

‘A person to be truly admired for nothing but apostasy and ambition and exceeding Tiberius in dissimulation’ [Slingsby Bethal 1668].

Given that in 2002, Cromwell was voted the third greatest Briton of all time, how do you explain the contempt shown him by some of his contemporaries?

Cromwell’s reputation has evolved significantly over time because of changing socio-political values. The idea that there was a natural, desirable socio-political order was a common one in the mid-17th Century. Cromwell came to be seen as the antithesis of this. Two other factors partly explain contempt towards Cromwell – namely Cromwell’s reaction to the structural problems of the regime and false causal responsibility retrospectively given to him. However, although both are important, contributing to a multicausal web of factors, both are insufficient to describe both why contemporaries felt contempt for Cromwell and why most don’t today.

Firstly, a change in socio-political values over the past 350 years provide the best explanation from the shift from a contemptuous to a largely respectful attitude towards Cromwell. In the mid-17th Century, ideas of the value of social order and the value of human equality were vastly different to what they are today. Cromwell’s destruction of the old order followed by what many considered a usurpation of its institutions represented something deeply disturbing to many. This ‘destruction of the old order’ needs to be clearly defined – it was the disregard for previously central constitutional norms and constraints. These include his role in execution of the King, his role in facilitating the dominance of the army at the expense of parliament and his promotion of religious ‘Independency’ at the expense of more moderate Protestantism. There is considerable amounts of convincing evidence that acts to corroborate this thesis. For one, the regicide was an act that was at best perceived as cruel but necessary¹. There was considerable reluctance by all but the most radical to be associated with the regicide. As Blair Worden points out, most purged parliamentarians chose not to return to the Rump after the regicide – indicating serious political concerns with what had been done². Other evidence also supports this. The only judge who could be convinced to try the King was John Bradshaw, a

¹ Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars*, 1640-60, pp 102-3

² *ibid*

relatively obscure, low-ranking official³. What's more, Cromwell was generally unpopular among most. Cromwell relied on the Army and reluctant, tacit gentry support for his regime⁴. Cromwell routinely filtered out MPs hostile to his agenda and even then, both Protectoral Parliaments pushed to re-establish some form of traditional constitutional order⁵. Only after considerable time did parts of the traditional political order pragmatically re-establish tentative links with Cromwell's regime – and usually only to control it⁶. Upon the return of Charles II, the sense that Cromwell was responsible for the deeply undesirable destruction of the traditional, natural socio-political order would be a point of unity – and translate into a 'contempt' of Cromwell. Most notably, the physical execution of Cromwell's dead body at Tyburn represented this consensus⁷. This was an attempt to solidify his reputation among the post-restoration order as a man who represented the worst of the 1640-60 period⁸. The idea that his chief evil was overturning the natural political order is illustrated by the fact that he was executed with others responsible for inverting the existing order – namely Pride, responsible for purging parliament, as well as Bradshaw⁹.

In contrast, the overturning of the 'natural order' is far less of a concern for modern Britons. Instead, differing interpretations of the legacy of Cromwell's rule have gained in prominence. The extent to which this is uniformly positive is given false credence by the 2002 BBC poll. The BBC poll suffered from several flaws that mean it is reasonable to question its reliability. For one, a high placement in the poll only indicates that there is a significant number of first preference votes in a vote with self-selection bias – not a general recognition that they were the greatest Briton¹⁰. What's worse, to gain a high position, not that many votes were needed. Due to the large number of potential candidates, Cromwell only received 2.8% of the vote yet was 10th in the poll¹¹. It is clear, therefore, that although there are people who do view see Cromwell as a positive force in history, that this isn't universal. The

³ Jonathon Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell's Head*, pp 123

⁴ Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars 1640-60*, pp 138-40

⁵ Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate*, Chapter 4, Stresses within the Protectorate, June 1655 – June 1657; Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate*, Chapter 2, The first year of the Cromwellian Protectorate

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Jonathon Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell's Head*, pp47-54

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*, pp 33

¹⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/11_november/25/greatbritons_final.shtml

¹¹ <https://www.biographyonline.net/british/greatest-britons2.html>

idea he was a dictator or genocidaire are both relatively popular conceptions of him today¹². Despite this, it is inconceivable to think of Cromwell with quite the same ‘contempt’ as was possible in the mid-17th Century. The idea Cromwell was something peculiarly abhorrent who inverted the natural order is a foreign concept to the 21st Century mind. In this sense, the contempt of many of contemporaries can be explained by his disregard for traditional norms. The fact these qualms make very little sense to us today is precisely the point - in the absence of mid-17th Century contempt, more sympathetic interpretations have been able to gain prominence, such as those found in the 2002 BBC poll.

Secondly, Cromwell’s character has several elements that explain why it is so easy for him to be seen with ‘contempt’. The reason for this is that exercising political power as a leader of post-Civil War England was so hard that compromises needed to be made. Cromwell had to deal with difficult, competing political pressures. He did this very effectively-Cromwell was a savvy political operator-but this often ended up acting to the detriment of his reputation. A good example of how this process in action is the refusal of the Crown by Cromwell in 1657. Here, Cromwell made both competing camps – the Army and conservatives – satisfied, while not making either enthusiastic. Cromwell made encouraging noises to important parliamentarians to show he was not opposed to the offer of the crown. Cromwell did not dissolve parliament when the debate on Kingship arose, despite having been voted funds¹³. What’s more, he did not oppose the title of ‘King’ outright – Cromwell chose to prevaricate, making the offer not seem an outrageous one¹⁴. However, despite these pro-conservative moves, he did refuse the offer of kingship, but did so in a way that did not satisfy the most radical in the military. As a result of this political balancing act, Cromwell transcended the party divisions to become a political actor with a reputation independent of both camps and their respective ideologies. For example, many contend that Cromwell betrayed the ‘Good Old Cause’ and acted in a frustratingly conservative way – especially in the later years of the Protectorate. Similarly, the tacit nature of

¹² Blair Worden, *The English Reputations of Oliver Cromwell*

¹³ Jonathon Fitzgibbons, *Hereditary Succession and the Cromwellian Protectorate: The Offer of the Crown Reconsidered*

¹⁴ David Horspool, *Cromwell*, pp105-6

Cromwell's gentry support meant it was hard to associate him fully with conservatives. This translated into 'contempt' to Cromwell for two reasons. The first was that the considerable frustration by those who accepted the necessity of Cromwell's rule often morphed into 'contempt'. For one, many political radicals were upset with Cromwell's backsliding. The most notable examples of this include John Lilburne and Edmund Ludlow¹⁵. Either Cromwell's ambition or pragmatism betrayed the 'Good Old Cause', making both contemptuous. The second way Cromwell's political strategy translated into 'contempt' is that it is often the case that Cromwell's political manoeuvring looked Machiavellian. Cromwell seemed to be adept at subtle political action and always seemed to be on the winning side of events. Cromwell often delayed his decisions to the last minute. He was skilled in the 'art of not knowing' – for example, by arriving in London the day after Pride's Purge¹⁶. The brush of Machiavellianism worsened 'contempt' towards Cromwell. Primarily, it gave Cromwell a false sense of agency. The sense that Cromwell had control of the events that culminated in the Protectorate made it very easy to feel resentful towards him. It needs to be noted that there is one major limitation to this whole analysis. This is that it overplays the strength of the radicals. Although there was some criticism from the military faction, this criticism was limited in character, and was not as persistent or strong than the real contempt that came from royalists and pro-parliamentary conservatives¹⁷. Radicals like the Levellers constituted a small minority of an already very radical, unrepresentative army. Their significance has been exaggerated by usually left-wing historians who have looked for ideological roots to later movements – and so the contempt given by contemporary radicals to Cromwell has been overexaggerated¹⁸. The best explanation of contempt focuses on mainstream conservative disdain of the person of Cromwell—and why this was such an easy position to maintain. This can only be explained with the shift of societal values from the 17th Century to today.

Finally, Cromwell has had his causal responsibility for the events of 1642-60 exaggerated in a way that has made his legacy multifaceted. The multifaceted nature of his legacy has meant that has been

¹⁵ Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain*, pp 193-4; John Simkin, <https://spartacus-educational.com/STUludlowE.htm>

¹⁶ Blair Worden, *Oliver Cromwell and the Protectorate*

¹⁷ Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate*, pp 51, 160-9

¹⁸ Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain*, pp 198-202

so easy for so many competing interpretations of the man to come to the fore. These attitudes include the mid-17th Century contempt and today's diverse, but broadly respectful attitude. Cromwell was always a politically and militarily important figure during both the Civil War and the years after it. However, he was not the central figure of English politics until 1653. Cromwell has been given primary causal responsibility for events and trends that he could have only contributed to in minor or partial ways¹⁹. For example, there was relatively extensive political pressures from the Army's rank-and-file on the army's leadership to execute the King. Cromwell – if anything - tried to allow events to develop to avoid this cruel necessity²⁰. Similarly, Cromwell did have a presence in the Rump before 1653 – but it was in any way in control. Even when he had formal control, Cromwell often acted with the Protectoral Council or Generals. Many decisions were taken by the army leadership collectively²¹. In the popular imagination, these subtleties are regularly lost. Instead, Cromwell has often had causal responsibility for what happened from 1642-60 foisted onto him. As a result, Cromwell has been made to artificially bear responsibility for things beyond his control. This has meant two things – both of which have facilitated anti-Cromwell 'contempt' in the mid-17th Century as well as later allowing his reputation to evolve. The first is that he is perceived as responsible for the destruction of the natural, hierarchical king-and-parliament-led political order – even though this is not the whole truth. The Army and religious radicals often forced Cromwell's hand – yet this is not baked into most mid-17th Century popular interpretations of him. This allowed contemporaries think contemptuously of Cromwell for undoing something so sacrosanct. The second important thing is that Cromwell's legacy has become multifaceted. He is held as responsible for many, often contradictory, changes. For example, he has been seen as a dictator, a working-class hero, regicide, genocidaire, democratic reformer and religious radical by various commentators²². Many of these interpretations are part-true, but it is undoubtedly the case that his role has been exaggerated in most of these popular interpretations. Being seen as responsible for so many differing trends explains why attitudes have shifted away from mid-1600s-style contempt. It also explains why today there is a multiplicity of

¹⁹ David Horspool, *Cromwell*, pp 32, 79-82; Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate*, pp29

²⁰ Christoher Hill, *God's Englishman*, pp79-80; Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars*, pp 100

²¹ Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate*, pp 29-30

²² Jonathon Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell's Head*; Blair Worden, *The English Reputations of Oliver Cromwell*

varied, often contradictory interpretations of Cromwell. One qualification must be made here.

Although this argument is predominantly correct, it ultimately is secondary. This argument shows why Cromwell reputation has been a magnet for strong opinions – but not why some were common at certain historical moments. Only with changing ideas of what we value as a society can we understand why it was common to feel contempt towards Cromwell in the 17th Century, and why most do not do so today.

In conclusion, the best explanation for ‘contempt’ towards Cromwell by contemporaries given today’s relatively respectful but diverse opinions of him is a shift in societal values. Although Cromwell’s reputation has elements that make it more susceptible to strong opinions, they only really describe why Cromwell’s reputation has garnered such strong opinions – and cannot describe why Cromwell was interpreted in certain ways at different historical moments. Fundamentally, attitudes towards hierarchy, order and religion in the mid-17th Century clash with what Cromwell was perceived to have done in a messy, antagonistic way. In microcosm, the shift in Cromwell’s reputation epitomises a more general, interesting shift in socio-political values—with hierarchy losing ground to human equality.

WORDS - 1999

Bibliography – Books and Articles

Coward, Barry, *Oliver Cromwell*, 1991, Longman Group UK Limited

Coward, Barry, *The Cromwellian Protectorate*, 2002, Manchester University Press

Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain*, 2010, Abacus

Fitzgibbons, Jonathon, *Cromwell’s Head*, 2008, The National Archives

Fitzgibbons, Jonathon, *Hereditary Succession and the Cromwellian Protectorate: The Offer of the Crown Reconsidered*, 2013, Oxford University Press

Hill, Christopher, *God’s Englishman*, 2019, Penguin

Hill, Christopher, *The Century of Revolution*, 2002, Routledge

Horspool, David, *Cromwell*, 2018, Penguin Books

Hutton, Ronald, *The British Republic, 1649-1660*, 1990, Macmillan Press Ltd

Hutton, Ronald, *Review of Oliver Cromwell: New Perspectives* - <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/746>, accessed 9th August 2020, online

Kishlansky, Mark, *A Monarchy Transformed, Britain 1603-1714*, 1997, Penguin Books
Lamont, William (ed.), *Historical Controversies and Historians*, 1998, UCL Press

Little, Patrick (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell: New Perspectives*, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan

Morrill, John, *Textualizing and Contextualising Cromwell*, 2009, Cambridge University Press

O Siochru, Michael, *God's Executioner, Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland*, 2008, Faber and Faber Ltd

Roots, Ivan (ed.), *Cromwell, A Profile*, 1973, Macmillan Press Ltd

Simkin, John, <https://spartacus-educational.com/STUludlowE.htm>, accessed 9th August 2020, online

Worden, Blair *The English Civil Wars*, 2009, Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Author not specified:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/11_november/25/greatbritons_fi_nal.shtml, accessed 8th August 2020, online, BBC.co.uk

<https://www.biographyonline.net/british/greatest-britons2.html>, accessed 8th August 2020, online, biographyonline.net