'Innovation' and revolution in seventeenth-century England

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Accepted Version

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Thomas Hobbes famously put the blame for the English revolution of the 1640s and 1650s partly on MPs who had been overly influenced by their reading of 'the bookes written by famous men of the ancient Graecian and Roman Commonwealths concerning their Policy and great actions' and hence had fallen 'in loue with their [popular or republican] formes of gouernment' (Hobbes 2010, 110). Hobbes's depiction of an ideological and one-sided classicising of politics as a driver of the English revolution was itself very partisan and provocative, and historians have been sceptical about how extensively or deeply contemporaries classicised the crisis of the mid-seventeenth century. Scholars of republicanism have given the greatest significance to classicising language in this period, identifying 'classical republicanism' as one crucial intellectual and cultural component of the revolution as it developed into the 1650s, but not necessarily (there is debate on this point) as an antecedent of the revolution (Pocock 1975; Peltonen 1997; Skinner 2002; Worden 2002). Certainly when the only republic in English history was established after the execution of Charles I in 1649, its advocates turned to classical texts and examples to justify it; and certainly those classical texts and examples had been the mainstay of grammar-school and university education (Peltonen 2013). But the ways in which texts were read (e.g. by commonplacing for moral exempla), and the political culture within which they were read, might well mean that rather than strenuous arguments for republicanism, the elements of classical culture which were actually pervasive in early modern England

were fairly trite and moralising sentiments about public duty which were easily reconciled with monarchical rule (see Cust 2007 for a suggestive example; Sommerville 2007; Cox Jensen 2012). In this chapter I see the classicising impulse as both pervasive and pointed, bipartisan and polarising. This chapter examines the classicising of crisis itself – the classicising of the very idea of regime change or revolution – by tracing the classicising concept of *novae res* or 'innovation' which was a common trope in the understanding of politics in early modern England. This was not initially a classicising impulse evoked by an actual, revolutionary crisis; it was commonplace at least from the start of the century. Indeed, the tropes surrounding 'innovation' often suggested that the classics provided an ever-relevant guide to human nature and political morality, and evoked a comfortably timeless view of political life in which the threat from ambitious 'innovators' would constantly recur but also constantly be averted. This recourse to the classics thus served to warn but also to reassure. However, as we will see, classicising (Aristotelian) arguments about the dangers of 'innovation' also began to be deployed in ways that pointed to possibly irreversible revolutionary changes, and which may indeed have contributed to the polarisation which enabled the revolution.

Discussion of 'innovation' prior to the civil war matters, because scholars have not always seen early Stuart people as inhabiting a conceptual world which had a place for notions of revolution. Even once the revolutionary events of the 1640s broke out, contemporaries were likely to call the events they lived through a 'rebellion', a 'civil war' or a period of 'troubles', and there has been an episodic scholarly debate about whether they ever called them a 'revolution' and what they meant by that if they did. Under Italian influence, 'revolution' did become a political term, and sometimes

managed to shake off its astronomical connotations of circularity; it is possible to find examples of 'revolution' denoting unidirectional political change, perhaps achieved with a degree of violence, from the later 1640s onwards (Snow 1962; Hill 1986; Rachum 1995; Harris 2000; Cressy 2006, 17-24). This scholarship has undoubtedly shown that revolution in something like our sense of the word was (or became) thinkable in this period, but in showing the impact of the mid-century events on the usage of the term it might be in danger of suggesting that this was not the case before the 1640s. Once we abandon the assumption that the early modern term for revolution must have been 'revolution', we can see that there was actually a rich set of discourses and assumptions about revolution in the pre-war period, focused on the widely-used term 'innovation'. The historiography addressing the *term* 'revolution' is thus very incomplete as a discussion of early modern *conceptions* of revolution. This chapter will suggest that while both inchoate sides repudiated rather than embracing revolutionary 'innovation', their capacity to imagine it nonetheless promoted the mutually defensive polarisation which led to war.

Recent debate has shifted away from overt attention to the causes of the civil war. From the 1940s, a shifting coalition of liberal 'whiggish' and socialist or Marxist historians had aimed, ultimately with limited success, to pin down the economic and social preconditions for something like a 'bourgeois revolution' in pre-civil-war England (for discussions of these debates and the revisionist reaction see Gurney 2015; Richardson 1998; Hutton 2004; MacLachlan, 1996). The vehement rejection of such interpretations by revisionist historians from the 1970s onwards often brought with it a rejection of the label 'revolution' for the mid-century crisis, and a concomitant assertion that mindsets in the pre-war period were profoundly 'unrevolutionary'. The

English 'revolution' has now re-emerged from the revisionist attack, not as an exemplar of any socio-economic structural model of the causes and consequences of revolution, but as a recognisably revolutionary set of *processes* in social, political, and cultural terms (Peacey 2013; Como 2018). These processes - the mobilisation of the public, polarisation, and radicalisation both in politics and religion - accelerated rapidly under the pressure of the crisis. Revolutionary aims emerged largely as a *result* of the developing crisis. I suggest that the conceptions of revolution present before the civil war did, as revisionists might have expected, serve to inculcate a reflexively antirevolutionary mindset. Nonetheless, these pervasive conceptions of revolution also primed people to detect and denounce the warning signs of revolutionary intent, fostering precisely the defensive activism and increasing polarisation which we now see as driving the incipient revolution.

'Innovation' could mean something like regime change or revolution because it often acted as a translation or English analogue of the Latin phrase *novae res* (literally 'new things') as the Oxford English Dictionary confirms. Modern dictionaries of classical Latin translate 'novae res' or 'res novae' as 'political innovations', 'constitutional changes', and 'revolution'. 'Innovation' might also, as we will see, translate Aristotle's terminology of revolution or regime change. But 'innovation' was far from a neutral term for regime change, because it had inherited the very consistent and striking pejorative connotations of the Latin *novae res.* Benoît Godin, examining the evolution of the broader concept of innovation rather than the connection with *novae res*, has argued that a 'prohibition episteme' effectively banning innovation applied from the Reformation to the nineteenth century (Godin 2015, 8). Here I argue that the pejorative quality of 'innovation' was often derived from its specifically

classical revolutionary connotations, but was reinforced by this cultural rejection of innovation in a broader sense. The implications of this are far-reaching, because 'innovation' was one of the keywords of early Stuart political discourse.

This chapter will first outline the remarkably consistent Roman usage of *novae res*, and then show that this strongly pejorative Roman discourse conditioned early modern conceptions of revolutionary 'innovation', making it almost impossible to imagine a revolution actually succeeding. An analysis of the translation of *novae res* into English demonstrates that 'innovation' is one of a cluster of terms which could be used to denote revolutionary change in English, including, by the later seventeenth century, 'revolution' itself. The following section analyses the significance of this revolutionary sense of 'innovation', a pervasive term in early seventeenth-century religious and political debate, for our understanding of political culture in the years before the civil war. Revolutions were not beyond the bounds of early Stuart imaginations, but the desire for 'innovation' was always attributed to ambitious or turbulent opponents, whose ambitions were likely to be thwarted. However, the range of meanings of 'innovation' in early modern English, combined with Aristotle's warnings about the origins of revolutions, meant that anxieties about religious change could be – and were – quickly converted into accusations of revolutionary intent, whose implications spilled over into politics too with implied charges of democratic or absolutist ambitions. Aristotle's analysis also made it easy to accuse rulers, as well as the ruled, of revolutionary innovation, meaning that mutual accusations sprang up which started to drive a dangerous process of political polarisation. Tracing the usage of this apparently conservative, pejorative notion of 'innovation' thus takes us much further into the genesis of the English revolution than we might expect.

I: *Novae res* in Latin literature

Novae res occurs in classical Latin in very particular contexts. Firstly, the political change or revolution the phrase denoted was almost always in the future. *Novae res* were the stuff of plans or activities – seditious or subversive plans against the established authorities – and were hardly ever described as actually being achieved. These *novae res* were often feared by the authorities and fomented by dissatisfied people, whether subjects of Roman imperial rule in more distant provinces or Romans marginalised by poverty or political circumstance. Texts reported fears that the material for *novae res* might be dangerously available, whether that material consisted of dissatisfied soldiers or civilians, or supplies of arms (Tacitus, *Histories* 1.6; Ammianus Marcellinus, 20.9.9; Suetonius, *Julius* 35.1). Such material could be particularly dangerous in the presence of an ambitious or discontented eminent individual, or under particular social, economic, or political conditions. Sallust engaged in this kind of sociological analysis of revolution, noting that when Manlius was stirring up the *plebs* in Etruria, they were particularly ripe for revolt because of poverty arising from the domination of Sulla (*Bellum Catilinae* 28.4). Often, however, the analysis was explicitly timeless in its attribution of the desire for *novae res* to the lower levels of the population. It was simply in the nature of the 'plebs' or 'volgus' to desire 'novae res':

> Nam volgus, uti plerumque solet et maxume Numidarum, ingenio mobili, seditiosum atque discordiosum erat, cupidum novarum rerum, quieti et otio advorsum.

The common throng, as usual—and especially so in the case of the

Numidians—was of a fickle disposition, prone to rebellion and disorder, fond of

revolution and opposed to peace and quiet. (Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 66.2)

In the *Bellum Catilinae*, Sallust similarly noted that 'omnino cuncta

plebes novarum rerum studio Catilinae incepta probabat' – 'the whole body of the

commons out of eagerness for change ['novae res'] approved Catiline's undertakings',

and elaborated that this was simply 'more suo' – 'according to their usual custom',

because the urban poor will always envy their betters ('bonis') and long to overthrow

the status quo (Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 37.1). Tacitus similarly generalised (about the

'populus' rather than the 'plebs'): 'populo, ut est novarum rerum cupiens pavidusque' –

'the populace, allured and terrified as always by revolution' (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.46).

'More suo', 'ut est', 'uti plerumque solet' – Sallust and Tacitus both naturalised or

generalised the restless or revolutionary tendency of the people or the commons. In

Livy we see the same social judgement on those who seek *novae res*, although

expressed with less explicit social determinism: those who fled to the sanctuary newly

founded by Romulus were a 'turba... sine discrimine liber an servus esset,

avida novarum rerum' - 'a miscellaneous rabble, without distinction of bond or free,

eager for new conditions' (Livy 1.8.6). Of course, this popular desire for change or

revolution reflected the virtually proverbial fickleness of the 'mobile vulgus' (the fickle

crowd); almost by definition 'levissimus quisque' ('the most light headed persons')

sought 'novas res' (Livy 24.1.7; Livy 1600, 509). This sense that the desire for 'novae res'

was not just a matter of political and economic circumstances, but of moral character

too, is reinforced by the fact that keenness for novae res was frequently also depicted

xenophobically as a national or ethnic characteristic. Like Sallust on the Numidians,

Livy attributed a native desire for revolution to Spaniards: 'ipsorum Hispanorum inquieta avidaque in novas res sunt ingenia' – translated colourfully by Philemon Holland in 1600 as 'the naturall disposition of all Spaniards, unconstant, busie, and evermore desirous of novelties and alterations' (Livy 22.21.2; Livy 1600, 444). Foreigners – particularly those responding restlessly to Roman rule – thus joined the mass of the Roman people in being seen as prone to and excitable to revolution.

Novae res were consistently associated with strong emotion. The descriptions we have already encountered of people as 'avidus' or 'cupidus' or 'cupiens', driven by intense desire, show that it was dangerously strong or uncontrolled emotion which drove people towards *novae res*. Individuals who sought revolutionary change for their own purposes might mobilise and manipulate this ready emotion in the wider population (e.g. Caesar, *Gallic War* 3.10; Tacitus, *Histories,* 1.5, 1.6; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 28.4). Such tropes drew on the familiar figure of the Greek demagogue and his mutually opportunistic relationship with the people, flagged up in Aristotle's descriptions of regime and constitutional change (Aristotle, *Politics* 1304b 21- 1305b 39).

While in the Roman literature people were constantly motivated by desire for, or occasionally fear of, this kind of regime change or revolution, *novae res* hardly ever seemed to actually happen. *Novae res* were glimpsed only at a certain moment in the potential unfolding of a revolution, and the term may have led readers to expect the ultimate defeat of the attempted revolution. Here a gap opens up between Roman and Greek treatments of revolution: Aristotle, Plato, and Polybius had discussed the occurrence of revolutions, and Aristotle was strikingly matter-of-fact about the factors which brought them about. In contrast, Roman discussions of *novae res* tended to be

pejorative, and to stand apart from discussion of actual changes of regime; such

changes seem to have been glossed not as examples of *novae res* but as 'mutatio rerum',

'commutatio rei publicae', 'conversiones rerum publicarum' and so on (Hatto 1949, 500-

1). *Novae res* tended to exist only within turbulent people's minds, and to the authors

who used the term they were nightmarish but unrealised visions.

II: *Novae res* in early modern texts and translations

Early modern texts, whether Latin works, translations of Latin works, or English texts,

reproduced the assumptions of classical authors about the sociological and moral

aspects of *novae res* remarkably faithfully. Francesco Patrizi, for example, attributed

the tendency of inferiors to seek *novae res* rather than submit to the rule of their

superiors simply to human (as opposed to animal) nature. (Patrizi 1608, 12; Patrizi

1576, 2). The classical understanding of *novae res* as the object of misguided

individuals' desires can be seen in the context of the English civil war and republic,

when a royalist controversialist, attacking John Milton's Latin defence of the regicide,

tried to discredit Milton by saying (rather inaccurately) that he had been thrown out

of Cambridge and gone off to the continent, only to return when he sensed the

stirrings of the civil war, 'rebellione ingruente spe rerum novarum in Angliam

revocatum' ('called back to England by the hope of *novae res* when the rebellion was

impending') ([Du Moulin?], 1652, 10). Milton was painted as a turbulent, emotional

youth, who came back to England because he was spoiling for trouble.

Before we look at the cultural translation of this strongly characterised concept

of revolution into seventeenth-century English discourse, we need to pin down the

English terminology used to translate the phrase *novae res*. From the sixteenth century onwards, 'innovation' was sometimes, very clearly, the translation for 'novae res' in the technical sense of political revolution. The 1591 translation of Tacitus' *Histories* translated 'pronus ad novas res' as 'prone to innouation', and 'ingens novis rebus materia' as 'matter enough for innouation' (Tacitus 1591, 3-4). However, 'innovation' was not universally used as a translation for *novae res*, and translators who clearly fully understood the revolutionary meaning of *novae res* used a variety of English terms to translate it. Philemon Holland translated 'novas res' in Livy as 'a change and alteration' or 'novelties and alterations' (Livy 1600, 422, 444). Sallust's many early modern translators show us the wide range of English terms which translated the concept of political change or revolution denoted by *novae res*. There was no discernible chronological progression in the use of 'innovation' as against other terms: it was the 1629 translation, in the middle of the chronological range, which used 'innovation' most consistently to translate 'novae res' (Sallust 1629). The earliest translation, from 1522, charmingly expanded 'novarum rerum avidum' into 'newfangled and moche desyrous of newe besynesse & newelties' (Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 46.3; Sallust 1522, xxxvii verso). In later translations too, although not always with quite this level of repetitive variegation, newness or novelty, rather than specifically 'innovation', might be the keynotes struck in translating 'novae res': while in 1629 the same phrase was (characteristically for that version) translated 'desirous of innouation', in 1609 it was 'enclined to Nouelty', and the unrelated 1692 translation similarly rendered it as 'inclin'd to Novelty' (Sallust 1629, 362; Sallust 1609, 45; Sallust 1692, 179). However, the potential for 'novae res' and its English translations to be drawn into a broader group of politically-loaded English terms is revealed in the translation of 'novarum rerum

studium' (Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 57.1) as 'the desire of *Reformation*' (Sallust 1683, 83) and 'desire of new revolutions' (Sallust 1692, 89). Again, in 1692 the translator expanded 'novis rebus studere' into 'went about to raise disturbances in the City, and sollicited the People to revolt' (Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 77.1; Sallust 1692, 229). Sallust's 'novae res' could thus be 'innovation' or 'novelty' but could also be 'reformation', 'revolutions', or 'revolt'. All of this suggests both that the connotations of 'novae res' in Latin literature might cling to a far broader range of terms than just 'innovation' in early modern English, and demonstrates that scholarly discussion of the semantic field around 'revolution' and rebellion at the time of the English civil war needs to be expanded to include 'innovation' and 'novelty', if we are to capture the full range of terminology employed. In the remainder of this essay, however, I will focus specifically on the usage of 'innovation' in political contexts in seventeenth-century English, as it is a ubiquitous keyword in seventeenth-century political discourse.

Early modern authors followed their Roman predecessors in their characterisation of 'innovation'. As in Latin, instances where it was suggested that 'innovation' (in the sense of revolution) had actually happened were vanishingly rare, although Philemon Holland, translating Florus, did say that Sulla 'altered the state, & in that innovation established it' (Livy 1600, 1252). Early modern 'innovation', like classical *novae res*, was almost always desired rather than achieved. Thus the essayist Robert Johnson regarded the Romans, corrupted by their own success, as 'desirous of ciuil tumults, … ready to catch at any occasion of Innouation' (Johnson 1601, 23). Innovation certainly connoted sedition and attempts to undermine the government: a proclamation by Elizabeth I described critics of her religious policy as 'some other natures (apt to innouation and affected much to their owne opinions)' who were

producing 'factious inuectiues in print, against our present gouernement': here aptness to innovation was seen as a problematic character trait, much as in the classical texts (Elizabeth I, 1602). The 1600 episcopal visitation of Chichester was on the look-out for any clergyman who 'preacheth any Doctrine of innouation, to with-draw the people from theyr due obedience': an example of the political fears which clung to the church (of which more below), but also an example of the potential for one malign individual to incite others to innovation (Watson, 1600, article 42). Innovation often arose from personal ambition. As the essayist William Cornwallis idiosyncratically explained, 'neither is there any thing so fast drawing to innouatio[n] as ambitions [*sic*], it being innouations minority, like a pumple [i.e. pimple] the childes age of a sore.' (Cornwallis 1600, Essay 46, sigs Ii3 and verso).

Unsurprisingly, the association of 'innovation' with pejorative views of the nature of the populace was as common in the early modern period as it was in ancient Rome. As we have already seen with Patrizi, these views were a Roman inheritance found in Italian texts as well as English ones, and sometimes reinforced by translations from Italian. Thus Girolamo Conestaggio's work on Portuguese history, translated in 1600, explained particular events by reference to 'the people desirous of innouation' and suggested that in France there were large numbers of people 'desirous of innouation' (Conestaggio 1600, 160; 267). The stereotypical view of the constituency who were thought to thirst for *novae res* is perfectly captured in a more fully English source which dismisses 'The Hydra headed multitude, that only gape for innovation' (Webster [and Heywood] (1654), written c. 1627, 57). As in the classical sources, the readiness of the poor or the many to be stirred up into revolution meant that ambitious individuals could play on this aptness. Indeed, according to one source,

sedition depended on the '*mutinous disposition,* of certaine *Captaines,* or *ring leaders* of the *people,* for albeit the *multitude* is apt to *innovation,* it doth ill stand firme untill some *first mover* taketh the *matter* in hand' (Roberts 1640, pp. 51-2). This meant that 'innovation', one keyword of early Stuart political discourse, was often found in close association with another such keyword, 'popularity'. Another Italian work translated into English provides a neat example: it explained that 'war makes men lawlesse, victories insolent, popularitie ambitious and studious of innouation' (Botero 1601, p. 163). This same pattern – a person's success leading to their popularity, and hence to their attempt to mobilise the multitude to 'innovation' - is neatly seen in a play text from 1640:

>   Sure he cannot thinke
>
> There's power in his successe to make him popular,
>
> And leade the multitude in their disorder
>
> To wish an innovation first, then practise it. (Nabbes 1640, unpaginated,
>
> Act 4)

'Popularity' had a range of meanings which are distinctively early modern: it meant both courting the people - demagoguery - and 'popular government' or democracy. When those associated with the government accused their opponents of novel or subversive political behaviour, popularity and innovation often went hand in hand. For example, Richard Cust has drawn attention to a memorandum written in 1626 which set out a list of those groups of people who were acting to the subversion of the regime. At number 9 on the list we find 'Innovators, *plebicolae*, and King-haters': cultivating the plebs (the common people), fomenting revolution, and seeking to overthrow the king were - apparently - one and the same thing (Cust 2002, 237, citing

'To His Sacred Majesty, Ab Ignoto' in *Cabala sive Scrinia Sacra* (3rd ed 1691), p. 257).

This accusatory discourse allowed those close to power to link 'popularity', the

attempt to mobilise or manipulate the people, with conspiracy to overthrow

monarchical government. When such alleged 'King-haters' were accused of

'popularity', the double meaning of the term also allowed the implication that the

constitution they sought was a democracy.

III: 'Innovation' and the genesis of the English Revolution

What can these very classical and classicising notions of 'innovation' tell us about early

Stuart political culture – the culture which preceded the extraordinary turbulence and

radicalisation of the civil war? On the face of it, the discourse of 'innovation' neatly fits

the picture of 'unrevolutionary England' painted by revisionist historians such as

Conrad Russell. Innovation was an almost universally pejorative word. This is

particularly striking given that it did not even always mean regime change or

revolution: its range of meaning clearly included more gradual or incremental change.

One dictionary simply defined 'innovation' as 'a making new,' not specifying that this

renewal should be sudden, total, or indeed political (Cockeram, 1623, s.v. 'innovation').

'Innovation' could refer to incremental change, or to very specific legal, religious, or

procedural changes, but what is striking to a modern reader is how vehemently even

such relatively minor changes were often reflexively rejected. Nonetheless, the

multiple classical connotations of 'innovation' also made it a very adaptable political

weapon, and the increasingly polarised uses of the term reveal a political culture

which was far from stable and harmonious.

The rejection of innovation had deep roots both in English legal tradition and in classical influences. The legalistic common-law culture of early Stuart England may have been partly responsible for a fidelity to precedent which led people to reject or at best disguise the new rather than defending it outright. Thus in the 1624 parliament when an MP proposed to save parliamentary time with a bill 'for continuance of all bills the next session' it was the common lawyer and exemplar of the 'common-law mind' Sir Edward Coke who was reported (in most of the parliamentary diaries recording the debates) as objecting on principle to this as a procedural innovation, and declaring 'Innovations in Parliament most dangerous' (Baker 2015-18, 29th April 1624). Although the common law tradition and the 'ancient constitution' it appealed to could be more flexible and adaptable than they might first appear, they certainly contributed to a discourse which resisted unprecedented innovations.

Early modern authors also derived the argument that it was dangerous to change the laws from classical sources. The Locrians were cited repeatedly to this effect, as 'that City, who permitted none to propound new Lawes, that had not a Collar about their necks ready for vengeance, if it were found unprofitable' (Cotton 1641, 15; cf. e.g. Fulbecke 1600, 8; Landi 1640, 184). The supposed constitutional fixity of ancient Sparta and contemporary Venice was cited as proof that 'all Innovation hath perturbations and troubles attending upon it' (Ward 1641, 107: the quoted phrase is translated from Erasmus' *Parabolae sive similia*, where the term used is 'rerum novatio'). But it was Aristotle who offered the most elaborate and considered opposition to constitutional innovation, and he did so precisely when discussing the genesis and prevention of political revolutions. He warned repeatedly of the potential for small changes to usher in revolution – changes which might barely have been noticed at the time of their

introduction. In the translation of 1598 (the only available English version, translated from French), Aristotle warned that 'the changes of Estates do grow by little and little: I say, by little & little, because many times there happeneth a great change both of manners and lawes, without being perceiued, through the neglecting of some small thing' (Aristotle 1598, 265). Revolutions could be caused by '*the neglecting of smal matters'*, as at Thurii, where a proposal to extend the terms of generalships was waved through after initial opposition by magistrates who trusted that 'whe[n] this law was changed, the rest of the Commonweale should not be touched: but after when they would haue resisted other alterations which were likewise attempted to be made, they could doe no good, but all the order of the Commonweale was changed into a Potentacie [i.e. oligarchy] by the authors of this innouation' (301). 'Innovation', with its connotations of newness and potentially gradual as well as revolutionary change, neatly translates Aristotle's standard terminology for revolution, 'νεωτερίζειν', while aligning it with conceptions of *novae res* often also translated as 'innovation'. To preserve governments from regime changes, Aristotle's advice was blunt: 'heed should bee taken aboue all things; that nothing be done contrary to the laws and customes, and specially that an inconuenience & mischeefe should be looked vnto at the first budding; how small soeuer it be' (305). Thus Aristotle's discussion made explicit the link between apparently small innovations and the danger of more wholesale, revolutionary, 'innovation' which might follow. Aristotle's advice was taken to heart: Henry Burton – a polemicist central to what Godin calls the 'innovation controversy' of the later 1630s (Godin 2015, 75-100) – had Aristotle as well as simply contemporary consensus in mind when he reproached his opponents with failure to understand a universally accepted truth: 'Have you not learned that *principle* in the *Politicks, That*

Suddaine Changes in the Civill Government, and most of all in Religion, is full of perill?' (Burton 1640, 30-1).

This cultural resistance to innovation was certainly deeply embedded in early modern English thought. Even Francis Bacon, an advocate of new, experimental learning, was relatively cautious in his defence of innovation in his *Essays*: even though change was necessary, and 'a Froward Retention of Custome, is as turbulent a Thing, as an *Innouation*', it was advisable to 'follow the Example of Time it selfe; which indeed *Innouateth* greatly, but quietly, and by degrees, scarce to be perceiued'. Indeed, in political or constitutional matters, he advised that it was wise 'not to try Experiments in States; Except the Necessity be Vrgent, or the vtility Euident' (Bacon 1625, 139-41). Even with this degree of reservation, Bacon was unusual in defending innovation at all. Neither did this change much, even as radical challenges to England's pre-war constitution emerged. Later in the century two republican writers, James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, both clearly followed Bacon in insisting that constitutions might indeed need the medicine of change or (Machiavellian) renewal at times, but rather than explicitly demanding innovation, they both expressed the fear that 'the name of innovation' would deter people from implementing the necessary reform (Sidney 1996, 462; Harrington 1977, vol 2, 728). This deep-seated resistance to innovation might be one reason for the failure of the English republic – and classical republicanism – to win hearts and minds in the 1650s.

So it might seem that the only concept of revolution accessible to people thinking about politics in early Stuart England was a profoundly disempowering one which emphasised the low social status (or shameless demagoguery), uncontrolled emotions, and dubious motivations of those who desired change, and made it almost

impossible to imagine a revolution succeeding. What that misses, however, is how empowering the *accusation* of 'innovation' could be. Indeed, the profusion of its use shows us a tense and increasingly polarised political arena; people's willingness to charge each other with revolutionary desires does not suggest that English people felt they were living in a comfortably consensual political culture. As we will see, particularly when we read early modern accusations of innovation through an Aristotelian lens, there is no doubt not only that people were making accusations about revolutionary intent, but also that they were accusing each other of having specific and major constitutional changes in mind. People could well imagine constitutional change, even if it was almost always a nightmare vision projected onto their opponents. The abhorrence of 'innovation' may tally with the revisionist tendency to stress a conservative mindset before the civil wars, but locating this polemically-deployed discourse within the dynamic of political conflict reveals a different picture, suggesting a much more unstable political culture and helping to explain how distrust ratcheted up enough to bring about civil war.

It is clear that, in keeping with Aristotle's warnings, specific innovations or changes were taken as evidence for systemic revolutionary intent. Thus an attack on the Earl of Strafford in the Irish parliament in 1640 argued that 'Innovations in Law, and consequently in government, creep in like heresies in Religion, slily and slowly, pleading i[n] the end a sawcy and usurp't legitimacy, by uncontrol'd prescription' (Anon (1641) *Speeches and Passages*, 254). Innovations in law lead to innovations in government, and those become legally established through unchallenged practice (prescription): a quiet revolution has occurred. Similarly, Henry Parker's discussion of the notorious tax of ship money first established that the tax 'is new', then dismissed

the claim of 'State necessity', given that previous monarchs even in 'the most necessitous calamitous times' had not acted as Charles I had done in his use of the levy. Parker thus concluded that 'if we admit not of this innovation, then the State suffers not; but if we admit it, no necessity being of it, we can frame no other reason for our so doing, but that our former franchises and priviledges were unjust, and therefore this way they must be annulled' ([Parker] 1640, p. 41). In other words, this would not just be a minor innovation in the practice of government, but an outright attack on subjects' 'franchises and priviledges'. To challenge the much-invoked liberties of the subject in this way was to change the foundations of the constitution with potentially revolutionary consequences. The editor of a collection of pro-episcopal petitions presumably also had serious constitutional change in mind when he (like Aristotle) decried 'the ill effects of Innovations in Government' and objected to petitions asking for 'the alteration of Lawes, and Government'. In keeping with the classical model of *novae res*, which was a gift to royalists uncomfortable with the popular politics which surrounded the outbreak of the English Revolution, he argued that 'a few Innovators' were stirring up 'thousands of people, with implicite faiths' to support their petitions: this is the motif of cynical incitement of the easily-excited multitude by interested parties (for the petitioning which was the basis of these fears, see Como 2018, 107-122). Nonetheless, the term 'innovation' alone could not be relied on to communicate the revolutionary nature of change: thus in the first petition in the collection, the petitioners made clear that their opponents were aiming at 'absolute Innovation of Government' in the church, not mere 'Reformation' (Aston 1642, sig A2; p. 1). 'Absolute' innovation is surely revolutionary change.

 Part of the talismanic power which 'innovation' had as a key-word in Stuart

political discourse may thus have come from a suggestive intertwining of Aristotelian argument, Roman terminology, and English legalistic ancient constitutionalism, all of which warned against 'innovation' in ways which have clear political resonance. What may be harder to understand is that the vast majority of the politically explosive accusations of innovation which flew thick and fast in the early 1640s and earlier periods of tension referred specifically to matters of religion, while still drawing precisely on the classical, political, notions of innovation which I have outlined. The political turbulence in the parliaments of the later 1620s coincided with the growing domination of the church by an 'Arminian' or 'Laudian' high-church movement which emphasized beauty, ceremony and hierarchy, as well as aggressively diminishing the scope for puritanism to survive within the national church. The crisis of 1628-1629, which was the prelude to Charles's Personal Rule without parliament until 1640, vividly demonstrates the extreme implications, according to the crown's critics, of Arminian innovations, and the way in which religion and politics had become intertwined. Alongside discontent about Charles's promotion of Arminian clergy, a dispute about the legality of his collection of tunnage and poundage (customs duties) persisted through the 1628-9 parliament. The king eventually chose to adjourn parliament to prevent further moves by his opponents on the issue, but, in a notorious scene on 2 March 1629 which provided Charles I with his rationale for avoiding parliaments for the next eleven years, hostile MPs resisted adjournment by holding the Speaker of the Commons down in his chair while Sir John Eliot introduced three resolutions. The first stated that 'Whosoever shall bring in innovation of religion, or by favour or countenance seek to extend or introduce Popery or Arminianism, or other opinion disagreeing from the true and orthodox Church, shall be reputed a capital

enemy to this Kingdom and Commonwealth.' Thus innovation – even in religion – was

being seen by some as treasonable, beginning to bridge the gap between religious and

political usages of the charge of 'innovation'. Indeed, the following resolution provided

that anyone defending the levying of tunnage and poundage without parliamentary

consent 'shall be likewise reputed an innovator in the Government, and a capital

enemy to the Kingdom and Commonwealth' (Gardiner 1906, 82-3). As Conrad Russell

noted, 'a new intellectual link' which connected 'alteration of religion with alteration

of government' had been born in the heightened debates of the 1628 parliament

(Russell 1979, 379-80; 404-5). A conspiracy of 'innovation' in both religion and political

matters was seen as a concerted, and treasonable, attempt at revolution. Even Russell

– always reluctant to see the seeds of the civil war in the 1620s - had to concede that

this thinking points us forwards to the Grand Remonstrance of 1641, although only the

most religiously-motivated of MPs, in his view, were able to maintain this paranoia

unbroken through the peaceful years of the 1630s (Russell 1979, 380; 406-7; 423-5).

This oppositional charge of religious innovation linked with politically

revolutionary intent was revived when, as David Como has recently shown, a

religiously radical activist minority within the puritan movement started to shape the

narrative which would become that of the parliamentarian cause (Como 2018, Part I).

Henry Burton's sermons preached on the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot initiated

the controversy. The date was no coincidence: Burton described the Fifth of November

as 'that day (the memoriall whereof should cause all loyall subjects for ever to detest

all Innovations tending to reduce us to that Religion of Rome, which plotted that

matchlesse treason)' (Burton 1636, sig. (a)2; for the Gunpowder Plot as an attempted

'innovation', cf. Herring and Vicars (1641), pp. 6, 56). Burton's topic was Laudian

innovations in religion, and he listed very specific innovations, but the implication was that the infamous plot to blow up the king in the House of Lords as the entire political nation attended the opening of Parliament was the consequence of just such desires to 'innovate' in religion. Aided by Charles I's explicit repudiation of innovation in religion in his Declaration explaining the dissolution of parliament in 1629, Burton presented the framers of these religious changes as a threat to the king:

> how audacious, yea how impious are our Innovatours, how fearelesse of Your Majestie, how regardlesse of Your Royall Honor, that in their Innovations made such havocke, commit such outrages, and that upon the open theater? New Rites and Ceremonies doe now, not *steale and creep into the Church* [in the words of Charles's 1629 *Declaration*], but… are violently and furiously obtruded upon Ministers and people (Burton 1636, sig (a)3 v.)

Godin interprets 'innovation' in this 1630s controversy as 'the modern form of and term for heresy' (Godin 2015, 10), but in fact it clearly draws much of its power from its connotations of political revolution. Burton was clear that the threat was not limited to the church: people must not stand by when 'wee see wicked men goe about by their Innovation, to undermine and overthrow the State of Religion, and of the Common-weale'. As Como comments, 'the threats of spiritual and secular tyranny were seen as intertwined' (2018, 25) and the Laudian bishops were the 'Innovatours' in question, exerting power through mechanisms of state such as the Privy Council, as well as through the church, and strongly suspected of hostility to the calling of parliaments, not least because of the parliamentary attacks on Arminian clergy in the later 1620s. But were these puritan fears really framed by classical notions of revolution? Burton's text puts it beyond doubt that they were. Warning that

'Innovation of Religion, and the Republike, is, and ever hath beene held dangerous to a State', he supported his claim with the examples of the Locrians' and Lycurgus' measures designed to prevent the changing of laws, and developed the argument by specifically citing Aristotle's advice on the prevention of revolutions:

'*Aristotle* compares changes in a State, which at first seeme but small and insensible, to the expenses of a howse, and the wasting of a mans substance by little and little, which in a short time consumes all.' Burton even provided two marginal references to *Politics* V, with the opening of the Greek phrases transliterated into the Roman alphabet to aid the reader in locating them should they so choose (Burton 1636, 93-4, misnumbered 92). Religious innovation was dangerous, revolutionary, and political.

The language of innovation was far from conservative in its effects when it was used in this way, against the powerful. Aristotle's analysis had made it clear that revolutions were sometimes engineered by members of the governing class or group rather than the excluded (Aristotle, *Politics* 1302b 7-10; 1304a 35-38), and those who opposed the rise of Arminian clergy to positions of ecclesiastical but also political power may have had that in mind when they accused them of seeking innovation. There was clearly a specific political content to the innovation they feared. Burton's arguments set the pattern for a set of incipient parliamentarian accusations from 1640. Anti-episcopal petitioners in Cheshire argued that their opponents were attempting an 'absolute Innovation of tyrannicall and Papall Government' which would undermine – or was linked with attempts to undermine – not only the government of the church by parliamentary statute, but government by parliament more broadly (Anon., 1641, *To the high and honourable court of Parliament* single page). The king himself tended to be depicted as one of the victims of the intended revolution, rather than its

mastermind, but puritan propagandists were able to muster opposition to royal

policies through charging his counsellors, and especially his bishops, with aiming to

seize control of government and move away from a parliamentary constitutional

norm. This oppositional use of charges of 'innovation' or revolutionary intent was

crucial to the genesis of a polarised and paranoid political culture on the eve of civil

war.

'Innovation' could thus be an explosive charge directed by subjects against those

in power, but naturally, the authorities could also use the charge of revolutionary

intent against voluble subjects such as these anti-episcopal campaigners. In fact, from

the later 1630s this counter-attack was the authorities' preferred way to counter the

charges of innovation flung at them. Thus Archbishop Laud, at the censure of Burton

and his fellow anti-episcopal propagandists Prynne and Bastwick in 1637, objected to

being accused of innovation by 'the greatest *Innovators* that the *Christian world* hath

almost ever known', borrowing a line from Juvenal to ask '*Quis tulerit Gracchos [de*

seditione querentes]?' This pithy line of Juvenal ('Who could stand the Gracchi moaning

about revolution?' Juvenal, *Satires* 2.24: Loeb Classical Library) had been translated a

few years earlier as 'The *Gracchi* plaining fore of Garboiles [disturbances] neare,/ And

Innovation, who can brooke to heare?' (Bidle, 1634, unpaginated). Laud, leaving the

phrase in Latin, may well have borrowed it from Peter Heylyn's material denouncing

Burton (Heylyn 1637, 119; Milton 2007, 61-3). Clearly anticipating objections that this

reference to sedition was irrelevant to the case in hand, Laud vehemently continued:

> And I said wel, *Quis tulerit Gracchos?* For 'tis most *apparent* to any man
>
> that will not winke, that the *Intention* of *these men,* and their *Abettors,* was
>
> and is to raise a *Sedition,* being as great *Incendiaries* in the *State* (where

they get power) as they have ever been in the *Church…* (Laud, 1637, pp. 5-

6).

Innovation was a charge which had to be refuted because it carried with it

implications of a desire for political revolution. The bishops had a rhetorical

advantage, as their accusers could rather more easily be painted as stereotypical

demagogic and popular 'innovators', on the model of the Gracchi, than the bishops

themselves. This accusation could then be developed to suggest the constitutional

direction which anti-episcopal campaigners might tend towards in politics.

The government of the church was often seen as an analogue of government in

the state, and it was widely held that the two should be in harmony. This meant that it

was all too easy to taint opponents of episcopacy with dangerous political aspirations.

Once the Long Parliament met in 1640, the debate about bishops became highly

politicised, with not only their place in the House of Lords, but their very existence,

challenged. Those defending the Church of England complete with its bishops (and, of

course, its royal supremacy) mobilised the language of 'innovation' against their

enemies just as Laud had done. A petition in defence of the Church of England argued

that dangerous anti-episcopal petitions aimed 'not so much … at reformation as

absolute innovation of [church] government' (Aston 1641, single page). This

'absolute innovation' was presbyterian church government. This, like the charges

levelled by the bishops' opponents, became an accusation of politically, as well as

religiously, revolutionary aspirations. Presbyterian church government was

characterised by its opponents in highly political terms as inconsistent with monarchy

and tending to anarchy and equality: 'such popular infusions spread as incline to a

paritie' (Aston 1641, single page). This charge – of 'innovation' with anti-monarchical

and even democratic implications - became a trope among those alarmed by the wave of anti-episcopal agitation. Sir Benjamin Rudyerd, who had supported action against specific Laudian 'innovations', nonetheless warned his fellow MPs against going too far: 'beware wee bring not in the greatest Innovation that ever was in *England*'. He explicitly suggested that reform of church government would threaten the monarchical constitution of the state: 'let us well bethinke our selves, whether a popular Democraticall Government of the Church (though fit for other places) will be either sutable or acceptable to a Regall, Monarchicall Government of the State' (Anon 1641, *Speeches and Passages*, 115). The editor of an ostentatiously timely edition of John Cheke's sixteenth-century work *The Hurt of Sedition* in 1641, in a rather leading question, asked whether feared that the attack on episcopacy arose from

> the common people too much distempered with those two vulgar diseases,
> Ignorance, and desire of Innovation? whence it is, they can only say they
> would not have this Government, but cannot say what they would have.
> Yea may it not be feared that an Anabaptisticall parity as well in State as
> Church sounds too plausibly in the eares of the multitude? (Cheke, 1641,
> sig. b3).

Here the social stereotyping of supporters of revolutionary 'innovation' comes together with the accusation that the type of government they sought was also popular or democratic – characterised by an alarming 'parity'. Thus both sides in these disputes extended the implications of religious innovation to political revolution, and each side depicted its opponents as advocates of particular constitutional revolutions – absolutist or democratic as the case might be.

IV: Conclusion

Once the English Revolution was under way, it tended not to be described as an 'innovation' (although royalists' fears of future republican 'innovators' or 'innovation' reappeared with all the traditional tropes of *novae res* after the Restoration: Poyntz 1661, 18; 25; 156; Godin 2015, 101-121). Just as *novae res* evoked hopes and fears of revolution, rather than describing actual changes of regime, intentions of 'innovation' were ferociously projected by each inchoate 'side' onto the other before the civil wars, but the constitutional changes which actually ensued do not seem to have been described as completed 'innovations'. This left a gap for the term 'revolution' to fill, and although it was only patchily deployed, the execution of the king and the coming of the republic, protectorate, and subsequently restoration of the monarchy gave 'revolution/s' a new place in political discourse. But this was the development of a new *version* of a concept of revolution, not the invention of a concept out of thin air. People in pre-civil-war England not only *had* a concept of revolution, in the form of 'innovation' and related terms; they made extensive political use of it.

This concept of revolutionary 'innovation' demonstrates that classical political ideas were far from having the automatically subversive or republican quality which Hobbes attributed to them. Where 'innovation' drew on the Roman concept of *novae res* it pejoratively implied a restless or ambitious desire for changes which were unlikely ever to happen. Aristotle had also warned against even apparently minor constitutional innovations as precursors to revolution, giving 'innovation' in English a doubly negative force as both revolution and a cause of revolution. But in spite of the apparently conservative message embedded in the concept of 'innovation', the

availability of this concept of revolution helped to fuel the polarisation eventually expressed in civil war. People could envisage their opponents as aiming at 'innovation' in the form of decisive constitutional change, and, crucially, this was a charge which could be levelled both at apparently 'popular' or democratic tendencies in church or state, and at the allegedly more absolutist ambitions of the Laudian bishops. It was thus perfectly possible to imagine revolutions before the English Revolution itself broke out – and people did so, feverishly, identifying their opponents as dangerous 'Innovators'. These mutual, extreme, even paranoid, narratives of 'innovation' helped to create the rhetorical polarisation which enabled the civil war – and ultimately a real rather than imagined revolution – to occur.

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