Politics. Rivista di Studi Politici
www.rivistapolitics.eu
n. 20 (4), 2/2023, 47-72

ISSN 2785-7719
Guida editori s.r.l.

From *Commons* to *People*: On the Invention of Modern Political Language in England

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Abstract

Between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, a significant shift in English political language occurred. Threatened by the perceived egalitarian and anarchic connotations of the lexical field of *commons*, political thinkers engaged in sustained linguistic contestation that resulted in a new centrality of the concepts of *people* and *multitude*. After an outline of the late medieval developments of concepts such as *community*, *commons*, and *commonwealth*, four case studies are considered to explore the problems raised by their semantics and the range of solutions provided by Tudor humanist writers: Thomas Elyot, Richard Morrison, John Cheke, and Thomas Smith. Finally, the advantages and drawbacks of the new vocabulary are assessed, as well as their implications for the way we think about the history of political thought today.

Keywords

Conceptual history - Political semantics - The people - Multitude - Commons

> And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.
>
> ACTS 10:15 (KJV)

Just as the High Court of Justice was about to sentence King Charles I «in the name of the people of England», Lady Fairfax interjected, «Not half, not a quarter of the people of England», before being dragged away from Westminster Hall (Wedgwood 1966, 143). Charles's previous contention that his defence was one with that of «the freedom and the liberty of the people of England» (Wedgwood 1966, 127) must have proven unsatisfactory, for the sentence was beheading, yet

it is indicative of a commonality of purpose among those involved in the events. More than that, a commonality of language concealing assumptions that were, or could be easily passed as, as good as axioms. Like the modern political scientist, Lady Fairfax might have been sceptical about who could speak on behalf of the people. Still, the concept's capacity as a device of legitimation went unquestioned. It had not always been so. By this culminating moment of the English Revolution, *the people* had come to the fore of political language thanks to a collective work of substitutions, redefinitions, and translations back and forth from Greek to English, passing through Latin, mainly in the sixteenth century. In doing so, the phrase gained new meanings and subsumed those previously belonging to the lexical field of *commons*, a field including such items as *community*, *commune*, *commons*, *commonalty*, and *commonwealth* [1]. Through this wavering, sometimes even contradictory process, political language came to look much more like what we are used to, leaving a profound mark on the kind of questions that could be asked by and of modern political theory.

1.

As Michaud-Quantin has noted, «La racine *Commun* […] offrait aux médiévaux l'avantage de vocables qui leur étaient familiers en latin aussi bien que dans leurs langues vulgaires» (Michaud-Quantin 1970, 147). *Communitas*, for instance, had made its fortune in the vocabulary of logicians dealing with the problem of universals, as well as of political thinkers occupied with the recovery of Aristotle. In the twelve-fifties and -sixties, the first Latin translator of the *Politics*, William of Moerbeke, had picked *communitas*, or alternatively *communicatio*, as a translation of κοινωνία, securing it a central place in high scholastic political thought (Schmidt 1986, 298-300; Quillet 1988, 526-28; Schütrumpf 2014, 16).

More prosaically, in many parts of Western Europe *communitas* could identify any human group sharing some property, declaredly or not. In England in particular, *communitas* and its less well-bred relatives such as *commons*, *commune*, and *commonalty* could be used for the collective body of the inhabitants of a chartered city or, for metonymy, their representatives. With the urban expansion and the parliamentary developments of the period, these designations came to have a

[1] The amount of spelling variations in the English language up to the seventeenth century is notorious. Our set of words is no exception. At the cost of some accuracy, throughout this article I have modernised all spelling except when particularly relevant (e.g., *common weal/wealth*). I have also silently adapted capitalization at the beginning of quotations to surrounding text when necessary.

bearing on the national political imaginary, with the result that associating the collectivity of the whole realm with such nouns was perceived less and less as a metaphorical quirk (Michaud-Quantin 1970, 148-51; Reynolds 1997, 135-36, 181-82, 268-73; Watts 2007, 248; 2017, 6-7). If initially this representation of the national collectivity was a baronial monopoly, by the fourteenth century local elites were asserting their claims (Fletcher 2010, 363-67; Reynolds 1997, 309-12; Elton 1969, 1-12). Those were officially sanctioned in 1341 with the first separate meeting of knights and burgesses as what would become the House of Commons. Just a few decades later, the so-called Good Parliament of 1376, if ephemeral in its achievements, proved both that the Commons could win the initiative and that the vocabulary of *commons* was key in so doing (Ormrod 2012; Fletcher 2010, 369-72).

Not all parts of the realm rested content with how the mechanism of parliamentary representation turned out to work. If the weight of popular presence and the ambiguity of the semantics of *commons* must already be acknowledged in thirteenth-century politics (Rollison 2010, 84-100), it is especially from the times of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 that insurgents started leveraging their self-identification as *commons* and *commonalty*, that is, at once third estate and collectivity of the realm, part and whole. Militarily well-organised and drawing considerable support from lower classes, their political platforms hinged precisely on a claim to collective representation. Given the failure of conventional ways of redressing the grievances plaguing the kingdom, so the claim went, the community had decided to address them without intermediaries (Bush 1999, 113; Rollison 2010, ch. 5). Whether their purpose were overturning or simply upholding the principles of the society of orders is still up for debate, and obviously no one all-encompassing answer can be given for the several revolts that shook England in the late medieval and early modern eras. Here, it is only necessary to notice that the qualification of rebels as *commons* and *commonalty* and the diverse, even contradictory conceptual baggage those words carried allowed for both orientations and to some extent prevented a neat settlement for either (Watts 2017, 11-13).

Common weal (or *commonwealth*, as the progressively prevalent spelling in the sixteenth century goes) is an expression whose original path is worthy of separate discussion. First of all, it echoed Latin expressions circulating for a long time in philosophical and legal thought, for instance, *bonum commune*, *communis utilitas*, *communis salus* (Withington 2010, 139; cf. Kempshall 1999; Post 1964). In the Later Middle Ages, similar formulas were widely cited by English royal statutes as the ultimate goal of good government. As such, they were among the watchwords aggressively appropriated by the already mentioned Good Parliament (Ormrod

2012, 180-82). Indeed, for David Starkey the mid-fifteenth neologism *common weal* was but a «new word […] used to express an old idea», that is the especially English duty of a king to provide for the «general welfare» of his subjects[2]. During the Wars of the Roses, Yorkist propaganda helped thrust it onto the stage of high-political contention nationwide (Starkey 1986, 21). Much of what has been said about the lexical field of *commons* in general holds true here: urban resonances and the growth of parliamentary power probably ensured its success in political discourse.

But *common weal* also took on a more peculiar function. Fifteenth-century humanist scholars were looking for a suitable translation for that dear notion of the Latins, *res publica*, and *common weal* initially seemed like an ideal candidate (Starkey 1986, 24; Watts 2011, 151-52). In this respect, Cicero was perhaps the single author who most decisively shaped the notion. While his fame had never quite waned during the Middle Ages, his extant texts knew unprecedented diffusion after the invention of the press, and by the sixteenth century he was the single most published author of classical antiquity (Wood 1990, 185-88). The Ciceronian and, more generally, the classical lineage of *res publica* was then pivotal in the semantic extension of *common weal* throughout the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries: not only the common good, but the polity in general or one of its specific forms (both of which Aristotle had ambiguously denominated πολιτεία); the collectivity of the inhabitants of the realm; even, more loosely, public affairs (EMRG 2011, 663-66; Watts 2011, 149-52; Hankins 2010, 456-60; Withington 2010, 141; Santi 2016, 159-61; McGovern 2019, 517-18).

The translation that made the fortune of *common weal*, however, was also to be its ruin: the civic pulse fostered by humanism could be accommodated only up to a point by the monarchical republic of Tudor England[3]. *Common weal* as a rendition of Aristotelian πολιτεία or of the equally non-monarchical historical polity of Rome could undoubtedly make for distasteful associations. Yet, its greatest threat was the possible implication of social equality and absence of private property. Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia*, a *Libellus* […] *de optimo rei publicae statu* whose impact can hardly be overstated, hammered its readers precisely with such an implication (see Pawlowski and Wegemer 2011, s.v. *respublica*; cf. Slavin 1988, 12-17). In 1551 *Utopia*'s translator, Ralph Robinson, generally quite recalcitrant to accept More's

[2] David Rollison has speculated that it might even have been used as early as the rebellion of 1381, but the evidence is not conclusive (Rollison 2010, 251-52).

[3] The fortunate hypothesis of a monarchical republic was first advanced, with reference to Elizabethan England, by Patrick Collinson (1994). It has later been expanded and applied to the whole early modern era, e.g. in Goldie 2001; McDiarmid 2007. For a contrarian view, cf. McGovern 2019.

most contentious linguistic innovations (Hexter 1964, 962-64), chose to render *res publica* at times with *public weal*, at others with *common weal*. Such anxiety was only compounded by the appropriations of 'common' agitators. To take but two instances, *common weal* was the battle cry of Jack Cade's rebels in 1450 – an obvious goal for self-styled *commons* – and then again of «the pilgrimage of grace for the commonwealth» of 1536 (Starkey 1986, 22; Bush 1999, 119).

2.

Reactions by the keepers of social order were not long in coming. Taken aback perhaps, they initially tended to avoid honouring insurgents with the title of *commons* and the like, relying instead on more univocally class-tinged labels such as *villeins*, *servants*, or *labourers* (Watts 2007, 249-50). However, as John Watts has shown, beginning at the end of the fifteenth century the prevalent approach switched to one of resemantisation. The name was conceded only so that its plebeian overtones could be magnified – like the adjective *common* in today's parlance, the semantic field of *commons* already conveniently carried associations with the ordinary and the numerous, hence, at one extreme, the unremarkable, the menial, the base (Williams 2015, s.v. *common*). At the same time, the residual political legitimacy of the *commons* was recuperated to its parliamentary representation in the Commons (Watts 2007, 252-58). But the collateral effect of this switch was to make such words less available as a neutral, pacified socio-political lexicon. The necessity arose of a vigorous, if selective, defence of the vocabulary of *commons* and *commonwealth*, or alternatively of the invention of a new language that could eschew the dangerous ambiguities of the old. In the following, we will survey some cases that exemplify the range of solutions offered.

Thomas Elyot's 1531 *Boke Named the Governour* is a convenient entry point for its acute awareness of linguistic questions. The incipit acknowledges that «a public weal is in sundry wise defined by philosophers», and Elyot offers his own, quasi-Ciceronian definition:

> A public weal is 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. In the Latin tongue it is called *respublica*, of the which the word *Res* has diverse significations, and does not only betoken that, that is called a thing, which is distinct from a person, but also signifies estate, condition, substance, and profit. In our old vulgar, profit is called weal (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:1).

Elyot has, in fact, already made a case for the abandonment of *common weal* with the astute word choice of his English translation. As he goes on to explain,

> public took his beginning of people: which in Latin is *populus*, in which word is contained all the inhabitants of a realm or city, of what estate or condition so ever they be. *Plebs* in English is called the commonalty, which signifies only the multitude, wherein be contained the base and vulgar inhabitants not advanced to any honour or dignity […]. And consequently there may appear like diversity to be in English between a public weal and a common weal, as should be in Latin between *res publica* and *res plebeia*. And after that signification, if there should be a commune weal, either the commoners only must be wealthy, and the genteel and noble men needy and miserable, or else excluding gentility, all men must be of one degree and sort, and a new name provided. For as much as *plebs* in Latin, and commoners in English, be words only made for the discrepancy of degrees, whereof proceeds order (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:2-3).

«Take away order from all things», and the result is «*Chaos*», as well social as cosmological (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:3). Expanding on this argument from natural analogy, Elyot comes to the conclusion that «undoubtedly the best and most sure governance is by one king or prince, which rules only for the weal of his people to him subject» (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:11-13).

I have said that Elyot's definition of *res publica* is *quasi*-Ciceronian; it is not, in fact, fully so. Cicero's, via his mouthpiece Scipio, runs as follows: «Est igitur […] res publica res populi; populus autem non omnis hominum coetus quoquo modo congregatus, sed coetus multitudinis iuris consensu et utilitatis communione sociatus» (Cicero 1928, I.xxv.39, 64)[4].

In the *Governour,* any reference to the purpose of political association has vanished, not least because it would have produced too evident a logical short circuit, *public weal* appearing both in the *definiens* and in the *definiendum* (once for *res publica*, the other for *communio utilitatis*). Elyot also fails to mention the *populus* within the definition itself, replacing it with *public weal*. This makes it possible that Elyot's *res publica* is at the same time a human «body living» and the material «profit» derived from that association – the short circuit creeps back – but at the cost of expunging a

[4] «Well, then, a commonwealth is the property of a people. But a people is not any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way, but an assemblage of people in large numbers associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good» (Cicero 1928, 65). For Cicero's concepts of *res publica* and *populus*, see Schofield 2009, Asmis 2004, Grilli 2005.

key mediating concept of Cicero's. It is true, *populus* appears right after, but only so that it can be contrasted with its protean hyponym *plebs*, that is, «communalty» or «multitude». This brings us to one last difference: the requirement of an internal hierarchy of the people reflective of cosmic order and the organicist analogy are forcefully introduced by Elyot[5]. Of course, Cicero was no leveller[6]. Even so, Elyot's emphases are much different and best understood in light of the repeated egalitarian and demotic appropriations of the lexical field of *commons* long before and for some time after he put pen to paper.

Elyot, however, cannot not withstand more than a few pages without blurring his definitions. When examining the three simple forms of constitution, he notes that «another public weal was among the Athenians, where equality was of estate among the people» (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:9); this «was called in Greek *democratia*, in Latin *popularis potentia*, in English the rule of the commonalty» (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:10). One is baffled at the exact difference of the adjective *popularis* from both *publicus* and *plebeius*. It would seem that the Athenian example is forcing into Elyot's distinction an idea he has striven to exclude, that of an equality of degree that can buttress its own kind of order. Likewise, during his discussion of «magistrates» Elyot casually talks of a «commune weal» that, for all intents and purposes, is indistinguishable from a «public weal» as he has defined it (Elyot [1531] 1883, 1:26).

Elyot's convictions were tenacious. His 1538 *Dictionary* – the first classical Latin-English – hosted no other *common*-headword than *communico*, «to communicate or depart something with another, which I have», and *communis*, «common». *Plebs* are naturally «the commune people», *vulgus* «the common people», *respublica* «a public weal». Equally tenacious were his slips: Elyot again defines *democratia* as «a form of a commonwealth, where the people have authority» (Elyot 1538, s.vv.).

In other writers less engrossed by the lexicographical fastidiousness of an Elyot, the confrontation with 'common' rebels could be more direct. Writing around the same time, Richard Morrison accuses them of devising «a certain commonwealth in word and in outward appearance, which if we baptise right, and not nickname it, we must need call a common woe» (Morrison 1536, sig. AIII^{r}). It is, of course, the «common woe» of social equality that Morrison is talking about. For him «a commonwealth is

[5] Of the abundant literature on the ideas of natural order and universal correspondences in the early modern era, see Mazzeo 1954; Winny 1957; Tillyard 1959; Hale 1961; Greenleaf 1964a, 1964b, chaps. 1-2; Daly 1979; Collins 1988, chap. 1.

[6] Walcot 1975, Wood 2016, and Barlow 2012 all provide different viewpoints on the topic, but are substantially agreed that private property is a tenet of Cicero's socio-political thought.

[…] wealthy and worthy his name, when everyone is content with his degree» (Morrison 1536, AIV^{r}). A nod to *De re publica* follows:

> A commune wealth is, as I think, nothing else but a certain number of cities, towns, shires, that all agree, upon one law, and one head, united and knit together, by the observation of the laws […]. The head must rule, if the body will do well, and not every man make himself ruler, where only one ought to be (Morrison 1536, BII^{v}-III^{r}).

And again: «A commune wealth is like a body, and so like, that it can be resembled to nothing so convenient, as unto that». If one confounded its parts, «what a monstrous body should this be» (Morrison 1536, BIII^{v})? Degrees are necessary «for the eschewing of the infinite jeopardies, that a multitude not governed falls into» (Morrison 1536, AII^{v}). «Lords must be lords, communes must be communes, every man accepting his degree» (Morrison 1536, BIV^{r}). Happy those commonwealths where the idle poor are all set to work rather than «sow sedition among the people» (Morrison 1536, CIV^{r}). Indeed, Morrison does not share Elyot's bitter resentment against the word *commonwealth* itself, opting instead for a subtler strategy of resemantisation. But if one considers his vigorous defence of the society of degrees, his use of metaphorics and his incipient contrast of *people* and *commons*/*communes*[7]*,* it is apparent that the theoretical framework of the two is very much the same.

John Cheke, in reacting to the uprisings of 1549, challenges the basis of the rebels' legitimacy claims: «Dare you commons take upon you more learning, than the chosen bishops and clerks of this realm have? Think you folly in it? You were wont to judge your Parliament wisest, and now will you suddenly excel them in wisdom» (Cheke 1549, sig. AVI^{r})? The subsequent escalation of the accusation may be puzzling at first. Unsatisfied with the role of counsellors, commons allegedly aspire to replace the king himself:

> And is it not a dangerous and a cruel kind of treason, so to give out precepts to the king's people? […] You having no authority of the King, but taking it of yourselves, what think you yourselves to be? […] you stir up uproars of people, hurly-burlies of vagabonds, routs of robbers. Is this any part of the king's ministry (Cheke 1549, BVII^{v}-VIII^{r})?

[7] In the *Remedy*, *commons* and *people* are mostly synonymous, but the idea of *the people* as that entity over which the king rules (highlighted by the use of the possessive) is emergent (e.g., sigs. DIII^{v}, FIV^{r}, FV^{r}).

It is, in fact, a very telling allegation. Like Elyot and Morrison before him, Cheke refuses to identify the commons with the people, the unstable but fundamentally reactive matter that the king's policy is aimed at moulding. Commons are accordingly pushed towards a functional overlap with the king, inevitably unnatural and usurpatory. They are thus analogous to seditious monsters, «headless captains», «brainless rebels»; an ailing organ of the body politic to be cured with «an extreme remedy»: martial law (Cheke 1549, CIII^{r}, FIIII^{r}).

Any hint of autonomous agency that might have been left in the people is finally absorbed by the ventriloquation of Cheke's text itself: the voice of *the people*, or its virtual equivalent, *subjects*[8]*,* is taken up at various points throughout the text, either to build common ground or, on the contrary, to trace a sharp boundary with their fictitious interlocutors, the commoners; in either case, to tame and vanquish them (e.g., Cheke 1549, AIII^{v}, CII^{v}). It must be finally noted that Cheke's version of the commonwealth is along the lines of Morrison's:

> If riches offend you, because you would have the like, then think that to be no commonwealth, but envy to the commonwealth.
>
> Though all be parts of one commonwealth, yet all be not like worthy parts, but all being under obedience, some kind in more subjection one way, and some kind in more service another way (Cheke 1549, AVIII^{r}, FVII$^{r\text{-}v}$).

Written in the early fifteen-sixties and published in 1583, Thomas Smith's *De Republica Anglorum* is rather heavy-handed in dispensing synonyms for the titular *respublica*: it can now be «commonwealth», now «government», now «city», now «policy», now – somewhat hesitantly – «society civil». Paradoxically, however, the most notable thing about the treatise is the overall marginal weight of the concept of *commonwealth* and of the rest of the lexical field of *commons*. The routine paraphrase of Cicero is present, this time inclusive of an assertion concerning the goal of political life. But Smith's version greatly narrows down its scope: «A commonwealth is called a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord and covenants among themselves, for the conservation of themselves as well in peace as in war» (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 20). Any mention of justice or the good life is ejected from the definition. The insisted repetition of the word *commonwealth* throughout the work may indeed overshadow

[8] The neutralisation of the republican connotations of the word *citizen* through its replacement with *subject* has been studied in Grace 1988; Condren 1994, chap. 3; Borot 2016.

that, when it is not the name of the political constitution, it describes little more than the bare fact of human association, the stage on which the play of actual political actors – the king and the people – takes place. We can here take into account only the latter. For starters, the consent of the people is pivotal in distinguishing the category of king from that of tyrant, as well as in delegitimising Catholic pretensions of papal supremacy over the king of England (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 14-15, 19). Following a discussion of the causes that bring to the institution of δημοκρατία, «the rule of the multitude»[9], chapter fifteen of the first book bears as a title the eloquent exhortation «that the commonwealth or policy must be according to the nature of the people» (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 27-28).

Parallels between the English people and the Roman *populus* run throughout the text. Smith states it clearly that by «the people» he means «that which the word *populus* does signify, the whole body and the three estates of the commonwealth», namely lords spiritual, lords temporal, and commons (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 16). Later, punctuating the lengthy analysis of «sorts» of people in the first book, we find the observation that

> when the Romans did write *senatus populusque Romanus*, they seemed to make but two orders, that is of the Senate and of the people of Rome, and so in the name of people they contained *equites* and *plebem*: so when we in England do say the Lords and the commons, the knights, esquires, and other gentlemen, with citizens, burgesses and yeomen be accompted to make the commons (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 34).

In an oft-quoted passage in book two, the «absolute power» of Parliament (and, in wartime, of the sole «Prince») is asserted (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 48, 59). Less noted usually is that the assertion revolves around the same kind of historical comparison:

> And to be short, *all that ever the people of Rome might do either in* Centuriatis comitiis *or* tributis [emphasis mine], the same may be done by the parliament of England, which represents and has the power of the whole realm both the head and the body. For every Englishman is intended to be there present, either in person or by procuration and attorneys, of what preeminence, state, dignity,

[9] But Smith dubiously glosses that «the Latins [called δημοκρατία] some *Respublica* by the general name, some *populi potestas,* some *census potestas,* I cannot tell how latinly» (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 27). Cf.: «Where the multitude does govern, the one they [Greek political philosophers] call a commonwealth by the general name *πολιτείαν*, or the rule of the people *Δημοκρατίαν*, the other the rule or the usurping of the popular or rascal and viler sort, because they be more in number *Δημοκρατίαν ἁπαντῶν*» (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 11).

> or quality soever he be, from the Prince (be he King or Queen) to the lowest person of England (T. Smith [1583] 1972, 49).

In such constructions, the specific 'sociological' contents ascribed to *commons* are less important than, for one, its being but one hyponym of *people* alongside the other two estates and, for two, its absorption by parliamentary representation. On the other hand, there seems to be uncertainty about the precise conceptual location of the king: Is he within or without the people? Smith's contribution in this respect is that the discussion to be had is on king *and* people, leaving their respective qualifications quite unspecified for the time being[10]. The classicist leanings of his political vocabulary, after all, had to find an uneasy compromise with his country's institutional setting.

The title of a recent publication (Zeitlin et al. 2014) well condenses the fate that awaited the concept of *commonwealth* in the seventeenth century: it would turn into a «political space», the recipient of governmental and 'oeconomic' policies that State machinery could implement more and more efficiently (cf. Muldrew 2013, 322). Indeed, by the eighteenth century it came to resemble our current *society*: almost everybody acknowledges we live in one; many argue over its ills and the best way to cure them; yet hardly anybody rallies behind its name[11].

The Civil War and the Interregnum parentheses, when Commonwealth became the official denomination of the English State, intensely reactivated the non-monarchical (now anti-monarchical) connotations of the word, but at the price of entrusting its fortune to that of the new regime (Condren 1994, 45-46; EMRG 2011, 677-83). At Restoration, the two fell together under the attacks of royalist propaganda, and the subsequent tale of resurrection on both sides of the Atlantic need not concern us here. Similar circumstances befell *commons*: still in 1653, Gerrard Winstanley, the Digger, was protesting to the Council of State «that England cannot be a free Commonwealth, unless all the poor commoners have a free use and benefit of the land» (Winstanley 1941, 347); but Commons were by and large those gathering at Parliament, disdainful of his cries.

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[10] Cf. Alston's introduction in T. Smith 1972, XXXV-VIII. For the paramount political implications of the conceptual location of king vis-à-vis the people on the eve of Civil War, see Weston 1960.

[11] For examples of the variety of views still possible, see Butler 1609, sig. B1^{v}; Raleigh [?] [1642] 1751, 2, 5; Forset 1969, 48 – the last being the prevailing one among writers at the time.

3.

Manifold factors contributed to the decline of *the commons* and the rise of *the people*, and even a cursory look at medieval and early modern literature dispels any doubt that for a long time the existence of the one ran parallel to the other[12]. It seems nonetheless warranted to list among such factors the humanist intellectual output sampled in the previous pages. One linguistic strategy adopted by this literature was that of disentangling the lexical field of *commons* from its associations with common property, thus the anomie which, in the opinion of most Tudor intellectuals and probably of their patrons, was its inevitable consequence. This was the strategy pursued by Cheke and Morrison. Alternatively, as was the case with Elyot and less conspicuously with Smith, *commons* and *commonwealth* could simply be pushed to the margins of political language. Of course, «coming to terms» with the complex tangle of discourse and institutional change, to use Stephen Foley's (1994) felicitous expression, is never easy. Some of the textual strategies of Tudor writers succeeded only in part. As Phil Withington has shown, for example, *publique weal* became a serious literary competitor to *common weal* in the decades following the publication of the *Governour*, but gave way to *commonwealth* at the turn of the century (Withington 2010, 144-46)[13]. Elyot's recommendation might have started no more than a passing fad, then, but in the long term the lexical field of *commons* as a whole came out weakened.

With its Latin and Italianate resonances, the concept of *people* was able to provide an important element to the ideology of those classes that were on the rise in sixteenth-century England, that is roughly the gentry, the upper yeomanry, and

[12] On the medieval heritage of the dictum *vox populi, vox Dei*, one can still usefully refer to Gallacher 1945; Boas 1969, 1973. Cf. Boureau 1992. A lexicological study of *peple* and *commune* in late medieval political literature is in Mairey 2009, 66-73. Less focused on specific lexical differences, Aers 1999 and Novak 2013 also contain interesting suggestions, as does Howard and Strohm 2007 as concerns drama. For complementary analyses of the concept of *people* in the early modern period, see Hill 1986, 1996; Wootton 1986, 38-58; Morgan 1988, pt. 1; Canovan 2005, chap. 2; Knights 2006, 99-108; Waddell 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Lee 2016, chap. 9; Coast 2019. It bears reminding that people had been the unmarked plural form of person at least since the fourteenth century (*OED*, 3rd ed., s.v. *people*). Scouring through the archives, one often comes across instances where it is simply indeterminable whether the people is to be understood distributively or collectively. It is conceivable that in the heat of political events one acceptation could abruptly turn into the other; this conceptual malleability must have made much for the fortune of the word in political discourse.

[13] Although it points in the right direction, Jonathan McGovern's (2019, 518) surmise that Elyot's proscription of *common weal* might have pushed writers to use *republic* instead must be received with some caution – not least because *republic*, coined in 1549, was not the author's preferred translation.

some sectors of the urban professions[14]. The ideals of civic participation, learning, and desert-based distribution of honours it evoked greatly appealed to individuals anxious to justify their new status both in the eyes of an old-blood nobility ever-suspicious of the *parvenu* and the myriad of those who, baseborn more or less alike, did not enjoy the same fortunate social trajectory. Those were the same classes that the Tudor State administration drew on for their grasp on local politics and, in several cases, their legal expertise. Indeed, the authors examined in this paper shared such social background. All were of non-aristocratic, some even of humble origins; all rose to prominence as public officers; all, with the exception of Morrison, offset that rise with a spectacular fall; all were well-versed in the law and the *humanae litterae*, some to the point of mastery – Cheke was the first Regius Professor of Greek in Cambridge, Smith of Civil Law; all were keen on equating true nobility with virtue and wisdom rather than lineage, or at least with a combination of the three[15]. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the new vernacular language of politics developed by English humanists accommodated the heritage of ancient political learning with the new 'technocratic', empirically oriented approach to administration developed by the Tudor State (Ferguson 1955, 287-88; Bush 1999, 124-25; Watts 2007; 258-60; 2011, 157-60; 2017, 16).

People came with another advantage. Whereas *commons* lacked a word that could be neatly opposed to it, *the multitude* was available to be arranged as *the people*'s «counterconcept» (see Koselleck 1985). The standard translation of *multitudo*, *plebs*, πλῆθος, and ὄχλος, *multitude* was an easy receptacle for all that 'common' seditionists had been and were not supposed to be. *Ungoverned, unruly*, *schismatical, senseless, fickle*, *mad* are some of its most recurring epithets. Unlike *commons*, as a rule *multitude* did not designate the collectivity of the realm. When not used in the generic sense of 'great number', it was usually reserved for mechanics, heretics, vagrants, and really whatever category the writer wanted to strike out of legitimacy (Tupper 1912; Patrides 1965; Hill 1991)[16]. Taking the hint from Cheke, his editor in 1641 had no

[14] If anything, the old 'storm over the gentry' has taught us that traditional aristocracy did not decline in terms of economic and political power. All the same, their ideology had ultimately to give in to the one sketched here. The relationship between English humanism and changing class structure has been pointed out a long time ago in Caspari 1954, esp. chaps. 1 and 6.

[15] The interwoven intellectual biographies of the authors considered in this paper are reconstructed in a classic book by Zeeveld (1948).

[16] A noteworthy exception is the so-called 'doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude' tentatively advanced by Aristotle in the *Politics* (Aristotle 1932, III.vi.1-7, 1281a-82a), that is the idea that under certain circumstances a multitude (πλῆθος) of people taken together may be superior to a single

problem in lumping together Papists and Puritans, Jack Straws and Wat Tylers old and new into an indistinct «giddy multitude» (Cheke 1641, sig. b3^{r-v}). Apolitical or impolitical to its core, *the multitude* was thus key in shoring up prescriptive conceptions of *the people* (cf. Condren 1994, 102-10). What is arguably the best-known case in the history of political thought, that of Hobbes, was made possible only by capitalising on such an inchoate dichotomy[17].

The monarchy itself had little reason to quarrel with the new idiom, at least for the time being. It was a time-honoured tradition of English political discourse to stress the reciprocal duties and affection of king and people, for criticising royal policy and enjoining subjects' obedience alike, depending on the speaker's inclinations (see for all Nederman 2007). The trope was still alive and well in the early Stuart era. It was pervasive in political tracts, royal proclamations, and parliamentary speeches, not least in most absolutist pronouncements. What distinguishes a king from a tyrant, wrote King James in his *Basilikon Doron*, is that «[t]he one acknowledgeth himself ordained for his people, having received from God a burden of government, whereof he must be countable: the other thinketh his people ordained for him, a prey to his passions and inordinate appetites, as the fruits of his magnanimity» (James VI and I [1616] 1918, 18). The inevitability of the concept even among those authors who were least willing to grant the people any active political role is therefore another likely reason for its success. As a case in point, the protracted debates over the meaning of safety of the people, or indeed the *salus populi*[18], during the mid-seventeenth century pamphlet wars were couched much in the terms inherited from the older discourse on royal duties.

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individual, no matter how good or competent (see Bookman 1992; Waldron 1999; Cammack 2013; Lane 2013 for various readings). The passage was widely glossed and reprised since the late medieval rediscovery of the work, e.g., by Marsilius of Padua (2005, I.xii.3) and possibly by Machiavelli (1996, I.58). Parts of this lineage have been reconstructed in Syros 2007; Simonetta 2011; Ossikovski 2012; S. Smith 2018, 177-83; Landi 2020; Mulieri 2022. However, I did not find that the motif made any significant contribution towards a positive reappraisal of the multitude in early modern England within political discourse writ large. In general, interpreters tended to put a spin on it to better fit local institutional realities (e.g., Marshall [1535], fols. 27^{v}-28^{r}; Case 1588, III.vii).

[17] Hobbes warns his readers time and again that taking the *people* for the *multitude* is a categorial mistake pregnant with political havoc (Hobbes 1841, II.vi.1-2, II.vii.5, II.vii.10-11, II.xii.8; 1969, II.i.2, II.viii.4, II.viii.9; 1994, I.xi.20, II.xxix.20). Among the vast literature on Hobbes's *people* and *multitude*, see esp. Chanteur 1969; Tuck 2006; Hoekstra 2006; Skinner 2007; Sussmann 2010; Astorga 2011; Gregersen 2012; Agamben 2015, chap. 2; Stolze 2015.

[18] The phrase *salus populi suprema lex esto* appears in Cicero's *De legibus* (Cicero 1928, III.iii.8, 466) as a regulative principle for consular action. A good account of the uses of the phrase in seventeenth-century England is in Murphy 2014, 859-66.

People was also the most etymologically accurate translation of *populus* as well as its cognate words in Romance languages, hence, by a well-established translational convention, δῆμος. This, in turn, put strong pressure on rendering Biblical Hebrew עַם (*'am*) with *people* in order to harmonise paleo- and neo-testamentary translations, as sanctioned by the King James Version of 1611. *Commons* and related words were not without their religious and ecclesiastical resonances (Michaud-Quantin 1970, 156-58; Quillet 1988, 524; Robertson 2001, 225n9), but none of them named the People of the Book themselves. Come the Reformation, it did not take much for royal apologists to work out the political potentiality of the notion and posit a link between national identity and holy peoplehood[19]. The link was of course unstable, as holy peoplehood could also provide a leverage point for sub- and supranational forms of association that were in tension with the English project of early modern nation-building (Pocock 1975, 111-13). The early Quakers are a notable example (see Moore 2020, 131-35).

What is sure is that the importance of the concept of *people* in those years went well beyond the question of the locus of sovereign power, and it is precisely on this note that we may conclude. The lexical shift I have outlined substantially contributed to the homogenisation of the political vocabularies of English and Romance languages. Consequently, those languages became well set up to think about the political issues that would confront them thereafter by projecting them back into the past and into other languages. *People, peuple, popolo, populus,* δῆμος, *'am*: today, it is natural to see those terms as facets of the same concept. It is then equally natural to ask, for example, whether the sovereignty of the people was first conceived of in ancient Athens or Rome, England or France, Italy, or even Israel[20]. Criticism of such an inquiry has typically challenged the historical plausibility of a perennial notion of sovereignty. To my knowledge, the other half of the formula, i.e., the people, has never received such an objection. I do not mean to say that such words are untranslatable, as a valuable philosophical dictionary called them some time ago (Cassin 2014)[21]. On the

[19] While there has been debate over when the idea of English divine election took hold (e.g., Wormald 1994, 2006; Molyneaux 2014; Jones 2016), scholars agree that it positively contributed to shaping English national identity and sentiments in the early modern era (Kohn 1940; 1956, 16-19; Haller 1963, chap. 7; Greenfeld 1992, chap. 1; A. D. Smith 2003, 115-23).

[20] To take but a recent instance, see the contributions in Bourke and Skinner 2016. The odd proposal of an ancient Israelite doctrine of popular sovereignty has been put forward in an essay (Fortenberry 2013) appeared on the conservative website *The Federalist Papers*, which gives at least some indication of the popularity of the approach.

[21] The editor does in fact specify that «to speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating» (Cassin 2014, XVII).

contrary, the problem is that those words are all too translatable, so much so that the automatisms of our translational traditions risk obliterating the layers of conceptual and lexical contestation that it took to make them sound so natural. The rise and fall of the lexical field of *commons* is evidence that these traditions, much like every other, had once to be invented.

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