JOHN LOCKE AND WILLIAM III: A DUTCHMAN'S RULE IN ENGLAND CURTAILED BY AN ENGLISHMAN TO WHOM THE DUTCH HAD EXTENDED POLITICAL ASYLUM

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Dutch Prince William of Orange and his Princess Mary, daughter of the English king James II, were well acquainted with John Locke, the English philosopher whose fame was to spread throughout the learned world during their joint reign as King and Queen of England. They held him in high esteem. During 1689-90, the first year of their reign, the king offered Locke several ambassadorial posts (which he declined to accept). That year also saw the publication of Locke's **Two Treatises of Government.** The opening paragraph of its preface at once gets us to the topic I want to highlight: the curtailment of a ruler's power through the enactment of principles of political individualism. Locke there writes about the purpose of his **Two Treatises:**

> ... to establish the throne of our great restorer, our present King William; to make good his title in the consent of the people; which being the only one of all lawful governments, he has more fully and clearly than any prince in Christendom; and to justify to the world the people of England, whose love of their just and natural rights, with their resolution to preserve them, saved the nation when it was on the very brink of slavery and ruin.

Before William came on the British scene, England "was on the very brink of slavery and ruin". It was, Locke believed, on the brink of ruin because it was on the brink of slavery; and it was on the brink of slavery because kings again acted as if in their rule they did not (as monarchs-in-Parliament) share sovereignty with the people in a relationship which made them, ultimately, responsible to th people; they again behaved as if their position and power did not originate with men but with God. Kings again ruled as if they had a divine right to rule.

It was Charles II who had re-introduced to Locke this pernicious view of the royal position. Now Charles should have known better. His father had, after all, lost his head through not heeding the contract which a large number of his people believed to be implicit in the relationship with their king; and Charles

himself had been able to return from exile in 1660 only when, through parliament, the people offered him the crown on the explicit affirmation that the king would rule as monarch-in-Parliament. It was, in addition, not as if he had received no warnings throughout his reign, especially during his maneuvering to have the crown pass to his Catholic brother James on the occasion of his death. That move was much against the will of his Protestant people. Insistence on its execution only showed the people as in fact without self-determination in the King's eyes. And, in the people's eyes, its enforcement after Charles' death robbed them of their freedom as a nation because it placed them under moral and political obligation to Rome.

Throughout his maneuverings Charles was warned and opposed by the party of the Whigs. Their chief spokesman was Anthony Ashley Cooper, First Earl of Shaftesbury: for his troubles Charles made him spend time in the Tower, but for his popularity with the people Charles also had to suffer him on occasion as Lord President of the Privy Council. This spokesman for individual rights had John Locke as his main advisor. It is no exaggeration to say that Shaftesbury's outlook--and that of his Whig intimates--was firmed up and given clear articulation through his long and intimate association with Locke, an association which began in 1666, six years after the restoration of the Stuart monarchy.[1] During the years that Shaftesbury opposed Charles, Locke developed his attack on the "false principles and foundation" **(First Treatise)** of Charles' actions and prepared his statement "concerning the true original, extent, and end, of civil government" **(Second Treatise).** The ideas and principles of these two treatises formed the immediate intellectual grounds of the Whig attack on Charles and of the alternative they proposed to his outlook.

But Charles possessed the power. When, in 1679, parliament had before it a Bill which would "disable" James "to inherit the crown of England", he dissolved parliament and dismissed Shaftesbury from Office. Shaftesbury's position became more and more precarious. In the end he fled to Holland, where he died in January 1683, eight months before Locke also found it necessary to secure his safety among the Dutch.

Charles died in 1685 and James succeeded him. Without much loss of time the new King sent an envoy to The Hague with the demand for extradition of 85 Englishmen accused of plotting against him. Locke was named as one of these. The Dutch government was extremely perfunctory in its attempt to locate the offenders. The following year the Estates-General published its list of offenders and Locke's name was left off.[2]

1688 was the year of the "Glorious Revolution": the Whigs, now led by Danby, invited William to cross the Channel with an army; James fled; the throne was declared vacant; and Parliament assumed the right to offer the crown to Mary and William. Mary followed her husband within three months--accompanied by John Locke, chief architect of the revolution which secured inalienable personal rights for British individuals and a position for the new King and Queen which made William complain that he had more power as **Stadthouder** in Holland then as King in England.

William's complaint was justified by the facts. Since facts are what they are because of the value-laden theory which they embody, we must step back from 1688 as well as from England; we must retreat half a century and focus on events in Holland. These events are among the main ingredients in an account of the limitations of royal power in England beyond that of a **stadthouder** in Holland. The events I have in mind concern the conception and birth of that period of Western history called **The Enlightenment.**

The Enlightenment is still usually considered to be an eighteenth-century affair in conception, birth and maturity. Certainly as to conception and birth that date is incorrect by at least half a century. It was most fully conceived by Descartes and most fully brought to light by him in the Netherlands in the sixteen-thirties and forties.[3] Descartes' offspring was rejected by the Dutch and this rejection helps to explain the aptness of half of William's complaint. Descartes' offspring was adopted by Locke and that helps to explain the appropriateness of the other half of the complaint. The British revolution of 1688 was the first of three revolutions--the American and French revolutions which took place a century later being the other two--the first of three states of affairs which were inspired by the thought of René Descartes.

The plausibility of these assertions hangs on my ability to deal with at least the following questions: (i) I have related Descartes and the Enlightenment: was there as close a connection as I intimated? (ii) I absolved the Dutch from being taken in by the Enlightenment--at least not taken in to the extent that the English and the French were: was such absolution warranted? (iii) I have linked Descartes, Locke, and the Enlightenment's revolutionary stance which, in the political realm, ascribes absolute supremacy to individuals' rights and thus severely circumscribes executive power: is my positing of these linkages defensible? Would a person like Locke (who certainly owed William a debt of gratitude) really want to curb the powers of such a generous and tolerant King? Are mere philosophers really capable of clipping royal wings? I shall deal with these questions in turn.

(i) Descartes and the Enlightenment

The fundamental feature of Descartes' position I take to be that of freedom, not that of reason.[4] This thesis in a general way points at the strong affinity between Cartesian and Enlightenment thought: for Descartes, as for most of the spokesmen of the Enlightenment, freedom of the individual was of ultimate importance. This general affinity becomes concrete through very specific characteristics shared by both Descartes and eighteenth-century thinkers (especially those Frenchmen to whom we often refer as the **philosophes).** Both promulgated the following closely related doctrines: (a) that mankind is in bondage to prejudice (where by "prejudice" they meant beliefs, practices and institutions which the individual's reason had not sanctioned); (b) that man is able to liberate himself from prejudice; (c) that he is able to liberate himself because he has available to him the method through the use of which liberation can be effected; (d) that this method is reason's proper mode of procedure and as such is universal in its application--i.e., it is to be applied to all areas of life: to the sciences (whether such theoretical sciences as mathematics or physics, or practical sciences like mechanics or politics) as well as to institutions (whether family, school, church or state); (e) that the method's application, in whatever realm, occasions revolution; (f) and that such rvolution is desired for the sake of progress in the attainment of ever greater individual freedom. Let me expand for a moment on the penultimate of these doctrines, on that of the Cartesian method demanding revolution.

Even though he wrote of himself as being a reformer, Descartes really wanted a revolution. Descartes is a revolutionary because his method dictates that no external givens may be simply accepted as a foundation for our theory, and that no existing principles or frameworks have an immediate legitimate claim to guide us in our practice. All foundations, principles and frameworks must be established by the individual; all institutions must have their natures determined by and their existence dependent on the reason and will of individuals banding together for the purpose of furthering the cause of humanity. Advancing the cause of humanity demands in the first instance the establishment and safeguarding of individual autonomy.

In what is perhaps the most typical of French Enlightenment documents, Condorcet's **Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind,**[5] we read that it was "the genius of Descartes" which "gave men's minds that general impetus which is the first principle of a revolution in the destinies of the human race..." (147). Descartes, says Condorcet, "wished to extend his method to all the subjects of human thought; God, man and the universe..." (122). "He commanded men to shake off the yoke of authority, to recognize none save that which was avowed by reason..." **(ibid).** None, that is, save that which was avowed by each person's own reason. For in his praise of Descartes, Condorcet writes: "He asked that the philosopher, cast into the middle of the universe, should begin by renouncing all the beliefs that he had received and even all the notions he had formed, so that he might then recreate for himself, as it were, a new understanding..." (121). Condorcet stresses that Descartes' call for revolution was needed. "He was obeyed, because he won men by his boldness and led them by his enthusiasm" (122). The revolution spread and "At last man could proclaim aloud his right, which for so long had been ignored, to submit all opinions to his own reason..."(136). The Enlighteners arose and, observing what they took to be the absurdities and intolerance of religion, the despotism and tyranny of politics, proceeded by "laying their axes to the very roots of these sinister trees" all the while "never ceasing to demand the independence of reason... as the right and the salvation of mankind" (137). As for Descartes, so for the **philosophes:** not the reformer's work of restoration or improvement but revolutionary deracination is necessary for progress in the human condition. But not so for the Dutch.

(ii) The Dutch and Descartes

The Dutch rejected Descartes and, over the next century, they tended to be indifferent to those whom Descartes had enlightened. This in spite of the fact that Descartes lived in Holland from 1628 to 1649, years which comprised two-thirds of his adult life and nearly all of his productive period, years during which he composed all of his major works--all of which were published in Holland by Dutch publishers.[6] There were exceptions, especially among those working in the physical sciences (think of Constantyn Huygens) but by and large the Dutch were not converted to Cartesianism. To the contrary.

Throughout 1641-43 there were public quarrels between Descartes and Gysbertus Voetius, rector of the university of Utrecht. Voetius used Aristotle to counter what he saw as Descartes' challenge to Christianity. In 1642 Utrecht University officially took Voetius' side and by so doing officially and explicitly decided in favour of Aristoteleanism over Cartesianism. In 1645 the Utrecht magistrates (who had already entered the fray in 1643) prohibited discussion in print of Descartes' philosophy. In 1647 difficulties erupted at the university of Leiden, where Jacobus Revius was Descartes' chief antagonist. In spite of Descartes' appeal to the Leiden magistrates there, too, the outcome was that theologians were forbidden to refer to Cartesian doctrines in speech or writing.[7] One--and possibly the most important--cause of the Enlightenment's relatively meagre effect on the Netherlands is to be located in the circumstances surrounding Descartes' career in Holland: he was read alright and, correctly, the spirit of his writings was discerned to oppose both the spirit of Christianity and that of the ancient philosophers. For that reason discussion of his writings was forbidden. As a consequence, at least in Dutch national politics, "the old philosophy" prevailed. Through suppression of Descartes it was Aristotelean wholism rather than reductionistic individualism which continued to structure most of Dutch political thought and practice. Because of Locke's influence in England and Descartes' lack of influence in Holland, William III was led to complain that he possessed less power as King of England than he enjoyed as **Stadthouder** of the Netherlands.

Aristoteleanism prevailed.[8] Through rejection of Descartes the Dutch tended to remain free from at least the more radical of

Enlightenment principles and practices. The Dutch published Descartes but dismissed his doctrines; they published the **philosophes** but tended not to read them--as Marc Michel Rey is reported to have said to Rousseau, "Nous vous imprimons mais nous ne vous lisons pas". Those among the Dutch who considered themselves enlightened--as did the members of the circle of Petrus Burman at **Kasteel Santhorst**-- rejected **liberté, égalité, fraternité** and adopted as their motto **Vryheid, Vroomheid, Vrede en Verdrag (Liberty, Piety, Peace and Toleration).**[9] **Through rejection of Descartes and considerable indifference to the** philosophes, Aristotelean rather than Cartesian doctrine continued to serve best as a theoretical account of Dutch political pracice in the second half of the seventeenth and throughtout the eighteenth century.

This practice was formed and consolidated throughout Protestant Holland's long struggle for independence from Catholic Spain.[10] During this struggle both Dutch religious and political consciousness became intensely social in nature. It gave rise to what has been described as an "evangelical, proto-romantic cult of the Fatherland".[11] As **Stadthouder** of this nation, even as member of the House of William the Silent, the **Vader des Vaderlands,** William III's power was of course hardly that which in his **Patriarcha** Sir Robert Filmer had ascribed to the British Kings.[12] But there were strong notions of society as a family, of persons as essentially members of a **volk.** Aristotelean wholistic notions (reinforced by the view the Dutch had of themselves as the nation of "reborn and resworn Hebrews, destined to enjoy the favours of Providence just as long as they remained faithful to the Ark of the Covenant")[13] kept reductionistic Cartesian notions at bay at least in politics. As **Stadthouder** the mantle of the "Father of the Fatherland" rested on William's shoulders. Notwithstanding anti-Orangist sentiments and activities, his personal position and influence were more secure in Holland[14] than they could ever be in England after the "Glorious Revolution". In the "Scepter'd Isle" no hint of Patriarchy (be it ever so tolerant) was to be tolerated. The King served at the request of the people, and his position was legitimate only as long as and to the extent that he executed the will of the majority of individuals as this came to him through the voice of the parliamentary majority.

(iii) Descartes, Locke, and the Enlightenment's revolutionary stance

The doctrine of Descartes' **Discourse on Method** was "in the air" in both theory and practice but, until the publication of the **Discourse,** it had not been clearly and popularly stated and it had not been promulgated as universally applicable. Descartes himself stressed the universal applicability of his reductionistic method, but illustrated its effects only in the realms of metaphysics, epistemology, mathematics, optics, meteorology, physics, and in his study of the passions. After the **Discourse** was published (1637) its doctrine spread like wildfire and within a generation its reductionistic principles were in many centers of learning accepted without question as the correct description of the way human reason works in its successful pursuit of truth. Add to this the belief that in the realms of ethics and politics reason's pronouncements are normative for action, and it is easy to see how the application of this methodology leads to political atomism with its individuals characterised by inalienable rights and its rulers possessed of an authority derived strictly from those they rule. Kings then reign at the pleasure of their subjects and only as long as they meet their subject's pleasure.

Locke adopted Descartes' methodology without qualms or questions and applied it in areas where Descartes had not ventured, notably in politics and in the study of the Scriptures.[15] Given a reductionistic methodology, explanation is from the **part** to the **whole.** So in arithmetic, for example, all numbers are ultimately explained in terms of what is taken to be the fundamental and self-evident concept of **unity;** and in philosophy we start with what is taken to be the fundamental self-evident subjective awareness of the absolute trustworthiness of the individual's autonomous thought. If this method is applied to politics we will there, too, look for a **part** in terms of which to explain the **whole.** The whole is the state, civil society. Society is made up of people, of individuals. Hence it will be the concept of the **individual** which explains that of the **state** and it will be the characteristics of the individual which determine the properties of political society.[16] If the state has a degree of power, its power is to be explained in terms of the power of its individual citizens. If the state possesses a degree of autonomy, that too is to be explained in terms of the freedom which characterizes its individual members. No ruler's power is legitimate

unless it is an expression of the citizens' power used to secure the ends for which the state's individuals want this power exercised. If the state's executive uses its derived power in a manner which infringes in any way on the liberty which the majority of the citizens deem to belong to them, then the executive oversteps the bounds of legitimacy and, in effect, becomes a rebellious brutal force. Parliament is the gathering of the individuals' representatives. The executive's disregard of its majority voice on any issue is at the cost of loss of executive legitimacy. If the executive is a king, disregard of parliament on any issue constitutes activity which signifies progress on the path to dethronement.

If we now return to my opening paragraph, to Locke's statement of purpose of his **Two Treatises,** we can recognize this statement as itself a severe delimitation of royal power and as an implicit warning to the King.

> ... to establish the throne of our great restorer, our present King William; to make good his title in the consent of the people; which being the only one of all lawful governments...

What Locke is saying is that the throne of William exists by the grace of the individuals who have contracted it into existence, and that only those exercises of royal power which rest on the consent of these individuals is lawful royal power.

Locke's was the intellect which firmed up and developed the ideology which came to expression in the platform of the party of the Whigs. The revolution of 1688 placed the Whigs firmly in political control. The Whigs crowned William and Mary. Their revolutionary position made this crown a confining band for one who, like William, had been long used to the non-revolutionary stance of the Dutch.[17]

NOTES

1. This is not to say that there were no additional influences. As an important member of the London business community Cooper had deep roots in the Puritanism of the 1640's and 1650's. Its rich intellectual tradition (Pym, Lilburne, Cartwright, Overton--not to mention Cromwell--on questions

of **contract, authority, sovereignty, social structures,** no doubt helps to explain why Cooper and his associates were so receptive to Locke's ideas.

2. See Richard I. Aaron, **John Locke** (3rd edn.), Oxford, 1971, Part I, chapter II.

3. This point I have argued in detail in a forthcoming book, **Descartes and the Enlightenment.**

4. I defended this thesis in "Descartes: the Primacy of Free-will over Reason", a paper presented at the meetings of the Canadian Philosophical Association, Montreal, 1985.

5. This work was written during 1773-4. My quotations will be from the translation of June Barraclough, London, 1955. I shall enter the page references directly in the text.

6. These included the **Discourse on Method** (1637), the **Meditations** (1641), the **Principles of Philosophy** (1644), and the **Passions of the Soul** (1649). The **Discourse** was published by Jan Maire of Leiden. The second (and, since it had the **"Objections and Replies" appended to it, the most important) edition of the** Meditations **was published in Amsterdam by Louis Elzevier. The Elzeviers also published the** Principles and the **Passions.**

7. See Jack R. Vrooman, **Rene Descartes, A Biography,** New York, 1970, **passim.**

8. The influence of Grotius did not really do much to curb that of Aristotle in national politics. Grotius was influential in international relations: here, his doctrines were as revolutionary as any of Locke's. But what Grotius had to say about the internal nature of the state sometimes tended to be a confused mixture of Aristotelean wholistic and "modern" reductionistic accounts. See Peter A. Schouls, **The Imposition of Method, a study of Descartes and Locke,** Oxford, 1980, pp. 10-12.

9. See Simon Schama, "The Enlightenment in the Netherlands", in **The Enlightenment in National Context,** ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 54-71, p. 61 and p. 67.

10. **From the medieval period on, Dutch towns were corporations with charters describing rights and duties of the** poorters in a community. As this system developed, each town came to send delegated (i.e., **instructed)** representatives to the Estates-General. Once independence from Spain had been established this form of national government became constitutional in the Dutch Republic. It was in this context of **community** that the office of **Stadthouder** was defined.

11. Schama, **loc. cit.**, p. 71. Schama argues in this context that the Dutch "Verlichting" primarily consisted in "the **rejection** of a cosmopolitan, Francophone, universally applicable, rationally discerned set of rational laws...".

12. This was brought home forcefully to his father, William II, in his attempted **coup** (1650) against the Grand Pensionary Johan van Oldenbarneveld.

13. Schama, **loc.cit.**, p. 66.

14. This was the case especially after 1672, the beginning of the Franco-Dutch war. The **volk** turned to their "Father", William III, for salvation. They gave him a free hand to fight France. At that point there were no constitutional restraints. William was in full control of the Estates-General, and the very notion of a shared sovereignty was unknown in this exercise of his office.

15. See Schouls, **The Imposition...**, chapters 6, 7, 8.

16. For a detailed account see Schouls, **The Imposition...**, chapter 7.

17. I am indebted for many points of historical detail to Professor Harry Groenwold of The King's College, Edmonton.