisonous because it mirrored the attitudes of Roman republicans whose iconic martyr was Brutus, the murderer of Caesar. Grounded on Cicero's *De Officiis* (44 B.C.) and the ideal of virtuous citizenship, the patriot narrative – according to Filmer – encouraged citizens to fulfil their duty towards the *patria* by overthrowing the legitimate ruler when they thought it necessary. This political activism threatened to irreparably taint the unity of the kingdom, which for Filmer was enshrined in the monarch. By seizing upon republican and godly patriotism, these divisive spirits made the king the mere figurehead of the English nation, replaced him with the authority of Parliament and questioned the inviolability of his prerogative. Accordingly, Puritan and quasi-republican types considered the people above the king (just as papists argued that the Pope was superior to secular monarchs), so that the former could judge the latter and re-appropriate the power they claimed to have conceded to the sovereign. Filmer believed that this seditious opinion had become so popular that 'many out of an imaginary fear pretend the power of the people to be necessary for the repressing of the insolencies of tyrants, herein they propound a remedy far worse than the disease' (33). For him, a considerable number of theorists as well as sundry MPs demagogically lured ignorant subjects into the deceptive belief that liberty (other than that provided by the king) was everything. However, what they proposed – Filmer caustically remarked – was no more than a theatrical staging of a fake liberty: indeed, they engendered a form of modern slavery. Only under the protective wing of the fatherly ruler could Englishmen be at peace and thrive in freedom. Being guided by the 'natural law of a father', a patriarchalist monarchy was the best form of government to guarantee people's prosperity and preserve the wealth of the kingdom. As he put it, even usurpers and tyrants were 'bound to preserve the lands, goods, liberties and lives of all their subjects, not by any municipal law of the land, but by the natural law of a father' (42). At a historical juncture of mounting disaffection towards a Stuart monarchy making itself unpopular through taxes like the Forced Loan (1626–7) and through poor diplomacy abroad, Filmer stressed that harmony could only be found in an absolute monarchy where political matters were left to the control of the supreme, patriotic *and* fatherly king.

By defining the role of the caring father, Filmer retraced the original moment of the foundation of political dominion. Above all, he employed this image to depict the patriotic king. As he put it, 'many a child, by succeeding a king, hath the right of a father over many a grey-headed multitude, and hath the title of *pater patriae*' (10). At this point, Filmer had consolidated in the most stringent way the indissoluble link between fatherhood, household, patriarchy and kingly care for the polity and its subjects. By identifying king and nation, he rejected the opinion fostered by quasi-republican and godly patriots, public men and MPs that love of country meant primarily allegiance to Parliament. Filmer had no doubt that people had to obey the king if they truly wanted to promote the interests of their country. Therefore, being faithful to the country as conceived by the 'common people' meant to be unfaithful to the sovereign. This was so because the latter *was* the country and as such could not be dissociated from the representation of the national commonweal. In consequence, those who aspired to become martyrs for their native land by fighting the king (in Parliament, in the localities and in print) inevitably betrayed the true *pater patriae*. Patriarchalism offered thus a powerful answer to the humanist and republican tenet whereby *amor patriae* was intertwined with *caritas*, which implied the dangerous equation of the self-sacrifice of the citizen dying *pro patria* with Christ's death for the salvation of humankind.

The excerpts that open this essay cast light on Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* as a thorough and radical expression of *political patriarchalism*. Filmer deployed the latter as a weapon against patriots and Jesuits during a historical phase of increasingly heated ideological battle between absolutists and their adversaries. He targeted these two camps because their works put forward theories that were at loggerheads with his absolute and Adamite vision of power and authority. Thus, patriarchalism served Sir Robert to contest patriotic contentions making Parliament the cornerstone of the kingdom's political identity, and to dismantle popish arguments whereby the Pope controlled monarchs and was their superior. The fatherly account of politics delineated in *Patriarcha* was a response to these two discourses: above all, it was a statement or a re-assertion of who held ultimate power. In order to avoid the lethal political scenario in which patriots and Jesuits had the upper hand, Filmer reconsidered the role of the fatherly sovereign and fostered his patriotic aura. For this reason, Filmerian patriarchalism needs to be read as a forceful attempt at rethinking the nature of power. As a result of its making Adam's fatherly might the essential model of kingship, *Patriarcha* provides a rich account of statecraft whose fundament was the principle of the patriarchalist sovereign as founder

of the State and father of the fatherland. And this, in turn, has to be interpreted as a move to make the ruler coincide *tout court* with the polity and to represent the will of the king as the supreme authorizing political and legal voice in the body politic.

Together with presenting a contextual reading of a much referred to but little studied patriarchal moment, this essay hopes to have shown the – unexpected – interplay of patriarchalism and patriotism in early modern political thought. Ultimately, this perspective also helps us to understand why thinkers of the status of John Locke felt it imperative to counter Filmer's patriarchalist arguments.