

REVIEW: JAMES HOLSTUN, *EHUD'S DAGGER: CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION*. LONDON: VERSO, 2000.

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Ehud's Dagger opens with a caveat: the author assumes a 'preposterously pre-post-Marxist position', one which does not share the 'current disdain for the *grand récits* of historians like Marx, Thompson, Hill and those writing in the tradition of the British Marxist historians' (p. ix-x). The object of study is, as the subtitle of the book indicates, class struggle in the English Revolution, as it is played out in five particular radical projects. Now, as those who have kept abreast of trends in social history in general—and seventeenth century English social history in particular—can attest to, such a research project will inevitably spark immediate controversy. The reason for this is, as Holstun himself points out, the field has witnessed the emergence of two distinct, yet ontologically similar, approaches to the study of the epoch that render its revolutionary character and the radical quality of its participants the topic of fierce debate. To characterize the struggle of the mid-seventeenth century as one of revolution instead of rebellion or civil war; and to characterize the political actors of that period as radicals instead of ranting zealots or envious opportunists is to immediately cast one's lot in with a particular political and ontological perspective: that of a Whig or Marxist.

Holstun's book is the first extensive—but by no means comprehensive—Marxist response to the claims of a conservative historical revisionism and a self-proclaimed radical new historicism, both of which, in the author's view,

'produce a relatively impoverished model' of seventeenth-century England 'as either the conflict of order and disorder, or the power-driven struggle of all against all.' Both the historical revisionists and the post-modern new historicists achieve this by 'refusing to acknowledge fundamental conflicts between more-or-less consciously formulated normative principles in seventeenth-century England', as well as by insisting that England 'knew only one culture and class' (p. 8). The history of Stuart England, in other words, is one of the order and stability of the *ancien régime* against the anarchy of the 'multitude of master-less men', or it is defined by the absence of a legitimating authority, thereby revealing 'the will to power beneath all *de jure* claims to abstract right' (p. 5). Nietzsche, Foucault, Hobbes and Thatcher stroll hand and hand through the early modern English countryside. As Holstun declares at the beginning of the book, his position is that of historical materialism in the vein of Marx, Sartre and the British Marxist historians. Using the work of the aforementioned thinkers, as well as Perry Anderson, Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, Holstun seeks to examine the 'dialectical encounter between experience and ideology...the movement of totalizing praxis by which historical actors reflect on prevailing forms of authority and on their own practical activity, and then act in such a way as to fuse and transform both' (pp. 5-6). The result of such an analysis is the examination of the development of coherent ideological positions of opposition to existing power relations, buttressed by alternative forms of *collective* authority.

These ideologies and collectivities can be found, argues Holstun, in the formation of Agitators within the New Model, centred around Leveller ideas, the organisation of

Digger communes based upon a project of labour withdrawal and collectivized farming, the attempted assassination of Oliver Cromwell by the Leveller Edward Sexby; the preachings of the anti-Protectorate prophet Anna Trapnel, and the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham by John Felton. Holstun analyses each event in turn, arguing—against both the revisionists and the new historicists—that the actions of these individuals and groups were motivated and guided, not by an indiscriminate mob mentality, nor by a form of political opportunism, but rather, by articulate and counter-hegemonic ideologies. In his chapter on the New Model Army Agitators, Holstun challenges the revisionist attempts to de-radicalize the Agitators by analysing the radical nature of the associative structures of authority that were created in opposition to the more traditional, hierarchical power structures of the Army Grandees. What we begin to see is the emergence of democratic structures that foster the direct participation of rank and file soldiers in the Leveller attempt to shape the contours of the early-modern English state. Agitators become akin to the delegates in a Soviet style council structure. This associative form of authority existed beside and in opposition to the standard hierarchical forms of military authority that cultivated a culture of deference to authority rather than democratic debate, and military discipline over direct member participation. At a time when what the Agitators *said* seems to outweigh what they *did*, it is refreshing to see Holstun move beyond the field of discourse in an analysis of the organisational structures of the Army-Leveller movement. Revisionist historians have theorized away Leveller radicalism through its superficial reliance on Leveller arguments for the ‘continuity’ of English ‘tradition’. Such

claims to continuity are said to reinforce the revisionist claim the English politics was characterized by alternate claimants to an authentic mantle of tradition. Despite its strengths, however, there are two fundamental weaknesses of Holstun’s book. First, critical analysis is often subordinated to a sustained polemic against revisionists and historicists alike. While the polemic nature of his arguments make for some highly enjoyable reading in the vein of E.P. Thompson and Marx (‘An *a priori* is like the smell of excrement...only that of others offends’), at times these polemics seem to disguise what is only partial critique of the literature and Holstun often stops short of critically engaging with, and building on existing Marxist analyses of this particular era. This is due to the fact that Holstun has set himself too great a task in taking on all the opponents that he does. As a result, certain fundamental claims presented by revisionists and historicists go un-criticized. For example, the revisionist argument that alternate claims to tradition merely represented tensions within a body of shared beliefs needs to be subjected to greater criticism. It can be shown that these conflicting claims of tradition were not merely ‘tensions’, in fact, they represented antagonistic notions of precisely what the traditional social relations of England were. In order to understand this, an analysis of the Levellers and the Diggers needs to be understood in relation to the antagonistic developments of the common law and customary right. To do this, we need to understand how, in a context of agrarian capitalism, powerful agents elevated the former over the latter, effectively eliminating the customary rights of small producers and peasants in favour of the exclusivity of absolute rights of property.

This leads to the second problem with the book. While Holstun gives due credit to the British Marxist Historians as well as Marxist scholars like Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood, his chapter on political Marxism and the transition from feudalism to capitalism remains somewhat external to the rest of the book. It doesn't factor at all in his analysis of the Levellers, and while it does enter into his discussion of the Diggers, it doesn't seem to move our understanding of the latter beyond conventional Marxist interpretations of Winstanley and the Diggers. Holstun seems more intent on defending figures like Winstanley from revisionist and historicist forces than he is in articulating how his analysis of the Diggers not only refutes these revisionist and historicist claims, but moves beyond the limitations of traditional Marxist interpretations. As a result, his chapter on the Diggers reads more like a vindication of Christopher Hill than it does a re-invigorated Marxist analysis of the Digger movement.

Having said all this, Holstun's book is an important one. In an intellectual climate where historians are being scolded for adhering to outdated notions such as causation or social determination and are being told that they must learn from the sophisticated techniques of literary studies, Holstun—himself a member of literary studies—is saying the exact opposite: it is time for those in literary studies to engage with the inconvenient complexities of history. *Ehud's Dagger* not only provides some valuable insights into the radical politics of early modern England, but also lays the foundation for the kind of work that needs to be done in this area. It is time, however, for Marxists to cease merely defending themselves from external critiques, and engage

more critically with the work of other Marxist scholars in an attempt to move our understanding of this period forward.