Our Democratic Roots: Seventeenth-Century English Revolutions
Reflection for FUUSM
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Earlier this summer, my family traveled to Boston to visit my sister-in-law, the kids' Aunt Connie. Although I was determined that my children learn some of our nation's history on the trip, I thought I had a pretty balanced plan: time learning about the Battle of Concord, followed by swimming in Walden Pond; Paul Revere's house, but also the American Girl Doll store; a couple of hours on the Freedom Trail, then a couple of hours at Legoland. To my amazement, the kids actually really liked the historical sites. Boston museums have done a great job making fun activities—like scavenger hunts and badges that let you pretend to be a particular person in the revolution—to help bring history alive to children—and adults!

Most of the sites we saw were associated with the American Revolution, which my children knew almost nothing about, so I saw this as a perfect learning opportunity, and boy did they soak it up. Being a British historian touring American revolutionary museums has its pitfalls, though. I'm sure I annoyed more people than just my children with constant reminders that "the taxes weren't actually high! much lower than they were in Britain!" "the tea was actually cheaper than it had been!" and "remember that the British king was not a tyrant but constrained by Parliament!" Since these facts rarely influence the college students I teach, I suppose I don't anticipate that they had much lasting affect on my kids as they stared at the map depicting that great historic act of domestic terrorism: the Boston Tea Party. (My youngest was most excited that the tea was dumped off of "Griffin's Wharf.")

Nevertheless, all my points were directed at something very important that we Americans shouldn't forget: When Americans rebelled in the 1770s, they were following in their own English traditions. When Thomas Jefferson wrote "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," he was blatantly plagiarizing British political theorist John Locke who wrote in anticipation of another revolution: The Glorious Revolution of 1688-89, in which the English deposed one ruler in favor of another (a revolution that was loudly cheered by the North American colonists).

But this was not the first of the English revolutions. England has a long tradition of upheaval in its government, but the most important of these for setting a lasting tradition was the English Civil War of the 1640s. Responding to a state church that appeared too Catholic, promoted religious unity, and persecuted religious dissenters, and also in response to (naturally) what some construed as unfair taxation without proper validation by Parliament (in other words, no taxation without representation!), some members of Parliament (many of them Puritans) went to war against their king and won. During the tumult, as Parliament and the victorious Army gained control of the government, the English were left with burning questions: Who should rule? Under what authority did anyone rule? Who should participate in government to assure both liberty and security?

Moments in history such as these create a fascinating cauldron of imagined futures. This was a time of dynamism: How far would it go?

From the late 1640s through the 1650s, almost anything seemed possible. With the king captured, Parliamentarians began to consider what their government ought to look like. England had a long tradition of parliamentary rule, but it was usually conceived as the rule of king-in-parliament: well, they no longer trusted the king, and weren't even sure they needed such a person anymore. During a session called the Putney Debates in 1647, leaders of the army and representatives of the army's rank and file met together to discuss what should come next. Interestingly, over the course of the 5-year war (to that point) the army had been radicalized. One of the forces of their radicalization was a man named John Lilburne, also known as Freeborn John, a radically democratic pamphleteer who was in and out of prison throughout his adult life for promoting the principle of equality as well as the importance of religious freedom. He and those who agreed with him came to be known as the Levellers. Their goals were for "liberty for tender consciences"—in other words, religious pluralism—and for every adult male to have a parliamentary vote, regardless of property—a very radical idea for the time. They wanted to level society to create a truly democratic system.

Lilburne is one of my favorite historical "types": a radical with a big mouth. On one occasion, after he'd endured hundreds of lashes for his seditious writings and then was placed in the pillory, he also had to be gagged because, even then, he *kept talking*. His views so influenced the parliamentary army that leaders like Oliver Cromwell nearly lost control of their revolution (in fact, the king was counting on this). In the 1647 Putney Debates, the radical army presented what they called "The Agreement of the People." Anger at the army's leadership, and failure to pay the soldiers, led them to demand their place at the table. The agreement argued that the power of a parliament elected equally by all men was "inferior only to theirs who choose them," and:

- "That matters of religion, and the ways of God's worship, are not at all entrusted to us by any human power" (because to presume to know the mind of God was sinful)
- "That in all laws made, or to be made, every person may be bound alike, and that no tenure, estate, charter, degree, birth or place, do confer any exemption from the ordinary course of legal proceedings whereunto others are subjected." (equality under the law)
- "That as the laws ought to be equal, so they must be good, and not evidently destructive to the safety and well-being of the people."
- "These things we declare to be our *native rights* . . . ."

At the debates, as the more conservative, property-owning army officers marveled in bemused horror at the egalitarianism of their men, Levellers like Major Thomas Rainsborough argued that

> "the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under . . . ."

Property owners responded as they have always done to such claims: If the poor, who so out-number the propertied, were to vote, they would immediately redistribute property and create anarchy. Rainsborough countered by asking what the soldiers had been fighting for, if not their own rights? He said that "this is the old law of England and that which *enslaves* the people of England that they should be bound by laws in which they have no voice at all!" Another radical, Sir Henry Wildman, also emphasized the theme of the people's enslavement:

> "Our case is to be considered thus, that we have been under slavery. That's acknowledged by all. Our very laws were made by our conquerors . . . . We are now engaged for our freedom. That's the end of Parliaments: not to constitute what is already [established but to act] according to the just rules of government. Every person in England hath as clear a right to elect his representative as the greatest person in England. I conceive that's the undeniable maxim of government: that all government is in the free consent of the people."

Although the Levellers weren't quite radical enough to admit women to the electorate, women joined the Leveller movement, too, and engaged in radical religious preaching during this time. Lilburne's wife Elizabeth smuggled him pens and papers while he was in prison so that he could keep writing, then smuggled the papers out to Lilburne's publisher. She, Katherine Chidley, Mary Overton and some 10,000 other women joined together to petition the government for the release of several Levellers who'd been imprisoned, on the grounds that "we are assured of our creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ equal unto men, as also of a proportional share in the *freedoms of this commonwealth*." For them, their equality in the eyes of God was matched by the liberties they expected from their government, whether they were women or not. When one member of Parliament suggested "it was not for women to petition; they might stay home and wash their dishes," one of the petitioners said (referencing the on-going Civil War), "Sir, we have scarce any dishes left us to wash, and those we have not sure to keep." Elizabeth Lilburne asked, "Have we not an equal interest with the men of this nation in those liberties and securities contained in the Petition of Right and other good laws of the land? Are any of our lives, limbs, liberties, or goods to be taken from us more than from men, but by due process of law and conviction of twelve sworn men of the neighborhood?"

And if you think you're hearing class antagonism in the Levellers' arguments, you are indeed. Although the Levellers focused on legal equality regardless of rank, station, or wealth, another group called the True Levellers advocated more directly for economic equality. Sometimes called the "Diggers" after their slogan "come dig with us on St. George's Hill," the True Levellers sought to create a communistic society in which everyone shared equally in both work and profit. [The digging referred to communal farming.] The Diggers saw the cause of economic equality as deeply Christian—the meek shall inherit the earth, after all.

The Levellers and the True Levellers are only two of the many radical groups that clamored to make their voices heard in the relatively free atmosphere of the Civil War and the period of Oliver Cromwell that followed. Although the Puritans get a bad rap for their repression, there was actually more religious tolerance, and less censorship, under

Cromwell's rule than there had been before. Religious and political sects abounded. This is when the Quakers originated, as well as the Seekers, the Ranters, the Fifth Monarchy Men, the Muggletonians, anti-Trinitarians (Socinians, that's us!), Anabaptists, Adamites (nudists), Familists . . . and so on. Contemporaries complained that the world had been turned upside down. And England struggled for more than a decade without a king, under the martial law of the Protectorate. The Levellers had not been able to persuade army officers like Cromwell to take greater steps toward democratic rule.

To some, like political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the pluralism of this era—and its inverting of social order—amounted to anarchy, producing such instability that it was to be avoided again at all costs, even through what Hobbes envisioned as a sort of contractual absolutism (we agree to be ruled and know that we have no right to rebellion). After Cromwell's death, the English did indeed reinstate the Anglican state religion, and they welcomed back a king in 1660: the son of the king they'd beheaded in the Civil War. And so we might think of these groups, like the Levellers, as some of the losers of history. The revolution, as it turned out, did not end up going very far. The world had been turned around again to (almost) the way it was.

But that "almost" was very important. When the next king to come along did not abide by the laws of the land and seemed poised in 1688 to raise an army to suppress Parliamentary power, the English had a tradition of rebellion on which to build. They decided to follow not Hobbes—who said that in the interest of security there was no right to rebellion—but physician and political philosopher John Locke who argued that a social contract based on *reason*—and the desire to protect natural rights like life, liberty and property—such a contract could be broken when men of reason saw these rights trampled upon by their government. This theory justified what the English have called since "The Glorious Revolution," or "The Bloodless Revolution," in which one ruler was replaced by another through the will of the people. England would not truly be democratic in Leveller terms until the end of the 19th century; then, women were not added to the electorate until 1920; and we must not forget that Britain's colonials, while they were sometimes accorded domestic rule, had no votes for the British Parliament.

So when the British North American colonists hollered for equality before the law and no taxation without representation in 1776, and when they imagined a state built on the assumption that "all men are created equal . . . endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," and that they might change out rulers who violated those rights, they were doing something very English—and in fact, putting forth the agenda of the Levellers 125 years before.

Even a conservative politician like Edmund Burke, who was famous for decrying the French Revolution as run by a rabid, bloodthirsty mob of rabble, even he suggested to the English Parliament 15 years earlier that the American colonists were just being good Englishmen with their revolution, and that, as Englishmen, they ought to have a voice in the imperial government. British colonial history would later prove that such rights were easier to see in white men than in women or people of color. And we know very well that our own country has failed since its beginnings, even in our constitution itself, to live up to such high ideals as those Lilburne, Locke, and Jefferson laid out.

But the United States—this great, Enlightenment, democratic experiment—has with tremendous effort and determination by its radical people been able to expand the electorate and that pool of people who deserve equality and voice in our society—not

only to the property-less, people of color, and women, but also to young people, to immigrants, to people of variety of gender and sexual orientations, regardless of religion. This inclusivity has created pluralism—an incredible amount of diversity—that Americans take to be the foundation of our civil society: *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one). We are united by our ideals of democracy, freedom of speech and religion, and equality under the law. It's not always easy to be united by abstractions such as these, and we have never done all we could to follow our own core principles. Yet, as a general rule, we Americans would rather be hypocrites than cynics. We're still aiming for our high-minded ideals. Our roots go deep, but the tree of liberty is still growing both out and up. One of the things I'm most proud of when watching the Olympics as an American is that you can never tell who the Americans are just by looking at them: we look like anyone and everyone. We're doing something right.

When my childhood neighbor found out I'm now a historian, he said to me that he thought all historians must be conservatives. My response, as you all can probably now anticipate, was, "There were lots of radicals in history. Thomas Jefferson was not a conservative." These radicals didn't build a world out of whole-cloth but in pieces, over long stretches of time. Ideas that seem too radical for their day may have to wait to win out, but we're living in a world that John and Elizabeth Lilburne would have recognized from their greatest imaginings. These radicals are our roots who ground and nourish us; our job today is to keep our many branches reaching toward the sky.