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Revolution Principles

Mark Knights

The Grand Security of our Government, and the very Pillar upon which it stands, is founded upon the steady Belief of the Subject's Obligation to an Absolute, and Unconditional Obedience to the Supreme Power, in All Things Lawful, and the utter Illegality of Resistance upon any Pretence whatsoever. But this Fundamental Doctrine, notwithstanding its Divine Sanction in the Express Command of God in Scripture, and without which, it is impossible any Government of any Kind, or Denomination in the World should subsist with Safety, and which has been so long the Honourable, and Distinguishing Characteristic of Our Church, is now, it seems, quite Exploded and Ridicul'd out of Countenance, as an Unfashionable, Superannuated, nay (which is more wonderful) as a Dangerous Tenet, utterly Inconsistent with the Right, Liberty and Property, of the PEOPLE; who, as our New Preachers, and New Politicians teach us, (I suppose by a New and Unheard-of Gospel, as well as Laws) have in Contradiction to Both, the Power Invested in Them, the Fountain and Original, of it, to Cancel their Allegiance at pleasure, and call their Sovereign to account for High Treason against his Supream Subjects forsooth; nay to Dethrone and Murther Him for a Criminal, as they did the Royal Martyr by a Judiciary Sentence. And what is almost Incredible, presume to make their Court to their Prince, by maintaining such Anti-monarchical Schemes. But, God be Thanked! neither the Constitution of our Church or State, is so far Alterd, but that by the Laws of Both, still in Force, and which I hope for ever will be) these Damnable Positions, let'em come either from Rome, or Geneva, from the Pulpit, or the Press, are condemn'd for Rebellion, and High Treason. Our Adversaries think they effectually stop our Mouths, and have Us Sure and Unanswerable on this Point, when they urge the Revolution of this Day in their Defence. But certainly They are the Greatest Enemies of That, and His Late Majesty, and the most Ungrateful for the Deliverance, who endeavour to cast such Black, and Odious Colours upon Both.¹

This sermon was preached on 5 November 1709, a highly charged day in the Protestant calendar, marking not only the Catholic gunpowder conspiracy of 1605 but also the landing of William of Orange at Torbay in 1688, the start of what became known as ‘the Glorious Revolution.’ In 1688 William’s father-in-law, the Catholic James II, had fled his kingdom and in 1689 William and Mary had been crowned joint monarchs in a transfer of the Crown that did extreme violence to notions of irresistible divine right monarchy. Indeed 1688 has recently been given added significance by the work of Steve Pincus who argues that it was the ‘first modern revolution.’² Preaching twenty years after 1688, Dr Henry Sacheverell was prosecuted in Parliament because his sermon had seemed to question the legality of 1688 and linked it conceptually to the other seventeenth-century revolution of the 1640s, arguing, as we see in this extract, that they shared a common ideology. His impeachment put ‘revolution principles,’ as they had come to be known in Anne’s reign, on trial. It provoked a vast printed debate (with about a thousand items it was one of the largest in the eighteenth century); contributed to the Tory party landslide in the elections of 1710; and resonated throughout the eighteenth century. In 1790, in the wake of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke returned to the Whig speeches at Sacheverell’s trial, in order to clarify what the Whig party stood for, a party which Burke claimed had, in 1709–10, disowned the type of abstract natural rights that he warned would bring disaster in France. Sacheverell’s sermon thus linked the two revolutions of the seventeenth century with the revolutionary era of the late eighteenth century.

Sacheverell was not a distinguished cleric and his hopes of becoming a bishop never materialized; he was found guilty of the impeachment charges. Yet the very mild penalty imposed on him – a ban from preaching for three years – represented a pyrrhic victory which he celebrated with an extraordinary ‘progress’ through the Midlands in 1710, during which he was mobbed and feted by enthusiastic supporters. His critics, the Whigs, had hoped for a show trial that would buttress their position; but Sacheverell successfully articulated and galvanized hostility to the principles underlying both the mid-seventeenth- and later-seventeenth-century revolutions.

The debate centred on three main ‘revolution principles’: the right of resistance; the right to freedom of worship; and the right to freedom of speech.

Underlying both the Puritan Revolution of the 1640s and the Revolution of 1688 lays a right to resist a monarch who had become a tyrant. Such a right had already been explored in the sixteenth century by French Protestants, the Huguenots, who had waged war against persecuting Catholic kings. In the

passage quoted, Sacheverell was fiercely attacking Britain's own adoption of resistance theory. He had a number of targets. One was what he saw as the unholy conjuncture of Rome and Geneva, Catholicism and Calvinism, both of which upheld resistance against religious apostates and tyrants. A second was the Whig invocation of the need to protect 'Liberty and Property' at the expense, as he saw it, of religion. William's invading ship had the banner of Liberty and Property flying from its mast, and in the hands of a theorist such as John Locke, these concepts were welded, in his *Two Treatises* of 1690, into a powerful set of arguments that justified a right of resistance when liberty and property had been invaded. Sacheverell noted that alongside Liberty and Property, the Whigs also appealed to a notion of inviolable law and to the 'People' – for Locke there was a law of entrusted power that reverted to the people, the original source of all human authority, when its legal terms were breached by a tyrannous sovereign. Law was also important for other revolutionaries in both the mid- and later seventeenth centuries who nurtured a belief in an ancient constitution, a set of privileges and rights that had been won over centuries and which defended the subject against the encroaching power of a monarch. Liberty, Property, the People and the Law were thus the bedrock concepts of a new way of thinking about the nature of authority and the right of the people to resist illegal attacks on them. For a few, such rights were natural and fundamental to the contract which had created society; for more, perhaps, these rights were legal privileges that had been hard fought for over many generations. Against all this, Sacheverell clung to a notion of authority that derived from scripture and monarchical power. Such authority could not be legitimately resisted, he argued, since to do so would be to resist God; and it was a tenet of the Church of England that resistance was unlawful. In this rival version, then, church and king stood and fell together. Without an absolute and unconditional obedience, Sacheverell asserted (and many High Church Tories agreed), all authority was unstable.

The second 'revolution principle' was freedom of worship. Less apparent in the extract, but pervading Sacheverell's sermon, he voiced a vehement hostility to dissenters: those (mostly Calvinist) Protestants who either refused to worship within the Church of England, preferring to set up their own communities of gathered believers, or those who wanted to see reform of the Church of England, to remove remnants of popery that had not been fully purged by the reformation. There is a hint of Sacheverell's view in the passage where he yokes together Rome and Geneva as being in an unholy alliance against the Church of England – both Papists and Calvinists, he suggested, wanted to destroy the Church of England. Both wanted toleration from worshipping within the established church, so were

natural allies. The issue of freedom of worship for such tender consciences had split the nation apart in the mid-seventeenth-century revolution (called 'wars of religion' by some commentators) and again in the later seventeenth century, when the restored monarchy had first persecuted and then tolerated the church's critics. The revolution of 1688 had resulted in the passage of the 1689 Toleration Act, which enshrined in law the principle of freedom of worship for most (Catholics, atheists and those who did not believe in the Trinity were specifically excepted). Sacheverell's sermon was so inflammatory because he suggested that the Toleration Act had been a pernicious mistake. Toleration, he insisted, nurtured 'Monsters and Vipers in our Bosom' who not only undermined the church but also took advantage of toleration to advance their political ambitions – often by hypocritically 'occasionally conforming' to the Church of England (taking the sacrament that for the rest of the year they refused) merely to qualify themselves for office under the terms of the Test and Corporation Acts, which had been passed in Charles II's reign to protect the Church of England against papists and dissenters. Thus the 'revolution principle' of liberty of conscience, Sacheverell suggested, unleashed religious unorthodoxy in the form of atheism, deism and anti-trinitarianism but it also undermined the constitution. Freedom of worship did persist, despite Sacheverell, but the relationship between church and state remained a bugbear until at least the 1820s.

The third revolution principle was the freedom of speech and of the press. The revolution of the 1640s had in part been ushered in by the collapse of the government's control over the press in November 1641 and the resulting rush of print from the presses had been revolutionary in articulating 'public opinion'. Similarly, in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, the laws requiring print to be licensed before publication were allowed to lapse in 1695, creating another flood of print and the consolidation of a newspaper and periodical market. Sacheverell claimed that the press was another means by which dangerous religious and political opinions were disseminated; and he also positioned his own trial as an attempt to censor him into silence (the extract refers to attempts to 'stop the mouths' of those like him). His sermon was condemned to be burnt by the common hangman. One image thus portrayed him with a padlocked mouth. Yet during his trial, Sacheverell had invoked, with approval, a decree of the University of Oxford in 1683 which had proscribed a set of ideological tenets drawn from Milton, Hobbes and other mid-century radicals. Moreover, Sacheverell's sermon was itself a publishing sensation, with almost 100,000 copies sold. Indeed, his trial helped consolidate an emerging visual revolution in political culture, as printed images became a routine part of the contests. This

had begun in earnest during the similarly febrile atmosphere in the aftermath of the Popish Plot in 1678, but it reached new heights with the Sacheverell affair: portraits of the doctor were everywhere, and the contest over revolution principles was summed up in emblematic engravings and woodcuts. Sacheverell was depicted as a hero in some; an ally of the devil in others. Pre-publication censorship was not restored in 1710, and liberty of the press became a prized post-revolutionary norm, though in the 1790s the government again sought to clamp down on the press in the wake of the French Revolution.

The passage includes Sacheverell's outrage at the 'Murther' of Charles I on 30 January 1649, a day that in 1662 was declared an annual national day of mourning when sermon after sermon was delivered to castigate the nation for the regicide. Charles had been tried for initiating the second civil war and condemned to death by a court that he refused to recognize. His trial represented for Sacheverell the unjust perversion of the power of the people being placed over the power of the sovereign and Charles was thus a 'Martyr' for church and state. Sacheverell too saw himself as a martyr for his opposition to 'revolution principles'. Numerous copies were made of an image in which he held a portrait of Charles I, a self-conscious attempt to use the memory of one revolution to blacken the legitimacy of another. Indeed, Stuart imagery continued to be used in a variety of items – fans, handkerchiefs, glassware, pottery, ribbons – well into the eighteenth century to poke fun at the Whig heirs of 1688. Revolution was a commercial as well as an ideological commodity.

Sacheverell's sermon had also attacked those who were indifferent to religion but wedded to advancing their own self-interest, those who took advantage of the emerging fiscal-military state that the war against France that was declared in 1689 (itself a revolution in foreign policy) strengthened.³ This was a state capable of raising unheard of amounts of taxation (following precedents along those lines in the 1640s revolution) and mobilizing unprecedentedly large armed forces, fighting not just naval war but also continental ground war. This opened up vast opportunities: not only to supply and man the army and navy but also to lend money to the crown in what became known as the 'financial revolution' that included the creation of the Bank of England in 1694 and the national debt. Sacheverell thus attacked the 'False Brethren' who 'mean nothing but getting money and preferment' at the expense of traditional values. They followed 'meer Interest and Ambition', 'the little Sordid Lucre of a Place or Preferment', ready to betray church and state if it was to their advantage. Sacheverell was tapping here into the ways in which the financial revolution was changing society – ushering in a set of commercial values that seemed to him (and to others, such

Figure 3.1 Sacheveirell holding a portrait of Charles I. © Trustees of the British Museum.

as Jonathan Swift) to be undermining the traditional social structures. Monied men seemed to be winning out. Indeed, Steve Pincus has recently called 1688 the ‘first modern revolution’ in part because it saw the triumph of a new model of ‘political economy’ – a rejection of the French, authoritarian form of

government that equated power and land and the adoption of a Dutch model of consensual government in which labour and manufacture were key.⁴

For other commentators, 1688 marked a cultural revolution: with religious and constitutional liberty came politeness, a way of interacting with others that was perfectly suited to the post-revolutionary world of free discussion and debate and to the economic benefits that allowed men and women to consume new global commodities, such as tea, coffee and sugar, which could be consumed at the private tea-table or in the public coffee house.⁵ Coffee had been introduced during the first seventeenth-century revolution – a coffee house was established in Oxford in 1650 – and the fashion caught on: by the time Sacheverell delivered his sermon, London was teeming with coffee houses. The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas thought that this conjunction of a free press, a bourgeois financial revolution and new cultural spaces in which a ‘public’ could operate signalled the emergence of a ‘public sphere’.⁶ Yet politeness was an ideal as much as a code of behaviour; and it was one that Sacheverell breached. He was a noisy firebrand who hectored his opponents with ‘heat, passion, violence and scurrilous language’. His abusive, railing tone – clearly evident in the passage but even riper in other parts of the sermon – was almost the opposite of polite. Indeed, contemporaries talked of this time as the ‘rage of party’ – a moment when partisan passions, loyalties to the two parties of Whig and Tory that had emerged in the 1680s, had become so heightened that scuffles broke out in coffee houses and there were even some Whig drinking dens – ‘mug houses’ – from which violent gangs emerged to beat up Tory rivals. Vigorous and at times vicious partisanship resulted in personal attacks, in print as well as in person; in biting satires; in impassioned language; and in electioneering that frequently descended into mud-slinging and lies (the revolution of 1688 had enabled the passage of an act in 1694 that guaranteed a general election at least once every three years, keeping the nation in a state of almost perpetual electoral fever). Indeed, it can be argued that the culture of politeness was in part a reaction to the excessive passions of the partisan. Although in his sermon Sacheverell attacked ‘moderation’ as a lukewarm affection for the church and state, it was a quality which was prized by the polite as one that would moderate the heat of division. The cleric saw moderation as a danger; but there were plenty who thought there needed to be far more of it. And while Sacheverell railed at the dissenters as ‘fanatics’, he too appeared to be fanatical in his zeal (the ‘Arch-Phanatick’ according to one critic), an ‘enthusiast’ who criticized puritan enthusiasm. In the vehemence of his attack on revolution principles, Sacheverell was fuelling a cultural

revolution that prized moderation, cool and rational debate and a polite way of interacting with others.

Such politeness was aimed at women as well as men. Joseph Addison's *Spectator*, which was perhaps the epitome of polite advice, specifically aimed to reach their tea-tables and give them, he said, more to talk about than their dress. Some women were leading as well as consuming this literature. Delarivier Manley, for example, was one of the first women to earn her living by her writing, a critic of the Whigs not quite in the Sacheverell mould but still sharply critical. Indeed, the revolution of 1688 sparked a reconsideration of the role of women. Mary Astell thus used Whig arguments against James II's tyranny to suggest that men privately tyrannized women, and Judith Drake even compared the plight of women to the 'Negroes in our Western Plantations'.⁷ Others discerned something of a sexual revolution – toleration of religion not only leading to irreligion and atheism, as Sacheverell said, but also to libertinism. Taking off the restraints of morality and authority unleashed immorality and vice.⁸ Thus 1688 provoked a 'moral revolution' – a campaign to prosecute prostitutes and to bear down on immoral behaviour. It was perhaps for this reason, as well as the flocks of adoring women who allegedly greeted his progress, that Sacheverell was satirized in visual prints with prostitutes. Hogarth even included a portrait of Sacheverell on the wall of the town miss in his series of *The Harlot's Progress* (1732).

1688 is sometimes dismissed as little more than a coup, a replacement of one monarch by his son-in-law without effecting real change. Seen through the eyes of Sacheverell, however, and seen as linked to the earlier mid-century revolution of the 1640s as he did, 1688 takes on a different complexion. For Sacheverell, and those like him, the two revolutions were profoundly disruptive and innovating: they not only introduced new principles of a right to resist, freedom of worship and freedom of the press but also provoked economic and cultural change that threatened the established order of things, introducing revolutions in foreign policy, in finance, in the armed forces, in morality and in politeness. Indeed, in many ways the revolutions of the 1640s and 1688 were still going on when Sacheverell delivered his sermon in 1709: the same issues were at stake as had troubled the nation for the previous three generations. In that sense, Sacheverell's sermon reminds us that revolutions need not be particularly quick affairs, however much the flare of events might make us think otherwise: the fallout from a revolution could provoke later revolutionary moments and the legacy of division might burn for a considerable time. Of course, with hindsight it is possible to discern that 1688 became a conservative rather than

a radical revolution: partisan rivalries ossified into Whig oligarchy; adherence to property as well as liberty foreclosed any possibility of a social revolution; politeness opened up and embraced gaps between the wealthy elite and the poor and impolite masses. Yet it is also worth remembering that in 1788 celebrations of the centenary of the revolution were quite widespread and that people did look back in the later eighteenth century to 1688 as some sort of moment of change and rupture. The word ‘revolution’ was beginning to acquire something like its modern meaning.

Further Reading

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