Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines

58 | 2024
Anti-Monarchism in the British Isles and Beyond

Was there an Alternative to Monarchy? Radicalism and Antiroyalism in the 1640s

Y avait-il une alternative à la monarchie ? Radicalisme et antiroyalisme dans les années 1640

Laurent Curelly

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ranam/1027
DOI: 10.4000/11uzf
ISSN: 3000-4411

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Strasbourg

Printed version
Date of publication: June 30, 2024
Number of pages: 25-42
ISBN: 979-10-344-0236-6
ISSN: 0557-6989

Electronic reference
Laurent Curelly, "Was there an Alternative to Monarchy? Radicalism and Antiroyalism in the 1640s", *Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines* [Online], 58 | 2024, Online since 30 June 2024, connection on 08 May 2025. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ranam/1027 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/11uzf

The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Was there an Alternative to Monarchy? Radicalism and Antiroyalism in the 1640s

Laurent Curelly♦

King Charles I's execution on 30 January 1649 was certainly an unprecedented event in the British Isles. It was greeted by some with cheers and more than a whiff of relief as it was hoped it would bring a long period of political instability to a close, while others shuddered at what royalist propaganda came to portray as a national tragedy. However, it was by no means a foregone conclusion—very few Englishmen would have anticipated this fatal act when the first Civil War broke out in 1642. Even fewer would have predicted that the king's trial and brutal death might culminate in a revolution[1] leading to the abolition of the Stuart monarchy and the establishment of a republican regime, known as the Commonwealth, in the wake of the regicide.

It is no easy thing to determine whether anti-kingly sentiment was rife in England in the 1640s. What is beyond doubt is that Charles I's authority came to be hotly contested. As early as 1628, the authors of the Petition of Right, in the House of Lords and the House of Commons alike, had expressed their grievances regarding what may be called the king's misuse of his prerogative, though not in so many words—foremost among these grievances were arbitrary justice and

♦ Laurent Curelly, *Université de Haute-Alsace*.

1 I argue that the events that took place in the 1640s, with the standoff between Parliament and King Charles I giving rise to two murderous Civil Wars, the radicalisation of the army, the trial of the king by what the royalists argued was a kangaroo court, his death on the scaffold and the collapse of monarchical institutions, should be labelled a "revolution". Revisionist and some post-revisionist historians' insistence on this period being called the "British Civil Wars" or the "Wars of the Three Kingdoms" seems to me to convey a misguided view of the sea change that the British Isles, most significantly England, actually experienced, when, to take up the title of a contemporary pamphlet—borrowed by Marxist historian Christopher Hill, "the world [was] turned upside down" (Hill 1991).

the levying of taxes not approved of by Parliament.[2] Criticisms were first heaped on the king's councillors, not least George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham, and Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford, not to mention William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury. But, as tension came to a head between the monarch and the Long Parliament in the early 1640s, Charles I himself was soon to face parliamentarians' censure.[3] This only meant that the king was gradually losing support, not that monarchy as an institution was in any danger yet. However, his inflexible attitude and his double-dealing, together with the development of radical politics, undermined any attempt at a compromise that might have allowed him to save his life and possibly his royal function in the process.[4]

Politics in the mid-seventeenth-century Revolution, especially in the 1640s, was characterised by the involvement of a diversity of actors, not least New Model Army soldiers—officers as well as the rank and file.[5] These had an agenda of their own, which was sometimes at odds with that of mainstream parliamentarians. A fair number of soldiers made common cause with radical sects, in particular the Levellers, so much so that Leveller thought penetrated the Army, however suspiciously senior officers viewed that influence.[6] There is no question that

2 The Petition of Right was prompted by the so-called Five-Knights case, whereby five knights were imprisoned in 1627 for refusing to pay the loan that Charles I had forced upon them. They appealed for *habeas corpus*. This case sparked a debate about how far the king's prerogative extended.

3 Following the Petition of Right, as he was faced with ever-growing opposition, the king dissolved parliament and ruled without it for eleven years. He convened it again twice in 1640 as he needed to finance his Scottish expedition—the Short Parliament was soon dissolved and replaced with a Parliament that was to last until Oliver Cromwell's coup in 1653, albeit in a purged form as of December 1648. It was the so-called Rump Parliament, after the House of Commons had been purged of the majority of its members, mostly Presbyterian MPs, which provided for the trial of the king.

4 Charles I's (in)ability to rule is still a matter of historical debate. It is encapsulated in a controversy in *Past & Present* between revisionist historian Mark Kishlansky and post-revisionist historians Richard Cust, Julian Goodare and Clive Holmes. Kishlansky challenged the longstanding theory that Charles was an inept and deceitful monarch and argued instead that the king had been misunderstood by historians as much as he had been debased by his contemporaries. While making allowances for Kishlansky's intellectual insight, Cust, Goodare and Holmes criticised his interpretation. My reading of Charles I's reign is based on Cust's arguments.

5 In February 1645, the House of Commons voted an ordinance setting up the New Model Army. The parliamentarian army was thus reorganised in an effort to make it more efficient. Parliament was to approve the appointment of officers, whose political opinions and religious persuasions it vetted (Gentles, 2022: 4-17).

6 I argue that the words "radical" or "radicalism" are not anachronistic when it comes to defining ideas and attitudes that were not necessarily extreme *per se* but that challenged norms in a thoroughgoing fashion. These words may not have been in use then, but the reality they describe is not to be doubted. The radicalisation of politics—in the army as well as in civil society—was fuelled by the expansion of cheap print—with presses, including "radical" printers' presses—churning out pamphlets and newspapers. The adjective "radical" is best contrasted with "mainstream"—the issue of norms and values, not least

Charles I's prevarication brought about his own demise, but the dissemination of radical thought, in all its hues, as well as the agency of a new brand of political actors—not least plebeian figures—caused monarchical order to collapse, whether it was a deliberate move on the part of those actors or not.

This essay explores forms of antiroyalism in England in the 1640s to decide whether an alternative to monarchy was seen as acceptable, even necessary, by Civil War radicals. While republicanism in the 1650s as a substitute for monarchy is now well documented, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to antimonarchical discourse and ideas in the 1640s.[7] This contribution teases out the complexity and admittedly puzzling inconsistency of Civil War radicals' attitudes to monarchy and hence to the political settlement of the kingdom, first after the king's defeat in the first Civil War in 1646, second at the time of the radicalisation of the New Model Army in 1647, and then after the regicide in 1649 and the establishment of the republic. The writings of the Levellers as well as those of army radicals are examined with reference to their authors' positioning on the Stuart monarchy, King Charles in particular, and on monarchy at large. Collective forms of expression, such as petitions and remonstrances, are favoured as they are certainly more emblematic of the mood prevailing in England and of the penetration of ideas than single-author writings, even though these are occasionally considered as well. The possible alternatives—and sometimes the actual lack of alternatives—as envisaged by these radicals are discussed.

This contribution studies antimonarchical attitudes as being integral to a diachronic and context-based radical narrative of the revolutionary 1640s. It shares David Como's methodological approach to the "dynamic of radicalization and polarization" that was characteristic of this tumultuous decade (2018: 7), with actors facing new challenges and producing novel streams of thought as they sought to negotiate eventful developments. Ultimately, it borrows from Christopher Hill's groundbreaking book on sectarian radicals, *The World Turned Upside Down*, which, despite its teleological slant, includes a great many illuminating analyses that are still helpful for modern-day scholars. However, while Hill tended to disregard the Levellers as petit-bourgeois liberals who did not fit in nicely with his vision of a plebeian revolution, this paper puts them back into the spotlight.

It combines intellectual history with a context-based approach that looks closely at Leveller and New Model Army texts. It is especially indebted to Rachel

those upheld by the monarchy, was at the core of political debates. For a discussion of early-modern English radicalism see Curelly and Smith, 2016: 1-24. The work of the Levellers will be defined further down.

7 The literature on mid-seventeenth-century English republicanism is too prolific to be given full coverage here. This essay is not yet a contribution to republican studies, essential though they are. It aims to follow a different path by focussing on the 1640s rather than the 1650s, even if John Milton began writing his republican treatises in 1649, and on different actors. Thus, it is hoped it will fill a gap in the literature on antiroyalism.

Foxley's *The Levellers: Radical Political Thought in the English Revolution*, an investigation of the Levellers' contribution to radical political thought, and to John Rees's militant history *The Leveller Revolution*. It also builds upon Gary De Krey's *Following the Levellers*, whose approach to the Leveller movement is based on "the premise that they were a unique historical development in response to a complicated set of unsettling political and religious circumstances" (2017: 9). It is the unique historical development of Levellers' and Army radicals' thought that this essay purports to review.



Parliamentary troops gained the upper hand over the king's army in the spring of 1646. On 24 June, Oxford, where Charles I and his soldiers were headquartered, surrendered; this event sealed the victory of the Westminster Parliament. The next month Parliament issued a blueprint for a treaty with the king—the so-called Newcastle Propositions—which, among other points, provided that Charles should sign the Scottish Covenant and that, as a result, the Church of England would be reformed along Presbyterian lines. The king, therefore, would retain his throne but his power, especially in religious matters, would be eroded somewhat.

Meanwhile, the Levellers emerged as a movement. They were not a faction in Parliament, although they came to enjoy support from some MPs, let alone a full-blown political party. They held meetings in taverns and alehouses, and spearheaded petitioning campaigns to press for political change. This was not a monolithic movement, with the major leaders such as John Lilburne, William Walwyn and Richard Overton advertising their own ideas and having their own priorities, but these men had enough in common to be identified as "Levellers" and vilified by their opponents—the term "Leveller" gained currency as an all-embracing word of abuse from the mid-1640s onwards.[8]

In July 1646 the Levellers took Parliament to task in the form of a remonstrance. It was possibly initiated by Overton and became generally regarded as the Levellers' founding text (Rees, 2016: 151). It was prompted by John Lilburne's imprisonment for his criticism of the House of Lords. It was widely circulated in London and, if the wording of its title is anything to go

8 See Foxley (2013: 1-20), and especially De Krey (2017: 1-13) for a discussion of the significance of the movement and a thorough presentation of the historiography of the Levellers, from J. Frank's Whiggish interpretation to H. N. Brailsford's and C. Hill's Marxist readings, to revisionist accounts—which played down the significance of the radicals—and D. Como's, R. Foxley's, and J. Peacey's post-revisionist studies. This essay ties in with the latter approach. It is mostly the Levellers' political thought that I discuss here, but they should by no means be seen as a "secularist" movement—their vindication of religious toleration and their anti-erastian approach to church organisation were central to their thought, so that their religious beliefs cannot be divorced from their political ideas. See Foxley (2013) and Como (2018) for further details about the Levellers' religion.

by, it garnered the support of "Many Thousand Citizens, and other Free-born people of England". It stands as one of the many examples of extensive popular mobilisation and plebeian involvement that characterised the British Civil Wars. This petition was written in an untypically uncompromising, even aggressive, tone. It included a number of Leveller motifs, chief among which were a defence of civil liberties, a vindication of popular sovereignty as well as an affirmation of the power of trust whereby representers should be accountable to their voters and, as a result, assemblies should be revocable.

The authors' indictment of Charles I was intertwined with an outright condemnation of kingly government. The petitioners thus asked Parliament to "declare and set forth King Charles his wickednesse openly before the word, and withall, to shew the intollerable inconveniences of having a Kingly Government, from the constant evill practices of those of this Nation; and so to declare King Charles an enemy" (*A Remonstrance of many thousand citizens*, 6). Criticism was no longer just aimed at Charles's evil counsellors, as it had been in the early 1640s, but it concerned the king himself. This text drew upon the so-called Grand Remonstrance of December 1641 as a milestone in the defence of civil liberties. The Grand Remonstrance originated in the House of Commons and warned the king against heeding the advice of those who supposedly sought to drive a wedge between the monarch and his Parliament. True, it aimed at restoring the king's rightful prerogative, so that it would not be detrimental either to Parliament's privileges or to the liberties of the people. In practice, this meant that limitations should actually be set to the king's prerogative. However, even though the Grand Remonstrance ran counter to royal absolutism as it had developed since the reign of Henry VIII, it was concerned about preserving the king and royalty against "parties and Factions" (*A remonstrance of the state of the kingdome*, n.p.) and was worded in a respectful tone that reflected its authors' loyalty to Charles.

The 1646 remonstrance went two steps further than its 1641 predecessor, in that it put the blame on King Charles himself for England's troubles while criticising Parliament for its alleged cowardice and subservience to the king: "As if you were of Counsell with him, and were resolved to hold up his reputation, thereby to enable him to goe on in mischief, you maintaine, *The King can doe no wrong*, and apply all his Oppressions to *Evill Counsellors*, begging and intreating him in such submissive language, to returne to his Kingly Office and Parliament" (*A Remonstrance of many thousand citizens*, 5). But then again, pamphlets that legitimised tyrannicide as of the French Wars of Religion in the late sixteenth century often distinguished between good and evil kings. So did Tudor historiography regarding medieval monarchs, commending good kings and reproving evil ones, but this, of course, was meant to glorify Queen Elizabeth I in the end.

The second step away from the 1641 remonstrance taken by the 1646 petition concerned its unambiguous rejection of monarchy. The abovementioned extract

continues thus: "As if you were resolved to make us beleeve, hee were a God, without whose presence, all must fall to ruine, or as if it were impossible for any Nation to be happy without a King" (*A Remonstrance of many thousand citizens*, 5). The problem with Charles as suggested here is not only that he was evil, but first and foremost that he was a king. The Grand Remonstrance and its 1646 counterpart, despite the explicit reference to its predecessor, were almost worlds apart: the former had been Parliament's initiative while the latter was a Leveller-inspired text that received popular sanction. Radical discourse, as typified by the 1646 remonstrance, often described English kings as usurpers because their ancestor William the Conqueror had forced his way into power and imposed his "Norman Yoke" on the people (Hill, 1997: 361-365). The Norman Conquest had introduced an irretrievable rupture in England's history, thus making kings illegitimate rulers. When they misused their prerogative, they acted in breach of the laws of the country; their power was then to be considered unlawful.

By the same token, the authors of the 1646 remonstrance accused Parliament of ruling tyrannically. Their target was the House of Lords, as may be expected, but also the House of Commons, whose authoritarian tendencies they disapproved of. What was perceived as parliamentary absolutism permeated radical discourse in the 1640s, and was only matched by royal absolutism: "You cannot fight for our liberties, but it must be in the name of king and parliament" (*A Remonstrance of many thousand citizens*, 5). The idea of king-in-parliament as vindicated by Parliament itself because it was sanctioned by a longstanding constitutional practice and reasserted in the 1628 Petition of Right was denounced by those who penned the remonstrance, and more widely by Civil War radicals, as a joint form of oppression.

If kings were no longer welcome, according to the Levellers, it was because they had infringed whatever power they have been entrusted with, and had done so at the expense of Parliament. In his *Arrow against all Tyrants and Tyrany*, published in October 1646, Leveller Richard Overton made it clear that "the power of the king cannot be *Legislative*, but only *executive*. […] And the Soveraigne power not being inherent in him, it cannot be conveyed by, or derived from him to any" (*Arrow*, 12). The issue at stake was the king's "negative voice," that is to say, his veto, a point—and a grievance—that cropped up in various pamphlets and petitions of the 1640s, such as Overton's *Arrow* and the "Large Petition" of March 1647, which resulted from yet another bout of Leveller activism. Overton and other radicals claimed that any of the king's attempts at overriding Parliament's legislative power should be kept in check. In that respect, the function of the king amounted to executing the laws and decisions made by Parliament, and no more: "It cannot be denied, but that the King is subordinate and inferiour to the whole Kingdome and body Representative. […] Seeing the Soveraigne power is not originally in the King, or personally terminated in him, then the King at most can be but chief Officer, or supream executioner of the Lawes" (*Arrow*, 11).

Overton substantiated his argument with a reference to the coronation oath whereby "the Commons (not the King or Lords) have power to chuse what Lawes themselves shall judge meetest, and thereto of necessity the King must assent" (*Arrow*, 11). The problem was that a new oath had been introduced by Henry VIII, which was far less liberal than the "ancient oath": the new oath provided that the king should pledge to uphold the laws and customs of the kingdom as long as they were "not prejudiciall to his Crowne, or imperiall Jurisdiction" and enforce the laws which "the Nobles and Peoples have made and chosen with his consent" (*The book of oaths*, 4). These provisions were absent from the ancient oath (for oaths in early modern England, see Curelly 2013). While the coronation oath under the Tudors and the Stuarts clearly had it that kings' *imperium* was coextensive with parliamentary sovereignty, Overton and his fellow Levellers rejected any royal encroachment upon Parliament's legislative power. In practice, this meant divesting the king of his godly authority and limiting his remit to that of a modern-day constitutional monarch, who would not even formally be granted the privilege to sign laws, in case he should abuse his royal assent.

As appears from the remonstrance and Overton's *Arrow*, it was not quite clear in 1646 whether the Levellers' antimonarchical sentiment extended to the kingly function itself. While the petitioners would have been happy to dispose of kings altogether, "this originall of all Oppressions" (*A Remonstrance of many thousand citizens*, 6), Overton intended to deprive the king of his royal prerogative to preclude any mischief he might be tempted to commit: "The Legislative power is not in the King himself, but only in the Kingdome and body Representative, who hath power to make or to abrogate Lawes, Statutes &c. **even without the Kings consent**" (*Arrow*, 11).[9]

If the Levellers seemed to be hesitant about who should exercise executive power—power to be exercised in a purely formal way at that, as whoever the person was would be denied any part in the decision-making process—it was because their priority was the advent of a form of parliamentary democracy. Cicero's maxim *Salus populi suprema lex* ("the safety of the people is the sovereign law")[10] was their mantra (see for example *Arrow*, 5). Practically, this meant that the House of Commons only—and not the House of Lords, it being considered an offshoot of royal power—would be given "absolute Soveraignty, thereby Authoritatively and legally to remove from amongst them all oppressions and tyranies, oppressors and tyrants how great soever in name, place or dignity" (*Arrow*, 5).

Leveller authors claimed that legislative assemblies, here the House of Commons, derived their authority from the people, who exercised absolute sovereignty and entrusted their representatives with the power to legislate. Because it had its foundational authority in the people, the legislative branch

9 My emphasis.
10 The phrase is borrowed from Cicero's *De Legibus*, book III, part III, sub. viii.

of government could not suffer to be hindered by anyone exercising executive power, be this person a king or anyone else. The authors of the "Large Petition," for example, warned Parliament that "in the first place you [should] be exceeding carefull to preserve your just Authority from all prejudices of a negative voyce in any person or persons whomsoever, which may disable you from making that happy return unto the people which they justly expect" because "no Government is more just in the constitution, then that of Parliaments, having its foundation in the free choyce of the people" (*The humble Petition of many thousands*, 4, 1). The petition listed the Long Parliament's achievements, such as the abolition of arbitrary courts of justice, illegal taxes and monopolies, as well as the abolition of episcopacy and the defence of non-conformity—all of which decisions were aimed at reversing Charles I's high-handed policies as well as Archbishop Laud's so-called ceremonial "innovations".

Nonetheless, the Levellers and their supporters were concerned that Parliament should not misuse its privileges as a representative assembly and thus betray the people's trust. Overton, for one, insisted that political authority ultimately resided in the people, who "have each of them communicated so much unto you (their *Chosen Ones*) of their natural rights and powers, that you might thereby become their absolute Commissioners, and lawfull Deputies, but no more" (*Arrow*, 4).

Radical antimonarchical discourse as was gaining currency at the end of the first Civil War, that is to say discourse chiefly coming from outside Parliament, gave primary importance to the issue of sovereignty. Kings were liable, even bound, to exercise arbitrary power because, right from the outset, the history of English monarchy had been tainted by usurpation and monarchs had seized the power that rightly belonged to the people. As a result, they should be barred from exercising sovereignty.

Where would this leave us if Charles I were to be deposed? This is a trickier question than meets the eye since popular sovereignty, as advocated by Civil War radicals, conflicted with parliamentary sovereignty, as championed by the king's opponents in Parliament. But then again, the Levellers were willing to hand sovereignty—that of the people—over to an annual or biennial House of Commons with an extended, if not universal, franchise. Rachel Foxley contends that "the act which constitutes the House of Commons as legislative sovereign is not a simple handover of delegated powers which can be recalled, but a much more organic extension of the powers of the people into their natural representatives" (2007: 657).

This, arguably, could work only if Parliament did not encroach upon the people's sovereignty, "the original of all power," a principle that featured in many radical pamphlets and underpinned the regime that was established after the regicide.[11] On 4 January 1649, the Commons issued a declaration stating the

11 It was only on 19 May 1649 that the Act declaring England a "Commonwealth and free state" was passed.

people was "the original of all Just power" and that "the Commons of *England*, in Parliament assembled, being chosen by, and representing the People, have the Supreme Power in this Nation" (*House of Commons Journal*, Volume 6: 4 January 1649, 111). How one could deal with coextensive sovereignty if Parliament betrayed the trust of the people was envisaged by the Levellers. If the people were to win back its sovereignty, then Parliament would lose its legislative agency and would become a mere executive body, having the power to enforce laws rather than make them.

Antiroyalism in the 1640s was given fresh impetus by the New Model Army stepping in as a fully fledged political actor. 1647 marked a departure for the army: in the spring and in the autumn, soldiers elected Agitators, that is to say representatives, to conduct negotiations with their officers; regiments issued a series of declarations known as "Engagements," which were both political platforms and oaths of a new kind (see Curelly 2013); rank-and-file soldiers called for talks with their senior officers, the so-called Grandees—debates thus took place in Putney in the autumn; the soldiers and the Levellers joined forces to push through their political programme. In this context, opposition to King Charles I flared up. The army arrested Charles and held him in semi-captivity, first in Holmby House in Northamptonshire, and then at Hampton Court, from where he escaped in November. In December both Houses of Parliament resolved that the king should be held in custody in Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight, where he had found shelter after his escape.

Common soldiers were especially disgruntled with the scheme devised by Presbyterian members of the House of Commons to disband the army on the grounds that victory had been achieved, while volunteers would be called on to serve in Ireland. Soldiers and junior officers made it clear in petitions and declarations that they would not disband until their grievances were redressed—significantly, these included the settlement of their pay arrears as well as indemnity from prosecution for past service. Unrest in the army was rampant, with the newly-elected Agitators[12] in cavalry regiments drawing up letters addressed both to their senior officers and to Parliament and discontent spreading farther afield. Meanwhile, the Levellers sought to mobilise support for their reforms through petitions, such as the "Large Petition," which called for the release of Leveller leader John Lilburne from prison and the enactment of their political platform.

12 The so-called "Agitators" were the elected representatives of their own regiments. This is how the word is to be understood, rather than in the sense of *agents provocateurs*, as some Marxist historians interpreted it.

These various struggles aggregated at what should have been a propitious time for Parliament as the king's army had been defeated and Charles was in a predicament. The soldiers' and the Levellers' protest was aimed at the Presbyterian-dominated House of Commons as much as it was directed at the uncompromising king. These two groups delivered various proposals for the settlement of the kingdom. The soldiers turned their grievances into a fully articulated political programme and a plan for action. In the autumn of 1647, the Putney debates became a partisan forum, in which the Grandees and the common soldiers argued about the future settlement of the country, notably what to do with the king.

Unquestionably, the soldiers pursued a much more radical agenda than their officers. Two prominent political manifestos originated in the army in the summer and the autumn. The first, *The heads of proposals*, drafted in July, resulted from a compromise between officers and Agitators, but it was especially the doing of Commissary-General Henry Ireton, Oliver Cromwell's son-in-law, who was to be an active participant in the Putney debates. This constitutional scheme was presented to the king, who rejected it outright. At the end of the first Civil War, Parliament had presented Charles with the Newcastle Propositions, which he had likewise rejected. *The heads of proposals* were not so unfavourable to the king as Parliament's plan, at least from a religious perspective, as episcopacy was to be retained in an effort to counter the advance of Presbyterianism in Parliament.

The king's arrogance infuriated many soldiers, who elected new Agitators. These supposedly would be more in tune with their demands, especially at a time when the Army Council, dominated by senior officers, resolved to open new negotiations with Charles. The concurrent manifesto, *The case of the Armie truly stated*, was issued by these new Agitators in early October and presented to the Grandees a few days before the beginning of the Putney debates. These two texts were discussed at Putney, together with the first draft of the Leveller-inspired *Agreement of the People*. They expressed conflicting views regarding the future of the English monarchy.

The heads of proposals was more concerned about pre-empting parliamentary absolutism than about curtailing the king's prerogative. And yet, Charles's encroachment upon Parliament's sovereignty had been one of the reasons why a war had been waged upon him and why the army had been assembled in the first place. In order to prevent perpetual parliaments, elections were to be held every other year and parliamentary sessions limited to a certain period of time, "afterwards to be adjournable or dissolvable by the King" (*Heads of proposals*, 2). This, granted, amounted to a reduction in the powers kings had enjoyed over their Parliaments before the war, not least the power to convene and dissolve them at will. But this constitutional manifesto still gave monarchs legislative authority while Charles I was to be restored and his prerogative was supposed to emerge unscathed from the troubles he had faced. Thus, clause 14 provided

"that (the things here before purposed, being provided for settling and securing the Rights, Liberties, Peace and Safety of the Kingdome) his Majesties Person, his Queen, and Royall issue, may be restored to a condition of safetie, honour and freedome in this Nation, without diminution to their personal Rights, or further limitation to the Exercise of the Regal power" (*Heads of proposals*, 2). The authors clearly considered that royalty was not incompatible with the preservation of the commonwealth.

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that the more radical army members should have been frustrated with this attempt at (re)conciliation, all the more so since Charles I was flexing his muscles again in a bid to play the army off against Parliament and the Grandees off against the rank and file. *The case of the Armie truly stated* was partly written in response to *The heads of proposals*. Its authors asserted popular sovereignty as the underlying principle of a reformed polity: "All power is originally and essentially in the whole body of the people of this Nation" (*The case of the Armie*, 15). As in *The heads of proposals*, they argued for biennial Parliaments that were to be the repositories of the people's trust and insisted that the king should not exercise any legislative power: "[Parliaments] may not be adjournable and dissolvable by the King, or any other except themselves" (*The case of the Armie*, 15). They blamed the Grandees' manifesto for reinstating the king's veto, the so-called "negative voice," and complained that, if *The heads of proposals* was to be enforced, royal power would be restored before the grievances of the people—not just those of the soldiers—had even been considered.

The case of the Armie did not explain what should be done with the king, provided he should be made harmless and powerless and sovereignty shifted back to the people. Harsh as it was on the king, it did not pull any punches in censoring Parliament for "return[ing] to their old dilatory ways" (*The case of the Armie*, 12), neither heeding the grievances of the people nor those of the army. There was to be no hindrance to the people's liberties and authority as the only legitimate source of political power. Kings were potentially dangerous, for they ruled by prerogative. In that respect, *The case of the Armie* chimed with many contemporary Leveller-inflected texts. It was seen as a subversive pamphlet liable to turn the world upside down, if the words of the Venetian ambassador are to be believed: "The new faction in the army which has caused some regiments to separate from the others, bears the title of the Levellers (Ugualità) and demands that the state shall be formed without king, princes or nobles, but all equal, as men were after the Creation" (qtd in Rees, 2016: 203-204). The diplomat was certainly jumping to conclusions, as *The case of the Armie* neither ruled out nor retained monarchy, but he clearly had a point regarding equality, which, according to Civil War radicals, was anchored in natural law and legitimised a democratic form of government. If the soldiers' manifesto had antimonarchical overtones,

this was because the king's prerogative was seen as being least compatible with a democratic state.[13]

Both *The heads of proposals* and *The case of the Armie* were scrutinised and fiercely debated at Putney. Some of the soldiers considered disposing of the king—not just Charles I, but any king—as an option, as did a man from Bedfordshire who claimed, in a no-nonsense manner, that "if you keep the government as it is and bring in the King, there may be more dangers than in changing the government" (Woodhouse, 1974: 18). This must have sent more than a shiver down Ireton's spine since the Commissary-General expressed much the same concern as the Venetian ambassador—a government without a king would spell doom for social order. He considered the possibility in a purely rhetorical manner, the better to dismiss it: "If God saw it good to destroy, not only King and Lords, but all distinctions of degrees—nay if it go further, to destroy all property, that there's no such thing left, that there be nothing at all of civil constitution left in the kingdom—if I see the hand of God in it I hope I shall with quietness acquiesce, and submit to it, and not resist it" (Woodhouse, 1974: 50). Ireton's rhetoric was possibly disingenuous but his argument was shaped by a strong attachment to existing structures of power, whereby monarchical rule was better than no rule at all and a king was a guardian of political and social stability.[14] Ireton's words thus echoed the Venetian ambassador's fears. While the radicals championed liberty at Putney and in their writings, Ireton and Cromwell vindicated property. In later tracts, the Levellers insisted that they had no intention of abolishing private property, but to little avail.

The Putney debates reflected a major fault line between the Grandees and Civil War radicals, rank-and-file soldiers and civilian Levellers alike, regarding their attitudes, not just towards King Charles I, but also towards monarchy at large. Leveller John Wildman expressed the prevailing opinion amongst radicals that kings should not exercise legislative power: "To give the King a legislative power is contrary to his own oath at his coronation, and it is the like to give a power to the King by his negative voice to deny all laws" (Woodhouse, 1974: 109). William Allen, an army Agitator, made the survival of the Stuart monarchy conditional upon the king's acknowledgement of civil liberties: "If the setting up of him be not consistent with [the liberties of the kingdom], and prejudicial to

13 How democratic a commonwealth governed according to Leveller principles would be is a moot point. The Levellers called for an extension of the franchise, a principle written into their various drafts of *The Agreement of the People*, but it was not to be universal, as it excluded not only women but also servants and vagrants, in other words those who could not depend on themselves for a living. The soldiers' manifestos made no mention of suffrage. Leveller proposals, however, were as close to modern democracy as could be in seventeenth-century England.

14 Ireton no doubt voiced a widespread position, elitist though it was. The same attachment to hierarchies is expressed in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*: "Take but degree away, untune that string, / And hark what discord follows" (1.3.109-110).

them, then down with him" (Woodhouse, 1974: 102). He bore Charles a grudge but was willing to have him recover his throne provided he made amends for his past behaviour. Ireton, as far as he was concerned, presented himself as a staunch defender of monarchy: "The government of Kings, or of Lords, is as just as any in the world, is the justest government in the world" (Woodhouse, 1974: 122).

The spread of antiroyalism among soldiers after the first Civil War went hand in hand with the radicalisation of the Army, and their defiance of Charles I was certainly compounded by the king's arrogance and his refusal to let go of at least part of his prerogative. Army radicals and the Levellers intended to divest him of the legislative powers he had taken on at the expense of the representatives of the people, should he become a mere puppet-figure; some were even considering disposing of him and of all monarchs. The rift between them and the Grandees on this and other issues only widened. There is some irony in Ireton's advocacy of monarchical government considering that slightly over a year later he signed King Charles's death warrant and was instrumental in establishing the Commonwealth—the only republic Britain ever had.

In the meantime, the king had waged a second war upon his Parliament. Following the defeat of his troops in August 1648, he was presented with the Newport Treaty, about which he procrastinated in an attempt to divide his adversaries. His dithering antagonised the Independents in Parliament and the New Model Army even further while the Presbyterian majority in the House of Commons was anxious to broker a deal with him. The Leveller-inspired petition of September 11th, endorsed by 40,000 Londoners, denounced the Newport Treaty and pressed for a settlement that, quite expectedly, asserted the joint authority of the people and Parliament in dealing with public affairs. The Commons were to be accountable to the people, for no institution could infringe on popular sovereignty, and the monarch, being "at most the chief public officer of this kingdom" (Sharp, 2004: 131) was to be subservient to both Parliament and the people. Royal prerogative was clearly not compatible with the sovereignty of the people. The petition was antiroyalist in tone as it argued that "most of the oppressions of the commonwealth have in all times been brought upon the people by the King and the Lords" (Sharp, 2004: 133), but did not expatiate on what a suitable alternative to monarchy could be. Denying the king any legislative authority and setting limitations to his power were options, and the petitioners urged the Commons to declare "what the duty or business of the kingly office is" (Sharp, 2004: 137).

Much more radical was the remonstrance that the New Model Army, including its senior officers, presented to the House of Commons on November 20th. It was clear that the Grandees, not least Ireton, had changed tack regarding the government of kings. If monarchy was to be retained, it was to be elective,

and would be conditional upon the king relinquishing his negative voice (*A Remonstrance of His Excellency Thomas Lord Fairfax*, 67). More importantly, perhaps, the king would have to consent to and subscribe to the *Agreement of the People*, the constitutional text drafted by the Levellers. No one would be admitted to the future polity, when it had been settled, unless they subscribed to it, "nor any King be admitted to the Crown, or other person to any Office, or place of publike trust, without expresse accord, and subscription to the same" (*A Remonstrance of His Excellency Thomas Lord Fairfax*, 67). The senior officers' position on the issue of sovereignty seems to have crystallised at that particular moment and it was as close as ever to that of the Levellers.

The Grandees and the Levellers were soon to fall out, and they did so at the very time when Parliament issued a declaration making the people the source of all political power. The radicals' agenda was about to be fulfilled. However, in the Levellers' eyes, the regime that emerged from the ashes of the defunct monarchy in the winter of 1649 proved to be as oppressive and as tyrannical as King Charles's government. Not all radicals approved of the proceedings that led to the king's trial or of the trial itself, which to them, amounted to summary justice. Nor were they happy with the Rump Parliament and the regicides seizing power. Equally did they resent the establishment of the Council of State in February 1649, a 41-member body whose members included senior army officers and which served as the Commonwealth's executive branch of government, and was supposedly accountable to the Rump Parliament ("February 1649: An Act of this Present Parliament for Constituting a Counsell of State for the Comonwealth of England," in Firth and Rait, 1911: 2-4).

Many of the Levellers' 1649 pamphlets cast aspersions on the Council of State as a symbol of tyrannical power, akin to the kind of power exercised by monarchs. Thus, in his *England's new chains discovered*, the Leveller leader John Lilburne, argued that those who then exercised power—"military power" as he put it—did so for their own benefit, self-interest "being the original of most regalties and tyrannies in the world" (*England's new chains discovered*, n. p.). The Commonwealth was a tyranny of a new kind, albeit one without a king or an emperor. An army pamphlet issued in the spring of 1649 called soldiers to action in similar terms: "Is it your ambition to enrich their Parliament-men, and impoverish their people; to take down Monarchical Tyranny, and set up an Aristocratical Tyranny?" (*The English Souldiers Standard*, 4) Whether it be referred to as "military power" or "aristocratical tyranny," the ruling clique was held responsible for introducing arbitrary government. This meant, for example, rounding up the Leveller leaders at night and putting them in gaol without giving them the right to a fair trial; it also meant quashing a series of mutinies in the army in May 1649 and punishing the ringleaders by death.[15]

15 Mutinies erupted in the army because lots were to be drawn to send regiments to Ireland. This aroused the ire of many soldiers, who refused to comply with the order

The May 1649 draft of *The Agreement of the People*, which the Levellers wrote in prison, provided that, in the alternative commonwealth they had to offer, legislative power should be in the hands of Parliament as the sole repository of the sovereignty of the people and that the Council of State as an undemocratic institution should be abolished. England had become a military dictatorship, which the authors intimated was the worst of all governments: "Nothing threatens greater danger to the commonwealth than that the military power should by any means come to be superior to the civil authority" (*An agreement of the free people of England*, 7).

Faced with martial oppression, the Levellers and their followers in the army were willing to have monarchy restored. The Levellers' take on monarchy—as well as that of many radicals—is encapsulated in this extract from a Leveller tract, penned in the summer of 1649: "Our hostile engagements against the late King, was not against him as out of any personal enmity, but simply and singly against his Oppressions and Tyranny on the People, and for their removal, but the use and advantage on all the successe God hath been pleased to give us is perverted to that end, that by his removal the Ruling sword-men might intrude into his throne, set up a Martiall Monarchie more cruell, Arbitrarie and Tyrannicall then England never tasted of" (*The Levellers (Falsly so called) vindicated* in Morton, 1975: 313). The authors deplored "this hatefull Kingship," that of Charles I and other monarchs, but claimed that, for lack of a better choice, they would "chuse subjection to the Prince, chusing rather ten thousand times to be his slaves then theirs, yet hating slavery under both" (*The Levellers (Falsly so called) vindicated* in Morton, 1975: 314).[16] It was clear that, in 1649 more than ever, the Levellers attached greater importance to civil liberties than to who should be entrusted with executive power—king or no king. Their antiroyalism was only secondary to their democratic agenda.



What comes from this study of opposition to monarchical government during the English revolution is that, first, antiroyalism in the 1640s was context-based. Criticisms of Charles I were intricately linked with those aimed at monarchy as a political regime. Antiroyalism was more of a dialogic attitude that interacted with historical circumstances and political actors than an entrenched feature of the radicals' programme. Second, it ran the gamut of forms, from the rejection of

unless their grievances be redressed. These mutinies were supported, even encouraged, by the Levellers.

16 For lack of space, the Diggers' antiroyalism cannot be discussed here. The Diggers were a small agrarian community who took on common land in the spring of 1649 to make a living out of it, thus challenging property rights. Gerrard Winstanley, the most prominent Digger leader, condemned kingly government as the worst form of oppression. This was mostly because William the Conqueror and his barons had deprived the English of their land. Winstanley's and the Diggers' antiroyalism was closely tied to the property issue.

absolute monarchy and arbitrary government to a preference for constitutional monarchy, or an inclination to elective kingship, or more rarely a liking for a form of republicanism that was to be defined. The king's execution was by no means premeditated, so considering who should replace him, and for what purpose, came at a late stage. Third, antiroyalism was fluid: it accommodated many grey zones as actors had to adjust to political developments. These actors' stance was often shaped by personal trajectories as well as by historical contingencies, not to mention a fair amount of political expediency, as when Henry Ireton presented himself as a guardian of monarchy only to end up as a regicide. But then again Ireton's turnabout may be explained by his desire to preserve social order. Perhaps, some self-fashioning was of the essence as well. Therefore, antiroyalism in the 1640s had as much to do with the actors' engagement with history in the making as with abstract principles. Thus, the Levellers' doleful cry as expressed in *The Levellers (Falsly so called) vindicated*—better a king than military rule—was revealing of a growing sense of frustration with what they perceived as a failed revolution.

References

Primary Sources

•*A remonstrance of His Excellency Thomas Lord Fairfax, Lord Generall of the Parliaments forces. And of the Generall Councell of officers held at St Albans the 16. of November, 1648. Presented to the Commons assembled in Parliament, the 20. instant, and tendred to the consideration of the whole kingdome*, London, 1648, 70 p.

•*A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens, and other Free-Born People of England, To their owne House of Commons. Occasioned through the Illegall and Barbarous Imprisonment of that Famous and Worthy Sufferer for his Countries Freedoms, Lievtenant Col. John Lilburne*, London, 1646, 20 p.

•*A remonstrance of the state of the kingdom*, London, 1641, 26 p.

•FIRTH, C. H., RAIT, R. S. (eds.) (1911): *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office.

•LILBURNE, J., (1649): *Englands new chains discovered; or The serious apprehensions of a part of the people, in behalf of the Commonwealth: (being presenters, promoters, and approvers of the large petition of September 11. 1648.)*, London, 1649, n. p.

•LILBURNE, J., WALWYN, W., PRINCE, T., OVERTON, R., (1649): *An agreement of the free people of England. Tendered as a peace-offering to this distressed nation*, London, 8 p.

•OVERTON, R., (1646): *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyrany, shot from the Prison of New-gate into the Prerogative Bowels of the Arbitrary House of Lords, and all other Usurpers and Tyrants whatsoever*, London, 20 p.

•*The Book of Oaths. And the Several Forms thereof, Both Ancient and Modern Faithfully Collected out of sundry Authentick Books of Records, not heretofore extant*, London, 1689, 264 p.
•*The case of the Armie truly stated,: together with the mischiefes and dangers that are imminent, and some sutable remedies, humbly proposed by the agents of five regiments of horse, to their respective regiments, and the whole Army*, London, 1647, 24 p.
•*The English souldiers standard to repaire to, for wisdome and understanding: in these doleful back-sliding times. To be read by every honest officer to his souldiers; and by the souldiers, one to another*, London, 1649, 12 p.
•*The heads of proposals, agreed on by his Excellency Sir Thomas Fairfax, and the Councell of the Armie: Tendred to the commissioners of Parliament residing with the Armie, to be by them presented to the Parliament*, London, 1647, 14 p.
•*The Levellers (Falsly so called) vindicated*, London, 1649, in MORTON, A.L. (ed.) (1975): *Freedom in Arms—A Selection of Leveller Writings*, Berlin, Seven Seas Publishers, p. 293-318.
•*To the Right Honourable, the Commons of England assembled in Parliament assembled. The humble Petition of Thousands well-affected persons inhabiting the City of London, Westminster, the Borough of Sonthwark Hamblets, and places adjacent*, London, 1648, in SHARP, A. (ed.) (2004): *The English Levellers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 131-139.
•*To the Right Honourable, and supreame Authority of this Nation, the Commons in Parliament Assembled. The humble Petition of many thousands, earnestly desiring the glory of God, the freedom of the Common-wealth, & the peace of all Men* (aka. Large Petition of March 1647), London, 1647, 8 p.
•WOODHOUSE, A.S.P. (ed.) (1974): *Puritanism and Liberty Being the Army Debates (1647-9) from the Clarke Manuscripts with Supplementary Documents*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 506 p.

Secondary Sources

•COMO, D. (2018): *Radical Parliamentarians and the English Civil War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 476 p.
•CURELLY, L. (2013): "'Agreement, Covenant, Engagement, Oath', ou le serment politique dans tous ses états à l'époque de la Révolution anglaise (1638-1660)," *Études Épistémè* 24, https://journals.openedition.org/episteme/240
•CURELLY, L., SMITH, N. (eds.) (2016): *Radical Voices, Radical Ways—Articulating and Disseminating Radicalism in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 273 p.
•CUST, R., GOODARE, J., & HOLMES, C. (2009): "Charles I: A Case of Mistaken Identity," *Past & Present* 205.1: 175-237.
•DE KREY, G. (2017): *Following the Levellers—Volume 1: Political and Religious Radicals in the English Civil War and Revolution, 1645-1649*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 299 p.

•FOXLEY, R. (2007): "Problems of Sovereignty in Leveller Writings," *History of Political Thought* 28.4: 642-660.
•FOXLEY, R. (2013): *The Levellers: Radical Political Thought in the English Revolution*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 256 p.
•GENTLES, I. (2022): *The New Model Army, Agent of Revolution*, Yale, Yale University Press, 400 p.
•HILL, C. (1991): *The World Turned Upside Down—Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (1st ed. 1972), London, Penguin, 432 p.
•HILL, C. (1997): *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revisited*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 438 p.
•KISHLANSKY, M. (2005): "Charles I: A Case of Mistaken Identity," *Past & Present* 189.1: 41-80.
•REES, J. (2016): *The Leveller Revolution—Radical Political Organisation in England 1640-1650*, London & New York, Verso, 490 p.