



1688

THE FIRST MODERN  
REVOLUTION

STEVE PINCUS

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THE LEWIS WALPOLE SERIES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CULTURE AND HISTORY

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REVOLUTION*

STEVE PINCUS

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PART I

# *Introductory*



# HISTORIC COUNTIES of ENGLAND



After  
*"The South Part of Great Britain  
called England and Wales"*  
by  
**HERMAN MOLL**  
1710

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## Introduction

England's Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 holds a special place in our understanding of the modern world and the revolutions that had a hand in shaping it. For the better part of three centuries scholars and public intellectuals identified England's Revolution of 1688–89 as a defining moment in England's exceptional history. Political philosophers have associated it with the origins of liberalism. Sociologists have contrasted it with the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. Historians have pointed to the Revolution as confirming the unusual nature of the English state. Scholars of literature and culture highlight the Revolution of 1688–89 as an important moment in defining English common sense and moderation. All of these interpretations derive their power from a deeply held and widely repeated narrative of England's Revolution of 1688–89. Unfortunately, that narrative is wrong. Replacing that historical narrative with a new one will necessarily force us to revise many of the basic historical, political, moral, and sociological categories we use to make sense of the modern world. This book aims to explain both the ways in which this traditional view is mistaken and why that view has been so widely accepted for such a long time. The old narrative emphasized the Revolution of 1688–89 as a great moment in which the English *defended* their unique way of life. The argument I advance in this book is that the English revolutionaries *created* a new kind of modern state. It was that new state that has proved so influential in shaping the modern world.

Men and women all over the English-speaking world once knew what happened in England's Revolution of 1688–89. In 1685, the Catholic King James II inherited the crown of England. In 1689 the English people agreed to replace him with the Protestants King William III and Queen Mary II. In the intervening years, James II gradually and

myopically alienated the moderate and sensible English people. He did this in a series of well-known missteps. In late 1685 he overreacted to the romantic but hopeless rebellion of his nephew, the Protestant Duke of Monmouth, by judicially murdering hundreds of humble inhabitants of the English West Country in the Bloody Assizes. Determined to improve the social and political status of his Catholic coreligionists, James then ran roughshod over English law. He insisted on his right to defy parliamentary statute and awarded Roman Catholics military and naval commissions. In 1687 he used his newly formed and illegal ecclesiastical commission to force England's Protestant universities to accept Roman Catholic fellows. When the fellows of Magdalen College Oxford resisted their king's demands, he had the dons stripped of their fellowships, turning the institution into a Catholic seminary.

According to this once well-known narrative, after James II had failed to persuade the House of Commons or the House of Lords to repeal England's laws against Roman Catholicism, he decided to emasculate Parliament. He first asserted his right to nullify the Test Acts and Penal Laws. These parliamentary statutes—requiring, in the case of the Test Acts, that all political or military officeholders take the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England and, in the case of the Penal Laws, punishing those who officiated at or attended non-Church of England services—had successfully insulated the English from Continental Catholic practices. Then James determined to have his royal fiat ratified by a Parliament packed with men whom he knew would do his bidding. When, in June 1688, seven bishops of the Church of England defied James II by refusing to have his Declaration of Indulgence, emasculating the Penal Laws and Test Acts, read from England's pulpits on the grounds of its illegality, James had the seven prelates dragged into court for a show trial. That even a carefully picked English jury acquitted the bishops demonstrated the extent to which the English were willing to go in support of their king. Soon after the trial, the English invited the Dutchman William III, Prince of Orange, to England to vindicate their religious and political liberty.

The English people enthusiastically welcomed William on his arrival in the west of England in 1688. James's army quickly melted away after a series of spectacular defections, including that of the future Duke of Marlborough. James himself, preceded by his wife and newborn son, fled to France. The English people, in what was thought to have been a remarkable moment of political unanimity, agreed to replace James with William and Mary in February 1689. The English justified the crowning of the new monarchs with the publication of the Declaration of Right, detailing the ways that James II had violated English law, thereby insisting on the limited power of English kings. In the traditional account of the Glorious Revolution, the English people, led by their natural leaders in the two Houses of Parliament, changed the English polity in the slightest of ways in 1688–89. They slightly altered the succession, they made it illegal for a Catholic ever to inherit the throne, and they passed the Toleration Act, allowing Protestant Dissenters to worship freely. There were, to be sure, some significant unintended consequences of this bloodless

revolution. But these outcomes were to be understood less as a direct consequence of these events than as the natural outgrowth of the English national character—a character that the Catholicizing Stuart monarchs had done much to pervert.

This was the story that every English schoolchild, and many North American ones, used to know. This was the story that the great Victorian historian Thomas Babington Macaulay laid out in his magisterial *History of England*, first published in the middle of the nineteenth century. That *History* was an immediate and runaway best seller and has deservedly been deeply influential ever since. Macaulay told his story in beautiful and accessible prose. He based his account on exhaustive research. Any scholar with an interest in the late seventeenth century should begin his or her research by examining Macaulay's notes, now preserved in the British Library. Very few subsequent scholars of the events Macaulay described have achieved his level of archival mastery. And in many ways, subsequent scholars have quibbled with the details of Macaulay's story while accepting his general thesis.

Macaulay's thesis became *the* classic statement of the Whig interpretation of the Revolution of 1688–89. It had a number of distinctive facets. First, the revolution was unrevolutionary. Unlike other subsequent revolutions, England's revolution was bloodless, consensual, aristocratic, and above all sensible. The English had no desire to transform their polity, their society, or their culture. Instead they worried that James II had intended to do just that. Second, the revolution was Protestant. James II had tried to reinstitute Catholicism in England. The revolution insured that England would remain a Protestant polity. Third, the revolution demonstrated the fundamentally exceptional nature of English national character. Continental Europeans vacillated between the wild extremes of republican and popular government on the one hand and tyrannical royal absolutism on the other. The English, by contrast, were committed to limited monarchy, allowing just the right amount of tempered popular liberty. Just as the English church was a sensible middle way between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and radical Protestant sectarianism, so the English polity, by maintaining its ancient constitution, was sensible and moderate. In this context the English remained committed to their hierarchical social structure precisely because it did not impose unbridgeable gaps between the aristocracy and the people. Fourth, there could have been no social grievances undergirding the Revolution of 1688–89 because English society had changed little in the period before James II's flight. It was only after English property rights were secured by the revolution, only after absolutism was no longer possible in England, that the English economy could truly flourish.

This book challenges every element of this established account. It is my claim that England's Revolution of 1688–89 was the first modern revolution. I came to this conclusion after more than a decade of research in archives across the United Kingdom, North America, and Europe. Macaulay built his story on a mountain of evidence; but much new material has become available in the intervening century and a half, and new bibliographic techniques have made it easier to locate materials. Macaulay assumed he knew

what a Catholic king must have wanted to achieve; but I decided to try to uncover the aims, ideals, and contexts in which James II and his Catholic advisers operated. Macaulay assumed that European affairs were of little interest to the English people; I chose, by contrast, to take seriously the mass of ephemeral publications discussing Continental power politics. Macaulay assumed that conflicts over economic policy would become central political questions only in his own day; I chose, instead, to investigate the links between the aspirations and activities of England's merchant communities and late-seventeenth-century politics. I have benefited immensely from the research of twentieth-century scholars into England's social and economic history. All told this new historical evidence, it seems to me, makes it possible to tell a radically different story about the Revolution of 1688–89. In this story the English experience is not exceptional but in fact typical (if precocious) of states experiencing modern revolutions. The Revolution of 1688–89 is important not because it reaffirmed the exceptional English national character but because it was a landmark moment in the emergence of the modern state.

England in the later seventeenth century was rapidly becoming a modern society. Its economy was booming. Its towns were growing and becoming more comfortable. Its trade was expanding. These developments made it possible for English statesmen to conceive of a more active role for the English government. But social and economic change did not make the Revolution of 1688–89 inevitable. James II, deeply influenced by the particular brand of Catholicism he practiced and by the successful political model of his cousin, Louis XIV of France, sought to develop a modern absolutist state. James and his supporters created a centralizing bureaucratic state, a professional standing army, and a world-class navy. At the same time, James fashioned a modern Catholic polity. James, like his cousin Louis XIV, wanted Catholic subjects but not a papal overlord. Instead James insisted on absolute sovereignty within his own dominion while at the same time seeking to Catholicize his Protestant country. James successfully promoted the spread of Catholic apologetic literature, the proliferation of Catholic schools and colleges, and the opening of Catholic churches. No one living through the 1680s in England could have failed to appreciate the new prominence of Catholicism in English everyday life. James and his advisers appreciated that his modern state needed an expanding set of resources to support his more interventionist state. They quickly concluded that a centralized overseas territorial empire, with bases in India, North America, and the West Indies were essential props. James marshaled newly available resources, and devised plans for a vastly increased empire, to create a modern Catholic state.

James's opponents were, by and large, revolutionaries, not reactionaries. They appreciated that only a modernized English state could compete in contemporary Europe. Unlike James, however, the revolutionaries looked to the Dutch Republic rather than to the French monarchy for political inspiration. They, too, wanted a state that could support a powerful army and a first-class navy. They, too, imagined that such a state would have to be centralized and interventionist. But unlike James and his advisers, the revolutionaries

imagined that England would be most powerful if it encouraged political participation rather than absolutism, if it were religiously tolerant rather than Catholicizing, and if it were devoted to promoting English manufactures rather than maintaining a landed empire. The revolutionaries understood full well that these political preferences put them at ideological loggerheads with Louis XIV's modern Catholic monarchy. The revolutionaries were therefore fully committed to fighting an all-out war against France, not only to protect the British Isles against a potential French-backed Jacobite restoration, but also to ensure that there would be European markets available to English manufactures and that European liberty would be preserved against French-style absolutism.

James II and his opponents did not only advocate radically different modernizing programs, they also were able to deploy a modern arsenal of political tools. James had succeeded in raising, maintaining, and deploying an efficient and disciplined army. He was in the process of molding most corporations throughout England and Wales into loyal instruments of local politics. James used the press and various political institutions to spread his regime's values and silence alternative viewpoints. James's regime may look brief and fragile in retrospect, but from the perspective of the later seventeenth century he had created a powerful edifice. It was precisely because James had been able to create such a powerful state that many of James's opponents realized that it could only be resisted with violence and that only a revolutionary transformation could prevent a future English monarch from re-creating his modern absolutist state. Those who overthrew James II in 1688 and shaped the new regime in the following decade were necessarily revolutionaries.

Though we have come to view the Glorious Revolution as bloodless, aristocratic, and consensual, the actual event was none of these things. The Revolution of 1688–89 was, of course, less bloody than the violent revolutions of the twentieth century, but the English endured a scale of violence against property and persons similar to that of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> English men and women throughout the country threatened one another, destroyed each other's property, and killed and maimed one another throughout the revolutionary period. English men and women, from London to Newcastle, from Plymouth to Norwich, experienced violence or threats of violence, or lived in terrifying fear of violence. This was not a tame event. Nor was it a staid negotiation conducted by elites. Men and women of all social categories took to the streets, marched in arms on England's byways and highways, and donated huge amounts of money—some in very small quantities—to support the revolutionary cause. When the members of the House of Lords tried calmly to settle the succession issue after James II had fled the country, an angry crowd numbering in the tens of thousands cut short the nobles' deliberations and forced their hands. Given the power, efficiency, and ideological cohesion of James II's new regime, it was not surprising that many supported their king with great enthusiasm even in 1688 and beyond. Since many of the revolutionaries sought to replace James II's French-style modernization program with one based on a Dutch model, it was also predictable that many others would support the undoing of James II's

new state edifice while doing everything they could to prevent the creation a Williamite alternative. The English throughout the 1680s, 1690s, and thereafter were politically and ideologically divided. There was no moment of English cohesion against an un-English king. There was no period in the late seventeenth century in which the sensible people of England collaborated to rid themselves against an irrational monarch. The Revolution of 1688–89 was, like all other revolutions, violent, popular, and divisive.

My central argument in this book, then, is that the English in the later seventeenth century forged the first modern revolution. This revolution had long-term causes and long-term consequences. The English could not have transformed their state and society in the ways that they did in the 1680s and 1690s had the events of the previous century—especially those of the crisis of the 1640s and 1650s—not unleashed a series of ideological debates that informed and transformed conceptions of state, religion, and society. English politicians, whether supporters of James II or of William and Mary, could not have transformed England's state institutions had the English economy not diverged from the late-seventeenth-century European pattern of recession and retrenchment. Because there were long-term causes of the Glorious Revolution, the consequences of that revolution were not necessarily unintended. The creation of the Bank of England, war against France, and religious toleration were all explicit goals of many of the revolutionaries. Precisely because the debates over these issues had long pedigrees, it would be wrong to understand 1688 or 1689 as a fundamental break in English history. The debates over these issues continued, albeit modified and reshaped by new institutional realities. Early Modern England did not come to an end in 1688, nor did Modern England begin then. It would, however, be fair to say that the character of English state and society relations was fundamentally transformed.

The revolutionaries created a new kind of English state after 1689. They rejected the modern, bureaucratic absolutist state model developed by Louis XIV in France. But they did not reject the state. Instead the revolutionaries created a state that was intrusive in different ways. Their state sought to transform England from an agrarian into a manufacturing society, oversaw the massive military buildup that was necessary to fight a war against the greatest military power that Europe had ever seen, and sought to promote a religiously tolerant society. John Locke, often described as one of the earliest and most influential liberal thinkers, was one of these revolutionaries. If the Glorious Revolution was a critical moment in the development of modern liberalism, that liberalism was not antagonistic to the state. The liberalism spawned in 1688–89 was revolutionary and interventionist rather than moderate and antistatist.

The Glorious Revolution, in my view, was not the triumph of a group of modernizers over defenders of traditional society. Instead the revolution pitted two groups of modernizers against each other. Both sides tried, against long odds, to appeal for the hearts and minds of the reactionaries. This, I believe, was a pattern typical of all modern revolutions. Revolutionary situations, in the vast majority of cases, have been created when

the regime in power decides, for whatever reason, that it needs to modernize. In so doing the regime extends the tendrils of the state deeper and more extensively into society than they had ever gone before, necessarily generating resentment. At the same time, by announcing a break with the past, the regime has lowered the bar for opposition movements. Potential revolutionaries no longer need to persuade their fellow subjects to break with traditional and trusted ways of life. They merely need to persuade them that they have a superior model for change. The regime in power can no longer rely on the habitual loyalty of elites. The revolutionaries of late-seventeenth-century England set the model for this now typical political pattern.

What do I mean by modern, modernizers, and modernization? The terms have become flashpoints in contemporary public discussion. Many scholars, scholars for whom I have the utmost respect, would prefer that we do away with them or at least severely limit their use.<sup>2</sup> These scholars, and many others, dislike the family of terms around “modernity” for two reasons. First, it is said that the term *modern* or *modernity* is never specified. It is a term that means everything and nothing. Second, it is claimed that modernization stories are always reading history backward from the perspective of contemporary advanced democracies. All modernization stories are measured against the outcome of modern capitalist (read non–state interventionist) democracy. These are serious concerns. When, throughout this book, I use the terms *modernization*, *modernity*, or *modern* I mean them in very specific ways. I do not conceive of modernity as a coherent and integrated whole. Nor do I think modernization implies one narrow and particular path. Instead, it makes sense to discuss an epochal break in the construction of the state, and perhaps only the state, in later seventeenth-century Europe as a whole, and in England in particular. Although changes in the state, I believe, had profound consequences for foreign policy, the nature of imperial aspirations, English economy, and English society, I am not asserting that modernization determined these outcomes. In fact, it is my central claim that different conceptions of the modern state made possible different political and social consequences. Above all, I am not saying that state modernization necessarily implied a complete and total break with the past in intellectual, religious, or social life.

What, then, do I mean by the emergence of a modern state? I mean two interrelated sets of changes. I mean, first, a set of sociostructural innovations in statecraft. State modernizers usually try to centralize and bureaucratize political authority. They attempt to transform and professionalize the military. They use the tools of the state to accelerate economic growth and shape the contours of society. They undertake to gather directly detailed information about and occasionally suppress social and political activities taking place in a wide range of geographical locales and social levels within the polity. Second, a modern state implies an ideological break with the past. State modernizers insist on their own novelty, on a sense that they are undertaking a project that is utterly new. James II frequently mentioned that he was basing his state on a “New Magna Carta.” One of those active on the other side in 1688, John Evelyn, hoped that the consequence of the revolution



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