

'WE ARE ALL ONE IN THE EYES OF THE LORD':

**CHRISTOPHER HILL AND THE HISTORICAL
MEANINGS OF RADICAL RELIGION**

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'We are All One in the Eyes of the Lord':

Christopher Hill and the Historical Meanings of Radical Religion¹

Christopher Hill, the Marxist historian who died in February 2003 at the age of ninety-one,² was a magisterial figure. His prodigious output,³ in lively and accessible prose, formed part of a distinctive tradition of non-doctrinaire but nonetheless unapologetic Marxism in application to history.⁴ Hill was, however, not particularly preoccupied with studying the material 'infrastructure'. Instead, he rejoiced in the power of ideas - and particularly ideas generated within the tradition of radical Protestantism that encouraged individuals to read their Bibles, to judge independently, and then to 'bear witness' to their beliefs, however unconventional.

With his fluent, enthusiastic style and love of historical 'colour', Hill was the Macaulay of Marxism. Both saw the history of seventeenth-century England in epic terms. For the Whig Macaulay the outcome was 'progress' in ideas, morals, and wealth. For Hill, on the other hand, the all-important 'Century of Revolution'⁵ left a double-sided legacy, containing a revolution within a revolution. The successful 'bourgeois' version did lead eventually to political stability, economic growth and material improvement. Yet Hill

detected too a lower-class upheaval in ideas, which, although initially unsuccessful, left a long-term legacy of radical alternatives.

Individual responses to Protestantism played a part in both revolutions. Hill liked the passage in *The Bible* (Acts, 17:6), when Christ's messengers were defined as 'these that have turned the world upside down ...' and he borrowed the phrase for the title of his most famous and influential book.⁶ The truth would be subversive of all existing assumptions. And it might be discovered by anyone, even the meanest person in the land. 'God is no respecter of persons'.⁷ After all, the Christian message proclaimed that the mighty would be humbled and the meek exalted. 'He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away'.⁸ Such texts inspired many in the past with their egalitarian promise, whether spiritual or secular; and they also inspired the young Christopher Hill.

Of course, he was well aware that a condition of real freedom *and* true equality for all was no easy objective to achieve in practice. He was worldly-wise, though neither worldly nor world-weary. But he believed that all imperfect societies, both past and present, contained the potential for something better. The poor would one day find their kingdom of heaven - here on earth. This for him was always the noble ideal. Present societies

could therefore learn from past endeavours, as he remarked at the end of

*The World Turned Upside Down:*⁹

We can, perhaps, extend a little gratitude to all those nameless radicals who foresaw and worked for - not our modern world - but something far nobler, something yet to be achieved - the upside down world.

An exploration of Christopher Hill's egalitarianism, and of its application to his evolving work as a historian, forms the theme of this essay. The first section explores his upbringing within a family tradition of staunch Biblical Protestantism, providing fresh information about key influences upon him. The second section explores Hill's loss of faith and transition to Marxism, which translated his belief in human equality into a secular form. His preoccupation with the role of religion, however, survived this intellectual shift. Section 3 accordingly explores the phases of Hill's historical writings, as he firstly studied the formation of the Protestant ethic and its implications for bourgeois society and latterly the ferment of religious thought in opposition to such respectability. Radical Protestantism, once Hill's faith, became his great subject.

I: Hill and Protestant Egalitarianism

Hill believed profoundly in human equality. He agreed with the bold words of the radical, Richard Rumbold, spoken in 1685 when awaiting execution: ‘None comes into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any booted and spurred to ride him.’¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the origins of Hill’s egalitarianism can be traced back to his deeply personal response to his religious upbringing, from which he imbibed the lesson of the spiritual equality of all in the eyes of God.

From earliest youth, he was immersed in a strong tradition of Yorkshire Methodism, with its brand of piety and proud dissenter separatism. Twice every Sunday, the Hill family rode their bicycles for several miles to attend service at the imposing Centenary Chapel, built in 1840 to commemorate the first hundred years of Methodism in York.¹¹ After the service, the sermon was always discussed, especially by Christopher and his mother. The Hill parents were not intentionally severe but they adhered strictly to their Methodism, with Sundays observed punctiliously as days of abstinence from worldly activities. Their Protestant piety provided a clear moral framework and code of behaviour. It was a family tradition that stretched back for several generations. For example, a history of York Methodism recorded of Eliza Hill (d. 1856) that she spent her last hours

‘sending out garments for the poor, praying ... and sharing in the joys of Christian fellowship’.¹² There was also an (uncanonised) ‘saint’ in the family. The Rev. David Hill (1840-96), the son of the devoted Eliza and great-uncle of Christopher Hill, was an inspirational Methodist missionary in China, where his work was long remembered.¹³

Emphasis within this familial tradition was laid particularly upon the importance of good works and simple living as well as upon inner spiritual conviction. Preserved among Hill’s personal papers, there survives a grand certificate awarded to him in 1925 by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, in testimony to his collection, during the previous five years 1921-5, of funds for missionary work. And he continued this voluntary labour between the ages of 9 to 17, riding his bicycle round the local villages on his annual round each Christmas to seek contributions.] Faith was, however, a matter to be observed with respectability and reserve. There was no sanctimonious wailing at the iniquities of the world, nor any parading of personal claims to salvation. In line with this restrained ethos, Christopher Hill never divulged anything about his inner spiritual experiences, if any there were, during his time as a Methodist.

Socially, however, he found himself by the later 1920s chafing at the restrictions of provincial Nonconformity, with its disapproval of drink,

extra-marital sex, and worldly temptations. Hill's vision of freedom was more libertarian, although never licentious. On one occasion, in late 1931, there was an unprecedented family confrontation, when Christopher Hill, as a newly liberated student at Oxford, returned home for the vacation and insisted upon taking his sister, who was younger than him by some years, to the theatre in York.¹⁴ This was heresy. Every good Wesleyan knew that theatres were haunts of the Devil or, at very least, not suitable for young teenage girls. The ensuing crisis was a rare breach in the normal family harmony. Hill's father was aghast at this back-sliding by his much-cherished son. However, it was typical of both men that they disagreed with tense silences rather than by shouted anger.

As the theatre confrontation suggests, it was in the early 1930s that Christopher Hill began to shed his Methodism. At this time he was reading history as an undergraduate at Balliol College. His tutor V.H. Galbraith used to recall laughingly that there had once been a 'conservative Christopher'.¹⁵ But at Oxford he soon became openly agnostic, even though he attended chapel during the vacations at York for some years, before eventually informing his saddened parents of his defection.

Afterwards, Christopher Hill remained a sceptic, especially about religious institutions; but he was not militantly anti-religious, accepting

other people's beliefs, particularly when sincerely held. He also knew his *Bible*, as few do nowadays, and wrote about its history.¹⁶ And Hill never shed his Nonconformist conscience, which, in a liberalised and secularised form, governed his personal moral code. At the same time, he was uncensorious about alternative lifestyle choices - encouraged in that by the cultured bohemianism of his first wife, Inez Waugh - and he was generous to people in trouble, even if the trouble came from activities of which he did not much approve. For example, he was no fan of the drugs culture but he corresponded regularly in the early 1990s with the convicted drug trafficker Howard Marks, to support a Balliol graduate incarcerated in a tough American prison.¹⁷

Above all, it was Hill's religious education that nurtured his intellectual and moral belief in equality. He was especially fired by one unconventional preacher on the Yorkshire Methodist circuit in the later 1920s. Hill's *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1965) was inscribed 'For T.S. Gregory'.¹⁸ At the end of the preface, Hill explained:

The dedication acknowledges a thirty-five-year-old debt which can never be repaid. How can one ever be sufficiently grateful to the person who first showed one that all accepted truths, just because they are accepted, tend to become lies?¹⁹

This declaration is interesting in a number of ways, as I once discussed with Christopher Hill. In the first place, Gregory's dictum dramatised the point that radical faiths, once institutionalised, may easily become mired in the affairs of the world. Church ownership of property in particular meant entanglement with money and mundanity. Thus a once-true faith could become distorted into a lie. Many movements for religious reform or eventual breakaway began with precisely this accusation - as Luther denounced the greed of Catholicism at the start of the Protestant Reformation. Gregory's teachings helped Hill put into historical context his own mixture of admiration for the principle of Christian brotherhood and of unhappiness with the restrictions of organised religion.

And there was more. As Hill recalled, T.S. Gregory was the one preacher who really hammered home the message of fundamental equality, thundering from the pulpit: *'We are all one in the eyes of the Lord'*. He made religion not abstract but immediate. And Christopher Hill gave me a vigorous imitation of Gregory's preaching style, leaning forward, as if from the ornate mahogany pulpit in the Centenary Chapel, and speaking with great emphasis to startle the respectable York Methodists with the admonition that, in order to see the divine, they should 'look into the eyes of every *fellow* sinner, even the poorest beggar or the most abandoned

prostitute or the most vicious wretch in the city streets'. Hill was intellectually stirred by this. The two held many long and earnest debates together. 'God is in man - in the vilest of men - or else He doesn't matter', wrote Gregory provocatively, in one of his published sermons.²⁰

Both men eventually found twentieth-century Methodism insufficient to hold them, although they quit in different directions and no longer remained close. In 1935, T.S. Gregory was received into the Catholic Church.²¹ The agnostic Hill had enough of the fundamentalist Protestant in him to laugh wryly when he later told me this news, which he found faintly distasteful: 'a waste of a good man'.

Nonetheless, the intellectual bond held good. Thirty-five years after their discussions, Hill acknowledged his gratitude to Gregory, aptly enough in a book entitled *Intellectual Origins*.²² Old truths could be turned into lies over time. For Hill the historian, the answer was to return to the seventeenth century, to the *fons et origo* of radical Protestantism. His belief in freedom plus equality attracted him to those who debated these issues in times of turmoil. He could empathise with their struggles; he understood their Biblical language; yet simultaneously he stood far enough apart to provide a historian's perspective.

II: Hill and Marxist Egalitarianism

There was a gap of some time - exactly how much is not clear - between Hill the doubting Methodist and Hill the convinced Marxist. His intellectual transition occurred during his student days but there was no single moment of conversion, before he joined the Communist Party in 1934. Marxism combined an underlying moral belief in equality with a sweeping view of historical destiny that predicted its eventual achievement. That was deeply attractive to Hill, who became a Marxist because he was an egalitarian rather than the other way round. He also applauded the international scope of Marxism, which freed historians mentally from the confines of national chauvinism - even though his own specialist research always remained focused upon England.

He was often asked why he became a communist, to which one favourite reply was 'Through reading the metaphysical poets'. That deflecting answer indicated Christopher Hill's dislike of 'confessional' conversations. He enjoyed the consternation of his questioners, who were probably expecting to hear about the evils of Hitler and who were instead left wondering who *were* the metaphysical poets. In fact Hill, who had a long stay in southern Germany in the early 1930s, was indeed radicalised by his strong awareness of the dangers of fascism. However, he preferred to

reply with his characteristic deadpan humour, which still continues to mislead. Thus some commentators report that he adopted Marxism as a methodology for decoding the metaphysical poets,²³ which is not what he said or meant.

Yet Hill's joke, like all good humour, had a hidden message. It indicated immediately that his commitment to Marxism had very personal roots. No-one else could have said this. The seventeenth-century metaphysicals were religious poets of great power, including men like John Donne (1572-1631) and Henry Vaughan (1622-95),²⁴ who had been collectively applauded by T.S. Eliot in 1921 as the last poets in English history who fused thought and feeling together.²⁵ After them, a prolonged 'dissociation of sensibility' ensued. Whether Eliot's verdict was poetically accurate remains debated. His dictum conveyed, however, a notion that was pleasing to Christopher Hill. For him, it was Marxism that provided a true fusion of intellect and emotion; and the metaphysicals who encouraged him to seek such a synthesis in a modern guise. He might have echoed Henry Vaughan's poem on *Eternity* (1655), which chided unbelievers:²⁶

Oh fools (said I) thus to prefer dark night
Before true light, ...

If Hill's adherence to Marxism did not result from a sudden conversion, it did commit him to a minority cause that was as distinctive in 1930s Britain as any religious sect. Here the independent tradition of Nonconformity came to his aid. Hill was accustomed to standing outside England's old establishment, even while he had sufficient social and academic status to assert his alternative views without being rattled by criticisms. He accepted condemnations from ideological opponents philosophically enough. In time, too, he had the reverse experience of being himself attacked as part of a new 'left establishment' in Oxford as Master of Balliol from 1965 to 1978. Hill took these twists and turns with wry composure, remarking sometimes that he wished that he actually had the power that his critics, whether from the left or the right, imagined him to wield.

Meanwhile, there were other linkages, both personal and intellectual, between Protestant Dissent and the Marxist movement in England that have often been noted.²⁷ Both world-views envisaged history as a redemptive process: good would eventually triumph. For Marxists, however, the communist revolution, which would emerge from the class struggle to end class oppression, was scheduled for this world rather than the next. No external divine power was required. Marxism thus generated not an extra-

worldly religion but a this-worldly ideological and political tradition, that increasingly diversified over time, and that commanded greater or lesser amounts of devotion, according to temperament.

Another historian who made a similar intellectual journey was Hill's friend and fellow historian E.P. Thompson. Also from a Nonconformist family, he had been educated at a leading Methodist school, before making the ideological break to write within his own evolving cultural Marxism.²⁸ It was therefore appropriate that Hill dedicated his study of *The English Bible* (1993) to E.P. Thompson and his wife, the historian Dorothy Thompson. They know, Hill wrote appreciatively, 'that all our work is about the present as well as the past'.²⁹

One of the great benefits provided by organised Marxism, as in the case of any coherent minority sect, was the comradeship of like-minded fellows. The bonds were heightened by personal friendships and, in the Cold War years, by a shared sense of 'outsiderdom'. Moreover, the CPGB's strict party line did not extend its writ to history. Such matters were open for argument.³⁰ And in the years from 1946 to 1956, they were mightily debated by the CPGB Historians' Group, its membership a scintillating galaxy including, among others, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Dorothy Thompson, sometimes E.P. Thompson (actually enrolled in the CPGB

Writers' Group), Rodney Hilton, Victor Kiernan, John Saville, A.L. Morton, and many others, including teachers, trade unionists and CP activists.³¹ For Hill, this became the peer group from which he drew sustenance and stimulus. In their intense debates, he upheld the classic Marxist model, in which England's seventeenth-century upheavals enshrined the historic transition from feudalism to capitalism.³²

Throughout his membership of the CPGB, which lasted more than twenty years until his resignation in 1957, Hill expressed no public doubts about the communist movement. He spent a year in Russia in 1935/6, when he learned the language. This skill led to his wartime secondment to the Foreign Office Northern Desk in 1944-5. In this role, he was, much later, accused of acting as a secret agent or spy for the Soviets.³³ It was, however, an implausible charge against a plain-dealing man, whose political views were publicly well known.³⁴ Indeed, Hill published in 1945 a propaganda booklet supporting the Soviet regime,³⁵ and in 1947 a sympathetic short biography of Lenin.³⁶ As the Cold War followed the hot war, Hill maintained his faith. In 1953 his essay on 'Stalin and the Science of History' in the Marxist *Modern Quarterly* praised the just-departed hero as both theorist and practitioner of benevolent social change.³⁷ This was the apogee of Hill's blind loyalism.

Soon, however, he faced once more the message that T.S. Gregory had conveyed with respect to organised religion: that ‘all accepted truths, just because they are accepted, tend to become lies.’ Embalmed as a repressive state orthodoxy, Soviet communism was not generating true freedom and equality. The tensions within the international movement became acute. In Britain in 1956 there was an internal campaign for real democracy within the Party, in protest at the CPGB leadership’s support for the Soviet invasion of ‘goulash-communist’ Hungary. Hill was a leading dissenter, though he disliked the in-fighting and the sundering of old alliances. Only when the democratisation campaign failed at the 1957 Party Congress, did he, with many others - especially but not exclusively the ‘intellectual’ comrades - resign from the CP.³⁸

Thereafter, Hill described himself as a Marxist, intellectually, but not a Communist, organisationally. The crisis caused him much anguish. However, he did not shed his belief in egalitarianism. Unlike a number of former communists, he did not move politically rightwards. Although the Soviet vehicle of historical transition had proved sadly flawed, the cause of equality remained for him a just one. Henceforth he could develop his own Marxism. The transition in 1956/7 also coincided with a personal change, following his second marriage to Bridget Mason (née Sutton). She too came

from a Nonconformist background as the daughter of a Baptist minister, and she too had moved from chapel to Marxism. Together, Christopher and Bridget Hill created their own secular version of a ‘holy household’, dedicated to history-writing.³⁹ This was their private fortress, beyond the reach of churches or political party.⁴⁰

Immediately, Hill’s writing productivity increased. All in all, he wrote more than fifteen books (including two textbooks), as well as edited volumes of printed primary sources and contributed to collaborative studies.⁴¹ He also completed over 150 scholarly essays, many subsequently reprinted in seven volumes.⁴² At the same time, Hill was always ready to lecture to schools, colleges and local history societies; he often travelled to lecture overseas; and he was a co-founder of the left-leaning journal *Past & Present* in 1952,⁴³ as well as an active supporter of the new History Workshop movement in the 1970s. All these were outlets to stress the importance of the seventeenth-century ‘English Revolution’ and its pressure-cooker debates. The arguments generated by those who lived through these exciting years, he wrote at the end of *The English Bible*, would illuminate later generations, even when the old literalism in interpreting Biblical texts had been shed: ‘They [the seventeenth-century

disputants] cut off the branch on which they sat, letting in more light, to the great advantage of those who followed them'.⁴⁴

III: Hill and the Historical Meanings of Radical Protestantism

A stress upon voluntarism lay at the heart of Hill's historical interpretation of radical religion, with reference particularly to its social rather than spiritual meanings. The post-1660 institutional development of Nonconformity, when the diverse array of sects formed themselves into established churches and gradually became respectable, was not his prime concern. Early Protestantism differed from later Dissent 'as much as vinegar does wine', he stated in 1958.⁴⁵ Another metaphor referred to the Puritanism that survived after defeat in 1660 as the 'dry husk' of what had gone before.⁴⁶ Such comments unduly compressed the next three hundred years of religious history and they skated entirely over the enthusiastic origins of Methodism in the eighteenth century, about which E.P. Thompson wrote controversially.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the Hill agenda was clear enough: he preferred to study the 'wine' of unruly debate rather than the 'vinegar' of institutionalised religion.

Individuals rather than impersonal trends were habitually highlighted. He produced three heavyweight biographies of leading seventeenth-century Puritans: Oliver Cromwell;⁴⁸ John Milton;⁴⁹ John Bunyan.⁵⁰ Their struggles to reconcile freedom and order were explored sympathetically. And Hill produced many vignettes in short essays about previously unknown thinkers, who exemplified the fermenting debates. There are thus wonderful brief biographies of men like ‘The Mad Hatter’ - Roger Crab, a radical egalitarian who espoused teetotalism and vegetarianism as well⁵¹ - or John Mason, the millenarian preacher who attracted hopeful crowds to witness the Last Judgement at a specified time (Whitsun 1694) and place (Water Stratford, just outside Buckingham).⁵²

When faced with the spontaneous religious excitements such as these, ecclesiastical organisation did not seem so very important. Nonetheless, Hill did devote his first monograph to the previously abstruse question of the financing of the pre-1640 Church of England. This study was replete with fiscal detail and theological learning, in a manner that surprised critics who had expected a more overtly Marxist tome. Hill’s *Economic Problems of the Church* (1956) studied the ‘material infrastructure’ of organised religion. On the one hand, he argued that the state Church of England, which was in a monopoly position before 1640, was too financially weak

and disorganised to perform effectively. On the other hand, he noted that its attempts to raise money made it increasingly unpopular, as it was felt to be cramping political and economic change in the wider society.⁵³ The Church of England was thus caught on a classic ‘Morton’s fork’, both prongs of which meant trouble - and trouble duly followed.

Far from all historians agree with Hill’s overall interpretation of the subsequent upheavals. A tide of neo-conservative ‘revisionism’ in the 1970s and 1980s argued that the period was not a century of revolution at all.⁵⁴ However, one of the frequent accusations made by the new school against gradualist Whigs as well as against revolutionary Marxists - that they ignored the abiding power of religion - could not be made against Hill. It might be argued that he exaggerated the problems of pre-1640 Anglicanism and underestimated its post-1660 capacity for a broad-based recovery.⁵⁵ Yet Hill’s exposition of the Church’s financial dilemmas still has not been superseded, although research into the topic rightly continues.⁵⁶

More controversial was his treatment of the dissentients, known loosely as the ‘Puritans’ - the very word a red rag for definitional disputes both then and later. Hill’s *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* began by exploring the uncertainties. One minister, accused of unorthodoxy in 1574, replied that his accuser ‘knew no more what a Puritan

is than his old horse';⁵⁷ and there were many old horses in the field, all neighing loudly.

Undeterred, however, Hill wrote on Puritanism at length, because it was central to his bold historical sociology of change in seventeenth-century England. The potential links between radical Protestant thought and emergent capitalism had been raised by Max Weber and R.H. Tawney long ago.⁵⁸ Hill developed the argument, which gave him a chance to historicise his own Nonconformist background. He defined Puritanism broadly, as a set of views that advocated further reforms within the Church of England and (in a minority of cases) outright separatism.⁵⁹ And he argued that the vehement criticisms of the Church contributed to the downfall of the monarchy in 1640: no bishops, no king. Thus Hill restored the Puritans, inchoate and disorganised as they yet were, to the centre-stage, although without reviving a simplified view of the conflict as 'the Puritan Revolution'.⁶⁰

By discussing opposition to the King in terms of both doctrinal and practical criticisms, Hill stressed that there was an interactive relationship between ideas and economics. Neither a purely materialist nor a purely idealist explanation could explain the outbreak of civil war. This approach updated earlier and simpler analyses, including his own.⁶¹ 'In the last

analysis', he emphasised, 'any rigid antithesis between a bourgeois revolution and a Puritan revolution is superficial.'⁶² This approach located the history of religion in the Marxist framework, without shedding the specificity of the seventeenth-century evidence.

Considerably more was required, however, than a mere assertion of the links between material and doctrinal issues. Hill explained his case in *Society and Puritanism*, which was designed as a companion volume to *Economic Problems of the Church*. He identified two linked developments. The social teachings of Puritan ministers stressed the virtues of thrift, sobriety, honesty, hard work, strict Sunday observance, godly household religion, and social discipline, while, at the same time, those virtues appealed especially to England's middling sort among the commercial/industrial sector of society in what he saw as 'an age of nascent industrialisation'.⁶³ Moreover, Hill further revised his own earlier work by concluding that, despite the return of a (weakened) Church of England in 1660, the Puritan Revolution did not simply fail. Its ideas had a covert victory, being adopted - and coarsened - in later eras of economic expansion. Even in apparent defeat, Puritan ideas did foster capitalism after all.

Striking as was this interpretation, it was difficult to clinch with precision. There were worries that Hill's model was too neat, making 'Puritanism' more coherent than it was, and linking it more closely with the 'industrious sort' than the evidence warranted. The American historian J.H. Hexter was particularly sharp, accusing Hill of scouring the sources to find evidence for a predetermined case and then of 'lumping' his material together too uncritically.⁶⁴ This hostile methodological dissection was undoubtedly damaging. Hill's sometimes impressionistic style, as he eagerly found linkages and connections across the centuries, did not in itself, however, either prove or disprove the substantive case about the role of religious thought as a generator of change, and the rumbling debates among historians and sociologists continue, still inconclusively.⁶⁵

Most problematic for Hill, however, was not such frontal attacks from critics but a general shift in interpretations of England's economic history. He had followed Marx and Engels in identifying the century before 1640 as the era of emergent capitalism. But in the 1970s and 1980s revisionist historians increasingly stressed the backwardness of England's pre-industrial economy⁶⁶ and the sluggishness of change, not just in the seventeenth century but even during the era of the 'classic' Industrial Revolution in the later eighteenth century. This countervailing approach,

and the complex debates that ensued across the ideological spectrum, threw complications into the path of the Marxist ‘grand narrative’. Hill’s works were, for example, always quoted approvingly by E.P. Thompson. Yet these ideological allies actually adopted quite different timetables for England’s key economic transition. For Thompson, it was the eighteenth century that saw the slow emergence of ‘agrarian and merchant capitalism’, ruled by an ‘agrarian bourgeoisie’,⁶⁷ which was not what Marx originally had in mind.

Alert to these research difficulties, but not fundamentally perturbed by them, Hill quietly shifted his emphasis. Increasingly, he represented 1640-60 not as the triumph of capitalism but as a triumph for the conditions that allowed capitalism to flourish.⁶⁸ The causal flow was in effect reversed. Political/intellectual change paved the way for economic transition, rather than the other way round. Capitalism for Hill remained a ‘given’ in the background but without a precise chronology. Meanwhile, retaining the ‘English Revolution’ as a revolution in thought gave Hill greater latitude to explore ideas - always his greatest interest. From his viewpoint, this shift was part of his normal process of continuous updating. He did not see it as a disavowal of Marxism.⁶⁹ Writing aged eighty, Hill still flew the flag unhesitatingly:⁷⁰

I have changed my vocabulary, but I do not think I have shifted very far on my main ‘Marxist’ point about seventeenth-century England. I still think that the events between 1640 and 1660 are aptly described as a revolution, since they led to vast changes in the history of England and of the world.

Pursuing henceforth not the bourgeois ethic but the less respectable areas of radical thought led to Hill’s most popular book, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). In this, he surveyed with relish not only the political Levellers and the agrarian-communist Diggers but also religious zealots such as the Fifth Monarchists, the Ranters, the Seekers, the early Quakers, and the Muggletonians. These people had often been dismissed as the ‘lunatic fringe’,⁷¹ including by Hill himself.⁷² Yet he now explored the meanings in their apparent madness. Religious freedoms led to unconventional arguments and unconventional deeds, such as when a woman in 1652 threw off all her clothes during a religious service in the chapel at Whitehall, crying: ‘Welcome the resurrection!’⁷³

Going naked ‘for a sign’ was a practice undertaken by spiritual enthusiasts known as ‘Adamites’ to show that they were in the same state of innocence as Adam before the Fall. For Hill, the challenge was to understand rather than to dismiss such behaviour. Here he aligned himself with the exhortation from E.P. Thompson, that historians should avoid ‘the

enormous condescension of posterity'. History's losers and oddities should be studied with the same seriousness that was accorded to history's winners. Hill's *World Turned Upside Down* was also influenced by his sympathy for the iconoclasm of 1960s youth culture. He remembered his own earlier recoil from Methodist stuffiness. However, contrary to some simplified assumptions,⁷⁴ Hill was by no means an uncritical advocate of 'let-it-all-hang-out' alternative culture, which differed diametrically from his own reserve. Nor was he ever anything other than sceptical when faced with euphoric claims in 1968/9 that either 'flower power' and/or student unrest were about to topple international capitalism. He knew much too much about the resilience of established power-structures to believe that.

Fresh controversy followed Hill onto this new terrain. Criticisms were especially directed at his analysis of the Ranters. He and other former communist historians were said to have, in effect, invented a movement of hippie-style libertarians, in order to show, falsely, the existence of popular revolt against the bourgeois Protestant ethic. Instead, it was argued, Ranterism was no more than a myth, generated in the social panic of 1650-1.⁷⁵ In response, Hill did concede that perhaps he had exaggerated the sexual elements of Ranter thought, explaining that 'I was still fighting an old battle against "the Puritan Revolution" and enjoyed emphasising that

libertinism was preached at the height of this revolution'.⁷⁶ Other than that, however, he stood his ground robustly. He produced ample further evidence of an organisationally inchoate⁷⁷ but recognisable milieu of Ranter thought, as many other historians have found also.⁷⁸ And he pointed out that hippie happenings were not the stuff of which classic Marxist dreams were made.⁷⁹

Continuing to explore potential alternatives to established social hierarchies, Hill cast his net ever more widely. In his last book, *Liberty against the Law* (1996), he analysed in turn pirates, smugglers, highwaymen, and outlaws, alongside grave clergymen, and agrarian communists, in an eclectic conjunction that would surely (for differing reasons) have alarmed them all.⁸⁰ An underlying romantic hope lurked within, that one day rebels of all stripes would unite. Yet Hill still knew that revolutions were rare. Commenting in 1996 on the Diggers' hope that a radicalised public opinion would pave the way via 'Christ rising in sons and daughters', Hill added that 'He still has some way to go'.⁸¹

Critics were not placated by such caution. Hill's love of links between past and present led some to accuse him of excessive 'presentism'. This charge was repeated late in his career and, for good measure, extended to all Marxist and left-leaning historians of seventeenth-century England. They were accused of fitting their histories to the ideological agendas of the day

in a process of ‘fabrication’.⁸² But this noun, implying invention with conscious intent to deceive, is unworthy. Rich intellectual traditions that are freely sustained over several generations, whether on the left and right, are built upon more than chicanery and bad faith. As for Hill himself, he wrote to communicate the truth as he saw it, not to fabricate a phoney past. It could be argued that he was sometimes self-deceived, such as in the early 1950s before he realised that he had to break from the Communist Party.⁸³ But that is a different point.

Overall, Hill’s ideas developed, within the continuing framework of his egalitarianism, in response to changing experiences, arguments, political events, ideological trends, the mood of the times, and fresh research, by himself and others. His perspectives upon history and his Marxism developed in an interlocking fashion, the influences flowing both ways.

Ultimately, Hill always stressed the potential, if not the actuality, of fundamental change in history. Causes that seemed outwardly defeated would not always remain so. Ideas and ideals would rise again. It was a consoling thought for someone who had twice left organised movements because they had become for him self-defeatingly rigid in their institutionalised application.

IV: Conclusion

Productive, provocative, and persistent, Christopher Hill with his fellow Marxists constituted the advance guards who brought ‘history from below’ irrevocably onto the historical agenda.⁸⁴ He also did much single-handedly to keep the seventeenth century in the forefront of the debates. Furthermore, Hill in his histories and E.P. Thompson, in his histories and theoretical writings, together inculcated a humanist or cultural Marxism, stressing the power of ideas rather than brute economics. That admittedly left a question-mark over the causes of historical change, since the deep drive of class conflict was weakened. Hill, however, saw cultural Marxism as a renewal and disagreed with those who claimed that Marxist history had entered an ‘abrupt and terminal decline’ from the Thatcher era onwards.⁸⁵

Religion remained the vehicle for the ideas he studied. But Hill never preached by the book. His interpretation of the historical meanings of religion embraced both the bourgeois work ethic and opposition to the same. Throughout his quest, he was a holist, or in Hexter’s terms a ‘lumper’, who looked for the big picture. He admired E.M. Forster’s advice: ‘Only connect! ... Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted

... Live in fragments no longer.⁸⁶ It was what Hill tried to do in his teaching and writing.

Above all, he was an egalitarian, nurtured by spiritual unity within Biblical Protestantism and translated into the ideal of a secular communism. Of all the seventeenth-century radicals, Hill declared that ‘I preferred the Diggers’.⁸⁷ He enjoyed editing the tracts by their spokesman, Gerrard Winstanley, who denounced the covetousness of the rich who left the masses in poverty.⁸⁸

What are the greatest sins in the world? I answer, these two: first, for a man to lock up the treasuries of the earth in chests and houses, and suffer it to rust or moulder while others starve for want. ... This is the greatest sin against universal love; this is the destroying sin, ... The second sin is like to this ...; and this is for any man or men first to take the earth by the power of the murdering sword from others ...

Christopher Hill agreed. *True* freedom had to include freedom from cankering want, as well as freedom from ignorance, powerlessness, despair, and the contempt of others. Such social justice was necessary because ‘we are all one’. This was what he believed. And, all his life, he stuck with his Good Old Cause.

ENDNOTES:

¹ With special thanks: to Irene Corfield, Tony Corfield, Andrew Hill, and Dinah Hill for sharing family memories; to Dorothy Thompson for illuminating briefings; and to Tony Belton, Irene Corfield, Lyndal Roper and Susan Whyman for constructive criticisms of an early draft

² Christopher Hill (1912-2003) was Fellow (1938-65) and then Master (1965-78) of Balliol College, Oxford. As one of the founders of the journal *Past & Present* (1952-), he appears in Stephen F.G. Farthing's group portrait of 'Historians of Past and Present' (1999) in the National Portrait Gallery.

³ See M.F. Roberts, 'A Select Bibliography, 1938-77', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill*, ed. Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas, Oxford, 1978, pp. 382-402. During the following twenty years 1977-97, Hill continued to publish voluminously, until halted by ill-health.

⁴ Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: an Introductory Analysis*, Basingstoke, 1995.

⁵ As in Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714*, Edinburgh, 1961.

⁶ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, London, 1972.

⁷ *Holy Bible*, Acts, 10:34.

⁸ *Holy Bible*, St. Luke, 1:53.

⁹ Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 311.

¹⁰ Quoted in *The Good Old Cause: the English Revolution of 1640-60 - Its Causes, Course and Consequences*, ed. Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, London, 1949, p. 474.

¹¹ Ronald Willis, *Nonconformist Chapels of York, 1693-1840*, York, 1964, pp. 27, 31-33; and illus. facing p.18.

¹² John Lyth, *Glimpses of Early Methodism in York and the Surrounding District*, York, 1885, pp. 272-3.

¹³ See W.T.A. Barber, *David Hill: an Apostle to the Chinese*, London, 1906; H.B. Burgoyne, *David Hill, Friend of China: a Modern Portrait*, London, 1949; and P. Yates, *'Friendly Foreign Devil': David Hill of China*, London, 1939.

¹⁴ Ex inf. Irene Corfield (née Hill), who is Christopher Hill's only sibling: P.J.C.

¹⁵ V.H. Galbraith helped to draw out the shy and stammering Christopher on his first arrival at Balliol College: ex inf. Christopher Hill to P.J.C.

¹⁶ Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, London, 1993.

¹⁷ Howard Marks, *Mr Nice*, London, 1996, p. 459.

¹⁸ Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford, 1965, p. [v]: this referred to the Rev. Theophilus Stephen Gregory (1897-1975).

¹⁹ Hill, *Intellectual Origins*, p. ix.

²⁰ T.S. Gregory, *They Shall See God*, London, 1926, p. 21.

²¹ See *Who's Who Online, 1897-1996*, and Grgeory's account of his conversion, in T.S. Gregory, *The Unfinished Universe*, London, 1935.

²² The dedication was updated in the revised edition: see Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revisited*, Oxford, 1997, p. [vii].

²³ See for example Alastair MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England: an Essay on the Fabrication of Seventeenth-Century History*, Basingstoke, 1996, p. 134.

²⁴ *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson, Oxford, 1921.

²⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1921; and repr. in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode, London, 1975, pp. 59-67, esp. p. 64.

²⁶ Henry Vaughan, 'The World (I)', in *Henry Vaughan: the Complete Poems*, ed. A. Rudrum, New Haven, 1976, p. 228.

²⁷ Much the best discussion is that in Raphael Samuel, 'The British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One', *New Left Review*, 120, March/April 1980, pp. 41-55.

²⁸ See Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson*, Toronto, 1981; Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, pp. 167-220; and *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, Cambridge, 1990.

²⁹ Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, London, 1993, p. [iv].

³⁰ As noted by Rodney Hilton, 'Some Reminiscences', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. Pennington and Thomas, pp. 8-9; and Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in *Rebels and their Causes*, ed. Maurice Cornforth, London, 1978, pp. 33-4.

³¹ Hobsbawm, 'Historians' Group', pp. 21-48; Richard Johnson, 'Culture and the Historians', in *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, ed. J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson, London, 1979, pp. 54-65; Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, pp. 10-15; D. Parker, 'The Communist Party and its Historians, 1946-89', *Socialist History* 12, 1997, pp. 33-58; and Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', pp. 91-4.

³² MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, pp. 116-21.

³³ See *The Times*, 5 March 2003, and Anthony Glee, *The Secrets of the Service: British Intelligence and Communist Subversion, 1939-51*, London, 1987, pp. 279-88.

³⁴ For a rejoinder to Glee, see John Saville, 'Christopher Hill at the Foreign Office, 1944-5', in John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945-6*, London, 1993, pp. 212-17.

³⁵ K.E. Holme [Holme being a transliteration of Hill in Russian], *Two Commonwealths: the Soviets and Ourselves*, London, 1945.

³⁶ Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*, London, 1947; and many reprints.

³⁷ Hill, 'Stalin and the Science of History', *Modern Quarterly* 8:4, autumn 1953, pp. 198-212.

³⁸ Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p. 17.

³⁹ The major publications of Bridget Hill (1922-2002) were *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford, 1989; *The Republican Virago: the Life and Times of Catherine Macaulay*, Oxford, 1992; *Servants: English Domesticity in*

the Eighteenth Century, Oxford, 1996; and *Women Alone: Spinsters in England, 1660-1850*, New Haven, 2001

⁴⁰ Hill did join the Labour Party, albeit without enthusiasm; and in the 1990s was, predictably, very hostile to New Labour.

⁴¹ H.N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, ed. Christopher Hill, London, 1961; and Christopher Hill, Barry Reay and William Lamont, *The World of the Muggletonians*, London, 1983.

⁴² These were, in order of publication: Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1958, containing one of his best essays 'The Norman Yoke', pp. 50-122; Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1974; Hill, *Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Vol. 1: Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England*, Brighton, 1985; *Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Vol. 2: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*, Brighton, 1986; *Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Vol. 3: People and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century England*, Brighton, 1986; Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1990; and Hill, *England's Turning Point: Essays on Seventeenth-Century English History*, London, 1998.

⁴³ *Past & Present's* initial sub-title, *A Journal of Scientific History*, recording Marxist faith in 'scientific socialism', was shed in 1958, when membership of the editorial board was widened.

⁴⁴ Hill, *English Bible*, p. 442.

⁴⁵ Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, p. xx.

⁴⁶ Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, London, 1964, p. 510.

⁴⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1980 edn., pp. 385-440.

⁴⁸ Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, London, 1970, amplifying his earlier *Oliver Cromwell, 1658-1959*, Historical Association pamphlet, 1958.

⁴⁹ Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, London, 1977.

⁵⁰ Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628-88*, Oxford, 1988, p. [v]: dedicated to Bridget Hill, 'beloved comrade and fellow pilgrim'.

⁵¹ Christopher Hill, 'The Mad Hatter', in his *Puritanism and Revolution*, pp. 314-22. See also R. Bowers, 'Roger Crab: Opposition Hunger Artist in 1650s England', *Seventeenth Century* 18, 2003, pp. 93-112.

⁵² Christopher Hill, 'John Mason and the End of the World', in his *Puritanism and Revolution*, pp. 323-36.

⁵³ Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church: From Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament*, Oxford, 1956.

⁵⁴ Contrast the 'revisionist' textbook by Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age: a History of England, 1603-1714*, London, 1980, with Hill's *Century of Revolution*. For his own later rejection of revisionism, see Hill, *English Bible*, pp. 47-9.

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- ⁵⁵ For Anglican religious identities, see *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560-1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier, Woodbridge, 2000.
- ⁵⁶ See, for example, Felicity Heal, *Of Prelates and Princes: A Study of the Economic and Social Position of the Tudor Episcopate*, Cambridge, 1980.
- ⁵⁷ Cited in Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, p. 14, n. 2.
- ⁵⁸ The classic interpretations are Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, pub. in German 1904/5; Eng. transl. 1930; and R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London, 1926.
- ⁵⁹ Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church*, p. xii.
- ⁶⁰ This name was popularised by Samuel Rawson Gardiner, *The First Two Stuarts and the Puritan Revolution, 1603-60*, London, 1876; and many later editions.
- ⁶¹ Notably in Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640*, London, 1940.
- ⁶² Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church*, p. 352.
- ⁶³ Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, esp. pp. 124-44, and quotation p. 134.
- ⁶⁴ J.H. Hexter, 'The Historical Method of Christopher Hill', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Oct. 1975, repr. in his *On Historians: Reappraisals of Some of the Makers of Modern History*, London, 1979, pp. 227-51. A reply by Hill, 'The Burden of Proof', followed in *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 Nov. 1975, p. 1333.
- ⁶⁵ For a case-history, see Gordon Marshall, *Presbyteries and Profits: Calvinism and the Development of Capitalism in Scotland, 1650-1707*, Edinburgh, 1992.
- ⁶⁶ Contrast F.J. Fisher, 'Tawney's Century', in *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England*, ed. F.J. Fisher, Cambridge, 1961, pp. 1-14, with Hill's essay 'Protestantism and Capitalism', in the same volume, pp. 15-39.
- ⁶⁷ E.P. Thompson, 'The Patrician and the Plebs', in his *Customs in Common*, London, 1991, esp. pp. 26, 36, 42, 84.
- ⁶⁸ See Hill, *Century of Revolution*, pp. 187-8, 307-8; Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: a Social and Economic History of Britain*, London, 1967, pp. 4-10; and Hill, 'A Bourgeois Revolution', in J.G.A. Pocock (ed.), *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, Princeton, 1980, pp. 109-39, esp. p. 111.
- ⁶⁹ For a critique from the left, see A.L. Merson, 'Problems of the English Bourgeois Revolution: Some Reflections on the Recent Work of Christopher Hill', *Marxism Today*, Oct. 1963, pp. 310-15.
- ⁷⁰ Christopher Hill, 'Premature Obsequies?' in *After the End of History*, ed. Alan Ryan, London, 1992, pp. 10-11.
- ⁷¹ Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 13.
- ⁷² Hill, *Century of Revolution*, p. 167.
- ⁷³ Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 256.
- ⁷⁴ Maclachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, pp. 184-6.
- ⁷⁵ J. Colin Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: the Ranters and the Historians*, Cambridge, 1986, passim esp. pp. 134-7.
- ⁷⁶ Christopher Hill, 'Abolishing the Ranters', in his *Nation of Change and Novelty*, pp. 172-218, esp. p. 210.

⁷⁷ As stressed by Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 163, and earlier by A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution*, London, 1970, p. 92.

⁷⁸ See Gerald Aylmer, 'Did the Ranters Exist?', *Past & Present*, no. 117 (1987), pp. 208-19; and Jerome Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy: The Ranters and the English Revolution*, Ohio, 1987.

⁷⁹ Hill, 'Abolishing the Ranters', p. 212.

⁸⁰ Christopher Hill, *Liberty against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies*, London, 1996.

⁸¹ Hill, *Liberty against the Law*, pp. 295, 297.

⁸² MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*.

⁸³ E.P. Thompson sent him an angry letter to that effect in 1956: ex inf. Christopher Hill to P.J.C.

⁸⁴ For evaluations, see Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach ...', *History Workshop Journal* 42, 1996, pp. 19-35, esp. p. 33; Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, pp. 221-49; MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, pp. 314-35; and Matt Perry, *Marxism and History*, Basingstoke, 2002, pp. 155-9.

⁸⁵ Stedman Jones, 'Determinist Fix', p. 19.

⁸⁶ E.M. Forster, *Howard's End*, London, 1910, in 1989 edn, p. 188.

⁸⁷ Christopher Hill, 'Abolishing the Ranters', p. 212.

⁸⁸ Gerrard Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush*, in *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 272.