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ANTI-TELEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF CONCEPTS TAKEN TO THE EXTREME

J.C.D. Clark (2000): English Society 1660-1832: Religion, ideology and politics during the ancien regime. Second Edition. Cambridge: CUP. 580 pages.

Though one of the most controversial works of late twentieth-century British historiography, the first edition of Jonathan Clark's *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (1985) has earned the status of a classic in the history of ideas due to the long-lived scholarly debate it initiated. This debate contributed to changes of focus in studies on eighteenth-century England and the entire English-speaking world. The second edition of the book (2000), which provides Clark's conclusions after fifteen years of discussion, will certainly meet with widespread interest among historians.

For the second edition, Clark has rewritten much of the original book. Both the academic and political contexts of rewriting have certainly been very different from those of the early 1980s. Clark now wishes to explain away some of the criticisms met by the first edition by referring to his need to react to the established values of the early 1980s. The debate for and against Clark's favourite concept

'the long eighteenth century' has also made him reconsider some aspects of his approach. He now states that the hypotheses of the first edition were 'provisional' and that, in some aspects, it has been necessary to draw different kind of conclusions as a result of further scholarly work. Yet Clark has not rejected his major argument on the survival of the religion-dominated ancien regime character of English society well into the 1830s. This thesis remains highly controversial to this day, particularly as Clark now considers the Restoration of 1660 (instead of the Revolution of 1688) as a decisive moment in the formation of ancien regime English society, thus extending the long eighteenth century to cover 170 years.

By year 2000, Clark sees his 'anti-teleological' perspective, which appreciates the religious basis of much of the eighteenth-century belief system, to have established itself. Undoubtedly, after thorough reassessments in historiography, no equal need to trumpet methodological flaws in earlier studies, to insist on the study of the eighteenth century on its own terms, or to emphasise the importance of focussing on continuities (and not mere changes) now exists. Our knowledge of various aspects of eighteenth-century England has increased considerably since an interest in the role of religion in the lives and thoughts of early modern people began to be taken more seriously in the 1990s, partly as a result of the publication of the first edition of *English Society*.

Clark presents his book as one of several endeavours among historians of ideas to 'defamiliarise' early modern society in order to free our understandings from distortions that have for long affected historiography of the period. Clark's book is intended to 'discern the unities and continuities which established society's basic public formulations, and the moral and religious experience of Englishmen' (p. 2). He points out, however, that his method differs from other available approaches to the history of past thought, including John Pocock's study of political discourses, Quentin Skinner's study of authors' intentions, and Reinhart Koselleck's study of the history of concepts.

Clark's methodological approach deserves particular attention. As Clark expresses some sympathy towards historians focussing on the changing meanings of concepts, one might ask whether his work could be considered a type of the history of concepts. Clark regards

language and substance as intimately connected and thus emphasises the central role of the history of ideas in understanding past societies. In accordance with the Anglophone contextualist tradition, he underscores the importance of studying the history of language use, pointing out that 'the history of concepts is here presented as the history of their uses in argument' (p. 2). Clark's method, as expressed here, indeed seems to be combining strategies applied in various approaches to the history of ideas.

Clark's work emphasises 'continuities, collectivities and man's sense of the sacred.' In the first two aspects at least, it resembles some of the basic assumptions of the history of concepts. Clark's book opens with a statement shared by all historians of concepts: 'Words change their meanings over time; new concepts are coined to describe new ideas.' Likewise, most historians of concepts would agree with Clark's warnings for the 'mortal sins' of anachronism, prolepsis and teleology which may rise if eighteenth-century 'keywords' are interpreted as anticipations of what was to come in the nineteenth century. Though such keywords appear as familiar to us, they often carry meanings that are completely different from those we attach to them. Clark goes even further, as he also rejects the application of concepts and categories dating from later periods to the study of the eighteenth century. Above all, he considers the use of terms such as 'conservatism', 'liberalism' and 'radicalism' in analyses of the long eighteenth century as seriously misleading. Such a fundamentalist view unavoidably affects research work in important ways. For instance, instead of 'radicals,' we had better characterise some early modern thinkers as extremists, or merely as disaffected. Attempts to remain strictly loyal to contemporary terminology may also cause considerable difficulties in the translation of eighteenth-century experiences to modern language. If we wish to be totally orthodox in our rejection of anachronistic terms, can we discuss 'identities' or 'pluralism,' for instance, as a number of historians and even Clark himself is forced to do?¹

Though sharing with historians of concepts an aversion to anachronism, Clark's method contains features that differ radically both from conventional approaches to the history of ideas and from the history of concepts. Most provocative is Clark's willingness to abandon the concepts of 'the Enlightenment' and 'industrial revolution'

as tools of analysis. Many scholars may wonder what would remain out of the eighteenth century if these commonplace models of interpretation were rejected. Clark's rejection of 'the Enlightenment' is, of course, well-founded in a sense that such a mixture of traditional and innovative elements of thought flourished in the eighteenth century that the application of the name of a single intellectual 'project' to an entire era may seriously distort our understanding of the period. Yet not all eighteenth-century scholars may share Clark's view that 'the Enlightenment can no longer be used as a reliable and agreed term of historical explanation and is even losing its usefulness as a shorthand signifier of an accepted body of authors and ideas' (p. 9). For the time being, it is impossible to imagine that the nearly two thousand scholars focussing on the eighteenth century, who attend congresses on the Enlightenment every four years, would change the name of the event into a 'Congress on the Long Eighteenth Century'.

The history of concepts in its Koselleckian form pays attention to contemporary experiences of change, particularly with reference to the eighteenth century which most scholars regard as a key period in the transition to modernity. Clark, in contrast, sees the discussion on the nature and timing of the transition to modernity as one originating from political science and argues that there are no reasons why historians should look for signs of 'modernisation' from the eighteenth century, as 'eighteenth-century Englishmen had no sense of living through such a process' (p. 11). For Clark, the transition to modernity had not happened during the Civil Wars of the 1640s. Neither did it happen in the eighteenth century, and hence 'the employment of the long eighteenth century to illustrate a watershed between pre-modernity and modernity is historically illegitimate' (p. 124). More particularly so because the eighteenth-century English did not yet possess concepts that historians have used when creating what he considers an arbitrary division between the past and present. Furthermore, argues Clark, neither did seventeenth and eighteenth-century Englishmen feel that they were living in a traditional society experiencing 'secularisation,' that is, emancipation of various branches of social life from religion. In brief, Clark rejects the secularisation thesis as inapplicable to a period when, instead of materialism, it were versions of heterodoxy which challenged the established ideology.

Clark thus calls for a fundamental reassessment of the widely shared ideas about the relationship between 'old' and 'new'. For him, there was no conflict between traditional and modern society in the eighteenth century. Instead, he sees 'the long eighteenth century' – a period between the political changes of the Restoration of 1660 and those of the Reform of 1832 – as a period neither pre-modern nor modern, yet one which possessed a considerable ideological integrity. According to Clark, ideas of religious and political hierarchy, formulated in the aftermath of the Restoration and expressed in frequently repeated phrases such as 'Church and State', only strengthened throughout the following century. The Church of England and society remained intimately linked, and may even have become more so in the course of the century. Such a link is undeniable, yet it might be worthwhile also to consider intellectual changes that could take place within continuity and orthodoxy of the established Church.

According to Clark, in a 'confessional state' with a distinct ideological hegemony, economic and social changes could occur and be understood within the established religion-dominated ideological framework. It was only in the 1830s, argues Clark, when the established set of beliefs quickly disintegrated as values changed and a number of phenomena became reconceptualised. Importantly, for Clark, the changes which brought the old society to an end occurred in attitudes, ideas and beliefs, not in the material basis of society.

For Clark, no simple transition to modernity ever happened. Undoubtedly, Clark is right to reject simplified secularisation and modernisation theses as far as they tend to deny the continued public significance of religion in the eighteenth century. Yet it might be more helpful to see secularisation and modernisation as gradual and evolutionary processes – in the same way he sees English economy as evolutionary – rather than to place all major ideological changes in the 1830s. Taken the fundamental changes which English society went through in the course of the eighteenth century, emphasised by many historians,² it is difficult to agree with the argument that the Englishmen experienced no transformation to something completely new happening. The pace of change must have been noticeable, and, indeed, a number of contemporary statements refer to a recognition of an on-going change. One might ask, for instance, does not suspiciousness towards things modern, innovation, novelty and change,

apparent in many early eighteenth-century texts,³ express an awareness of modernity, though often condemning or denying it?

One aspect that the historians of concepts, often relying on interpretations of the eighteenth century as an era of the Enlightenment, have not taken seriously enough, is the interplay between the spheres of politics and religion. Clark strongly emphasises the fact that the discourses of religion, popular culture, political theory and high politics were, throughout the century, closely interrelated. The discourses of religion and law still dominated political discourse. Even the major revolutions of the period had religious dimensions which, according to Clark, older 'political science' failed to appreciate.

Clark is certainly right to point out that much of the secular terminology of modern political science only came into existence in the nineteenth century. Eighteenth-century politics, in contrast, continued to a great extent to be conceptualised through religion. This thesis on the religious origin of major eighteenth-century political concepts finds support from several recent studies on English politics, though not all scholars see the dominance of religion as unchanging throughout the century. Historians have placed the starting point of decline in the dominance of religion differently, ranging from the Restoration to the late eighteenth century. Clark remains an exception when timing this turn only with the reforms of the 1830s and seeing no fundamental discontinuity in the history of the long eighteenth century. For Clark, it is only the early nineteenth century which deserves to be called 'a period of remarkable conceptual innovation.' These innovations included the translation of freethinking into liberalism and atheism into radicalism, the rise of the language of class, and the narrowing of categories such as family and friend into their modern restricted senses. Though recognising such conceptual changes in the early nineteenth century, Clark remains deeply sceptical to the Koselleckian hypothesis of *Sattelzeit*, or a period of transition to modernity between 1750 and 1850, at least with reference to English history.

One feature in Clark's type of the history of concepts probably appears as disturbing to many historians of concepts. Like most other historians of ideas writing on eighteenth-century English history, Clark often refers only to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* when tracing word history. Other dic-

tionaries or sources conveying information on semantic change are all too often ignored. Points on conceptual change would certainly be based on a much firmer foundation if they were supported by the consultation of all available dictionary sources and not merely one eighteenth-century authority, particularly as Johnson is known to have held extremely traditionalist views on a number of phenomena and even to have manipulated dictionary entries to express his doubts. Furthermore, though Clark points to a need to compare English and continental developments in the eighteenth century, that is something he and most of his colleagues continue to exclude from their accounts of English history, even if scholarly literature in other languages usable for comparisons already exists.

* * *

Turning from the method to the substance of Clark's interpretation of eighteenth-century English political theory, one can only admire the depth and thoroughness of his analysis. Developments in political theory between the Restoration and Reform have been subjected to scholarship of the highest degree. Clark shows how, during the Restoration, an initially religious approach to royalism turned increasingly legalistic. Religious idioms, however, remained in constant use in political discourse. New forms of religion-derived political rhetoric were also introduced: in the rhetoric used by the government, republicanism, sectarianism, fanaticism and nonconformity were linked, whereas opposition rhetoric associated absolute monarchy with popery.

Clark's interpretation of the events of the Revolution of 1688 can by now be regarded as rather conventional. He illustrates how, among the political elite, the thesis of royal abdication soon substituted extremist interpretations of the Revolution, including John Locke's contractual and resistance theories. The Revolution turned the ancient constitution into the Protestant Constitution which practically meant Anglican hegemony, within which divisions among members of the political elite also took place. Clark argues that the revolutionaries were not reaching for either a new political or social order, and neither was the Revolution a distinct victory of constitutionalism. Importantly, republicanism (which has been so eagerly studied by his-

torians of ideas) was to remain a marginal line in English political discourse throughout the eighteenth century, whereas providence continued to be used as a major source of legitimation for political power even by the governing Whigs. As Clark puts it, the republicans were 'the anomaly, a minority of "Freethinkers" in a Christian mental universe' (p. 324).

Clark correctly reminds historians of political theory of the danger of creating a distorted image when basing their conclusions on eighteenth-century political thought on mere canonical thinkers. Furthermore, Clark wishes to demonstrate that also great philosophers such as John Locke held assumptions inherent in a traditional society and cannot be considered founders of traditions of thought that later 'led' to the rise of nineteenth-century political ideologies. Clark plays down the role of Locke, for instance, by pointing out that he wrote outside the mainstream political discourse. Furthermore, his and other models of human character, on which political theory built, remained subject to religious influences. Most English political theorists continued to be clergymen (and thus not politicians, lawyers or other secular thinkers), which ensured continuity in English political theory and prevented it from taking secular forms of the kind of the French Enlightenment.

Political and ecclesiastical establishments continued to work in close cooperation in the eighteenth century. Well-known political language originating from the Bible, natural law and the history of the English monarchy remained in constant use. Above all, Clark maintains, 'the secular state was no easy or natural formation' (p. 107). He concedes, that, by 1760, it had become evident that the traditional doctrine of divine indefeasible hereditary right of monarchy could never again be revived, but Clark does not see this as a major turn in English political discourse. Here, for instance, it might have been helpful to compare English developments with those of other Protestant nation states such as the Netherlands and Sweden. In both countries, political language used even by the clergy of the established churches appears to have experienced changes by the 1760s. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the concepts of official political theory and national identity, as used in sermons preached to political authorities on national days of prayer, had gone through a considerable transformation by the 1760s in England as well.⁴

National identities have been an object of attention of a number of historians in recent years. Faithfully to his insistence on the need to avoid anachronistic categories, Clark rightly rejects the use of the nineteenth-century terms 'nationality' and 'nationalism' with reference to the eighteenth century. Undoubtedly, references to 'the nation', which had been frequent indeed in English political discourse ever since the Reformation, must not be interpreted as precursory nationalism in its nineteenth-century race and language-oriented form. Yet Clark finds it legitimate to study changing expressions of collective consciousness ever since early medieval times. He argues that an ancient English identity was based on widely (though not universally) shared assumptions on religion and on a long national history and that this identity experienced no profound changes no matter what political and social developments England went through. It was only in the 1790s when a few thinkers, provoked by the French Revolution, began to denounce this inherited conception of Englishness.

Clark rejects Linda Colley's (1992) thesis of Anti-Catholicism and Protestantism as bases for a national consensus. The intensity of Anti-Catholicism declined particularly after 1760, when the threat of a Catholic restoration vanished. Disagreements between different Protestant denominations became visible during the American War of Independence. But religion continued to have an impact on 'the monarchical nature of English identity' in the reign of George III. Clark gives Robert Hay Drummond's sermon in the coronation of George III as an example of a new focus on monarchy as a promoter of religious and political virtue instead of monarchy as a divine institution. Yet Clark argues that it was only very slowly between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries that the principle of divine right was secularised so that divine sanction was transformed from the person of the monarch to the entire political system. Clark supports his point by presenting early nineteenth-century evidence to illustrate a continuous belief in some circles in the necessity of a union between the State and the established Church. Here it might have been possible to focus on how official political theory and definitions of national identity had in fact already been transformed by the time of Drummond's sermon (1760) from one of an Israel-like guilty nation to one of a moral community in which thankfulness

was due not only to God but also to the constitution. As Clark himself states, by the mid eighteenth century, a number of clergymen had rejected political theology based on a direct application of the Bible to forms of government, even if many still continued to defend the doctrine of divine providence in human affairs. Such changes in clerical assumptions were consequential as the clergy formed the group responsible for the political education of the nation. Besides, some leading churchmen even suggested, in official connections, that divine interventions of the kind of seventeenth century were no more needed.⁵

One of the most frequently disputed aspects of the 1985 edition of *English Society* was Clark's interpretation on English radicalism. Also in the second edition, Clark insists that any disaffection with the established politico-religious order could have (though not all disaffection had) religious origins for as long as society and Church were regarded as identical and the established Church continued to work as the major agent of State at local level. In other words, Clark argues, eighteenth-century disaffection was not so much directed against the franchise system of parliamentary elections but against the status of the established Church and its creed. According to Clark, heterodoxy in deistical or Anti-Trinitarian forms was 'conceptually basic' to the ideological positions of extremist thinkers (p. 339). Though Clark provides sufficient evidence to illustrate the connection between heterodoxy and political extremism, with an extended conceptual analysis, it might be possible for him to demonstrate this conceptual linkage more distinctly. An excellent illustration of a fruitful contextual analysis of concepts is provided by Clark's demonstration of the emergence of the nineteenth-century meaning of radicalism in the writings of Jeremy Bentham in the late 1810s and 1820s (pp. 498-9).

* * *

With his self-confident argumentation, Clark endeavours to show that his approach to the long eighteenth century has by now been universally adopted. Any review of recent scholarly debate in history, however, demonstrates that this is not the case: a widespread Clarkian school of eighteenth-century enthusiasts does not exist, and

there is a risk that even his modified interpretation will remain in the margins of historical research. However, Clark's interventions in the debate have always been extremely fruitful ones, forcing historians to reconsider their approaches to a period the 'modern' features of which they easily take as self-evident but which they are in serious danger of misunderstanding because of their innate inability to view the period on its own not-so-modern terms. To an historian of concepts, Clark's work teaches further awareness of the dangers of anachronism, including the need to avoid an illusion that religion suddenly turned into a private matter with little real public influence as societies entered modernity in the eighteenth century.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion on the concept of identity, see Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600-1800*. Cambridge 1999, 291.
- ² See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton 1975, 423, 425, and Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783*, Oxford 1989, 677.
- ³ Pasi Ihalainen, *The Discourse on Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-Century England*. Helsinki 1999, 74-80.
- ⁴ Discussed in more detail in Pasi Ihalainen, 'Kansallisesta syillisyyden tunteesta isänmaanrakkauteen: Englantilainen kansallistunne valtiollisten vuosipäivien virallisissa saarnoissa 1688-1762,' forthcoming, Helsinki 2001; see also James Claudle, *Measures of Allegiance: Sermon Culture and the Creation of a Public Discourse of Obedience and Resistance in Georgian Britain, 1714-1760*. Unprinted doctoral dissertation. Yale University 1995.
- ⁵ Ihalainen 2001.