

N.B. This is a rough, unpublished, piece written in the 1970's. The arguments and quotations have not been checked. Please treat accordingly.

### Christopher Hill

In order to see how the vision of Maitland and Stubbs, traces of which we still find in Trevelyan, was finally undermined, we need to find a direct link between the sociology of Marx and Weber and early modern history. Of course ideas are not like germs, carried by individuals, but in order to understand what happened it helps to examine a specific individual over his life in order to see how his ideas were developed. We have already seen how Tawney, starting with a modified rejection of Maitland, became more and more concerned with a simple Weberian opposition between 'medieval' and 'modern'. Tawney was the most influential social historian of the period between 1920 and 1950. It is arguable that his mantle, for the period from 1950 to 1975 was taken over by Christopher Hill, an admirer of his work and as prolific as Tawney. It is difficult to estimate Hill's influence since we still live under its shadow. As one of the founder's of the most prestigious journal **Past and Present** and Life President (just as Tawney had founded the **Economic History Review**, as author of over ten substantial monographs on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including two very widely used textbooks, as distinguished Ford Lecturer and Master of Balliol, as tutor of many of the leading contemporary historians of the period he has certainly been very important. It is therefore worth looking briefly at his work to see how far it helps to provide the missing link between Marx and English history. Although Marx was a contemporary of Maitland's, there is no sign that his work, based on an infinitely slimmer knowledge of English history, would have roused much interest in late nineteenth century historians. But for Christopher Hill it gave a broad interpretative structure which is implicit or explicit in all of his work. On it he hung, like a Christmas tree, the most amazing wealth of contemporary quotations and illustrations. Very few historians have read half as deeply in the contemporary pamphlet literature of the period and very few have written with such grace and elegance. His influence, like that of Tawney's, was partly due to his immense readability, as well as his concern for ordinary people and everyday concerns.

(See life of in recent fresh draft: born c.1910, Fellow of All Souls, 1924-38 and Fellow of Balliol College 1938-1965). The framework is laid out in a short essay first published in 1940 and reprinted in various editions until at least 1959. Entitled **The English Revolution 1640** this work is a paraphrase of Marx's views on the development of capitalism in England. In the introduction to the edition of 1955, Hill describes medieval, 'feudal' society as follows:

'Agriculture is the basis of economy and...political power is monopolised by a class of landowners. The mass of the population consists of dependent peasants subsisting on the produce of their family holdings. The landowners are maintained by the rent paid by the peasants, which might be in the form of food or labour, as in early days, or (by the sixteenth century) in money. In such a society there is room for small handicraft production, exchange of products, internal and overseas trade...commerce and industry are subordinated to and plundered by the landowners and their State. **Merchant** capital can develop within feudalism without changing the mode of production; a challenge to the old ruling class and its state comes only with the development of the capitalist mode of production in industry and agriculture.'

This world is smashed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thus as Tawney had tried to document, 'The "progressive" (i.e. capitalist) farming of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to expropriation of many a small group of profiteers; the village community was broken up.'

Thus 'capitalism had performed its historical task of laying the industrial foundation for a socialist society.' The English Civil War, therefore, was 'the victory of the bourgeoisie', which finally broke an older world. This change started, as Marx and Weber had shown, in the later fifteenth century. 'For centuries English society had been feudal, made up of isolated local communities producing for their own consumption, with very little trade between them. But gradually from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries a change began to come over the structure of this agricultural community.' This all began to change rapidly when Christopher Columbus discovered America and foreign trade expanded. The confiscation of Church lands at the Reformation threw more land onto the market. 'All these happenings were changing the structure of English rural society. The nature of land-holding change. 'In feudal England land had passed by inheritance from father to son, cultivated all the time in traditional ways for the consumption of one family; it had changed hands comparatively rarely.' In other words, it was a traditional 'peasant', subsistence economy, 'But now, the law adapting itself to the economic needs of society, land was beginning to become a commodity, bought and sold in a competitive market, and thus capital heaped up in the towns split over into the countryside.' This diffusion outwards of 'the new commercial spirits radiating from London and the ports' affected the south and east first, the north and west remained 'relatively untouched'. The legal revolution was linked to an ethical revolution. Landlords began to market their surpluses, fixed rents began to be "rocked up" to fantastically high levels.' This was a 'moral' revolution, for 'Feudal society had been dominated by custom, tradition. Money had been comparatively unimportant.' But in time, 'the needs of growing capitalism produced a new morality.' People pursued profit rather than human happiness, and 'A new kind of farmer was thus emerging in the Home Counties - the capitalist farmer.'

Yet it needed more than gradual erosion to change one 'mode of production' into another. The change was effected by blowing the old world apart in the Civil War. This was not the 'Great Rebellion' or the 'Puritan Revolt' which earlier historians such as Gardiner had believed it to be. It was the destruction of one type of society, 'feudalism', and its replacement by another 'capitalism'. It is thus truly a great divide. In 1640, despite growing commercialization, 'The structure of society was still essentially feudal; so were its laws and its political institutions...This legal network had to broken through if rural capitalism was to develop the resources of the countryside to the full.' The peasants needed to be expropriated, but above all the laws and political system needed to be changed. The rest of the pamphlet is concerned to show how the war of the 1640s was a class war, in which the new capitalist forces were liberated. 'A victory for Charles I and his gang could only have meant the economic stagnation of England, the stabilisation of a backward feudal society in a commercial age, and have necessitated an even bloodier struggle for liberation later.'

This massive and decisive break has been concealed by subsequent historians, Hill implies self-consciously. Thus Maitland and Stubbs and co. were covering up the fact that England had behaved in the way that Marx had believed, that it had had its revolutionary change from one mode of production to another. Ever since 1660, he writes, 'orthodox historians have done their utmost to stress the "continuity" of English history, to minimise the revolutionary breaks, to pretend that the "interregnum" (the word itself shows what they are trying to do) was an unfortunate accident...But now we know that 'in fact, the period 1640-60 saw the destruction of one kind of state and the introduction of a new political structure within which capitalism could freely develop.' After 1660 there was 'a new social order' which 'would not have been won without revolution.'

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<sup>1</sup>61. N.B. it is probably true to say that subsequent work by Hill's own pupils and others, e.g. Thirsky, Habakkuk et al. have given overwhelming support to the believers in 'continuity' and not to Hill's interpretation - but that is another story.

It might seem unfair and invidious to quote at length a pamphlet written originally when Hill was a young man. Yet reading through his subsequent works, though the picture is refined, amplified, it is difficult to see in what way it has been seriously modified. This is clearly very good news for Marxists, for it appears that on the basis of practically no historical evidence, Marx drew an outline of the development of the first capitalist society which is almost totally accurate. We may look briefly at some of Hill's later writings in order to see the elaboration of this structure. In his influential textbook, significantly titled **The Century of Revolution 1603-1714**, published in 1961, the theme of the massive transformation from a 'traditional', a 'feudal', a 'peasant' society into the 'modern', 'capitalist', 'individualist' society is the central one in the book. It is explicitly stated at the start. The first paragraph sets the tone. 'The years between 1603 and 1714 were perhaps the most decisive in English history...during the seventeenth century modern English society and a modern state began to take shape, and England's position in the world was transformed.' Hill then gives an overview of the changes covering areas ranging from diet to religion, from clothing to poetry. He concludes that 'The transformation that took place in the seventeenth century is then far more than merely a constitutional or political revolution, or a revolution in economics, religion, or taste. It embraces the whole of life. Two conceptions of civilization were in conflict.'<sup>2</sup> Marx is nowhere mentioned, but he would have been delighted to find that people lived in one kind of world in 1600 and another in 1700, that they had moved from one socio-economic formation to another, through revolution.

Hill published a second textbook in 1967 which takes a longer time period, namely **Reformation to Industrial Revolution**, (i.e. 1530 to 1780). At first sight it looks as if a longer perspective would tend to minimize the importance of the years 1640-1660. It also looks as if he is prepared to see more 'continuity' between the older order and the new. Thus he rightly points the danger of a dividing line between 'the Middle Ages' and 'Modern Times'<sup>3</sup> and discusses the fact that if we were to take the method of producing wealth as the main criterion, then it is the industrial revolution of the late C18 which is the turning point. He points out that 'medieval society was dominated by great landowners: as was England in 1780', that 'England in 1530, in 1780 and in 1967 was governed by the crown in Parliament.'<sup>4</sup> Yet the spectre is soon slain; this is only an 'apparent continuity'. The landowners in 1780 and 1530 were a very different phenomenon, parliament too is only 'in a formal sense the same institution'. Thus we are reassured that the book is concerned with 'the making of modern English society', with the social transition. Similar illustrations concerning housing, diet, clothing are given<sup>5</sup> though it is admitted that this whole period was one of 'slow economic change'. Yet 'if we look at political history, we see this gradual advance interrupted by a sharp break after 1640.' This 'political revolution' we are told, 'gave rise to revolutions in trade and agriculture.' These three together, as Rostow would no doubt be delighted to hear, 'prepared for that take-off into the modern industrial world which England was the first country to achieve.'<sup>6</sup> In the body of the book Hill documents the growth of this 'modern'

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<sup>2</sup>pp. 4-5

<sup>3</sup>p. 7

<sup>4</sup>p. 7

<sup>5</sup>p. 9

<sup>6</sup>p. 10

society, gradually from 1530, with an abrupt break in the 1640s. In fact it is this sharp break which is again stressed throughout the book; at times it reads almost like something out of **1066 and All That**. Like Hobbes' remark about the first puff of gunpowder killing off the last fairy, we are told that England was basically 'feudal' and 'traditional' until the 1640s and then, suddenly, become 'modern'. 'In agrarian relations the Middle Ages were brought to an end in 1646 by the abolition of feudal tenures and the Court of Wards.'<sup>7</sup> 'In trade, colonial and foreign policy, the end of the Middle Ages in England came in 1650-1...'<sup>8</sup> 'In finance the Middle Ages in England ended in 1643, when two new modern taxes, the excise and the land tax, were introduced...'<sup>9</sup> And we are told that 'It is difficult to exaggerate the social significance of the religious and intellectual revolution of the sixteen-forties and fifties.'<sup>10</sup> These are only a few of the 'revolutions' which changed one type of society into another, suddenly and traumatically - a face which Marx had anticipated by the accumulated efforts of the great historians and scholars of the nineteenth century had totally failed to notice.

Hill's influence through his text-books would have been lessened if they had not been supported by a large number of learned monographs and essays over the same period and up to the present. His highly-praised and carefully documented **Economic Problems of the Church**, his more controversial **Intellectual Origins of the Civil War**, as well as numerous other works, allow us to see a large mind at work synthesizing and throwing out challenging ideas. It is unfair to select from this large corpus, but we are forced to do so and may briefly look at two articles. One is in his **Society and Puritanism** (1964), entitled 'Individuals and Communities'. Here we have a discussion of the break-down of the 'medieval community' and the rise of the 'individual' in the early modern period, an account of from **gemeinschaft** to **gesellschaft** that would delight many a sociologist. We are told that 'Medieval society was a federation of communities: members of town guilds and villages...had a status, rights as well as duties, because of their membership of such communities.' But, as Tawney had shown, 'the economic processes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries disrupted these communities.'<sup>11</sup> The existence of vagabonds is 'the most obvious example of the breakdown of the local community as a unit of employment or of social security.'<sup>12</sup> The changes were related to 'the rise of a spirit of individualism' in the early seventeenth century.<sup>13</sup> The 'traditional village festivities kept alive a communal spirit' which was 'alien to the new emphasis on the individual' and this is illustrated in the rise of Puritanism. It is a picture of disruption and atomization, 'Economic processes were atomizing society, converting it from a

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<sup>7</sup>p. 115

<sup>8</sup>p. 123

<sup>9</sup>p. 144

<sup>10</sup>p. 152

<sup>11</sup>p. 483

<sup>12</sup>p. 483

<sup>13</sup>p. 484

hierarchy of communities to the agglomeration of equal competing individuals depicted in **Leviathan**.<sup>14</sup> The change could be seen everywhere. In religion, there was a contrast between 'seventeenth-century family religion' and 'medieval community religion'. It could be seen in family life. Medieval peasants had been unable to have a private family life because of their squalid homes; 'a peasant-hut' was not 'favourable to home life'. It was in the growing number of 'middle-class' homes, with their 'unprecedented comfort and privacy', that people could withdraw from the corporate community.<sup>15</sup> Thus we are told that 'The old geographical communities, with their rough-and-ready but effective hierarchical subordination, their traditional ceremonies, their succession of popular seasonal festivals...were passing. The new communities of the sects which ultimately emerged were voluntary, electing and paying their own minister, relieving their own poor, imposing a more rigorous discipline on their own members than the national Church could now do. Contract communities had succeeded status communities.'<sup>16</sup>

Thus we are seeing a gradual shift from 'traditional', 'communal' society to the 'atomized individualism of Hobbes and Adam Smith.'<sup>17</sup> In this process, the central two motive forces were the Protestant and the Capitalist 'revolutions' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus Marx and Weber are blended once again, via Tawney. For though Hill points out in his essay on 'Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism' (in the essays presented to Tawney 1961) that there are a number of defects in the Weberian thesis, yet he still accepts a modified version of it. Although there is no easy correlation, so that 'men did not become capitalists because they were Protestants, nor Protestants because they were capitalist', it is nevertheless the case that 'The Protestant revolt melted down the iron ideological framework which held society in its ancient mould. Where capitalism already existed, it had henceforth freer scope...In a society already becoming capitalist, protestantism facilitated the triumph of the new values.'<sup>18</sup> This implies that Hill is siding with Marx against Weber - ideology is a reflection, though not a necessary and direct reflection, of changes in the relations of production. Yet it is the less important for that. Hill accepts Weber's insight into the fact that 'The victory of protestantism helped to end the animistic magical universe, and undermined the traditional popular conception of religion as propitiation...'<sup>19</sup> The picture is completed. The modern sociological view of the 'great transition' has been fully absorbed. The hesitance of Trevelyan, the blindnesses of Maitland and Stubbs and the rest have been overcome. Sociologists and historians have at last agreed that England went through its great transition, its 'take-off', a century ahead of any other European country. The message for those concerned with 'underdevelopment' in other countries is clear. If they want 'economic progress', they need to abolish the 'traditional' system. 'Progress' may be painful, but even Hill sees the capitalist revolution as

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<sup>14</sup>p. 487

<sup>15</sup>p. 488

<sup>16</sup>p. 491

<sup>17</sup>p. 503

<sup>18</sup>p. 36

<sup>19</sup>p. 38

a necessary stage before the communist one.<sup>20</sup>

It will be obvious that behind this general description there is a very marked contrast between two different systems. In order to highlight the great change, it is necessary to contrast it with 'medieval' or 'feudal' society. This had been necessary for Marx and Weber as well. It is interesting that Hill should not feel it necessary to read, or at least discuss, any medieval history in order to see whether his vision of communalism, 'feudalism' etc. is correct. Thus he does not make explicit the fact that he is adopting Marx's view of the medieval period, which is in every deep respect contradicted by Maitland's. Yet, it is probably that even if he had consulted medieval social and economic historians writing in the second half of the twentieth century they would have confirmed his views, for they were, with some notable exceptions either Marxists or, like Eileen Power, close friends and influenced by Tawney. There would therefore have been little to shake Hill's belief in what now looks like a largely fictional picture of medieval agrarian structure. It is probably the case therefore that he would not have been forced into abandoning a position which has meant that though his account of the seventeenth century may satisfy him, most others writing on this period (e.g. T-Roper et al) find it as unconvincing as Tawney's.

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<sup>20</sup>English Revolution, 5