

5

The Rise and Fall of 'Commonwealth'

In 1584 a Cambridge 'Scholar' wrote to his 'friend in London' telling how he had been invited to spend Christmas in the 'company' of a 'very worshipful and grave gentleman' whose son – a pupil of the scholar – was about to leave university for the Inns of Court. The scholar noted that the 'request was grateful unto me in respect of the time, as also the matter, but especially of the company': his host had 'great wisdom, experience, and grave judgment in affairs of the world that do occur', especially regarding 'our own country'. The 'singular delight to be in his company' only increased when they were joined by an 'ancient' lawyer 'who haunted much the company of the said gentleman my friend'. Although the lawyer 'was inclined to be a Papist' it quickly became apparent that he showed 'moderation and reservation of his duty towards Prince and country'; prioritized 'friendship or service' over 'their different conscience'; and 'neither was wilful or obstinate in his opinion, and much less reproachful in speech'. Such 'temperate behaviour, induced this gentleman and me, to affect the more his company, and to discourse as freely with him in all occurrences, as if he had been of our own religion' (Anon. 1584, 2–4).

So begins one of the most vicious and libellous pamphlets of the early modern period. With the fictional 'company' quickly and skillfully established, there followed a three-way dialogue between the Scholar, Gentleman, and Lawyer conducted 'after dinner . . . for our recreation . . . when other[s] went to cards and other pastimes'. Their initial subject is how 'men of a different religion from the state wherein they live, may be said to deal against the same state'. However, this soon developed into a concerted and vitriolic attack

against Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. The patron of Thomas Digges and John Barston was now presented as a philanderer, adulterer, murderer, atheist, rebel, coward, oppressor, usurper, and consummate politician in the modern Italian – Machiavellian – mode. Whether in love, religion, or politics Leicester had a ‘tyrannous purpose . . . to aspire to tyranny by most manifest ways, and to possess himself (as now he hath done) of Court, Council, and country, without controlement: so that nothing wanteth to him but only his pleasure [. . .] in whatsoever his will is once settled to obtain’ (16, 54). Indeed, so omnipotent was Leicester both at ‘Court’ and in ‘the country abroad’ that ‘the riches and wealth of so worthy a common weal’ merely ‘serve to purchase this man private friends, and favourers, only to advance his party, and fortify his faction’ (48–50). According to the Lawyer he is the ‘perfect Potentate’ who has reduced ‘our state’ to ‘a *Leicestrensem rempublicam*, a Leicestrian common wealth, or the common wealth of my Lord of Leicester’ (52). The dialogue, which was banned by the government but continued to circulate in manuscript, accordingly became known as ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’. This was the name it took when it was re-published as a contribution to the political crisis of 1641 (Anon. 1641).

‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’ was composed and printed by Catholic exiles in Paris (Holmes 1982). It was one of a sequence of ‘commonwealth’ tracts presenting the governing Protestant regime as nothing more than a collection of ambitious politicians who had managed to impose their ‘private’ ‘will’ and ‘conscience’ onto that of the English ‘state’. The recurring claim of these pamphlets was that, through their manipulation of Tudor monarchs and the infrastructures of local government, ‘new men’ like Leicester or his erstwhile rival at court, William Cecil (Lord Burghley), had subverted both traditional religion and the traditional social order – in particular the power of the ‘ancient nobility’ (Adams 2002, 48–9). Not only were Elizabethan courtiers like Leicester and Cecil ‘evil counsellors’ in the medieval (Gothic) mould; they were ‘Machiavellian libertines’ operating with all ‘the reason of Seignior Machievel’, that most notorious of Renaissance advisors (Anon. 1584, 103). Far from serving ‘our commonwealth’, the claim with which Elizabethans across the social spectrum tended to justify their actions, the men at the top were busy expropriating it for their own vicarious ends (Questier 2005, 80–4; Lake 2005, 138–43).

As the patron of texts that launched (so to speak) the words ‘modern’ and ‘society’ onto the early modern reading public, it is fitting that Leicester should be so closely associated with the final of the three words at the centre of this book. That this association was

entirely negative reflects the normative power of ‘commonwealth’ and its derivatives as the sacrosanct stick with which to beat political enemies (Lake 2005, 138). It also demonstrates, through inversion, the especial investment that Elizabethan governors attached to the concept. This investment was never more apparent in 1584, when ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’ was first smuggled into England: the previous year had seen the posthumous publication of Sir Thomas Smith’s extraordinarily influential account of *De Republica Anglorum*. Sold as *The Commonwealth of England* after 1589, Smith’s deeply humanist depiction of English society and its polity had the implicit approval of his friend and patron Lord Burghley, whom he had known since their days as students in Cambridge in the 1540s (Smith 1583). The book ran to eleven editions between 1589 and 1640 and by the seventeenth century was known simply as ‘Smith’s Commonwealth’ (Bolton 1629). The authors of ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’ cleverly played on the recent publication of Smith’s manuscript (written in the 1560s when Smith was an ambassador in Paris). The ‘Scholar’, ‘Lawyer’ and ‘Gentleman’ are more than reminiscent of Smith and his Cambridge ‘friends’; Burghley is mischievously mentioned by the Catholic satirists as the only challenge to Leicester at court, and real defender of commonwealth; and the University of Oxford, where Leicester was Chancellor, was described as awash with ‘atheism’ and ‘Galen’s religion’ and ‘like soon to come to destruction’ (Anon. 1584, 77–9). Not that Leicester needed the infamous Cambridge network to define commonwealth for him; his commitment to the idea was a family affair (Brennan 2006, 18). While awaiting execution for corruption in 1509 Leicester’s grandfather, Edmund Dudley, composed *The Tree of Commonwealth*, a text now widely cited by historians as exemplifying later medieval notions of the social and political order (Wrightson 2000, 27; Jones 2000, 28–9; Wood 2007, 144). The genealogy was duly recognized by the authors of ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’, who correctly note that a manuscript of the treatise was ‘delivered to my Lord of Leicester many years gone’. With satirical slyness they then ‘marvel’ that he has yet to ‘publish the same’ and speculate that it must be in order to use ‘the secrets therein contained [. . .] only himself, and to gather the fruit of that tree into his own house alone’. Indeed, ‘it cannot be denied, but that Edmund Dudley’s brood, have learned by this book, and by other means, to be more cunning gatherers, then ever their first progenitor was, that made the book’ (Anon. 1584, 75, 76).

‘Commonwealth’ for early moderns was the term that most resembled our twentieth-first-century sense of ‘society’. It evoked in the most general way the collective resources, institutions, and well-being

(or 'weal') of local and national communities; and it described the manner in which those resources were, or should be, governed. As the satirical power of 'Leicester's Commonwealth' suggests, the word was quite as axiomatic to English early modernity as 'modern', 'society', and 'company'. However, there are important differences between it and the other words considered by this book which should be highlighted from the start. Most obviously, 'modern' and 'society' are recognized keywords of contemporary (i.e. twenty-first century) discourse which have generally lacked detailed and contextualized historical treatment, certainly in English. 'Commonwealth' and its derivatives carry little contemporary purchase; indeed, it would in all likelihood be obsolete if it had not been adapted to describe the affiliations engendered by British imperialism in the nineteenth century. The upshot is that whereas 'society' and 'modern' both appear in Raymond Williams's *Keywords* and its sequel, 'commonwealth' does not (Williams 1976; Bennett et al. 2005). In the meantime, however, 'commonwealth' has received a good deal of historical attention from a variety of perspectives; its prominence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is eminently clear, as is its significance in providing an appropriate and overarching framework for understanding English early modernity. Just as early modern England witnessed the introduction of 'society' and 'modern' into the vernacular, so it underwent the rise and fall of 'commonwealth'.

On from this, 'modern' and 'society' were both translations of foreign words that entered the vernacular after 1500 and only became visible (in terms of their appearance on printed title-pages) in the 130 years after 1570. 'Commonwealth' was, in contrast, a vernacular construction that was in regular (albeit non-printed) use from at least the first half of the fifteenth century and appears on a printed title-page as early as 1496. Like 'company', it is not so much a coinage of early modernity as a term invigorated by changing social and cultural circumstances. However, unlike 'company' (or indeed 'society'), 'commonwealth' was subject to profound conceptual palpitations from the 1530s onwards. These were caused by the introduction of the classical concept of *res publica* into English and the possibility that 'commonwealth' could or should serve as its vernacular translation. The result was that 'commonwealth' became a term of the English Renaissance even as it retained its 'Gothic' connotations. By the time *De Republica Anglorum* and 'Leicester's Commonwealth' were published it was a word over-brimming with tensions and complexity.

Finally, 'commonwealth' was an intrinsically political term in a way that 'modern', 'society', and 'company' were not (though as

‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’ demonstrates, the purpose of ‘company’ could become political in the right circumstances). This was true in the sense that ‘commonwealth’ was coined as a term of local and subsequently national governance. It was true in terms of the genres through which it was first disseminated in the vernacular: it appeared in civic minutes, petitions, proclamations, and (most importantly) books of statutes long before it adorned humanist treatises and satires. And it is true in the sense that ‘commonwealth’ was the watchword of most of the major conflagrations and rebellions between 1450 and 1650. Cade’s Rebellion (1451), the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536), Kett’s Rebellion (1549), the Civil War (1642), and the Regicide (1649) were all undertaken in the name of ‘commonweal’ or ‘commonwealth’. Likewise the short-lived English republic (1649–60) took ‘Commonwealth and Free State’ as its title. The term’s political prominence only ended with its widespread disavowal following the monarchical Restoration in 1660.

The authors of ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’ not only invoked the normative term of Elizabethan governance to tarnish their Puritan nemesis; they also raised the spectre of popular rebellion. They published their diatribe at a particular moment in the history of ‘commonwealth’ and this chapter contextualizes that moment by tracing the broader contours of the rise and fall of the word and its variants: in particular, ‘commonweal’ and ‘publique weal’. The first part looks at the genesis of this vocabulary in local civic politics, its violent assimilation into national political culture, and the semantic challenge posed by humanism and its imposition of *res publica* into the vernacular. The next part then traces the use of ‘commonwealth’ on printed title-pages from its first surviving appearance in 1496 to its wholesale adaptation after 1559. Part considers the centrality of commonwealth to the formation of what has been termed the English ‘monarchical republic’. The chapter concludes by surveying the term’s final rise and fall in the middle of the seventeenth century.

‘Common Good’, *Communitas*, *Res Publica*

‘The statutes concerning the comon wele made in the parliament holden at Westminster the 14 October in the reign of our sovereign lord the King Henry VII: eleventh year’ was published in 1496 (England 1496). As the first surviving use of commonwealth on a printed title-page, the book of statutes points to the close relationship between ‘commonwealth’ and governance and the importance of

governmental literature in placing the term in print. However, it is also misleading in important respects. First, the term 'commonweal' was initially forged in the crucible of local rather than parliamentary politics: Bristol citizens looked to arbitrate between 'the profit, worship and weal of the Commune [i.e. the city]' and particular 'crafts' in 1439; a Coventry burgess noted the 'prejudice of common good' and 'prejudice of common weal' in 1446; and urban-based wool-packers used the idea of 'common weal' in a petition to parliament in 1455 (Watts 2007a, 5). Second, the recognition of 'common weal' as the overarching basis for parliamentary legislation marked the end rather than the start of the word's assimilation into national political discourse. This process began with Cade's Revolt in 1451, when Kentish rebels legitimated their march on London in the name of the 'common weal', and was helped on its way by Yorkist propagandists, who recognized the slogan as a way to galvanize popular support against Henry VI and his favourites (Starkey 1986, 20; Watts 1996, 205, 254; Rollison 2006, 241). The political theorist Sir John Fortescue made the word respectable and by the 1470s urban inhabitants and their monarch were speaking the same language (Starkey 1986, 25). In 1476, for example, the citizens of York could petition the crown to dismiss a corrupt official on the grounds of 'our common weal' and 'the common weal of your said city' (Attreed 1991, I, 47). Unlike 'society' and 'modern', the language of commonwealth was vernacular from the start.

John Watts's recent and forensic discussion of the antecedents of the term suggests that these early appearances are no coincidence. The term translated into the vernacular two well-established traditions of social thought and practice – traditions especially important to associational and communal life. The first of these was the medieval notion of 'common good' (*bonum commune* or *bonum publica*) – that is the good of human society in terms of the just and equitable distribution of resources (material and moral) and the preservation of those resources from various kind of threat: external enemies, private interests, institutional corruption, and so on. The second was 'the language of *communitas* and the institutions associated with it'. As Watts explains, from the eleventh century 'commune' was used to depict 'self-governing urban and rural organizations' either in the form of self-ruling communities (e.g. Italian city states) or, as in England, representative bodies connecting local communities to larger entities (Watts 2007a, 3; 2007b, 248). Watts suggests that the 'strongest association between political collectivities and the declaration of the common good was to be found in polities in which the former had to represent themselves towards a superior ruler'. It so happened

that from an early date in England ‘there was an unusual degree of correlation between royal, representative and communal structures, and between these and the common good of the realm, and its various communities and individuals’ (4). From the mid fifteenth century ‘commonweal’ became the term to designate the intersections between different kinds of *communitas* and the ‘common good’ its representatives were supposed to protect and represent.

This was primarily through the efforts of the ‘chief inhabitants’ of both urban and rural communities (Watts 2007b, 250–1). The catalyst for ‘commonweal’ becoming endemic to national and parliamentary politics in the 1450s was its appropriation by Yorkist nobles to garner popular support against a monarchy perceived as corrupt and prejudicial to the common good (the commonweal). However, Yorkist propagandists were merely talking to the people in a language they understood. The key brokers in this dialogue were community leaders – the honest, better, discreet sorts who populated the associational structures that constituted their communities. These infrastructures in turn provided ‘the commons’ with degrees of collective agency and legitimacy that they could never have wielded as individuals. As the most recent study of 1450 puts it, ‘Cade’s Revolt began as the action of responsible local leaders entrusted with official and public authority’ [in this instance the militia]. ‘This act of violence derived its meaning from the political world view of a ‘responsible’ middle stratum of county society, the prosperous commoners or yeomen’: it was not ‘a revolt of the disenfranchised’ (Bohna 2003, 581). The same could equally be said for the rebellions of 1536 and 1549 and, indeed, effective popular resistance more generally (Bush 1999, 123; Rollison 2006, 234; Wood 1999, 260). In each instance the desire to protect communal resources – economic, material, and religious – was a key basis for collective association on a wider front. And in each instance the language of commonwealth was paramount (Shagan 2003, 270–3, 280).

The conjunction of ‘common good’ and *communitas* made for a capacious and eminently negotiable sense of ‘commonweal’ or ‘commonwealth’ by the beginning of the sixteenth century. It described the shared resources – material, symbolic, institutional – of groups of people gathered together in various kinds of community. It also invoked the collective well-being of communities – both of themselves and the larger polities to which they belonged – and the obligations and reciprocities that *communitas* entailed. Edmund Dudley’s *The Tree of Commonwealth* – depicting a shared resource nourished and cherished for the benefit of all – was representative of a general consensus. How and by whom the ‘commonweal’ should be nourished,

where it ended and personal profit began, what and who it included and excluded – these were matters of interpretation, negotiation, and conflict. In this sense, the term did not detail specifics or policies so much as provide an overarching paradigm that shaped the way politics was conducted and legitimated. Like any effective hegemony, the conflict it structured depended on a consensus which, in this instance, had been forged over the previous century (Dudley 1509).

This consensus was undermined – and the meaning of ‘commonwealth’ deeply confused – by the translation of *res publica* into the vernacular. Although the concept was available to writers and officials in the High Middle Ages it had not been used by them (Wakelin 2006). Its introduction into English in the last decades of the fifteenth century was an achievement of humanism and ultimately the distinguishing feature between medieval and early modern notions of ‘commonwealth’. Usually associated with Cicero – his *De Re Publica* was the fullest development of the concept – the term had three basic connotations. First, it referred to any kind of political body with a recognizable constitution and commonalty of interest (also denoted by the ‘state’). This sense came attached with a typology of political forms through which commonwealths could be (in theory) best governed – monarchy (rule of one), aristocracy (rule of few), democracy (also known as ‘commonwealth’), a mixture of all three. These were normative states which had, in turn, their corrupt inverses: tyranny, oligarchy, and populism. Second, it referred to the public life and participants of a society broadly defined, as well as the affective obligations that citizens or subjects owed it. Synonyms for commonwealth in this sense of *res publica* included ‘country’ and ‘nation’ by the end of the sixteenth century and ‘the public’ by the mid seventeenth century. Third, it denoted a republic in the classical (usually Roman) sense of the term. ‘It was in this borrowed toga of *res publica* that commonweal was to play its central role in Tudor discourse’ (Starkey 1986, 25; Watts 2007a, 2).

The vernacularization of *res publica* was a decisive and disruptive process for at least three reasons. Most obviously, it was a term recovered by – and reserved for – ‘the learned’. As early as 1481, William Caxton prefaced his translation of Cicero’s *The Polityque Book Named Tullus de Senectute* with the warning that ‘this book is not requisite nor else convenient for every rude and simple man which understands not of science nor cunning, and for such as have not heard of the noble policy and prudence of the Romans’. On the contrary, it was intended ‘but for noble, wise and great lords gentlemen: merchants that have seen and daily been occupied in matters touching the publique weal’ (Cicero 1481, 13). It followed that, like

‘modern’ warfare 100 years later, governance and politics – the business of ‘commonwealth’ – was an ‘art’ which required education in quite particular (classical) skills and knowledge. Defined as *res publica*, ‘commonwealth’ was not so much a shared ‘tree’ as an enclosed garden; a specialist arena of activity reserved for men capable of cultivating within themselves – and others – ‘civility’ and ‘reason’. Second, the assimilation of *res publica* transposed a new typology of political arrangements into the vernacular. Classical notions of democracy, aristocracy, monarchy, and the mixed polity were outlined in English, providing a new way of categorizing existing political arrangements as well as imagining future possibilities. It also placed traditional kinds of political activity, not least rebellion, in a new perspective. Third, as William Johnson intimated in 1869, the classical notion of *res publica* massively accentuated the awareness of, and patriotism towards, a person’s ‘country’, ‘nation’, and ‘native soil’. It was precisely this sense of the term that Robert Allott emphasized in his miscellany of ‘modern poets’ in 1600. ‘Commonweal’ was coupled with ‘country’ and illustrated with Gascoigne’s couplet: ‘A happy quarrel is it and a good,/ For country’s cause to spend our dearest blood’. (Allott 1600, 35).

Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke Called the Governour* remains the most dramatic and conceptually violent assault on indigenous notions of ‘commonweal’. Running through eight editions between 1531 and 1580, *The Boke* was written for ‘my duty that I owe to my natural country’; conceived as an attempt ‘to describe in our vulgar tongue’ *res publica*; and constructed from ‘the sayings of most noble authors (Greeks and Latins) as by my own experience’ (Elyot 1531, Aii). It was, in short, an archetypal early modern ‘enterprise’. Elyot’s starting point was simply to reject ‘commonweal’ as an appropriate translation of *res publica* and replace it with what he regarded to be a more appropriate term: ‘publike weal’ (1). Like any good humanist Elyot rooted his argument in language. He claimed that the difference ‘between a publike weal and commune weal’ in English was the equivalent to that of a ‘*Res publica* and *Res plebeia*’ in Latin. In a *Res plebeia*, ‘either the commoners only must be wealthy/ and the gentle and noblemen needy and miserable/ or else excluding gentility/ all men must be of one degree and sort/ and a new name provided’ (1–2). A *Res publica*, in contrast, was ‘a body living/compact or made of sundry estates and degrees of men/which is disposed by the order of equity/ and governed by the rule and moderation of reason’ (1). Elyot now provided a political handbook in which classical categories, exemplars, virtues, and assumptions (both Greek and Roman) were introduced to a vernacular audience. This was, for example, the

first time that readers could learn in English the Greek typologies of aristocracy and democracy alongside monarchy. *Aristocratia* was 'where the governance and rule was always permitted to them/which excelled in virtue . . . the rule of the men of best disposition'. His example was the Spartans. *Democratia* was 'another publique weal among the Athenians/ where equality was of estate among the people/ and only by their whole consent their city and dominions were governed'. It translated 'in English/the rule of the commonalty' and was best described as 'a Monster with many heads' – a 'commonweal' (7). Elyot ostensibly preferred 'the governance of one person' over both aristocracy and democracy (8v, 7). Yet by naming these alternatives Elyot placed them at the disposal of a vernacular readership, presenting a veritable Pandora's Box of political possibilities and fuelling the imagination of erstwhile 'subjects'. Moreover, Elyot's own prescription for an English *res publica* was not, in practice, 'one King or Prince' (7). Rather it was an aristocracy of 'inferior governors' who 'in their education and virtue in manners . . . they have in common with Princes' (14). The remainder of *The Boke* accordingly outlined the humanist 'education or form of bringing up the child of a gentleman which is to have authority in the publike weal' (15).

The aristocratic emphases of Elyot should be compared with the more democratic conceits of another foundational text of English humanism. Published in Latin in 1516 but only translated into English in 1551, Thomas More's *Utopia* was altogether more ambivalent about the contemporary implications of *res publica* (Robinson 1551). As well as being England's most famous humanist, More was a proud citizen of London fully versed, as Sarah Rees Jones has shown, in the assumptions of corporate citizenship (Rees Jones 2001). Perhaps because of this, *Utopia* retained traditional notions of *communitas* and 'common good' within a modern classical framework. The result was, among other things, an exercise in scathing contemporary social criticism, a discussion about what constitutes good governance, and an evocation of what a reformed commonwealth might resemble. As the central character Hythloday notes: 'When I consider and weigh in my mind all these commonwealths which now a-days anywhere do flourish, God help me, I can perceive nothing but a certain conspiracy of rich men, procuring their own commodities under the name and title of the common wealth' (Robinson 1551, S1v; More 1516, 108). For Hythloday as for Elyot, the very concept of 'commonwealth' was nonsensical in the modern world: *Utopia* 'alone of good right may claim and take upon it the name of common wealth or publique weal'. Although 'in other places they speak still of the common wealth', in truth 'every man procures his own private

wealth'; it was only in Utopia – 'where nothing is private' – that 'the common affairs be earnestly looked upon' (Robinson 1551, R7v; More 1516, 106). For Elyot the answer to this conundrum was simply to jettison 'commonweal' and its indigenous inferences and concentrate instead on educating those blessed with 'private wealth' into virtuous and publicly minded 'magistrates' of the 'publique weal'. More and his subsequent translators and admirers played, in contrast, with the possibility that a properly reformed *res publica*, entirely populated by virtuous citizens, could establish and maintain something approaching 'commonweal' in practice. Indeed Brendan Bradshaw has gone as far as to describe *Utopia* as the quintessential statement of the 'ideology of the commonwealth' – a manifesto that 'called for the conduct of government in accordance with principles of political and social morality and insisted that the advancement of the commonwealth, the welfare of the community, provided the proper objective and moral norm of government action' (Bradshaw 1979, 458–9). Elyot's conception and propagation of *res publica* anticipates precisely the kind of early modernity identified by (and with) William Johnson. *Utopia* was, unsurprisingly, one of William Morris's favourite books (Morris 1893).

The Rise of *Res Publica*

Commonwealth vocabulary carried, then, three basic connotations by the third decade of the sixteenth century: the common good, *communitas*, and *res publica*. Insofar as printed title-pages were concerned, Figure 5.1 shows that until the 1540s 'commonweal' (as a synonym of 'common good') predominated. Thereafter Elyot's conception of 'publique weal' also became visible (as a translation of *res publica*). However, the word 'commonwealth' itself did not appear on title-pages until after the accession of Elizabeth in 1558, and then only infrequently; indeed it was not until the 1580s, when Elyot's *The Boke* finally went out of fashion, that 'commonwealth' began to be used on printed title-pages more regularly than its precursors. The publication of *De Republica Anglorum* and 'Leicester's Commonwealth' reflected this process, the new preference for 'commonwealth' coinciding with the introduction of 'society' and 'modern' into the vernacular. The result was that by the seventeenth century 'commonwealth' was established as the most visible 'commonwealth' term.

Figure 5.2 puts these early adaptations of 'commonweal', 'publique weal', and 'commonwealth' into a longer perspective (it shows

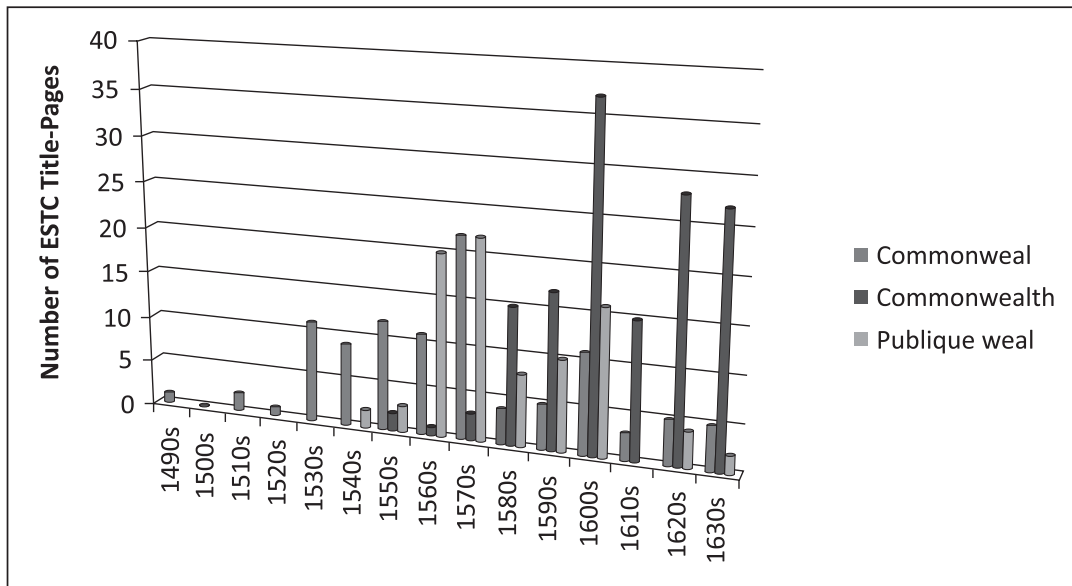


Figure 5.1 'Commonweal', 'Commonwealth', and 'Publique Weal', 1490–1640.

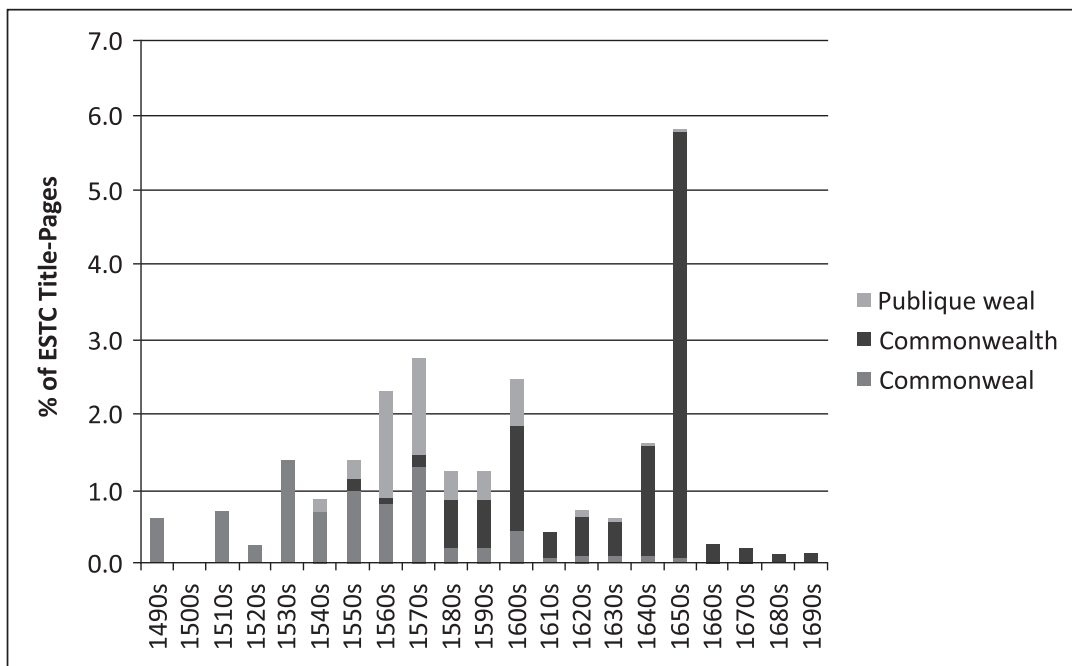
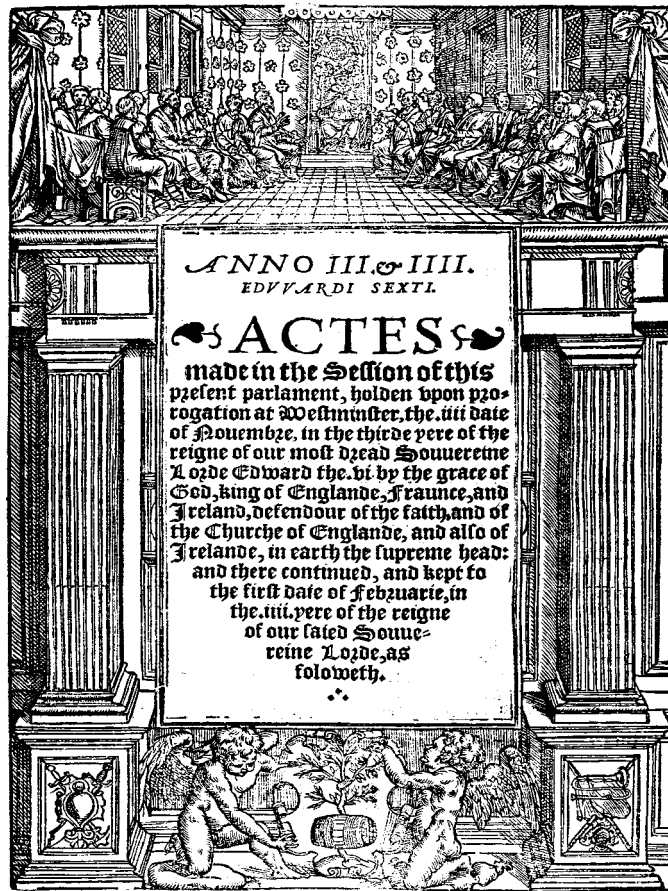


Figure 5.2 'Commonweal', 'Commonwealth', and 'Publique Weal', 1490–1700.

all appearances of 'commonwealth' vocabulary as a percentage of ESTC title-pages between 1490 and 1700). There are two discursive peaks. The first was in the 1560s and 1570s, when 'commonweal' and 'publique weal' were predominant and accounted for over 2 per

cent of all printed title-pages. The second was in the 1640s and 1650s, the word ‘commonwealth’ appearing on first 1.5 per cent and then 5.6 per cent of printed title-pages. There was, in contrast, a significant dip in appearances of the vocabulary of commonwealth from the 1610s to the 1630s, when the terms accounted for 0.5 per cent of printed title-pages, and ‘commonwealth’ and its alternatives virtually disappeared from the printed horizons of the reading public after 1660. Before 1550, title-pages displaying ‘commonweal’ accounted for 0.68 per cent of all texts catalogued on the ESTC; after 1660, ‘commonwealth’ appeared on only 0.1 per cent of printed title-pages.

Books of statutes played a significant part in this story. They also nicely illuminate the displacement of ‘the common good’ by *res publica* from the second quarter of the sixteenth century. In the forty or so years after 1496 the phrase ‘commonweal and profit of this realm’ was a regular (though not inevitable) fixture on books of statutes, accounting for all title-page appearances of commonwealth vocabulary before the 1540s. After 1536 no parliaments announced the fruits of their deliberations ‘for the commonweal’. That is not to say ‘commonweal’ disappeared from the genre: individual acts could still be framed in commonwealth vocabulary and new editions of books of statutes from old parliaments (i.e. before 1536) retained their previous wording (England and Wales 1543). It is nevertheless the case that from 1535, when the Henrician reformation began in earnest, legislation was no longer passed ‘for the commonweal and profit’ of the realm. Nor did ‘commonweal’ make a return under Edward. Rather the ‘publique weal’ was intimated instead. Although Edwardian books of statutes make no linguistic references to Elyot’s construction there are plenty of visual hints, not least the standardized woodcut of virtuous citizens – ‘inferior magistrates’ – debating in assembly and counselling their monarch. The image showed wise legislation emanating from the *res publica* of reasonable and moderate ‘inferior magistrates’: it gushes like a fountain to be collected by nymphs and disseminated in a barrel for the common good (Figure 7). Another image showed a learned statesman – Protector Somerset – communing with the ancients and God in order to make law for his people. This imagery was jettisoned by Marian parliaments along with any reference to ‘publique weal’ or ‘commonweal’ whatsoever. When commonwealth vocabulary returned to the genre in 1563 the form it took was ‘weal publique’ rather than ‘commonweal’: *res publica* rather than ‘the common good’ (England and Wales 1563). As a result, the great swathe of Elizabethan legislation now credited with addressing the significant social and economic problems of the



7 England and Wales, *Anno Septimo Edwardi Sexti*, 1553, title-page.

period was passed not for the ‘commonweal and profit of this [her] realm’ but for ‘the high pleasure of almighty God and publique weal’ (Wrightson 2000, 155–8). It is precisely this turn of phrase that explains, in turn, the peak in commonwealth vocabulary in the 1560s and 1570s. The same phrasing continued into the reigns of the early Stuarts, though with fewer parliaments meeting after 1614 the number of statute-books – and so title-page appearances of ‘publique weal’ – also diminished (England and Wales 1624). The 1640 parliaments rectified the deficit with a vengeance, using ‘commonwealth’ rather than ‘publique weal’. At the Restoration all commonwealth vocabulary was permanently excised from the title-pages of parliamentary literature.

The rise of *res publica* is also apparent in other genres and contexts. Thomas Becon’s *The New Pollecy of War* was the first text that wasn’t a statute-book to carry commonwealth vocabulary on its title-page. Published in 1542, it adapted Elyot’s construction in order

to distinguish between ‘the Christian publique weal’ and ‘the cruel tyrant the Great Turk’. Like any sound theorist of *res publica*, Becon also asserted that ‘our [native] country is to be more regarded than our parents’ (Becon 1542, A2r). Becon was followed by a handful of other texts, including moralist tracts like *The Rueful Complaynt of the Publyke Weale of England* in 1550 and Ralph Robinson’s 1551 translation of More’s *Utopia*, which was advertised as *the best state of a publique weal*. *The Rueful Complaynt* encapsulated the space between ‘the common good’ and *res publica* (or ‘commonweal’ and ‘public weal’) which humanism had opened up. It took the form of a versified dialogue between ‘Publyke Weal’ and ‘England’ in which the ‘Publyke Weal’ interrogates England about its current ‘misery’ and ‘England’ replies by blaming endemic greed and corruption among ‘rich men’, ‘merchants’, ‘lords’, ‘craftsmen’, enclosing yeomen – anyone who is socially mobile and oppresses ‘the poor’. ‘Public Weal’ then concludes by thundering:

Would it not make/any heart break/Thus to hear of England’s fall/
Some good man/ for the commons speak/ That rich men mar not all.
God save Edward our King/ And his counsellors so worthy/ And send
them grace/ To help this thing/ For the weal of the communality.

The ‘public weal’ was clearly sympathetic to the plight of the ‘commonweal’; it was also distinct from it (Anon. 1550).

As *The Rueful Complaynt* suggests, between the 1530s and the 1560s – between the eras of ‘commonweal’ and ‘publique weal’ – there was a titanic struggle over the meaning of commonwealth. Although excised from new books of parliamentary statutes, ‘commonweal’ remained the watchword of ‘the Commons’ outwith parliament. The declarations justifying the rebellions of 1536 and 1537 were saturated with the term. The commons undertook ‘the Pilgrimage of Grace for the commonwealth’; it was reported how ‘the good Christian men of England were in [the] North, and [they] were then risen for common wealth’; the first two articles of ‘The Lincoln Articles’ – the manifesto which persuaded the Yorkshire lawyer Robert Aske to lead the Pilgrimage – explained that the rebels were only responding to that ‘which as we think is a great hurt to the common wealth’ (Bush 1996, 369; Gunn 1989, 76; Fletcher and MacCulloch 2008, 142). Moreover, examples of local usage found by Andy Wood suggest that by the end of the 1540s rebels were using the language not simply to invoke ‘the common good’ but also the kind of Aristotelian democracy feared by Elyot. Traditional meanings remained, for sure: Robert Kett was ‘ready in the common-wealth’s

cause to hazard both life and goods' and Protector Somerset assured the rebels of his 'consideration of our whole commonwealth and of justice as appertains'. Yet in 1549 Norfolk insurgents declared 'for a Commonwealth', plotted to 'put down the gentlemen . . . for a commonweal', and ultimately 'died for a commonwealth' (Wood 2007, 144–5; Shagan 1999, 53–63).

It was in this crucible of social and semantic struggle that the network of Cambridge humanists who dominated first Edwardian and then Elizabethan politics forged what proved to be the normative concept of early modern 'commonwealth'. The figureheads were Cecil (Lord Burghley), the most powerful English statesman in the second half of the sixteenth century, and his friend Thomas Smith, the pre-eminent theorist of English *res publica*. Both men were closely involved in the reformatory legislation of Lord Protector Somerset's regime, and Smith wrote his first exposition on commonwealth – *A Brief Conceit Touching the Common Weal of this Realm of England* – at the height of the popular uprisings of 1549. It circulated extensively as a manuscript within governing circles before its anonymous and posthumous publication in 1581 (Stafford 1581). The *modus operandi* of Smith, Cecil, and their 'Cambridge set' was, of course, humanism (Davies 1966, 544). Cecil – 'the very Cato of the commonwealth' – learned to love Cicero at grammar school and St John's, Cambridge before studying common law at Gray's Inn. He combined this formidable academic training with a practised political pragmatism: like More's character in *Utopia*, he had no doubts 'about the usefulness of a life of counsel' (Alford 2007, 77). Smith's application of classical learning was more explicit. He explained to his friend Walter Haddon that *De Republica Anglorum* was written 'in a style mid-way between the historical and the philosophical, giving it the shape in which I imagined that Aristotle wrote of the many Greek commonwealths, books which are no longer extant' (Alston 1906, xiii–xiv). Likewise Smith's 1549 economic treatise – lauded by most historians as the most incisive and innovative work of political economy from the sixteenth century – was primarily an exercise in Ciceronian *honestas*. It employed the rules of classical civility to address the economic problems 'touching the commonweal' in precisely the same way that Digges turned to Roman theory as the template for 'modern war'. Smith provided, in short, a conception of commonwealth that was quintessentially 'modern' in the Renaissance sense of that term (Withington 2009a, 460).

This conception drew less on Elyot's *Governor*, more on *Utopia*. Rather than an aristocratic cadre of virtuous 'governors' monopolizing 'reason', Smith and his circle envisaged an entire citizenry that

was reformed, civil, industrious, and constantly conscious of the common good. And rather than a rigid division between patricians and plebeians, Smith talked (like John Barston) of ‘mutual society’ and ‘society civil’ – overlapping associations in which public decisions at the domestic, local, and national level were invariably reached through counsel. His 1549 dialogue began with the observation that ‘no man is a stranger to the commonweal he is in’; what followed was a ‘multi-vocal, socially complex perspective on the difficulties of the times’ (Smith 1549, 152). *The Commonwealth of England* reiterated that the English commonwealth was, first and foremost, ‘a society or common doing of freemen’. It was constituted not merely by the monarch, nobility, and gentry but also the yeomanry broadly defined – the freemen of towns and cities and freeholders (worth over 40s) in the country. Even ‘day labourers, poor husbandmen, yea merchants or retailers which have no free land, copyholders, all artificers . . . be not altogether neglected’ (Smith 1583, 76). Smith looked to incorporate formally, that is, precisely the sorts of men who had defended and represented their ‘commonweals’ over the previous century: the ‘honest men’ and ‘chief inhabitants’ of England’s rural and urban *communitas*. As a vision of the polity this was not too different from popular expectations, and in the hundred years after 1560 a variety of legislative and institutional developments saw the establishment of something akin to an incorporated *res publica* (a process discussed in Chapter 7). Yet the perennial problem facing Smith and other reformers was that England was not, in fact, Utopia. Utopian citizens enjoyed communality and equality not because it was their right but because they were civil enough to enjoy it. As inherently rational and industrious people, they welcomed and internalized rules based on reason. In England, as anywhere, this was not necessarily the case.

The solution that Smith offered to this problem in the 1540s encapsulated both the modernity of his perspective and the tension between classical theories of *res publica* and contemporary practice. As in ancient Athens and Rome, Utopian citizenship utilized the institution of slavery as at once a punitive institution for those who lapsed in their civility and a free source of labour (More 1516, 80, 83). Smith attempted to transpose this system into England in 1547. He did so as the proponent and likely author of the infamous Vagrants Act (1 Edw. VI c3). This observed that ‘idle and vagabond persons, being unprofitable members, or rather enemies of the commonwealth, had been suffered to remain and increase’ (England and Wales 1548; Davies 1966, 533–4). It opined that ‘if they should be punished by death, whipping, imprisonment, and with other corporal pain, it were

not without their deserts, for the example of others, and to the benefit of the commonwealth'. The statute nevertheless conceded that 'if they could be brought to be made profitable, and do service it were much to be wished and desired'. It was accordingly ruled that if any 'master' offered 'such idle person service, and labour, and that by him refused', and could 'prove the idle living of the person' with 'two honest witnesses' before a Justice of the Peace', then that person 'was to be marked with a hot Iron in the breast, the mark of V and to be his slave' for two years. The master was to give 'the said slave bread and water, or small drink, and such refuse of meat as he shall think meet [and] cause the said slave to work by beating'. 'Slaves' who absconded were to be marked on the forehead and enslaved in perpetuity; if they ran away again they were to be killed. The basic thrust of the statute was not that different to earlier legislation designed to cope with the problems of a nascent capitalist economy. Its real novelty lay in its conceptualization of poverty (or its self-induced forms) as slavery. The response of the English commons was unequivocal. The majority of urban and rural magistrates simply ignored it. Where vagrants were threatened with the law, in Norfolk, it may have contributed to rebellion. Certainly the sixteenth article of 'Kett's Demands' (issued during the commotion of 1549) proclaimed that 'We pray that all bond men may be made free for God made all free with his precious blood shedding' (Fletcher and MacCulloch 2008, 158). Although the statute was subsequently repealed in 1549, Smith and other members of his Cambridge circle unsuccessfully recommended it be 'revived and duly put in execution' in 1558 (Davies 1966, 544).

A year later, in 1559, 'commonweal' (as opposed to 'publique weal') depicted *res publica* on a printed title-page for the first time. The cultural driver was international Protestantism, a primary instigator the Earl of Leicester. In 1559 the common lawyer William Bavande 'Englished' *A woorke of Ioannes Ferrarius Montanus, touchyng the good orderynge of a common weale* (Bavande 1559). Ferrarius was a German humanist and follower of the great Lutheran and humanist Philip Melancthon; he placed particular especial on lesser magistrates in upholding and reforming *res publica*. The same year the evangelical bookseller John Day translated Johann Sleidanus's *Commentaries, concerning the state of religion and common weale, during the raigne of the Emperour Charles the fift*. Commissioned by the reformer Martin Bucer, himself a friend and ally of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the chronicle related the course of the Protestant Reformation to date (for the second edition, published in 1560, Day changed 'commonweal' to 'commonwealth') (Sleidanus 1560). In 1562, Robert Fills 'translated out of French into English' *The lavves*

and statutes of Geneva [...] and their common wealth quietli governed. Fills had spent most of the 1550s as a Marian exile in Geneva. He now used humanist methodology (he listed ‘Elyot’s dictionary’ in his library) to popularize John Calvin’s teaching for an English audience. He explained that just as ‘we may peruse and understand the laws, fashions and ordinances of the Jews, Grecians, Romans and others’, so there was much to learn ‘out of a strange and far country, and foreign tongue’ (Fills 1562, iiiii). Each of these treatises was published from the heart of the Protestant establishment: Bavande was a renowned translator of evangelical works at the Inns of Court, Fills had been a member of John Knox’s congregation in Geneva, and Day was responsible for producing John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (Andrew Pettegree, *ODNB*). More to the point, it was from Leicester that two of the three printers sought patronage and political backing. Dudley protected Day’s monopoly over a number of books of popular religious instruction after 1560 (the income from which helped fund the project with Foxe). And Fills not only dedicated his discussion of ‘a well-instituted commonweal’ to Leicester (Fills 1562, iiiii); in 1567 he became his chaplain (David J. Crankshaw, *ODNB*).

Commonwealth and Monarchical Republicanism

By the time *De Republica Anglorum* and ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’ were published in the early 1580s, therefore, ‘commonwealth’ had already enjoyed a long and extraordinary history. Coined as a term of indigenous politics and governance, it was subsequently seized and exploited by magnates, monarchs, and parliaments. Denigrated by Elyot and displaced from parliamentary literature, it was nevertheless contested by rebels and rulers, appropriated by humanists and Protestants, and re-affixed as the moniker of the Elizabethan *res publica*. It was a vocabulary that could invoke the common good and communal resources (material and moral); types of polity and their constitutions (aristocracy, democracy, mixed monarchy); a person’s country and nation (and the service they owed it); even a republican ‘free state’. It was the moral and normative centre of political discourse; yet it could also justify the implementation of slavery. As importantly, it described local communities and their constituent societies quite as easily as the sovereign state. The vernacularization of *res publica* ran through the spine of this history. However, the especial force and peculiarity of ‘commonwealth’ lay in its layers of

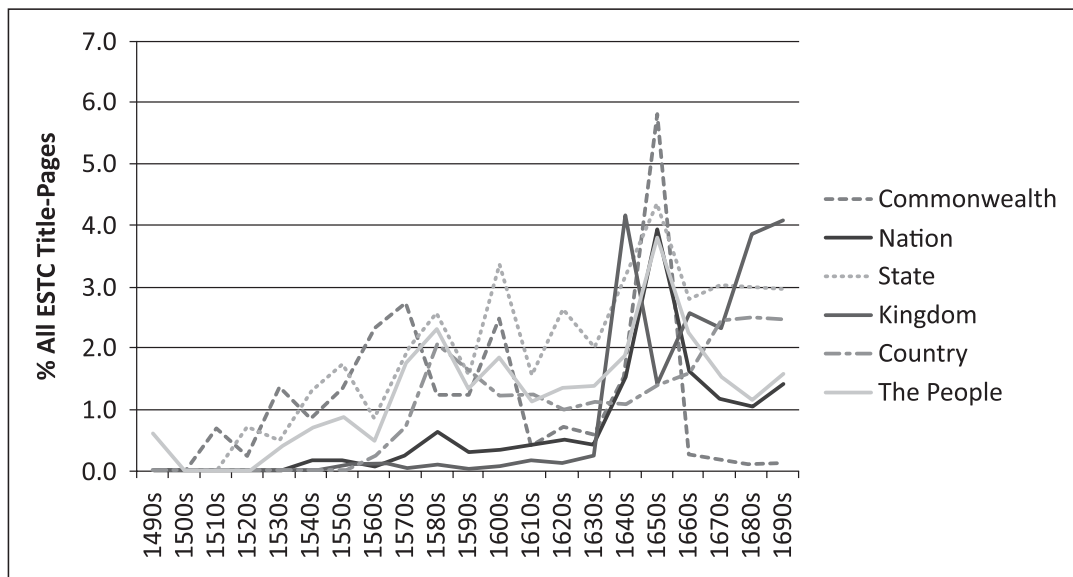


Figure 5.3 Commonwealth Vocabulary Compared, 1490–1700.

inference and archaeology of meaning. Comparable terms like ‘country’, ‘state’, ‘nation’, and ‘kingdom’ lacked the connotations of popular and elite, indigenous and classical, Gothic and modern, social and political, general and particular.

Given its semantic complexity, the importance of commonwealth vocabulary in the hundred years after 1559 is all the more remarkable. This significance is demonstrated by Figure 5.3, which compares the history of commonwealth and its variants with the trajectories of some alternative terms and synonyms: ‘state’, ‘nation’, ‘country’, ‘the people’, and ‘kingdom’. It suggests that until the 1610s ‘commonwealth’, ‘state’, and ‘the people’ were by far the most visible of these terms (at least insofar as printed title-pages were concerned) with commonwealth especially dominant in the 1560s and 1570s. The 1580s saw the popularization of synonyms like ‘country’ and ‘the people’ (and to a lesser extent ‘nation’). While the prominence of ‘state’ stemmed from its more general sense of ‘condition’, increasingly from the 1590s it was the ‘condition’ of the *res publica* that the word described – a tendency enhanced by the new popularity of ‘reason of state’ literature. This coincided with the significant decrease in the number of title-pages containing commonwealth language under James and Charles: while fewer parliaments inevitably meant fewer books of statutes (an important means by which the concept was propagated) the number of other genres bearing in the term also declined. The phrase ‘the people’ became relatively prominent from the 1570s, in large part because of the extremely popular *Whole*

Book of Psalms being designed ‘to be sung in all churches, of all the people together’ (Day 1572). However, Thomas Cooper’s *An Admonition to the People of England* (Cooper 1589) suggested the declarative power of the phrase – a power quickly appropriated by propagandists in the 1640s.

Perhaps most striking, however, is that viewed in these terms ‘kingdom’ was well-nigh invisible until the breakdown in the relationship between king and parliament after 1640, when it became ubiquitous. The political struggle also revitalized the fortunes of ‘commonwealth’, which became one of the motifs of parliamentary propaganda: although both royalists and parliamentarians claimed to be acting on behalf of the ‘kingdom’ and ‘state’, royalists proved extremely reluctant to talk in terms of ‘the commonwealth’ (or, indeed, ‘the public’). Commonwealth’s ascendancy was assured in the 1650s, when it described the revolutionary *res publica* in theory and in practice. The Restoration of the monarchy was, in turn, quite as violent and comprehensive as the impact of civil war and regicide, certainly discursively. Indeed, viewed in the round it is one of the great historical ironies that the mid century troubles not only destroyed once and for all the vernacular notion of commonwealth. They were also the progenitor of ‘kingdom’ as the term most likely to describe English society.

This suggests a dynamic of continuity and change that is, perhaps, paradoxical for the modern reader. The republican regimes of the 1650s adopted as their watchword one of the oldest and well-established vernacular terms – albeit one encrusted with a variety of meanings and possibilities. Royalists, insofar as they congregated under the concept of ‘kingdom’, helped popularize a word that was relatively invisible before the 1640s. The point is nicely made by comparing the percentage of ESTC title-pages carrying these words at regular intervals after 1630. For the period 1500 to 1630, for example, ‘state’ appears on 2.2 per cent of all ESTC title-pages, ‘commonwealth’ on 1.1 per cent, ‘nation’ on 0.4 per cent, and ‘kingdom’ with 0.1 per cent. If this is extended to include the period 1500 and 1660 (i.e. the wars and regicide) then ‘state’ has appeared on 2.9 per cent of all ESTC title-pages, ‘commonwealth’ on 2.3 per cent, ‘kingdom’ on 1.6 per cent, and ‘nation’ on 1.5 per cent. Yet the eclipse of ‘commonwealth’ at the Restoration was such – and the rise of ‘kingdom’ so emphatic – that for the period 1500 and 1700 as a whole ‘state’ appears on 2.9 per cent of ESTC title-pages, ‘kingdom’ on 2.5 per cent, ‘nation’ on 1.4 per cent, and ‘commonwealth’ on 1.2 per cent. Commonwealth emerges, in effect, as the least visible of these early modern words despite its relative prominence for most of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This indicates the extent of commonwealth's eventual decline. As importantly, it also suggests that the peak in commonwealth language in the seventeenth century was consistent with, rather than anomalous to, the discursive tendencies of the previous 100 years – in particular the first few decades of Elizabeth's reign.

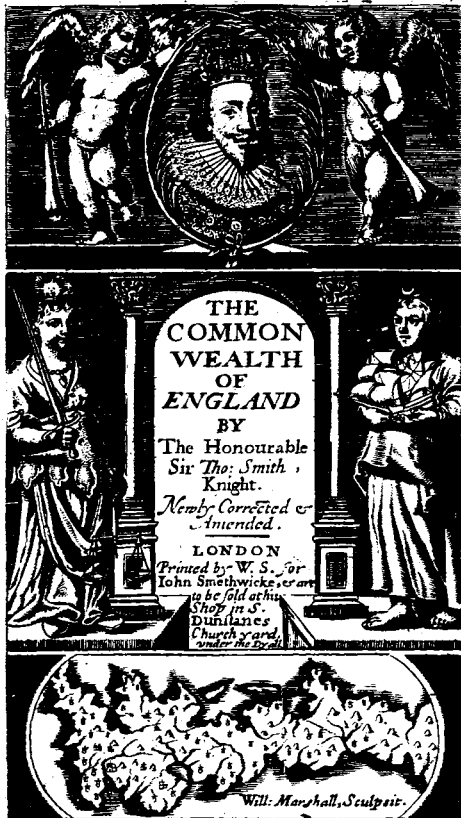
This is not as paradoxical as it might sound. Over the last twenty years social and cultural historians have placed increasing emphasis on the capacity for civic consciousness and public activism in England after the death of Henry VIII – so much so that it is now common to speak of an English 'monarchical republic' in the second half of the sixteenth century. The basic insight of this perspective is that although sixteenth-century England was a monarchy, the nature of governance was such that enormous power and responsibility increasingly devolved across the social spectrum – not merely to the Privy Council and parliament, but to governors of counties, cities and boroughs, and, increasingly, parishes. According to Patrick Collinson, 'Elizabethan England was a republic which happened also to be a monarchy: or vice versa' – a *res publica* in which Renaissance ideals of personal and public government were widely disseminated and appropriated, and in which 'citizens' were 'concealed within subjects' (Collinson 1994, 43; McDiarmid 2007, 1–9). This interpretation of Elizabethan politics is clearly resonant with important strands of the story of 'commonwealth' outlined here; it is no coincidence that Collinson looked to Cecil and Smith as the guiding spirits of 'monarchical republicanism' (Collinson 1990). The survival of commonwealth vocabulary into the mid seventeenth century suggests, in turn, that the institutional and cultural foundations of *res publica* did not disappear after 1603. This was despite the scepticism – perhaps downright hostility – of the later Jacobean and Carolinian regimes to the civic implications of the vocabulary, and so the public pretensions of erstwhile subjects.

One key to this continuity, considered in more detail in Chapter 7, was what social historians have described as early modern 'state-formation'. This involved the institutional expansion of *res publica* not so much through centralization – the creation of a permanent bureaucracy of the kind usually associated with 'absolute monarchy' – as *incorporation*, whereby localized communities, companies, and societies became more affiliated with metropolitan institutions even as they retained significant degrees of autonomy. This facilitated a huge increase in the amount of centrally decreed governance from the 1560s which was implemented through – rather than despite – the connivance and discretion of local (and often quite humble)

office-holders. This broadening of the ‘publique weal’ accompanied a second development: the proliferation of a host of printed genres providing vernacular discussions about ‘commonwealths’ and ‘states’ (Peltonen 1995). These ranged from translations of classical and continental treatises to ‘modern’ histories and geographies (e.g. Aristotle 1598; Bodin 1606; Fletcher 1591). They also encompassed more popular dialogues and pamphlets as well as handbooks on Machiavellianism or the virtuous life (e.g. Averell 1588; Greene 1592; Becon 1594). In the meantime, late medieval notions of the common good survived in popular memory, through local government, and through plans and projects developed in its name.

The cumulative effect of these and many other titles was that by 1600 notions of good and bad citizenship; love of nation and country; the relative attractions of democracy, aristocracy, and city republics (and their corrupt perversions); the means to compare and evaluate the quality of governors: the mediating role of law and counsel – all these characteristics of commonwealth were firmly embedded in the vernacular political imagination. Insofar as this imagination was saturated with classical commonplaces and comparisons, then it was ‘modern’ in the early modern sense of that term. As importantly, they increasingly characterized the political cultures of England’s incorporated communities and societies: the ‘little commonwealths’ of parish, borough, city, and county (Hindle 2004, 334; Withington 2005, 10–11). Even if certain sorts of people were excluded from this institutional and discursive penumbra – whether for reasons of geography, gender, poverty, or illiteracy – there were increasing numbers of professionals and activists more than happy to impart their knowledge and advice: not least lawyers, clerics, the burgeoning cadre of ‘university men’. None of which is to claim that commonwealth vocabulary in some sense ‘caused’ the civil wars. Rather it provided an important framework for political actions and their justification – or condemnation – by the time the king and the Commons fell out in 1640.

Emblematic of this continuity of reference was the appearance of new editions of Edwardian and Elizabethan texts. Smith’s *The Commonwealth of England* was published repeatedly after its translation from the Latin into English in 1589, first by the Exeter-born bookseller John Windet and subsequently by his apprentice and successor William Stansby (also born in Exeter). The text was sold in the shop of Stansby’s friend, John Smithwick, in St Dunstan’s Churchyard on Fleet Street. Stansby’s authors included Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, Samuel Purchas, John Donne, and Michal Drayton – men at the heart of the contemporary literary and political estab-



THE
COMMON-
WEALTH
OF
ENGLAND:

And the manner and Govern-
ment thereof.

COMPILED BY THE
Honourable Sir *Thomas Smith*, Knight,
Doctor of both Lawes, and one of the
principall Secretaries unto the two
most worthy Princes, King E^d
WARD, and Queene
ELIZABETH.

With new Additions of the chief Courts
in ENGLAND, and the Offices
thereof, by the said
Author.

LONDON,
Printed by *R. Young* for *J. Smethwicke*, and
are to be sold at his shop in *S. Dun-*
stons Church-yard.
1640.

8 Thomas Smith, *Commonwealth of England*, 1640, title-page.

lishment. Although Stansby died in 1638, Smithwick insured that a new edition of 'Smith's Commonweal' was available for 1640. New editions of 'Leicester's Commonwealth' – complete, abridged, versified – quickly followed (despite attempts to suppress it); so, too, did an edition of Sir John Cheke's condemnation of the 1549 rebellion, *The Hurt of Sedition, How Grievous it is to a Commonwealth* (Cheke 1641). A prominent Cambridge humanist, Cheke had been a close friend and correspondent of both Smith and Cecil. However, the most spectacular example of the dialectic between past and present was the publication of a new edition of Robinson's translation of *Utopia* in 1639. The publishing history of this foundational humanist text is fascinating and deserves further study (Baker 1999). Initially ushered into print by Cecil in 1551, it was re-printed in 1556, 1597, 1624, and 1639 – at moments, that is, of especial political uncertainty. On each occasion the title-page was substantially altered, although 'a best state of a publique weal' remained fixed throughout. In 1639 there was, however, a major innovation. For the first and indeed only time

A fruteful/

and pleasaunt woꝛke of the
 beste state of a publyque weale, and
 of the newe ple called *Utopia*: written
 in Latine by Spꝛ Thomas More
 knyght, and translated into Englyshe
 by Raphe Robynson Citizein and
 Goldsmythe of London, at the
 procurement, and earnest re-
 quest of George Tadlowe
 CITIZEIN & Haberdassher
 of the same Citie.
 (.)

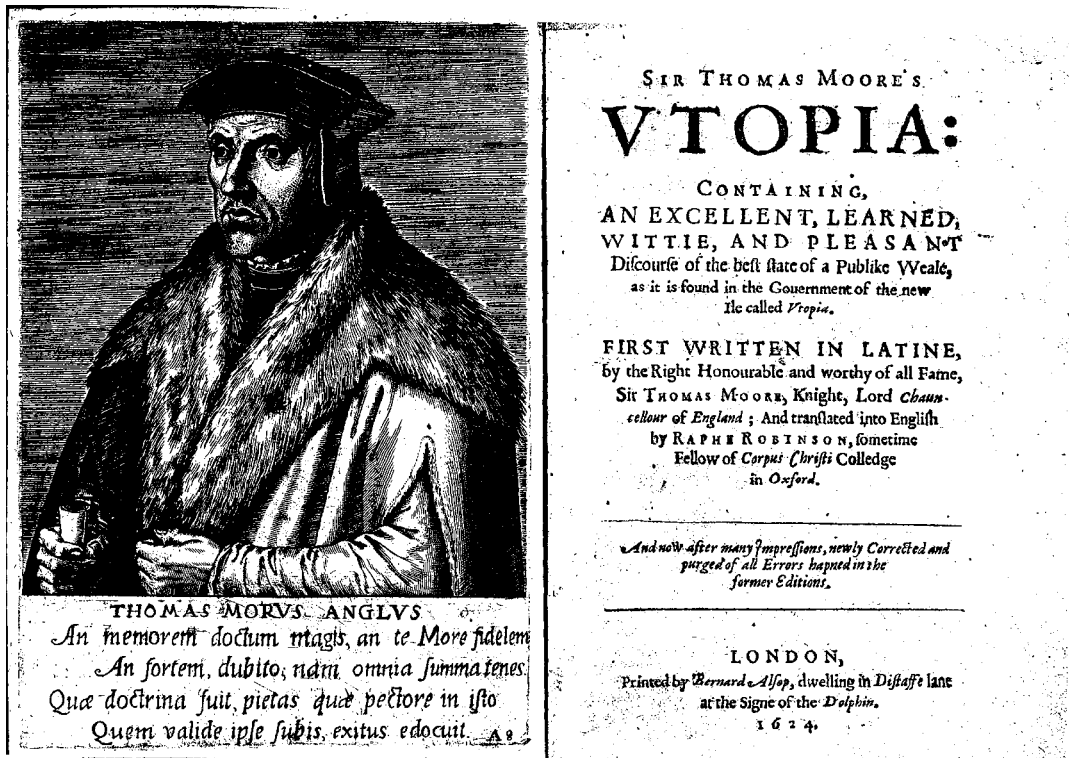
Printed at London
 by Abraham Vele, dwelling in Pauls
 churchparde at the sygne of
 the Lambe. Anno.
 1551.



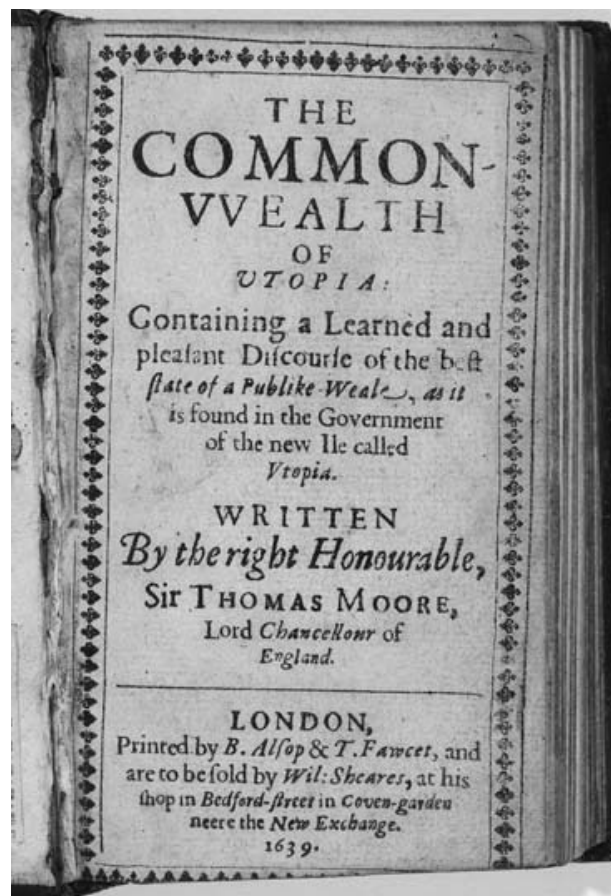
9 Ralph Robinson, *Utopia*, 1551, title-page.

readers were enticed with the prospect of learning about *The Commonwealth of Utopia*, with ‘Commonwealth’ set much more prominently than the rest of the title-page. A text symptomatic of the politics of commonwealth in the previous century, it was now represented as a sign of the current times.

The same continuities can be found in the career of John Pym, a man pivotal to the outbreak of civil war in 1642. If the epithet ‘King Pym’ is overstated then he was nevertheless deeply implicated in those religious and commercial ‘companies’ that crystallized and sustained a sense of frustration with royal policy after 1625 (Kupperman 1993, 10–15). He was also singular in his ability to manage and popularize opposition to Charles following the calling of the Short and Long Parliaments in 1640. The aggressive Protestantism of Pym and his allies, which was reminiscent of Leicester, is well known. Less appreciated is his humanism. His grandfather, a kinsman of Thomas Elyot, was named Erasmus; Pym’s father, great-grandfather, brother and son were all christened Alexander – an unusual and symbolic family



10 Ralph Robinson, *Utopia*, 1624, title-page.



11 Ralph Robinson, *Utopia*, 1639, title-page.

in the early modern period. Born in 1584, Pym enjoyed the archetypal education of the University of Oxford and the Inns of Court before becoming a lawyer and MP. His utter immersion in the culture so implied was best revealed by his *Declaration and Vindication* of 1643, in which he defended his significant role in precipitating civil war. Directed at ‘Malignants and people ill-affected to the good of the Commonwealth’, he observed that

In that devilish conspiracy of *Cataline* against the state and Senate of Rome, none among the senators was so obnoxious to the envy of the Conspirators or liable their traducements, as that great Orator and Patriot of his Country, *Cicero*; because by his counsel and zeal to the Commonwealth, their plot for the time thereof was discovered and prevented.

Pym continued that, ‘though I will not be so arrogant, to parallel myself with that Worthy, yet my case (if we may compare lesser things with great) hath to his a very near resemblance’. This was not least because his enemies, ‘out of their malice’, ‘[convert] that to a vice, which without boast be it spoken, I esteem as my principal virtue’. The said ‘virtue’ would not have been out of place in either republican Rome or Elizabethan England. It was ‘my care to the Public Utility’ (Pym 1643, 7).

The Rise and Fall of Commonwealth

Notions of commonwealth forged in the sixteenth century – in particular the idea of a participatory and Protestant *res publica* promoted under Elizabeth – are an important context for understanding the outbreak of civil war. However, the pressures and opportunities thereafter made for a discursive intensity that was quantitatively different to what had gone before. This can be appreciated simply by considering the distribution of the thirty-eight authors who, like Pym, used commonwealth vocabulary more than once on title-pages bearing their name during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴

⁴ This figure excludes unattributed acronyms (e.g. ‘M. E.’), pseudonyms (e.g. ‘A Well-wisher of the Commonwealth’), new editions of old texts, governmental literature (e.g. books of statutes or proclamations), and speculative authorship. Newspaper titles are only counted once despite appearing serially. It also excludes Thomas Smith, whose *Discourse of the Commonweal of England* was posthumously published in 1581 by William Strafford as *A Compendious or Brief Examination of Certain Ordinary Complaints, of Divers of Our Countrymen*.

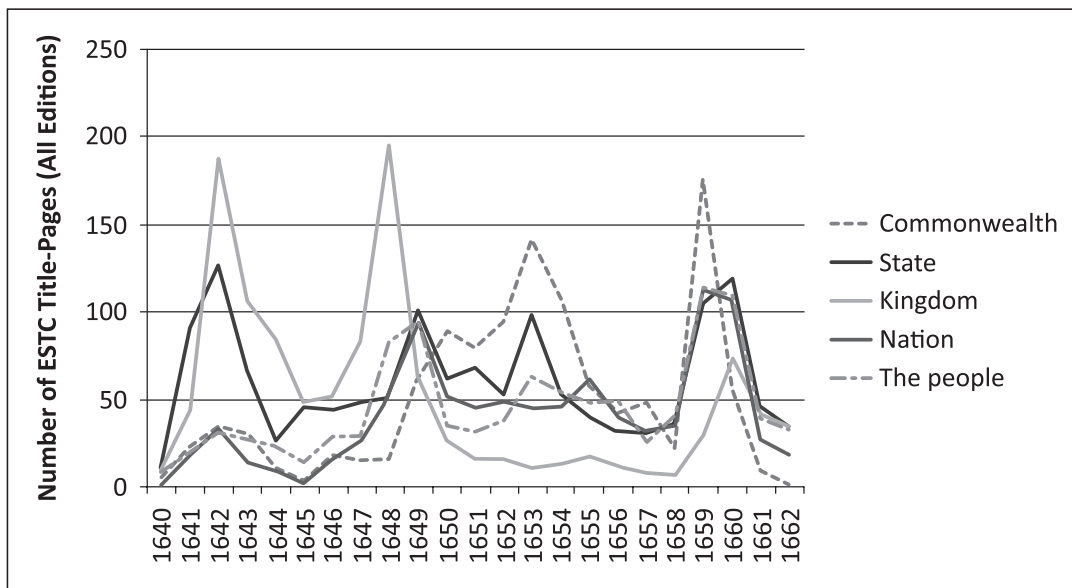


Figure 5.4 Commonwealth Vocabulary Compared, 1640–1662.

All but one of these men – there are no women in the sample – wrote their said title-pages in the seventeenth century. The exception was the clergyman and anti-theatrical polemicist Stephen Gosson, who followed his 1579 *The School of Abuse* (which announced ‘poets, pipers, players, kesters and such like’ as ‘caterpillars of a commonwealth’) with *Plays Confuted* three years later (this promised to prove that plays ‘are not be suffered in a Christian commonweal’) (Gosson 1579; 1582). Aside from Gosson, only one of the remaining thirty-seven authors published a commonwealth title-page before 1640. This was George Wither, England’s first self-proclaimed ‘modern poet’ and ‘modern author’ (see Chapter 3). More to the point, twenty-seven of these serial users of commonwealth only began including the term in their title-pages after 1649 – a pattern which fits with the yearly appearance of political language between 1640 and 1660 outlined in Figure 5.4. This shows that while commonwealth vocabulary was certainly part of the discursive mix in the 1640s, it only became really dominant after the execution of the king and the formal establishment of the English ‘free-state’ in 1649.

Consideration of the most habitual users of commonwealth vocabulary in the mid seventeenth century demonstrates at once the range of agendas and perspectives the term accommodated as well as the variety of meanings it could invoke. (‘Habitual’ here is taken to mean affixing the term on five printed title-pages or more). The author to use commonwealth most often in this way was the Leveller,

John Lilburne (ten title-pages). Just below Lilburne was James Harrington, the republican theorist, and Thomas Violet, a political economist (both eight title-pages). There then followed three authors who used the term on six title-pages apiece: the educational reformer Samuel Hartlib, the journalist and republican theorist Marchamont Nedham, and the Fifth Monarchist John Spittlehouse. Making up the rear with five title-pages each was the Quaker propagandist Edward Burrough and the ‘modern poet’ – and religious prophet – George Wither.

This impressive list of polemicists, theorists, and activists should not be regarded as a group of ‘commonwealth’ writers *per se* – they were widely divergent in their particular agendas and backgrounds and in all but the case of Harrington published more texts without ‘commonwealth’ on the title-page than on it. That said, with the exception of Lilburne and Burrough – who both preferred ‘the people’ over ‘commonwealth’ – they all used commonwealth vocabulary to situate and advertise their publications more often than alternative designations (i.e. the terms compared in Figure 5.4).

Through the pens of these men alone ‘commonwealth’ re-invoked the full range of meanings that it had acquired in the course of its turbulent history. In 1646 Hartlib used commonwealth to describe the traditional idea of the ‘common good’. In works after 1650 these lingering senses merged with the idea of ‘country’ broadly defined (Hartlib 1646; 1650; 1653; 1655a; 1655b). Thomas Violet did the same in his petitions and treatises on political economy, though after 1650 this sense merged with the republic formally established (Violet 1643; 1650; 1651; 1653a; 1653b; 1656). Lilburne gave this familiar conception a familiarly political twist. In four pamphlets published in late 1648 and 1649 he used commonwealth to signal the social entity to which he believed all public office-holders – whether soldiers, MPs, or pamphleteers; aldermen or churchwardens; parliamentarians or royalists – were ultimately answerable. *England’s new chains discovered* represented, for example, ‘the serious apprehensions of a part of the people, in behalf of the Commonwealth’. *A manifestation from Lieutenant Col. John Lilburn, Mr. William Walwyn, Mr. Thomas Prince, and Mr. Richard Overton . . . and others, commonly (though unjustly) styled Levellers* was likewise ‘intended for their full vindication from the many aspersions cast upon them, to render them odious to the world, and unserviceable to the Common-wealth’ (Lilburne 1649d; 1649c; 1649a; 1649b). In these renderings ‘commonwealth’ was synonymous with ‘the people’, his favourite term for the idea of collective sovereignty and a concept which the rebels of 1549 would surely have understood. Even in

subsequent pamphlets commonwealth remained distinct from its public authority (Lilburne 1650; 1653). The sense of commonwealth as the greater collective good was retained by the religious polemicists Burrough and Spittlehouse in their appeals to the 1650s *res publica*. Burrough's justification for his Quaker pamphlets after 1656 was that they were published 'for the good of this Commonwealth, and the information of all people in it' (Burrough 1658; 1656; 1657; 1659a; 1659b). Spittlehouse introduced his 1653 argument for oligarchic government by the Saints by promising to discuss 'the present tempers of each society of people in this Commonwealth, under each degree or notion whatsoever'. He took 'society' to be the different religious groupings and classes within England, 'commonwealth' as the society (as we understand that term) in its entirety (Spittlehouse 1653e; 1653a; 1653b; 1653c; 1653d).

For the republicans Harrington and Nedham commonwealth was, in contrast, a straightforward term of classical emulation and comparison: England was now a republican *res publica*; the ancients, along with the most astute Renaissance writers, offered the best exemplar for both its theory and practice. In *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, which he published in 1656 after years locked away in his private library, Harrington argued that an 'equal commonwealth' was the logical conclusion to England's historical and economic development over the previous two centuries. 'Ancient prudence' confirmed what recent experience showed: economic and political power were closely related; political stability required a certain symmetry between a commonwealth's social, economic, and constitutional structures. In Oceana (i.e. England) the redistribution of wealth and resources under the Tudors, the erosion of feudalism and the rise of the middling and commercial classes meant that there were no longer the concentrations of property ('real or personal') to support an absolute monarchy, hereditary aristocracy, or, indeed, the 'Gothic' mixed monarchy of king, lords and commons (Tawney 1941; Wrightson 2000, 4–5; Pocock 1992, xix). From within the hurlyburly of early modern journalism Nedham arrived at an equally materialist analysis: a free commonwealth offered, above all else, the best means of satisfying the particular 'interests' of different groupings ('societies') within the commonwealth, as well as defending the collective interest of the people at large (Nedham, 1660).

The corpus of George Wither's 'commonwealth' texts ran the gamut of these meanings; moreover they did so with a degree of 'singularity' appropriate for England's first self-proclaimed 'modern

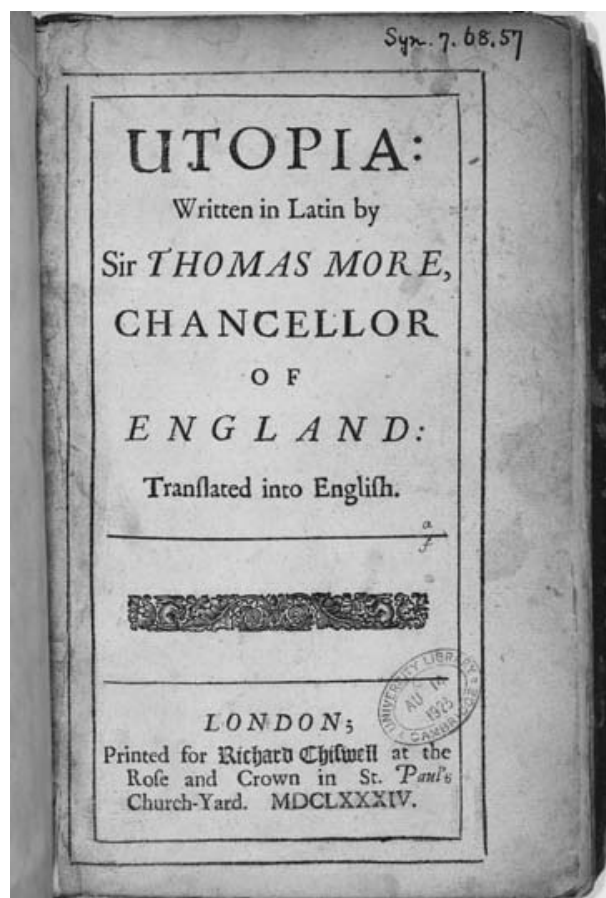
author'. In his 1624 text, *The Scholars Purgatory*, he contrasted 'the Stationers common-wealth' – which was really the particular interest of a corporation and its members – with 'the publike advantage of the Church, the state & whole commonwealth of England' (Wither 1624). In *Opobalsamum Anglicanum* he deployed the medieval metaphor of the social body and promised 'An English balm, lately pressed out of a shrub, and spread upon these papers, for the cure of some scabs, gangrene and cancers endangering the body of this commonwealth' (Wither 1646). Like Lilburne, who admired his poetry, Wither appealed to the greater good from a partisan and deeply personalized perspective. As he put it, he belonged to the 'fellow-ship' of 'the well-affected English'. Unlike Lilburne, Wither jubilantly embraced the transformation to a republic in 1649, though not on the grounds of property and interest delineated by Harrington and Nedham. In 1651 Wither published *The British Appeals, With Gods Merciful Replies on Behalf of the Commonwealth of England*. This was a 'brief commemorative poem, composed for a memorial of some of those many signal mercies lately vouchsafed to this republike' (Wither 1651a). The poem, which was anything but brief, was quickly followed by *Three Grains of Spiritual Frankincense, Infused into Three Hymns of Praise*. This consisted of three republican hymns 'humbly offered toward the publike thanksgiving, commanded by authority of Parliament to be celebrated throughout the Commonwealth of England, the 30 of this present January' (Wither 1651b). In keeping with Wither's anti-classicism this liturgy for the republic appealed not to ancient Greece or Rome but the primitive church. Likewise the crimes of Charles were not those of Roman tyrants so much as the Pharaohs (and their oppression of Israel) and the Normans: 'This is the Day, whereon our Yoke/ Of Norman Bondage first was broke/ And England, from her chains made free'. Yet for all his sublimation of the Gothic, Wither still echoed (consciously or not) the exclusionary tendencies of More's *Utopia* and Smith's Vagrancy Law. As he thundered:

Slaves, they deserve to be, therefore,/And to be bar'd for evermore,/
The Freedoms of this Commonweal,/Who shall not be thankful, now
appear,/And vindicate with Sword and Spear,/God's just replies, to our
Appeal. (Wither 1651b, 3)

Wither's hymn exposed the fundamental paradox of early modern commonwealth. The vocabulary described a condition of collective belonging and participation; but it alienated, even enslaved, those who could not or did not want to participate and belong.

Conclusion

Unfortunately for Wither the course of political events meant that it was precisely those deserved to be enslaved who secured political power in 1660. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the discursive fall of 'commonwealth' was as swift and resounding as the ascent of 'kingdom'. Its disavowal was encapsulated by Richard Baxter's remarkable public statement of 1670, in which he declared 'that whereas the bookseller hath in the catalogue of my books, named my *Holy Commonwealth, or political aphorisms* I do hereby recall the said book, and profess my repentance that ever I published it'. As eloquent was the 1684 edition of *Utopia*. Translated by Gilbert Burnett, not only 'commonwealth' but also 'the best state of a publique weal' was now excised from the title-page. The term did not even see a revival during the fraught years of the so-called 'exclusion crisis', when it seemed England was once more on the brink of civil war. Although the vocabulary of commonwealth seemed irreparably soiled its



12 Gilbert Burnett, *Utopia*, 1684, title-page.

synonyms and connotations were more resilient. The ‘publique weal’ became ‘the public’. Terms like ‘nation’ and ‘the people’ – not to mention ‘state’ and ‘country’ – perpetuated. ‘Society’ was increasingly appropriated to denote not merely voluntary associations and groups but also the collective in its more general and abstract sense. And between the covers (if not on the title-pages) writers like Locke continued to talk of ‘commonwealth’ – though they were careful to define their terms.

Certainly the Restoration poet, MP, and political satirist Andrew Marvell was not short of a vocabulary to express his belief and conviction in a *res publica* that should be distinct from and served by sovereign authority. Marvell was a product of the ‘monarchical republic’ if ever there was one. Born into the urban middling sort, he was educated at Hull Grammar School and Cambridge University; enthused with a classicized and Protestant world view; and was highly attuned to the symbiotic relationship between commercial and political power. For Marvell, commonwealth after 1660 was a partisan and dangerous word. As he noted in November 1669, Westminster was rife with rumours ‘that there was some great & evil design on foot, & many old Army commonwealths & Council of States men and Outlaws & foreigners about town’. Yet if the word was redundant, the concept was as vital as ever: he served ‘the public’ and ‘the nation’ instead (Marvell 1927, 91).

The rise and fall of commonwealth is one of the epic historical narratives. It is also the discursive spine of English early modernity. As the vehicle for the ‘common good’ and *communitas* it describes the slow decline, and intermittent efflorescence, of medieval commonalty: the Gothic culture and social relationships eulogized by Pugin, Ruskin and Morris and valorized by the first generations of economic historians. As the vernacular translation of *res publica* it is equally pivotal to the history of English nationhood and state-formation identified by William Johnson and outlined by subsequent generations of political and social historians. Insofar as these meanings had contrasting indigenous and classical antecedents then ‘commonwealth’ served as an intersection and occasional battleground for local and learned (or Gothic and Renaissance) culture. In all of these respects it was a vocabulary that accommodated within itself (so to speak) the fraught transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gessellschaft*, or ‘community’ to ‘society’. This transition was only made fraught for contemporaries – and muddier for historians – by the politicization of commonwealth after 1640 and its sequestration by ideologues and partisans. Ostensibly a term of the wider collective and the greater good, in practice it became a symbol of what was also styled ‘the

Good Old Cause'. Yet as 'Leicester's Commonwealth' testified, the appropriations of the 1640s and 1650s merely continued a process begun in the previous century, when the vocabulary was first sequestered as a term of international Protestantism.

Clearly this politics was crucial to the term's history. However, it can obscure another aspect of the vocabulary which is especially significant for the broader themes of this book. Keith Wrightson has argued with Tawney 'that the precursors of economic history in Britain included those who detected an economic and social dimension in the seventeenth-century crisis of the British monarchy and sought to explain its nature' (Wrightson 2000, 4). While Harrington was the most prominent of these writers, *Oceana* was merely the most recent example of a tradition of indigenous economic and social analyses that extended from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Thomas Smith's *Discourse* to Francis Bacon's *History of Henry VII* (which Harrington drew on extensively) (3). Harrington's contention that stable political constitutions should reflect changing economic and social circumstances was anticipated, for example, by Smith in *The Commonwealth of England* (Smith used the analogy of the shoe always needing to fit the foot). Smith had already established the principle that 'the common good' was dependent on the capacity for personal and corporate 'profit' – or what Nedham later described as 'interest' – in his *Discourse of the Commonweal*. Yet these early examples of 'modern' economic analysis are also the foundational texts of English civic humanism: More, Smith, and Harrington were the greatest humanists of their generations; each reached their diagnoses for the contemporary commonwealth through the explicit application of classical methods and 'ancient prudence'.

Two points follow from this. First, the genealogy of modern economic history and theory – and the various political creeds it has sanctioned – is inextricable from the English Renaissance broadly defined. In this sense, neither Tawney nor Pocock are wrong in their respective characterizations of Harrington as an 'economic' and 'humanist' thinker: like Smith and More before him, he was both. Second, if 'the spirit of the Renaissance' was, as most Victorians agreed, 'the intellectual side' of the 'transition from Medieval to Commercial Society', then it also provided the skills and tools to critique, challenge, and even reverse that process. William Morris's appropriation of *Utopia* in 1893 is a case in point. England's greatest exponent of the Gothic was well aware that *Utopia* was written by 'the enthusiast of the Renaissance'. He nevertheless regarded it 'a necessary part of a Socialist's library'. Far from a 'charming literary exercise' or an 'idealized ancient society', *Utopia* was 'a living work

of art' that 'we Socialists cannot forget'. As far as Morris was concerned, More had bequeathed nothing less than the 'steady expression' of 'a society in which the individual man can scarcely conceive of his existence apart from the Commonwealth of which he forms a portion' (Morris 1893, 374–5). Morris's socialism would no doubt have bewildered the sixteenth-century authors of 'Leicester's Commonwealth' and *The Commonwealth of England*. The sense of commonwealth informing it would have been more familiar.