

*James Harrington: An Intellectual Biography*, by Rachel Hammersley (Oxford University Press., 2019; pp. xvii + 315).

Little compares to the seventeenth century English achievement in political thought, as in other genres of writing. Even within this context the stature of James Harrington is exalted. Like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke he aspired successfully to elevate polemic to the status of philosophy, extracting from the cure for a malady specific to one time and place universal principles of nature. Notwithstanding its baroque complexities of content, form and style his *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) attracted immediate attention, resulting in a flurry of debate, in print, in parliament and in coffee houses. It had an enduring subsequent influence in early modern England, Scotland, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy and North America. Thereafter it has enjoyed an intermittent starring role in twentieth century historiographies concerning economic, especially Marxist, materialism; utopianism; the so-called 'gentry controversy'; and republicanism. Over the last seventy years the latter has been a particularly rich, diverse and contentious field. That all republicanisms, whether classical or modern, Roman, Greek or Venetian, Platonic, Aristotelian, Machiavellian or Hobbesian, aristocratic or popular, rational or sceptical, atomistic, mechanical or materialist, have been made to explain Harrington is one testimony to the complexity and multivocality of his thought. Yet as Rachel Hammersley's brilliant new study shows, this is only part of the puzzle. Such is Harrington's range, eclecticism, novelty, ambition, and sheer peculiarity that if all republican roads have run through *Oceana*, republicanism is, in that text, only one path of many, mapping an extraordinary geography both terrestrial and celestial.

That is one challenge facing any author of an intellectual biography of Harrington. Another concerns the absence of personal and family papers, and the little that is known about his life. Moreover what is known has appeared to pose another conundrum, in that before publishing the greatest work of English republicanism Harrington was, between 1647 and 1649, not only a gentleman of the bedchamber but a close and devoted personal friend of Charles I. Hammersley's first achievement in this book is a forensic and subtle marshalling and interpretation of the evidence available which, by scrupulously adhering to its limits, achieves both credibility and clarity. A Lincolnshire gentleman, Harrington was a moderate parliamentarian who in 1639 opposed war with Scotland and in 1641 supported it in Ireland. By 1644 a family history of service to the Stuart monarchy and, in particular, to James VI and I's daughter Elizabeth of Bohemia, helped to make him parliament's agent for financial support of her son and heir Charles Louis. Far from problematising the authorship of *Oceana*, his subsequent service to Charles I while the latter was in parliamentary captivity helps to explain it. For in that work Harrington did not argue, like other republican writers, that a 'commonwealth' was always the best regime. Rather, the 'balance of dominion' being what it now was, English monarchy had become impossible and only a commonwealth would achieve stability and prevent a repetition of the tragedy of civil war. Similarly, unlike other republican writers, far from praising the regicidal 'free state' established in 1649, *Oceana* excoriated it as an oligarchy. Thus Harrington was, first and foremost, a rabid peacemaker whose book, in its 'Preliminaries', offered the first explanation and then history of the civil wars and revolution and then, having diagnosed the disease, delivered in its 'Modell of the Commonwealth' a constitutional cure good, he claimed, not only for this, but for all time. More broadly *Oceana*, a work of counsel dedicated to Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector, was a hybrid of republicanism, royalism, natural philosophy and gentry-oriented Erastianism not uncharacteristic of the ruling class reconstituting itself around the Protectorate between 1656 and 1658.

Hammersley's book is now the definitive Harrington biography. However her principal preoccupation, and achievement, is for the first time to carefully and fully illuminate all significant features not only of Harrington's political, but also of his economic, historical, religious, and philosophical writing. Her reconstruction of these aspects of Harrington's thought from his many polemical engagements successfully clarifies his recurring preoccupations, strategies, discoveries and assumptions. In the process she negotiates several large and complicated historiographies with exemplary comprehensiveness, courtesy and incision, demonstrating a capacity to see the important components even of incompatible alternative analyses while retaining an intellectual independence securely grounded in her mastery of Harrington's oeuvre. In a meticulous discussion not only of the substance of Harrington's writing, but of its form and style, she demonstrates his preoccupation with textual as well as constitutional structure and presentation. She shows the scope granted him by *Oceana*'s rigorous constitutional safeguards to incorporate an inclusive definition of citizenship accompanied by measures supporting equality and meritocratic social mobility; she investigates his innovative use of language (a feature stimulated by his rivalry with Hobbes) and the impact of his literary interests upon a blending of genres including political exposition, historical narrative, oratory and prose romance. The most important chapter is on Harrington's natural philosophy, correctly seen as core of the whole. The result is the best and most complete analysis now available of the thought of a pivotal thinker; the first, indeed, to treat this subject not in prosecution of a larger intellectual theme or thesis, but in its own right, and on its own terms.

For Harrington the key to politics was Ancient Prudence, defined as the government of laws and not men. Although Plato, Aristotle and others had articulated this doctrine, no-one before him (not even Bacon or Machiavelli) had identified its material foundation. Yet in respect of this, his great invention, as important, he believed, as Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood, Harrington himself missed something crucial. Although the balance of dominion could refer to money or land, and despite the importance of the former in Venice, the constitution of which he praised to the skies, the foundation of his own legislature, divided into horse and foot, was implacably terrestrial. Despite its name the Commonwealth of Oceana had no navy. Hammersley attributes this to Harrington's inability to imagine in England any other form of wealth acquiring a stature comparable to land. Yet it was in England that, from 1649, in co-operation with the city of London, there had been unleashed a Dutch-inspired maritime, mercantile and naval revolution which would in the long term establish the basis for a modern commercial society and industrial economy. Harrington dismissed these developments not only because, like Plato, he regarded maritime and commercial politics as inherently unstable. They were also the work of the republican government of 1649-53 which both he and, by 1653, his would-be Protectoral patron abhorred. In this respect both of these gentlemen, of Lincolnshire and neighbouring Cambridgeshire, had their faces averted from the future, and specifically from the saltwater inundation which, by trading stability for dynamism, as Machiavelli had counselled, would eventually make the United Kingdom of Great Britain the world's pre-eminent power.

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