An Agreement of the People: Self-empowerment and the Downfall of the Great Chain of Being in Early Modern England

Tim Aberle

In a manifesto published in 1647, a small but significant band of English parliamentarian soldiers and politicians declared a series of imperatives to honor in the post-Civil War reformation period. Published as *An Agreement of the People*, the document boldly expressed the revolutionary notion that the people of England were sovereign, stating that the power of Parliament was "inferior only to theirs that choose them," or "the people of England."[1] Such a truly revolutionary concept markedly differed from the norms of paternalism and deference that sustained a hierarchical social and political system in England during the late Tudor and early Stuart periods.[2] As articulated by the authors of the document, the adoption of personal independence and collective sovereignty by the people was a major change in early modern England, and it affected political, social, and religious issues alike.

Although the exact sentiments in *An Agreement of the People* were not fully established as the new English order due to powerful conservative elements within the Parliamentarian victors, the ideas expressed in the document did reflect drastic changes in the psyches of English people before, during, and after the Civil War. In fact, evidence suggests that a major portion of the parliamentarian forces ultimately fought for sovereignty of the people as much or more than out of loyalty to their local gentry.[3] Their common purpose of dethroning an oppressive and autocratic ruler in favor of self-determination regarding religious and political issues sustained the parliamentarian effort, making reformation possible. Therefore, the English Civil War and its outcome resulted from a massive paradigm shift concerning English identity. The empowerment of individuals as equal, sovereign beings

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Tim Aberle is a senior majoring in history with teacher certification from Fairbury, Illinois. He will graduate in December of 2012 with additional endorsements in language arts and the middle grades. He wrote this paper for Dr. Key in "HIS3100: The History of England," during the Fall semester of 2011. He plans to teach and eventually continue his education in graduate school.

[1] *An Agreement of the People* (ca. late October 1647), in *Sources and Debates in English History, 1485-1714*, 2nd ed., ed. Newton Key and Robert Bucholz (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 186-7.

[2] Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 182.

[3] Ibid., 259.

ultimately brought destruction of the Great Chain of Being, which was the fundamental cultural framework for a hierarchical socio-political order, but a revolutionary change had to occur to influence such individual empowerment. Primarily, religious independence stimulated the empowerment of individuals as equal and discerning citizens, leading to a dramatically new English identity by the end of the Civil War period.

Prior to the immediate events that culminated in the Civil War, religion was the backbone of the social and political order in early modern England. Through the state church, its episcopal structure, and its intellectual monopoly over English culture, religious doctrine and sermons in the late Tudor and early Stuart period promoted paternalism and deference, reinforcing those values as proper and divinely sanctioned.[4] Also, in the highly censured literary environment of the period, writers who were granted publication used scripture to reinforce those values even further. For example, Sir Robert Filmer justified the absolutist political structure of England in *Patriarcha* by referring to the Book of Genesis and the story of Adam.[5] In the 1630 work, Filmer compares the king of a people to Adam, reasoning that subjection to a monarch as a supreme, fatherly being is as natural and proper as the subjection of children to their parents. Through such scripture-based arguments, a literate minority used their intellectual influence over illiterate commoners to promote and maintain a value system of social submission to superiors in the Great Chain of Being in early modern England. However, the increase of literacy during the Stuart period enabled common people to read and evaluate scripture for themselves.[6] In turn, increased literacy led to more independent congregations, less dependence on state-sponsored dogma, and ultimately a stronger sense of self-determination instead of deference.

Religious independence first manifested itself in English culture through a significant diversification of religious sects during and after the Civil War. According to Bucholz and Key, parliamentary authorities implemented a time of free press during the Civil War in order to encourage popular questioning and an ultimate overthrow of the government.[7] The ensuing flood of literature facilitated the expression of divergent opinions on a variety of social topics, including religion. Unrestricted expression not only served to promote and share different opinions among the populace and stimulate intellectual development, but it also demonstrated the extent to which literacy and the ability to self-administer scripture had undermined the homogeneous religious

[4] Ibid., 182.
[5] "Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha*" (ca. 1630, pub. 1680), in *Sources and Debates*, 140.
[6] Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England*, 209.
[7] Ibid., 263.

environment that the Tudors' and Stuarts' state-sponsored church strived to create in the previous decades.

One specific broadside that was published in London in 1647 particularly emphasizes how the Anglican Church came to be splintered by different opinions.[8] Illustrating and profiling 12 different religious sects such as Anabaptists, Adamites, Arminians, and Libertins, a conservative author refers to their perceived "false and dangerous" intentions and exaggerates their features in order to emphasize their radical nature. In effect, the illustration is an attempt to stigmatize the sects in question and therefore make the Church of England seem like the most normal and sensible choice in a pool of different religious disciplines. Such an effort does not only reveal that English religious culture was becoming more diverse, but it also suggests that the rate at which new sects emerged and proliferated was so great as to alarm conservatives like the author and the Rump Parliament, who only wished to remove the king rather than alter the nation's religious and social structure altogether. By the middle of the 1640s, it was becoming clear that the religious fabric of early modern England had frayed.

When religious diversification permeated the ranks of the parliamentarian army, the Civil War became a vehicle for major changes in religion at an institutional level. In effect, revolt and overthrow of the monarchy set the changes in English religious identity in motion. While different religious sects were tolerated but still alienated in England's religious structure before the war, their participation in the parliamentarian effort enabled them to agitate for broader social recognition. In other words, English religious character had begun to change under the Stuarts, but the Civil War provided the opportunity to manifest that change in institutional reform. Similar to the author of the 1647 broadside, Thomas Edwards, a Presbyterian writer, noted the diverse religious population particularly among the parliamentary ranks in 1646's *Gangraena*.[9] Warning against Anabaptists, Arminians, and other independent sects that were present in the army, Edwards refers to the subjects as "strange monsters" as he emphasizes their erroneous beliefs. More importantly though, Edwards attributes the sects' proliferation to "libertinism as the great vein going through the whole of the army." Implying that different sects spread like blood-borne pathogens among the army, Edwards suggests that libertinism, or the general condition of having liberty "of conscience" and "of preaching," encouraged the growth of different religious interpretations. Therefore, the document illustrates how adherents of diverse religious sects served in the parliamentarian forces as opportunists; they flourished in the

[8] [Anon.], *A catalogue of the several sects and opinions in England and other nations* [London, 1647], broadside.

[9] Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646), in *Sources and Debates*, 193–4.

tolerant environment that parliamentarian authorities created, taking advantage of the opportunity to seize freedom of worship from the bonds of the state-sponsored church.

Such empowerment invoked fear in the more conservative parliamentarians who wished to reform government while maintaining the rest of England's social order, which again was an aristocratic hierarchy dependent upon tight control of a religion that endorsed submission and deference. According to Bucholz and Key, Parliament actually implemented a government censure as early as 1643 to curtail the increasing diversification of opinions.[10] However, such an effort was in vain. Having granted initial tolerance in exchange for the assistance and loyalty of England's masses, Parliament had enabled a population thirsting for liberty to challenge the existing order, and they could not prevent them from pressing even further. As a result, the diverse religious community survived into the aftermath of the Civil War.

In the post-War reformation period, two groups, the Quakers and the Levellers, exemplified the threat to the order that Parliament had tried to maintain. Their dangers are particularly evident in two contemporary documents illustrating the changes in English psyche that the groups represented. In one document from 1649, a group of women protested the imprisonment of some Leveller leaders who had published literature calling for popular sovereignty.[11] Claiming assurance of their "creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ, equal unto men," the women draw from a scriptural reference to justify themselves as having an appropriately equal right to petition authorities and therefore have a voice in government. Such behavior drastically contradicted the Great Chain of Being, which relegated women to a silent role, but the writers' boldly asserted their perceived rights as equal beings nevertheless. Essentially, their religious beliefs emboldened them to present themselves as sovereign participants in England's society, leading them to defy the established order in the process.

Similarly, the Quaker James Nayler challenged conservative order and directly protested the influence of bishops in English religious life in a 1656 hearing of Parliament.[12] Reacting to his impersonation of Jesus Christ in Bristol earlier that year, Parliament reprimanded Nayler and summoned him to account for his actions, and the hearing was published in a report of the proceedings. According to the reporter, Nayler addressed Parliament as being "a long time under dark forms, neglecting the power of godliness, as bishops." Claiming that he was obeying God's will, Nayler effectively expressed his independence, suggesting that he had dominion in his spiritual life over the dictations of the bishops and

[10] Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England*, 263-4.
[11] "Leveller Women" (May 1649), in *Sources and Debates*, 196.
[12] "Parliament on James Nayler" (December 5-8, 1656), Ibid., 201-3.

subsequently demanding that Parliament eliminate their role in society. Convinced that he alone was capable of discerning God's input, Nayler impersonated Christ in order to express to his neighbors that Christ was present in every individual, therefore encouraging them to assert themselves and break free from the instructional constraints of traditional religious doctrine. In other words, he challenged traditional deference. In doing so, he effectively acted out of a desire to pursue social change in favor of personal religious independence in the reformation environment. Along with the Leveller women, Nayler assumed personal sovereignty; their religious convictions empowered them to challenge authority and actively pursue change.

As religious independence empowered sects of the English population to assume sovereignty over their religious lives, it stimulated an ultimate movement toward popular sovereignty in England's political structure as well. As Gerrard Winstanley expressed in a letter to Oliver Cromwell, the parliamentarian victors and their armies of commoners recovered their "land and liberties again . . . out of that Norman hand."[13] Referring to the long-standing system of property ownership that had entitled aristocratic privilege since the Norman conquest, Winstanley appeals to an ancient English society that saw land equally possessed by all as a "common treasury." In an attempt to persuade Cromwell to eliminate private property, Winstanley effectively articulated the new, post-Civil War English psyche. That is, England was to be had by the people as a whole and not as a select few. To be English was no longer to be subject to the Crown, the bishops, or the land-holding elite; it was to be united as a sovereign body of citizens capable of self-determination. Although many of his ideas and those of his fellow Diggers were shunned as too radical by most of English society, his fundamental idea that individuals should be in control of their lives reflected that of the general population. Abiezer Coppe expands this view even further stating that "pure libertinism" would overturn even the victorious Rump Parliament, riding the surge of individual empowerment that had propelled the English to overturning the "bishops, Charles, and the Lords" in favor of complete self-determination.[14]

With the religious backbone of the Great Chain of Being gone, the political hierarchy and system of exclusive aristocratic privilege stood at risk for collapse. Essentially, if the religious instructions that had propped up an elite order of people collapsed, then the rights that had been previously allocated to them were no longer considered exclusive. Instead, the bonds that kept English commoners in an inferior state of

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[13] "Gerrard Winstanley, 'To His Excellency Oliver Cromwell, General of the Commonwealth's Army'" (1652), in *Sources and Debates*, 197-98.

[14] "*Abiezer Coppe*, A Fiery Flying Roll: a Word from the Lord to All the Great Ones of the Earth" (January 1650), in *Sources and Debates*, 199.

deference were released. As a result, a powerful sense of entitlement swept through the psyches of Englishmen and women, and such a movement created a drastically different English identity from that of the late Tudor and early Stuart periods. Essentially, the forging of a new English identity in which "the people of England" held the supreme power had come to fruition after the Civil War.[15] As the drafters of *An Agreement of the People* had expressed, the power of English authorities was thereafter to be inferior only to those that chose them.

[15] "An Agreement of the People" (ca. late October 1647), in *Sources and Debates*, 186-7.