The English Revolution, also known as the English Civil War, the Puritan Revolution, and the War of the Three Kingdoms, is one of the most significant events in the history of early-modern Europe. Some scholars credit it with establishing the precedent that English monarchs may not rule without the consent of Parliament, thereby creating a constitutional monarchy. Others suggest that the revolution freed the burgeoning middle class from feudal domination and thus cleared the way for the Industrial Revolution and the British Empire. The consequences of the revolution are undeniably significant and well-documented. However, the causes of this conflict are hotly disputed among historians, as indicated by the general lack of agreement as to what to call the conflict.

Surveying the recent historiography on the subject, Christopher Hill points out “the English Revolution is still an enigma.” Yet he identifies several major trends that influence the examination of this period. The first trend identifies the period as “The Puritan Revolution” and views the conflict as “a struggle for religious and constitutional liberty.” Another interpretation views the shifting socioeconomic status of the gentry as destabilizing the established order and igniting conflict. Hill proffers a Marxian interpretation which ultimately views the conflict as a “Bourgeois Revolution,” but he wisely notes that “we must widen our view so as to embrace the total activity of society. Any event so complex as a revolution must be seen as a whole. Large numbers of men and women were drawn into political activity by religious and political ideas as well as by economic necessities.”

Diverse as these interpretations may be, they each share a basic
assumption. Each views the seventeenth-century conflict between king and Parliament as constituting a “revolution” – a progressive, substantial change in the fundamental organization of English life. Furthermore, they posit that, whether implicitly or explicitly, an urge for change lie behind the causes of the “revolution.” Yet, evidence suggests this assumption is, in fact, false. This essay seeks to offer an alternate interpretation of the conflict. Namely, the “English Revolution” is best understood as the “English Radical Reaction,” for the conflict was not intended to change England, but instead to conserve their traditional social-political-economic order (hereafter referred to simply as the “traditional order”) against the encroachments of the Stuart monarchy.

In order to undertake such a venture, a brief examination of the traditional order will be necessary. Though there is some debate over the status of the Anglo-Saxon period within such considerations, there remains no question that the Magna Carta firmly established English traditional order. After the loss of his French holdings in 1204, King John forced his nobles to pay a series of unpopular taxes. With this revenue, John raised an army which he used to invade France in an attempt to regain the lost territories. In 1214, John’s army was crushed at the Battle of Bouvines. Defeated, John was now prey to the demands of the English nobility. The following year these nobles, bitter over the forced taxation, forced John to sign the Magna Carta, which defined the “customary” obligations and rights of the King, nobility, and freeborn English. As such, the charter, essentially a conservative document, codified existing practices.

Many of the rights detailed by the Magna Carta are significant to this discussion. Several clauses dealt with economic and political rights and obligations, limiting the power of the King by prohibiting certain forms of taxation. Clauses 36-40 established such guarantees against arbitrary power as the right of habeas corpus (#36), protections against self-incrimination (#38), and the right to “due process of law” (#39 and #40). The most significant clauses, however, are numbers 12 and 14, which together provided:

No “scutage” or “aid” may be levied in our kingdom without its general consent... To obtain the general consent of the realm...
for the assessment of an “aid”... or a “scutage,” we will cause the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and greater barons to be summoned individually by letter. To those who hold lands directly of us we will cause a general summons to be issued, through the sheriffs and other officials, to come together on a fixed day... and at a fixed place... When a summons has been issued, the business appointed for the day shall go forward in accordance with the resolution of those present.6

In short, the Magna Carta was created in reaction to the unpopular taxes established by King John. The landed nobility, faced with this threat against their property, sought protections from excessive royal power. Hence, clauses 12 and 14 denied the King the power of taxation without the approval of the landed nobility. Property-holders thus gained political power by the very basis of holding property; this link between property and political power endured well into the modern era.

Finally, the Magna Carta established a system by which the terms of the charter could be enforced against all parties, even the monarch:

If we... offend in any respect against any man, or transgress any of the articles of the peace or of this security... the said twenty-five barons, they shall come to us... to declare it and claim immediate redress. If we... make no redress within forty days, reckoning from the day on which the offence was declared to us or to him... [the barons] may distrain upon and assail us in every way possible, with the support of the whole community of the land, by seizing our castles, lands, possessions, or anything else saving only our own person and those of the queen and our children, until they have secured such redress as they have determined upon. Having secured the redress, they may then resume their normal obedience to us.7

Here, the essence of the Magna Carta and the traditional order became most obvious. In principle, all individuals were placed under the law. No one, not even the King, could claim exemption.

The traditional order thus construed is founded upon these
principles. First, the sanctity of property must be protected from the abuses of royal authority. Second, political power and property are fundamentally linked. Third, certain legal rights protect all men. Finally, no one is above the law. These principles wax and wane over the subsequent centuries, yet they are not directly challenged until the ascension of the Stuarts in 1603. This challenge would be met by Parliament and the people of England, who would ultimately reassert their traditional rights against this challenge.

Following the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the crown passed to James VI of Scotland, known subsequently as James I. Upon assuming the throne, conflicts erupted between the crown and the Parliament over issues of authority and rights. James held a strong preconception of the monarchy, based in the theory of the “Divine Right of Kings.” Parliament countered by asserting the traditional order established with the Magna Carta. Tensions mounted throughout the kingdom.

James’ speech before the Parliament illustrated his conception of monarchy. In it, he declared, “the state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God’s Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called gods.” One can imagine the discomfort within Parliament regarding the implications of this equation between the monarchy and divinity. James, however, unwilling to simply infer this connection, continued:

Kings are justly called gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth... God hath the power to create or destroy, to make or unmake at his pleasure, to give life or send death, to judge all and to be judged nor accountable to none... And the like power have kings: they make and unmake their subjects, they have the power of raising up and casting down, of life and of death, judges over all their subjects and in all causes and yet accountable to none but God only.

By illustrating the full implications of the divine right theory, James mounted a direct assault upon the foundations of the traditional order. Against the sanctity of property, James argued that it was the power of
the King to dispose of his subjects and therefore their property, as he saw fit. James argued against the linkage of political power and property, contending that his ruling authority came from God alone. Against the principle that legal rights protected all men, James countered that his power over his subjects was without limit. Finally, James dismissed the principle of the supremacy of law, with the assertion that he answered to none, save God alone.

As mentioned, this challenge to the traditional order was not contested. Parliament attempted, gently at first, to correct the King and reassert its traditional rights. When James challenged that Parliament exists purely at the pleasure and grace of the King, Parliament responded:

Now concerning the ancient right... of this house of the parliament, the misinformation openly delivered to your majesty hath been... we hold not our privileges of right, but of grace only, renewed every parliament... Against which assertions... the house of commons assembled in parliament, and in the name of the whole commons of the realm of England, with uniform consent for ourselves and our posterities, do expressly protest, as being derogatory in the highest degree to the true dignity, liberty, and authority of your majesty's high courts of parliament, and consequently to the right of all your majesty's said subjects, and the whole body of this your kingdom.11

Thus, Parliament asserted its “ancient right” against the “misinformation” of the new king. This ancient right grounded itself in a familiar concept:

And contrariwise... we most truly avouch that our privileges and liberties are our rights and due inheritance no less than our very lands and goods; that they cannot be withheld from us, denied, or impaired, but with apparent wrong to the whole state of the realm; and that our making of request in the entrance of parliament to enjoy our privileges is an act only of manners and doth not weaken our right, no more than our suing to the king
Property was the foundation of Parliament's ancient right to assemble, as it was the foundation of all other rights. Furthermore, Parliament was exclusively constituted of property-holders, thus these rights were inherent within Parliament, and could not be denied.

This debate continued until the death of James in 1625, and the subsequent ascension of his son, Charles I. Setting himself squarely within his father's footsteps, Charles also argued for an absolutist monarchy based on divine right. He moved beyond the arguments of his father, however, and acted in accordance with those beliefs. Breaking two of the long-standing taboos of the fiercely Protestant England, Charles selected a Catholic bride, Henrietta Maria of France, and also granted freedom of worship to English Catholics. This raises the ire of Parliament, and when they sought to remove the man they felt was responsible for this outrage, the Duke of Buckingham, Charles dissolved Parliament. The dissolution, however, created its own set of problems, as Parliament had not yet granted Charles the customary dues of "tonnage and poundage," which were the basis of the royal budget. To supplement his income, Charles simply collected these taxes without the consent of Parliament and began a series of forced loans. By raising taxes without the approval of Parliament, Charles not just attacked the traditional order, he actively overturned it.

The case of the Five Knights illustrated another dimension of Charles's campaign against the traditional order. In this case, the judiciary was asked to consider the imprisonment of individuals who refused to pay Charles's forced loan. The justice presented the case as such:

[W]e are sworn to maintain all prerogatives of the king... And we are likewise sworn to administer justice equally to all people... That which is now to be judged by us is this: whether any one that is committed by the king's authority, and no cause declared of his commitment, according as here it is upon this return — whether we ought to deliver him by bail or to remand him back again.
Thus another fundamental issue addressed by the Magna Carta: whether an individual could be imprisoned without cause. Surprisingly, the court ruled that this exercise of royal prerogative was sound:

[The king] bids us proceed by law as we are sworn to do, and so is the king. And we make no doubt but the king, if you seek to him... will have mercy. But we leave that. If in justice we ought to deliver you, we would do it; but upon these grounds and these records, and the precedents and resolutions, we cannot deliver you, but you must be remanded. 15

By ruling that the king does indeed hold the power to detain individuals without due cause, the court affirmed Charles's campaign against the traditional order.

Parliament again attempted to assert it rights against this threatening new intrusion of royal power. The Petition of Right, drafted in 1628, was intended to educate Charles in the proper procedures of English government. Beginning with the issue of taxation and the forced loans, Parliament reminded Charles:

whereas it is declared and enacted by a statute made in the time of the reign of King Edward the First... that no tallage or aid should be laid or levied by the king or his heirs in this realm without the goodwill and assent of... the freemen of the commonalty of this realm; and, by authority of parliament holden... it is declared and enacted that from thenceforth no person should be compelled to make any loans to the king against his will... your subjects have inherited this freedom, that they should not be compelled to contribute to any tax, tallage, aid, or other like charge not set by common consent in parliament. 16

Furthermore, with regard to the precedent of imprisonment without cause, the petition reprimanded Charles, thus:

by the statute called the Great Charter of the Liberties of England, it is declared and enacted that no freeman may be
taken or imprisoned... but by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land... nevertheless, against the tenor of the said statutes and other the good laws and statutes of your realm to that end provided, divers of your subjects have of late been imprisoned without any cause showed.\textsuperscript{17}

Again, quite obviously, Parliament, whose cause was essentially conservative, attempted to protect the traditional order against the novel intrusions of the Stuart monarchy. The Stuart program of absolutist monarchy based on divine right theory was the true revolutionary doctrine, as it entailed the overthrow of the existing order. These two doctrines clashed repeatedly, neither decisively overpowering the other. Stalemate produced frustration; frustration pushed these doctrines towards more radical formulations.

Within a year of receiving the Petition of Right, Charles intensified the situation by dissolving Parliament and initiating a period of personal rule, which lasted for more than a decade. Still denied the necessary income of tonnage and poundage dues, Charles attempted to circumvent Parliament's control of the purse by enacting the collection of "Ship Money." Affirmed by the judiciary in 1637, this practice allowed that:

\begin{quote}
your majesty may... command all the subjects of this your kingdom at their charge to provide and furnish such number of ships, with men, munition, and victuals... for the defence and safeguard of the kingdom... and that by law your majesty may compel the doing thereof in case of refusal or refractoriness.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

In effect, this practice constituted a regular tax levied without the consent of Parliament; however, it did not fully solve Charles's financial problems. When war erupted between England and Scotland in 1639, Charles discovered that he lacked the funds to raise an effective army. Forced to recall Parliament in 1640, the King found himself facing a group unwilling to grant the assistance he demanded. Dissolving the so-called "Short Parliament" after only three weeks, Charles again attempted personal rule. However, the combined pressures of the continuing
financial problems, the occupation of northern England by the Scottish armies, and the increasing demands of the populace that Parliament be recalled forced Charles's hand. The "Long Parliament" assembled in November 1640. The period of peaceful debate had reached an end. 19

Much as did the nobles under King John, the "Long Parliament" exploited Charles's position of weakness to gain concessions and reforms. One of the first acts passed, the Triennial Act, called for the regular meeting of Parliament for the purpose of "preventing of inconveniences happening by the long intermission of parliaments." 20 Subsequent acts established that "this present parliament now assembled shall not be dissolved unless it be by act of parliament to be passed for that purpose, nor shall be, at any time or times during the continuance thereof, prorogued or adjourned, unless it be by act of parliament to be likewise passed for that purpose." 21 Parliament then repealed the collection of the Ship Money, abolished the Star Chamber court, and severely curtailed the powers of the ecclesiastical authorities. 22 With each of these acts, Parliament grew increasingly radical in its reaction against the Stuart absolutism. While tied to the basic principles of the traditional order (i.e. the sanctity of property, the equation of property and power, the universal protection of law, and the submission of all men to the law), Parliament grew more willing to dispose the actual traditions in order to preserve the principles behind those traditions.

The Militia Ordinance illustrates this point. Drafted in 1642 in response to the failed attempt to impeach and arrest five members of the "Long Parliament" earlier that year, the ordinance proclaimed:

it is ordained by the lords and commons now in parliament assembled... [they] shall have power to lead, conduct and employ the [militia] aforesaid arrayed and weaponed, for the suppression of all rebellions, insurrections, and invasions that may happen within the several and respective counties and places; and shall have power and authority to lead, conduct, and employ the persons aforesaid arrayed and weaponed... for the suppression of all rebellions. 23

By this ordinance, Parliament stripped the King of his traditional
powers over the militia and bestowed them upon itself. Charles quickly responded:

Whereas we understand that, expressly contrary to the... laws of this our kingdom, under colour... of an ordinance of parliament, without our consent or any... warrant from us, the trained bands and militia of this kingdom have been lately, and are intended to be, put in arms and drawn into companies in a warlike manner... in case any of our trained bands shall rise or gather together contrary to this our command, we shall then call them in due time to a strict account and proceed legally against them as violators of the laws.24

The conflict between the King and Parliament took a new turn. Whereas before, Parliament merely asserted its traditional rights as a defense against the encroachments of the Stuarts, now Parliament itself encroached upon the traditional authority of the King in order to protect those same rights.

This new radical new formulation of Parliamentary powers is clearly expressed in the Declaration of the Lords and Commons.

[I]t is acknowledged that the king is the fountain of justice and protection; but the acts of justice and protection are not exercised in his own person, nor depend upon his pleasure, but by his courts and by his ministers, who must do their duty therein though the king in his own person should forbid them... The high court of parliament is not only a court of judicature... but it is likewise a council to provide for the necessities, prevent the imminent dangers, and preserve the public peace and safety of the kingdom, and to declare the king's pleasure in those things as are requisite thereunto... the king's supreme and royal pleasure is exercised and declared in this high court of law and council, after a more eminent and obligatory manner than it can be by personal act or resolution of his own.25

Parliament took a significant leap. It claimed for itself the "king's
pleasure," as opposed to the "king's person," such that it alone stood as the judge of the greater "good." Though the King's person could oppose Parliament, the acts of Parliament contained within them the "king's pleasure," and therefore the power to justly oppose the king. The implicit corollary to this proposition was, of course, that the king's opposition to Parliament was essentially unjust. With this powerful new tool, the Parliament gained the moral justification necessary to carry out a civil war against the monarchy and its transformation from a conservative body to a radical reactionary body is thus completed.

This radical formulation of Parliamentary reaction propelled the events from 1649-60. The trial and execution of Charles exhibited this concern with maintaining the traditional order:

Charles Stuart, the now king of England, not content with those many encroachments which his predecessors had made upon the people in their rights and freedoms, hath had a wicked design totally to subvert the ancient and fundamental laws and liberties of this nation and in their place to introduce an arbitrary and tyrannical government.  

Yet the methods employed were strikingly untraditional: "For all which treasons and crimes this court doth adjudge that he, the said Charles Stuart, as a tyrant, traitor, murderer, and public enemy to the good people of this nation, shall be put to death by severing of his head from his body." True, the English were never exactly timid when it came to killing unpopular monarchs; yet such regicide typically occurred under the guise of a "hunting accident" or some other plausible misfortune. The trial, conviction, and public execution of a sitting king for the crime of treason would have been unthinkable, yet that was the fate that befell King Charles I.

Perhaps the best evidence for the assertion that the "revolution" actually constituted a radicalized reaction comes from an ongoing debate within the "revolutionaries" themselves, best exemplified by the Putney Debates. These debates demonstrated the essential conservative foundation of the Parliamentarians, led by Cromwell, against the true revolutionary ideology of the Levellers.
The debates at Putney centered around the Leveler-proposed constitution, "An Agreement of the People," which was far more democratic in its formulations than the constitution proposed by Cromwell and the leaders of the Parliamentary forces. Yet Cromwell and his partner in the debate, Commissary-General Ireton, seem quite reluctant to accept this new constitution. Cromwell argued, "this paper does contain in it a very great alteration of the very government of the kingdom... what the consequences of such an alteration as this would be, if there were nothing else to be considered, wise men and godly men ought to consider." Upon consideration, however, Cromwell and his ally objected to the "Agreement" based on two particular concerns: first, the distribution of the franchise and its effects upon property, and secondly, the right to break unjust agreements.

With regards to the issue of franchise, Ireton noted:

It is said, they are to be distributed according to the number of the inhabitants... And this doth make me think that the meaning is, that every man that is an inhabitant is to be equally considered, and to have an equal voice in the election of those representers.29

This principle, by which every inhabitant had an equal voice in the election of representatives, Ireton found to be quite troubling. "[I]f you make this rule," he charged, "I think you must fly for refuge to an absolute natural right, and you must deny all civil right."30 Ireton argued the only possible justification for the claim of equal representation was as a natural right. However, by doing so not only was the traditional order's association of political power with property undermined, property itself was threatened:

For thus: by that same right of nature... by which you say one man hath an equal right with another to the choosing of him that shall govern him – by that same right of nature, he hath the same equal right in any goods he sees... to take and use them for his sustenance.31
By acknowledging a natural right which existed within all men, Ireton feared that a slippery-slope would be created where all men might have a natural right to property. This universal right to property would dissolve the established legal rights of property-holders, destroying another principle of the traditional order. Thus, this revolutionary principle of equal representation based on natural right was rejected in favor of a traditional understanding of property-based rights and representation. Again, the conservative trend was obvious.

With regard to the second issue, the right to break unjust agreements, Cromwell and Ireton grew extremely suspicious of such a revolutionary principle. Speaking of the Leveller’s representative, Mr. Wildman, Ireton stated, “he hints that, if he that makes an engagement (be it what it will be) have further light that this engagement was not good or honest, then he is free from it.” He disagreed with this policy, arguing, “I account that the great foundation of justice, that we should keep covenant with one another... take that away, I do not know what ground there is of anything you can call any man’s right.” Again the threat of this principle to property was established:

What right hath any man to anything if you lay not down the principle, that we are to keep covenant? If you will resort to the Law of Nature by the Law of Nature you have no more right to this land, or anything else, than I have. I have as much right to take hold of anything... as you.

The sanctity of covenant established the rule of law, the right of property, and the general social order. Cromwell, Ireton, and the other Parliamentary leaders again must disavow this revolutionary democratic principle in favor of a traditional conception of law and contract.

The principles debated at Putney, the status of natural rights, the relationship between natural right and property, and the right to dissolve unjust relationships, had to wait for the writings of John Locke before they began to gain acceptance among those in power. For now, the traditional order, first codified under Magna Carta, prevailed.

Thus, in conclusion, it has been shown that the “English Revolution” is better classified as the “English Radical Reaction.”
Parliament and its leaders were no Jacobins—they set out to recreate society, but instead conservative figures sought to protect the traditional order from the growing power of an aggressive king. In doing so, however, Parliamentarians were forced to adopt radical tactics to forward their agenda, subverting the actual traditional practices and roles of the King and Parliament in order to protect traditional order. Through these radical challenges to tradition, however, Parliament opened the door to the explicit questioning of the very principles they sought to preserve. Levellers, Diggers, and Lockeans all followed the lead of Parliament. These subsequent movements, and not the actions of Parliament, comprised the true English Revolution.

2 Ibid, 4.
3 Ibid, 6-22.
9 Ibid, 118.
11 Ibid.
13 Stephenson and Marcham, “The Case of the Five Knights (1627)” in *Sources, Document 94-A*.
14 Ibid.
15 Stephenson and Marcham, “Petition of Right (1628)” in *Sources, Document 92-D*. 
16 Ibid.
17 Stephenson and Marcham, “The Question of Ship Money (1637)” in Sources, Document 94-B.
18 Hill, Century of Revolution, 8-10.
19 Stephenson and Marcham, “The Triennial Act (1641)” in Sources, Document 96-A.
20 Stephenson and Marcham, “Act to Continue the Existing Parliament (1641)” in Sources, Document 96-C.
21 Stephenson and Marcham, Sources, Documents 96-E, G, and L.
22 Stephenson and Marcham, “The Militia Ordinance (1642)” in Sources, Document 96-M.
23 Stephenson and Marcham, “Royal Proclamation (27 May 1642)” in Sources, Document 96-N.
24 Stephenson and Marcham, “Declaration of the Lords and Commons (27 May 1642)” in Sources, Document 96-O.
25 Stephenson and Marcham, “Act Erecting a High Court of Justice (6 January)” in Sources, Document 104-A.
26 Stephenson and Marcham, “The Sentence of the Court (27 January)” in Sources, Document 104-C.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.