

ENGLAND'S 17th CENTURY REVOLUTION

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A Review of Francois Guizot's 1850
pamphlet

*Pourquoi la revolution d'Angleterre
a-t-elle reussi?*

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In this pamphlet, M. Guizot [1784-1874, French historian; one-time head of government] intends to prove that Louis Philippe and the politics pursued by M. Guizot should not really have been overthrown on February 24, 1848, and that only the wicked character of the French is to be blamed for the fact that the July Monarchy of 1830, after an existence of 18 troublesome years, collapsed so ignominiously and did not acquire the endurance that the English monarchy has enjoyed since 1688.

Reading this pamphlet, one realized that even the ablest men of the ancien regime, as well as men who cannot be denied certain historical talents, have become so confused by the fateful events of that February that they have lost all sense of history and, indeed, no longer understand their previous actions. Instead of gaining, from the experience of the February Revolution, some insight into the totally different historical situation and into the entirely different position that the classes occupy in society under the French Monarchy of



Prince William of Orange is read the Bill of Rights concerning Parliament before being offered the throne as William III

1830 and under the English Monarchy of 1688, M. Guizot dissolves these difference with a few moralistic phrases and asserts in conclusion that the policy overthrown on February 24 was "only one that could master the revolution, in the same way that it had controlled the state".

Specifically formulated, the question M. Guizot sets out to answer is: Why did bourgeois society in England develop as a constitutional monarchy longer than it did in France?

Characteristic of M. Guizot's knowledge of the course of bourgeois development in England is the following passage:

"Under George I and George II, the public spirit took a different direction: Foreign policy ceased to be the major interest; internal administration, the maintenance of peace, financial, colonial, and commercial questions, and the development and struggle for parliamentary government became the major issues occupying the government and the public."

M. Guizot finds in the reign of William III only two points worth mentioning: the preservation of the balance of power between Parliament and crown, and the preservation of the European balance of power through the wars against Louis XIV. Under the Hanoverian dynasty, "public opinion suddenly takes a "different direction", nobody knows how or why. Here one sees how M. Guizot superimposes the most commonplace phrases of French parliamentary debates on English history, believing he has thereby explained it. In the same way, Guizot also imagines that, as French Prime Minister, he carried on his shoulders the responsibility of preserving the proper equilibrium between Parliament and crown, as well as the European balance of power, and in reality he did nothing but huckster French society away piecemeal to the moneyed Jews of the Paris

M. Guizot does not think it worth mentioning that the struggle against Louis XIV was simply a war of competition aimed at the destruction of French naval power and commerce; nor does he mention the rule of the finance bourgeoisie through the establishment of the Bank of England under William III, nor the introduction of the public debt which then received its first sanction, nor that the manufacturing bourgeoisie received a new impetus by the consistent application of a system of protective tariffs. For Guizot, only political phrases are meaningful. He does not even mention that under Queen Anne the ruling parties could preserve themselves, as well as the constitutional monarchy, only by forcibly extending the term of Parliament to seven years, thus all but destroying any influence the people might have had on government.

Under the Hanoverian dynasty, England had already reached a stage of development where it could fight its wars of competition against France with modern means. England herself challenged France directly only in America and the East Indies, whereas on the Continent she contended herself with paying foreign sovereigns, such as Frederick II, to

wage war against France. And while foreign policy assumed such a new form, M. Guizot has this to say: "Foreign policy ceased to be the major interest", being replaced by "the maintenance of peace". Regarding the statement that the "development and struggle for parliamentary government" became a major concern, one may recall the incidents of corruption under the Walpole Ministry, which, indeed, resemble very closely the scandals that became daily events under M. Guizot.

The fact that the English Revolution developed more successfully than the French can be attributed, according to M. Guizot, to two factors: first, that the English Revolution had a thoroughly religious character, and hence in no way broke with all past traditions; and second, that from the very beginning it was not destructive but constructive, Parliament defending the old existing laws against encroachment by the crown.

In regard to the first point, M. Guizot seems to have forgotten that the free-thinking philosophy which makes him shudder so terribly when he sees it in the French Revolution was imported to France from no other country than England. Its father was Locke, and in Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke it had already achieved that ingenious form which later found such a brilliant development in France. We thus arrive at the strange conclusion that the same free-thinking philosophy which, according to M. Guizot, wrecked the French Revolution, was one of the most essential products of the religious English Revolution.

In regard to the second point, Guizot completely forgets that the French Revolution, equally conservative, began even more conservatively than the English. Absolutism, particularly as it finally appeared in France, was an innovation there too, and it was against this innovation that the parlements [French Diets] revolted to defend the old laws, the *us et coutumes* [usages and customs] of the old monarchy with its Estates General. And whereas the French Revolution was to revive the old Estates General that had quietly died since Henry IV and Louis XIV, the English Revolution, on the contrary, could show no comparable classical-conservative element.

According to M. Guizot, the main result of the English Revolution was that it made it impossible for the king to rule against the will of Parliament and the House of Commons. Thus, to him, the whole revolution consists only of this: that in the beginning both sides, crown and Parliament, overstep their bounds and go too far, until they finally find their proper equilibrium under William III and neutralize each other. M. Guizot finds it superfluous to mention that the subjection of the crown to Parliament meant subjection to the rule of a class. Nor does he think it necessary to deal with the fact that this class won the necessary power in order finally to make the crown its servant. According to him, the whole struggle between Charles I and Parliament was merely over purely political privileges. Not a word is said about why the Parliament, and the class represented in it, needed these privileges. Nor does Guizot talk about Charles I's interference with free competition, which made England's commerce and industry increasingly impossible; nor about the dependence on Parliament into which Charles I, in his continuous need for money, fell the more deeply the more he tried to defy it. Consequently, M. Guizot explains

the revolution as being merely due to the ill will and religious fanaticism of a few troublemakers who would not rest content with moderate freedom. Guizot is just as little able to explain the interrelationship between the religious movement and the development of bourgeois society. To him, of course, the Republic [Cromwell's] is likewise the work of a mere handful of ambitious and malicious fanatics. Nowhere does he mention the attempts made to establish republics in Lisbon, Naples, and Messina at that time -- attempts following the Dutch example, as England did.

Although M. Guizot never loses sight of the French Revolution, he does not even reach the simple conclusion that the transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy can take place only after violent struggles and passing through a republican stage, and that even then the old dynasty, having become useless, must make way for a usurpatory side line. Hence, Guizot can say only the most trivial commonplaces about the overthrow of the English Restoration monarchy. He does not even cite the most immediate causes: the fear on the part of the great new landowners, who had acquired property before the restoration of Catholicism -- property robbed from the church -- which they would have to change hands; the aversion of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie to Catholicism, a religion in now way suitable for its commerce; the nonchalance with which the Stuarts, for their own and their courtier's benefit, sold all of England's industry and commerce to the French government, that is, to the only country then in a position to offer England dangerous and often successful competition, etc. Since M. Guizot omits the most momentous points, there is nothing left for him but the highly unsatisfactory and banal narration of mere political events.

For M. Guizot, the great mystery is the conservative nature of the English Revolution, which he can ascribe only to the superior intelligence of the English, whereas in fact it can be found in the enduring alliance between the bourgeoisie and a great part of the landowners, an alliance that constitutes the major difference between it and the French Revolution, which destroyed the great landholdings with its parcelization policy. The English class of great landowners, allied with the bourgeoisie -- which, incidentally, had already developed under Henry VIII -- did not find itself in opposition -- as did the French feudal landowners in 1789 -- but rather in complete harmony with the vital requirements of the bourgeoisie. In fact, their lands were not feudal but bourgeois property. On the one hand, they were able to provide the industrial bourgeoisie with the manpower necessary for manufacturing, and on the other they were able to develop agriculture to the standards consonant with industry and commerce. Thus their common interests with the bourgeoisie, thus their alliance with it.

For Guizot, English history ends with the consolidation of the constitutional monarchy. For him, everything that follows is limited to a pleasant alternating game between Tories and Whigs, that is, to the great debate between M. Guizot and M. Thiers. In reality, however, the consolidation of the constitutional monarchy is only the beginning of the magnificent development and transformation of bourgeois society in England. Where M. Guizot sees only gentle calm and idyllic peace, in reality the most violent conflicts and the

most penetrating revolutions are taking place. Under the constitutional monarchy, manufacturing at first expands to an extent hitherto unknown, only to make way for heavy industry, the steam engine, and the colossal factories. Whole classes of the population disappear, to be replaced by new ones, with new living conditions and new requirements. A new, more gigantic bourgeoisie comes into existence; while the old bourgeoisie fights with the French Revolution, the new one conquers the world market. It becomes so all-powerful that even before the Reform Bill gives it direct political power, it forces its opponents to enact legislation entirely in conformity with *its* interest and *its* needs. It wins direct representation in Parliament and uses it for the destruction of the last remnants of real power left to the landowners. It is, finally, at the present moment engaged in a thorough demolition of the beautiful codes of the English Constitution, which M. Guizot so admires.

And while M. Guizot compliments the English for the fact that the reprehensible excesses of French social life, republicanism and socialism, have not destroyed the foundations of their sanctified monarchy, the class antagonisms of English society have actually reached a height not found anywhere else, and the bourgeoisie, with its incomparable wealth and productive powers, confronts a proletariat which likewise has incomparable power and concentration. The respect that M. Guizot offers to England finally adds up to the fact that, under the protection of the constitutional monarchy, more, and more radical, elements of social revolutions have developed than in all other countries of the world together.

At the point where the threads of English history come together in a knot, when M. Guizot cannot even pretend to cut with mere political phrases, he takes refuge in religious catchwork, in God's armed intervention. Thus, for example, the holy spirit suddenly descends on the army and prevents Cromwell from declaring himself king. Before his conscience, Guizot saves himself through God, before his profane public, he does so through his style.

In reality, not only do *les rois s'en vont* [the kings depart] but also *les capacites de la bourgeoisie s'en vont* [the capacities of the bourgeoisie disappear].
