“NO NEWE ENTERPRIZE”: EMPIRICAL POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF INNOVATION IN THE COLONIAL ENGLISH AMERICAS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“No Newe Enterprize”: Empirical Political Science and the Problem of Innovation in the Colonial English Americas

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This dissertation offers a literary history of rebellion in England’s seventeenth-century American colonies informed by two understudied aspects of early modern political thought. First, it recovers the prohibition on what writers in the period pejoratively called “innovation,” a synonym for revolt reflective of the widespread assumption that any form of change, however small or ostensibly apolitical, was guaranteed to be politically disruptive. Second, it charts the rise of an empirical approach to political knowledge grounded in the eyewitness report genre and focused on the threat of political innovation: a particularizing, inductive alternative to the abstract, deductive discourse of “political philosophy” that I call “Atlantic political science.”

In the absence of modern disciplinary distinctions, elites throughout English North America and the Caribbean adapted representational strategies from an emergent natural science in order to make sense of unfamiliar situations, for which the inherited axioms of classical and scriptural political thought failed to prepare them. These scientific techniques helped them to predict, narrate, and thwart the various forms of political innovation threatening their fledgling settlements: from mutiny and heresy to
Native American warfare and slave insurrection. But if empiricism fortified the colonial project at a crucial moment, when it still seemed deeply transgressive and entirely unforeordained, it also made inadvertently “audible” the very anticolonial critique it was meant to overcome. Articulated by underclass “innovators,” this critique emphasized the incriminating novelty of colonialism’s elite-sponsored institutions, including repressive new forms of governance, new theologies, and new economic regimes like slavery.

Political innovation was not so much prohibited as monopolized by various constituencies in the period because it was not only a pervasive polemical term for rebellion but also a key aspect of modern sovereignty. Appropriating the divine right to enact change, colonial leaders insisted that observably exceptional New World circumstances authorized certain departures from precedent. Rereading political-scientific reports by writers like William Strachey, John Winthrop, and Richard Ligon thus allows us to recast anticolonial rebellion not as a form of “radicalism”—an unabashedly pro-change ethos that only emerges in the late eighteenth century—but rather as resistance to change. Charting the successive emergence of colonies in the greater Chesapeake, New England, and the Caribbean, the dissertation reframes the settlement period as an extended conflict between innovation and “counter-innovation,” that is, between top-down change and restorative underclass rebellion. Ultimately, the project expands our narrow definition of political thought beyond the Eurocentric canon of political philosophy, demonstrates colonialism’s centrality to innovation’s positive transvaluation in the late eighteenth century, and recovers from the history of anticolonial resistance a concept of salutary political change liberated from the hubris of Euro-Christian absolutism and sorely needed in our own innovation-obsessed moment.
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Note on Usage

I have preserved my early modern sources’ original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation except to transpose “i” and “j” and “u” and “v” in accordance with modern usage. Direct quotations from scripture are drawn from either the 1599 Geneva Bible (GB) or the 1611 King James Bible (KJV) as indicated parenthetically.
Consider (if you will) the difference between the life of men in any of the most civilised province[s] of Europe and in one of the most savage and barbarous regions of the New Indies, and then you will think it great enough to justify the remark that *Man is a God to man*. … It helps to observe the force, virtue, and consequences of what has been discovered, and that is nowhere more apparent than in those three things which were unknown to the ancients … namely the *Art of Printing*, *Gunpowder*, and the *Mariner’s Compass*. For these three have altered the whole face and state of things right across the globe[;] no empire, no sect, and no star seems to have exerted a greater effect and influence on human affairs than these mechanical innovations.

—Francis Bacon, *Instauratio Magna* (1620)

Amongst men, there are very many, that thinke themselves wiser, and abler to govern the Publique, better than the rest; and these strive to reforme and innovate, one this way, another that way; and thereby bring it into Distraction and Civill warre.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)
Introduction

“First Beginnings” and “Weighty Employments”

In the final, 1646 entry of the annals we now call Of Plymouth Plantation, William Bradford reports that certain “discontented persons” sought to “trouble” the New England colonies’ “peace and disturb, if not innovate, their government.” In plain, concise prose, Plymouth’s governor-historian accuses these unnamed “persons” of fomenting disorder by attempting to alter an established political structure. In characterizing them this way, as possibly seeking to “innovate,” Bradford deployed a pervasive early modern idiom, one reflective of a virtually axiomatic belief that change and novelty were to be feared, prevented, and punished rather than desired, pursued, and applauded. Far from being conceived as a positive good, as it is today, innovation was once a pejorative term: a prohibited activity and a mainstay of early modern polemicism, a synonym for “rebellion” and “heresy” and a near-universal form of defamation. From antiquity through the late eighteenth century and beyond, the term served to delegitimize (perceived) departures from precedent based on the enduring assumption that any change, however small or ostensibly apolitical, was guaranteed to be politically disruptive.¹

Bradford’s account not only signals his normative allegiance to the idea of a status quo via the pejorative “idiom of innovation,” it also exemplifies his contribution to an early modern fund of firsthand knowledge about politics—broadly defined as the adjudication of collective relations—and especially about outbreaks of rebellion and effective measures used to quell them: a discourse I call “Atlantic political science.” While his somewhat elliptical literary style and the fact that his text did not appear in

print until the nineteenth century would seem to imply a coterie readership nurtured by Plymouth’s geographic isolation and separatist ecclesiology, Bradford in fact imagined a wider audience. In his words, he had kept a record of the challenges of New World governance not only to educate subsequent generations of Plymouth colonists about the “difficulties their fathers wrestled with in ... their first beginnings” but “also that some use may be made hereof in after times by others in such like weighty employments.” Bradford’s sense of the “use” fellow rulers might make of his experiential knowledge about governance provides a handy definition of Atlantic political science, but it also indexes that discourse’s central contradiction. For if writers like Bradford saw change as the chief threat to political stability, how are we to reconcile this with his references to “first beginnings” and “weighty employments”? How do we make sense of the fact that the pastor John Robinson called on the settlers to exercise special vigilance lest Plymouth be “shaken with unnecessary novelties” while simultaneously metaphorizing the colony as a “new house,” vulnerable precisely because its foundations were not yet “settled”? In short, how do we square the period’s orthodox opposition to innovation with the indisputable novelty of New World colonialism?²

This dissertation argues that the discourse of Atlantic political science emerged to mediate this powerful contradiction. Although they have received insufficient scholarly attention, both the experiential epistemology and the idiom of innovation found in Bradford’s text played major roles in the political and intellectual history of England and its colonies. The two were also closely related: elites throughout England’s North

American and Caribbean settlements turned to the sense-based epistemology of empiricism in order to make sense of new, unfamiliar, and unprecedented situations—situations for which metropolitan directives and classical and scriptural traditions of political thought failed to prepare them. In the absence of modern disciplinary distinctions, colonial leaders adapted the techniques of first-hand observation, detailed description, and inductive interpretation from an emergent natural science in order to manage and effectively exploit New World novelty. These scientific techniques helped them to predict, narrate, and thwart the various forms of political “innovation” or rebellion that threatened their fledgling settlements: from mutiny and heresy to Native American warfare and slave insurrection. But the rigorous empiricism at the heart of Atlantic political science also had the unintended effect of disclosing the disavowed novelty of colonialism’s top-down (or elite-sponsored) institutions, including new forms of governance, new theologies, and new economic arrangements like slavery. The candid reportage demanded by the Americas’ exceptional political circumstances inadvertently made “audible” the very anticolonial critique its authors intended to silence. Articulated by the underclass (or hierarchically subordinate) persons whom elites disparaged as “innovators,” this critique often emphasized those elites’ own departures from precedent.

The early modern “innovation prohibition” rested on the assumption that ancient political wisdom was universally applicable. In this sense, denouncing innovation would seem to go hand in hand with an approach to political knowledge undergirded not by the emergent category of “experience” but by received ideas, transhistorical abstraction, and rationalist deduction—the political epistemology dominant in the period and privileged in scholarly accounts, which I will call “political philosophy.” But while early moderns
undoubtedly inherited their fear of novelty from classical writers, actual instances of innovation tended to confound traditional wisdom. New World political novelty thus prompted a turn to the inductive, empirical epistemology of “political science”—a phrase meant to evoke its methodological affinities not with the modern academic discipline of that name but instead with a natural science that was similarly transformed by an influx of data from the Americas. Attending to the signature genre of Atlantic political science, the “colonial report,” promises to enrich our understanding of both the history of political thought and the history of science by recovering a moment when the two overlapped. I demonstrate that the rise of experience as a valid source of knowledge took place not only via the (natural) Scientific Revolution but also through a major shift in political hermeneutics that was, like Francis Bacon’s New Science, intimately linked with both colonialism and the modern transvaluation of innovation. Likewise, I show that the era’s most pressing political questions were addressed not only in the abstract, Eurocentric texts of canonical political philosophy like Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) and John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) but also in understudied political-scientific reports emanating from the imperial periphery. Expanding our narrow definition of political thought in this fashion serves to nuance our accounts of a number of political concepts, especially those involving early modern attitudes toward political change.3

Even as colonial leaders used first-hand experience and inductive reasoning to

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3 On experientialism’s resistance and amenability to innovation see Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 126-127. Eric Slauter is representative in regarding “political science” as an Enlightenment discourse epitomized by European figures like Montesquieu and the U.S. founders. Yet his account of the shift from an early conception of polities as natural to a later sense of polities as artificial or even aesthetic suggests the heuristic validity of an early modern “natural science of politics.” See Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1-17, 87-122. Like early modern political philosophy, eighteenth-century political science and the modern academic discipline it spawned tend to be abstract, theoretical, secular, Eurocentric, and mono-disciplinary. They also tend to be concerned with later phenomena like the nation state, electoral politics, bureaucracy, a fully-fledged public sphere, and the prospect of revolution.
revise the irrelevant axioms of Old World political thought, they claimed to uphold its
core assumption: that the best forms of government had been perfected in antiquity and
thus that new forms could never be worth the risk they entailed. The fundamental
contradiction of Atlantic political science—that it sought simultaneously to stifle
underclass anticolonial innovation and to legitimize colonialism’s top-down
innovations—derives from the ambiguities of the innovation concept. For innovation was
at once a synonym for rebellion and a key aspect of emergent definitions of sovereignty
(the ruler’s supreme power). The controversial notion of the ruler’s right to enact change
made for a complicated colonial scene. On the one hand, elites in the Americas claimed
to be upholding time-tested assumptions about politics by straining to identify precedents
for their actions; on the other hand, they insisted that observably exceptional New World
circumstances authorized certain departures from precedent—a process I will call the
“dialectic of novelty and empiricism.” Quasi-sovereign in their local jurisdictions but
subordinate in the broader empire, colonial leaders were forced to defend their enterprise
against accusations of innovation voiced by those they exploited in the Americas and by
their many critics in England. The detailed accounts that writers like William Strachey,
John Winthrop, and Richard Ligon provided of the natural contingencies, underclass
resistance, and metropolitan meddling threatening their colonies thus tend to trouble the
establishedness of colonial elite hegemony in their very efforts to justify the sovereign
innovations that eventually secured it. The novel project of settlement was initially more
transgressive than triumphant, and that sense of transgression began to abate only when
the colonies became paradoxically able to serve as their own precedents.4

4 Colonial leaders’ oscillation between imitation and innovation bears out Anthony Grafton’s claim that
New World “discoveries” caused not the simple obsolescence of ancient texts but rather their renewed
Recovering the connections between innovation and Atlantic political science promises to modify our understanding not only of sovereignty but also rebellion. The colonial report genre’s tendency to grant us inadvertent access to the marginalized voices of colonialism’s discontents allows us to recast early modern rebellion not as a form of “radicalism”—an unabashedly pro-change ethos that only emerges in the late eighteenth century—as scholars often assume, but rather as resistance to change. Ultimately, then, I reread the first century of permanent Anglo-American settlement as an extended conflict between innovation and what I call “counter-innovation,” that is, between elite attempts to remake the world and underclass efforts to preserve or restore a status quo ante (“state of things previous”). Charting the successive emergence of settlements in the greater Chesapeake, New England, and the Caribbean, the chapters that follow each pair an instance of top-down innovation—absolute governorship in Virginia and Bermuda, the new civil and ecclesiastical regime of Congregationalism in Massachusetts, and the unprecedented institution of racial slavery in Barbados—with the form of non-elite counter-innovation that responded to it: mutiny, heresy, and slave revolt.5

* * *

Until recently there has been very little scholarship on the pejorative idiom of innovation. Many have failed to recognize it at all, retrojecting the twentieth century’s pro-innovation bias onto the past, while others have acknowledged the concept’s early meaning as a historical oddity without considering its ubiquity or implications. Still others have offered trenchant accounts of the concept but only in passing and in the

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5 See “radical,” OED Online (2017), esp. adj., def. 7b, and n., def. 6a. The innovation of indigenous dispossession and the counter-innovative native response thereto will be discussed briefly in Chapter One.
service of other inquiries. For example, amidst an attempt to locate the origins of public sphere discourse in the new print culture of the English Revolution, David Zaret notes that “Pervasive fear of change qua innovation is the dominant outlook of individuals, at all social levels, across the political spectrum” during the period and coins the phrase “paradox of innovation” to describe the disavowal of innovation by its “practitioners.”

The major exception to these patterns of scholarly neglect is Benoît Godin’s 2015 study *Innovation Contested*, the first book-length inquiry into the history of the concept. Godin ably charts innovation’s trajectory from an ancient and early modern pejorative to an unquestioned value in late modernity. But while his findings coincide in many respects with my own, his study also exhibits several fundamental limitations. First, he ignores the New World, a particularly fraught arena for controversies about innovation. Second, he neglects the intimate relationship between innovation and empiricism. And finally, he overlooks innovation’s tacit centrality to emergent definitions of sovereignty.6

Innovation’s dangerousness was early modern common sense. The term described a positive orientation toward change and an attendant hostility toward established authority—both grounds for suspicion in an intensely traditionalist era, when precedent was the dominant prism for evaluating behavior. Writers in the period fundamentally

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lacked a vocabulary for describing change as valuable: in J. G. A. Pocock’s words, “The ancient equation of change with degeneration and entropy … held fast” through the eighteenth century. Early moderns’ basic assumptions about history conditioned a flat refusal of the new. Aristotelianism trained them to regard a natural body’s deviation from an established telos as deformity, while Christianity taught them that ex nihilo creation and, indeed, change of any kind, was God’s exclusive province. Innovation was thus a specifically human activity synonymous not only with sedition but also heresy, sin, blasphemy, and idolatry; and divine innovation really wasn’t innovation at all but instead providence or miracle. Mutual accusations of innovation structured intra-elite confrontations between Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans and puritans, absolutists and constitutionalists, among many others. But elite writers also ascribed a particularly insatiable desire for novelty to underclass persons: the lowborn, the poor, women, religious dissidents, foreigners, natives, and slaves. These groups were said to prefer superficial political alternatives without appreciating the dangers of change, though they were often denied the political agency needed to enact change on their own. In short, the ubiquity and vehemence of the idiom of innovation cannot be underestimated.7

And yet despite being forbidden, innovation was central to a number of early modern movements and institutions. The innovation prohibition conditioned those seeking change to represent their aims—whether sincerely or opportunistically—as replication and restoration. And this resulted in a “dialectic of imitation and innovation” apparent in monarchism, republicanism, and the common law tradition, in the

Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, and Scientific Revolution, and perhaps most dramatically, in New World colonialism, indigenous dispossession, and slavery. What all of these formations have in common is an aspiration toward sovereignty, toward mastery (of various degrees of absolutism) over environments and their inhabitants, over access to the divine, and over the course of history, via a monopoly on legitimate political change. Thus for the sake of clarity, I will use the term “rebellion-as-innovation” to describe the forms of underclass resistance or counter-innovation that elites vilified—often unduly—as novel and the term “sovereignty-as-innovation” to describe the formerly divine right to enact political change claimed by those same elites. As we will see, the settlement period might be narrated as a series of developments in the idea sovereignty-as-innovation: from the emergency powers of Chesapeake governors to the godlike “discretion” practiced by New England magistrates to the racial absolutism of Caribbean slave-mastery.

Returning to the accusation of innovation voiced in Of Plymouth Plantation helps to concretize the foregoing claims. The “discontented persons” to whom Bradford referred were Robert Child and the other signers of the 1646 “Remonstrance and Petition” to the Massachusetts Bay General Court, who sought to reform the governments of puritan New England by extending the civil liberties enjoyed only by covenanted Congregationalists to the colonies’ populations of Englishmen holding Presbyterian, Anglican, and other non-Congregationalist views. The Remonstrants were typical of the era’s disempowered groups in disavowing the novelty of their proposed reforms by casting them as a return to a more originary arrangement. Thus both the Remonstrance and the pamphlet in which it was printed, New Englands Jonas Cast up at London (1647), urged the (re-)establishment of an exclusively English legal code and condemned
the exclusionary practices enabled by New England’s unprecedented synthesis of English and Biblical law. In the pamphlet’s words, the Remonstrants were “not aiming at novelty and disturbance, but at the glory of God, our allegiance to the State of England, and [the] good of these poor Plantations.” From Bradford’s point of view, however, the scriptural precedents outranked the conflicting English ones, making the Remonstrants the true innovators. The petitioners were imprisoned and heavily fined, and although Child eventually escaped to London, his suit to Parliament failed. New England’s London agent Edward Winslow successfully defended the colonies before the Committee on Foreign Plantations and in print. His own pamphlet, *New Englands Salamander* (1647), refuted the Remonstrants by insisting that Plymouth’s government was “legall and not Arbitrary, being as neere the Law of England as our condition will permit.”

Yet the triumph over the Remonstrants recounted in and wrought by Winslow’s political-scientific report should not distract us from the contradiction that resurfaces here, as he parries an accusation of “Arbitrariness” (a synonym for innovation) by invoking New England’s conformity to the “non-repugnance” clauses included in most colonial charters. For his assertion is not that the settlers have entirely avoided departing from English legal precedent but, rather, that they have departed from it only so far as their unique circumstances demanded. Accusations of innovation were most forceful when those who voiced them could not themselves be accused of innovating, but such a luxury was hard to come by in the tumultuous decades surrounding the English Civil Wars and in the colonial Americas, where exactly reproducing Old World arrangements

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proved impossible. While Winslow’s claims to sufficient legal conformity are bound up with his confident assertion that New England’s leaders “have the power of absolute Government” within their jurisdictions—a classic claim to sovereignty-as-innovation—his text in fact telegraphs an anxiety experienced by elites throughout the hemisphere and the century, who attempted to root out underclass rebellion-as-innovation even as they faced accusations of the novelty of Anglo-American colonialism itself. That anxiety became especially visible when Virginia colony secretary and exemplary colonial reporter William Strachey found himself protesting-too-much that colonialism “is no newe enterprize”—the phrase this dissertation takes as its foretitle.9

* * *

Strachey might have offered the same feeble protest for his political science. For as Jim Egan observes, experiential knowledge was “an upstart newcomer that potentially challenged the traditional positions of power established by rank and proximity to the king” in this moment. No Newe Enterprize is the beneficiary of two scholarly trends that elucidate this fact: what we might call the “epistemological turn” in early American studies and the more inchoate “formal turn” in the history of political thought. The former describes the wealth of recent scholarship on the idiosyncratic project of New World knowledge production. The latter describes growing interest among historians of political thought in the rhetorical, representational, and aesthetic dimensions of political ideas. My inquiry into Atlantic political science seeks to unite these two conversations.10

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The “epistemological turn” in early American studies builds on influential work in the history of science on the rise of empiricism as a valid source of epistemological authority. Scholars like Peter Dear, Barbara Shapiro, Steven Shapin, and Simon Schaffer, among many others, have done a great deal to illuminate empiricism’s challenge to established textual authorities and rationalist deduction. But while they have acknowledged the role that New World eyewitness data played in that process—as “new phenomena” from the Americas revealed classical “inventories of things-that-existed-in-the-world” to be “impoverished”—they have tended to do so only abstractly and in passing. The “epistemological turn” arose to nuance this story, to better explain the process whereby, in Ralph Bauer’s words, “European encounters with the New World … unleashed an unprecedented inflation in the value of empirical forms of knowledge.”

These studies have revealed the significance of American knowers and knowledge to an Enlightenment too often conceived in Eurocentric and secular terms and too readily honeycombed into anachronistic intellectual disciplines. Recovering the pre-disciplinarity of the era, scholars have explored the representational contours not only of early natural-scientific and medical discourses but also of what we regard today as pseudo-scientific, religious, occult, and racial ones. But while they have offered careful accounts of the exchange of natural, preternatural, and proto-ethnographic data between colonial periphery and metropolitan center, paying special attention to the (geo)politics thereof, these scholars have been less attentive to an analogous exchange of political data:

Atlantic political science. Here, first-hand reportage on colonial affairs and on Native American and diasporic African ways of collective life challenged the reigning paradigms of political thought in much the same way that the New World’s novel zoological, botanical, and geographic data transformed those bodies of knowledge.¹²

*No Newe Enterprize* thus attempts to recover an overlooked branch of a broader epistemological project bound up with European imperialism, Christian millennialism, the rise of creole cultures, the formation of today’s academic disciplines, and the definition of modernity itself. Many of the political-scientific reporters I discuss in the pages that follow doubled as naturalists, experimentalists, physicians, mathematicians, and lay or ordained religious authorities; and they produced different kinds of knowledge simultaneously. While political observers lacked a clear infrastructure akin to the one the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge provided for naturalists, theirs was nonetheless a recognizable form of collective, empirical inquiry. It should be noted that, no less than in earlier studies of New World natural science, empiricism refers in my account not to an actually achieved objectivity but to an ideology, ethos, and

literary posture. A socially positioned and historicizable method rather than a universal or transhistorical one, empiricism was at once an asset and a liability for colonial elites: while eyewitnessing was often a vehicle for narrowly subjective perspectives and a tool of those in power (or soon to be), the “empirical imperative” that staked leaders’ effective response to New World contingency on their candid reportage of circumstances on the ground could also undermine Anglo-American hegemony by revealing its novelty.\(^{13}\)

The distinction between political philosophy and political science is one early moderns themselves made. But while it is readily intelligible as a skirmish in the larger battle between rationalism and empiricism, deduction and induction, \textit{a priori} and \textit{a posteriori} interpretation, that distinction nonetheless entails an admittedly schematic attempt on my part to stabilize a complex, even contradictory constellation of seventeenth-century terms. I follow scholars like Barbara Shapiro and Susan Scott Parrish in using the word “science” in a specialized and somewhat anachronistic sense meant to evoke the connections, literal as well as analogic, between the study of politics and the study of nature in the period. Early moderns used the umbrella term \textit{scientia} to describe any form of certain knowledge. Often, as in the writings of Hobbes—to whom we will return in succeeding chapters as a major political-philosophical foil for political-scientific reporters—this meant the rational truth they privileged over empirical data. But “science” in my usage describes the more partial, provisional, and cumulative knowledge drawn from the experiential, experimental, and inductive procedures that we now associate exclusively with the study of nature—which early moderns called “natural history” or, more confusingly, “natural philosophy” and which we simply call “science.” Likewise,

\(^{13}\) On empiricism as an ideology and ethos see especially Shapin, \textit{Social History of Truth}.\textcopyright
“philosophy” in my usage describes rationalist knowledge drawn from syllogistic logic, textual authorities, or speculative modes like the utopian tradition. By contrast with political philosophy’s pretensions to universalism, political science is more attentive to local particularity, more flexible and open-ended, and more conducive to improvisation. Practical rather than theoretical, political science is less convinced of its findings in advance—an orientation that could be both debilitating and empowering. It is analogous to (and overlaps with) hybrid discourses like “political theology,” “political economy,” and what Sarah Rivett calls the “science of the soul,” the use of natural-scientific methods to study the effects of grace in puritan converts. In sum, Atlantic political science is perhaps best understood as a natural science of politics.14

The very attributes that make Atlantic political science a prime object of study for early Americanists influenced by the “epistemological turn” have excluded it from consideration by historians of political thought. Yet the incipient “formal turn” in the latter discipline offers a way to rectify this oversight. The “formal turn” recalls the earlier “linguistic turn” associated with J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. But where that methodology—so influential for my inquiry into the idiom of innovation—deepened the study of political ideas by focusing on the languages used to express them, the formalism I have in mind considers not only terminology and rhetorical context but also imagery, tropes, allusions, interpretive frameworks, and modes of narration, description, and address. The “formal turn” is also closely related to, yet more capacious than, what Nikolas Kompridis calls the “aesthetic turn in political thought.” As the largely European

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14 See Rivett, Science of the Soul. On empiricism’s openness, see Shapin and Schaffer, Leviathan and the Air-Pump. For the battle between empiricism and rationalism see Williams, Keywords, 115-117, 126-129, 252-254, 276-280. For uses of the term “science” to describe political empiricism see Parrish, “Richard Ligon and the Atlantic Science of Commonwealths”; Barbara J. Shapiro, “Empiricism and English Political Thought, 1550-1720,” Eighteenth-Century Thought 1 (2003), 1-33, esp. 25.
and historically later subject matter of the essays in Kompridis’s recent edited collection of that name suggests, “aesthetics” may imply unnecessarily limiting criteria. By contrast, the concept of “form” better conveys early Americanist literary scholars’ key insight that all texts, even non-belletristic ones, have “literary” qualities ripe for close analysis. As Michael Warner notes, the pre-Romantic definition of “literature” encompassed not just poems, plays, and novels but “all forms of written discourse.” Embracing early modern pre-disciplinarity thus promises to have the same effect on the history of political thought that Christopher Iannini describes it having on the study of New World natural history: it allows us to appreciate “the complex interplay between scientific and literary epistemologies”—or between political, scientific, and literary epistemologies—“during a period when they were not yet clearly demarcated.”15

Historians of political thought have long assumed that an empirical approach to political knowledge failed to emerge concurrently with early modern developments in inductive natural science, even as they have rendered this prophecy essentially self-fulfilling by neglecting to look beyond the rationalist approach epitomized by Hobbes and Locke. Barbara Shapiro, whose work represents a rare exception to this tendency, suggests that the empirical tradition goes unmentioned in major surveys like The Cambridge History of Political Thought because participant writings are “often … embedded in voyage and chorological literature” and thus prove “difficult to locate.”

That is, such texts have gone unstudied because they challenge the generic and geographic parameters of canonical political philosophy. Yet I would argue that that challenge is precisely why Atlantic political science can so enrich our histories of key political concepts. No longer disqualified for their failure to uphold the arbitrary criteria of traditional political thought, colonial reports prompt us to revise those criteria in accordance with the field’s recent formalist interest in a “wide[r] array of genres.”

* * *

A rare consideration of early colonial political science hints at the productive conjunction of these two scholarly conversations. In a 2010 essay exemplary of the “epistemological turn” in early American studies and congenial to the “formal turn” in the history of political thought, Susan Scott Parrish offered a compelling reading of Richard Ligon’s 1657 *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* as “a work of serious political science” that self-consciously posed its colonial empiricism as an alternative to Hobbes’s metropolitan rationalism. This dissertation argues that Parrish’s basic argument about Ligon can be extended to a larger number of elite colonials. At the same time, I hope to show that many of her particular claims might be nuanced in light of both the innovation prohibition and empiricism’s centrality to modern sovereignty.

Parrish’s archive exemplifies an additional movement in early American studies to which I am committed: the rejection of the anachronistic cultural geography inaugurated by United States independence in favor of various “Atlantic” alternatives.

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The implications of this trend are two-fold, impacting both the geographic boundaries and the periodization of one’s inquiry. Throughout the dissertation, but especially in my own engagement with Ligon’s text in Chapter Four, I attempt to recover a sense of the mainland North American colonies as vitally linked with both the Old World and the Caribbean colonies, which would not become U.S. states. Resisting proto-nationalist teleologies, I also focus on the seventeenth century for several reasons: first, because that is when the pejorative idiom of innovation was most vehemently deployed; second, because that is when early modern pre-disciplinarity made the methodological borrowings that defined Atlantic political science possible; and finally, because the early settlement period is when colonial political relations were most new and least stable, when rebellions were most likely, when metropolitan oversight was least effective, and thus when elite sovereignty-as-innovation was most nakedly pursued and most subject to critique. The major exception to the Eurocentrism of so much work in the history of political thought is the overwhelming attention paid to the American Revolution and to the pre-revolutionary intellectual histories of those colonies—Massachusetts, Virginia—that eventually became prominent parts of the nation it founded. By contrast, I want to suggest that the New World’s most significant contribution may lie in the absolutist political science of racial slavery first developed in places like Barbados and Jamaica.18

Atlantic political science served to unite elite colonials writing at different moments, living in different regions, and engaged in different intellectual pursuits around the common provocation of political innovation. Despite their imperial rivalry, Anglophone colonial reporters found models in earlier Ibero-American texts rooted in natural and political “experiencia” like Peter Martyr’s *Decades of the Newe Worlde* (1511; English, 1555), Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés’s *General and Natural History of the Indies* (1535; 1851–55), Bartolomé de Las Casas’s *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552; English, 1583), and José de Acosta’s *Naturall and Morall Historie of the West Indies* (1590; English, 1604). The English also profited from one another’s experiences. Thus the Virginia settlers gleaned insights from earlier colonial ventures in Ireland. Thus Massachusetts Bay colony founders like Governor John Winthrop sought to learn from the “ill successe of other Plantations,” especially Virginia. Thus Barbadian governor Philip Bell wrote to Winthrop, who had ample experience stifling heresy, in 1641 to complain of the island’s “divers sects of familists … and their turbulent practices.” And thus the author, publisher, or printer of a 1676 account of King Philip’s War in New England saw fit to append an account of a 1675 Barbadian slave conspiracy, whose own author linked both events in turn with the settler-native conflicts that preceded Bacon’s Rebellion “in Virginia.” That this pamphlet was licensed to Henry Oldenburg, first secretary of the Royal Society, offers tantalizing, albeit incomplete, evidence of a circum-Atlantic political-scientific network, which would cut across scholarly disciplines and would include not only Bradford, Winslow, Strachey, Winthrop, Ligon, and Bell but also John Smith, William Berkeley, Robert
Beverley, John Taylor, Hans Sloane, Increase and Cotton Mather, and many others.¹⁹

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Mapping the contest between empiricism and rationalism onto a circum-Atlantic cultural geography reveals that the former was, above all, an expedient epistemology for colonial elites: in an era of imperial decentralization, when “metropolitan authorities governed by hearsay,” eyewitnessing granted the authority to respond in kind to the threat of contingency and innovation—to exercise Machiavellian virtù in the face of fortuna—even as the reportage it generated disclosed the novel elite practices that had produced those threats in the first place. The “dialectic of novelty and empiricism”—wherein new objects of study demand eyewitnessing and eyewitnessing authorizes new courses of action—and the “dialectic of imitation and innovation”—wherein new arrangements thrive on their real or imagined continuity with prior ones—coalesce in a final dialectic, wherein disavowed elite innovation prompts underclass counter-innovation and empirical engagement with that counter-innovation authorizes further elite innovation. Phrased more concretely, colonialism’s oppressive new civil, ecclesiastical, and economic arrangements bred rebellion, and those rebellions’ observable exceptionality vis-à-vis the Old World norms espoused by political philosophy provided elites with a mandate to enact additional changes: expanded powers, stricter laws, harsher punishments. In short, Atlantic political science was a mechanism for converting novelty into sovereignty.²⁰


²⁰ Field, Errands Into the Metropolis, 14 (“metropolitan authorities”).
Colonial leaders’ eagerness to monopolize the legitimate capacity to enact change should not mislead us into thinking that they abandoned their reverence for precedent, however. The long-term outcome of the “dialectic of innovation and counter-innovation” was the creation of a New World status quo, resistance to which might rightfully be called “innovation” and, eventually, radicalism. Yet the early settlements manifestly lacked this stature. Thus far I have used the terms “elite” and “underclass” to describe relative positions in colonial hierarchies. But my primary sources make it very clear that those positions were entirely contingent, only calcifying into what seem static relations—even foregone conclusions—because of the exigencies of language. Recuperating the innovation prohibition helps us to appreciate how tenuous Euro-Christian hegemony in the Americas really was and to better understand both the alternative regimes that might have existed (or continued to exist) in its stead and the brutal measures would-be elites used to secure the dominance they eventually enjoyed. Before the histories we now know were coerced into existence, elites were not yet elites and underclasses were not yet underclasses, orthodoxies were not yet orthodoxies and heterodoxies were not yet heterodoxies, masters were not yet masters and slaves were not yet slaves. Propertied Euro-Christian men often accused the rebellious of seeking to “turn the world upside down,” to cite the scriptural title of Christopher Hill’s influential history of Civil War-era radicalism. But especially in the colonies, that world had not yet been set right side up.

Put another way, it was still a “new world,” in the transgressive and conditional, rather than triumphant and foreordained, sense. Scholars long ago jettisoned the notion that Europeans had “discovered” America in favor of the idea, articulated with special

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clarity by Edmundo O’Gorman, that they had “invented” it. My use of the geographic descriptor “New World” is meant to echo this claim while underscoring the fact that “invention” was an equally pejorative conceptual cognate of innovation in the period. A related body of historiography has helped us to see how Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans mutually created “new worlds for all.” But O’Gorman also reminds us that the ideological “invention of America” entailed a “humanistic turn” whose universalist pretensions barely conceal what Jared Hickman glosses as “the apotheosis of Euro-Christians at the expense of non-Euro-Christians.” O’Gorman’s account of this shift resonates with my redefinition of sovereignty as a monopoly on the formerly divine right to innovate: “The universe no longer appears … as a strange, alien, and forbidden reality belonging to God and made for His sake, but as a vast inexhaustible quarry of cosmic matter out of which man may carve … his world, depending not on divine permission, but solely on his own initiative, daring, and technical ability.” Likewise, Hickman’s study of the role the mythical figure—and archetypal innovator—Prometheus played in representations of the cosmic drama of colonialism and slavery echoes my distinction between elite sovereignty-as-innovation and underclass rebellion-as-innovation. He demonstrates that New World theological-cum-racial distinctions came to structure the double standard whereby Euro-Christians claimed the cosmic “insubordination” O’Gorman describes as their exclusive property. These insights should color any analysis of what Keith Wrightson deems a favorite scholarly theme: “the novelty of the societies created by English settlers in the New World and the tensions that they felt between the cultural inheritance carried with them and the demands of a novel environment.” Viewed in light of the innovation prohibition, a wide range of colonial formations—from
creolization to puritan typology to agricultural “improvement”—prove deeply fraught.22

Americanist literary historians like Hickman, Jonathan Elmer, and Paul Downes have gone a long way toward recovering the New World’s impact on modern theories of sovereignty. They have brought welcome specificity to accounts like the one offered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which remains tethered to a European archive despite occasional nods to colonial figures like Toussaint L’Ouverture. Hardt and Negri usefully define modern sovereignty as the result of a confrontation between two processes: the “radical [and] revolutionary” augmentation of humanity’s perceived powers to shape an immanent world—exemplified by the Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution, and voyages of “discovery”—and the anti-democratic and “counterrevolution[ary]” circumscription of those powers within new forms of transcendence, exemplified by absolutism, racism, and imperialism. I want not only to argue that this process is identical with the development of New World sovereignty-as-innovation but also to slow it down, to linger in its formative years—the early settlement moment that Hickman, Elmer, and Downes, like Hardt and Negri, move quickly beyond—and, in so doing, to recover both its transgressiveness and its dependence on empiricism. The approach I am proposing thus goes beyond Daniel Richter’s provocative claim that when we “face east” in our scholarship, “peer[ing] … over the shoulder[s]” of indigenous people, “North America becomes the ‘old world’ and Western Europe the ‘new.’” For where Richter’s influential formulation stresses the relative novelty of two mutually unfamiliar cultures in order to

reorient our perspective from the eventual victors to the not-yet-vanquished, I want to underline the absolute novelty—and novel absolutism—of their collision. While native people and other “others” absolutely exercised agency in that collision, Euro-Christian elites exercised their agency absolutely, transforming the “old” indigenous America into a “new” genocidal one via the blasphemous, Promethean innovation of colonization.23

* * *

Despite the ubiquity of the pejorative idiom of innovation in seventeenth-century writing, scholars of early modern rebellion have consistently preferred the anachronistic framework of “radicalism.” The late eighteenth-century idea of radicalism may be an oblique conceptual heir to innovation, but it operates according to a different logic and entails different values. First and foremost, no early modern person would have self-identified as an innovator, whereas radicalism describes a pro-change ideology that adherents openly avowed. Moreover, while radicalism’s adjectival form describes a commitment to thoroughgoing change that might be paired with various ideologies, its noun forms typically evoke the left wing of the political spectrum famously inspired by the seating arrangement in the 1789 National Assembly during the French Revolution. That the major features of left-wing ideology—the promotion of liberty, equality, and underclass uplift over against the claims of monarchy, aristocracy, and other kinds of inherited or wealth-based privilege—would come to dominate the idea of political change as such seems almost inevitable. But this dissertation argues that political change could

take other forms, ones leftist ideologies would naturally seem to oppose.24

This dissertation also argues that while aspects of left-wing ideology may figure in early modern rebellions, they coexist with the major attributes of counter-innovation: a restorative rather than progressive bent and an antagonism towards elite innovation. Even when early modern rebellion seems to seek the political change denoted by the term radicalism, this distinction holds. For counter-innovation does not merely contest an elite hegemony but contests its very claim to be a status quo; and by virtue of counter-innovation’s firm basis in religious hermeneutics, Christian or otherwise, its human-led change can be narrated as the result of divine agency. Craig Calhoun has called into question radicalism’s secularity, progressivism, and assimilability with leftist and liberal ideologies. In his account, radicalism as often supported “tradition” as “transformation”: many early nineteenth-century radical movements “were aimed less at any ancient regime than at what elites considered to be progress.” Calhoun’s is a laudable endeavor, not dissimilar from my own, but it risks rendering the term unserviceable. I would propose that what he describes as restorative radicalism is better understood as residual counter-innovation and that radicalism’s conceptual utility rests on its denotation of an unabashedly pro-change stance. Calhoun’s nineteenth-century rebels may not have availed themselves of it, but by their moment such a stance was available. In the early colonial era, it was not. The tendency to conflate early modern rebellion with later forms of radicalism and revolution threatens to obscure a powerful critique of sovereignty-as-innovation pertinent to our moment, when innovation has become a late-capitalist

24 On the origins of this political spectrum, see Marcel Gauchet, “Right and Left,” in Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions, eds. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kitzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 241-290. Tellingly, Gauchet quotes a politician seated in the Assembly’s right wing denigrating those seated in the left wing as “innovators” (245).
buzzword, neoliberal panacea, and near-imperative in almost every social sector.\textsuperscript{25}

It is a testament to the power of the innovation prohibition that even the word “radical” originally staked its legitimacy on a logic directly opposite its current one. The term refers etymologically to “roots,” to origins, to what is natural, essential, and fundamental, and thus to the absence of change—hence its early predominance in botanical, linguistic, mathematical, and medical discourses. As radicalism began to (partially) replace innovation as the preferred term for attitudes promotive of political change in the late eighteenth century, these earlier connotations made possible a portrayal of immediate or thoroughgoing change as a return to a more originary arrangement—an old strategy we glimpsed above in the 1646 “Remonstrance and Petition.” An observable “swap” takes place in the nineteenth century, when the term innovation begins to find its positive place in liberal discourses of technological, economic, and social progress and the once-neutral word radical assumes some of the functions once fulfilled by innovation. But even as radicalism has come to signify an extreme mode of political reformism—pejorative or praiseworthy according to one’s ideological lights—it has continued to enjoy an association with restoration (sometimes genuine, sometimes rhetorical) that was denied to the epithet innovation. Simultaneously, by arriving later to political discourse, radicalism bears a capacity for legitimacy that political innovation lacked because it is able to draw on the Enlightenment rhetoric of non-teleological progress that innovation

\textsuperscript{25} Craig Calhoun, \textit{The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), esp. 1-42, quotations on 10 (“tradition”; “transformation”), 26 (“were aimed”). For a similar critique of the tendency to read early modern rebellions through the lens of modern revolutions see Elliott, \textit{Spain and Its World}, 92-113. And for a pertinent example of that tendency, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, \textit{The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic} (Boston: Beacon, 2000). On the twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourse of innovation, see Godin, \textit{Innovation Contested}, 222-287.
came to encapsulate once it shed its political connotations and, thus, its stigma.²⁶

To summarize, the difference between early modern and post-eighteenth-century forms of political change hinges on four issues: what the rebel is opposing; what the rebel is proposing as a replacement; how the rebel is represented by her opponents; and how she represents herself. These issues variously combine to create four possible scenarios:

1.) If the rebel proposes to replace a new state of affairs with a return to a status quo, we have an instance of counter-innovation; 2.) If the rebel proposes to replace a status quo with a new state of affairs, we have an instance of radicalism; 3.) If the rebel’s opponents vilify her as seeking to replace a status quo with a new state of affairs, we have an instance of innovation; 4.) If the rebel’s opponents vilify her as resisting a new state of affairs in favor of a status quo, we have an instance of conservatism, which generally fails to seem like “rebellion” at all because it claims continuity with the past. The difference between situations 1 and 4 and 2 and 3, respectively, lies in the transvaluation of political change that occurs in the late eighteenth century—partly, I will argue, by way of colonialism. Situations 2 and 4 are possible only after that shift has rendered an openly pro-change stance tenable and an anti-change stance subject to pejorativization. Before that moment support for the status quo is the default position, and opposition to the status quo is a polemical (or even literal) death sentence. The access to dissident voices inadvertently provided by colonial elites’ empirical reportage makes this easier to see.²⁷

This dissertation focuses on instances of situation 1, often misrepresented as situation 3, opposing actual (yet disavowed) instances of situation 3: underclass counter-innovation, maligned as innovation, reacts to an elite innovation that disguises its own

²⁶ See “radical,” OED Online; Calhoun, Roots of Radicalism.
²⁷ For a law threatening innovators with the death penalty, see Winslow, New England’s Salamander, 14.
novelty; slave revolt opposes an Atlantic slavery that claims to be consistent with earlier forms of servitude but clearly is not. As this example suggests, representation counts for everything here. In this sense, the dissertation considers the pre-history not only of Calhoun’s more nuanced radicalism but also of the public sphere debate he rightly sees as central to it. But where a focus on representation can seem hopelessly relativistic, as “radical” and “conservative” quickly become moving targets, the innovation prohibition serves to estrange the idea of political change and to reorient us toward a more objective criterion: the extent to which an idea or action was genuinely new in the period.28

As my engagement with the history of science suggests, the idea of objectivity threatens to raise more questions than it answers. But I want to insist upon it as a useful methodological category. While the analyses that follow keep issues of literary form, rhetoric, and representation at the forefront, I have nonetheless operated under the assumption that studying a critical mass of primary and secondary texts can give us a fairly accurate sense of the events depicted, against which we can then measure individual depictions. The pejorative early modern idiom of innovation is an object lesson in the power of subjective perception, interpretation, and depiction in human affairs. Yet precisely because this topic drives home so forcefully the fact that modern scholars are, no less than their historical subjects, limited by a set of cultural conditions, I have resolved to embrace that subjectivism as an avenue to knowledge of the past. I believe this is a valid and responsible scholarly method, especially when it is sufficiently acknowledged. We always make judgments; the best we can do is to be clear about when we are doing so and to explain how those judgments arise from others’.

In order to arrive at an objective sense of the novelty of early modern practices, I read primary sources both with and against their grain in order to understand their authors’ motivations, biases, and vulnerabilities, and I read widely in the secondary literature in order to establish a scholarly consensus that cuts across a range of disciplines, methodologies, and political commitments. In the case of Atlantic slavery, for example, I collate antislavery primary sources that criticize slavery for being innovative, proslavery primary sources that anxiously insist that slavery is consistent with precedent but candidly report evidence that it is not, and secondary sources that argue—from a variety of stances, many of them neutral about or even pro-innovation—that modern slavery was historically unprecedented. With this body of evidence ready to hand I feel confident regarding slavery as a disavowed elite innovation that might be legitimately resisted according to the anti-change ethos espoused by the slaveholders themselves. The project’s politics lies in my sense that any uninvited elite effort to transform underclass ways of life—whether in the seventeenth century or today—is fundamentally unjust, that to change the rules in the middle of the game is to exercise an unwarranted form of power, and that rebellion is an entirely valid response to excessive expressions of sovereignty. Ultimately, the alternative genealogy of radicalism traceable in the history of anticolonial counter-innovation models an attitude urgently needed in our own innovation-obsessed era: one that balances the virtues of change with the virtues of precedent and thereby balances, in anti-absolutist fashion, the claims of all concerned.

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The dissertation’s first chapter offers intertwined prehistories of innovation and Atlantic political science. I begin by tracing the career of the innovation idiom via its
appearances in major texts of ancient and early modern political thought and adjacent discourses as well as its positive transvaluation in the late eighteenth century. Here, I demonstrate both the term’s pejorativism and its tacit centrality to early modern sovereignty. Innovation provides the core logic not only for the era’s absolutisms but also for ostensibly anti-absolutist alternatives like republicanism, which evince a similar desire to monopolize the legitimate right to enact political change. I then consider three major intellectual movements—the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution—which developed a productively ambivalent relationship toward innovation and which experimented with empirical modes of political interpretation. I identify conceptual and formal antecedents for colonial political science in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, John Calvin, and especially Francis Bacon, who promoted an inductive approach to “civil” as well as natural knowledge and who offered a rare early modern endorsement of innovation. The chapter concludes with a brief case study: Captain John Smith’s revealing eyewitness reportage on the project of native dispossession.

Subsequent chapters offer regional case studies of the “dialectic of innovation and counter-innovation.” Pairing my analyses of Baconian political-scientific reports with contextualizing archival material—natural histories, sermons, letters, poems, charters, legal codes, trial transcripts, heresiographies, and polemical pamphlets—I explore how the imposition of repressive new institutions elicited diverse forms of resistance. Chapter Two examines the brutal modes of settler discipline introduced into the Chesapeake region in 1609. These top-down innovations—absolute governorship, martial law, and more rigorous forms of indentured servitude—encountered resistance in the form of settler mutiny, both in Virginia and in Bermuda, where the vessel carrying Virginia’s new
governor to the colony was shipwrecked by a storm that year. Connecting the mutinies with the shipwreck via the “murmuring” trope, a common early modern figure for unintelligible dissent, eyewitness reporter William Strachey deems them “innovations.” But he also adumbrates controversial new ideas about the ruler’s right to exceed the law in a “state of exception,” defending the unprecedented steps the governor took to reassert order in a space outside his jurisdiction and shot through with contingency. Ultimately, Strachey’s empirical report on the mutinies and the “murmuring” that portends them records a powerful underclass critique of the colonial regime as innovative.

Turning to puritan New England in Chapter Three, I consider its new forms of civil and ecclesiastical governance alongside the heresy and sedition they elicited. I focus on the Antinomian Controversy, the battle between emergent orthodoxy and formidable heterodoxy that disturbed the Massachusetts Bay colony from 1636-1638, and on Bay Governor John Winthrop, an exemplary participant in Atlantic political science. In the 1644 pamphlet he co-authored to justify the controversy’s handling, Winthrop disparages arch-heretic Anne Hutchinson as an innovator. Bearing out recent scholarship on the compatibility of puritanism and the New Science, he also utilizes empirical methods to represent her fate as a providential punishment, an observable divine intervention into human affairs. Yet by revisiting the complexities of puritan primitivism (devotion to scriptural precedent), I also show that Winthrop’s political-scientific approach reflects the anxieties involved in founding the new, model polity he famously called a “Citty upon a Hill.” Recovering the controversy’s coincidence with metropolitan attacks on the colony’s charter and local disputes over the limits of magisterial sovereignty, I contend that it might be viewed as a conflict over the legitimacy of innovation and the
epistemological merits of empirical political science. Pitting the antinomians’ anti-empiricism against the “antinomianism” Winthrop himself exhibits in his claim to extra-legal magisterial “discretion,” the controversy becomes a contest between rival attempts to monopolize the right to enact change through different kinds of access to God.

My final chapter examines the rise of Anglo-American plantation slavery and the threat of slave revolt that attended it by reading Richard Ligon’s 1657 civil and natural of Barbados. A royalist exile fleeing the reprisals of Civil War England, Ligon soon found the Caribbean to be undergoing a violent transformation of its own: the Sugar Revolution that made slavery its primary source of labor. Capturing this transitional moment, Ligon brings natural scientific and theological hermeneutics to bear on political questions, documenting the island’s flora, fauna, and slave conspiracies. He attempts to domesticate the novel plantation complex even as he seems to recognize that slave-mastery requires the institution of a permanent “state of exception” wherein elite innovation is the norm. Ligon’s promotion of colonial empiricism as methodologically superior to Hobbes’s metropolitan rationalism is of a piece with his tendency to outpace the secular absolutism outlined in *Leviathan*. For Ligon proposes that slavery might be made consensual by offering the enslaved a kind of transcendent *quid pro quo*: exchanging Christian conversion (and thus, perhaps, salvation) for the unprecedented death sentence of New World bondage. Seeking to prevent insurrection, he observes African modes of expression and religious affiliation in order to develop a political theology of racial slavery that combines earthly subordination with otherworldly reciprocity. Yet his eyewitness reportage also brings to the fore ample evidence—slavery’s novelty, the master class’ opposition to slave conversion, the slaves’ own political theologies of
resistance—that interracial political violence is inevitable. Transforming the planters into kings or even human gods, Atlantic slavery culminates the dissertation’s history of colonial elite sovereignty-as-innovation. Likewise, slave revolt becomes not only the premier instance of anti-colonial counter-innovation but also, finally, the key to an alternative genealogy of radicalism that rejects the hubristic fantasy of “Euro-Christian apotheosis” at the core of our own era’s uninterrogated love affair with innovation.
Chapter One

The Idiom of Innovation and the New Science of Politics

In the preface to the autograph manuscript of his *Discourses on Livy*, Niccolò Machiavelli deployed an arresting analogy to neutralize the potentially subversive novelty of his approach to political knowledge:

> Although the envious nature of men has always made it no less perilous to discover new methods and institutions than to search for unknown lands and seas, … nevertheless, driven by that natural desire I have always felt to … bring common benefit to everyone, I have resolved to enter upon a path still untrodden.

The passage legitimizes the text’s “new methods” by identifying a kind of precedent-by-analogy in the recent voyages of New World “discovery,” which initially faced skepticism but ultimately effected a valuable expansion of European learning. In its eagerness to convert ostensible transgression into indisputable public good, Machiavelli’s self-comparison to explorers like Columbus and Vespucci reveals how easily efforts to expand political wisdom could resemble the sin of political innovation. The analogy also hints at the intimate connection between the emergent discourse of “political science”—an experimental, empirical alternative to the more prescriptive, rationalist discourse of “political philosophy”—and the European colonization of the Americas. For that political science, which owed so much to Machiavelli’s “new methods,” did not simply resemble Europe’s transformative encounter with the New World, it was in fact fueled by experiential knowledge of the unknown or unprecedented polities that would be found or founded there. Machiavelli’s induction focused on the familiar Mediterranean, but it would prove most useful in the “unknown lands” of the Atlantic.¹

Machiavelli’s analogy bears out two of this dissertation’s major claims. First, political novelty was at once a call to observation and a goad to further innovation; not for no reason were the words “experience” and “experiment” essentially synonymous in early modern English. And second, it was in the colonies that expanded opportunities for innovation—both the forms of underclass resistance that elites gave that name and the new forms of sovereignty that elites insisted weren’t new—would call for and be called for by an empirical epistemology. Far from being confident “pioneers,” in the figurative as well as literal sense of the word, colonial leaders were compelled to defend their ventures beyond the tried and true. That their favorite form of defense was what John Milton called “necessity, / The Tyrant’s plea” suggests that Machiavelli’s analogy was reversible. Before innovation assumed the positive connotations it enjoys in our own era, New World elites seemed to resemble the Florentine’s infamous prince; as Bartolomé de Las Casas put it, they were “petty tyrants” committing “unprecedented barbarities.”

This chapter has two overarching aims. First, it provides an overview of the idiom of innovation from antiquity through the seventeenth century (the setting of the chapters that follow) and into the late eighteenth, when the term’s pejorative connotations began to abate and new ways of understanding change arose. Reading across a wide range of discourses, I trace the term’s major attributes, assumptions, and connotations, focusing on its function as a polemical synonym for rebellion and heresy, as well as tyranny and ecclesiastical unref orm, and on its purported role as the damning desideratum of various underclass groups (the lowborn, women, and non-Europeans). But I also consider the

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challenge innovation posed as it became increasingly associated with sovereignty, orthodoxy, modernity, and colonialism. I argue that the concept provided the tacit logic not only for absolutism but also for its major challengers like republicanism, the common law, and New World governance, and I show that the idea of innovation empowered established churches as well as their eschatologically energized rivals. My account of the transvaluation of innovation—from a blasphemous human usurpation of divine privilege destined to upend the entire social order to the hallmark of eighteenth-century progress and revolution—focuses on major European developments. But my hope in doing so is to lay the intellectual-historical groundwork for subsequent chapters’ investigation of how the colonial dialectics of “imitation and innovation,” “novelty and empiricism,” and “innovation and counter-innovation” brought about the idea of salutary political change.

The chapter’s second major aim is to trace the intellectual prehistory of Atlantic political science by considering three major early modern cultural movements that influenced it: the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution, as respectively represented by Machiavelli’s civic humanism, John Calvin’s reformed theology, and Francis Bacon’s New Science. These movements both flirted with and disavowed innovation and thus served as ambiguous models for those seeking change and those seeking to avoid change alike. Uncoincidentally, they also pioneered an empirical approach to political knowledge: Machiavelli’s inductive generalizations from ancient history, Calvin’s experiential engagements with scriptural history and the materialist core of his providentialism, and especially Bacon’s cautious sense that the empirical method he proposed for the study of nature might be extended to politics. The chapter concludes with a brief case study intended to introduce the central genre of Atlantic political
science, the colonial report: Captain John Smith’s revealing eyewitness account of the
 coronation of Powhatan. It is in this genre, I argue, that political empiricism best
discloses innovation’s dual role as sovereignty’s chief threat and disavowed logic.

Following the conceptual history of innovation offered by sections I and II, the
chapter’s third section demonstrates that Machiavelli outspokenly advocated political
innovation through the concept of virtù and that the basic conditions that lead him to do
so—fortuna, contingency, de facto rule—were endemic to the colonial Americas.
Examining how a dialogue between earnestly revered past precedent and observably
exceptional present circumstance could yield a concept of salutary political change, I
recast the entire settlement period as an extended “Machiavellian moment,” when the
perceived incongruence between Old World models and New World challenges begat
sovereign improvisation. Machiavelli’s inductive approach to an ancient history rife with
examples of innovation provided a template for colonial political science.

Section IV argues that the Protestant critique of Catholicism’s innovations upon
the liturgy, sacraments, and ecclesiastical organization of the primitive church coexisted
with an eschatological investment in innovation that readily spilled into the political
sphere. Even as Calvin strove to limit this possibility, his ideas proved attractive to
thinkers who were far more open to political change than he—and not just those whom
scholars conventionally define as “radicals.” Energized by an emergent empiricism,
Protestant providentialism made it possible for believers to figure their own agency as the
vehicle of God’s will, not only in the Europe’s well-known instances of Calvinist
resistance theory but also in the open-ended space of the New World.

Before turning to the John Smith case study, the chapter’s fifth section recovers
the interconnections between Francis Bacon’s Machiavellian endorsement of innovation, his promotion of political as well as natural empiricism, and his depiction of New World colonialism as part of a secular eschatology of modern human (read: Euro-Christian) intellectual and technological progress. I contextualize his claims about the value of novelty alongside his failed attempts to represent his New Science as restorative and to segregate nature, politics, and theology in order to prevent scientific innovation from having ripple effects in other arenas. Bacon’s cautious sense of the utility of political empiricism established the formal contours of the colonial report genre. As Smith’s example shows, that genre served to convert novel circumstances into a monopoly on legitimate innovation even as it also disclosed the transgressive newness of colonial rule.

I. The Innovation Idiom, Part 1: Rebellion and Sovereignty, Heresy and Orthodoxy

In an era obsessed with precedent, the pejorative idiom of innovation was an essential part of the polemical repertoire. Early moderns deployed the term loosely. Political usages ranged from minor alterations in policy to the violent overturning of the entire political order, and ostensibly apolitical usages always connoted the threat of civil disturbance. We might use the terms “absolute” and “relative” innovation to distinguish those changes that were genuinely unprecedented in world history from those that were merely new for a particular society, but writers in the period tended not to do so: local novelty was as dangerous as global. Accusations of innovation thrived on this ambiguity, though it also tended to open accusers up to counter-accusation. Practices ranging from new medical cures to infant baptism to alternative modes of writing to the catechization of slaves all bore the pejorative brand of innovation that royalists likewise stamped upon
the 1649 execution of England’s king. As this heterogeneous catalogue suggests, the word is a useful index of the weakness of early modern disciplinary distinctions: it had currency in the overlapping fields of politics, theology, natural science, medicine, economics, law, and aesthetics—each of which formed an important part of the period’s capaciously defined literary culture and cannot be treated in isolation.3

The early modern sense of novelty as the defining feature of dangerous social forces reflects the fact that a sense of historicism was barely emergent in the period. Renaissance writers posited a universal human subject existing across time, relied upon cyclical models of history, and understood classical and scriptural antiquity to have already limned the acceptable permutations of political organization. When they did discuss “progress” they used the word in a fundamentally Aristotelian sense to describe the development of a thing into its final form or true nature, rather than in the post-Enlightenment sense of open-ended advancement toward a limitless horizon of improvement. This cultural climate generated a host of rhetorical strategies designed to disavow or defend one’s innovations: representing innovation as restoration, a return to a status quo ante, or the realization of continuous or interrupted precedent; describing human innovation as the enactment of divine providence, natural law, or transhistorical reason; declaring innovation the special privilege of one person, status, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, or race; euphemizing innovation as reform; exceptionalizing certain

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times, places, and persons—most notably the early settlement moment, the New World, and its indigenous inhabitants—as necessarily exempt from the innovation prohibition; relativizing novelty as an innocuous capitalist commodity; distinguishing between cultural arenas where innovation is or is not safe; and inventing the concept of non-teleological progress. Securing widespread assent to these rhetorical moves (or making them unnecessary altogether) accomplished the positive modern transvaluation of innovation. And colonialism, I want to hazard, was absolutely crucial to that process.4

Unsurprisingly, early moderns took many of their cues about innovation from the ancients. In Book IV of Plato’s Republic, Socrates insists that the rulers of his ideal city “must guard against innovation in gymnastic and music” because “styles of music are nowhere disturbed without disturbing the most important laws and customs of political order.” The near-absurdity of this claim to modern ears arises not from a problem of translation but from a difference of bedrock cultural assumptions. Prior to the nineteenth century, innovation’s presumed contagiousness dictated that it would transgress the already permeable boundaries between different cultural sectors. History taught that even so slight an alteration as a change in music or exercise regimen might have a kind of political ripple effect. Thus Socrates’s interlocutor observes that “lawlessness readily creeps in unobserved,” and Socrates concurs, noting that it disguises itself “as mere play that supposedly does no harm.” Similarly, in Book II of Plato’s Laws, the Athenian Stranger praises the Egyptians who, recognizing “that it’s necessary for the young in the cities to practice fine postures and fine songs,” forbid “Painters and others who represented postures … to make innovations or think up things different from the

ancestral.” Surpassing Plato’s infamous mistrust of mimesis in Book X of *The Republic*, this paranoia about the aftershocks of aesthetic and cultural innovation reminds us of the significant overlap between politics and other domains before the Enlightenment and historicizes our tendency to value art for its originality as a distinctly post-Romantic one.5

Even more so than Plato’s dialogues, which engage in utopian speculation even as they warn against political change, Aristotle’s *Politics* was a key source of assumptions about the dangers of political innovation. In Book V, which theorizes the “causes of revolution” and “modes of preservation in states,” Aristotle articulates an ideal of political stability as the absence of change, which would become a tacit axiom of early modern political thought. He posits several types of polity—government by the one, few, and many, in both their virtuous and corrupt forms and in various combinations—and he acknowledges that one type continually transforms into another. Yet he also insists that this disturbing trend might be forestalled if the demographic equilibrium within a polity were carefully maintained—a state achievable by inhibiting any change that does not conform to his ideal of teleology as normative progression toward a pre-defined end.6

Aristotle condemned political novelty as degenerative whenever it failed to yield the telos of political organization: the balanced polity best suited to a given place and population. He also elaborated Plato’s claim that small alterations inevitably led to larger ones. Noting that change could be “partial,” “gradual[,] and imperceptible,” Aristotle cautions that in many cases “revolutions are occasioned by trifles.” Indeed, in Book II, he

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wonders if laws “ought not always to remain unaltered,” concluding that

the habit of lightly changing the laws is an evil, and, when the advantage is small, some errors both of lawgivers and rulers had better be left; the citizen will not gain so much by making the change as he will lose by the habit of disobedience … For the law has no power to command obedience except that of habit, which can only be given by time, so that a readiness to change from old to new laws enfeebles the power of the law.

The passage begins to clarify early modern anxieties about political change, which could seem necessary to counter other forms of change like corruption but ultimately threatened the destruction of the entire political order. Rendering this passage—“the most notable disputation of all the booke”—in English, a 1598 translation-digest of the Politics amplified its concerns for an age anxious about its own modernity; and unlike most twentieth-century translations, it did so in the idiom of innovation: “without apparant benefit, no alteration or innovation ought to be made, for feare of losing the authority and obedience of the law, which is not got but by length of time: so that it is better to tolerate some imperfections in lawes, and wants in Magistrates, if they be not too prejudiciall & hurtfull; then [sic] by supposing to amend them, to overthrow a state.”

Early modern writers also drew assumptions about innovation from ancient Roman writers like Cicero and Sallust, whose accounts of the Catiline conspiracy to overthrow the Republic repeatedly used the idiomatic phrase “novae res” (literally, “new things”) and its variants to describe political change. The English word innovation derives from this root and context, though this has been partially obscured by the fact that

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the Latin infinitive “innovāre” translates not only as “to innovate,” “to alter,” “to change,” and “to make new” but also “to renew,” “to renovate,” “to restore,” and “to return.” That the latter set of definitions—each beginning with the prefix “re-,” meaning “back” or “again”—would seem to bear the opposite meaning of the former bespeaks an enduring ambivalence about change in western culture. This ambivalence became particularly acute in the age of New World settlement, when the question of whether the colonies were reproducing European ways of life or creating something new was hotly contested. Further anxiety arose from attempts to model the colonial project on the ambiguous precedent of Roman imperial expansion, which was simultaneously seen as antiquity’s crowning achievement and the innovation that destroyed the Republic.8

Classical anxieties about innovation only deepened in early modernity, inflecting the political concept of sovereignty and the theological concept of Christian orthodoxy in complex ways. A text illustrative of the interpenetration of those two concepts in the English context will serve as a useful point of entry for our consideration of innovation as a polemical synonym for rebellion and heresy. In 1548, the year before the Book of Common Prayer formalized the Anglican liturgy, Edward IV issued A Proclamation against Those that Doeth Innovate. On pain of “grevous punishementes,” the king commaundeth, that no … persone, of what estate, ordre, or degree so ever he be, of his private mynde, will or phantasie, … [shall] omitte, leave doune, chaunge, alter or innovate any ordre, Rite or Ceremonie, commonly used and frequented in the Churche of Englande … in the reigne of our late sovereigne lorde his highnes father other then [sic] suche as his highnes, by the advise aforesaied, by his

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majesties visitours, Injuncions, Statutes or Proclamacions, hath already or hereafter shall commaunde, to be omitted, left, innovated, or changed.

The Proclamation perpetuates the ancient belief that even minor alterations in realms adjacent to politics will have politically disruptive effects. Through its references to one’s “private mynde, will or phantasie,” the edict articulates another key assumption about innovation: its dangerously individualistic and psychologically compromised nature. Yet the edict also complicates the innovation prohibition by invoking Edward’s father Henry VIII’s break with the Catholic Church and founding of the Church of England. Taking one of the two possible tacks—the other being the steadfast disavowal of one’s innovations—the Proclamation boldly asserts the sovereign’s legitimate capacity to enact change by demanding obedience to what the king “hath already or hereafter shall [have] … innovated.” In this way, innovation is not so much prohibited as monopolized.9

Rhetorically, Edward’s unabashed claim to the right to innovate was extremely rare in the period, but conceptually it was less so. Indeed, I would argue that innovation was central to early modern theories of sovereignty, especially the absolutist ones articulated by European monarchs and political philosophers. Absolutists often relied upon the ancient Roman concept of legibus solutus, which held that the ruler was not subject to his own laws. Jean Bodin’s Six Books of a Common-weale (1576; English, 1606) went further, arguing that “the first and chief mark of a sovereign prince” is the power to give “law to subjects … without their consent” and to “annul, change, or correct the laws according to the exigencies of situations, times, and persons”—in a word, to innovate. Thomas Hobbes would similarly imagine a sovereign who monopolized the

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9 Edward VI of England, A Proclamation Against Those that Doeth Innovate, Alter or Leave Doune Any Rite or Ceremonie in the Church… (London: 1548), unpaginated broadside (“grevous punishementes”; “commaundeth, that”). Godin discusses the Proclamation in Innovation Contested, 75-77, but he overlooks the defense of sovereignty-as-innovation that coexists with its condemnation of rebellion-as-innovation.
legitimate right to enact political change, secularizing but otherwise upholding the
delegation of God’s power to innovate entailed in the theory of the divine right of kings. I
would argue that the concept of sovereign “decisionism” that twentieth-century theorists
of the “state of exception” trace via Hobbes and others is synonymous with innovation as
well. Decisionism describes the ruler’s ability to suspend the constitutional order in a
moment of crisis in order to preserve the polity. As we will see, this idea found special
purchase amidst the emergencies of colonial settlement, but it also applied more broadly
as historical contingency increasingly seemed the dominant feature of political life.10

Two of the biggest challenges to the absolutist pretensions of English monarchs—
republicanism and the common law—shared decisionism’s preoccupation with historical
contingency. Participants in these two movements denounced the crown’s innovations,
but it might be more accurate to say that they sought to break the monopoly imagined in
Edward’s *Proclamation*, to partake in the sovereign right to enact change and thereby to
make possible a kind of “controlled innovation.” Instructive here is J. G. A. Pocock’s
account of the distinctly early modern “problem of the republic’s existence in time,” “the
moment … [when] the republic … confront[ed] its own temporal finitude, … attempting
to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as
especially destructive to all systems of secular stability.” Pocock argues that republics’
historical particularism made them uniquely susceptible to decay, rendering republicans
especially receptive to the idea that adaptation was essential to the polity’s survival. But I

*legibus solutus*, see Skinner, *Foundations*, II:113-134. On “decisionism” and the “state of exception” see
Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare
would argue that this claim might be extended to all forms of government. The concept of
decisionism demonstrates that even the period’s “customary,” non-republican polities—
steeped in theology and overseen by a godlike monarch—failed to offer their members
the “affiliation with the timeless” promised by ancient and medieval kingdoms; they too
conceived a salutary form of innovation as a defense against the ravages of time.11

Where absolutism endowed a single individual with the right to improvise in
response to unknowable future contingencies, republicanism staked the efficacy of that
adaptation on its dispersal among an active, virtuous citizenry and its institutionalization
via legal mechanisms like rotation of office. While these differences are important, I want
to suggest that the concept of sovereignty-as-innovation can illuminate an isomorphism
between, for instance, the absolutism of England’s Stuart monarchs and the republican
Algernon Sidney’s bold claim that “Good Governments admit of Changes,” a claim
contained in a manuscript for which a Stuart king had him executed. Beginning with this
chapter’s discussion of Niccolò Machiavelli’s by turns republican and absolutist thought,
this dissertation ventures to redefine modernity as the period in which classical efforts to
“construct a polity of universal form so as to escape the cycle of change” began to give
way to—or, take the form of—acceptance of innovation as the hallmark of sovereignty.12

The common law tradition similarly combined a normative allegiance to
precedent—and an attendant aversion to monarchical innovation—with a proto-historicist
willingness to alter or even create law as new circumstances demanded. Unlike the civil
law, which existed in the abstraction of written statute, the common law was instantiated

(“affiliation with”).
in judges’ rulings on particular cases, each based on prior precedent and each capable of creating additional precedent. Subtly and organically refined over the centuries, the common law was held to embody a prudence beyond that of any individual, even the king. Indeed, insofar as it was held to antedate the monarchy itself, the common law and the “ancient constitution” on which it was said to rest served as a powerful check on kingly prerogative. The common law was rooted in custom, an ostensibly unchanging set of practices but one whose purported applicability in all eras might instead entail political change. In Pocock’s words, “Custom was tam antiqua et tam nova, always immemorial and always perfectly up-to-date.” Like republicanism then, the common law tradition was not so much a brake on monarchical sovereignty as a rival form thereof, a mechanism for dealing with contingency through gradual, collective, controlled innovation.13

In its intimate connections to both republicanism and the common law, a third challenge to English absolutism—New World governance—exhibits a similar ambivalence about innovation. As Andrew Fitzmaurice argues, the humanist training of many of early Anglo-American colonialism’s major players lent it a “quasi-republican” character. Colonization meant establishing not mere military or trading outposts but new “commonwealths” in the classical sense of discrete civil societies seeking the good of their members. Colonial commonwealths expanded England’s limited opportunities for the exercise of civic virtue, but I would add that they also provided legitimate occasions for relative, foundational innovation and for experiments in the republican “best state of the commonwealth” tradition. Predictably, however, this salutary novelty shaded into more deleterious forms: from the corrupting foreign luxury that was said to have caused

the downfall of imperial Rome to the quasi-sovereignty that undermined the colonies’ subordination to the crown. The common law also took on new meaning in the Americas. Where it functioned in England as a gradual, non-absolutist alternative to positive legislation, the common law became in the New World settlement a way for leaders combining legislative, executive, and judicial roles to exercise decisionist sovereignty over against the prescriptions of royal charters and the rights of those they ruled. In sum, physical—and epistemological—distance from the metropole enabled innovation.14

As Edward’s Proclamation demonstrates, the concept and idiom of innovation were also central to the era’s theological conflicts. The ecclesiastical disputes of the Reformation—Protestant vs. Catholic as well as puritan vs. Anglican—evince the same double movement that characterizes the era’s political conflicts: participants accused their opponents of innovating even as they sought to legitimize their own disavowed innovations. Much as the classical ideal of political stability as the absence of change gave way to a sense of sovereign innovation as the key to weathering historical contingency, so too did the ideal of Christian orthodoxy as an unchanging body of belief recede before a sense of modernity as a transformative period in providential history. While change was God’s prerogative it was nonetheless possible that he had delegated the right to innovate to those who were to realize his will. The otherworldly stakes of the era’s major religious controversies gave rise to new absolutist political theologies, which reimagined certain instances of human-led change as the vehicles of providence even as they continued to denigrate other forms of human change as heretical.

As we will see, Protestants articulated their critique of the Catholic Church using

14 See Fitzmaurice, Humanism and America, esp. 1-57, quotation on 10 (“quasi-republican”).
the pejorative idiom of innovation, while detractors described the reformers as political
and theological innovators. The Anglican divine Richard Hooker deployed the term in *Of
the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1593-1661), his response to the puritan critique of the
English Church. Hooker defended the Anglican liturgy, the episcopacy, and the royal
leadership of the national church against what he called the “dangerous innovations” of
the puritans, who had similarly condemned the Elizabethan Settlement for failing to root
out the human inventions forced upon Christianity by Rome. Crucially, the puritans
found these innovations no less pernicious for having occurred centuries earlier—that is,
for no longer being technically “new.” The attempt to rid English worship of the “trifles
and trashe of mennes traditions,” as the 1572 *Admonition to the Parliament* put it, thus
positioned puritanism as a return to a deeper and ultimately divine point of origin, more
legitimate even than long-accumulated human custom. Recounting the history of New
England more than a century later, Cotton Mather would use the term to describe the
oppressive Laudian Anglicanism from which the puritan settlers had fled: “The Design of
these Refugees, thus carried into the Wilderness, was, that they might … practise the
Evangelical Worship of our Lord Jesus Christ, … without any Human Innovations and
Impositions.” That the term also pervades Archbishop William Laud’s own anti-puritan
writings as well as works by persecuted New England dissidents like Roger Williams
bespeaks its rhetorical power and ideological flexibility. Bandied endlessly between
representatives of these two stances—between supporters of innovative reform cast as a
return to origins and defenders of entrenched innovations against more recent ones—the
term’s pejorative force remained axiomatic even as its core logic was smuggled into
reformed and unreformed theology alike under the aegis of providence.15

II. The Innovation Idiom, Part 2: Identity, Prohibition, Transvaluation

The pejorative idiom of innovation not only served to disparage rebels and tyrants, heretics and unreformed churches, it was also central to the hierarchically subordinate status of three identity categories: the poor and lowborn, women, and non-Europeans. All of these underclass groups were said to suffer from a proverbially insatiable desire for novelty. In 1671, George Monck, 1st Duke of Albemarle, voiced this belief with reference to persons of low economic class and social status: “the poorer and meaner people,” he wrote, are “always dangerous to the peace of a Kingdom” because, “having nothing to lose,” they “willingly embrace all means of Innovation, in hope of gaining something by other mens ruine.” Monck proposed putting such people to a trade or “implo[y]ing] them abroad in Plantations, or in a War,” but by his moment the colonial reports to which we will turn in subsequent chapters had revealed that masterless men were as “dangerous” abroad as they were at home. Far from being a convenient receptacle for would-be innovators, writers like William Strachey suggested, the New World might be a breeding ground for underclass innovation. The very characteristics that made the Americas ripe for transformation by elites seeking power and profit also made possible a variety of underclass innovations: from alternative forms of polity and

collectivist economies to unorthodox theologies and non-Euro-Christian hegemonies.\textsuperscript{16}

Underclass persons were said to desire political change but were not always dignified with the capacity to achieve it themselves. Enter the concept of demagoguery, which served to explain the threat they nonetheless posed: recently disempowered former elites often played upon their inferiors’ longing for change in order to advance to positions of power. William Shakespeare dramatizes this assumption in \textit{1 Henry IV} (1598) when the king denounces the Earl of Worcester for having sought

\begin{quote}
To face [i.e. adorn] the garment of rebellion  
With some fine colour that may please the eye  
Of fickle changelings and poor discontents,  
Which gape and rub the elbow at the news  
Of hurly-burly innovation.
\end{quote}

The accusation of Worcester’s demagoguery links an underclass desire for sensory over-stimulation with intellectual inconstancy. To be swayable by “pleas[ing]” “colour” and disorienting (“hurly-burly”) sound is to lack the settled mind that knows to be wary of political change. To “gape”—to involuntarily widen the mouth and eyes in astonishment, hunger, or exhaustion—is to lack the control over one’s body necessary to keep deceptive allurements from altering one’s beliefs. The lines brand the mob as “fickle” by virtue of its dual attraction to fleeting pleasures and impractical political schemes, which coalesce in the figure of the “garment of rebellion.” The underclass love of novelty was also imagined as a kind of appetite or infirmity: in the words of King Charles I, a “thirst after Novelties” or an “Itch of Novelty”; in the words of Lancelot Andrewes and many others, a “humor of innovation” as “contagious” as it was “unreasonable.” With dizzying circularity, writers described non-elites as infatuated with novelty because they were

\textsuperscript{16} George Monck, \textit{Observations upon Military and Political Affairs} (London: 1671), 146 (“the poorer”; “always dangerous”; “having nothing”; “willingly embrace”; “imploy[ing] them”).
intellectually compromised and intellectually compromised because of their infatuation with novelty. Diverting attention from underclass persons’ possible motivations for overturning an unsatisfactory status quo, these writers suggested that those persons’ very desire to alter the polity confirmed the rightfulness of their subordination within it.17

Women were believed to suffer from an especially acute desire for novelty. And while they, too, were not generally seen as capable of initiating political innovation themselves, they were taken seriously as occasions for conflicts between powerful men. The popular theme of female inconstancy drew on classical and scriptural traditions that denigrated women’s bodies and minds as sinful, fickle, and unthinkingly desirous of change. It also drew on an emergent ideology that freighted women with an appetite for the exotic luxury commodities animating the otherwise masculine projects of colonial settlement and global trade. The early modern controversy over the use of cosmetics illustrates the confluence of these ideas. Thomas Tuke’s *A Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* (1616) rails against women’s investments in the new, the false, the foreign, and the trivial, mocking the “ever stirring” female “imagination,” which “nothing pleases … [for] long.” Tuke’s generic female figure finds special pleasure in London, where “she hath nothing to doe, but to learne a new fashion, and to buy her a perwigge, powder, ointments, a feather, or to see a play.” The passage offers a laundry list of signifiers of what Joseph Roach calls the “circum-Atlantic world,” a “vortex” of exchange and performance where European, African, and Native American cultures

invented and reinvented themselves through processes of “surrogation.” As agents of self-adornment, consumption, and social and sexual reproduction, women come to stand in for the anxious prospect of cultural change itself. And this illicit female agency remained bound up with the theological linkage of procreation and original sin: “tricking her selfe with toyes and gauds,” Tuke’s woman is blasphemously “her owne creatrisse.” Femininity becomes a scapegoat for capitalism and imperialism’s attempted ex nihilo creation, an alibi for the corrupting-because-“effeminizing” luxury loosed by conquest.18

Like women and the lowborn, non-Europeans were often said to be addicted to novelty. The concept thus played an overlooked role in the intellectual history of ethnic, religious, cultural, national, and ultimately, racial difference. The same populations whose “effeminizing” luxury was said to have corrupted imperial Rome were also said to be fitted only for despotism, since their child-like desire for the new left them susceptible to demagoguery. John Calvin claimed that “Westerners” were “less enamored of novelty” than “Asiatics and Africans,” and Algernon Sidney noted with approval that “the base effeminate Asiatics and Africans, for being careless of their Liberty, or unable to govern themselves, were by Aristotle and other wise men called Slaves by Nature, and looked upon as little different from Beasts.” James Harrington’s The Commonwealth of Oceana (1656) contains a similar contention that “the people of the eastern parts, … scarce ever knew any other condition than that of slavery” whereas “western” peoples have “ever had … a relish of liberty,” as does Milton’s The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649). In

each case the western aptitude for political liberty seems to be predicated upon a liberty from the love of novelty that plagues non-westerners. (Of course, as we have already seen, western liberty more often meant the right to innovate with impunity.) This ideological conjunction becomes more concrete in the literature of colonization. In a 1493 letter Christopher Columbus compares the natives of modern-day Hispaniola to “animals” because they willingly exchange “whatever they have” for “something … of little worth”—“pieces of broken crockery” or “broken hoops from … wine barrels”—which they esteem as “the most precious jewel in the world” merely because it is new to them. As with lowborn Europeans, it was assumed that non-Europeans’ love of apolitical novelty would inevitably lead to political innovation. This association would reach an apex of sorts in Edmund Burke’s denigrating comparison of the innovating French Revolutionaries to “a procession of American savages” and “a gang of Maroon slaves, suddenly broke loose from the house of bondage” and “not accustomed” to “liberty.”19

The era of the English Civil Wars and Interregnum represents something of a high water mark in the career of the innovation idiom. The term aided royalists in denouncing the king’s enemies as “Innovators who try experiments upon a State” and who “are not ruled by any customes and Lawes, but such as please them.” Yet it also served critics of tyrannical rule, whether by monarch, Parliament, or Lord Protector. Thus John Lilburne and the other Levellers who authored the final edition of An Agreement of the People

complained of the tendency of all officeholders to “innovate in Government[,] to exceed their time and power in places of trust, to introduce an Arbitrary, and Tyrannical power, and to overturn all things into Anarchy and Confusion.” Lilburne attempted to evade accusations of innovation by representing his proposed reforms as the recovery of the “native Freedoms and Birth-rights” of the “Free-born People of England.” But others in the period explored more complex forms of argumentation vis-à-vis political change. Consider the four different lines of reasoning employed in John Milton’s *Areopagitica* (1644). A critique of Parliament’s Licensing Order of 1643, which required that writers obtain state approval before their works could appear in print, the pamphlet begins by arguing that it is Parliament’s censorship that is innovative, rather than the content of the texts it wished to censor: “what do they tell us vainly of new opinions, when this very opinion of theirs, that none must be heard but whom they like, is the worst and newest opinion of all[?]” Next, Milton contends that legislating the freedom of the press would effect a return to a *status quo ante*: while his opponents may “accuse me of being new or insolent,” he explains, there is ample precedent for free intellectual exchange in classical and early Christian history. As if to cover all bases, however, he also identifies an unflattering precedent for the Licensing Order in the Inquisition, and he situates the unfettered inquiry enabled by a free press as the key to an *ongoing* Protestant Reformation, a “perpetuall progression” toward truth. Invoking the apostolic injunction to “Try all things, and keep that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21 [GB]), he contradicts his earlier claims, arguing now that “new notions and ideas” are beneficial to the polity.20

We might understand Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) as an attempt to reassert control over the innovation prohibition in light of these developments. Hobbes emphatically rejected Scholasticism and received wisdom, but like many other early modern intellectual originals—for example, Michel de Montaigne and René Descartes—he doubled down on the dangers of novelty, bolstering a very old opinion about change via refurbished rationalist methods. Hobbes cites the desire “to reforme and innovate” as one of the many innate attributes individuals must suppress in order to attain civil peace: “the constitution of mans nature, is of it self subject to desire of novelty.” The existence of this desire is a major reason why the Hobbesian state of nature is also a state of war. And its eradication is crucial to the transition to civil government: “the People are to be taught … not to … desire change.” Unlike those who distinguished between innovation and reform, Hobbes insists upon their synonymy, echoing Charles I’s suspicions about “innovations, masked under the name of reformation.” And like Shakespeare and many others, Hobbes correlates the “desire of novelty” with a failure to discipline the unruly body, comparing it—again, like Charles—to the “itch” of those with “hot bloods.”

For Hobbes, the mind was as much a problem as the body. Like Edward VI, Hobbes links innovation to the “fancy” the intellectual faculty responsible for creating mistaken perceptions and false imaginings. He attributes to the “fancy” the tendency for
individuals living in “setled” governments to desire “alteration” in imitation of “a
neighbouring Nation,” on the model of “the antient Greeks, and Romans,” or based on
Christian millennialism: “stirred up” by a superficially attractive political alternative—
the “strong, and delightfull impression” experienced when reading classical “books of
Policy,” for example—the innovator threatens to return the commonwealth to the state of
nature. Hobbes likens the “desire of change” to “the breach of the first of Gods
Commandements”: the Israelites’ foolish preference for the foreign idol of the golden calf
over the one true God (Exodus 32) and their disastrous request that God provide them
with a king (1 Samuel 8). And he concludes that the ideal form of government “is not to
be disputed, where any one of them is already established; but the present ought alwaies
to be preferred, maintained, and accounted best; because it is against both the Law of
Nature, and the Divine positive Law, to doe any thing tending to the subversion thereof.”
Rejecting Aristotelian methods while upholding Aristotle’s prohibition on innovation,
Hobbes so values obedience that he is willing to “account best” even those forms of
government that manifestly are not.22

Despite Hobbes’s best efforts to reaffirm the sovereign’s monopoly on the right to
innovate, salutary forms of political change continued emerge. Indeed, writers eventually
began to use the word innovation to describe the kind of political disturbance that their
proposed reforms would avoid. James Harrington’s Commonwealth of Oceana promotes
an agrarian republicanism rooted in economic “balance” as the form of government “least
subject unto innovation or turbulency”—an ironic claim given that Sallust had used the
phrase “novae res” to describe Catiline’s agrarian reforms and debt relief proposals.

neighbouring”; “the antient”; “stirred up”; “books of Policy”), II:XXIX:170, p. 226 (“strong, and”),
Likewise, John Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) argues that the various sects coexisting under a tolerationist regime would, “like so many guardians of the public peace, … watch one another, that nothing may be innovated or changed in the form of the government, because they can hope for nothing better than what they already enjoy.”

While the term innovation does not appear in Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), the word “arbitrary”—a synonym for innovation describing rule by personal will—is used extensively and fulfills a similar function. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke seeks to overcome his culture’s suspicion of all political novelty by casting the moderate exercise of popular sovereignty as a corrective to the innovations of tyrants, arguing that “change” enacted for the good of the “People … will always, when done, justifie itself.”

Locke’s text marks a major shift. Where Hobbes had argued that the “present [form of government] ought alwaies to be preferred” to the violent state of nature, Locke positions his more peaceable state of nature as a transcendent space of custom-trumping precedent, to which the people can revert when tyranny becomes intolerable. Crucially, Locke explicitly refutes the assumption that “no Government will be able long to subsist, if the People may set up a new Legislative, whenever they take offense at the old one”: “To this, I Answer: Quite the contrary. People are not so easily got out of their old Forms, as some are apt to suggest.” Against Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and countless others, Locke insists that “Revolutions happen not upon every little mismanagement in publick affairs.” However, he also warns that, “if a long train of Abuses … make the [tyrannical] design visible to the People … ’tis not to be wonder’d, that they should then rouze themselves.”

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It makes sense that Locke would eschew the word innovation in his attempt to legitimize controlled, collective change. Although he couches it as a return to a status quo ante (the state of nature), his response to tyranny is unabashedly “a new Form of Government.” In this way, he inaugurates the era when revolutions could claim legitimacy precisely because of—rather than despite—their breaks with the past.24

Locke’s claims struck a major blow at the innovation prohibition, but the term’s pejorative connotations nonetheless persisted in the Age of Revolutions. Thus the Loyalist narrator of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer (1782) ascribes his aversion to the American Revolution to his “fear of innovations.” And thus in 1792 one Thomas Bancroft published a sermon entitled The Danger of Political Innovation and the Evil of Anarchy. Still, a change had undoubtedly taken place. In 1794 the New England puritan Ezra Stiles looked back to the regicidal English Revolution to justify the regicidal French Revolution, arguing that “assemblies for the express purpose of altering and changing the polity, are not to be reprobated, as unjustifiable, seditious, and traitorous.” And most dramatically, the author of An Essay on Civil Government (1793) contended that “a disposition to remain tied to habit and custom, and a dread of advancing or innovation, has hitherto done him [i.e., “man”] more harm, perhaps, than all his other vices and defects,” insisting that those “who … remain … determined against all innovation … may yet, in time, be persuaded” of its virtues.25

But perhaps the clearest indication of the profound transformation that the innovation concept had undergone by the end of the eighteenth century is provided by the thought of Edmund Burke. Burke upheld the distinction between innovation and reform for much the same reason that Hobbes and Charles I had denied it: for fear of the disruptive effects of thoroughgoing alteration. His insistence that “To innovate is not to reform” bespeaks his recognition of the need for gradual change in response to historical contingency. This bears repeating: by the late eighteenth century, even a paragon of conservatism like Burke took the necessity of non-restorative political change for granted, writing in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) that “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.” He focused his energies not on criticizing change in and of itself but on criticizing how it was carried out—hence his qualitative distinction between sudden, dramatic innovation and reform, whose “operation is slow, … almost imperceptible.” Burke retained many of the early modern assumptions about innovation traced above; for example, he upheld the notion that a love of novelty derived from a damaged individual psyche, noting that “A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views.” That selfishness went beyond a lack of concern for one’s contemporaries: Burkean rights are national rather than natural, an “entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity”—the utility of “the idea of inheritance” being that it “furnishes a sure principle of conservation … without at all excluding a principle of improvement.”

Burke regarded the French Revolution as a classic example of innovation because

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26 Edmund Burke, A Letter from The Right Honourable Edmund Burke to a Noble Lord… (London: 1796), 20 (“To innovate”); Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, 21 (“A state”), 169 (“operation is”), 33 (“A spirit”; “entailed inheritance”; “the idea”; “furnishes a”).
its adherents valued the new for its own sake, failing to recognize the virtues of established ways and the dangers involved in trying what had never been tried. He believed the revolutionaries were misguided because they wrongly understood their nation to be “incapable or undeserving of reform” and thus leapt to wholesale innovation. As an alternative, he pointed to the process of gradual, collective adaptation involved in the English common law. By the late eighteenth century, then, change had gone from being something one could not value to something one could not help but value. This dissertation argues that that transvaluation owed a great deal to New World colonialism and to the inductive, empirical hermeneutic of Atlantic political science, which forced a recognition of the inescapability of historical contingency and of the value of change. Old World political philosophers’ failure to appreciate innovation’s utility, I will argue, derives from their rationalism, and their occasional recognition of that utility arises when they take seriously the kind of particularism and contingency that defined the Americas.  

III. The Renaissance: Niccolò Machiavelli’s Civic Humanism

This section and the two that follow expand the foregoing discussion by examining innovation’s ambiguous place in three major intellectual traditions upon which the discourse of Atlantic political science drew: the Renaissance civic humanism of Niccolò Machiavelli, the reformed theology of John Calvin, and the New Science of Francis Bacon. In each case an ambivalent attitude toward innovation—combining a residual fear of change with an emergent sense of its value—engendered interpretive practices that prefigured or even influenced the empirical hermeneutic we find in the

colonial report genre. Examining this attitude in some detail will clarify why the project of New World settlement was so conducive to the rise of a fully-fledged political science.

To many early modern commentators, the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution seemed deeply innovative. Yet these movements ultimately gained acceptance by disavowing their novelty and attempting to segregate politics, religion, and science from one another in order to pursue new lines of thought in one sphere without upsetting the others. When describing their projects, Machiavelli, Calvin, and Bacon deployed a host of alternative terms—renovation, restoration, renewal, rebirth, reformation, instauration—which describe a return to a preexisting state of purity or the realization of a telos. But as often as they cultivated this sense of continuity with the past, these thinkers also encouraged innovation: from the shift in historical consciousness wrought by Machiavelli’s proto-empirical approach to politics and his sense of the polity’s need to adapt to contingency; to the new estimation of individual volition and epistemological capacity and the cautious theory of resistance to tyrants implied by the Reformation; to the repudiation of received wisdom and the emphasis on first-hand observation, experimentation, and invention central to Bacon’s New Science.28

The European cultural efflorescence that we now call the Renaissance exhibited a dialectic of imitation and innovation. On the one hand, the movement’s basis in the rediscovery of classical texts and the emulation of ancient models would seem to imply conformity with the innovation prohibition. On the other hand, the renewed attention to antiquity encouraged by the “new learning” of humanism engendered a “new sense of

historical distance” among Europeans who had not yet felt significant “discontinuity with the culture of Greece and Rome.” And the desire to duplicate the achievements of the past often led to unprecedented forms of cultural production, involving not so much a return to classical values as a progression beyond them.29

This dialectic takes on special urgency in Machiavelli’s writings. In what follows, I argue that the signature Machiavellian concept of virtù—the ability needed to overcome the ravages of fortuna, the supra-human force that unpredictably intervenes in human affairs—is a synonym for salutary innovation. I follow Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and others in avoiding the tendency—most pronounced in the work of Leo Strauss—to allow Machiavelli’s divorce of political prudence from conventional morality and his candid advice to tyrants to overshadow his commitment to republican principles and ethically neutral political observation. Doing so means regarding his two major works—The Prince (completed, 1513; published, 1532) and the Discourses on Livy (completed, c. 1517; published, 1531)—as a coherent elucidation of a consistent set of ideals in two different contexts: monarchy and republicanism. As we saw above, both of these forms of government were responsive to the problem of historical contingency, a synonym for fortuna. Despite his occasional inconsistencies, then, Machiavelli’s preoccupation with innovation provides a clear itinerary through his major works.30

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29 Skinner, Foundations, I:86 (“new sense of”), I:85 (“radical discontinuity”). While the phrase “the Renaissance” was not used to describe this movement until the late 1820s, metaphors of rebirth and enlightenment abound in the early modern period. See “Renaissance, n.,” OED Online (2017).

In *The Prince*, *virtù* describes the often amoral abilities of the individual ruler, which enable him to maintain his state; in the *Discourses*, the term’s connotations are broadened to refer to a general spirit of civic commitment, the willingness of an entire citizenry to subordinate private interests to public ones in order to preserve the republic. But in both cases *virtù* is a mechanism of stability and longevity. Machiavelli’s proposed response to the new political situations created by *fortuna* breaks with the Aristotelian equation of stability with the absence of non-teleological change: innovation is essential to the stabilizing power of *virtù*. But far from being limited to the absolutist *Prince*, this insight appears in both texts. Thus in a chapter from the *Discourses* whose title enjoins “Those Who Wish Always to Enjoy Good Fortune to Change with the Times,” Machiavelli observes: “fortune varies for a single man, because she brings about … changes in the times while he fails to modify his methods. The downfall of cities also arises from their failure to modify the institutions of their republics over time.” Where Aristotle worried that any change would upset the naturally balanced polity, Machiavelli argues that constant adaptation can prevent that balance from naturally upsetting itself.\(^{31}\)

*The Prince*’s advice about how rulers might maintain “new” “principalities” and the *Discourses*’s advice about how modern republics might replicate ancient Rome’s legendary durability are thus two expressions of the same philosophy. Even when he voices his preference for republics over monarchies in the *Discourses*—“governments by peoples are better than governments by princes”—he does so on the grounds that the

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former enjoys a greater capacity for self-modification: “a republic has a longer life and much greater fortune than a principality, because it can more easily adapt itself to the diversity of circumstances than can a prince, through the diversity of the citizens who inhabit it.” Overturning the assumption that republics were short-lived because their “diversity” produced discord, he attributes republicanism’s ability to forestall decline to its production of dynamic class conflict and its capacity for imperial expansion. The prince’s diversity of tactics—his decisionism avant la lettre—serves the same purpose.32

Yet in both contexts this notion of salutary innovation emerges from a deep reverence, rather than a rejection, of precedent. Civic humanists believed that a proper understanding of the world began with the study of ancient history, which recorded certain basic truths about human life. Machiavelli ran with this premise, formulating an entire political-scientific system based on proto-empirical engagement with classical precedent. He grounded this system in two assumptions, which, in their ostensible contradiction with one another, embody the dialectic of imitation and innovation at the heart of the Renaissance. First, he believed that all human beings share a fundamentally similar nature or, rather, that there persisted across time and space a finite gallery of classes and types whose variety and patterns of alteration were themselves predictable. As he puts it in the Discourses, “Anyone who studies current and ancient affairs will easily recognize that the same desires and humours exist and have always existed in all

cities and among all peoples” and that “the same conflicts arise in every era.”

Second, even as he promoted classical imitation based on this similarity, Machiavelli attributed the extraordinary success of his primary model to its many innovations. He argued that ancient Rome had attained its internal stability and imperial prowess not because it had been especially favored by fortuna but because of its unique laws and its leaders’ superior virtù. Rome had become a worthy model for subsequent polities precisely because it eschewed earlier, less successful models at its founding and subsequently obeyed the recurrent need to establish “new institutions.” That is, Rome triumphed because it followed “its own way of existence.” Thus he insists upon Rome’s differences from the polities that preceded it—“no republic was ever organized so that it could acquire territory as Rome did”—and even, in some moments, from those that would follow: “what worked for the Romans [in this instance] will never work for you.” For Machiavelli, Rome is both exemplary and exceptional.

The contradictions that emerge here—that modern polities should follow a model that did not itself follow models and that the best model might sometimes prove unfollowable—bespeak the fundamental paradox of Machiavelli’s thought. His method of generalizing from history glorifies Rome as a comprehensive guide to politics, yet the primary generalization this method produces is the necessity of adaptation in a world shot through with fortuna. Moderns versed in ancient history learn which behaviors yield which results under which circumstances, but they also learn that no behavior can be replicated for long without becoming unsuited to its circumstances—an insight that

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33 Machiavelli, Discourses, I:39, p. 105 (“Anyone who”; “the same”). Machiavelli’s contemporaries criticized his rather atypical political science. See Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, 268-269; Butterfield, Statecraft of Machiavelli.
would seem to call for innovation rather than imitation. Thus Machiavelli ambiguously concludes the passage about “all cities and … all peoples” quoted above by contending, “it is an easy matter for anyone who examines past events carefully to foresee future events … and to apply the remedies that the ancients employed, or if old remedies cannot be found, to think of new ones based on the similarity of circumstances.”

In the general preface to the Discourses, Machiavelli voices the conventional humanist complaint that the ancient world is “praised … rather than imitated,” “as if the sky, the sun, the elements, or human beings had changed … from what they were in antiquity.” And he announces that his text will provide the “practical knowledge” necessary for the reproduction of Rome’s success. In this spirit, he demystifies ancient precedent by describing modern law as “nothing other than the decisions delivered by the jurists of antiquity which … teach our contemporary jurists how to render judgments” and modern medicine as nothing “other than the experiments performed by the doctors of antiquity upon which today’s doctors and their diagnoses rely.” These statements simultaneously extol the ancient world as the pinnacle of human achievement and expose its accomplishments as the fruit of an experimental approach forbidden in modernity. In these moments, it becomes difficult to say whether Machiavelli intends for modern states to imitate Rome’s particular policies, which were innovative when first introduced, or to imitate its general ethos of innovation, which might in fact mean ignoring some of its policies; it is unclear whether he promotes relative or absolute innovation. Regardless, the comparativism nurtured by an investment in precedent has rendered novelty desirable.

If Machiavelli pessimistically assumes that “the same conflicts arise in every era,”

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35 Machiavelli, Discourses, I:39, p. 105 (“it is”).
36 Machiavelli, “Preface to the 1531 Roman Edition,” in Discourses, 17 (“praised …”; “nothing other”; “other than”), 18 (“as if”; “practical knowledge”).
he is also optimistic that the careful management of those conflicts can stabilize the polity, permitting it to match or even surpass Rome. He still understands political history as cyclical, meaning that we have not yet reached a fully developed concept of progress, and he remains far from idealistic, insisting in the *Discourses* that “it is impossible to organize an everlasting republic.” But insofar as he paradoxically suggests that a polity might maintain itself by constantly changing, he takes a major step toward articulating a positive version of innovation. As the roles of political observer and political actor blur when the ability to derive new courses of action from past examples finds success in actual decision-making, it thus becomes possible to describe Machiavelli as an innovator in both our contemporary sense (an intellectual original) and in the pejorative early modern sense (a political rebel), as engendering a “revolution” in the history of political thought and, potentially, an actual revolution.37

As we saw in the opening to this chapter, the damming association between his method’s newness and political innovation in the more literal sense was not lost on Machiavelli. It was not for nothing that John Donne imagined Machiavelli in Hell alongside Columbus, Copernicus, the ur-Jesuit Ignatius of Loyola, and the purveyors of new commodities. Elaborating his theory of political conflict in the preface to Book II of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli situates himself in complex relation to the desire for novelty:

> human appetites are insatiable, for while we are endowed by nature with the power and will to desire everything, and by fortune with the ability to obtain little of it, the result is a continuous discontent in the minds of men and a dissatisfaction with the things they possess; this causes them to condemn present times, to praise the past, and to long for the future, even though they do so without any reasonable motive. I do not know, therefore, whether I deserve to be considered among those who deceive themselves if … I praise too lavishly the

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times of the ancient Romans and condemn our own. Certainly, if the exceptional ability that prevailed then and the vice that prevails today were not clearer than the sun, I would speak more cautiously … But since the matter is so obvious that everyone can see it, I shall boldly proclaim … so that the young men who will read these writings of mine can avoid the errors of the present and be prepared to imitate the past whenever fortune provides them with the proper occasion.

Machiavelli’s transhistorical understanding of political conflict depends upon a basic logical chain: “insatiable” “appetite” confronts a scarcity of resources, producing “discontent;” and this discontent breeds a desire for political change in the open-ended “future,” possibly modeled on an idealized “past.” He invokes the possibility that his own writings participate in this spirit of “discontent” only to overturn it by insisting upon antiquity’s conventional superiority to modernity. Yet the ambiguity of his stance deepens rather than dissipates in the passage’s final sentence, since, as we have seen, imitating Rome might in fact involve innovation. Rather than fight against the universal fact that all “men are desirous of new things to such an extent that those who are faring well wish for change as much as those who are faring badly,” Machiavelli cultivates it as a mechanism of stabilizing adaptation. Still, despite his reverence for the past, he cannot escape the stigma that Hobbes would attach—quite possibly with Machiavelli in mind—to those unable to discipline a fancy “stirred up” by ancient political alternatives.³⁸

Political innovation does not delegitimize political power for Machiavelli, but it does entail serious risks. As he writes in The Prince, “taking the initiative in introducing a new form of government is very difficult and dangerous, and unlikely to succeed.”

because “all those who profit from the old order will be opposed to the innovator, whereas all those who might benefit from the new order are, at best, tepid supporters of him.” On the one hand, habit and custom oppose the new prince: “it is as difficult and as dangerous to try to liberate a people that wishes to live in slavery as it is to try to enslave a people that wishes to live in freedom.” On the other hand, the very desire for novelty that aids the new prince can be turned against him as soon as his rule begins: “men are very ready to change their ruler when they believe that they can better their condition.” These unpredictable conditions explain the harsh measures he recommends to the prince, who, he claims, “is always forced to injure his new subjects.”

Machiavelli does not discourage innovation then, but he does insist that it should either be obscured, in order to ensure its approval, or pursued in a totalizing fashion in order to annihilate all opposition to it. In the Discourses, he writes:

Anyone who … tries to reform the government of a city in a way that is acceptable and capable of maintaining it to everyone’s satisfaction will find it necessary to retain at least the semblance of its ancient customs, so that it will not seem to the people that its institutions have changed, though in fact the new institutions may be completely dissimilar from those of the past, because men in general live as much by appearances as by realities.

This prescription jibes with his emphasis in The Prince on the value of dissembling. But he goes on to qualify it and to propose a different approach for would-be autocrats:

“anyone who wishes to institute a body politic, whether a republic or a kingdom, should observe this [foregoing advice], but anyone who wishes to create an absolute authority, a form the authors call tyranny, must create everything anew.” Innovation’s greatest risk, he suggests, is that its efforts to overcome contingency can unleash contingency all the more. To reign permanently, the new prince must outdo fortuna through innovations so

39 Machiavelli, The Prince, VI, p. 20 (“taking the”), VI, p. 21 (“all those”), III, p. 7 (“men are”; “is always”); Machiavelli, Discourses, III:8, p. 280 (“it is”).
extreme that they make further ones impossible. This remains a dubious prospect, however, since “any change always leaves a toothing-stone for further building.”40

Because he upholds the conventional value of political stability, if not the conventional methods of achieving it, Machiavelli is able to argue that even “an absolute authority” can have its subjects’ interests at heart. His accounts of Rome’s legendary second king Numa and the Biblical Moses clarify the utility of innovation in attaining not only the ruler’s good but that of the polity as a whole. They also demonstrate theology’s centrality to sovereignty-as-innovation. Machiavelli attributes the public’s acceptance of Numa’s “new and unusual institutions,” which number “among the principal reasons for the happiness of that city,” to his “turn[] to religion.” Indeed, he concludes that “no maker of extraordinary laws who did not have recourse to God has ever existed in any society, because these laws would not otherwise be accepted.” His discussion of Moses similarly demystifies religion by attributing the foundation of the Israelite polity to its disavowed innovations. Even as he mouths the conventional pieties about the role of divine providence in that process, Machiavelli lists Moses among several archetypes of “the innovator,” including Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus. Moses’s theocratic disciplinary apparatus becomes proof of the contention that “all armed prophets succeed whereas unarmed ones fail”: “you must be able to force them [i.e., the people] to believe” when they cease to. Like Numa’s example, however, the career of Moses suggests that even if they do involve manipulation, illegitimate means might justify the legitimate end of political stability. Machiavelli thus reveals innovation not to be a political aberration but,

rather, a key ingredient in the foundation of history’s great polities.  

Machiavelli’s discussion of Moses was a key source of early modern accusations of his blasphemy and atheism. But I would argue that what early readers found most reprehensible about his political thought was not (or not only) his promotion of the morally suspect tactics of force and fraud or his willingness to present religious belief and revered scriptural personages as the tools of secular power. Instead, what readers most took issue with was his outspoken endorsement of innovation as the key to political stability. Whether it took the form of the prince’s solitary virtù or the more extensive virtù of a republic’s citizenry, Machiavellian innovation was a blasphemous usurpation of the divine monopoly on change and an affront to mainstream political thought. Still, despite his constant repudiation, Machiavelli’s influence was profound.

The history of Machiavelli’s Anglophone reception is well known. Diatribes against his atheism, immorality, and support for tyranny were commonplace, cementing the “Machiavel” as a term of abuse and a stock villain on the Renaissance stage. And this only intensified after Edward Dacres published the first English translations of the Discourses and The Prince in 1636 and 1640. But Machiavelli’s corpus was also understood more neutrally, as a meditation on the tension between religion and “policy” (politics conceived in entirely secular terms), as a model of political observation, and as a veiled condemnation of absolutism. According to this last view, The Prince was a republican satire of tyranny useful in criticizing Charles I, Oliver Cromwell, and Charles II by turns. Machiavelli’s influence is especially difficult to trace because writers discussed him without having read him, invoked his principles with approval while

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41 Machiavelli, Discourses, I:11, p. 51 (“new and”), I:11, p. 50 (“turn[] to”), I:11, p. 52 (“among the”; “no maker”); Machiavelli, The Prince, VI, p. 21 (“the innovator”; “all armed”; “you must”).
avoiding the stigma involved in actually citing him, and selectively appropriated his ideas without wholly endorsing him. Yet we know that he was read with muted approval by figures like Gabriel Harvey, Walter Raleigh, and Francis Bacon, by mid-century republicans like John Milton, James Harrington, and Algernon Sidney, and by U.S. founding fathers like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison.\(^{42}\)

My interest lies not in retelling this familiar story but, instead, in querying Machiavelli’s more oblique influence on an earlier generation of colonials and therefore in addressing the gap in our intellectual historical paradigms that has allowed Pocock and others to leap from Civil War England to Revolutionary and Federalist America without considering the robust cultures of political thought that flourished in England’s early settlements. Felix Raab argues that while “Machiavelli was being quite widely read in England” from the 1580s onward, he was not immediately relevant to English political thought until the Civil Wars, when hereditary succession was interrupted by the “new situation” of \textit{de facto} rule. But by this logic Machiavellian forms of political analysis would also be of use in the Americas during the first century of English settlement, when \textit{de facto} political situations were the rule rather than the exception—when, in Jonathan Elmer’s words, royal “power … [was] present, absent, and (merely) represented all at once.” What I am proposing, finally, is the extension of Pocock’s landmark concept of the “Machiavellian moment” to the founding decades of all of England’s American

possessions. The discourse of Atlantic political science developed in response to the numerous disruptions, rebellions, and crises of authority that comprise colonial history. Because the New World was by definition unpredictable, contingent, innovative, elites in the Chesapeake, New England, and the Caribbean turned to Machiavellian political science, which taught that stability could be attained only through the empirical observation of past events and a willingness to counter fortuna with further innovation.43

IV. The Reformation: John Calvin’s Protestant Theology

As with the Renaissance, a dialectic of imitation and innovation undergirded the Protestant Reformation. Adherents insisted that they intended to reform an existing faith, not found a new one, and that their practices were rooted in the eternal truth of God’s Word and the ways of the primitive church, prior to its corruption by Roman Catholic innovation. Yet much of Protestant theology seemed unprecedented or not very recently precedent; it was undoubtedly productive of substantially new social relations; and its emphasis on the novel—albeit divinely orchestrated—terminus of millennial eschatology, “the world to come,” reoriented early moderns toward an innovative future. As a pioneering articulation of the Reformation’s major tenets exerting significant influence in English culture, John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion (Latin, 1536-1559; 43

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English, 1561) promises to illuminate the complex relationship toward political-theological change and the concomitant recourse to empiricism that made Protestant hermeneutics so central to Atlantic political science.44

Protestantism entailed an unprecedented confidence in the individual’s interpretive capacity and a profound reconceptualization of human agency. Despite its emphasis on innate depravity and on the Fall’s impact on human knowledge, the rejection of clerical hierarchy and the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (the idea that all knowledge necessary for salvation could be found in the Bible) recast the believer as a competent reader of scripture, the world, and her own soul. Of course, this also produced a great deal of anxiety, prompting redoubled ministerial efforts to circumscribe the hermeneutic process, but the newfound legibility of divine signs remained. Similarly, despite its emphasis on absolute divine sovereignty via the doctrines of unconditional election, irresistible grace, and *sola fide* (the idea that salvation was achievable by faith alone), Calvinism also endowed human actions with renewed significance as potential vehicles of the divine will. Covenant theology held that God condescended to enter into contractual relations with the faithful, even as he graciously endowed them with the ability to uphold their part therein. The concept of callings held that God chose certain individuals to serve as civil and ecclesiastical leaders. And the doctrine of means functioned, in a post-miraculous age, to confine divine sovereignty within a predictable, 

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natural order by imagining that God enacted his absolute will through the use of second
causes or “means.” These two trends—the believer’s augmented interpretive prowess and
the reconfigured relationship between divinity, humanity, and nature—coalesce in the
Protestant hermeneutic of providentialism. Insofar as it required the observation of
material signifiers to detect God’s interventions into worldly affairs, and insofar as it
provided a way to disavow human innovation, providentialism would prove a key feature
of Atlantic political science.45

Although Calvin focuses on the subject of “Civil Government” only in the final
chapter of the four-volume *Institutes*, the political implications of his theology provide an
overarching context for the entire work. Highly sensitive to the popular association of
Protestantism with civil disturbance, he directly addresses the Reformation’s relationship
to innovation. He also identifies with what scholars call the “Magisterial Reformation,”
the attempt to reform limited territories through cooperation with secular authorities, as
distinguished from the “Radical Reformation,” which proceeded without secular support.
The *Institutes*’s “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France” is designed to secure the
monarch’s protection for Protestants and to reassure him of their obedience in the wake
of a recent attempt by Anabaptists to establish an illicit theocracy, reportedly involving
polygamy and the communal ownership of property, in the German city of Münster. The
Münster Rebellion (1534-1535) resulted in a bloody year-long siege and quickly became
a byword for innovative sectarian threats to political order, a cautionary tale about the

45 On the epistemological effects of original sin, see Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations
of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On the problem of interpretive latitude, see
28 and passim. On covenant theology, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 365-431 and passim. On the doctrine of means, see Miller,
dangers of moving too far from clerical hierarchy and the political status quo. With this event in mind, Calvin rejects the idea that the Reformers wish “to subvert all orders and civil governments, to disrupt the peace and quiet of the people, to abolish all laws, to scatter all lordships and possessions—in short to turn everything upside down!” Yet, in addition to arguing that Protestantism poses no threat to secular authority, he also cites scriptural examples of similar attacks being leveled against the prophets and Christ, whom the Jews considered “seditious.” Unlike his flat denials of Protestantism’s seditiousness, these citations reframe the accusation of sedition as an index of the accuser’s opposition to God’s plan, thereby foreshadowing the new faith’s capacity to alter innovation’s connotations by trumping human precedent with eschatology.46

These explicitly political statements are closely related to Calvin’s attempt in the “Prefatory Address” to refute the claim that the Reformation is “‘new’ and ‘of recent birth’” and therefore incompatible with “ancient custom.” This refutation involves four significant rhetorical moves. First, he overturns the accusation of novelty by appealing to the eternality of the divine truth contained in scripture: “by calling it [i.e., Protestantism] ‘new’ they do great wrong to God, whose Sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty.” Then, he turns the tables on his opponents by using the accusation to evidence their distance from the true faith: “Indeed, I do not at all doubt that it is new to them, since to them both Christ himself and his gospel are new.” Next, he stresses the antiquity—though, crucially, not the continuity—of Reformed theology in order to evidence its orthodoxy: “he who knows that this preaching of Paul is ancient, that ‘Jesus

Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification,’ will find nothing new among us.” Finally, he argues that this doctrine’s unfamiliarity is an outgrowth of the Fall, which the providential event of the Reformation promises to overcome: “That it [i.e., the doctrine] has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man’s impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God’s goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted.” This depiction of Protestantism as the “restoration” of humanity’s prelapsarian condition (the ultimate status quo ante) is meant to signal its opposition to innovation. That this event is enacted by divine rather than human agency confirms the Reformation’s immunity to the fallen fancy, will, and whim responsible for papal tyranny and sectarian anarchy alike.47

The corollary of Calvin’s claim that the Reformation is not novel is that the Church of Rome is. The Institutes characterizes Catholic doctrines, institutions, and practices as “innovations, surely not of God’s institution, nor supported by ancient church observance.” Calvin elaborates this claim in three central chapters of Book IV, whose titles alone tell the story: Chapter IV, “The Condition of the Ancient Church, and the Kind of Government in Use before the Papacy,” V, “The Ancient Form of Government Was Completely Overthrown by the Tyranny of the Papacy,” and VI, “The Primacy of the Roman See.” Like Machiavelli, Calvin evidences the process of corruption in order to demonstrate the urgent need to reestablish a seemingly novel—because long eclipsed—precedent. Because the Church’s “ancient customs … have been not only disturbed but completely erased and hidden,” their recovery is bound to break with purely human standards of establishedness: “If they [i.e., the Catholics] claim custom, use, or long-standing authorization, I confront them with Christ’s definition”; for a “single utterance

47 Calvin, “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” Institutes, 15 (“new’ and”; “ancient custom”; “by calling”), 16 (“Indeed, I”; “he who”; “That it”).
of God … ought to be of more weight than countless tens of thousands of canons."\(^{48}\)

Even as he appeals to the idea of antiquity, then, Calvin questions its value. The true test of a doctrine’s validity, he suggests, is not the tenure of its institutionalization—which can be erroneous however longevitous—but, instead, its conformity to the divine will: “in the Kingdom of God his eternal truth must alone be listened to and observed, a truth that cannot be dictated to by length of time, by long-standing custom, or by the conspiracy of men.” Even as he insists upon the political inoffensiveness of the Reformation then, Calvin suggests that divinely sanctioned innovation may be superior to imitation and continuity; he hints at Protestant eschatology’s tendency to lead in unprecedented directions. After all, a salutary notion of innovation was already implied in the conception of conversion articulated in Romans 6, where the fallen “old man” is transformed into the sanctified “new man,” and in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “if any man be in Christ, let him be a new creature. Old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new” (GB). Should this individual model be extrapolated to a collective scale, it might well entail political innovation. Indeed, such was the case during the Scottish Reformation, English Civil Wars, and puritan colonization projects, when Calvinists sought in various ways to remake the world.\(^{49}\)

Calvin’s refutation of Protestantism’s novelty and his counter-charge of Catholic innovation allowed him to overturn the widespread assumption that any iteration of Reformed faith would lead to a second Münster. But this was not merely a pragmatic concession to the concerns of secular authorities. His numerous references to the innovations not only of the Reformation’s opponents but also of its more extremist

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\(^{49}\) Calvin, “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” in *Institutes*, 23 (“in the”).
adherents demonstrate that he was genuinely concerned to stifle heresy and rebellion. In
the text’s final chapter, he defends the need for civil government against those “insane
and barbarous men” who “furiously strive to overturn this divinely established order”:

certain men, when they hear that the gospel promises a freedom that
acknowledges no king and no magistrate among men, but looks to Christ alone,
think that they cannot benefit by their freedom so long as they see any power set
up over them. They therefore think that nothing will be safe unless the whole
world is reshaped to a new form, where there are neither courts, nor laws, nor
magistrates[.]

Faced with the threatening prospect of a world “reshaped to a new form,” Calvin insists
that “spiritual freedom” and “civil bondage” can coexist. He accomplishes this by
separating theology and politics as discrete spheres: “Christ’s spiritual Kingdom and the
civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct.” Yet he also seeks to show that, while
distinct, spiritual and temporal government are not incompatible—a move at once useful
to the Reformation’s public image and conducive to Protestant political innovation.50

To bolster his claim, Calvin repeatedly references and quotes from the *locus
classicus* of discussions of Protestant political obligation, the thirteenth chapter of Paul’s
epistle to the Romans. The first three verses of Romans 13 (GB) read:

> Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers: for there is no power but of
>  God: and the powers that be, are ordained of God.
> Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and
>  they that resist, shall receive to themselves condemnation.
> For Magistrates are not to be feared for good works, but for evil. Wilt thou
>  then be without fear of the power? do well: so shalt thou have praise of the same.

The passage bolsters Calvin’s demand for obedience by declaring that all political
authority derives from God, who delegates power to human “representatives” via

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“spiritual freedom”; “civil bondage”; “Christ’s spiritual”; “within its”). On spiritual and secular spheres see
152-171; Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University
callings. Despite his distinction between spiritual and secular kingdoms, the orthodox reading of Romans 13 equates sedition with blasphemy. The present-tense phrase “the powers that be” dictates that the only test of a magistrate’s legitimacy is his title: “once the Lord advances any man to kingly rank, he attests to us his determination that he would have him reign.” This providentialist formulation positions political power as self-justifying, commanding obedience merely because it exists, and crucially, Calvin argues, it applies as much to tyrants as to more pious rulers: “We are not only subject to the authority of princes who perform their office toward us uprightly and faithfully as they ought, but also to the authority of all who, by whatever means, have got control of affairs, even though they perform not a whit of the princes’ office.” According to this gloss, the Christian should not only obey established authorities but should also disregard the potentially innovative “means” by which they established themselves. The orthodox explanation for this potential injustice is that God instrumentalizes tyrants to scourge a wayward people. Calvin thus promotes “passive obedience,” insisting that true Christians ought to meet oppression with prayer, not vengeance. Paraphrasing the epistle’s second verse, he contends that “the magistrate cannot be resisted without God being resisted at the same time.” Patient suffering is a duty, and its occasion should prompt self-examination to rectify the behaviors that incurred God’s wrath in the first place.51

Yet Protestants also qualified the doctrine of non-resistance in several ways. Late in the Institutes, Calvin himself notes an “exception”—“If they [i.e., magistrates]
command anything against him [i.e., God], let it go unesteemed”—and he paraphrases Acts 5:29: “We must obey God rather than men.” As Harro Höpfl points out, the implication here, “which Calvin did not pursue,” is that “any ruler who sets himself against God, ipso facto ceased to be a ruler. This is not what Calvin intended, for the rest of his argument would be nullified by such an admission. It is, however, precisely what some of his successors meant.” Over the next several centuries, Protestant thinkers would rigorously reinterpret Romans 13, seizing especially upon the third verse in order to equate tyranny with blasphemy. If “Magistrates are not to be feared for good works, but for evil” and a magistrate is known for evil works, he is no longer a magistrate and may be legitimately deposed. This is the first of two lines of argument that Quentin Skinner identifies in his account of the emergence, first, of a “duty” and, then, of a “right” of Protestant subjects to resist tyrants. According to this first argument—the “private-law” argument—magistrates who failed to govern properly had voided their titles and could therefore be opposed as private persons in the name of self-defense. The second, which Skinner calls the “constitutional” argument, claimed that the people’s representatives in a mixed polity might oppose tyrants in their name. Calvin would eventually come to espouse a moderate version of the latter argument, instructing disgruntled “private citizens” to “commit the matter to the judgment of the magistrate, whose hand alone here is free” and to refrain from even “disput[ing] over what would be the best kind of government in that place where they live.”

Calvin’s endorsement of the “constitutional” argument turned on a key ambiguity

in Romans 13: if the rise of tyrants is an expression of God’s will, might not resistance to tyrants also be? Might God not scourge his scourges? Citing scriptural precedents like the Israelite exodus from Egypt under Moses, Calvin notes that God “sometimes … raises up open avengers from among his servants … to punish the wicked government and deliver his people.” But he also insists, “if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord’s to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer.” Significantly, he continues, “I am speaking all the while of private individuals. For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings … I am … far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings.” Indeed, he suggests, popular magistrates are positively obligated to defend “the freedom of the people” against tyranny through legitimate political change. Calvin’s heirs in England, Scotland, and France would far outpace him in advocating resistance to tyrants. By the 1550s, Skinner reports, the most extreme Calvinists argued that it was “legitimate not merely for magistrates, but even for individual citizens, and thus for the whole body of the people, to engage lawfully in acts of political violence.” Utilizing the framework of covenant theology, Scottish Calvinists like John Knox would “reverse the most fundamental assumption of orthodox reformation political thought” by assuring “the people not that they will be damned if they resist the powers that be, but rather that they will be damned if they fail to do so.” These theories would also fuel the 1649 English regicide and would eventuate in the more secular right to resistance articulated in Locke’s Two Treatises.53

In sum, Calvinism harbored a latent argument for salutary political change. An

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ambiguous formulation like Calvin’s paraphrase of Daniel 2:21—“In Daniel, the Lord changes times and successions of times, removes kings and sets them up”—could be used to justify both obedience, by characterizing tyrants as the scourge of God, and resistance, by allowing one to self-identify, via the doctrine of “means,” as a vehicle of divine innovation. To be only slightly reductive, if God’s sovereignty is as absolute as Calvinism suggests, then virtually every successful endeavor is justified. Calvin attempted to render this self-justifying providentialism unavailable to his readers, but that did not prevent them from correlating the righteousness of their cause with their empirically verifiable victories, nor from anticipating the immanentization of the spiritual kingdom of the hereafter in the earthly kingdoms of the here and now. As the pious natural philosopher and imperial booster Robert Boyle put it, “Theology teaches us … that one Day this world … shall either be Abolished by Annihilation, or (which seems far more probable) be Innovated, and, as it were, Transfigur’d, … So that … the present state of things (as well Naturall as Political) shall have an end.”

The familiar genealogy of resistance theories that takes us from Calvin to Locke illuminates a great deal about Protestantism’s relationship to political change, but it has been severely limited by its inattention to the innovation prohibition and to empirical political science. Perpetuating an essentially Weberian narrative about Protestantism as an engine of modernization and progress, that genealogy has prompted some fairly misleading forms of historical anachronism: for example, Michael Walzer’s influential claim that “Puritanism” constituted “the earliest form of political radicalism.” Resisting the explanatory allure of this decidedly late eighteenth-century concept promises to

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expand our sense of the forms of political innovation legitimated in Calvinist terms during the period, which included not only challenges to authority but also its reaffirmation, not only new kinds of liberty but also new forms of slavery. Attending to the Protestant dialectic of imitation and innovation allows us to appreciate the surprising commonalities between the political and economic reforms proposed by the Digger Gerrard Winstanley—which he framed not as a restoration but as a “Resurrection”—and Oliver Cromwell’s equally transformative “Western Design” to conquer the Spanish Caribbean. In both cases allegiance to scriptural precedent yields an open-ended eschatology that casts human actions as the “means” of accomplishing the cosmic innovation described by Boyle. In puritan New England this dynamic would produce a full-blown qualification of the innovation prohibition as expressed in Romans 13: the “Distinctıon” between “a Common-wealth already settled, and a Common-wealth yet to be settled, … wherein men are free to chuse what Form they shall judge best.” Energized by the empirical hermeneutic of Calvinist providentialism, Atlantic political science would convert exceptional New World circumstances into new forms of innovation.\(^{55}\)

V. The Scientific Revolution: Francis Bacon’s New Science

Francis Bacon was at once bolder than Machiavelli and Calvin in his endorsement of innovation and comparably cautious about (accusations of) political and theological disturbance. The Scientific Revolution, like the Renaissance and Reformation, exhibited

a dialectic of imitation and innovation. Bacon rejected received wisdom and conceived of modernity as potentially superior to antiquity. Yet he pitched his projected expansion of human knowledge as a form of restoration. He encouraged revision, invention, and experimentation, predicating the value of his inductive and empirical method upon its novelty. Yet he tempered that novelty by insisting that natural-scientific advancement be gradual and rigorously segregated from politics and religion. He aimed his epistemological program at what seemed an unprecedented control over nature. Yet he depicted that control as the recovery of prelapsarian human sovereignty. Predictably, however, these strategies of disavowal tended to backfire, revealing the New Science to be innovative in the fully pejorative, political sense. It is in this capacity that Bacon’s thought exerted such a powerful influence on Atlantic political science. He cautiously endorsed the expansion of “civil knowledge,” suggesting that the same inductive methods he proposed for the study of nature might be extended to the study of politics. And in the wake of this failure of disciplinary segregation, his bold recuperation of innovation as a positive good led colonials steeped in empiricism to question and, ultimately, revise the entrenched assumptions of metropolitan political thought. 

The most significant statement of Bacon’s attitude toward change appears in his essay “Of Innovations” (1625), which boldly departs from the period’s widespread

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hostility toward the term. Like Machiavelli, whom he cites with approval throughout his writings, Bacon insists that the suprahuman force of historical contingency demands an equally innovative response. Indeed, he invokes the example of medical science to argue that this is already common practice: “Surely every Medicine is an Innovation; And he that will not apply New Remedies, must expect New Evils: For Time is the greatest Innovatour: And if Time, of course, alter Things to the worse, and Wisedome, and Counsell shall not alter them to the better, what shall be the End?” Bacon legitimizes innovation by a logic of necessity: “Time” (a clear analogue of Machiavellian fortuna) inevitably confronts us with new situations, to which we can only respond in kind. He does acknowledge the standard concerns about innovation’s dangers: “It is true, that what is setled by Custome, though it be not good, yet at least it is fit … Whereas New Things peece not so well.” But he concludes that these warnings would apply only in a world devoid of contingency: “All this is true, if Time stood still; which contrariwise moveth so round, that a Froward Retention of Custome, is as turbulent a Thing, as an Innovation.”

The essay culminates with an endorsement of innovation virtually without parallel in early modern English literature. Yet that endorsement is not without its qualifications: “It were good therefore, that Men in their Innovations, would follow the Example of Time it selfe; which indeed Innovateth greatly, but quietly, and by degrees, scarce to be perceived.” Bacon promotes a kind of controlled innovation by assimilating novelty to the barely emergent concept of progress unbound by teleology, which would become central to the Enlightenment precisely because the subtle, incremental nature of its

57 Francis Bacon, “Of Innovations,” in The Essays or Counsels, Civill and Morall, ed. Michael Kiernan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 75-76, quotations on 75 (“Surely every”; “the first”; “It is”), 75-76 (“All this”). For Bacon’s explicit engagements with Machiavelli, see for example The Advancement of Learning, ed. Michael Kiernan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77, 144, 172, 175.
movement toward an ever-receding horizon of achievement promised to prevent the
disruptively sudden or thorough. Bacon’s first qualification, then, is that innovation be gradual. His second involves restricting innovation to natural
science so as to prevent it from wreaking havoc in other spheres. Thus, he enjoins the
reader “not to try Experiments in states” or churches, concluding the essay with a
scriptural quotation that promotes the “Ancient Way” as the “right way.”

The argument Bacon makes in “Of Innovations” is of a piece with his tendency to
promote his new scientific method precisely because of, rather than despite, its novelty.
Published in Latin in 1620 as one of the six intended parts of his unfinished, colossally
ambitious *Instauratio Magna* (“The Great Instauration”), Bacon’s *Novum Organum*
(“The New Instrument”), pursues two major tacks. First, it criticizes the reigning system
of scholastic syllogistic reasoning for prematurely leaping to generalization and thereby
creating ignorance and controversy rather than useable truth. Second, the text promotes
an empirical alternative method, which produces axioms “step by step” so as “not to
reach the most general ones until last.” Bacon’s inductive New Science entails a decisive
break with deductive Aristotelian method. The text’s title plays on the title of Aristotle’s
treatise on logic, the *Organon*, thereby signaling Bacon’s provocative willingness to
disavow the old in favor of the new. He excoriates moderns for overvaluing ancient
knowledge and forcing their evidence to conform to existing axioms. And he turns
Aristotle’s teleology against him by recasting classical learning as the “boyhood of
science,” a mere prelude to its modern consummation. Bacon’s method is not only novel
but also productive of novelty. Yet invention and experimentation, too, get transvalued

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58 Bacon, “Of Innovations,” in *Essayes*, 76 (“It were”; “not to”; “ancient way”; “right way”). See Jeremiah
6:16. I break here with Godin, who claims that Bacon views innovation as entirely pejorative and “does not
mix science and innovation.” See *Innovation Contested*, 177-207, esp. 180-186, quotation on 178.
here. He identifies three archetypal markers of modernity’s salutary novelty: “the Art of Printing, Gunpowder, and the Mariner’s Compass.” These “mechanical innovations,” he proudly observes, “were unknown to the ancients” and “have altered the whole face and state of things.” At his most exuberant, Bacon even declares that “he who knows forms”—the eternal laws that cause a thing to realize its nature—will paradoxically be able to “bring about things that have never been done before.”

Alongside the vision of salutary change on display in Bacon’s writings we find a good deal of rhetorical hedging about the novelty of his New Science. In these moments, he backpedals his more extravagant assertions, casting his method not as an innovation but as a restoration, reformation, or return. In the Advancement of Learning (1605), for instance, Bacon describes himself as “zealous and affectionate to recede as little from Antiquitie … as may stand with truth” and even characterizes Aristotle as an innovator in order to clear himself of the charge. In other cases, claims to innovation and imitation coexist. This ambiguity emerges in individual words like “instauration,” which can denote both a renewal and an initial establishment, and in individual sentences, like the following: “a way completely different from the one known before should be opened for the human intellect, and other helps devised to let the mind exert its proper authority over the nature of things.” Here, the latter clause redirects the break with precedent entailed in the former clause (“completely different from the one known before”) toward a re-affirmation of an originary and eternal order (the mind’s “proper authority” over nature).

Elsewhere, passages revise one another: Bacon claims that he seeks “to open up a

completely new route for the intellect” yet insists that he will “steer a middle course, neither ruining what the ancients rightly laid down nor despising what the new men rightly put forward.” When the political stakes were highest, he attempted to reframe the conversation entirely: thus in the Instauratio Magna’s dedication to King James I, Bacon notes, “the things I speak of are certainly quite new in their very kind, but are framed on an extremely ancient archetype, i.e. the very world itself.” And throughout his career he sought to erect barriers between the “Divine,” “Natural,” and “Humane” spheres in order to legitimize natural-scientific innovation as inoffensive to both theology and politics.60

These disavowals and qualifications emerge directly from the conventional wisdom that all innovation is political innovation. Bacon seems at some level to have recognized that, as Christopher Hill puts it, “A man steeped in Baconianism would, if he applied the method to politics at all, not be an unquestioning supporter of the status quo.” In a crucial aphorism from Novum Organum Bacon makes explicit—and attempts to mitigate—the risk he runs in endorsing scientific novelty: at the present, he complains, men’s studies are kept imprisoned in some few authors’ writings, and he who quarrels with them is instantly attacked as a troublemaker thirsting for novelty [homo turbidus, & rerum novarum cupidus]. Yet surely affairs of state differ greatly from the arts, for political novelty is riskier than intellectual. In affairs of state even change for the better brings fears of disorder, since civil government rests not on demonstration but on authority, consent, reputation, and opinion. But in the arts and sciences, as in mines, all ought to echo to the sound of new works and further advancement.

Bacon invokes the figure of the innovator in its fully pejorative political sense here (“a troublemaker thirsting for novelty”). In so doing, he espouses the orthodox view found in Aristotle’s Politics: the notion that even beneficial change is to be avoided because of its

60 Bacon, Advancement of Learning, 81 (“zealous and”), 76 (“Divine”; “Natural”; “Humane”); Bacon, Instauratio Magna, 11 (“a way”), 57 (“to open”), 91 (“steer a”), 7 (“the things”). See “instauration, n.,” OED Online (2017). For Aristotle as an innovator see Bacon, Advancement of Learning, 81.
capacity for civil disturbance. Yet once he’s distinguished between “affairs of state” and “arts and sciences,” Bacon can freely promote “new works” in the latter arena without concern for their aftershocks in the former. That this distinction is immediately belied by the phrase “administration and government of learning,” a rhetorical choice that emphasizes the overlap of politics and natural science, seems not to deter Bacon. Natural scientific “discoveries,” he insists, “spread their blessings without causing hurt or grief to anybody,” whereas the “improvement of political conditions seldom proceeds without violence and disorder.” Thus, in a surprising expression of deference to classical authority, he had concluded in The Advancement of Learning that “Civile knowledge hath [already] beene elegantlye handled, and therefore I cannot reporte it … deficient.”

Bacon is even more emphatic about the distinction between natural science and theology. Following Calvin, he premises his philosophical reforms on an understanding of the human senses and faculties as profoundly limited. While inquiry must begin with perception, it needs to be supplemented by a variety of “helps,” especially an inductive interpretive method, which progressively refines sensory data into usable truth through repeated experiments. This materialist approach allows him to exclude, by definition, the divine, transcendent, and *a priori*. Since it is revealed rather than observable, Christian doctrine is invincible to proof and disproof alike; its only “helps” are faith and scripture. Thus Bacon writes, “I … humbly pray that things human stand not in the way of things divine,” expressing his hope that his empiricism will incite neither “unbelief …

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respecting the divine mysteries” nor the “opposite” error of thinking that “inquiry into nature is forbidden.” Echoing Calvin’s distinction between spiritual and secular realms, Bacon insists that the “unhealthy mixture of things divine and human begets not only fantastic philosophy but heretical religion.” His solution is to “restrict the sense to its proper sphere in divine matters” and thereby to “give to faith that which is faith’s” (a telling adaptation of Matthew 22:21). And yet as Calvin’s empirical providentialism suggests, this division would also prove difficult to uphold.\(^6\)

For even as he attempted to segregate science, politics, and theology, Bacon sought to reimagine the relationships between them. The crux of his new method was the replacement of speculative metaphysics by a rejuvenated “natural philosophy” as the foundational “Philosophia Prima,” under whose aegis the “particular sciences,” including “political philosophy,” would proceed. These warring intentions result in four conceptual and formal tendencies that undermine his proposed distinctions: first, Bacon’s rhetorical choices frequently emphasize the overlap rather than the distance between politics and natural science; second, he imagined a utopian society in which the successful pursuit of scientific inquiry depends upon an unprecedented political structure; third, several of his essays deploy a political-scientific method modeled on his natural scientific one; fourth, his efforts to assimilate the New Science to the recovery of humanity’s prelapsarian sovereignty over nature tends to slide into a secular eschatology of Euro-Christian world

dominance bearing all the transgressive hallmarks of political innovation.63

Bacon describes both nature and natural scientific inquiry in political terms. Throughout *Novum Organum*, he laments the disruptive effects of the reigning system of scholastic logic, in which a few ambitious authors exercise a kind of “dictatorship,” transferring “the realm of opinion into their own hands” while lesser “men have surrendered their judgments and (like the Pedarian senators) concurred in supporting one man’s opinion.” The “government of the sciences … always has been and always will be popular,” he explains, leaving it vulnerable to epistemological demagoguery. Yet the New Science promises to end the strife between the partisans of “antiquity and novelty,” which has heretofore produced “factious studies” rather than truth. Similarly, Bacon describes natural bodies as having “consents and aversions or friendships and enmities.” Among “the main species of motions,” he lists the “motion of matter’s Resistance,” the “motion of Liberty,” and the motions of “Lesser” and “Greater Congregation.” But perhaps the best example of his inability to separate nature and politics is what he terms “Royal or Political Motion,” in which

> the parts governing or maintaining an ascendancy in any [natural] body curb, tame, suppress, and order the other parts, and compel them to unite, separate, stand still, move, and assemble, not according to their own desires but [according] to the well-being of the governing part, such that the ruling part exercises a kind of Government or Political Power over the subject parts.

Drawing on an enduring tradition of emblematic reading that would go on to have a fraught career in the New World, the passage simultaneously politicizes nature and naturalizes politics. In so doing it not only legitimizes the monarchical absolutism that Bacon would elsewhere espouse but also seems to equate natural and political science,

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suggesting that the former’s new methods might be productively extended to the latter. If the observation of nature substantiates assumptions about politics, might not the observation of politics itself be similarly illuminating?64

Even as Bacon praised the observational political realism of “Macciavell & others that write what men doe and not what they ought to do,” he authored a utopian narrative that boldly speculated about new forms of polity. Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (Latin, 1624; English, 1627) imagines an ideal commonwealth organized around an institute for scientific research. Insofar as this institute relies upon a political structure unfamiliar to Europe, it would seem a clear instance of natural scientific and political innovation flourishing in tandem. Like Thomas More’s *Utopia* (Latin, 1516; English, 1551), Bacon’s *New Atlantis* deploys the conceit of exotic travel to confront its European audience with an unfamiliar—or as *Utopia*’s subtitle puts it, “new” (*nova*)—political arrangement. But where More is at best ambivalent about the possibility of European emulation, Bacon seems to have intended his text to spur real reform. In a prefatory note, his literary executor William Rawley contends that Bacon hoped to see aspects of it put into practice despite his fiction’s ambitiousness: “Certainly the model is more vast and high than can possibly be imitated in all things; notwithstanding most things therein are within men’s power to effect.” Rawley even notes that Bacon intended to accompany his “fable” with “a frame of Laws, or the best state or mould of a commonwealth” in order to facilitate this innovative imitation, but he was unfortunately “diverted” by his work in “Natural

History.” Further ambiguities emerge: in its unprecedentedly totalizing focus on scientific investigation, Bacon’s utopia aims both to “enlarg[e] … the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible” and “to give perpetuity to that which … [is already] established” in its civil government. New political forms rooted in scientific innovation promise to prevent local political change. Yet the New Atlantis would seem to contradict Bacon’s earlier assessment of “Civile knowledge” as not “deficient.”

Despite his concerns about its predictive accuracy and implied endorsement of innovation, Bacon warmed to the idea of political science later in his career. Indeed, he brought his methods for studying the natural world to bear on politics in his Essays or Counsels, Civil and Morall (1597; 1612; 1625). Pieces like “Of Empire,” “Of Counsel,” “Of Faction,” “Of Vicissitude of Things,” and especially “Of Seditions and Troubles” demonstrate the utility of an inductive, (proto-)empirical approach to politics born of a preoccupation with innovative or contingent situations. Bacon follows “Macciavel” in evidencing his generalizations through examples from ancient and modern history and his own experience as a statesman, lawyer, and jurist. And he proceeds by explaining causality, analyzing exceptions, and breaking down complex phenomena into their component parts according to the method laid out in Novum Organum. As if to announce this interdisciplinary approach, “Of Seditions and Troubles” (1625) begins by analogizing natural and political knowledge: “Shepheards of People, had need know the Kalenders of Tempests in State.” The essay then goes on to outline the primary “Causes,”

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“Signes,” and “Remedies” of sedition. As we might expect, political change tops the list of “Causes”: “Innovation in Religion; Taxes; Alteration of Lawes and Customes; Breaking of Priviledges; Generall Oppression; Advancement of unworthy persons; Strangers; Dearth; … [and] Factions growne desperate.” In this way, Bacon foreshadows the mode of political prediction and prescription to emerge in the contingent space of the Americas, where “Tempests in State” were commonplace. He encouraged travelers to record their observations about civil as well as natural phenomena as part of his ambitious plan to reform human knowledge, calling for “greater diligence” in the production of “Narrations and Relations of particular [political] actions.”

“Of Seditions and Troubles” expresses conventional concern about the effects of top-down “Innovation,” but Bacon’s relationship to political change would prove more complicated. For the key qualification he voices in “Of Innovations” in order to disavow the threat of political innovation latent in his New Science has a remarkable second clause: he enjoins his readers “not to try Experiments in states; Except the Necessity be Urgent, or the utility Evident.” Still, he continued to insist that the political sphere did not enjoy the same capacity for innovation that he ascribed to the natural sphere. By the Restoration, when the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge was founded, Bacon’s disciplinary segregations had become a crucial talking point for a scientific culture eager to avoid association with the recent political disturbances of the Civil War era. Thus Thomas Sprat’s History of the Royal-Society (1667) claims that, for

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“all the *Innovation*, of which they [i.e., “*new Experiments*”] can be suspected, we find nothing will be indanger’d, but only the *Physics of Antiquity.*” Sprat felt compelled to make this argument because, as Christopher Hill suggests, Baconianism had fueled the attempts of puritan parliamentarians to realize God’s kingdom on earth during the Revolution. But once again, I would insist that a different, untold story was unfolding simultaneously on the imperial periphery. As New World colonials took up Bacon’s ideas, they would embrace the disciplinary overlap that he could not overcome in *Novum Organum*, flirt with the utopian impulse behind the *New Atlantis*, and fully realize the empirical political science adumbrated in the *Essays*, engaging in political innovation in response to observably exceptional circumstances about which the ancients were silent. \(^{67}\)

Bacon’s most transcendent attempt to deny the novelty of his New Science involved claiming that it would restore humanity’s prelapsarian mastery of nature. In the *Novum Organum*’s final aphorism, he explains that while “man lost both his state of innocence and his command over created things” by the Fall, “both of these losses can to some extent be made good even in this life, the former by religion and faith, the latter by the arts and sciences.” A familiar tension emerges here as the resumption of an Edenic birthright blurs into a flouting of divine punishment, as “what nature does” becomes what nature “may be made to do.” Bacon’s claim that the “aim of human power is to generate … new natures” would seem to entail more than mere restoration. In fact, I want to argue that Bacon’s advocacy of innovation implies a classically Calvinist eschatology, a

transcendent narrative of modern human progress, and that that eschatology is fundamentally racial in its disproportionate distribution of sovereignty across the globe. Bacon’s three markers of modernity’s salutary novelty—“Printing, Gunpowder, and the Mariner’s Compass”—serve to distinguish not just moderns from ancients but also Europeans from the ethnic others they used those technologies to subjugate. He draws this distinction explicitly just before he praises those three “mechanical innovations”: “consider … the difference between the life of men in any of the most civilised province[s] of Europe and in one of the most savage and barbarous regions of the New Indies, and then you will think it great enough to justify the remark that Man is a God to man.” This remark is a perfect example of what Jared Hickman terms “the apotheosis of Euro-Christians at the expense of non-Euro-Christians.” Bacon clarifies that “this difference does not spring from soil, climate, or bodily constitution but from the arts,” thereby resisting a certain kind of proto-racialism. But the eschatology of Euro-Christian global ascendancy persists, first, because of the arbitrary and thus providential fact that those “arts” were perfected by Europeans, and second, because Europeans who did not personally invent printing, gunpowder, and the compass benefit from them simply by virtue of their arbitrary, providential membership in that culture. The Promethean transgression of innovation is converted, before our eyes, from a damnable usurpation of divine sovereignty to the ordained monopolization of that sovereignty by a single race.

In a fitting echo of Machiavelli’s comparison of his new political-scientific methods to the “search for unknown lands and seas,” the oft-cited frontispiece to Bacon’s

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68 Bacon, Instauratio Magna, 447 (“man lost”; “both of”; “that injunction”), 201 (“aim of”), 195 (“Printing, Gunpowder”; “mechanical innovations”; “consider … the”; “this difference”); Bacon, Novum Organum, ed. Anderson, 130 (“what nature”; “may be”); cf. the Rees translation in Bacon, Instauratio Magna, 215 (“what nature may do or allow”); Jared Hickman, Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54 (“the apotheosis”).
Instauratio Magna depicts a ship passing beyond the mythical Pillars of Hercules, which marked the boundary between the familiar Mediterranean and the unexplored Atlantic and thus the point at which ancient knowledge of the world ceased. As scholars have argued, the image signals the intimate connection between the transgression of ancient geographic limits entailed by the voyages of New World “discovery” and the transgression of ancient epistemological limits entailed by the New Science. But I would add that the imperial image of a ship of state opening new territories to exploration figures the political scientific, as well as natural scientific, dimensions of Europe’s transformative encounter with the Americas. Bacon may have remained ambivalent about political innovation, but his methods and ideas would facilitate precisely that in the New World. There, a fully inductive and empirical approach to novel political circumstances would aid colonial elites in revising the inherited ideas standing between them and an apotheosizing “command over created things” denied to the “savage and barbarous.”

VI. The Coronation of Powhatan: A Case Study in Colonial Reportage

The previous three sections sought to demonstrate that the formative influence Machiavelli, Calvin, and Bacon exerted on Atlantic political science derives from the dialectical relationship between novelty and empiricism in their thought. In each case, a willingness to innovate arises from an observational epistemology that was itself a response to novel circumstances. Atlantic political science exhibits a similar dialectic:

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political innovation is both its chief preoccupation and its primary by-product. Exacerbated by the New World’s unfamiliarity, the contingency and rebellion threatening the colonial project inspired new kinds of rule. And this dynamic accomplished a positive transvaluation of innovation that proceeded in tandem with the one traced earlier in this chapter through European developments like John Locke’s *Two Treatises* and the French Revolution. Responding to the provocation of masterless men, outspoken heretics, and rebel slaves, elites like William Strachey, John Winthrop, and Richard Ligon reimagined sovereignty as a monopoly on the legitimate right to innovate.

And yet, precisely because of its commitment to eyewitnessing, the signal genre in which this interpretive process ran its course—the colonial report—also revealed that New World elites were not playing by their own rules. The double standard that saw top-down innovations legitimized at the expense of underclass ones became conspicuous in the very attempt to accrue the sensory evidence necessary to enact it. By way of conclusion, this section explores the inadvertent access the colonial report genre provides to the marginalized voices of colonialism’s discontents. Attending to a form of counter-innovation not examined at length in later chapters—Native American resistance—I show that the interpretive strategies Atlantic political science borrowed from Machiavelli, Calvin, and Bacon both abetted and disrupted the exercise of colonial sovereignty. Recuperating colonized perspectives via colonizer narratives is of course a sensitive task, but it is one that candid political-scientific reportage facilitates and one to which literary scholars attuned to questions of form and representation are particularly well suited.

Captain John Smith’s account of the attempted coronation of the Algonquian paramount chief Powhatan dramatizes with special clarity the colonial dialectics of
imitation and innovation, novelty and empiricism, and innovation and counter-innovation. Smith’s rival Captain Christopher Newport and the Virginia Company’s London council believed that crowning Powhatan as the region’s king would paradoxically subordinate him and his people to James I. Smith disagreed. As he recounts the event in his *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624) his attempt to make his superiors look foolish by comparison with himself dovetails with his investment in first-hand reportage to provide inadvertent access to a formidable anticolonial perspective.

A self-professed reader of Machiavelli, Smith was controversial figure. His upward social mobility, innovative policies, and empirical epistemology all positioned him at odds with his culture’s rigorous traditionalism. These attributes were also closely related: Smith promoted first-hand experience as a new source of political, as well as epistemological, authority—as the means by which nobility by merit rather than birth might be recognized and by which actions might be evaluated for their utility rather than their conformity with conventional wisdom. The New World proved an ideal stage on which to enact this fundamentally political-scientific procedure, but even there he seemed threatening. In fact, he was imprisoned on the voyage to Virginia for fear that he sought “to usurpe the government, murther the Councell, and make himself King,” though he was soon exonnerated, admitted to the council and eventually became the colony’s president. In a 1608 letter to the London council that he termed “my rude Answer” and included in the *Generall Historie*, Smith claimed that the injunction “to follow … [the] directions [the Company sent] by Captaine Newport” would lead to “the confusion of all.” He proposed that his own experience of matters on the ground was a better guide.70

In a sense, Smith’s account of the coronation tests the soundness of this recommendation. When, at Newport’s request, Smith invites Powhatan to Jamestown to receive his coronation gifts and to “conclude their [plan of] revenge against” a rival tribe, Smith reports that “this subtile Savage thus replied”:

If your King have [sic] sent me Presents, I also am a King, and this is my land: eight days I will stay to receive them. Your Father [i.e., Newport] is to come to me, not I to him, nor yet to your Fort, neither will I bite at such a bait: as for the Monacans I can revenge my owne injuries, and as ... for any salt water beyond the mountains [i.e., a northwest passage], the Relations you have had from my people are false.

Smith intends for the account to showcase Powhatan’s imperviousness to Newport’s schemes and thus to argue the need for a new, more hardnosed course of action. But instead it ends up making Powhatan seem equipped to take on all comers, Smith included. Powhatan styles himself the equal of James I, with or without a crown: the owner of his land, indifferent to foreign overtures and impatient with foreign fantasies, inflexible and discerning, sensible and self-sufficient.71

The attempted “Coronation” only confirms this inadvertent portrait. In Smith’s memorable words,

the presents were brought him [i.e., Powhatan], his Bason and Ewer, Bed and furniture set up, his scarlet Cloke and apparell with much adoe put on him, being persuwaded by [his advisor] Namontack they would not hurt him: but a foule trouble there was to make him kneele to receive his Crowne, he neither knowing the majesty nor meaning of a Crowne, nor bending of the knee, endured so many perswasions, examples, and instructions, as tyred them all; at last by leaning hard on his shoulders, he a little stooped, and three having the crown in their hands put it on his head, when by the warning of a Pistoll the Boats were prepared with such a volley of shot, that the King start up in a horrible feare, till he saw all was well.

Then remembering himself, to congratulate their kindnesse, he gave his old shooes and his mantell to Captaine Newport: but perceiving his [i.e., Newport’s] purpose was to discover the Monacans, he [i.e., Powhatan] labored to divert his resolution, refusing to lend him either men or guides more than Namontack.

The scene is farcical, almost absurd. But while Smith’s self-promotion saturates the narration, there is little reason to distrust his account of Powhatan’s puzzled, yet largely empowered response. Newport and the London council believe that this ostensibly universal political ceremony will be able transcend the relevant cultural distances in order to ratify the native ruler’s subservience to an English one; their position is consonant with the abstract, deductive approach I call political philosophy. Smith, by contrast, uses the resulting comedy of errors to demonstrate that abstract Old World political prescriptions fail where experiential New World knowledge succeeds; in addition to being an advertisement for himself, the passage is an advertisement for Atlantic political science.72

The exchange’s awkward physicality (“leaning hard on his shoulders, he a little stooped”) literalizes the utter incongruence between European political axioms and New World circumstances. Likewise, Powhatan’s ostensible ignorance casts doubt on the exportability of English ideals: here we have a “King” who paradoxically knows “neither … the majesty nor meaning of a Crowne.” The confusion about the kneeling foregrounds the ritual’s paradoxical logic (subordination-by-elevation)—itself an imperialist inversion of its paradoxical logic as applied to European monarchs (elevation-by-subordination). In short, Smith’s empiricism produces something more than a mockery of Newport by way of a mockery Powhatan. As in the speech quoted above, the detailed account of the coronation ends up emphasizing the native sovereignty that Smith, as much as Newport, wished to undercut. Aside from his brief hesitation about the “Cloke” and the “volley of

72 Smith, Generall Historie, in Writings, 358 (“Coronation”; “the presents”).
shot,” Powhatan seems in control of the entire ordeal. Indeed, it is possible that he understands perfectly well what is being asked of him and that his intransigence is of a piece with the two empowered gestures that conclude the scene: his temporizing about the Monacans and his comically insulting gift of “his old shooes and his mantell” to Newport. If Smith intends for the scene to evidence his own deeper, because experiential, knowledge of native affairs and to argue for an unprecedented course of action, that experientialism is precisely what ends up making the entire settlement project seem in danger of failure. Colonialism’s novelty shifts from liability to asset and back to liability again. Far from requiring confirmation by Euro-Christian political ceremony, Powhatan’s rule enjoys a status quo stature that undermines colonial elite efforts to brand native resistance as innovation and modern scholars’ tendency to read it as radicalism.

In a seminal essay, Myra Jehlen used a similar reading of this scene to launch a crucial argument against new historicist approaches to settlement writing. These approaches, she argued, took the ideological coherence of colonialist discourse for granted and thereby foreclosed the access to alternative perspectives, cultures, and historical outcomes offered by the formal idiosyncrasies of texts like Smith’s. Relying upon the unreliability of colonial narratives, new historicist readings arrived not at skepticism but at a form of certainty that disempowered imperialism’s discontents in the very act of critiquing their disempowerment. Rather than emphasize either the seamless poetics of power believed to organize colonial texts or those anomalous instances of “textual rupture” wherein the colonizer loses the control he usually wields, Jehlen proposed that we focus on the colonial habit of telling multiple conflicting stories at once: “These chronicles’ lapses and incoherencies, their redundancies and paradoxes, represent
the limits of discourse, the moments in which discourse does not know what to say. These are moments when alternatives coexist, when their futures are underdetermined and therefore genuinely undetermined.” Through Smith’s example, Jehlen elaborated the concept of “history before the fact,” which holds the formal incoherencies of settlement writing to be expressive of the uncertain early status of Euro-American hegemony.73

Jehlen’s argument’s influence and portability to other archives have made it easy to overlook the provenance of her key terms. For her claims are grounded not only in the profound contingency of the early settlement moment but also in the roughly coincident beginnings of New World colonialism and the Scientific Revolution. Thus she turns to the sociologist of science Bruno Latour, reimagining his respective terms for the highly contingent process of creating natural scientific knowledge—“science in the making”—and the resulting scientific explanation, which only appears coherent in retrospect and bears no traces of its fraught construction—“ready-made science”—as “history before the fact” and “history as the past,” respectively. This dissertation’s account of political science as a kind of “political knowledge in the making” builds on Jehlen’s argument by specifying empiricism’s role in the transition from “history before the fact” to “history as the past”—from innovation to new precedent, from innovation prohibition to salutary modern change. While her critique of new historicism may seem less urgent today, the desire to access colonized perspectives and to recast Euro-Christian hegemony in the Americas as unforeordained remains. Expanding her insights to a wider cadre of writers,

I show that political-scientific texts invested in first-hand eyewitnessing offer privileged access to “history before the fact.” Like Smith, colonial reporters throughout the New World “tell[] us something … [they] should not have [told us] out of uncertainty over how to organize … [their] historical narrative[s].” What they tell us is a damning confession of their own innovations.74

Chapter Two

Sovereignty and Mutiny in William Strachey’s Bermuda and Virginia

On July 28, 1609, the English flagship *Sea Venture* wrecked in Bermuda en route to Virginia, setting off a series of political emergencies. As the centerpiece of the Virginia Company of London’s most ambitious recent attempt to reinforce its major American holding, the ship had departed Plymouth, England, on June 2 at the head of an “unprecedentedly large” fleet carrying personnel and provisions desperately needed by the struggling Jamestown settlement, established just two years earlier. Pioneering a more direct route to North America, the *Sea Venture* bore another significant cargo: Virginia’s recently appointed first governor Sir Thomas Gates and the document that guaranteed his authority, the colony’s substantially revised Second Charter, granted by James I on May 23 of that year. As related by fellow passenger William Strachey, whose subsequent role as colony secretary would prompt him to narrate these events in “A True Reportory of the Wracke, and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight,” a severe storm separated the *Sea Venture* from the rest of the fleet, and the unseasoned ship began to leak. But after three days and four nights of continuous pumping by low- and high-born passengers alike, the fleet’s admiral Sir George Somers sighted land. To avoid foundering, he drove the ship onto the rocky coast of Bermuda where all 150 people onboard safely disembarked.1

Yet for the settlers there followed a “greater,” metaphorical “shipwracke,” a

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“tempest of Dissention” wherein “every man over-valuing his own worth, would be a Commander” and “every man underprizing anothers value, denied [i.e., refused] to be commanded.” The wreck of the Sea Venture caused an immediate crisis of authority in both Bermuda and Virginia. Seizing upon this unexpected disruption, many of the castaways mutinied, asserting their preference for life on the uninhabited archipelago over the toil and conflict they knew to await them on the mainland, while Gates pushed his newfound authority to its limits in an attempt to assert order in a space beyond his jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the Virginia colonists fared even worse, dying of starvation and disease, rebelling, deserting, and weathering attacks by members of the Powhatan Confederacy while those who had arrived in the fleet’s other ships contested the authority of President John Smith despite lacking the documents needed to prove his supersession.2

Upon arriving in Bermuda, Gates dispatched a sailor bearing letters to Virginia in a longboat, seeking not only to procure rescue for the castaways but also to address the power vacuum that was likely to emerge in Jamestown in his absence. In a passage that epitomizes a central dynamic of his text, Strachey reports,

by a long practised experience, foreseeing and fearing what innovation and tumult might happily [i.e., possibly] arise, amongst the younger and ambitious spirits of the new companies to arrive in Virginia … hee [i.e., Gates] framed his letters to the Colony, and by a particular commission confirmed Captain Peter Win [as] his lieutenant governor, with an Assistance of sixe Counsellours.

The passage makes exemplary use of the pejorative idiom of innovation. Linking the term with contingency (“happily”), pairing it with another early modern synonym for revolt (“tumult”), and ascribing it to specific identity categories (the “younger and ambitious” new settlers), Strachey depicts the colony as imperiled by political change. Crucially, he

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2 Strachey, TR, in Smith, Writings, 1034 (“greater”; “shipwracke”; “tempest of”; “every man over-valuing”; “every man underprizing”). These quotations, which refer to Virginia but also apply to Bermuda, appear in the True Declaration of the Estate excerpt interpolated into the “True Reportory” (1034-1037).
also attributes Gates’s ability to predict and thwart this “innovation” to his “long
practised experience.” While Gates’s fear of innovation might seem to indicate his
allegiance to the traditional principles of rationalist political philosophy, the centrality of
“experience” to his praxis signals instead his commitment to political empiricism. The
emphasis on experience found throughout Strachey’s works makes it clear that he, too,
endorsed this approach. Indeed, this chapter argues that the “True Reportory” is an
exemplary work of Atlantic political science. Rooted in first-hand observation, detailed
description, and inductive interpretation, this discourse served to authorize political
improvisation in the face of observably unprecedented or exceptional circumstances,
which, colonial elites insisted, were to be found in abundance in the New World.3

The most significant aspect of the passage quoted above, then, is the fact that
Gates paradoxically responds to the threat of innovation with an innovation of his own.
His fears about new settlers altering the colony’s government lead him to alter the
colony’s government by naming a “lieutenant governor” and constituting a group of
“Counsellours.” The convoluted temporality of this exchange is apparent from the asides
that punctuate Strachey’s narration: Gates’s epistolary exercise of authority is meant to
guard against any settler who might “attempt the innovating of the person (now named by
him) or form of government, which in some Articles hee did likewise prescribe unto
them.” That the constitution Gates alters here was itself new—so new, in fact, that it had
not yet arrived in Virginia in the form of the Second Charter and his own person—does
not seem to trouble his condemnation of his subordinates as innovators. On the contrary,
Strachey’s “True Reportory” contends, the legitimacy of Gates’s innovations arises

3 Strachey, TR, in Smith, Writings, 998 (“by a”).
precisely from the threat of novelty and contingency represented by both fractious colonists and the storm that wrecked the Sea Venture in Bermuda.  

Gates’s actions bear out one of the previous chapter’s major claims: while innovation was prohibited in the early modern period, it actually happened all the time, especially in the colonies, and issues of status directly impacted its legitimacy. Elites freighted their subordinates with a proverbially insatiable desire for innovation even as they enacted the very forms of political change against which those subordinates were often rebelling: from enclosure and enslavement in the Old World to repressive new forms of political, ecclesiastical, and economic discipline in the New. Writers may have used the word innovation to describe underclass rebellion, but the reality was far more complex: non-elites routinely rejected political change in favor of restoring prior arrangements; and the legitimate ability to innovate was becoming a key aspect of sovereignty in the period. Initiating the dissertation’s regional case studies of early colonial rebellion, this chapter argues that Strachey’s “True Reportory” offers an especially clear view of the New World dialectic of innovation and counter-innovation, wherein colonialism’s top-down innovations prompt underclass counter-innovation (or rebellion) and empirical engagement with that counter-innovation authorizes further elite innovation (or sovereignty). In this case, the new disciplinary regime entailed in the Second Charter prompted the mutinies made possible by the wreck of the Sea Venture, and by experientially confirming long-standing assumptions about underclass intractability and emergent ideas about how New World contingency might aggravate it, these mutinies authorized the additional innovations that allowed Governor Gates and his

4 Strachey, TR, in Smith, Writings, 998 (“lieutenant governor”; “Counsellours”; “attempt the”).
successors to achieve an enduring colonial hegemony.

The “True Reportory” both documents and participates in this process. The text has most often been considered simply as source material for William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, but its greatest significance lies in its sophisticated reimagining of key political concepts in light of the contingencies of settlement. Reconceived as an attempt to distinguish competing forms of political change, this formerly marginal text proves central to the histories of both Anglo-American literature and political thought. Strachey attempts, at once, to legitimize Gates’s novel sovereignty and to assimilate it to traditional forms of hierarchy and governance. To this end, his text combines eyewitness reportage with literary conventions, most notably the “murmuring” trope, a common early modern figure for unintelligible verbal dissent. Deriving from “biblical and … Ciceronian” traditions and finding renewed purchase amidst the competing forms of “oratory” unleashed by the “novel circumstances of colonial life,” the murmuring trope allowed elites to acknowledge the fact of dissent without actually engaging with its content by representing underclass speech as excessively embodied and thus irrational. Yet the need to accurately inform his superiors—what I will call the “empirical imperative”—eventually leads Strachey to render the mutineers’ murmuring audible, articulate, and even compelling. His commitment to the observational practices demanded by New World novelty thus grants us access to the marginalized voices of colonialism’s discontents, which have heretofore tended to seem inaccessible or to be read through the anachronistic lens of radicalism, an unabashedly pro-change ethos that only arises in the late eighteenth century. In the process, the “True Reportory” reveals the mutineers’ supposed innovations to be the effect rather than the cause of the Virginia
Company’s own incriminating departures from nature, custom, and precedent.  

Strachey deploys the murmuring trope to describe both the seditious speech that precedes the mutinies and the storm that wrecks the Sea Venture. In so doing he aligns these two threats to English colonialism as avatars of an unavoidable force of suprahuman change to which extreme measures are the only appropriate response: what Niccolò Machiavelli had called *fortuna* and Francis Bacon would simply term “Time.”

Suffused with this force, Bermuda proves an unpredictable and contingent arena combining aspects of the “state of nature”—a space physically or temporally outside the political-legal order—and the “state of exception,” an emergency circumstance that imports such an extra-constitutional space into the political-legal order itself. In this sense, the “True Reportory” positions the shipwreck and mutinies as retroactive justifications for the controversial new arrangement made possible by the Second Charter: the governor’s absolute powers. Gates’s ability to enact emergency legislation, declare martial law, and oversee more rigorous forms of indentured servitude bespeaks a form of sovereignty consonant with what modern theorists of the “state of exception” call

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“decisionism,” the ruler’s capacity to suspend the constitution in a moment of unforeseen crisis in order to preserve the polity. As I argued in Chapter One, this understanding of sovereignty is tantamount to the legitimate right to innovate, and it emerges not from the abstract theorizations of metropolitan political philosophy but instead from the precarious project of settlement that Strachey so carefully documents.

And yet the very commitment to observation required to activate these special powers threatens to short-circuit them. Strachey’s attention to the mutineers’ claims—especially those of the minister’s clerk Stephen Hopkins—forecloses this potential loophole in the innovation prohibition. To Gates’s chaotic state of nature/exception, which demands an absolute sovereign capable of restoring order through innovation, Hopkins opposes a more hospitable state of nature characterized by originary (i.e., non-innovative) liberty and equality. Thus, by expanding its focus beyond rational public speech—long regarded as the essence of political participation—to address the epistemologically frustrating phenomenon of murmuring, Strachey’s report inadvertently discloses the top-down innovations that prompted such resistance in the first place and recasts the mutineers’ actions as a counter-innovative response to changes forced upon them. Ultimately, the “True Reportory” reveals that major concepts associated with the Eurocentric canon of political thought—sovereignty and rebellion, the state of nature and the state of exception—were powerfully shaped by the more particular conflicts of the colonial Americas, where theory was routinely confronted by disruptive reality.

I. Satellite Absolutism: Sovereignty-as-Innovation in the Colonial State of Exception

Strachey’s text’s convoluted publication history has made it especially ripe for
consideration as a mere source. The “True Reportory” circulated in manuscript as early as 1610 but only appeared in print in 1625, when Samuel Purchas included it in his massive compendium of travel and settlement narratives, *Hakluytus Posthumus; or, Purchas his Pilgrimes*. This indeterminate circulatory trajectory has led scholars to speculate that the text served as raw material not only for Shakespeare’s play but also, perhaps, for the rationalist political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. That the “True Reportory” has not registered as a significant work in its own right bears out the unfortunate pattern described in this dissertation’s introduction, wherein historians of political thought have not searched for what they have not expected to find and thus have neglected the tradition of political empiricism that Strachey exemplifies. That we encounter the text “embedded in voyage and chorological literature” affirms Barbara Shapiro’s account of the generic, disciplinary, and geopolitical impediments to the study of early modern political science.6

That the colonial reports Hobbes encountered as a Virginia Company shareholder might have influenced his political thought despite his strenuous aversion to empirical particulars would also seem to bear out Ralph Bauer’s account of the system of “epistemic mercantilism” organizing Europe’s Atlantic empires. Drawing on the writings of Francis Bacon, Bauer argues that imperial knowledge production was characterized by “a division of intellectual labor between imperial peripheries and centers,” wherein colonials were to serve as the mere collectors or “miners” of raw data while the abstraction of that data into useable knowledge was to be the exclusive province of metropolitan “refiners” or “smiths.” Yet as Bauer himself shows, this theory proved...
difficult to uphold in practice. Rather than approach Strachey as “miner” and Purchas, Shakespeare, or Hobbes as “refiner,” I would emphasize that emergency conditions often led to the localization of this intellectual labor entirely within the colonies. Elite settlers frequently rejected the directives of distant metropolitan officials in favor of their own conclusions, since the lag in transatlantic communications and the rate at which New World circumstances changed tended to disqualify those directives before they could even arrive. The Second Charter represents a clear attempt to institutionalize local political empiricism in response to this process of epistemological trial and error.

Regarding the “True Reportory” as a mere source therefore risks obscuring the complex geopolitics of circum-Atlantic political knowledge production.7

The Sea Venture castaways remained stranded in Bermuda for over nine months. While there Gates and his fellow elites struggled to quell a series of mutinies involving work stoppage, supply theft, desertion, and violence. The mutineers based their actions on an understanding of the archipelago as a semi-tropical paradise, abundant with food and lacking a hostile native population, and a salutary state of nature, a space of pre-political liberty. Gates insisted upon the servants’ obligations to the Virginia Company, while the mutineers’ most eloquent spokesperson Stephen Hopkins argued that those obligations had been nullified by the shipwreck. After the castaways finally managed to build two small ships and sail to Virginia—departing on May 10, 1610, and arriving on May 23—Gates spent little more than two weeks in the failing settlement before deciding

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to abandon the colony entirely on June 7. But in a twist of fate that providentialist
Company promoters relished rehearsing, his successor, Sir Thomas West, 3rd Baron De
La Warr, finally arrived in Virginia with additional provisions and personnel on June 9,
just in time to compel the departing settlers to return to Jamestown and persevere.
Significant problems continued to threaten the colony—especially resistance from those
it displaced and those whose labor made its existence possible—but the subsequent
alterations to its management enabled by the Second Charter and implemented by Gates,
De La Warr, and deputy governor and marshal Sir Thomas Dale are held to have ensured
Jamestown’s survival as “the first permanent English settlement” in the Americas, at
once an unprecedented achievement and a model for future colonial endeavors.⁸

Anglo-American colonialism had involved novel arrangements from the start, but
historians widely agree that 1609 marks a turning point. In the representative but
pointedly anachronistic words of historian Karen Ordahl Kupperman, it was at this
moment that the Virginia Company “really began to innovate.” According to this view,
Jamestown survived because its leaders hit upon the successful formula. That that
formula involved brutal new forms of dispossession, coercion, and exploitation
sometimes seems to get lost in a narrative of triumph over adversity. Kathleen Donegan
has recently critiqued this historiographic mode for representing Jamestown’s
development as a series of “false starts” followed by a moment when the colony is
“salvaged by some crucial shift.” From this perspective, she explains, “Virginia’s [early]
miseries are made to become a sideline to its subsequent histories” via “a narration of

⁸ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 1 (“the first”). The introduction of tobacco monoculture and the rise of
plantation slavery were, of course, crucial to Virginia’s stabilization and subsequent role as “the successful
archetype” of Anglo-American colonialism (Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 11), but these innovations are
beyond the scope of this chapter, as are issues of Native American dispossession and resistance.
recovery,” which prevents us from recognizing that “crisis was a means of producing coloniality.” I would add that the prevailing “narration of recovery” is expressive of the pro-innovation bias on display in Kupperman’s remarks, in James Horn’s depiction of the 1609 voyage as a “new beginning” for the colony, and in numerous similar statements. My reading of the “True Reportory” thus seeks not only to register the uncertainty, abjection, and crisis that Donegan has restored to our account of the settlement period after decades of historiographic triumphalism but also to correlate those conditions with concurrent debates about sovereignty, epistemology, and political change.9

Where some scholars have emphasized Jamestown’s survival over the innovative means by which it was achieved, others have cast a more critical eye on the settlement’s history. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, for instance, rightly read the events surrounding the wreck of the Sea Venture as emblematic of the new forms of exploitation and resistance inaugurated by capitalism and imperialism. Yet they too overlook the liabilities of novelty in 1609 and thereby mistake the Bermuda mutinies for radicalism. Seeking to excavate a coherent radical tradition extending from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and beyond, they inadvertently retroject the future-oriented, pro-change values of a later historical moment into the early modern period. The mutinies

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undoubtedly represent an attempt to develop “alternative ways of living,” as Linebaugh and Rediker put it, but their approach takes for granted that these alternatives were new, progressive political arrangements rather than restorative, traditional ones. In so doing, they reify the colonial regime as a status quo when, in fact, it was hardly established at this moment. By contrast, I resituate the Second Charter in an early modern cultural climate of hostility towards novelty in order to recuperate an underclass critique of colonialism’s innovations made “audible” by Strachey’s candid reportage.\(^\text{10}\)

The “True Reportory” is illustrative not only of the early modern innovation prohibition but also of innovation’s tacit centrality to absolutist definitions of sovereignty. Indeed, this emergent understanding of innovation as an essential feature of successful rule renders the term synonymous with the idea of sovereign decisionism operant in a state of exception theorized by Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and others. Precisely because the state of exception “cannot be anticipated” by the constitutional order—precisely because it is “new and alien”—Schmitt regarded it as surmountable only by an extra-constitutional power. He therefore defined sovereignty as the capacity to decide that such a situation exists and to decide on the appropriate response to it, even if that response exceeds the normative political-legal order. In this sense, we might adapt Schmitt’s classic formulation—the “essence of … sovereignty” lies in a “monopoly [on the right] to decide” the “state of exception”—as follows: the essence of sovereignty lies in a monopoly on the right to innovate. Within his poorly defined New World

jurisdiction, the Second Charter granted such a monopoly to Sir Thomas Gates.\textsuperscript{11}

More recently, Agamben has nuanced the state of exception concept by arguing that the sovereign “decision is not the expression of the will of a subject hierarchically superior to all others, but rather represents the inscription within the body of the *nomos* [i.e., the formal legal order] of the exteriority that animates it and gives it meaning.” That is, sovereignty imports into the polity precisely what the law is thought to exclude: the chaotic violence of the state of nature or state of exception, concepts Agamben explicitly equates. According to this account, the sovereign’s power over “bare life”—defined as “human life … politicized … through an abandonment to an unconditional power of death”—both responds to and perpetuates a “zone of indistinction between outside and inside, chaos and … normal situation.” As we have seen, the New World was a space in which the boundary between nature and polity, “chaos and normal situation,” was especially indistinct, a space in which contingency routinely frustrated colonial elite ambitions, prompting authoritarian extemporizations. In its depiction of the colony’s unsettled early conditions and the draconian discipline implemented to overcome them, Strachey’s “True Reportory” thus makes visible the dialectical process through which this innovative form of rule improvised its way into being.\textsuperscript{12}

The constitutional changes enabled by the Second Charter were intended to address the New World’s troubling political-legal exceptionalism by establishing what


we might call a “satellite absolutism,” a locally sovereign but imperially subordinate
government. Virginia’s original 1606 letters patent and several related documents had
constituted a resident colonial government subservient to a royally appointed London
council and composed of a president and local council. These texts’ bewildering
rhetorical hedging about colonial departures from English law and about the authority of
the president—who was at once superior to and capable of being deposed by his
council—reflect the crown and Company’s early anxieties about installing a sovereign
figure in far-flung colonial space. The council-and-president arrangement encouraged
elite infighting, creating opportunities for resistance from below and undermining the
colony’s profitability, stability, and stature vis-à-vis imperial rivals. As a 1610 Virginia
Company pamphlet entitled A True and Sincere Declaration put it, the settlement was
threatened by “the misgovernment of the Commaders [sic], by dissention and ambition
among themselves, and … [by] the Idlenesse and bestiall slouth, of the common sort,
who were active in nothing but adhearing to factions and parts, even to their owne ruine.”
The Company therefore resolved to replace this regime with the strong command of a
“sole and absolute Governor,” appointed for life, unbeholden to his council, and
endowed with extensive powers, including the right to enact new laws. The governorship
hierarchized the colony’s elites and altered its relationship to the Company’s recently
modified corporate structure in England. It also impacted indenture contracts, which
servants still arranged with the Company rather than with private planters. But despite
securing Jamestown’s survival, this arrangement would collapse when James I revoked
the charter, dissolved the Company, and made Virginia the first royal colony in 1624, one
year before Strachey’s narrative belatedly appeared in print. As these eventualities
suggest, the charter’s various innovations were far from uncontroversial—hence Strachey’s anxious insistence that colonialism “is no newe enterprize.”

The governor’s absolute sovereignty amounted to the legitimate capacity to innovate. Consider the “Instruccions Orders and Constitucions” issued to Gates at his departure from England. Evoking his extensive military experience, the document directs him “in all such cases of … necessity, [to] proceede by martial law” and to govern “rather uppon the naturall right and equity than uppon the nicenes and lettre of the lawe.” Here, “nature” opposes the “lawe,” describing a bedrock context for sovereignty whose euphemization as “right and equity” barely conceals its synonymy with force. The “Instruccions” concludes that “a summary and arbitrary way of justice discreetely mingled with those gravities and fourmes of magistracy … wilbe [sic] of most use both for expedicion and for example.” That is, the Company advises that the semblance of constitutional order will serve to mask the more naked expressions of power needed to stabilize a settlement in crisis. And crucially, subordinating the “lettre of the lawe” to this adaptive absolutism is less a temporary expedient designed for rare emergencies than an

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example” of effective rule in the New World’s “permanent state of exception.”

This solution caused further problems, however. As legal historian David H.
Flaherty notes, the Virginia Company’s “recommendations [to Gates] were widely at
variance with the accepted common law system.” That system was designed, as we saw
in Chapter One, to enable a form of safe, gradual legal change whose authorization
derived not from the arbitrary whims of a single ruler but from the accumulated collective
wisdom embodied in custom and precedent. Gates’s powers therefore subverted one of
English political culture’s most cherished mechanisms of controlled innovation.

Moreover, one of the Second Charter’s few possible precedents was arguably worse than
no precedent at all: in Philip Barbour’s words, the new governor was “virtually a viceroy
after the Spanish pattern.” As J. H. Elliott notes, Spain was able to suppress all threats of
colonial rebellion prior to the nineteenth century through a combination of centralized
imperial bureaucracy and local iron-fist rule rooted in first-hand experience and
Machiavellian flexibility. Yet the “Black Legend” of Spanish colonial cruelty rendered
outright emulation untenable for the English. The “True Reportory” performs this
ambivalence in its reverent citations of Ibero-American reporters like José de Acosta and
Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés and in its simultaneous depiction of Catholic
superstition as an impediment to Spanish colonial hegemony.

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That the Virginia Company was thinking in terms commensurate with Schmitt and Agamben—and in dialogue with Spain—is clear from the Protestant political theology of colonialism it elaborates. For example, the *True and Sincere Declaration*’s remarks about how political wisdom or “Councell” might be fortified by closer attention to “accidents and contingencies” like the shipwreck demonstrate how the conjunction of novelty, empiricism, and providentialism could beget sovereignty. The author piously observes, “It is reserved and onely proper to Divine wisedome to fore-see and ordaine, both the Endes and Wayes of every action,” whereas “humaine prudence … can have no absolute assurance, and infalliblenesse in the Waies and Meanes, which are contingent, and various, … subject to unpresent circumstances, and doubtfull events.” Yet the very awareness of humanity’s inability to predict contingency becomes empowering by highlighting the value of pious improvisation. Indeed, the text suggests that the wreck of the *Sea Venture* might be a divine attempt to “trye [i.e., test] our constancie and perseverance” and so calls for redoubled efforts to overcome the New World’s many challenges by trusting—and thereby partaking—in God’s sovereign foresight.16

Still, there was always a risk that this faith might shade into a heretical presumption of the divine power to know and innovate. In the preface to another pamphlet about the wreck of the *Sea Venture*, the preacher and Virginia Company affiliate William Crashaw inveighed against “the misprision and misconceits of the world,” which had led Europeans to believe Bermuda uninhabitable. Citing “true and large experience,” which “hath now told us, it [i.e. Bermuda] is one of the sweetest Paradises … upon the earth,” he exclaims, “Let them hearken to this … that mislike all

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16 *A True and Sincere Declaration*, 5 (“Councell”), 15 (“accidents and”; “trye our”), 1 (“It is”; “humaine prudence”). See also the Company’s more pronounced providentialism in *A True Declaration of the Estate*. 
new inventions, and suspect all new discoveries, and hold it for a rule, That whatsoever is
new is nought.” While this statement might suggest that the innovation prohibition was
receding before the triumphant march of colonialism, I would argue instead that the very
need to articulate it reveals how transgressive New World “discovery” and settlement still
seemed. Crashaw insists that the settlement of Bermuda is God’s will, but his
providentialism often veers toward aggrandizing the human agency that realizes it.17

Compiled by Strachey in For the Colony in Virginia Britannia: Lawes Divine, Morall, and Martiall (1612), Virginia’s new political-legal regime reassured some
metropolitan onlookers that the settlement was under firm control and drew criticism
from others for codifying its unprecedented severity. In the end, satellite absolutism
would accomplish the stabilization of the colony so often celebrated by historians—but
not without transgressing the innovation prohibition. Overcoming this contradiction is the
burden of the “True Reportory.” Strachey’s parallel accounts of the storm and shipwreck,
on the one hand, and the mutinies they made possible, on the other, are intended to justify
the sovereign decisionism inscribed in the Second Charter as the only viable response to
exceptional New World circumstances. Yet the experiential knowledge necessary to
substantiate this claim undermines it, revealing political innovation to be not so much
sovereignty’s greatest threat as its hidden essence.

II. “A vigilant observer of civill cautions”: William Strachey’s Political Empiricism

On December 14, 1610, recently appointed secretary of the Virginia Company
Richard Martin wrote to recently appointed secretary of the Virginia colony William

Strachey to solicit an account of the Jamestown settlement. Reaching Virginia on April 20, 1611, almost a year after Strachey’s arrival from Bermuda, the letter concluded with an “earnest request” for information about

the nature & qualitie of the soyle, … the manners of the people, how the Barbarians are content with your being there, but especially how our owne people doe brooke [i.e., bear] their obedience[,] how they endure labor, whether willingly or upon constraint, [and] how they live in the exercise of Religion, whether out of conscience or for fashion.

The letter positions Strachey as an observer of natural, political, economic, ethnographic, and ecclesiastical phenomena at once. Uniting the various forms of control entailed in the Anglo-American colonial project, Martin’s inquiries culminate in the more “general[]” question of “what ease you have in the government there”—a question whose capacious conception of “government” indexes the seventeenth-century belief that colonization demanded expertise in what are understood today as discrete domains of knowledge. In this pre-disciplinary spirit, moreover, the letter suggests that the practices of first-hand eyewitnessing and candid reportage that were then becoming the hallmarks of natural science are essential to the task of stabilizing a new polity. Thus Martin punctuates his inquiries with an injunction “to deale Clearely with me, … that thereby I may be truly able to satisfie others, & to direct my counsells & endevors for [the] prevention of evill, if there be any.” Far from soliciting the kind of glowing promotional tract that often emanated from new colonies in desperate need of patronage and investment then, the letter proposes an epistemological and rhetorical program for transatlantic political correspondence rooted in rigorous empiricism. Martin assumes that the New World’s novel political situations, like its unfamiliar natural formations, will require observation and induction if they are to be controlled. And while it is not explicitly framed as a
response to Martin, Strachey’s “True Reportory” shares these assumptions. The text’s formal and ideological contours bear the marks of the “empirical imperative” represented by the settler’s need to “deale Clearely” with metropolitan and colonial superiors.18

Martin’s letter recalls Francis Bacon’s endorsement of political empiricism, traced in the previous chapter. Colonial reports like Strachey’s “True Reportory” seem to be exactly what Bacon had in mind when he called for “greater diligence” in the production of “Narrations and Relations of particular [political] actions” in The Advancement of Learning (1605). Indeed, Strachey described a related text, his Historie of Travaile in Virginia Britannia, in similar terms—as “a true narration or historie of the countrie”—when he dedicated one of three surviving manuscript copies to “the Right Honourable Sir Francis Bacon,” a “most noble fautor [i.e., favorer] of the Virginian Plantation.” At the same time, Strachey’s colonial political science also departed from the hierarchical Baconian model that Ralph Bauer calls “epistemic mercantilism.” As we have seen, the impracticality of consulting distant authorities lacking first-hand knowledge of facts on the ground often encouraged colonial elites to act as both “miners” and “refiners”: the new latitude granted by the Second Charter empowered figures like Strachey and Gates not only to collect political data but also to interpret and, most importantly, to act on it.19

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The colonial consolidation of these two roles manifests in Strachey’s writing style. He combines the plain prose of natural science, which authorized new kinds of rule, with an almost reflexive advertence to literary conventions linked with traditional forms of hierarchy. Equally invested in first-person testimony and in metaphor, scriptural figuration, and classical quotation, Strachey’s writing is a far cry from the “naked, natural way of speaking” later promoted by the Royal Society. Empiricism is always an ideology and a rhetorical posture for Strachey, even if the candor it engenders proves as capable of undermining his interpretations as supporting them. His account of Bermuda’s “Palme Trees” is a case in point. In the interdisciplinary spirit of Martin’s letter, Strachey takes an empirical approach to natural and political phenomena alike, but he pairs this strategy with the enduring hermeneutic of emblematic reading, which transforms the trees into bodies politic. As several scholars have noted, colonial experience tended to disrupt established patterns of emblematic reading. Where the abstractness of natural-political emblems like the body politic and its variants had tended to shield the hierarchical ideologies encoded within them from critique in Old World contexts, Strachey’s New World empiricism leads him to literalize and thus to problematize them.20

Thus the palm trees passage vacillates between the purely descriptive mode demanded by unfamiliar New World flora and a more abstract, even political-philosophical account of the trees as models for human society. Strachey conventionally regards the palm trees as emblematic of the polity, but his more mundane emphasis on

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their role as a food source and building material for the castaways and as a potential transatlantic commodity undercuts their ability to naturalize hierarchy. After enumerating the trees’ uses, he deploys a political metaphor to describe their extensive felling:

> With these leaves we thatched our Cabbins, and roasting the Palmito or soft top thereof, they had a taste like fried Melons … Many an ancient Burger was therefore heaved at, and fell not for his place, but for his head: for our common people, whose bellies never had eares, made it no breach of Charitie in their hot blouds and tall stomackes to murder thousands of them.

The passage moves from promotionalist natural-historical description to an allegory of impending elite-underclass conflict. Like the pejorative idiom of innovation, the palm tree emblem links the irrational bodily desires of the “common people” with violent rebellion against their betters. The image of “bellies” lacking “eares” excludes non-elites from the rational discussion that constitutes legitimate politics, while the idea that “murder” is the shortsighted result of “hot blouds and tall stomackes” ascribes to non-elites an insatiable appetite for change that endangers the trees’/“Burger[s’]” “ancient” status. Strachey summons a perverse inversion of the hierarchical body politic emblem in the destruction of the tree’s vertical structure. And the removal of “head” from trunk reenacts the leveling effects of the storm, which had forced the “better sort” onboard the Sea Venture to labor alongside their subordinates and even physically “groveled” Gates. Yet Strachey’s empiricism also causes the emblem to break down. For he metaphorizes rebellion as the excessive consumption of precisely the “marchantable” natural resources that make Bermuda worthy of becoming England’s newest colony. He attempts to have it both ways, attributing to the commoners an excessive “sensuality” that causes them to crave both culinary and political novelty even as he seeks to cultivate metropolitan appetites for unfamiliar New World commodities through detailed description. In short,
the conflict here between traditional literary strategies and the elite settler’s “empirical imperative” discloses the dialectic of innovation and counter-innovation. It is the colony’s leaders, not its restive workforce, whose desire for lucrative trade goods leads them to decapitate the trees that more often stood in for the king than the “Burger.”

The conflict between empiricism and literary convention produces an even more damning revelation of colonialism’s novelty in Strachey’s preface to his legal compilation, the *Lawes Divine, Morall, and Martillal*, the only New World text published under his name in his lifetime and a major point of comparison for the “True Reportory.” Perhaps with Martin’s letter in mind, Strachey begins by apologizing that the New World’s unique challenges—especially the storm and shipwreck—have obstructed his reportage. Although he stakes his authority on his status as “a sufferer and an eie witnesse,” he notes with regret that “many impediments, as yet detaine … my observations in the shadow of darknesse.” This metaphor of failed visual perception signals his endorsement of an empirical approach to political knowledge even as it concedes that colonial contingency could sometimes undermine empiricism. While he cannot yet “deliver” his “perfect” “observations” to his Virginia Company dedicatees, he explains that he will “in the meane time present a transcript of the Toparchia or State of those duties, by which the Colonie stands regulated.” He thus denigrates the text’s abstract legal prescriptions as a kind of consolation prize, less useful than the empirical reportage he promises is to come. By his own account the *Lawes* is a mere promotional text intended to allay anxieties, encourage investment, and “checke … [those] who malitiously and desperately heretofore have censured … [the colony], … as if we lived

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there lawnesse, without obedience to our Countrey, or observance of Religion to God.”

The preface contains several further declarations of Strachey’s commitment to political empiricism. He positions “experience” as his primary source of knowledge and identifies himself as “a vigilant observer of civill cautions,” an especially evocative early modern definition of the political-scientific reporter. But despite this clear epistemological affiliation, the “darknesse” obstructing his “observations” leads Strachey to privilege promotionalism and rationalism here, as he pivots to respond to accusations of Virginia’s laws’ novelty. While his antagonists have questioned the possible precedents for the colony’s severe new disciplinary regime, he insists that its constitutions and Lawes … [are] auncient and common, since … [their] grounds are the same constant, Asterismes [i.e., constellations], and starres, which must guide all that travell in these perplexed wayes, and paths of publique affairs; and whoever shall wander from them, shall but decline [i.e., deviate onto] a hazardous … by-course to bring their purposes to good effect.

According to the promotionally-minded and empirically-limited Strachey of the Lawes—what we might call “Strachey as rationalist political philosopher”—Virginia confirms the assumption that political problems and solutions are universal: the colony’s leaders must follow the same guidelines that organize polities in all times and places or risk disaster. Yet the mixed character of his metaphor—a variation on the classical “ship of state” topos—belies its comfortable restatement of metropolitan orthodoxy regarding the dangers of political innovation. The passage metaphorizes received wisdom as the constellations guiding a sea traveller, but given that the “wayes, and paths” of governance are already “perplexed,” it seems odd to warn so strictly against “wander[ing] from them.” If the established paths are themselves “hazardous,” why not try a “by-course,”

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22 Strachey, Lawes, 3 (“a sufferer”; “many impediments”), 4 (“deliver”; “perfect”; “observations”; “in the”; “checke … [those]”).
which, Strachey acknowledges, can also bring one’s “purposes to good effect”?23

The tendency for the “Asterismes” analogy to undermine itself evokes the
Baconian stance on innovation, traced in Chapter One. For Bacon, innovation is what
“Time” inevitably does; it is a fact of natural and political existence. Taking his cue from
Machiavelli’s notion of virtù—the human ability to overcome the contingencies of
fortuna through adaptation—Bacon argues that, at least in certain spheres, the only
tenable response to inevitable supra-human innovation lies in human innovation, in what
Strachey denigrates here as a “by-course.” Notably, Bacon deployed the invention of “the
Mariner’s Compass” and the image of a ship exploring the Atlantic to figure this salutary
novelty. In the “True Reportory” Strachey similarly used the shipwreck image—implicit
in the ship of state topos and literalized by his Sea Venture experience—to legitimize
such a “by-course.” He utilizes the murmuring trope to link the storm and the mutinies it
occasions as states of exception to which Gates’ sovereignty-as-innovation is the only
appropriate response. That is, he argues that the New World’s empirically verifiable
novelty, especially its expanded opportunities for rebellion, justifies the unprecedented
severity of the martial law and absolute governorship implemented there.24

And yet, by carefully documenting these challenges, the “True Reportory” also
emphasizes that top-down innovations like martial law partake of precisely the
“hazard[s]” Strachey warned about in the Lawes and, moreover, that those innovations
actually tend to precede the underclass counter-innovations used to justify them. The

23 Strachey, Lawes, 6 (“a vigilant”), 3 (“darknesse”; “observations”), 4 (“constitutions and”). I adapt these
24 Francis Bacon, “Of Innovations,” in The Essays or Counsels, Civill and Morall, ed. Michael Kieran
(1625; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 75-76, quotation on 75 (“Time”); Francis Bacon, The
Instauratio Magna Part II: Novum Organum, ed. and trans. Graham Rees with Maria Wakely (New York:
Oxford University Press, 2004), 195 (“the Mariner’s”).
narrative underlines this inconsistency insofar as the shipwreck and mutinies occur after the Virginia Company abandons the English common law by adopting the Second Charter, after the *Sea Venture* quite literally deviates from the usual “Asterismes” by pioneering a new route to North America, and more broadly, after the English leave the relative stability of the Old World for the uncertainties of the New in the first place. The “Asterismes” passage may refer to Plato’s discussion of the “ship of state” in the *Republic*, where the pilot-governor to whom maritime contingency commands obedience is also a philosopher. But as Hans Blumenberg has shown, long-distance seafaring more often connoted transgression and forbidden knowledge in antiquity and early modernity. In claiming that the colonial polity lies beneath the same constellations that guide all rulers then, Strachey actually makes the opposite point: that the New World is a space where the abstractions of political philosophy fail to apply with particular force and thus where innovation—of both the underclass and elite varieties—may be unavoidable.25

### III. “Such a Murmur”: Shipwreck and Rebellion

As a whole, the “True Reportory” provides the kind of eyewitness reportage that Francis Bacon had imagined and Richard Martin had requested. In keeping with his sense of how enabling the New World dialectic of novelty and empiricism could be, Strachey stakes his ability to thwart underclass political innovation on his first-hand observation.

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Yet the text begins with a moment when sense perception has reached its limits. Bearing out his apology in the *Lawes* about the “impediments” shrouding his “observations in … darknesse,” Strachey writes in the opening pages of the “True Reportory” that the storm “beate all light from heaven; which like an hell of darknesse turned black upon us,” leaving every passenger with “overmastered sences.” Eyewitnessing fails during the shipwreck not because the senses have too little to go on—as will prove to be the case with the mutineers’ murmuring—but because they have absorbed too much, and this excessive stimulation threatens to destabilize the conjunction of knowledge and power at the core of Atlantic political science. Thus Strachey continues, the “unmerciful tempest … Worketh upon the whole frame of the body and most loathsomely affecteth all the powers thereof … giv[ing] not the minde any free and quiet time, to use her judgement [sic] and Empire.” Instead of narrating the settler taking intellectual and physical possession of a passive American landscape, Strachey exhibits what Kathleen Donegan terms a “disordered epistemology that belies … colonial mastery.” The settler’s inability to apprehend New World nature—which instead restricts “the minde[s] … Empire” by interrupting its “quiet time”—signals the frustration of England’s empire. Or rather, Strachey will argue, the contingency represented by the storm will jeopardize the colonial project unless its leaders are granted the capacity to respond in kind. That is, he emphasizes the storm’s resistance to observation only to double down on the value of experience and the sovereign decisionism it entails; he stresses the storm’s ability to alter the settlers’ plans only to activate the governor’s capacity to do so himself.26

Strachey’s treatment of the Bermuda conspiracies mirrors his account of the storm

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as a force that is both epistemologically frustrating and innovative vis-à-vis the colonial project. He attends to the threat of mutiny primarily by examining the verbal dissent that prefigures it. But this observational approach conflicts with his recourse to the murmuring trope, a literary convention that presumes the fundamental inaccessibility of dissident voices and thus would seem to render empirical reportage superfluous. When Strachey depicts the Bermuda mutineers as producing “such a murmur, and such a discontent” among the castaways tasked with building replacement ships, and when Gates complains of “the murmuring and mutinie of such Rebellious and turbulent Humorists,” they use the term to condense a number of traditional assumptions about non-elites. Murmuring’s irrational, excessively embodied cast bespoke the unthinking appetite for political innovation that was said to motivate the underclasses. But given the immediate threat the mutineers’ innovations posed to the colony, Strachey could not simply dismiss their dissent with a trope. Murmuring concretized what Paul Rahe calls “differential moral and political rationality,” the perceived variations in political aptitude among persons of differing status, which thinkers since antiquity had linked to the “capacity for rational speech.” At the same time, as Carla Mazzio notes, murmuring “was commonly employed … as a sign of conspiracy, implying consciously muted though internally comprehensible sedition.” The need to “deale Clearely” with his colonial and metropolitan superiors thus forced Strachey to determine whether the mutineers’ murmuring was indicative of political incompetence or surreptitious proficiency.27

This was, by definition, a difficult task. Murmuring describes speech that is

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dangerous precisely because it is “semi-public,” that is, intended for audiences composed of everyone except those who deem it illicit. Addressing itself to an audience of potential strangers, murmuring aspires to publicity while simultaneously abiding by the secrecy necessary for the achievement of its aims—a paradox Strachey attempts to convey by noting that the mutineers’ grievances are “preached, and published” but only “to each other.” As with the storm, the challenge murmuring poses is thus fundamentally epistemological. If the source, content, and terminus of “murmuring” remained unknown colonial elites could not protect their innovative endeavor from the innovations that threatened it. As a kind of early warning sign for rebellion, murmuring was an occasion for empiricism and thus an opportunity to fortify sovereignty. But it also represented a potentially impenetrable object of study and therefore a threat to the colonial project. Faced with the prospect of empiricism’s failure, elites tended either to downplay underclass dissent or to renew their commitment to observation. Strachey attempts to do both. His use of the trope participates in an enduring tradition that seized upon the unintelligibility of underclass speech in order to depict it as irrational, apolitical, and therefore innocuous. But he also listened too closely, as it were, and his attempts to understand the settlers’ grievances undermine the connection he proposes between murmuring’s corporeal excesses and its discursive shortcomings. Obliged to translate the mutineers’ murmurings, he records a critique that depicts Gates’s satellite absolutism as dangerously innovative and underclass revolt as a welcome form of restoration.28

Etymologically, murmuring associated semi-public speech with the incoherent noise produced by composite natural formations lacking clear hierarchical organization,

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28 Strachey, TR, in Smith, Writings, 1001 (“preached, and”; “to each”).
like rivers and rainfall, which might be understood as inversions of the natural-political body politic emblem and its derivatives like the palm tree and ship of state. It is no coincidence then that Strachey deploys the murmuring trope both in his account of the mutineers’ conspiratorial speechmaking and to represent the storm that makes those conspiracies possible. The “True Reportory” describes the storm not only as stifling human speech (“our clamours dround in the windes”) but also speaking in its own way: Strachey depicts the “windes singing,” “roaring,” and emitting “terrible cries” and most significantly, “murmurs.” It is unlikely that this rhetorical choice was an entirely unconscious one, given that he had elevated the trope almost to the status of a technical legal term when he included it in one of the Lawes’s many proscriptive litanies: “No manner of Persons … shall … murmur, mutenie, resist, disobey, or neglect the commaundments … of the Lord Governour.” Building on this usage, Strachey’s account of the shipwreck grows increasingly political as it progresses. He characterizes the storm as “a restlesse tumult,” marked by “hurly” (loud commotion) and “violence”—all terms that appear frequently in early modern accounts of rebellion and illicit oratory. Each time the storm seems to let up, “the windes (as having gotten their mouthes now free, and at liberty) spake more loud, and grew more tumultuous and malignant.” In short, the storm not only creates the conditions for the mutinies but also resembles them. By reuniting murmuring’s political and natural meanings, Strachey reinforces his claim that the New World is an exceptional space requiring mechanisms for legitimate elite innovation.29

Figuring storm as mutiny (“a restlesse tumult”) and mutiny as storm (a “tempest of Dissent”) via the murmuring trope allows the “True Reportory” to equate both of

these challenges to English colonialism with *fortuna*, understood in Machiavellian terms as an unavoidable force of suprahuman contingency to be overcome only by *virtù*, the ability to enact change. Gates’s satellite absolutism might also be regarded, in Baconian terms, as a human innovation counterposed to “Time … the greatest Innovatour.” Yet the intensity and rapidity of New World change undermined Bacon’s emphasis on gradualism, and colonialism’s interdisciplinarity—glimpsed in Martin’s interconnected queries about soil, obedience, and worship—troubled Bacon’s attempts to segregate science, politics, and religion as discrete cultural arenas, where salutary innovations would not trigger more dangerous ones. Adumbrating the state of exception concept, Strachey promotes experientially-informed sovereignty-as-innovation as the key to overcoming foul weather and settler disobedience alike—a conjunction Bacon would also evoke when he metaphorized rebellions as “*Tempests in State*” in his pioneering political-scientific essay “Of Seditions and Troubles.” But putting Bacon’s advice into practice also brought certain liabilities to the fore. For Strachey’s first-hand reportage ultimately undermines his attempts to legitimize Gates’s absolute sovereignty when the murmuring trope gives way to Stephen Hopkins’s paraphrased speech, to which we will now turn.30

### IV. Rival States of Nature: Mutiny as Counter-Innovation

Gates contends with “Divers mutinies” in Bermuda, which Strachey, upholding the conventional understanding of rational public speech as a metonym for legitimate politics, metaphorizes as “divellish disquiets.” But one conspiracy in particular has rightly stood out to scholars, even as they have overlooked some of its most important

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implications. Stephen Hopkins outshines the leaders of previous conspiracies in intellectual acuity: while these other mutineers are simply described as “sectary in points of religion,” he is said to have “much knowledge in the Scriptures, and could reason well therein.” And compared with the text’s dismissive depiction of the others’ grievances as mere murmuring, its treatment of Hopkins is rich in observational detail, involving something closer to transcription. To be sure, Strachey’s narration completely mediates our limited access to Hopkins, making it necessary to take into account his authorial agenda and the literary conventions governing “re-created or invented speeches.” But the need to “deale Clearely” also leads Strachey to record a perspective manifestly at odds with his text’s aims, to “tell[] us something he should not have.” Amidst the uncertainties of settlement, he can’t afford not to record Hopkins’s remarks, tending as they do to “shake the foundation of our quiet safety.” Straining to hear him, the “True Reportory” makes audible a formidable critique of colonial elite sovereignty-as-innovation.31

Insofar as we are able to reconstruct the speech from Strachey’s brief, elliptical paraphrase, it might be said to redirect many of the rhetorical techniques the colonial project used to legitimize itself—Protestant providentialism, the state of nature/exception concept and its associated theories of sovereignty, and the contractual logic of indentured servitude—toward restorative or counter-innovative ends. Strachey reports that Hopkins alleged substantial arguments, both civill and divine (the Scripture falsly quoted) that it was no breach of honesty, conscience, nor Religion, to decline from the obedience of the Governour, or refuse to go any further, led by his authority (except it so pleased themselves) since the authority ceased when the

wrecke was committed, and with it, they were all then freed from the government of any man; and for a matter of Conscience, it was not unknowne to the meanest, how much we were therein bound each one to provide for himselfe, and his owne family.

The speech exploits the political ambiguities of Protestantism, which, as we saw in Chapter One, could counsel obedience or defiance as the “powers that be” (Romans 13:1) and the persecuted elect seemed, by turns, the rightful enactors of the divine will. Hopkins also takes advantage of Christianity’s broader tendency to caution against political and theological change even as it presented God’s sovereign providence as kind of divine innovation. Thus where Strachey and the Virginia Company understand the castaways’ providential “deliverance” from Bermuda to indicate divine support for Gates’s absolute power, Hopkins seems to have taken the shipwreck as a sign of God’s preference for non-authoritarian rule or even a pre-political egalitarianism.32

This revisionist political theology allows Hopkins to elaborate a geographically and temporally nuanced account of political obligation. Implicitly representing Bermuda as a state of nature—a concept that had existed since antiquity but would soon take on special significance in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke—Hopkins suggests that Anglo-American hegemony is not as secure as Gates and Strachey believe: English authority cannot be presumed to be in force where it has not been formally established. By dramatizing the incongruities between territorial boundary and legal jurisdiction, colonial experience demonstrates the profound conditionality of all political relations naturalized by body politic figures like the palm tree and ship of state. Hopkins’s speech looks to the murmuring, multitudinous storm as an alternative to these traditional natural-political emblems. In so doing, he recasts hierarchy as an artificial

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32 Strachey, TR, in Smith, Writings, 1002 (“alleaged substantiall”), 987 (“deliverance”).
arrangement, one that nature is bound to undermine. Where the Virginia Company’s instructions to Gates had contrasted the “lettre of the lawe” with the governor’s “naturall right” to declare martial law, Hopkins appeals to the idea of nature to characterize humanity’s originary condition as one of liberty (“freed from the government of any man”). This allows him to recast his own so-called innovations as a return to the ultimate status quo ante: a state of nature which exhibits none of the chaos that Gates presumes and which proves to be a state of exception only insofar as it cancels, rather than confirms, obligation and diffuses, rather than concentrates, sovereignty.

These dueling conceptions of the state of nature might be said to adumbrate two more familiar theorizations. The arguments espoused by Strachey, Gates, and the Virginia Company anticipate aspects of the Hobbesian state of nature, wherein universal equality leads to perennial strife that urges consent to a sovereign out of fear of further anomie. In Hobbes’s words, “during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.” Like Hobbes, Gates views nature as a chaotic space in need of strong command. Meanwhile, Hopkins’s arguments anticipate features of the Lockean state of nature, wherein natural equals can peacefully coexist and wherein consent is more freely granted or withheld. Although it entails “Inconveniences” that incentivize the establishment of “Civil Government,” Locke’s state of nature is clearly distinguished from the “State of War” that results when one person attempts to exercise “Absolute Power” over another. In short, Hopkins’s state of nature resembles Locke’s insofar as one wouldn’t mind inhabiting it.33

The terms “Hobbesian” and “Lockean” provide a useful vocabulary for describing the ideological conflict Strachey narrates, but I hasten to add that such shorthands have their limitations. As we will see in Chapter Four, Hobbes’s aversion to empiricism and the exclusion of theological matters from his political thought dictated that his theory of sovereignty was in fact less absolutist, less promotive of sovereignty-as-innovation, than those articulated by some of his colonial counterparts. Likewise, Lockean political philosophy would not only provide justification for the very forms of capitalist-imperialist exploitation that Hopkins was resisting, it would also pair the restorative logic we find in Hopkins’s speech with an endorsement of innovation foreign to the Bermuda mutineers. In the event of constitutional dissolution and a return to the state of nature, Locke claims that sovereignty “revert[s]” back to “the Community,” which “may dispose of it again anew into what hands they please, and so constitute a new Form of Government.” That is, he promotes a liberal-revolutionary understanding of salutary political change, which involves a return to originary circumstances only as a detour on the path to an unabashedly new arrangement. Thus, to draw these analogies is neither to insist upon Strachey’s direct influence on Hobbes or Locke—their well-documented relationship to American colonialism notwithstanding—nor is it to stake the significance of the “True Reportory” on its mere confirmation of more familiar theorizations avant la lettre. Instead, it is to suggest that these rival conceptions of the state of nature and their corollary theories of sovereignty emerged organically from the confrontations of

settlement and the kind of political-scientific reportage that Hobbes and Locke eschew.34

Both Strachey and Hopkins understand the storm to exhibit, in exaggerative form, the fundamental condition of colonial political life writ large: routine contingency, a permanent state of exception. But they instrumentalize this insight to opposite purposes. Where the shipwreck’s disclosure of the fragility of colonial elite hegemony evaporates obligation for Hopkins, it confirms the Virginia Company’s turn to the improvisatory, de facto modes of governance that I have variously called satellite absolutism, sovereign decisionism, Machiavellian virtù, and top-down innovation. Gates’s response to another mutiny is illustrative of this dynamic. Writing to Admiral Somers, who had encamped on a different island in the Bermudan archipelago, in a letter that Strachey includes in the “True Reportory,” Gates “intreated him [i.e., Somers] by any secret practice to apprehend” these new mutineers. Gates justifies this sovereign disregard for normative legal procedures (“by any secret practice”) by invoking the contractual logic of indentured servitude interrogated in Hopkins’s speech. The letter emphasizes the debt the servants owe their betters, namely the duty to complete

the businesse for which they were sent out of England: for which … at the expence and charge of the Adventurers [i.e., Company investors], they were to him [i.e., Gates] committed, and … the meanest in the whole Fleet stood the Company in no lesse than twentie pounds, for his owne personal Transportation, and things necessary to accompany him.

Gates suppresses the mutinies with the coercive force of spectacular public sentencings and executions, which Strachey deems commensurate with the servants’ debt. But these measures only tend to confirm Hopkins’s critique of the novelty and unnaturalness of colonial sovereignty and to substantiate his depiction of mutiny as the effect rather than

34 Locke, Two Treatises, II:X132, p. 354 (“revert[s]”; “the Community”; “may dispose,” emphasis mine).
the cause of the Second Charter’s brutal new forms of discipline.\textsuperscript{35}

As Hopkins saw it, contractual relations were precisely what the shipwreck had called into question. Bermuda offered the underclass castaways self-determination, whereas in Virginia, Hopkins argued, they “might well feare to be detained in that Countrie by the authority of the Commander thereof, and their whole life [sic] to serve the turns of the Adventurers, with their travailes and labours.” Gates presents indentured servitude as a simple form of \textit{quid pro quo}, but as David Galenson notes, the “large size of the debt” involved in transatlantic transportation and maintenance rendered it an unprecedented form of obligation, one that Hopkins rightly saw as susceptible to exploitative augmentation in accordance with sovereign decisionism. Rather than deny the new contractual logic of indentured servitude, then, Hopkins’s speech turns it against itself, revealing its ostensible consent to be coercion by another name. He acknowledges that the soldiers and laborers onboard the \textit{Sea Venture} have entered into a formal legal agreement, receiving compensation in advance in exchange for a term of service. But in light of his fears that an indenture might be indefinitely extended in a state of exception (“their whole life to serve”), he invokes a version of what contract law calls \textit{force majeure} or \textit{act of God} to argue that a servant may refuse to fulfill her term if an unexpected disruption has caused its conditions to go unmet. The shipwreck has led the Virginia Company to renege on its promise of “Transportation,” thereby remitting the servants’ debt and reasserting the natural rights of individual liberty and self-preservation (“bound each one to provide for himselfe”) precisely at the moment of rupture (“the

\textsuperscript{35} Strachey, \textit{TR}, in Smith, \textit{Writings}, 1007 (“intreated him”; “the businesse”).
authority ceased when the wracke was committed”).36

For all the sophistication of his political thought, Hopkins’s plot fails. His co-conspirators reveal it to Gates, who passes “the sentence of a Martiall Court upon him, such as belongs to Mutinie and Rebellion.” But Gates eventually pardons Hopkins, strangely enough at the request of Strachey and others among “the better sort,” who are moved by his “peniten[ce].” Steven Greenblatt reads this scene as a paradigmatic instance of the production of “salutary anxiety,” the mechanism whereby Renaissance elites “deliberately evoked” feelings of “insecurity” in their subordinates in order to ensure obedience. In fact, he claims that pardoning Hopkins does as much to cement Gates’s totalizing power as does the execution of another mutineer. But while I follow Agamben in recognizing both the execution and the pardon as expressions of the sovereign decision, I would argue, contra Greenblatt, that the formal features of Strachey’s report guarantee Hopkins’s continued capacity to challenge Gates’s rule.37

The access the “True Reportory” provides to underclass voices derives from the exigencies of Atlantic political science. Linking the mutineers’ speeches and the storm that makes them possible via the murmuring trope helped Strachey to legitimize Gates’s satellite absolutism—and the departures from classical prescription and metropolitan directive it entailed—by projecting a verifiable and potentially indefinite state of emergency. But the commitment to detailed description conditioned by his “empirical imperative” ultimately leads Strachey to record the very critique he intends to silence: namely, that sovereignty is simply innovation by another name. It is only by attending to

36 Strachey, TR, in Smith, Writings, 1003 (“might well”); Galenson, White Servitude in Colonial America, 3n7 (“large size”).
an unrecognized genre of political thought, the colonial report, that the period’s complex attitudes toward political change become fully apparent. And it is only by recuperating innovation’s pejorative early meaning that we can recognize that Hopkins’s resistance to the new asymmetries of power made possible by the Second Charter is restorative rather than radical. Indeed, to read colonialism’s discontents as forerunners of later forms of radical and revolutionary ideology is to misattribute to them the endorsement of innovation underlying the very forms of colonial oppression they were resisting.

V. “Horrid Chaunges” and “Newe Lawes”

The tendency to disclose colonialism’s transgression of the innovation prohibition in the very attempt to finesse it reappears throughout the early Chesapeake archive. Thus a report that Strachey helped to prepare shortly after De La Warr arrived in Virginia and assumed power complains of the “horrid chaunges” recently endured by the colony while, in the same breath, praising the Virginia Company for “changing the [colony’s] authoritie [i.e., form of government] into an absolute command.” And thus sometime colony president and acting governor George Percy endorsed the “newe Lawes” that Sir Thomas Dale enacted in the spring of 1611 while simultaneously registering his disapproval of the “extreme and crewell tortures” Dale used to punish “dyvers of his men [who] beinge Idell and nott willeinge to take paynes [i.e., to labor] did Runne away unto the Indyans.” Despite his abhorrence, Percy’s breathless litany—“Some he [i.e., Dale] apointed to be hanged some burned some to be broken upon wheles others to be Staked and some to be shott to deathe”—may well have advanced Dale’s primary aim: “To terrify the reste … [from] attempetinge the Lyke.” But even as it converted experience
into new precedent, Percy’s eyewitness reportage also laid bare the brutality that secured Jamestown’s survival, providing fodder for metropolitan criticism. Contra Dale’s protestations of both prior precedent and urgent New World “necessitie” in the sections of Strachey’s Lawes that he authored, Percy reasserts the connection between the severity and the novelty of Virginia’s satellite absolutism—anticipating, in his preoccupation with the governor’s “extreme and crewel tortures,” the modern constitutionalist (and residually anti-innovation) opposition to “cruel and unusual punishment.”

In later sections of the “True Reportory,” Strachey lapses into the promotional register we glimpsed in the preface to the Lawes, concealing a priori judgments beneath the stylistic hallmarks of empiricist reportage in order to create precedents where none existed via legislation and to import the anomic of the state of exception into the normative legal order via the governor’s absolute sovereignty. Like Dale, that is, Strachey sometimes used first-hand observation and inductive interpretation to confirm inherited political-philosophical axioms. For example, he announces that “all giddy and lawlesse attempts [i.e., all insurrectionary plots], have always something of imperfection” that reliably causes them to miscarry, explaining that the moral dilemma inevitably produced by so illicit an action breeds informancy. But while this comforting generalization proves true in the case of Hopkins’s mutiny, it would seem to contradict Strachey’s earlier insistence that the New World’s contingencies are so unprecedentedly

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38 “Letter from the Lord Delawarr, Governor of Virginia, to the Patentees in England,” in Strachey, Historie of Travaile, ed. Major, xxi-xxvi, quotations on xxv (“horrid chaunges”), xxxiii (“changing the”); George Percy, A Trewe Relacyon of the Procedeings and Occurentes of Moment Which Have Hapned in Virginia from the Tyme Sir Thomas Gates Was Shippwrackte upon the Bermudes Anno 1609 untill My Departure owtt of the Cowntry … in … 1612, in Smith, Writings, 1093-1114, quotations on 1109 (“ne we Lawes”), 1112 (“extreme and”; “dyvers of”; “Some he”; “To terrify”); Strachey, Lawes, 10 (“necessitie”). For Dale’s citation of precedents see Strachey, Lawes, 53-54. For a similar defense of Dale citing both precedent and necessity see Ralph Hamor, A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia, and the successe of the affaires there till the 18 of June. 1614, in Smith, Writings, 1115-1168, esp. 1139.
conducive to rebellion that they require the equally unprecedented powers of an absolute governor. If Strachey’s claim is true then mutineers pose no real threat and Gates’s strong command is unnecessary; if not, then colonial experience will require the revision of Old World assumptions about underclass agency. In short, while Atlantic political science could sometimes function ideologically, I would nonetheless insist that it could not “contain” the “subversion” to which it responded; an experiential residue remains despite Strachey’s best efforts to project a seamless poetics of power. Once the need to “deale Clearely” forces Strachey to demystify the mutineers’ murmuring, Hopkins’s indictment of colonial elite innovation becomes an ineffaceable part of the archive.39

Hopkins and his ideas would reappear in the annals of English colonialism. A decade later in 1620, en route to what would become the Plymouth Colony, disaffected Mayflower passengers would deliver a series of “mutinous speeches” that William Bradford describes as the occasion for that ship’s famous Compact. And while there is strong evidence to suggest that, although he was onboard, Hopkins was not among the speechmakers this time around, the logic of the critique they voiced would closely echo the remarks he had made in Bermuda. When an “empirical imperative” similar to the one felt by Strachey obliges Bradford to translate what he calls the passengers’ “murmurings” into concrete paraphrase, we learn that they had insisted upon their right, “when they came ashore,” to “use their own liberty, for none had power to command them, the patent they had being for Virginia and not for New England, which belonged to another government, with which the Virginia Company had nothing to do.” The speechmakers recognize how readily New World conditions could decouple sovereignty and geography,

how the very conditions that made it possible to assert new jurisdictions also provided new opportunities to refuse obedience. Moreover, they reveal the *Mayflower Compact* to have been not so much a ratification of the equality of equals in the spirit of modern liberal democracy as a preemptive strike against a potent threat to what could hardly be described as a status quo. In short, the critique voiced by Hopkins (not to appear in print for another five years) resurfaces here, despite its supposed containment in Bermuda—a counter-innovative underclass response to elite innovation, made possible by the contingencies of transatlantic sea travel and documented by political scientific reportage at the founding of a new Anglo-American settlement, whose leaders looked to the once-unprecedented Virginia colony as a model.\footnote{William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (New York: Random House, 1981), 83 (“mutinous speeches”; “when they”; “use their”), 84 (“murmurings”). Linebaugh and Rediker insist, upon scant evidence, that Hopkins was among the *Mayflower’s* speechmakers (*Many-Headed Hydra* 13, 356n9), but the fact that he signed the *Compact* and later served as an assistant to Plymouth’s governors suggests otherwise. I would argue that it is precisely Hopkins’s *unexceptionality* that makes the critique Bradford records so significant. See George Ernest Bowman, *The Mayflower Compact and Its Signers* (Boston: Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, 1920); Charles Edward Banks, *The English Ancestry and Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1968), 61-64; Caleb H. Johnson, *The Mayflower and her passengers* (Indiana: Xlibris Corp., 2006), 160–68.}
Chapter Three

Congregationalism and Heresy in John Winthrop’s Massachusetts

this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth in, new Churches, and a new Common-wealth together.


As the project of Anglo-American settlement proceeded apace over the first half of the seventeenth century, the innovation prohibition showed no signs of abating. Hegemonies still had to be built from scratch and defended against both local underclass “innovators” and metropolitan superiors wary of colonial elite departures from precedent. The pejorative idiom of innovation that had proven so crucial to the Protestant attack on unreformed churches also galvanized efforts to carry the work of reform into the New World. Yet the powerful association between theological and political novelty, Reformation and rebellion, left puritans like those who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony especially vulnerable to allegations of novelty. In many cases the accusation seems warranted. The puritans were theological primitivists, obsessed with adherence to Biblical models, but precisely because of their energetic religiosity, Massachusetts elites often outstripped their forebears elsewhere in the Americas in their amenability to certain forms of disavowed innovation. Insofar as scriptural precedents outranked even the most enduring human ones and insofar as providentialism removed the stigma of agency from the equation by representing historical events as divine interventions into earthly affairs accomplished via natural and human “means,” New Englanders could be quite bold in their endorsement of political-theological change.

Consider the remonstrance submitted to the Massachusetts Bay General Court in

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1637 by a “heretical” group facing persecution at the hands of an “orthodoxy” (terms I use with caution, as I explain below). Echoing John Calvin, the text reads modern events through the prism of scriptural history in order to parry an allegation of innovation:

wee beseech you remember the old method of Satan, the ancient enemy of Free Grace, in all ages of the Churches, who hath raised up such calumnies against the faithfull Prophets of God, Elijah [i.e., Elijah] was called the troubler of Israel, Amos was charged for conspiracy, Paul was counted a … mover of sedition, and a ring-leader of a Sect, and Christ himselfe … was charged to bee a Teacher of New Doctrine … Now wee beseech you consider, whether that old serpent work not after his old method, even in our daies.

The remonstrants appeal not simply to precedent but to a particular kind of precedent, wherein accusations of novelty correlate with godliness. In so doing, they recast their persecution by the Bay magistrates as “the old method of Satan” and reposition themselves within a genealogy that culminates with Christ, “himselfe” disparaged as the “Teacher of New Doctrine.” The orthodoxy reacted unfavorably to this interpretation, in part because its strategies were ones they themselves used to evade the accusations of innovation they constantly faced as puritans and colonials. Massachusetts elites were in fact deeply invested in the idea of their polity’s transformative—yet non-innovative, because restorative and divinely orchestrated—role in sacred history. This attitude is on full display in this chapter’s epigraph, in which the early New England historian Edward Johnson praises the region in scriptural accents as “the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth in, new Churches, and a new Common-wealth together.”

As both of these examples demonstrate, the providentialist loophole in the innovation prohibition depended on material signification and sensory observation. In

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this sense, puritanism’s complex relationship to political change went hand in hand with a commitment to empiricism. Bearing out a growing body of scholarship on the compatibility—rather than antagonism—between Protestantism and the New Science, New England elites like Massachusetts Bay founder and twelve-time governor John Winthrop borrowed representational strategies from Baconian natural science in order to develop a puritan strain of Atlantic political science. Protestantism’s theological affinities with empiricism dovetailed with Winthrop’s theory of godly magistracy as a divinely sanctioned monopoly on the right to enact political change in exceptional circumstances. Like John Smith’s Virginia and William Strachey’s Bermuda, Winthrop’s Massachusetts seemed to require an observational epistemology capable of improvising responses to its many threats: metropolitan attempts to undermine its civil and ecclesiastical autonomy, indigenous resistance, and its own settlers’ political-theological dissent.

This chapter focuses on a well-known instance of the latter threat, the outbreak of heresy and sedition that historians call the Antinomian Controversy or, more recently, the “free grace controversy,” the designation I adopt. Between 1636 and 1638, the controversy divided the colony between two different strains of Calvinist soteriology. The “orthodoxy,” which included Winthrop and most of the Bay’s ministers and magistrates, sought to balance human agency and divine sovereignty. They argued that, even though salvation was effected entirely by God’s grace, it took place through created means and could thus be apprehended empirically. This view positioned scripture and clergy as crucial mediators between the individual and the divine and rendered obedience to moral law a sturdy sign—though not the cause—of election, which, Calvinists insisted, could not be earned. The orthodoxy deemed their adversaries “antinomians” because their
emphasis on the transformative power of free grace was said to place them in opposition to ("anti") the law ("nomos"), leading them to believe that the elect could no longer sin.3

Centered in the Boston Church, the “heretical” antinomian party was a loose affiliation that included a number of non-elites, a handful of magistrates, merchants, and military leaders, the minister John Wheelwright, the lay spiritual leader Anne Hutchinson (the orthodoxy’s avowed antagonist), and the puritan nobleman Henry Vane, Jr. (likely the orthodoxy’s unspoken antagonist). Combining the theology of John Cotton, the most renowned minister in New England, with their own speculations and ideas drawn from England’s theological underground, the antinomians insisted upon the elect individual’s utter passivity in the process of regeneration and on God’s direct communication with the believer. Because this position denigrated scriptural and clerical mediation and obedience to the law as forms of quasi-Catholic “salvation by works” at odds with unmerited grace, and because its adherents’ claims to intimacy with the divine were believed to countenance rebellion, the orthodoxy regarded it as deeply subversive. Finding this instance of New World heresy to rival the most infamous Old World cases, Bay leaders insisted that the antinomians would inevitably undermine the colony’s ecclesiastical order and civil peace. Accordingly, they brought the newly minted apparatuses of church and state power to bear on the heretics, suppressing their political-theological innovations through fines, disarmament, disenfranchisement, excommunication, and banishment.

The magisterial-ministerial elite also responded to the antinomians in writing.

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3 This paragraph and the next draw on Michael P. Winship’s indispensable study of the controversy, Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), which proposes the more accurate and neutral name “free grace controversy” (1). See also Hall, AC, passim; and Emery Battis’s useful, if also dated and at times misleading account in Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in Massachusetts Bay Colony (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962).
This chapter focuses on the colony’s quasi-official report on the controversy, *A Short Story Of the Rise, Reign, and Ruin of the Antinomians, Familists & Libertines, that infected the Churches of New-England*. Authored by Winthrop, the minister Thomas Weld, and others, belatedly published in London in 1644, and geared toward a metropolitan audience, the text combines empirical reportage with the interpretive frameworks of providentialism, typology, and emblematic reading. Constituting heresy as a novel object of study reflective of the New World’s exceptional political circumstances, Winthrop positions the controversy as evidence of the need for a form of magisterial sovereignty derived from and modeled on God’s. In this way, his political science serves, first, to vindicate a number of top-down innovations—either by disavowing their novelty or by representing them as the “means” of fulfilling providence—and, second, to undermine as innovative those political theologies that did not conform to his vision of a godly commonwealth. The top-down innovations in question included the new modes of “liberal” hegemony organizing the Bay government, which paired absolutist magisterial “discretion” with electoral consent; the relatively untried Congregationalist form of ecclesiastical polity organizing its churches, which similarly combined voluntarism and subjection; and the sense-based hermeneutic born of the recent cross-fertilization of Protestantism and empiricism, upon which both kinds of governance relied.

I begin by rehearsing the controversy’s major theological disagreements and key events, arguing that the conflict concerned precisely the questions of agency and epistemology at the heart of Atlantic political science: if God is all-powerful, what kinds of actions are legitimate? How does divine transformation relate to human-led change? How does individual regeneration relate to collective life? And how is one to know any
of this with certainty? Thereafter, I examine the *Short Story*’s recourse to the innovation idiom and its empiricist technique, especially apparent in its representation of the stillborn fetuses delivered by Hutchinson and her follower Mary Dyer. The experiential detail produced by Winthrop’s quasi-scientific descriptions of these “monstrous births” allows him to read them as providential manifestations of divine displeasure with the heretics. Materializing the antinomians’ unnatural, disorderly, proliferating innovations legitimizes the orthodoxy’s efforts to suppress them as the enactment of God’s will. Yet Winthrop’s empiricism also discloses just how unprecedented those efforts were. Thus I examine his political science alongside the accusations of political and ecclesiastical innovation he and the colony faced and alongside the anxious dialectic of imitation and innovation at play in his lay sermon, “A Modell of Christian Charity.” Doing so allows us to recover the entirely contingent character of the orthodoxy’s hegemony at this moment and to recast the antinomian heresy as a form of counter-innovation, a response to elite innovation that entailed political-theological change only as a side effect of its own restorationist commitments and subordination of human to divine agency.

The free grace controversy coincided with metropolitan attacks on the colony’s charter and with local disputes over the nature of magisterial sovereignty. Even as they criticized the king’s pretensions to absolutism and even as they condemned the political-theological novelties of heretics like Hutchinson, leaders like Winthrop claimed new discretionary powers unfettered by constitutional limitations. Citing the magistrate’s superior perceptual and interpretive abilities, the divine sanction of civic office, scriptural precedents of judicial latitude, and the exigencies of the New World state of exception, he insisted that the capacity for legitimate adaptation was essential to the colony’s survival.
Others disagreed and did not hesitate to deem him an innovator. At the same moment that Hutchinson rejected adherence to moral law as insufficient evidence of one’s salvation, then, Winthrop exhibited an “antinomianism” of his own, resisting the rank and file’s attempts to check magisterial “discretion” through the codification of Massachusetts’s laws. The constitutional tug-of-war that took place during the colony’s first decade and a half has bred significant scholarly disagreement about whether the Bay government was fundamentally authoritarian and oligarchic or democratic and republican. But as we will see, this confusion is itself symptomatic of Winthrop’s theory of magistracy, which exemplifies emergent liberal modes of authority best understood not as “liberatory” but as more subtly hegemonic insofar as they demand consensual subordination.4

Revisiting “A Modell of Christian Charity” similarly destabilizes the status quo claim at the heart of Winthrop’s accusations of antinomian innovation. While the puritan primitivism on display in the sermon prescribed adherence to scriptural precedent, I show that it could just as easily authorize political-theological change. This would prove to be a liability as well as an asset, as becomes clear from Winthrop’s anxious account of the simultaneously imitative and innovative, exemplary and exceptional New England “Citty upon a Hill.” The sermon’s typological assertion of observable correspondences between modern and scriptural events also helps us to see that while empiricism was crucial to orthodox claims to continuity with precedent, it could also allow such interpretations to run amok. The wages of empiricism become especially clear in the Short Story. For

Winthrop’s candid reportage would fall prey to ironic repurposing by Congregationalism’s metropolitan enemies, to an empiricist critique focused on its scientific inconsistencies, and to an anti-empiricist antinomian critique that rejected the very notion that God communicates to the elect through natural “means.”

Ultimately, however, I argue that there is a fundamental isomorphism between Hutchinson’s revelation-based approach to political knowledge and action and Winthrop’s ideal of empirically-informed magisterial discretion—between their respective attempts to place themselves “above the law” via privileged contact with God. Reconceiving the free grace controversy’s two competing theologies as rival attempts to monopolize the divine right to enact change illuminates certain similarities between innovation and counter-innovation, sovereignty and rebellion, orthodoxy and heresy. Like the dissertation’s broader use of the terms “elite” and “underclass,” this chapter’s recourse to the latter pair of terms is largely a matter of rhetorical convenience. In my usage “orthodoxy” and “heresy” describe two fairly new theologies, existing on a reformed Protestant spectrum, which only crystallized into starker opposition and hierarchical relation through their confrontation. The chapter attempts to narrate that confrontation anew by attending to puritanism’s idiosyncratic relationship to the innovation prohibition and to political empiricism.5

I. Theological Issues: The “New Creature” in the New World

At its core, the free grace controversy concerned the relationship between divine sovereignty and human agency in the *ordo salutis* (“order of salvation”), the process whereby God’s grace regenerated the elect sinner, and the appropriate means of knowing whether that process had taken place. All Protestants believed regeneration was orderly and predictable enough to make assurance of salvation possible. But disagreement arose about the relationship between the two covenants God was held to have made with humanity. The first, the “covenant of works,” promised Adam and his posterity eternal life in exchange for perfect obedience to the moral law. God proffered the second, the “covenant of grace,” after the Fall made it impossible for humanity to fulfill the first. The covenant of grace was reserved for the elect and, rather than being meritorious, could be fulfilled only by the sinner’s faith (paradoxically implanted by God himself) that God would impute the righteousness of Christ’s atoning death to the sinner. The trouble in Massachusetts arose when John Cotton began to exaggerate the distinction between the two, such that the covenant of works became not so much an obsolete route to salvation as “a fatal trap for reprobates who vainly sought salvation through their own efforts.” As the antinomians took up this distinction they came to believe that those under the covenant of works were not only deluding themselves about their salvific status but were actively hostile to those under the covenant of grace. Yet according to the orthodoxy, this was to misapprehend the relationship between the two: the covenant of grace was an

extension and remodeling of the covenant of works, in which Christ’s righteous behavior graciously “repaid” the elect’s otherwise unpayable “debt.” While the moral law as instantiated in the Mosaic commandments was no longer a means to salvation, the orthodoxy argued, it had not been abrogated by the covenant of grace but, rather, persisted as the behavioral standard appropriate to the regenerate. The question remained, however, of whether the covenant of grace was wholly gracious if faith was its condition. The orthodoxy answered affirmatively, insisting that God implanted faith, but for the antinomians, the orthodoxy’s faith could sometimes seem like a work in its own right.6

Cotton’s emphasis on divine sovereignty led him to break with the other New England ministers regarding the relationship between “justification”—God’s gracious imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the sinner—and “sanctification,” the godliness exhibited by the saved through obedience to the law and the performance of good works. The orthodoxy grew concerned when Cotton insisted not only that justification preceded sanctification and thus that one’s sanctification could not evidence one’s justification but also that justification preceded faith as well. For Cotton, faith served a “cognitive” rather than a “causal” function: he used the term to refer not to the faith for which we are justified but to the faith that confirms to us that we are justified after the fact. As rearticulated by Hutchinson, this position seemed to the orthodoxy to tend toward antinomianism, the belief that one’s personal relationship with the Holy Spirit exempted one from adherence to the moral law. For their part Cotton and the antinomians accused the orthodoxy of veering toward the opposite theological extreme, Arminianism, which

undermined God’s sovereignty by suggesting that human choice played a role in one’s salvation. Each side accused the other of promising its adherents “a faire and easie way to Heaven”: the orthodoxy via a crypto-Arminian or even “Popish” emphasis on human volition and “legal” works, the heretics by conceiving a humanity so powerless that one could only “waite for Christ to do all.”

Scholars have often assumed that Calvinism implied a basic incompatibility between divine sovereignty and human agency in the *ordo salutis* and thus that the “hidden” issue animating the controversy was “preparationism,” the orthodoxy’s belief that one could take certain steps to prepare for salvation. But as William Stoever has shown, Reformed Protestants were amply furnished with techniques for harmonizing “divine grace and created nature in the regeneration of sinful mankind in such a way that the gratuity of grace and the integrity of nature were each preserved.” These techniques included the “scholastic doctrine of multiple causality” and the idea that God instrumentalized created “means” to accomplish his ends. In the case of regeneration, these “means” included the human faculties, covenants, sermon-hearing, rigorous introspection, and sanctified behavior. While the uses to which the orthodoxy would put it were historically unprecedented, the puritan conversion morphology was thus not a betrayal of Calvinism but instead a tense-yet-workable system for avoiding the Scylla of antinomianism and the Charybdis of Arminianism. Likewise, Cotton’s rejection of the “means of grace” was not a more authentic Calvinism but instead a genuine flirtation with heresy—albeit one conceived as restorationist.8

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8 Stoever, *Faire and Easie Way*, x (“divine grace”), 110 (“scholastic doctrine”). On preparationism see
The free grace controversy concerned the use of “means” not only in the process of salvation but also in the quest for assurance of salvation. Cotton’s emphasis on divine sovereignty at the expense of human initiative undermined the orthodoxy’s method of gaining assurance through the observation of outward signs of sanctification and faith. As many scholars have noted, this method of gaining assurance was fundamentally empirical. Indeed, Sarah Rivett has persuasively demonstrated the methodological affinities between early empirical natural science and the orthodoxy’s efforts to observe and document the signs of grace, which she terms the “science of the soul.” Cotton’s self-consciously “nonempirical” alternative method emphasized the accepted but nonetheless delicate notion of the “witness of the Spirit,” a more intuitive, internal experience of grace that gave the elect assurance immediately (i.e., without the use of means, which he and the antinomians rejected). In Stoever’s words, “Cotton … denied that regenerating grace could be known empirically by its effects.” Where the orthodox conversion morphology held that grace regenerated the saint’s fallen senses, Cotton countered that election granted “spiritual,” not physical “sight”: for him, “human perception, however enlightened by grace, was subordinate to a still higher, increated knowledge, given by the Spirit directly, which Cotton held to be alone determinative of true sainthood.” Yet to the orthodoxy’s ears, this mode of assurance tended toward a direct, personal revelation freed from the restraints of scriptural, clerical, and behavioral corroboration and thus toward

familism, a heretical claim to intimacy with God.9

According to the antinomians, the efficacy of those restraints was precisely the issue, however. Put another way, the orthodoxy wasn’t all that orthodox. While the ministers’ reliance on created means as avenues to knowledge of election was in alignment with mainstream Calvinism and thus not exactly new, there were absolutely aspects of the New England “science of the soul” that were. First, the colonists’ commitment to the empirical investigation of grace constituted, in Rivett’s pointed words, “a radical and unprecedented innovation.” Second, the New England requirement that candidates for church membership testify to the workings of grace in their souls before their prospective congregations was “novel” and “unprecedented.” Finally, the predication of the civil status of freemanship on voluntary but rigorously policed church membership was also historically new. The free grace controversy was thus a classic contest between innovation and counter-innovation, wherein an elite-sponsored institution, falsely represented as already established, is said to be assailed by non-elite innovators, who, upon closer inspection, seem to seek something closer to restoration. It would be wrong to suggest that the antinomians’ goal was simply to reinstate an earlier ecclesiology, but the same must be said of the orthodoxy. Both Winthrop and Hutchinson exploited puritan primitivism’s paradoxical tendency to enable change.10

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Novelty was not just a polemical descriptor of the controversy’s competing theologies then, it was also a central topic of those theologies. The antinomian emphasis on Christ’s permanent “indwelling” within the elect amplified the orthodox notion that one became a “new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17) following regeneration, bringing out the latent affinities between regeneration and innovation in puritanism. Where the orthodoxy conceived of grace as effecting the restoration of the fallen person and thus preferred metaphors of “rebirth” “rather than … violent destruction and creation de novo,” Cotton and the antinomians believed in a more thorough transformation wrought by the actual presence of the divine in the convert. According to the orthodoxy, it was a short leap from the innovation of the elect to the innovation of the polity. In Stoever’s account, orthodox covenant theology was designed to prevent precisely this outcome: it “provided a conceptual framework within which to integrate responsibility for order with yearning for spontaneity and newness”; the covenantal “dialectic of nature and grace … served not only to legitimate practical efforts to reorder earthly society according to God’s will, but also to moderate such efforts, so that the transformation of individuals and institutions, while earnestly pursued, was not simply equated with dissolution of worldly order.” In short, the covenant meant controlled change. In its tendency to push orthodox puritanism to its limits, antinomianism not only rejected this dialectic but also revealed it to countenance its own forms of political and theological innovation.

Winthrop’s situation in New England thus resembled Oliver Cromwell’s in an old England overrun with Civil War sectarianism: his duty to balance “divine newness and

divine order” “meant committing acts of violent radicalism on one hand while restraining radicals of a different color on the other.” Hutchinson’s heresy was a response to this political-theological double standard—confirmation of Francis Bacon’s claim that elite “Innovation in Religion” was one of the major “Causes and Motives of Seditions.”

II. “Rise, Reign, and Ruin”: The Controversy and Its Representation

Soon after she arrived in Massachusetts in 1634 Anne Hutchinson joined the Boston Church and began holding lay religious gatherings or “conventicles” in her home, gaining adherents for her outspoken criticism of the New England clergy. Beginning in 1636, ministers like Thomas Shepard attempted to sound out John Cotton’s orthodoxy, but their relentless demand for theological unity prompted Cotton to emphasize, rather than downplay, their disagreements. Cotton’s stature would shield Hutchinson from criticism before her claims became indefensibly heterodox and he was obliged to distance himself from her. That same year John Wheelwright arrived in the colony. The antinomians welcomed him as a crucial counterweight to the Bay’s “legalist” clergy, but Winthrop blocked his appointment to the Boston Church. Hutchinson’s party received an additional boost when their elite sympathizer Henry Vane, Jr. was elected governor that May. Vane’s puritanism and influence at court made him a valuable ally for the colony, but his election also meant that one of the heretics’ staunchest supporters was now its ruler. Like Cotton, Vane heightened the controversy’s stakes by endowing Hutchinson’s views with legitimacy. Indeed, historians have recently argued that Vane was the

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orthodoxy’s chief antagonist and that his ability to influence the colony led Winthrop to downplay his role and exaggerate Hutchinson’s in the Short Story.  

The General Court decreed January 19, 1637 a fast day, a collective display of humility intended to restore God’s favor and resolve the controversy. But the sermon Wheelwright preached that day enflamed, rather than reconciled, the partisans. Despite the efforts of the antinomians, who presented a remonstrance (quoted in this chapter’s introduction) to the Court on his behalf, Wheelwright would later be questioned about the sermon and convicted of “sedition” and “contempt.” The May 17, 1637 court of elections was the most contested in the colony’s early history. Governor Vane pushed to have a second petition protesting Wheelwright’s treatment read, but Deputy Governor Winthrop insisted that the elections had to take place before petitions could be heard. Of course, because the new governor took office immediately, the petition would find little traction if read after Winthrop was elected. And elected he was. Although there was “great danger of a tumult that day”—the antinomians were said to have made “fierce speeches” and even “laid hands on” their opponents—Winthrop was ultimately chosen as governor. The Court then passed a controversial edict restricting immigration to the colony for fear of an influx of additional heretics. Thereafter, the orthodoxy would utilize the full extent of the

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power it consolidated in the election of 1637 to chasten the antinomians.\footnote{Winthrop, \textit{Journal}, 210 ("sedition" and "contempt"), 215 ("great danger"; "fierce speeches"; "laid hands"). For the immigration order, see Winthrop, \textit{Journal}, 219. That month, a coalition of New England militias also massacred six to seven hundred Pequot men, women, and children in a fortified village near Connecticut’s Mystic River; see Winthrop, \textit{Journal}, 220-221; Winship, \textit{Making Heretics}, 139.}

Vane departed for England that August. The antinomians hoped he would use his court connections to return in triumph as royal governor general, but this did not take place. Instead, the Massachusetts churches convened a synod or ministerial assembly. Meeting from August 30 to September 22, 1637, the synod largely succeeded in codifying the orthodoxy’s position on the theological matters at issue, assembling evidence of the antinomians’ heresies, and bringing Cotton back into the fold. In October, Hutchinson’s supporter Mary Dyer gave birth to a deformed stillborn fetus but buried it in secret. This would become a key piece of evidence in the case against the heretics when Winthrop learned of it the following March. The November 1637 meeting of the General Court saw Hutchinson’s civil trial for sedition, slander, and heresy. Although she ably matched wits with Winthrop, exploiting vulnerabilities in the case against her and repurposing orthodox hermeneutics to legitimize her positions, she also laid claim to precisely the kind of “immediate revelation” the orthodoxy feared would result from her familism, effectively proving the Court’s case against her. The magistrates banished Hutchinson, disenfranchised and banished Wheelwright, disenfranchised eight antinomians, and disarmed seventy-five more, though many repented and had their sentences reduced or remitted. During the winter, the antinomians “aired progressively more shocking heresies”—militarized, it would seem, by the self-fulfilling nature of their persecution. At her ecclesiastical trial in March of 1638 Hutchinson flirted with repentance but was excommunicated nonetheless. She departed the colony with a few
followers at the end of the month. Settling in Aquidneck Island (part of Roger Williams’s Rhode Island and Providence Plantations), she delivered a “monstrous birth” of her own before moving further beyond the Bay’s reach, this time to Dutch New Netherland, where she and most her family were killed in a native raid in 1643.¹⁴

The *Short Story* is a complex text with a convoluted publication history. In the first place, it did not appear in print until 1644. Next, it is less a coherent whole than a compilation of disparate documents, including polemical justifications of the orthodoxy’s actions, compilations of theological errors, civil and ecclesiastical court records, and Winthrop’s description of Dyer’s “monstrous birth.” Finally, no author’s name appears on its title page. David D. Hall has recently argued that, in light of “its eclectic contents,” “it should be considered an authorless book,” but scholars (including, at times, Hall himself) have long attributed it to Winthrop. While acknowledging the contributions of various writers, editors, printers, publishers, and institutions, which make the text a prime example of what Hall calls “social authorship,” I nonetheless refer to the *Short Story* below as a unit and to Winthrop (and Thomas Weld) as its “author(s).” I do so not only for the sake of convenience but also because the text was meant to speak on behalf of a colony under Winthrop’s leadership—and because its failure to speak coherently indexes the Bay’s fraught “satellite sovereignty,” its local primacy and imperial subordination.¹⁵

Corroborating this sense of the text as an extension of Winthrop’s magistracy, if not his individual intellect, Thomas Weld’s editorial role grew out of his responsibilities


as the colony’s authorized representative in London. Seeing a second run of the text through the press there in 1644, he saw fit to replace the title under which it had first appeared earlier that year—Antinomians and Familists Condemned By the Synod of Elders in New-England: with the Proceedings of the Magistrates against them...—with the more sensational one we know today. Finding the collection to lack an organizing narrative framework, Weld also added a preface and an afterward: “Meeting with this Book, newly come forth of the Presse,” he explains, “[I was] earnestly pressed by diverse [persons] to perfect it, by laying downe the order and sense of this story, (which in the Book is omitted).” Thus, while I avoid taking for granted the kind of elite consensus that allowed Perry Miller to generalize about a single “New England mind,” I regard the Short Story as a text that at least aspired to “official” utterance. As we will see, the text’s grounding in Winthrop’s eyewitness reportage functioned at once to shore up and to unravel the unified, absolute sovereignty he claimed.16

III. “New sprung errours” and Puritan Political Science

Like other works of Atlantic political science, the Short Story is deeply concerned with the threat of political change. Indeed, the puritans’ primitivism rendered them especially suspicious of the new while their empiricism made them especially interested in novel objects of knowledge. It is no surprise then that the text makes extensive use of the pejorative idiom of innovation in its criticism of the antinomians. Bearing out Benoît Godin’s claim that “innovation” and “heresy” are essentially synonymous, Weld’s preface condemns the Hutchinsonians for promoting a “new Religion,” laments that

orthodox preaching “suited not their new fancies,” and explains their theology’s ability to attract so many adherents so quickly by pointing to “the novelty of it.” Likewise, Winthrop refers disparagingly to their “new tenets,” “new opinions,” “new sprung errours,” and “new rule of practise by immediate revelation.” Throughout the text, this theological novelty is linked to the threat of “sedition” and “civill disturbances.” Citing precedent, “necessity,” and the state of exception (“the case was now desperate”), the magistrates pressed their power to its limits in order to oust the innovators.17

Paradoxically, the Short Story likens the free grace controversy to earlier outbreaks of heresy and claims that it exceeds such precedents. As Winthrop explains,

the Tragedy of Munster … gave just occasion to feare the danger we were in, seeing (by the judgement [sic] of Luther writing of those troublous times), we had not to doe with so simple a Devill, as managed that businesse … but [rather,] Satan seemed to have commission now to use his utmost cunning to undermine the Kingdome of Christ here (as the same Luther foretold, he would doe, when he should enterprize any such innovation under the cleare light of the Gospel)[.]

The passage invokes Martin Luther’s proto-political-scientific account of the most infamous case of Old World political-theological innovation (the Münster Rebellion) but only to emphasize the New England antinomians’ exceptionality, which is then used to legitimize colonial elite departures from precedent according to a logic of “inevitable necessity.” Winthrop insists that “the like [i.e., the equivalent] hath not beene knowne in former ages, that ever so many wise, sober, and well grounded Christians, should so suddenly be seduced by the meanes of a woman”; and in a surviving transcript of Hutchinson’s civil trial not included in the Short Story, he brands the antinomian errors

17 Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 206 (“new Religion”), 209 (“suited not”), 204 (“the novelty”), 264 (“new tenets”), 248 (“new opinions”; “the case”), 301 (“new sprung”), 279 (“new rule”), 213 (“sedition”; “civill disturbances”), 254 (“necessity”). For references to precedent see Short Story, in Hall, AC, 254. And see Benoît Godin, Innovation Contested: The Idea of Innovation over the Centuries (Routledge: 2015), who is somewhat misleading about the term’s history and secularity but provocative nonetheless: “Innovation is … the secularized term for heresy” (6); “innovation is the modern form of and term for heresy” (10).
“the most desperate enthusiasm in the world,” exclaiming, “Of all the revelations that ever I read of I never read the like ground laid as is for this. The Enthusiasts and Anabaptists had never the like.” Similarly, Weld’s preface describes Dyer and Hutchinson “produc[ing] out of their wombs … such monstrous births as no Chronicle (I thinke) hardly ever recorded the like.” He even makes the entirely disingenuous claim that the manner of Hutchison’s death is unprecedented: “I never heard that the Indians in those parts did ever before this, commit the like outrage upon any one family, or families, and therefore Gods hand is the more apparently seene therein.” Easily glossed over as little more than vituperative rhetoric, these superlatives in fact amount to a depiction of the antinomians as innovative even among innovators.18

It is a testament to the widespread rhetorical power of the innovation idiom, however, that one of Hutchinson’s key strategies of self-defense during her civil trial is to cite precedents for her actions. While scholars have tended to read her theology as anti-authoritarian, anti-traditionalist, and pro-change in a “liberal,” “radical,” or uniquely modern way, I would stress the complex coexistence of her claims to theological uniqueness with her deep primitivist commitments. Like the orthodoxy, Hutchinson disavows her own agency in engendering political-theological change and presents that change as the recovery of precedent: her thought exhibits a dialectic of imitation and innovation. Consider the dispute during her civil trial about her conventicles, an accepted puritan practice but one whose limits Hutchinson probed by independently expounding scripture before large audiences on a weekly basis. Commanded by Winthrop to “shew a warrant for” these meetings, she produces two kinds of precedent. First, she argues that

18 Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 275-276 (“the Tragedy”), 276 (“inevitable necessity”; “the like”), 214 (“produc[ing] out”), 218 (“I never”); “The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown,” in Hall, AC, 311-348, quotation on 342 (“the most”; “Of all”).
“there were such meetings in use before I came.” But the prosecution insists that these other conventicles are “not so publick and frequent as yours” and demands again to know “by what authority, or rule, you uphold them.” Hutchinson then provides a scriptural citation, but the Court rejects it, prompting her to demand a negative precedent, “a rule against” her meetings. The Court invokes a verse of its own and insists upon positive precedent. Only when further scriptures fail to satisfy does an exasperated Hutchinson attack the primitivism she otherwise shares with her interrogators by mocking their literalist biblicism: “Must I shew my name written therein?”

As we will see, Hutchinson’s critique echoed those voiced by metropolitan opponents of the “Citty upon a Hill,” including re-emigrant dissidents, King Charles and his bishops, and even fellow puritans. Her jibe suggested that, behind every effort to return church and state to their primitive roots lay the risk of projecting yet another inventive human sensibility onto God’s eternal prescriptions—that devotion to precedent could mask innovation. While pairing puritanism with New World settlement may have expanded opportunities for purity, it also risked a damning association with novelty. And while empiricism may have aided elites in thwarting political-theological rebellion by authorizing magisterial discretion in the face of unprecedented circumstances, it also threatened to disclose colonialism’s many top-down innovations.

Much as we saw historians regarding Virginia’s repressive early regime as a necessary evil in the previous chapter, scholars have occasionally seen fit to justify the orthodoxy’s suppression of the antinomians. Curiously, Edmund Morgan’s attempt to do

so in an early essay entitled, “The Case against Anne Hutchinson,” involves claiming that puritanism was incompatible with scientific empiricism. Arguing for “the appropriateness of the [court’s] sentence” within the puritan worldview, Morgan claims that Hutchinson’s ideas were “absolutely inconsistent” with the colony’s continued existence. Adopting the orthodoxy’s arguments from necessity, his account is rife with imperatives: Winthrop “could not help regarding that woman as an enemy of God. As governor he was bound to do his utmost to protect the Word and the state from this instrument of Satan.” Bracketing the obvious counter-evidence—Hutchinson’s early innocuousness to the Bay authorities, Vane’s tenure as governor—I want to focus instead on Morgan’s strange explanation for why scholars’ unfamiliarity with “the mental climate in which … [the trial] was conducted” leads them to view Winthrop unsympathetically. This unfamiliarity, Morgan insists, is born of the new “theory of knowledge” produced by the “introduction and spread of scientific investigation.” Starkly differentiating between the modern pursuit of “the relative sort of truth obtainable by observation” and the search for “absolute truth” that dominates early modern thought, Morgan completely overlooks how invested the puritans were in the empirical epistemology that underwrote the Scientific Revolution he equates with secular relativism. Indeed, it is precisely because empiricism is so central to Winthrop’s hermeneutics that Morgan relies on him as a source about the events of the controversy in order, tautologically, to confirm his partisan interpretation thereof.20

The decades since Morgan’s essay appeared have witnessed substantial scholarly elaboration of the “Puritanism and Science” thesis, which argued that puritanism paved the way for England’s Scientific Revolution. Building on this scholarship, I would argue that empiricism was essential to a wide array of puritan hermeneutic practices pertinent to the study of politics, especially providentialism, typology, and emblematic reading. Simply put, Winthrop’s interpretive “engine” absolutely required the “fuel” of observed particulars—a fact inadvertently emphasized by the ocular bent of the scriptural Winthrop quotation with which Morgan closed his essay: “It is the Lords work, and it is marvellous in our eyes” (Psalms 118:23). Useful here is T. Dwight Bozeman’s notion of “the Protestant epistemology,” which he explicitly links with “empiricist values” despite his—to my mind, unnecessary—resistance to the “Puritanism and Science” thesis as a variant of the “Puritanism-as-modernization” thesis. In their “untiring opposition to ‘human invention,’” the reformers rejected the “speculative excess” of Catholic and Anglican scholastic rationalism in favor of truth derived from experience, broadly construed. Although they believed the “human faculties” to be “radically fallen,” puritans insisted that the proper avenue to knowledge was sensory engagement with both earthly phenomena—the stuff of nature and history—and with the Bible, understood not as a collection of abstract axioms but as a “vividly real world” described by “eyewitnesses,” “a living field of action” to be “entered into” and replicated. Put another way, the quarrels of the English Reformation led many puritans to the same preference for empiricism over rationalism espoused by many colonial political writers, puritan and otherwise.21

21 Morgan, “Case against Anne Hutchinson,” 649 (“It is”); Bozeman, To Live Ancient Lives, 69 (“the Protestant”; “empiricist values”), 51 (“untiring opposition”), 52 (“speculative excess”), 53 (“human
The importance of material signification to Protestant hermeneutics has long been apparent even to scholars not focused on the intersections between puritanism and empiricism. Consider the concept of typology. Originally conceived as a means of illuminating an overarching divine plan unfolding across history by asserting parallels between Old and New Testament events, typology became a pervasive early modern hermeneutic, applicable to Biblical and post-Biblical events alike. Insofar as typology provided a way to claim that God orchestrated modern events as echoes of scriptural ones it was a crucial means of finessing the innovation prohibition: the correspondence between type and antitype entailed imitation, even as it produced something unprecedented in modernity. Uncoincidentally, typology was also inescapably material and therefore subject to sensory observation. Thus, Sacvan Bercovitch defines it in fundamentally empiricist terms: typology is “essentially historical” and “worldly,” focused on “ordinary, temporal … facts” and particular “details” even as it “forces them into the framework of the ideal.” Crucially, typology’s empirical verifiability made it “an ideal method for regulating spiritualization,” a counterweight to the interpretive freedom loosed by the Reformation. Bozeman’s “Protestant epistemology” thus accomplished for interpreters of history what Rivett’s “science of the soul” accomplished for interpreters of grace: it undermined the possibility of delusion latent within puritanism by insisting that

experiential knowledge be ratified by its conformity with scripture, its approval by an educated ministry, and its corroboration by fellow eyewitnesses. The orthodoxy’s critique of Hutchinson centered on her failure to follow these protocols.\(^{22}\)

While scholars recognize Winthrop to be a capable political thinker, they have yet to fully appreciate his role as an empirical one. Doing so presents a challenge, however, since he lived and wrote before British natural science institutionalized itself as a discrete discipline—a moment we might identify with the 1660 founding of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge. While scholars readily acknowledge his son John Winthrop, Jr.—the Royal Society’s first colonial fellow, as well as a New England magistrate—as an important figure in early transatlantic science, they have scarcely remarked on the elder Winthrop’s empiricism. In the absence of such a biographical smoking gun, we have to rely for evidence on his literary practice as contextualized by the scholarship on Protestantism and science. Winthrop was certainly capable of the kind abstract claims that would lead one to associate him with political philosophy, but he was also deeply invested in induction from political particulars. Consider the memorandum made in the spare leaves at the end of the third volume of his journal. Here Winthrop set down a series of examples, drawn from Biblical and recent history, of “Wholesome Counsells … & good Actions, that have had ill successe, even to publick danger.” Rather than proceeding on rationalist grounds, deducing axioms from inherited premises, Winthrop’s practice here resembles Niccolò Machiavelli’s proto-empirical use of historical examples to develop new courses of action suited to modernity’s challenges.

Following his emigration, these habits would blossom into the fully empirical practice of
generalizing from his own experience as the leader of a New World “Citty upon a Hill.”

IV. “King Winthrop with all his inventions”: The Problem of Colonial Sovereignty

At the same moment that he described the antinomians as innovators, both John
Winthrop and the Bay colony generally were being accused of novelty. The New England
puritans faced accusations of both ecclesiastical and civil rebellion, or innovation, to
which they responded both with disavowals and with claims to sovereignty, or the right
to innovate. The ecclesiastical accusation amounted to an allegation of separatism. In
response, they developed the ecclesiology of “Non-Separating Congregationalism,”
exploiting their distance from the metropole to argue that, even as they founded
functionally independent congregations, they had not formally broken with the Church of
England. The accusation of civil rebellion concerned both the colony’s relationship to
England (what we might call its “external sovereignty”) and its magistrates’ relationship
to those they ruled (its “internal sovereignty”). These allegations inflected the free grace
controversy in significant, yet underappreciated ways.

According to the Massachusetts Bay Company charter or “patent,” granted by
Charles I on March 4, 1629, the Company shareholders (called the “freemen”) were to

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23 Winthrop, *Journal*, 774 (“Wholesome Counsells”). On Winthrop’s political thought see for example
Jr. and science, see Raymond Phineas Stearns, *Science in the British Colonies of America* (Urbana:
University of Illinois Press, 1970), 117-138; Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero’s America: John Winthrop,
Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: University of North
Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2010).

24 Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press for Harvard
University Press, 1959), 105 (“Non-Separating”). As Winship notes, “The free grace controversy and the
shifting fortunes of the precarious Massachusetts charter are conventionally treated as separate stories, …
but they are inseparably intertwined” (*Making Heretics*, 9).
assemble as a General Court four times annually to legislate and once a year each May to elect magistrates—the governor, deputy governor, and eighteen “assistants”—who were to meet monthly as an executive council. But two features of the charter allowed the founders to enact what Edmund Morgan and David Hall each non-pejoratively describe as a series of “innovations.” First, because the charter did not stipulate the number of officers required to constitute a quorum, “Winthrop and the dozen or so members of the company who came with him had unlimited authority to exercise any kind of government they chose over the other settlers.” Second, because the founders took the charter with them, rather than leaving it with a governing body in England where it could be more easily consulted or rescinded, they were in a better position to dictate the terms of their relationship to the crown and Parliament. Exploiting this unprecedented failure “to specify a particular residence for the corporation’s headquarters” the founders converted the Company’s charter into the colony’s constitution and the Company’s executives into members of the colony’s supreme executive, legislative, and judicial assembly. In the inaugural, October 1630 meeting of the General Court the founders expanded the definition of “freeman” to refer to all colonists endowed with the right to vote and hold office. But they also limited the freemen’s powers—denying them the legislative role laid out in the charter and stipulating that they would elect the governor only indirectly, via the assistants—and regulated the franchise by making church membership a prerequisite of freemanship. In 1634, the freemen finally demanded “a sight of the Patent,” which Winthrop had thus far kept hidden from them. Incensed at what they found, they claimed their full powers and elected Thomas Dudley as governor over Winthrop, who had held
the post continuously for the colony’s first five years of existence.25

The same ship that brought Anne Hutchinson and her family to Massachusetts in September 1634, just a few months after Winthrop’s electoral defeat, also brought word that the King had constituted a new Royal Commission for Regulating Plantations led by the puritans’ implacable enemy, Archbishop William Laud. Empowered to “call in patents, make laws, inflict punishments, and … remove governors,” the Commission issued a writ of *quo warranto* to the Massachusetts Bay Company and reiterated earlier demands that the charter be sent back to England. The magistrates temporized about the charter while training troops and “hasten[ing] our fortifications” in anticipation of the arrival of a “general Governor,” against whom they vowed to “defende our lawfull possessions.” Crucially, the Commission’s writ disputed the magistrates’ “claim to sole government over persons in the jurisdiction, the use of martial law, and the making of laws contrary to the laws of England.” In other words, the colony’s “internal sovereignty” jeopardized its “external sovereignty.” Yet the Bay’s response was to further augment the magistrates’ powers by constituting a special war committee. The Laudian invasion never materialized, however, and once Civil War affairs in Scotland and England preoccupied him, Charles I ceased to pose a significant threat to the colony.26

As the war’s tides began to turn against the king, Parliament constituted its own Commission for Foreign Plantations in November of 1643. The Commission was far more disposed to favor the Bay colony, but Winthrop remained wary. As he put it in his

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journal, “if we should put ourselves under the protection of the parliament, we must then be subject to all such laws as they should make.” Puzzling out the colony’s relationship to the metropole in ways that bore directly on the free grace controversy of the previous decade, he noted that while the charter had been granted by the crown, ostensibly rendering the colony subordinate, it also gave the magistrates absolute power within its bounds. To guarantee this tenuous satellite sovereignty—the political equivalent of “Non-Separating Congregationalism”—in the uncertain years of the Interregnum, the ministers Hugh Peter and Thomas Weld had been sent to England as representatives and Winthrop had corresponded extensively with Parliament. One such communiqué is illuminating. Defending the magistrates’ autonomy within their jurisdiction, despite their continued allegiance to England, in a letter to the Commission, Winthrop construed colonial expertise as intrinsically inferior yet circumstantially superior to metropolitan expertise:

> though we shall readily Admitt, that the wisdome & experience of that great Councell [i.e., Parliament], & of your honors, as a part thereof, are far more able to prescribe Rules of Government, & to Judge of Causes, then suche poore Rustickes, as a wildernesse can breed up, yet … considering the vast distance betweene England & these partes … your consells & Judgmentes, could neither be so well gronded, nor so seasonably applied, as might … be … usefull to us.

Winthrop’s letter is at once self-effacing, in its performance of the “poore Rusticke” deferring to metropolitan judgment, and assertive of colonial prerogative, in its insistence that first-hand political knowledge “seasonably applied” is superior to advice from a “distance.” Winthrop’s exceptionalizing claims about “the different Condition of this place & people” seem to have convinced Parliament that the settlers ought to “have the Government in our owne hands,” for the Commission would eventually grant Winthrop’s request. The colony would enjoy virtual independence until the Restoration, but earlier,
during the free grace controversy, its “external sovereignty” was very much in question.\footnote{Winthrop, \textit{Journal}, 346 (“if we”), 674-675 (“though we”), 671 (“the different”), 675 (“have the”). On deference to metropolitan judgment see Ralph Bauer, \textit{The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For Winthrop on colonial sovereignty see \textit{Journal}, 647-648. On the colony’s virtual autonomy see Miller, \textit{Orthodoxy}, 219.}

The issue of “internal sovereignty” also reached crisis proportions in this period. T. H. Breen usefully narrates the colony’s early decades as a contest between two competing conceptions of magisterial authority: one side argued that the magistrates’ powers had been “\textit{delegated}” by the electorate and thus that they were limited, while the other side viewed the magistrates’ powers as “\textit{discretionary}” and therefore unrestricted. Winthrop steadfastly espoused the “discretionary” position, and the “delegated” party found occasional supporters among the antinomians, especially Henry Vane; but the two conflicts did not perfectly overlap. Instead, the contest over magisterial sovereignty cast a refracted light on the free grace controversy’s debates about the law and complicated the magistrates’ efforts to oust the heretics.\footnote{Breen, \textit{Character}, 59 (“\textit{discretionary}”; “\textit{delegated}”).}

Winthrop’s outspoken advocacy of the “discretionary” position derived from his conception of civic office as a divine calling, from his preference for an empirical approach to political knowledge, and from his sense of the settlement moment as a “state of exception” requiring a godly version of “reason of state.” He believed not only that God appointed certain individuals “to govern unimpeded by … restrictions imposed by those less fit to rule” but also that divine sovereignty was in some measure transferred to the ruler in the process. As Winthrop uncompromisingly put it, “Judges are Gods upon earth,” and obstructing the magistrate is akin to “limiting … providence.” He also believed that local elites were endowed with superior perceptual and interpretive abilities, which helped them to effectively improvise in response to danger. And he argued that the
rigid application of a priori principles was detrimental to new polities: “It is against reason that some men should better judge of the merit of a cause [i.e., case] in the bare theory thereof, than others (as wise and godly) should be able to discern of it pro re nata [“as the circumstance arises”].” Finally, he defended “discretion” not only because “Differences of times, places, etc., may aggravate or extenuate some offences” but also because contingency was endemic to the “infancy” of polities and to the New World.29

Winthrop’s position was thus fundamentally Machiavellian. As George Mosse long ago argued, the Bay governor’s preference for “flexibility of action” in response to “new situations and dangers” demonstrates the assimilation of Machiavellian “reason of state” to Christian ethics by way of Protestant casuistry. Mosse may well have understated the case: he downplays the importance of the colonial context to Winthrop’s ideal of discretion, and he neglects what I take to be the key point of intellectual commonality that allowed Machiavelli’s secular political thought to find such purchase among devout puritans: their shared absolutism. Mosse also errs in presenting his argument as an alternative to the idea that the ‘new sciences’” were central to “the rise of political realism.” As we saw in Chapter One, Machiavelli’s political thought was very much in line with the empirically-derived mastery promised by both the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. All three discursive strands—political, theological, and scientific—intertwined in Atlantic political science. The free grace controversy illustrates this confluence: when the empirical bent of Winthrop’s

providentialism and discretionary political hermeneutic met with the threat of New World rebellion-as-innovation, puritanism’s existing ambivalence toward political change produced unexpected forms of sovereignty-as-innovation.\footnote{George L. Mosse, *The Holy Pretence: A Study in Christianity and Reason of State from William Perkins to John Winthrop* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968), 2 (“flexibility of”), 5 (“new situations”), 4 (“the ‘new’”, “the rise”).}

Winthrop recognized scripture as the only legitimate check on magisterial power, but God’s word could be surprisingly flexible. While the puritans sought to replicate the Bible’s ecclesiastical models, “there was no general demand that the particulars of governmental structure or procedure … be grounded specifically in Old Testament precedent.” They deployed an inchoate notion of historical relativism to argue not only that human positive law was alterable but also that divine law did not apply uniformly in all eras. In Winthrop’s words, “God hath not confined all wisdom, etc., to any one generation, that they should set rules for all others to walk by.” He also drew on the concept of legal “equity” articulated by the influential English theologian William Perkins, which upheld the ruler’s right to adapt the law “according to … [his] discretion, … as the circumstance requireth” and especially when scripture was silent on a given issue. This was often the case. As Mark Cahn notes, “the Bible established few exact penalties.” Paradoxically, then, Winthrop was able to cite scripture as a precedent for the absence of precedent. He legitimized magisterial innovation at the expense of “fixed penalties grounded only upon ‘human … Invention,’” by claiming that Old Testament judges had enjoyed the same latitude.\footnote{Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives*, 158n11 (“there was”), (quoting Allyn B. Forbes et al., eds., *Winthrop Papers*, 6 vols. [Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929-]), IV:475) 191 (“fixed penalties”); Winthrop, *Journal*, 382 (“God hath”); William Perkins, “Epieikeia, or a Treatise of Christian Equity and Moderation,” in Morgan, *Puritan Political Ideas*, 59-73, quotation on 61 (“according to”); Cahn, “Punishment, Discretion,” 126 (“the Bible”). See also Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives*, 158, 161, 165, 181, 190; Breen, *Character*, passim esp. 60; Cahn, “Punishment, Discretion.”}

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Discretion did not necessarily mean severity. Perkinsian “equity” more often recommended the “Mitigation” of penalties than their “extremity” in Massachusetts. In fact, Winthrop espoused the belief “that in the infancy of plantations justice should be administered with more lenity then [sic] in a settled state.” But after he was criticized for excessive forbearance during the Roger Williams affair he acknowledged his “error” and promised “to take up a stricter Course,” as he undoubtedly did during the free grace controversy. As we saw in Chapter Two, however, even “mitigation” functioned as a guarantor of sovereign power. Winthrop’s conception of discretion converted leniency as well as severity, remission as well as punishment, into affirmations of his legitimate right to innovate. The same can be said of the “democratization” of the General Court. While this period saw expanded opportunities for political participation, this ultimately served to ratify the Court’s sovereignty by aggrandizing its source. As Winthrop argued, once granted, electoral consent legitimized any form magisterial discretion might take. The Bay regime thus combined democratic consent with absolutist strategies of rule. It was, in Edmund Morgan’s words, an elected “despotism” whose provisions for legitimate elite innovation “counted for much in a new colony in a new world, where preconceived rules would be constantly rubbing against unforeseen difficulties.” Making the argument Morgan rehearses here is one of the primary aims of Winthrop’s Short Story.32

The “discretionary” versus “delegated” contest would come to a head in conflicts over the magisterial veto, the proposed magistracy for life, and the standing council, which the colonist Richard Saltonstall deemed “a sinful innovation.” But the most severe

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dispute concerned the codification of the colony’s laws. In 1635, Winthrop reports, “The deputyes havinge conceived great danger to our state in regarde that our magistrates (for want of positive Lawes in many Cases[)] might proceed accordinge to their discretions, it was agreed that some men should be appointed to frame a bodye of … Lawes in resemblance to a magna Charta.” The issue was postponed several times before the General Court finally enacted The Lawes and Liberties of Massachusetts in 1648. But while this document specified some penalties, it did not restrict magisterial discretion entirely. The codification dispute clarifies the discretionary position’s key contradiction: Winthrop and his ilk defended magisterial autonomy in the New World even as they attacked unlimited royal prerogative in the Old; the puritan governor sought “to avoid the very limitations … [he] had wished to impose upon the king,” promoting a political theology “hardly distinguishable from the ‘Divine Right’ theory of King James I.”33

Proponents of the “delegated” position often noted this contradiction themselves. Winthrop’s resistance to codification led to fears that “the magistrates affected an Arbitrary Government, & that they had (or sought to have) an unlimited power, to doe what they pleased without Control.” Indeed, accusations of “arbitrary” rule—a synonym for “innovation” often reserved for those in positions of power—abounded in the colony. The Boston lawyer Thomas Lechford’s insistence that “the government is cleerely arbitrary, according to the discretions of the … Magistrates” is representative of countless similar statements. Whether they were concerned about their leaders’ infringements upon

33 Winthrop, Journal, 390 (“a sinful”); 146 (“The deputyes”); Miller, Orthodoxy, 222 (“to avoid”); Mosse, Holy Pretence, 64 (“hardly distinguishable”). On the codification controversy, see Cahn, “Punishment, Discretion”; George Lee Haskins, Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts: A Study in Tradition and Design (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Bozeman, To Live Ancient Lives, 151-192; Morgan, Puritan Dilemma, 145-162; Hall, Reforming People, 22-52. On the veto, magistracy for life, and standing council, see Breen, Character, 77-81, 74-75, and 75-77, respectively; see also Winthrop, Journal, 174, 456-458; Hall, Reforming People, 28-29; Morgan, Puritan Dilemma, 150; Miller, Orthodoxy, 231-232. On the puritan magistrates’ resemblance to the Stuarts see also Hall, Reforming People, 29-30, 33.
or resemblance to the Stuarts’ absolutism, New England dissidents were quite vocal
about their disapproval of what William Pynchon cleverly called the “lawlesse law of
discretion.” Thus, in an intercepted 1634 letter, the puritans’ perennial opponent Thomas
Morton condemned “King Winthrop with all his inventions and his Amsterdam
fantastical ordinances, … which do exemplify his detestation to the church of England,
and the contempt of his majesty’s authority and wholesome laws.”

Winthrop responded to such accusations in his 1644 “Discourse on Arbitrary
Government” and his 1645 “little speech” on liberty. The former insisted that the
magistrates’ annual election by the freemen prevented discretion from becoming
“arbitrary” and excused any appearance to the contrary by likening the colony to Israel in
“Nehemiah his time,” when the polity was threatened by “imminent danger” because it
“was not [yet] setled.” The latter exhorted the electorate to prefer “Civill” liberty—which
is “exercised in a waye of subjection”—over “Naturall” liberty, a liberty to “doe what …
[one] liste[s].” These statements might be said to summarize a career devoted to a liberal
notion of consensual subordination that was no less affirmative of sovereignty-as-
innovation than more baldly coercive forms like absolute monarchy.

V. The “Citty upon a Hill” and the Dialectic of Imitation and Innovation

The previous section argued that Winthrop’s theologically-informed political

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science served to disavow elite innovations and stifle underclass ones. This section contends that the puritans’ politically-minded theological project exhibits a similar dialectic of imitation and innovation. Although scholars have overlooked this in their rush to read the text as the mission statement of a world-altering New England puritan “Errand into the Wilderness,” Winthrop’s oft-cited lay sermon, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” is in fact a key site of ambivalence about colonialism’s novelty. Scholars long believed the sermon to have been dramatically delivered before fellow immigrants onboard the flagship Arbella en route to the New World. But it was more recently shown to have been preached to (or at least intended for) a wider audience of Massachusetts Bay Company affiliates in England just prior to the Winthrop fleet’s departure in the spring of 1630—a circumstance that undermines our sense of the settlers as innovators willfully isolated from an unreformed Old World. “A Modell” famously argues that the members of a godly community must be “knit … together in the Bond of brotherly affecion.” Only by achieving the corporate unity of a body politic joined by the “ligamentes” of Christian “love” can the community hope to uphold a covenant with God modeled on Israel’s. In the sermon’s best-known passage, Winthrop elaborates the stakes of this covenant. If the settlers observe the “Articles” of their “special Commission,” he writes,

wee shall see much more of his wisdome power goodnes and truthe then [sic] formerly wee have bee acquainted with, wee shall finde that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us; soe that if we shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and so cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

The passage is ubiquitous in studies of New England puritanism because it provides a
tidy point of departure for a historiography invested, often unconsciously, in innovation. Winthrop’s exhortation becomes an origin myth for a new kind of settlement, colony, and, ultimately, nation by staging the Great Migration as a dramatic break with the Old World and by rendering puritan covenant theology consonant with later ideologies of American exceptionalism centered on transcendent collective progress.36

Perry Miller’s well-known concept of a New England puritan “Errand” exemplifies this tendency. Based almost exclusively on a selective reading of Winthrop’s sermon, Miller’s “Errand” thesis attributed to the settlers a conscious intention of inspiring widespread political-theological reform in the Old World through their own example. While Miller occasionally registered an awareness of novelty’s pejorative early modern connotations—referring, for example, to “the horrid crime of ‘innovation’”—this did not prevent him from defining the “Errand” as the pursuit of a self-consciously new society. Conveniently forgetting the continent’s native presence, he argues that conditions in America, “a bare land, devoid of already established (and corrupt) institutions,” allowed the puritans to “start de novo” as civil and ecclesiastical architects and thereby to instruct “the Calvinist internationale … [about] how to go about completing the already begun but temporarily stalled revolution in Europe.” Despite substantial critique, the tremendous explanatory power of Miller’s thesis made it something of a scholarly article

of faith. Thus even a figure like Sacvan Bercovitch, whose scholarship has substantially revised Miller’s legacy, argues that the “errand mean[t] progress” and describes puritanism as “committed from the start to … modernization.”

As we have seen, however, such an understanding of change was in fact abhorrent to early moderns in general and seventeenth-century puritans in particular. Nonetheless, Winthrop’s sermon does seem to single New England out as unique among political-theological communities and to narrate that uniqueness as a break with the recent past (“wee shall see much more of [God’s] … truthe … [than] formerly”); it does seem to court a kind of exceptionalism (“hee shall make us a prayse and glory”) while simultaneously rendering the colony a new precedent (“men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England”); and even as it seeks to neutralize accusations of innovation by stressing the divine sovereignty orchestrating history, the sermon renders God’s transformative favor conditional on the colonists’ obedience and relies on material, often political, signifiers as evidence (“ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies”). If scholars have been wrong to attribute the twentieth century’s pro-innovation bias to the puritans, how then do we explain Winthrop’s exuberant, endlessly quoted typological evocation of the “Citty upon a Hill”?

The answer lies in the puritans’ primitivism. As T. Dwight Bozeman’s

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indispensable study of the topic demonstrates, an earnest commitment to replicating scriptural models coexisted with and even abetted an inadvertent tendency toward innovation. Contending against various iterations of the claim that Protestantism was a straightforward agent of modernization—especially Miller’s claims about New England’s “conscious, explicit, collective, overriding, world-redeeming Errand” as purportedly exemplified by Winthrop’s sermon—Bozeman re-centers puritanism on its efforts to recover scriptural antiquity. He argues that the settlers were invested not in an open-ended future but in a sacred past, not in progress but in restitution. Primitivist puritans challenged Catholic and Anglican claims to the continuity of unbroken apostolic succession by presenting themselves as a godly remnant destined to reinstate a more ancient status quo ante eclipsed by centuries of corruption: the era of Israel under the covenant and the early Christian church. This “mythic” “Puritan primordium” had a “normative” force for modern believers because it upheld “the crucial premise … that the first is best”—an assumption common, as we have seen, to many strains of early modern thought but raised to a unprecedented pitch by the Reformation’s otherworldly stakes.38

Anglicans endorsed the doctrine of adiaphora (“things indifferent”), which held that many of the details of church governance and worship were “incidental to salvation” and thus could vary according to time and place. To them, “ecclesiastical invention” was acceptable as long as it did not conflict with explicit scriptural proscription. Puritanism, by contrast, was more prescriptive. Scriptural patterns were binding because they were “pure,” deriving directly “from the divine source … [and] untouched by … corrupting human influences.” For the puritans, the “catalyst of man’s imminent and progressive

38 Bozeman, To Live Ancient Lives, 95 (“conscious, explicit”), 14 (“mythic”; “Puritan primordium”; “normative”; “the crucial”).
venture into a newness beyond profane history was precisely the removal of novelty, of all long-hated invention, from the face of the earth.” The reformers’ rejection of clerical hierarchy, ornate iconography, and elaborate liturgical ritual was thus an expression of the innovation prohibition. And this bred a decidedly retrospective conception of history: movement “through the age of reformation and toward the eschatological climax was simultaneously a retrogression.” As David Scobey puts it, “the New England Way did not claim to forge a revolutionary new order but to revive an earlier past.” If the settlers had an “Errand,” it was, in Scott Michaelsen’s words, an “errand of recovery.”

And yet puritan primitivism entailed something more than simple restoration. As Bozeman acknowledges, it often resulted in objective historical change: “the Puritan reverence for first things … function[ed] as an antitraditionalist force”; by “laboring to … restore first forms of church and society, [the] New Englanders altered many of the received ways of English community”; their “restitutionist accomplishments bespoke a society so unprecedentedly keyed to biblical pattern” that it was absolutely “historically new.” Deriving directly from God, primitive ordinances enjoyed a sanction far superior to that of mere human precedent: they were not simply ancient but timeless, impervious to historical change. John Cotton illustrated this belief in a surprising claim he made while voicing the primitivist argument that “No new traditions must bee thrust on us.” Defining “True Antiquity” not merely as that which derives “From the first Institution … of a thing” but also as “That which fetcheth its beginning from God,” he argued that divine

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ordinances like “Baptisme and the Lord’s Supper” were binding even though they had emerged in “later times” (i.e., after “Christs coming”). Because divine sovereignty is operant at specific moments in history but orchestrated from the transcendent perspective of eternity, Cotton paradoxically argues that “whatever comes from God … is always new, and never waxeth old, and as it is new, so it is always old.” Thus did puritanism venture far beyond other, less energetically theological forms of primitivism in its simultaneous contempt for and endorsement of innovation. In William Stoever’s words, the “combination of newness and order” in Protestant theology bred “perennial tension,” rendering “innovation, separation, and revolution difficult and conscience-wracking matters for Puritans, even as the Spirit … pressed them toward all three.”

Winthrop’s primitivism is on full display in his call to imitate Biblical “patterns” of charity and self-sacrifice during the colony’s times of initial hardship. All of the models he cites—Christ, the “Apostles,” “the Israelites,” “the primitive Churche,” and “our forefathers in times of persecution here in England”—derive from “extraordinary times and occasions,” that is, from exceptional moments when the preservation of a godly remnant required that normal courses of action be abandoned. These models apply to the settlement moment only because it too is “extraordinary,” typical in its atypicality. The word “extraordinary” appears six times in the sermon, but the most important usage occurs in Winthrop’s closing exhortation. Here, he announces that the “end[s] wee aime at … are extraordinary, therefore wee must not content our selves with usuall ordinary meanes[;] whatsoever wee did … when wee lived in England, the same must wee doe and

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more allsoe where wee goe.” The passage describes a commitment to recovering primitive precedent, to be sure, but imitating scriptural models also promises to render New England unprecedented in post-Biblical time. The sermon is predicated, after all, on Winthrop’s self-identification with Moses, the leader of an exodus of the godly but also a figure whom Machiavelli had identified as an archetype of “the innovator.” Scholars who read “A Modell” as exemplary of a modernizing “Errand” are thus responding to a genuinely innovative impulse in the text, even as they fail to appreciate that this emerges only inadvertently, as a side effect of the puritans’ restorationist ambitions, and that it was a point of vulnerability in a cultural climate hostile toward novelty.41

As an alternative to the positively-stated mission of the “Errand” thesis, we would do well to attend to the tremendous risk at the core of Winthrop’s sermon: the risk of becoming a negative exemplum, “a story and a by-word through the world,” a cautionary tale about the consequences of “deal[ing] falsely with our god.” While, in Michael Warner’s words, “Critics have … been content to produce untiring enthusiasm for the rhetoric of the city on the hill,” a more careful reading reveals that Winthrop was concerned less with success than with failure, less with the promise than with the peril of having “the eies of all people … upon us.” Warner terms this condition “hazardous specularity,” arguing that the colony’s (real or imagined) hyper-visibility was not an asset but a liability—one, I would add, that links questions of observation and objectivity with accusations of colonial rebellion, heresy, and innovation. Cotton crystallized this linkage, warning that the colony’s failure would “force all whose eyes are on you, throughout the

Christian world to think, these [Congregationalist institutions] are but the inventions of men.” Insofar as it makes New England vulnerable to scrutiny as well as available for adulation, “A Modell” thus frames the colonial enterprise as dependent upon its favorable portrayal in the unpredictable representational field of the emergent public sphere. In this sense, as Michaelsen argues, the sermon is not a declaration of independence so much as a “diagram of … reporting relationships” between colony and metropole. As we will see, a sense of “hazardous specularity” pervades Winthrop’s reportage in the Short Story.42

“A Modell” attempts to head off accusations of innovation by emphasizing the colony’s conformity not only with scriptural precedent but also with traditional political relations modeled on a providentially superintended natural world. Winthrop begins by insisting that hierarchy is divinely ordained and thus universal: “God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the Condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjeccion.” The clear implication is that New England will uphold this enduring political wisdom, that colonialism will not entail innovations upon a social structure found “in all times.” To evidence this point, he invokes the familiar body politic emblem as a kind of natural precedent. He explains that every “body … consists of partes and that which knits these partes together [i.e., love] gives the body its perfeccion, because it makes eache parte soe contiguous to [each] other as thereby they doe mutually participate with each other, both in strength and infirmity[,] in pleasure and paine.” As with William Strachey’s palm tree and the ship of state emblems, discussed in

the previous chapter, Winthrop’s body politic serves to defend Massachusetts against both rebellion-as-innovation and accusations of rebellion-as-innovation. His body politic enjoys natural and divine sanction, since it mirrors the hierarchical mutuality found in both the human body and in “the most perfect of all bodies, Christ and his church.” As with Strachey’s decapitated palm tree, moreover, Winthrop’s emblem makes rhetorically available the specter of its own perverse inversion: the “monstrous” antinomian birth.43

Crucially, however, Winthrop’s emblem also complicates itself. For the sermon goes on to associate the human body that has heretofore represented unchanging natural-political relations with the transformative power of divine grace. Through a complex series of transpositions Winthrop links his emblem of the godly-because-non-innovative polity with the spiritual regeneration experienced by its elect members. In a crucial passage, he explains that the Christian “love” that serves as “the sinewes and other ligaments” of the body politic “is the fruite of the new birthe, and none can have it but the new Creature.” The sermon’s dizzying shifts between individual and collective scales suggest that New England might seek forms of political change on par with the event of salvation. Inexorably material rather than wholly spiritual, divinely orchestrated but brought to fruition by human agency, Winthrop’s body politic cannot help but represent the possibility of innovation latent with puritanism.44

In sum, “A Modell of Christian Charity” invests New England with an unprecedented and exceptional status in modernity paradoxically born of its conformity with scriptural archetypes. The sermon exhibits a dialectic of imitation and innovation
which is paradigmatic of the colony’s broader history and which became a matter of
dispute during the free grace controversy. The sermon’s appeal to the “extraordinary” as
a historical category resonates with the “state of exception” theory discussed in previous
chapters, wherein the sovereign can legitimately suspend legal norms in the face of
unforeseen conditions. Giorgio Agamben’s passing remark that “messianism is … a
theory of the state of exception” prompts us to consider how the Calvinist emphasis on a
divine sovereignty that providentially intrudes into everyday life impacted debates about
magisterial discretion and colonial autonomy, especially in the contingent circumstances
of early settlement. In what follows, I argue that the “due forme of Government” that
Winthrop called for was one capable of orchestrating relations between a sovereign God
and his sovereign earthly representatives in such a way that certain human innovations
could gain validity as the “means” of carrying out divine ones. And I read the free grace
controversy as a dispute about the questions of agency involved in bringing about that
change and the questions of epistemology involved in interpreting it.45

VI. “I Saw This Monster”: Empiricism and Providentialism in the *Short Story*

Energized by the centrality of sensory experience to Protestant hermeneutics and
by the importance of elite eyewitnessing to local magisterial discretion, the orthodoxy’s
report on the free grace controversy stakes its credibility on its empiricism. The *Short
Story*’s subtitle, for example, indicates that it was “Published at the instant request of
sundry, by one that was an eye and eare-witnesse of the carriage of matters there.”

Although the phrase seems to refer not to Winthrop (as scholars have often assumed) but

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45 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford:
40 (“due forme”).
rather to Thomas Weld, its recourse to what Jim Egan calls “the rhetoric of experience” is
unmistakable. Moreover, one of Weld’s primary justifications for publication—“it’s
requisite that Gods great works should be made knowne”—situates the text within an
enduring tradition of puritan empiricism. Dedicated to documenting the sensible effects
of divine providence, this tradition would include Rivett’s “science of the soul,” Increase
Mather’s self-consciously Boylean Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences
(1684), Cotton Mather’s pious contributions to the Philosophical Transactions of the
Royal Society, the use of “spectral evidence” in the Salem witchcraft trials, and the
experiential conversion morphology and sermonic theory of Jonathan Edwards.46

The Short Story’s empiricism is apparent in its heresiographic compilation of the
antinomian’s theological errors, in its quasi-forensic accounts of the controversy’s civil
and ecclesiastical trials (which ironically functioned to record the public speech of a
woman accused of illicit public speaking), and especially in its reportage on the
antinomian “monstrous births,” my focus in this section. In its discussion of the births,
the text participated in a popular Renaissance and Reformation tradition of inquiry into
natural marvels, which yoked together theological, political, and scientific discourses. As
Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park observe, early modern “monsters” functioned
simultaneously as bearers of “ominous religious resonances” and as “objects of scientific
inquiry.” Especially in light of Francis Bacon’s “injunction to seek the anomaly in
nature,” marvels like “monstrous births” played a crucial role in the rise of “empirical
investigation,” raising important issues of evidence and credibility. In their equally

empirical role as “portents signifying divine wrath and imminent catastrophe,” they also became vehicles for political-theological critique. In this way “monstrous births” constituted an obvious object of study for Atlantic political science.\textsuperscript{47}

The antinomian “monstrous birth” functions in the \textit{Short Story} as an emblem, a material object expressive of a broader meaning that inheres within it rather than being imposed from without by a human interpreter. Much as Strachey’s “True Reportory” had presented the shipwreck as an inversion of the “ship of state” emblem, the \textit{Short Story} presents the “monstrous births” as inversions of the body politic emblem that Winthrop had developed in “A Modell of Christian Charity.” As an unnatural aberration, a product of illicit female creativity, and a formless, non-hierarchically arranged composite body proliferating beyond its ill-defined bounds, the “monstrous birth” is a vivid figure for political-theological disorder. Winthrop’s empiricism initially reinforces this emblematic reading: body politic and “monstrous birth” alike become more effective signifiers insofar as they are made tangible through detailed description. But as with Strachey, empiricism ultimately compromises Winthrop’s emblem. While the births convey the text’s major arguments about the heretics, they also tempt its authors into unrestrained interpretations of their own. Winthrop and Weld seek to legitimize their hermeneutic praxis as faithful to the New Scientific gold standard of corroborated eyewitnessing, but their text also fueled critiques of orthodox political-theological epistemology as productive of nothing more than human invention.

Of Dyer, Weld simply remarks that she “brought forth her birth of a woman child,

Winthrop had more to say. Although he does not comment in the *Short Story* on Hutchinson’s miscarriage (which took place in Aquidneck following her banishment and thus was not available to him at the time of composition), he provides a detailed description of Dyer’s. This account’s conformity to the protocols of early natural scientific description serves to substantiate his claim that the heretics represent an exceptional threat to ecclesiastical order and civil peace. In a passage based on an entry in his journal he writes:

At Boston in New England, upon the 17. day of October 1637. the wife of one William Dyer … was delivered of a large woman childe, it was stillborn, about two moneths before her time, the child having life a few hours before the delivery, but so monstrous and misshapen, as the like hath scarce been heard of: it had no head but a face, which stood so low upon the brest, as the eares (which were like an Apes) grew upon the shoulders. … The eyes stood farre out, so did the mouth, the nose was hooking upward, the brest and back was [sic] full of sharp prickles, like a Thornback, the navell and all the belly with the distinction of the sex, were, where the lower part of the back and hips should have been, and those back parts were on the side the face stood. … The arms and hands, with the thighs and legges, were as other childrens, but in stead of toes, it had upon each foot three claws, with talons like a young fowle. … Upon the back above the belly it had two great holes, like mouthes, and in each of them stuck out a piece of flesh. … It had no forehead, but in the place thereof, above the eyes, foure hornes, whereof two were above an inch long, hard, and sharp, the other two were somewhat shorter.

The description of the birth evokes the salient characteristics of the antinomians’ errors.

Winthrop follows Weld in depicting it as unprecedented (“the like hath scarce been heard of”). He characterizes it as unnatural, exhibiting both distorted human features and a grotesque combination of animal ones. And he presents the birth as disorderly, its midsection swapped back for front in a microcosmic exhibition of that favorite phrase of elite reporters on early modern rebellion, “the world turned upside down.”

Winthrop follows this description with a list of “observable” or noteworthy aspects of the “birth and [its] discovery.” First, the “Father and Mother were of the highest forme of our refined Familists,” as was the “Midwife,” Jane Hawkins, and of course Hutchinson herself, who assisted with the birth. Second, “the women who were present at the womans travaile, were suddenly taken with such a violent vomiting, and purging, without eating or drinking of any thing, as they were forced to goe home.” Third, the moment the unborn child died “the bed wherein the mother lay shook so violently, as all which were in the room perceived it.” Fourth, the “manner of the discovery was very strange”: one of the elders overheard another colonist identify Dyer as “the woman who had the Monster” as she departed Hutchinson’s church trial, and Winthrop followed up on the hint, questioning Hutchinson, Hawkins, and Cotton, who revealed that the fetus had been buried in secret months earlier on Cotton’s advice.49

Winthrop presents his claims about the supernatural happenings that accompanied the birth—the “vomiting” and bed-shaking—as trustworthy because they were collectively apprehended, “perceived” by “all which were in the room.” To adopt a phrase of Steven Shapin’s, these witnesses serve as “extensions of his own senses,” much as Winthrop, as credible colonial reporter, serves as an extension of his metropolitan readers’ senses. Moreover, Winthrop’s remarks about the birth’s “discovery” lead to what is arguably the text’s most empiricist act: his order that the body of “the child” “be taken up [i.e., exhumed], and viewed … for further assurance.” “[T]hough it were much corrupted,” he concludes, “yet the horns, and claws, and holes in the back, and some scales, &c. were found and seen of [i.e., by] above a hundred persons.” Here, the material

49 Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 281 (“observable”; “birth and”; “Father and”; “Midwife”; “the women”; “the bed”; “manner of”; “the woman”).
evidence of the disinterred fetus confirms the reports Winthrop had compiled before itself being transformed into a piece of textual testimony. And again this testimony is unimpeachably collective rather than dubiously individual. We might say of Winthrop’s reportage what Sarah Rivett says of the testimony of grace: “an audience of converted saints confirms its legitimacy and authenticity by bearing witness to the visible evidence.” If the *Short Story* is an early foray into print publicity, as scholars have argued, its candor, eyewitness claims, and appeal to readerly rationality as readily demarcate it as work of Atlantic political science combining public sphere debate, theological polemic, and scientific reportage.⁵⁰

Winthrop’s providentialist commitments are somewhat understated here—especially compared to Weld’s more heavy-handed interpretations—but his empiricism is nonetheless directed entirely toward that end. Empiricism could be a liability as well as an asset, however. In the first place, Winthrop could fail to meet his own empiricist standards. Contradictions between the different descriptions of the “monstrous birth” that he circulated in old and New England suggest that the “true state [of the exhumed fetus] was grossly exaggerated by him, perhaps by finding, self-deludedly, what he was looking for.” He inhabited the literary posture of empiricism, invoking his own high status and eyewitness experience in the attestation that concludes one such description: “I saw this Monster and doe affirme this relacon to be true. [Signed.] John Wenthropp gent of the Massachusett.” But closer analysis suggests that he “had only the vaguest idea of the state

of malformation of the body at birth and that his accounts were variously embellished.”51

There was also the issue of Winthrop’s source. The description of Dyer’s “monstrous birth” that appears in his journal is so similar to the one that appears in the *Short Story* as to make re-quotation unnecessary. But the insight the journal provides into the provenance of that description merits close attention. The *Short Story* account quoted above simply begins with the relevant details (“At Boston in New England…”), scarcely mentions and never names the “Midwife,” Jane Hawkins, and subordinates her second-hand testimony about the delivery to Winthrop’s first-hand account of the exhumed fetus. The journal entry, by contrast, makes it clear that the description implicitly presented in the *Short Story* as Winthrop’s own words is actually Hawkins’s: “she made this report of it, viz.: It was a woman child, stillborn…” Indeed, Anne Jacobson Schutte argues that Hawkins “provid[ed] virtually all the details that later appeared in print.” Winthrop’s use of Hawkins’s testimony far exceeds what Shapin describes as the conventional reliance on observations provided and experiments conducted by anonymous subordinate assistants in the period’s gentlemanly scientific culture. Not only did Hawkins’s gender and dependent status associate her with mendacity and “inaccurate perceptions,” she was also a follower of Hutchinson, “a rank familist” who was “prohibited from practicing midwifery,” banished for heterodoxy, and even suspected of witchcraft. By obscuring Hawkins’s contributions to his report, Winthrop attempted to downplay both his reliance on heretical witnesses and his own corresponding lack of first-hand experience—a

51 Valerie Pearl and Morris Pearl, “Governor John Winthrop on the Birth of the Antinomians’ ‘Monster’: The Earliest Reports to Reach England and the Making of a Myth,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd Ser., 102 (1990): 21-37, quotations on 27 (“true state”), 37 (“I saw”), 28 (“had only”). Winthrop sent descriptions of Dyer’s “monstrous birth” to William Bradford and Roger Williams. A version of the description also figures prominently in a pamphlet entitled *Newes from New-England of a Most Strange and Prodigious Birth* (London, 1642). And in 1990 Pearl and Pearl discovered two additional English manuscript accounts of Dyer’s fetus in England, both written in 1638 by individuals connected with the colonial project who had access to Winthrop’s description.
pattern repeated in the journal’s account of Hutchinson’s “monstrous birth.” In short, empiricism could both undermine and bolster Winthrop’s providentialism. Inconsistencies in his reportage and his informants’ suspect credentials made him vulnerable to precisely the charge of heresy he leveled against the antinomians.52

In the wake of the *Short Story*’s publication, John Wheelwright’s camp would critique the orthodoxy’s political science on empiricist grounds. The antinomians would take a different approach. As the decision to conceal Dyer’s fetus suggests, they saw Winthrop’s sense-based hermeneutic coming. Once he aired his reading, they responded with an anti-empiricist critique befitting their theological rejection of mediated contact with God. Questioning the very premise of orthodox political empiricism by insisting upon the immediacy of divine communication, the Hutchinsonians would argue that Winthrop’s interpretations were merely the products of his own imagination.

Weld’s account of the “monstrous births” in the *Short Story*’s preface was similarly assailable. Less rigorously empiricist than Winthrop, Weld leaps more readily from observation to interpretation, announcing the births’ function as a divine sign:

> Then God himselfe was pleased to step in with his casting voice, and bring in his owne vote and suffrage from heaven, by testifying his displeasure against their opinions and practices, as clearely as if he had pointed with his finger, in causing the two fomenting women in the time of the height of the Opinions to produce out of their wombs, as before they had out of their braines, such monstrous births as no Chronicle (I thinke) hardly ever recorded the like.

Weld presents the “monstrous births” as a legible divine judgment on the heretics that vindicates their repression by the orthodoxy. God has countered Hutchinson’s illicit

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speech with a superior form of expression, a “loud-speaking providence from Heaven.”

And precisely because it is conveyed via natural signs, this pronouncement is unmistakable (“as clearely as if he had pointed with his finger”). Weld is also more explicit in his efforts to correlate the details of the miscarriage with Hutchinson’s errors:

*Mistris Hutchinson being big with child … brought forth not one, (as Mistris Dier did) but (which was more strange to amazement) 30. monstrous births or thereabouts, at once; some of them bigger, some lesser, some of one shape, some of another; few of any perfect shape, none at all of them (as farre as I could ever learne) of humane shape. … And see how the wisdom of God fitted his judgement [sic] to her sinne every way, for looke as she had vented mishapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters; and as about 30. Opinions in number, so many monsters.

Weld’s more direct equation of heresy and monstrosity is, accordingly, less empirical. Curiously, he implies that he is not even certain about the two details on which the whole emblem depends: the number of “births” and the number of “opinions.” He twice qualifies his enumeration of the former, and he contradicts the accounts of the latter provided later in the text. He also calls into question his own eyewitnessing (“as farre as I could ever learne”). In short, Weld’s political science could be somewhat careless.53

Weld was no less committed to the ideology of empiricism for that, however. Thus he attempts to overcome a major pitfall of candid description, the fact that one risked jeopardizing one’s credibility by describing prodigies: “These things are so strange, that I am almost loath to be the reporter of them, lest I should seem to feigne a new story, and not to relate an old one, but I have learned otherwise (blessed be his name) then [sic] to delude the world with untruths.” Weld invokes the issue of tale-telling only to debunk it here, hoping that his mere awareness of the problem will remove him.

from suspicion. But he also registers the linkage between the stigma of mendacity and the stigma of novelty ("lest I should seem to feigne a new story"). The very newness that made an object worthy of observation threatened to compromise the observer’s integrity. Too intense a focus on an object like the “monstrous births” risked associating the reporter with the “insatiable human appetite for the rare, the novel, the strange” or with “curiosity,” an epistemological stance whose shifting fortunes—from what St. Augustine called a “lust of the eyes” linked with forbidden knowledge and original sin to a marker of refinement in the eighteenth-century culture of exotic commodity consumption—index the slow, contested process of de-pejorativizing the new.54

Scholars have offered a variety of useful readings of the Short Story’s “monstrous birth” emblem, but they have often overlooked what I take to be its central feature. For example, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon reads the “monstrous birth” alongside the body politic Winthrop describes in “A Modell of Christian Charity,” noting the disparate valences of the two bodies’ similar headlessness: the former indicted simple democracy and “corrupt female interiority” while the latter lauds New England’s emergent liberal hegemony, which replaced enforced submission to a distant (and soon-to-be-beheaded) head of state with the internalization of discipline by consenting subjects. Yet Dillon’s illuminating account disregards temporality. The fully developed fetus is an ideal emblem of the early modern concept of progress, defined as change culminating in a foreordained telos; it represents legitimate, natural replication. By contrast, the “monstrous” stillborn fetus is an apt figure for development gone horribly awry, for proliferating aberration.

Winthrop and Weld find this particular rhetorical figure an effective means of depicting the antinomians as unnatural, disorderly, and dangerously creative, then, because the “monstrous birth” was an emblem of innovation itself.55

The “monstrous birth” represented the disturbing fruit of human invention, the dangerous novelty desired by non-elites (especially women), and the rebellious effects of an overemphasis on the transformative power of free grace. Like Strachey’s use of the “murmuring” trope, the “monstrous birth” allows Winthrop and Weld to link the antinomians’ corporeal excesses with their political irrationality, and here, the emblem’s gendered resonances undoubtedly aided their efforts to refocus attention on Hutchinson and deflect it from Henry Vane. But the figure’s most significant feature is its novelty (an attribute with which Vane remained associated, as we will see). This novelty became the occasion for observation, since what was new was not comprehensible by recourse to textual authorities, inherited assumptions, or rationalist deduction. And the result of this dialectical process was a warrant to depart from precedent in the pursuit of civil and ecclesiastical order in accordance with Winthrop’s ideal of magisterial discretion. In short, political-theological innovation became the grounds for further innovation, heresy and rebellion the occasions for exercises of sovereignty.

VII. “A Spurious Issue of his Intellect”: Empiricist and Anti-Empiricist Critiques

Empiricism was essential to the dialectic of innovation and counter-innovation that allowed the orthodoxy to emerge victorious from the free grace controversy. Yet as

55 See Dillon, Gender of Freedom, 82-102, esp. 91-92, quotation on 92 (“corrupt female”); Egan, Authorizing Experience, 66-81. Although it plays a less central role in the text than the “monstrous birth” emblem, the trope of “infection” follows the same logic of proliferation that I have identified as a key feature of the innovation idiom; see Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 212, 265, 202.
we have seen, empiricism also entailed certain risks. In the aftermath of the controversy, the magistrates and ministers had in fact been deeply divided over whether or not to publish an official account in England. On the one hand, they wished to counter the damaging “misreport” already circulating in the metropole via word of mouth, transatlantic letters, and publications by re-emigrant New England dissidents, anti-Congregationalist heresiographers, and Presbyterian polemicists. On the other hand, they seem to have foreseen that the information recorded in an official vindication could be used against them. Tending to the former view, the minister Thomas Hooker argued for publication in an April 1637 letter to his son-in-law Thomas Shepard. Against those who feared that publication would “bring a prejudice upon the plantations,” Hooker contended that New England affairs had never really been private at all: “there is nothing done in corners here but it is openly there [i.e., in England] related and in such notorious cases, which cannot be kept secret, the most plain and naked relation ever causeth the truth to most appear.” Hooker’s remarks are expressive at once of what Michael Warner calls the “hazardous specularity” inherent to the “Citty upon a Hill” paradigm and of an emergent optimism about the objectivity of print and the rationality of an adjudicating readership common to both early scientific culture and later public sphere discourse. But Hooker was not persuasive enough to effect immediate publication. Although the clerk John Higginson was tasked with preparing the text for the press, the ministers and magistrates shelved the project again in 1641. Scholars are unsure who carried the documents across the Atlantic and arranged for the first printing in 1644, but Weld’s editorial labors were likely meant to reassert control over a text that threatened to do more harm than good.56

56 Winthrop, “Short Story” in Hall AC, 290 (“misreport”); Hall, Ways of Writing, (quoting Thomas Hutchinson, History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay [Boston, 1767], I:60-61) 59 (“bring
This is precisely what happened. The *Short Story* appeared in London at a crucial point in the course of the Civil Wars. Antinomian sects had begun to emerge in England in the early 1640s, and the Presbyterian-dominated Westminster Assembly of Divines first convened in 1643 to decide the appropriate features of the restructured English Church. The *Short Story* was intended to prove that the mechanisms of authority in Congregationalist Massachusetts were able to halt the spread of heresy and sectarianism that many feared would result from so decentralized an ecclesiastical arrangement, but this plan backfired: in the hands of Presbyterians like Thomas Edwards and Robert Baillie the text became proof that Congregationalism produced heresy. Moreover, by the time the *Short Story* appeared in print, Civil War exigencies were nudging English Independents toward tolerationism, so that New England elites found themselves criticized both by their avowed Presbyterian and Anglican enemies (for breeding heresy) and by their English Independent allies (for persecuting religious dissidents). This, I want to argue, was the risk colonial elites took in documenting exceptional New World political challenges in a bid for discretionary power based on experiential knowledge unavailable to metropolitan superiors. Eyewitness reportage may have secured colonial leaders the right to innovate within their own jurisdictions, but they also empowered a wider field of interpreters once they entered the transatlantic public sphere.\(^57\)

Beyond taking the colonists at their own incriminating word, two other avenues of critique were available to New England’s enemies. An explicit response to the *Short Story* appeared in London in 1645 under the title *Mercurius Americanus, Mr. Welds his...*  

Antitype, or Massachusetts great Apologie examined. Long ascribed to John Wheelwright but more recently attributed to his son John Wheelwright, Jr., the text condemned the handling of the free grace controversy. And crucially, this condemnation took the form of a critique of the Short Story as insufficiently empiricist. Focusing its attack on Weld (possibly out of ignorance of Winthrop’s authorial role), Mercurius Americanus bemoans the orthodoxy’s uncharitable treatment of the antinomians and argues against the blanket attribution of their errors to Wheelwright, Sr. Most importantly, it takes issue with the Short Story on methodological and stylistic grounds. For instance, Wheelwright, Jr. questions Weld’s self-described efforts to “perfect” the text’s disordered first edition, disputing the generic parameters of the colonial report in the process:

*how will he perfect it? He tells us how, by laying down the sense and order of the story: What have we here? a mythologie? Reall Histories … carry their own sense [i.e., meaning], matters of fact need no comment, [whereas] fictions have their senses, Fables their Morals. Did his zeal … towards the prostration of these Opinionists pitch his thoughts, … upon … invective? … did the man lay down his own sense, when he resolved to lay down the sense of the story?*

Wheelwright, Jr., distinguishes between denigrated belletristic genres (“mythologie,” “fictions,” “Fables”)—and later, “polemicall Essayes”—which bear the marks of subjective interpretation, and “Reall Histories,” which are comprised of that hallmark of empiricist culture, the “matter of fact,” and thus defy authorial manipulation. Weld has misrepresented the Short Story as an instance of the latter genre when it is in fact an example of the former. At the heart of this critique we find not skepticism about empiricism but a thoroughgoing faith in the printed report’s ability to convey observed truth. Wheelwright, Jr. believes that true content entails its own transparent form of presentation (“Reall Histories … carry their own sense”) and so contends that Weld has
falsely claimed objectivity for what is in fact a highly imaginative account.\footnote{58}

*Mercurius Americanus* mounts an even more devastating critique in its discussion of the “monstrous births.” Here, Wheelwright, Jr. insists that Weld’s (really Winthrop’s) citation of second-hand testimony “from any [person] then present [at the births]” fails to justify his interpretive “confiden[ce].” Demanding first-hand knowledge, Wheelwright, Jr. derisively writes, “I admire his certainty, or rather impudence: did the man obtestricate[?]” Questioning the text’s empiricism while upholding empiricism as a value, he suggests that he would be satisfied with the *Short Story*’s account only if Weld had delivered the fetus himself. Ultimately, *Mercurius Americanus* dramatically reverses the *Short Story*’s central invective:

As for his [i.e., Weld’s] Analogy, which he observes betwixt her productions [i.e., Hutchinson’s births] and opinions, *That as she held thirty of the one, so she brought forth thirty of the other: Gods wisdom (he saith) fitting those to these: It is a monstrous conception of his brain, a spurious issue of his intellect, acted upon by a sweatish and Feaverish zeal.*

If, as I have argued, the antinomian “monstrous birth” is an emblem of political-theological innovation, representing heretical thought, unbridled creativity, and undisciplined action through a figure of proliferating bodily excess and deformity, Wheelwright, Jr.’s depiction of Weld’s interpretation as “a monstrous conception of his brain” amounts to a devastating attack on the orthodoxy’s epistemological integrity.

Insofar as the word “spurious” denoted not only untruth but also bastardy in the period,

Mercurius Americanus represents Weld’s interpretations as his illegitimate children, his own monstrous births. Wheelwright, Jr., thus associates the Short Story with precisely the attributes that had been used to denigrate the antinomians. The text substitutes human novelty for divine truth in a grotesquely embodied way that debars its author(s) from the public sphere of rational debate. Instead of undertaking the “accurate physicall inspection” “require[d]” of him, Weld “resolves his … imperfect … if not feigned facts into phanatique meditations.” And crucially, this fanaticism—ostensibly aimed at curbing political disruption—has politically disruptive effects. Ultimately, Wheelwright, Jr. not only criticizes the Short Story as insufficiently empiricist, he also dismisses its appeal to the kinds of discretionary power that observable emergencies were held to necessitate.

Mocking Weld’s “pretence” for publication—“the necessity of State”—Wheelwright, Jr. writes, “he [i.e., Weld] would be thought an Oracle of Imperiall depths; A considerable penman, upon whom States depend, and [upon] whose writings the exigences [sic] of Kingdoms expect.” Denying Weld a place in the grandiose project of Atlantic political science, Mercurius Americanus depicts him instead as a greater heretic and disturber of the peace than any of the antinomians, as the colony’s true innovator.59

The Short Story also expresses concern about a different type of criticism leveled by the antinomians, who took more fundamental issue with sensory experience as a source of knowledge. According to Weld, even though anyone might “read their sinne in these judgements [sic]”—that is, even though the “monstrous births” are perfectly clear signs of divine displeasure with the antinomians—the heretics refused to acknowledge “the finger of God in all these dreadfull passages.” Instead, he laments, they “turned all

[blame] from themselves upon the faithfull servants of God that laboured to reclaime them, saying: ... This is for you, yee legalists, that your eyes might be further blinded, by Gods hand upon us, in your legall ways, and stumble and fall, and in the end breake your necks into Hell, if yee imbrace not the truth." This passage clarifies that Atlantic political science was not simply the orthodoxy’s preferred optic for representing the free grace controversy but, rather, was among the issues at stake in the controversy itself. Weld presents the “monstrous births” as transparent divine messages, but the antinomians insist that their mediatedness negates their epistemological value. The essence of their heresy, we recall, involved their claim to direct, unmediated access to the divine and a corresponding insistence on the insufficiency of material signs and “means” of God’s will. Aligning Weld and Winthrop’s providential political empiricism with the “legalist” approach to salvation and assurance of salvation, the antinomians invert the orthodoxy’s metaphors of ocular certainty by describing them as “blinded” to “the truth.” In this way, the antinomians arrive, via a different avenue, at the same conclusion reached in Mercurius Americanus: the magistrates and ministers are the true innovators, mistaking their own corrupt perceptions and outright inventions for truth and promoting a sinful political-theological activism at odds with God’s sovereign providence.60

VIII. Magisterial Discretion and “The Absolutism of the Prophet”

The antinomians’ rejection of political empiricism constituted a powerful challenge to the orthodoxy’s hegemony. But equally troubling were those moments when the heretics engaged in a counter-innovative repurposing of orthodox representational

60 Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 215 (“read their”; “the finger”; “turned all”).
strategies. A few key examples will serve to illustrate the fundamental similarity, first, between antinomianism’s indifference to the moral law and the magistrates’ claims to sovereign discretion and, second, between familism’s unmediated access to divine truth and the empiricist orthodoxy’s comparably intimate access to God via created “means.” Especially when they show the free grace controversy intersecting with the discretionary-delegated debate, these moments of resemblance confirm that the clash between the orthodoxy and the antinomians fundamentally concerned the epistemological merits of empirical political science and the monopolization of the legitimate right to innovate.

John Wheelwright’s fast day sermon had urged adherents to the covenant of grace to engage in “combate” against “those under a covenant of works.” While he insisted that “the weapons of our warfare are not carnall but spirituall,” the sermon elsewhere seemed to countenance precisely the violent uprising it claimed to disown. Thus the Short Story points out that his “instances of illustration … were of another nature, as of Moses killing the Egyptian” and other passages where “victories” were obtained “with swords and hammers” which “are no spirituall weapons.” Even “if his intent were not to stirre up to open force and armes,” Winthrop concludes, “yet his reading and experience might have told him, how dangerous it is to heat peoples affections against their opposites.” On the one hand, this critique seems sound. Wheelwright had noted and disregarded this risk in the sermon itself: responding to concerns that his words “will cause a combustion in the Church and common wealth,” he states, “I must confesse and acknowledge it will do so, but what then? did not Christ come to send fire upon the earth[?]” On the other hand, the Short Story’s defense of Wheelwright’s conviction rests uneasily alongside instances of the orthodoxy “heat[ing] peoples affections against their opposites.” As Michael Winship
notes, Wheelwright’s sermon “starts to seem like more of the same” when viewed alongside statements by Thomas Shepard and others. Wheelwright even invoked the same scripture Winthrop had used to embolden his fellow settlers in “A Modell of Christian Charity”: “Joshua 23. 10. One of you shall chase a thousand.” The conflation of “carnall” and “spirituall” forms of “combate” was thus the common property of the orthodox and heretical alike; where they differed was in their definitions of the enemy.61

Wheelwright’s sermon not only demonstrates the ready slippage between material and spiritual registers in Protestant hermeneutics, it also lays bare the usual strategies for circumventing Calvinist limitations on human agency. As an exaggerated form of orthodox puritanism (rather than its structural opposite), antinomianism helps us to see the contradiction between spiritual passivity in the face of an absolutely sovereign God and the kind of political-theological activity sometimes expected of an embattled godly remnant. Wheelwright’s antinomian insistence that Christ alone is responsible for one’s regeneration exists in tension with his remarkably activist calls to (spiritual) arms elsewhere in the sermon: “we must … come out against the enimyes of the Lord”; “we must kill them with the word of the Lord”; “we must be willing to lay downe our lives.” This position’s ironies become especially apparent when he recommends active resistance of those who falsely preach of meritorious salvation: “if we do not strive, those under a covenant of works will prevaile.” Ultimately, the sermon casts suspicion on all efforts to render human passivity in soteriological affairs consonant with human agency

in political affairs, including the orthodoxy’s suppression of the antinomians.\(^{62}\)

Hutchinson makes this point more directly during a pointed exchange with Winthrop early on in her civil trial. Here, she presses the prosecution to specify the laws she has transgressed. Winthrop responds that she has broken “the fifth Commandement, which commands us to honour Father and Mother, which includes all in authority”—a standard belief in the period. In response, Hutchinson asks him to consider a hypothetical: “Put case, I do feare the Lord, and my Parent doe not, may not I entertain one that feares the Lord, because my Father will not let mee? [Then] I may put honour upon him as a childe of God.” Winthrop dismisses the question and turns to other matters, but because it registers in the Short Story’s empirical account, it continues to trouble both his case against the heretics and his conception of magisterial sovereignty. For the question she poses is essentially the question of resistance—a complex issue for John Calvin and his followers, as we saw in Chapter One. The Fifth Commandment is the familial equivalent of Romans 13, which commanded obedience to all rulers, even evil ones. Hutchinson resembles Calvin’s other emboldened heirs insofar as she invokes God’s higher claims to human loyalty in order to ask if a manifestly ungodly authority might be disobeyed in his name. The implication is that Massachusetts’s “legalist” magistrates and ministers have become the enemies of God and thus that resisting them would not mean breaking the fifth commandment but “honour[ing]” a higher “Parent.” A further implication is that, by establishing a New World government that England’s king was then threatening to dissolve, the orthodoxy themselves had failed to exhibit the obedience counseled in the fifth commandment and Romans 13. In recasting authority as

\(^{62}\) Wheelwright, “A Fast Day Sermon,” in Hall, \textit{AC}, 160 (“we are”), 158 (“we must … come”; “if we”), 163 (“we must kill”), 166 (“we must be”).
consensual rather than parental, colonization would seem to have authorized innovation.63

The next point of commonality between the antinomians and the orthodoxy initially seems their point of greatest difference: Hutchinson’s claim to “immediate revelation.” Launching into an impromptu spiritual autobiography late in her civil trial, she explains that, after Cotton was silenced and departed for New England, “it was revealed to me, that I must go thither also, and that there I should be persecuted and suffer much trouble.” Although she calls them “immediate revelations,” Hutchinson describes many of these divine communiqués as conveyed via Biblical passages: “the Lord … brought to my mind another Scripture.” At least initially then, their “immediacy” seems to refer to the Spirit’s random suggestion of verses relevant to her life. This practice was one that the orthodoxy engaged in as well—with similar political effects.64

The most important scriptural passage “brought to [Hutchinson’s] mind” is Daniel 6. In a moment of empiricist quasi-transcription akin to the Powhatan and Stephen Hopkins speeches respectively recorded by John Smith and William Strachey, the Short Story permits Hutchinson to summarize the Daniel story and apply it to her own situation:

When the Presidents and Princes could find nothing against him, because he was faithfull, they sought matter against him concerning the Law of his God, to cast him into the Lions denne; so it was revealed to me that they should plot against me, but the Lord bid me not to feare, for he that delivered Daniel, and the three children, his hand was not shortened [i.e., his power was undiminished]. And see this Scripture fulfilled this day in mine eyes, therefore take heed what yee goe about to doe unto me, for you have no power over my body, neither can you do me any harme, for I am in the hands of the eternall Jehovah my Savior … I feare none but the great Jehovah, which hath foretold me of these things, and I doe verily beleeve that he will deliver me out of [y]our hands, therefore take heed how you proceed against me; for I know that for this you goe about to doe to me, God

64 Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 272 (“it was”; “the Lord”), 273 (“immediate revelations”).
will ruine you and your posterity, and this whole State.

The speech demonstrates how readily the puritan orthodoxy’s typological hermeneutic could be turned against the colony’s emergent status quo. Hutchinson appropriates the Daniel story to her own ends, claiming the role of persecuted godly remnant, which her interrogators so often claimed for themselves, and repositioning those interrogators as the persecuting princes of Calvin’s reading of Romans 13, the scourges God sent to punish a wayward people. In fact, she comes close to presenting herself as one of the “avengers” Calvin had said that God “sometimes … raises up … to punish the wicked government and deliver his people.” Vilified for worshipping God rather than the king, Daniel embodies Calvin’s key “exception” to Pauline obedience, the same exception Hutchinson had invoked in the exchange about the fifth commandment: “If they [i.e., the magistrates] command anything against him [i.e., God], let it go unesteemed.” Thus does Hutchinson find semi-legitimate grounds for resistance to those who deem her an innovator.65

Unsurprisingly, Hutchinson’s interrogators were not pleased with this bold display. The Short Story account continues,

When she had thus vented her mind, the Court demanded of her, how she expected to be delivered, whether by miracle as Daniel was, to which she answered, yes, by miracle as Daniel was. Being further demanded how shee did know that it was God that did reveale these things to her, and not Satan? She answered, how did Abraham know that it was the voyce of God, when he commanded him to sacrifice his sonne?

In the alternative trial transcript first published the eighteenth century, this exchange continues as follows: the Deputy Governor answers her question, feeding her the line that would undo her—“By an immediate voice”—and Hutchinson confirms her meaning: “So

to me by an immediate revelation. … By the voice of his [i.e., God’s] own spirit in my soul.” The Court then turns to Cotton, who attempts to parse Hutchinson’s claim. But his distinctions between scriptural and unscriptural revelations and between a “common providence” and a “miracle” fail to mitigate her perceived heresy. Although she had invoked a sensory form of confirmation (“And see this Scripture fulfilled this day in mine eyes”), Hutchinson’s self-comparison to Abraham confirmed the accusation of familism. Her typology was not nearly as invested as Winthrop’s in correlating experiential detail with scriptural detail and was thus less easily controlled. For her orthodox judges, this claim to intimate, immediate, transformative contact with the divine distinguished Hutchinson’s illicit hermeneutic praxis from their own mediated, empirical alternative.66

Yet there remained fundamental similarities between Hutchinson’s revelations and orthodox interpretive practices. As David Thomson notes, the “immediate revelation” charge represents something of a “double standard”: “critics have been quick to agree with Hutchinson’s detractors that the immediacy of the ‘immediate revelation’ … was new to Puritanism,” but this was simply not the case. Winthrop himself regularly used language at odds with Cotton’s distinction between “providence” and “miracle,” as when he claimed that “the Lord hath … prospered his people here beyond [the] ordinary ways of providence.” Hutchinson had even singled out Thomas Shepard as the only “legalist” minister whose ideas ever appealed to her because she had heard him lay claim to a revelation of England’s imminent destruction. What her prosecutors termed an antinomian invention was thus a mainstay of puritan hermeneutics; if it was “new,” the New England orthodoxy was no less guilty of innovation than Hutchinson. The issue was

66 Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 273 (“When she”), 274 (“common providence”; “miracle”); “The Examination,” in Hall, AC, 337 (“By an”; “So to”).
not revelations as such but instead “who had them, what context they had them in, and whose interests they served.” An influential woman with suspect theological credentials forecasting the destruction of the colony in open court did not constitute a legitimate instance of revelation. Winthrop, by contrast, seems a better candidate—until we recall how tenuous his rule and the orthodoxy’s more generally were at this moment. Facing numerous threats—from the crown’s attacks on the charter to Laud’s attacks on Congregationalism, from outbreaks of heresy to “delegated” attacks on magisterial discretion, from lost elections to open rebellions—Winthrop’s magistracy was a classic instance of what Machiavelli described as “innovative” rule. Once we refuse to take the orthodoxy’s hegemony for granted, we are no longer obligated to assume that Winthrop’s more mediated interpretative practice enjoyed automatic legitimacy.67

Support for this approach is to be found in Winthrop’s decision to describe Hutchinson’s damning claim to “immediate revelations” as—of all things—a revelation in the speech that follows her fateful admission. Despite its empiricism, his interpretation bears a close resemblance to the antinomian/familist hermeneutic he means to condemn:

Mistriss Hutchinson having thus freely and fully discovered her selfe, the Court … did observe a special providence of God, that … her owne mouth should deliver her into the power of the Court, as guilty of that which all suspected her for, but were not furnished with proofe sufficient to proceed against her, for here she hath manifested, that her opinions and practise have been the cause of al[l] our disturbances, & that she walked by such a rule as cannot stand with the peace of any State; for such bottomlesse revelations, as either came without any word, or without the sense of the word, (which was framed to humane capacity) if they be allowed in one thing, must be admitted a rule in all things; for they being above reason and Scripture, they are not subject to control.

The passage summarizes the Court’s improvised indictment, spelling out the connection between Hutchinson’s pretense to “immediate revelation” and her tendency toward political innovation. Interpretation unconstrained by scripture has the capacity to countenance any course of action imaginable, including rebellion. The extreme openendedness of her thought mirrors the proliferative, deformed nature of innovation as emblematized by the “monstrous birth.” But remarkably, Winthrop represents Hutchinson’s incriminating admission of her own providential revelations as itself a revelatory “special providence.” When “proofe sufficient” to convict was lacking, God intervened to make his will known. That this interpretation, in which Hutchinson functions as the ironic “means” of her own divine judgment, was very much in the eye of the beholder—indeed independent of “reason and Scripture”—fails to trouble the Court’s ruling. But it serves to shorten the distance between orthodoxy and heresy, suggesting that a providentialism corroborated by scripture, clergy, and collective eyewitnessing is no more authoritative than an individual’s heretical claim to hear God’s voice.68

Winthrop’s characterization of the antinomians as innovators redounded upon him most dramatically when the free grace controversy intersected with the conflict over magisterial discretion. Criticism of Wheelwright’s treatment, for instance, aligned with the broader concerns of the delegated party. Scholars have observed that the signers of the petition presented to the General Court on Wheelwright’s behalf were punished out of hand for what was a legitimate, if delicate, custom in English legal culture. The Court also refused to record the dissenting opinion of the magistrates who had not voted for conviction and told Wheelwright that his intention to appeal to the king was illegitimate.

The *Short Story* responds to the “further objection … [that] *Wheelwright* had not a lawfull tryall, as not being put upon a Jury of freemen” by explaining that the colony’s satellite sovereignty freed it from English precedent: “such Courts as have power to make and abrogate Laws, are tyed to no other Order, but their own.” Finally, the magistrates were held to have exceeded their authority in passing the 1637 order prohibiting new immigrants from residing in the colony for more than three weeks without permission. Winthrop responded to this last criticism with “A Declaration of the Intent and Equitie of the Order”—at once, in Michael Winship’s words, “a straightforward justification of the Court’s action in terms of contractual political theory” and “a brute assertion of Massachusetts realpolitik” and thus a perfect illustration of how ostensibly anti-absolutist regimes might nonetheless promote sovereignty-as-innovation. Henry Vane’s response to Winthrop’s “Declaration” challenged this especially galling display of decisionism on grounds crucial to the free grace controversy: Were the colony’s rulers really vehicles of the divine will? Or were they usurping an authority that belonged solely to Christ? Vane might have posed the same question the prosecution had asked Hutchinson, the central question of Protestant hermeneutics: “How do you know that that was the spirit?”  

Vane’s criticism of the immigration order was part of his broader “delegated” condemnation of a colonial system of governance in which crucial matters depended “upon such unlimited and unsafe a rule, as the will and discretion of men.” This accusation closely resembles Winthrop’s account of Hutchinson as someone who

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“walked by such a rule as cannot stand with the peace of any State.” Whether defined as constitutional limitation, scriptural precedent, or collective eyewitnessing, the idea of a “rule” was central to the innovation prohibition. Yet Winthrop, as well as Hutchinson, claimed exemption from that prohibition. The controversy was thus a flashpoint for issues of sovereignty in a much deeper sense than the particular instances when the conflict over discretion impacted its participants. For it was ultimately a contest between two different conceptions of how God’s absolute power might be transferred to human beings. The orthodoxy and the antinomians were vying not only for epistemological supremacy—for a monopoly on truth via access to the divine—but also, despite their shared commitment to the Calvinist notion of human insufficiency, for political supremacy—for a monopoly on legitimate political change. There is thus a fundamental isomorphism between the power sought by the man satirized as “King Winthrop” and “the absolutism of the prophet” exhibited by Hutchinson. *Sovereign discretion was a form of antinomianism, and empirical providentialism was a kind of familism.*

The non-antinomian New England dissident Thomas Lechford seems to have appreciated this. Recognizing how observable New World contingency and the trump card of primitivism were being used to justify innovative or “arbitrary” proceedings, he attacked the Bay government for “slight[ing] all former laws of the Church or State, [and] cases of experience and precedents, to go hammer out new [laws], according to severall exigencies; upon pretence that the Word of God is sufficient to rule us.” In its close resemblance to Winthrop’s own denunciations of the antinomians’ political-theological innovations, Lechford’s critique reveals that sovereignty and rebellion, orthodoxy and

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heresy, could sometimes be two sides of the same coin: rival forms of change that could not be narrated as such in the era of the innovation prohibition.71

IX. The Innovator’s “Golden Pretences” and the New England Primordium

The election held on May 2, 1638 saw “the former governour, John Winthrop, … chosen again.” Taking place shortly after Hutchinson’s departure and the exhumation of Dyer’s “monstrous birth,” the election represented one stage of closure for the free grace controversy. Despite the continued threat of metropolitan attacks on the colony’s civil and ecclesiastical autonomy, Native American resistance, and local political-theological rebellion, the orthodoxy consolidated itself as an orthodoxy in the years following the controversy. Orthodox hegemony was never total, but it was successful enough that, as Bozeman notes, the precedent-obsessed founding generation eventually became a precedent in its own right. Functioning as “a kind of secondary primordium,” the innovative “Citty upon a Hill” took on the exemplary role forecasted in “A Modell of Christian Charity,” prompting jeremiadic narratives of second-generation declension. Despite the various victories of the “delegated” party, Winthrop’s ideal of magisterial discretion also entrenched itself in this period: decisionist sovereignty remained in force even as Massachusetts, like Virginia, became increasingly liberal and democratic, granting the right of political participation to orthodox white male settlers and denying it to heretics, dissidents, women, natives, foreigners, and slaves. Winthrop’s puritan political science gained legitimacy in this period as well, even as empirical reportage continued to inadvertently record powerful critiques and to lay bare the similarities

71 Lechford, Plain Dealing, 28 (“slight[ing] all”).
between disavowed elite innovations and condemned non-elite counter-innovations.\textsuperscript{72}

Thomas Shepard was asked to deliver the 1638 election sermon, and the surviving notes suggest that he sought to train his auditors to recognize and curtail political innovation in light of the controversy. Taking Judges 9:14-15 as his text, Shepard elaborates the story of Abimelech—the usurping Philistine king metaphorized as a “bramble” wrongfully chosen over more qualified “trees”—into a theory of electoral politics. He argues that “the temper of the multitude especially in free states ... [in which] the government depends on popular electi[on], ... [is] apt to desire & accept of change of government” by “making choyce of brambles” or demagogues. And he offers a familiar explanation for this desire for change: “the multitude are exceeding apt to be led by colours like birds by glasses & larkes by lures, & golden pretences w[hich] Innovators ever have.” In other words, non-elites’ undisciplined sensory appetites compromise their foresight—figured as literal sight—leaving them vulnerable to upstarts: the people desire innovation because they are “apt to looke no further than present respect and benefit; & cannot see the consequences of things no more than blind men [can see] pits afar off.”\textsuperscript{73}

Shepard exhorts the electorate to learn from experience—their own, perceptually competent elites’, and those recorded in scripture—in order to prevent the rise of “a Bramble governor.” He counsels his auditors to elect only familiar candidates (“on[e] fr[om] among y[our]selves; a member of some church”) and not to be swayed by markers of apparent quality: “let any come over among us never so nobly descended never so pious,” the electorate should not “assent” to a candidate until they know him not to be a

\textsuperscript{72} Winthrop, \textit{Journal}, 257 (“the former”); Bozeman, \textit{To Live Ancient Lives}, 320 (“a kind”). For resistance to the idea of a total orthodox victory see Knight, \textit{Orthodoxies}, 197; Hall, \textit{Ways of Writing}, 150.

\textsuperscript{73} “Thomas Shepard’s Election Sermon, in 1638,” \textit{The New England Historical and Genealogical Register} 24 (1870): 361-366, quotations on 362 (“the temper”; “making choyce”; “apt to”), 363 (“the multitude”).
bramble. In this moment, it becomes clear that the “pious,” “nobly descended,”
interloping “Innovator” Shepard has in mind is Henry Vane. Indeed, Shepard had earlier
deemed Vanes the “prime craftsman of forging all our late novelties” in a letter to
Winthrop, and Vane also makes sense as the residual target of the Short Story’s otherwise
evasive references to the antinomians’ “Machivilian policy.” As we have seen, however,
that description also applied to Winthrop and Shepard themselves. Winthrop had
described Hutchinson’s theological innovations as unprecedented, claiming, “The
Enthusiasts and Anabaptists had never the like,” but he used virtually identical language
to laud New England’s transformative recovery of scriptural precedent: “Never the like
since Israell.” And despite the orthodoxy’s denunciation of Wheelwright for “heat[ing]
the] peoples affections against their opposites,” Shepard’s sermon concludes with a call
to violence that treads the literal-figurative line with little regard for its potentially
disruptive effects: “w[hen] brambles … appeare call for hatchets do not deale gently it
will prick you; but let severity in this case, be used.” Transmuting the orthodoxy’s
discretionary response to the free grace controversy into a prescription for future action,
Shepard’s scripturally- and empirically-informed call for improvised “severity” in the
face of “innovation” crystallized the central insight of Atlantic political science.74

“w[hen] brambles”); Winship, Making Heretics, (quoting Forbes et al., eds., Winthrop Papers, III:415) 52
(“prime craftsman”); Winthrop, Short Story, in Hall, AC, 207 (“Machivilian policy”), 293 (“heat[ing]
On Vane as Shepard’s target see Breen, Character, 57-58; Winship, Making Heretics, 146.
Chapter Four

Sugar Revolution and Slave Insurrection in Richard Ligon’s Barbados

Anglo-American plantation slavery was an innovation. Indeed, slavery’s rise might be termed the signal innovation of the early colonial period and a foundational event of modernity. While slavery had existed throughout human history, and while there were recent precedents ready to hand in the Iberian colonies, there is widespread agreement that the British Atlantic slave system constituted both a “relative” (local) and an “absolute” (global) innovation. Beyond the fact that slavery was absent from English life and law, the particular brand that emerged in the seventeenth-century Anglo-Americas exhibited new features or intensified old ones beyond recognition: from the scale and brutality of the slave system as conditioned by the surplus of New World land and African labor and by capitalism’s new products, markets, and expectations about efficiency; to the codification of a specifically racial slavery characterized by perpetual and heritable servitude, a total lack of rights, and the augmentation of slave-master power; to the transformation of European settler and metropolitan cultures, Africa, and ultimately the world as it became more closely interconnected by commerce.

The scholarship on the subject bears out this claim. Michael Craton alludes to “the awful novelty of European slavery,” Robin Blackburn to the “innovation of colonial slavery.” Sidney Mintz terms “slavery” and “the plantation system” “European innovations” and contends that “Slavery of the British West Indian … sort was probably without precedent, legal or otherwise, anywhere in modern times.” Richard Dunn concurs: the Anglo-Caribbean way of life organized around slavery was “totally without precedent in English experience” and outran that of the “Spaniards.” The “essential
difference,” Dunn explains, between “New World slavery” and “older forms of bondage in classical antiquity, medieval Europe, and the Arabic world” lies in its “starkly racial character.” For C. L. R. James, the plantation system constitutes “an original pattern, not European, not African, not part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of that word, but West Indian, *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else.” Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh deem the settlers of Barbados entirely unsuccessful in the attempt to reproduce English ways of life signaled by the island’s nickname: “The Europeans had failed to create a Little England.” Instead, they argue, settlement and slavery entailed “profound and permanent change” for the island’s ecology and for all involved. David Brion Davis emphasizes more than others the “continuity between ancient and modern slavery,” but he nonetheless concludes that “No slave system in history was quite like that of the West Indies and Southern states of America.” Even Orlando Patterson, perhaps the greatest skeptic of exceptionalist arguments about New World slavery, concedes that aspects of the British plantation system were without precedent: of the absolutism at the heart of American slave-mastery he writes, “Nothing like this had previously existed in the long annals of human slavery.”

This chapter takes up Anglo-American plantation slavery not just as one more

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colonial elite innovation—vulnerable to critique in the age of the innovation prohibition—but also as the culmination of the New World experiment with sovereignty-as-innovation traced in previous chapters. Patterson’s account of slave-mastery as a form of “sovereignal freedom,” the “absolute freedom to dominate another” in imitation of the monotheistic “king-god,” helps us to see that slavery was innovative in two senses, or at two overlapping scales: what we might call the “innovation of slavery” and “slavery as innovation.” The first phrase refers to the fact that slavery in its modern, racial, quasi-capitalist New World form was historically unprecedented, as the scholarly consensus invoked above attests. The second phrase describes slave-mastery as the ultimate form of absolutism, an unparalleled level of arbitrary power that entailed the legitimate capacity to dramatically transform other human beings’ day-to-day lives: to buy, sell, relocate, force to labor, torture, maim, or even kill them with impunity. If “the novelty of chattel slavery … would prove crucial to the rise of abolitionism” that is in part because “the authority exercised by slaveholders in the Americas was something new.” Atlantic slavery was an unprecedented usurpation of the divine right to enact change.

Richard Ligon’s 1657 True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados provides an ideal opportunity to reconsider slavery in this light. A royalist exile fleeing Civil War England for the West Indies in the late 1640s, Ligon was also a pious natural historian and a keen observer of political relations. Seeking to elude the reprisals that would attend a parliamentarian victory and to remake the fortune he had lost when locals resisted a scheme in which he had invested to privatize wetland commons a decade earlier, Ligon

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worked as a gentlemanly assistant to wealthy Barbadian planters from 1647-1650. His time on the island thus coincided with the beginning of the remarkably transformative period that historians call the Sugar Revolution. Ligon faithfully documented that transformation, which included the rise of near-monocultural industrial-scale sugar cultivation, the transition from European indentured to African slave labor, and the consolidation of large estates and substantial political power by a small class of wealthy planters. By virtue of sugar’s innovations Barbados became, at once, “the richest [colony] in the English empire” and the site of unprecedented asymmetries of power.3

Ligon’s text is an exemplary work of Atlantic political science. Indeed, he might be said to culminate the intellectual project imagined by Francis Bacon and undertaken by John Smith, William Strachey, John Winthrop, and others. My reading of the History regards Ligon’s experiential epistemology as both a response to and an engine of New World novelty. The text brings empirical methods to bear on Caribbean flora, fauna, and master-slave relations, demonstrating the early modern overlap between natural and political science. In particular, Ligon sets his empiricist sights on the problem of insurrection, considering the unfamiliar governmental challenge of enslaved resistance,

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disavowing the top-down innovations that prompted it in the first place, and imagining new forms of absolute power capable of fortifying the regime it threatened. As with his predecessors, then, Ligon’s eyewitnessing serves to authorize further elite improvisation. Paradoxically, his intellectual labors permit a deeply novel Barbados to function as its own precedent and to serve as a model for future slave colonies—a dynamic closely bound up with his fervent religiosity, which dictates that his political science doubles as a political theology. In this sense, the History presents a Caribbean version of the New England “Citty upon a Hill”: an innovative model that Ligon, riffing on the sugarworks blueprints he includes in his text, calls “a Scale for those that go upon the like.”

Like Strachey’s “True Reportory” and Winthrop’s Short Story, however, Ligon’s History also falls prey to empiricism’s liabilities. For while first-hand knowledge abets England’s primacy in the Caribbean, the detailed reportage demanded by Ligon’s industrial-instructional, natural-scientific, political-scientific, and providentialist aims leads him to reveal more than he intended in passages he calls “extravagant digressions.” Moreover, his eyewitnessing competes with an older mode of emblematic reading intended to assimilate the plantation regime to traditional forms of rule that the master class has clearly left behind. Although Ligon’s text nuances our sense of the innovation prohibition, demonstrating that certain forms of novelty were beginning to gain acceptance over the course of the century through the rise of exotic commodity consumption and the discourse of agricultural “improvement,” it also shows that the

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planters were anxious to represent their emergent hegemony as a foregone conclusion and to depict slave revolt as dangerous change rather than salutary restoration. I therefore read the period’s various forms of enslaved resistance—from suicide to fugitivity to maroonage to insurrection—as key examples of counter-innovation, a rebellious response to elite innovation oriented more toward a disrupted past than an open-ended future.5

Despite his sincere desire to make master-slave relations more humane, Ligon’s theory of colonial elite sovereignty-as-innovation outdoes his forebears’ in absolutism. In Strachey and Winthrop’s texts, this was the formal sovereignty of a colonial governor at the uncertain moment of initial settlement. But in Ligon’s History the sovereignty at issue is the more enduring absolutism-in-miniature enjoyed by the planters, who were said to rule their slaves “like little princes.” Eschewing strictly constitutional issues, this chapter locates the Caribbean dialectic of innovation and counter-innovation on the plantation, a state of nature/exception enclosed within the polity. Here, the planters institutionalized the contingency that had plagued earlier colonial ventures, thereby authorizing the unprecedented innovations of slave-mastery as permanent modus operandi. At the very moment that the English Revolution dethroned one monarch, I will argue, a comparably dramatic transformation of political relations—the Sugar Revolution—crowned a small number of Caribbean elites as the “kings” of their plantations. Indeed, the Sugar Revolution went further, effecting a kind of deification of Euro-Christian masters vis-à-vis non-Euro-Christian slaves. Even as sovereignty was redefined in more democratic terms in the period—witness the expanded opportunities for (propertied white male) political participation in Virginia and Massachusetts and in England’s Long Parliament—

5 Ligon, History, 77 (“extravagant digressions”).
the emergence of New World racial slavery enable an entire class to act as monarchs or even gods in relation to their human chattels.  

Ligon’s absolutism outpaced not only his colonial forebears’ but also that of Thomas Hobbes, the History’s clear interlocutor. While Hobbes’s notoriously “atheistic” political philosophy is often described as absolutist, it evinces a stubborn commitment to consent that Ligon’s political science is better able to square with absolute rule. Hobbes made subjects’ obedience contingent upon their protection by the sovereign and therefore deemed slavery (as distinct from servitude) an unstable, because non-mutual relationship. By contrast, Ligon’s empirical and theological commitments allow him to articulate a more thoroughly absolutist vision of slave-mastery. He presents slave Christianization as a guarantor of, rather than an impediment to, Euro-American hegemony. If slavery could not possibly be mutual when conceived as an entirely earthly relationship, Ligon resituates it within a larger cosmographic framework, arguing that the slaves’ salvation via Euro-Christian catechization is a fitting recompense for their life-ending labor.

After correlating Ligon’s relationships to empiricism and innovation and elucidating his disagreements with Hobbes, I consider the History’s preoccupation with African speech (or its absence) and religiosity. I contextualize his experience of the former alongside the traditional association of rational discourse with political subjectivity in western political thought. And I situate his first-hand observations of the latter in relation to his unheeded arguments for slave conversion. Ligon represents the Africans he meets both as heathens whose physical and spiritual alterity provides empirical evidence of their enslavability and, simultaneously, as meek proto-Christian

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primitives amenable to Euro-Christian instruction. For Ligon, that is, the incoherence or non-existence of black speech figures the innate African affinity for both conversion and enslavement. As he turns to the problem of revolt—both obliquely in his emblematic readings and more directly in his reportage on conspiracies—the Christianized slave becomes a kind of ideal anti-citizen, the perfect subordinate of the apotheosized master class who willfully relinquishes her own will through the very forms of rational discourse that empower Euro-Christians. In short, the *History* hopes to transmute the dangerous political innovation of slave revolt into the innocuous innovation of conversion.

Ultimately, however, I show that Ligon’s political science of slavery could not overcome the persistent threat of insurrection. By way of conclusion, I consider the quintessentially political-scientific act of legislation by discussing the enactment of Barbados’s slave codes and their uptake as legal precedent in new slave colonies like Jamaica, and I turn to eyewitness reports on two Barbadian slave conspiracies discovered in the decades after Ligon’s visit. Both the slave codes and the conspiracies evidence the domestication of the innovative regime of Atlantic slavery, but they also show that every new change brought further counter-innovation as part of what Michael Craton terms a “general rejection of the sugar revolution.” Indeed, I argue that we might trace an alternative genealogy of radicalism in the history of enslaved resistance. Despite the planters’ strenuous efforts to deny Africans the capacity to imagine viable political alternatives, a pro-change ideology that eschewed the absolutism of Euro-Christian apotheosis emerged from rebel slaves’ recognition that the innovations of Atlantic slavery had been so thoroughgoing as to foreclose all avenues of simple restoration—that
there was, in a very real sense, no *status quo ante* to return to.⁷

I. Innovation Transvalued: The English, Sugar, and Scientific Revolutions

Reconceiving slavery as an innovation has the virtue of bringing together the pejorative early modern idiom of innovation, in all its strangeness, and the pervasive pro-innovation bias of our moment, a more familiar artifact of late capitalism that seeks to apply the logic of market expansion and technological development to nearly every aspect of contemporary society. For slavery is not simply an innovation in political relations assailable as such in the seventeenth century, it is also an early example of modern industrial-capitalist innovation (its complex and disputed relationship to capitalism notwithstanding). As Davis notes, before westerners imagined abolition as an archetypal expression of “progress,” slavery itself had occupied that role. Slavery was once the classic example of humanity’s (read: male Euro-Christians’) godlike power to shape the world—a power we continue to celebrate without hesitation today. Thus could the historian Richard Sheridan remark that “The plantation was truly an innovation in the Schumpeterian sense,” invoking the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, the “iconic theorist” and “symbolic father” of the twentieth-century field of “innovation studies.”⁸

Bringing slavery into the orbit of the early modern innovation prohibition also has

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the virtue of highlighting its profoundly theological basis. As Jared Hickman has recently argued, racial slavery is the preeminent expression of Euro-Christians’ tendency to view their own global dominance in eschatological terms. Rereading the cataclysmic encounter of 1492 as an occasion for the proliferation—rather than the diminution—of cosmographies, Hickman rejects as Eurocentric even the most subtle repackagings of the secularization thesis, the claim that religious belief has abated in modernity. He posits that while Christianity’s contradictions might have yielded a secularizing mood of “opposition to a ‘transcendent absolute’” (i.e., God) this process was set off-course by the fact of New World “discovery,” producing instead an “immanent absolute”: “the apotheosis of Euro-Christians at the expense of non-Euro-Christians.” Emboldened by their paradoxical conception of “liberation as submission to the Absolute,” Euro-Christians “attempted to exercise power as absolutely as their God.” Writers represented this deification through racialized renderings of the Prometheus figure, the Titan of Greek myth who was punished for stealing fire from the Olympians and giving it to humanity. This Prometheanism, I would argue, was synonymous with innovation: heretical and forbidden, yet increasingly valuable and legitimate for a privileged few. Race, on Hickman’s account, “provide[s] a theodical justification for … overturning … the existing cosmic arrangement of human diversity,” that is, for the innovations perpetrated by the “white Prometheus” epitomized by the colonizer and slave-master. By contrast, the “black Prometheus” represents what I call “counter-innovation” and Hickman, with more subtlety than most, calls “radicalism”—a form of cosmic opposition to Euro-Christian hegemony that entails a “nonabsolutist” alternative to the political theology of slavery.9

9 Jared Hickman, Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12 (“finite space”), 11 (“opposition to”; “immanent absolute”), 54 (“the
Ligon’s account of the moment when the Promethean innovations of the Sugar Revolution were still new allows us to slow down and analyze the process whose result Hickman’s predominantly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archive often takes as a given: the “cosmic status quo” of Euro-Christian hegemony. In its depiction of slavery’s transvaluation of innovation, Ligon’s text also affords us the opportunity to contrast the early modern pre-disciplinary ethos that yoked together scientific, agricultural, industrial, economic, political, and theological enterprises with the disciplinary distinctions that now demarcate certain cultural arenas as spaces for legitimate innovation. By demonstrating how inextricable the scientific and technological change involved in the rise of sugar cultivation was from the political and theological change involved in the rise of slavery, Ligon’s text prompts reflection on late modernity’s unexamined pro-innovation bias.10

Ligon returned to England in 1650 and penned the True and Exact History shortly thereafter in debtor’s prison, publishing the text in 1657. He died in 1662, the same year that Charles II chartered the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, and luminaries of the Scientific Revolution like Samuel Hartlib, John Evelyn, John Beale, and Hans Sloane read the History with enthusiasm. The text enjoyed a “wide readership” in its day not only because it conformed to the standards of natural-historical reportage that the emergent scientific establishment wished to promote but also because it provided detailed instructions and diagrams for the establishment of new sugar plantations, especially useful to the colonization of Jamaica, which had been seized from Spain in 1655 as part of Oliver Cromwell’s Western Design. These two projects were intimately

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10 Hickman, Black Prometheus, 16 (“cosmic status”).
related: Ligon orchestrates his first-hand natural and political observations into a formula for colonial elite improvisation within several interconnected cultural arenas. Michael Craton observes that the planters “could benefit from the cumulative effect of earlier experiences, emulating laws and practices found to be effective and circulating news and detailed reports of slave rebellions elsewhere.” If this collation of information about slave-mastery sounds quite a bit like the collaborative, cumulative practice of early natural science that is because Craton is describing Atlantic political science.\textsuperscript{11}

Ligon experienced life in Barbados a full two decades after its colonization began, meaning that he missed the chaotic moment of initial settlement that has thus far been our primary focus. Although slavery’s innovativeness gives the lie to the \textit{History}’s claim that the island is “govern[ed] … by the Laws of \textit{England}, for all Criminal, Civil, Martial, Ecclesiastical, and Maritime affairs,” intra-elite political affairs in mid-century Barbados did prove relatively stable, capable even of withstanding the transatlantic aftershocks of the English Revolution. Relocating the kind of war then raging in the metropole to the plantation, the planters exercised a form of absolute power over their slaves that did not merely coexist with but in fact undergirded the Euro-Christian equality formalized in the Barbadian Assembly, a body conceived “in the nature of the Parliament of \textit{England}.”\textsuperscript{12}

The result of this state of affairs is that Ligon’s \textit{History} displays a different relationship to innovation than other political-scientific texts. An illuminating point of


comparison is the parliamentarian colonist Nicholas Foster’s eyewitness report on the royalist coup that occurred on the island in 1650, just after Ligon’s departure and well after the tide of the Civil Wars had turned against the king. Foster’s *A Briefe Relation of the Late Horrid Rebellion Acted in the Island Barbadas* (1650) is a clear participant in the discourse of Atlantic political science. Unsurprisingly, it makes ample use of the idiom of innovation. Led by Ligon’s friend Humphrey Walrond and his brother Edward, the royalists insinuate themselves into positions of power and then persecute resident parliamentarians through fines, disarmament, and removal from office. Among other “unparalleld proceedings” and “new designes,” these “new modell’d States men” even force the governor to proclaim for Charles II. In the end, the political situation in Barbados could be made to conform to the new political situation in Interregnum England only through a lengthy parliamentarian siege of the island. The peace Ligon had celebrated just months before the coup—when “the word[s] *Roundhead* or *Cavalier*” were politely avoided—finally did return, and not a moment too soon. For as Foster notes, the coup and siege left the planters (disarmed parliamentarians and distracted royalists alike) vulnerable “to the cruelty of their slaves, who were of ability enough to destroy, and murther them, had not God in mercy restrained their cruelty.” In this way, the profitability of slavery and the dangers of insurrection served to unite an otherwise divided plantocracy. In another account, the Walronds are said to “look on themselves as absolute Princes,” but with peace re-established and the state of war/nature/exception firmly relocated to the plantation, every master could enjoy that privilege.13

Ligon clearly regarded slave rebellion as a form of disruptive change, but his text doesn’t use the pejorative idiom of innovation to describe it. I would propose four explanations for the term’s absence, which will serve to measure both the distance we have travelled since the turn of the seventeenth century and the distance that still exists between Ligon’s milieu and the one we inhabit today, wherein innovation’s value is axiomatic. First, while innovation undoubtedly retained its pejorative connotations through the turn of the nineteenth century, change, novelty, and creativity were slowly being disconnected from politics and theology and attaining a certain limited value in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Although the word “innovation” does not appear in Ligon’s *History*, the word “novelty” does, and its neutral, if not downright positive, valences suggest that exotic new commodities no longer seemed so threatening—a shift due, in no small part, to New World colonialism and the discourse of agricultural “improvement.” Second, its precedents notwithstanding, Anglo-American slavery may have been too palpably novel for an observer like Ligon to claim that resistance to it was innovative, rather than restorative. If the innovation idiom had often drawn unwanted attention to the top-down innovations to which early modern rebels responded, Ligon may have grasped that this approach was more liability than asset. Third, especially in his concern with slave conversion, Ligon seems to have regarded nonwhites as something of an exception to the innovation prohibition, as blank slates whose primitive culture could be overwritten with impunity by a more advanced one—an attitude also visible in contemporaneous colonial-indigenous relations. Finally, he may have regarded non-Europeans as incapable of imagining political change. The absence of the innovation departure, see Kupperman, “Introduction,” in Ligon, *History*, 28. On the coup, see Carla Gardina Pestana, *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640–1661* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 86-122, esp. 93-99, 101-112; Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh, *No Peace Beyond the Line*, 156-160.
idiom in this and many other early accounts of slave conspiracy suggests that it may have been ideologically useful in this moment to view rebel slaves as seeking to imitate their ancestors or masters rather than institute genuine political alternatives.\(^{14}\)

Avoiding the idiom of innovation allows Ligon to promote certain kinds of novelty as positive goods to be monopolized by elite Euro-Christians. But in light of the persistent entanglement of discrete disciplines in his text and in light of the connections between the English and Sugar revolutions, I would argue that his ostensibly apolitical designation of New World commodities as “new” discloses, in its very attempt to disavow, the political innovations driving the colonial project. At a sumptuous banquet on the Cape Verdean island of St. Jago, where his ship stops for supplies en route to Barbados, Ligon describes “strange” and “excellent” “salads … which I took great heed of, being all Novelties to me.” Mid-meal, a musician performs what Ligon calls “a Novelty.” And after dinner, he attempts to charm his hostess by gifting her some English “Trifles,” valuable to her, he imagines, for their “Novelty.” As these examples suggest, the sharp edges of newness were being dulled in this period by making novelty a marker of pleasure, entertainment, and romance and by relativizing the term (one woman’s novelty is another man’s trifle). But this is less true of the island’s most novel commodity: sugar. Far exceeding its Dutch and Portuguese precursors, English sugar production exerted an unprecedentedly transformative effect on all who came within its orbit, and Ligon faithfully documented that “Revolution,” which was every bit as

political as it was scientific, agricultural, or economic.15

Ligon’s account of the emergent sugar economy dovetails with his culinary and commodity connoisseurship—his interest in “rarities”—and with his natural history’s participation in the emergent social and epistemological posture of “curiosity.” His time in Barbados coincided with the introduction and “perfection” of sugar production there. When he arrived in 1647, he notes, “the great work of Sugar-making, was but newly practised by the inhabitans there.” By the time he left, the colonists had acquired the relevant expertise through trial and error, and the sugar economy was fully functional. If sugar’s novelty here seems entirely aboveboard and unabashed, that is because Ligon’s text labors to make it seem both a natural, teleological development (through metaphors of “infancy” and maturity) and an apolitical one. But because his empiricism obliges him to describe all aspects of Barbadian life, including the essential role the enslaved play in sugar’s production, the History cannot help but reveal the intensity of the changes wrought by this new regime.16

The novelty of the plantation regime becomes especially clear when the aspiration to absolutism at the core of the Sugar Revolution runs up against countervailing forces. Like his predecessors, Ligon describes the New World as dramatically unsettled and unpredictable, as a place where a variety of “accidents,” “mischances,” “casualties,” “changes and chances”—including shipwreck, plague, fire, invasive plants, mechanical

15 Ligon, History, 53 (“strange”; “excellent” “salads … which”), 54 (“a Novelty”), 55 (“Trifles”; “Novelty”). Russell Menard and John McCusker have called the idea of a “Sugar Revolution” into question, but they take issue not with the fact or extent of its changes but rather with their causes and pace. See John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, “The Sugar Industry in the Seventeenth Century: A New Perspective on the Barbadian ‘Sugar Revolution’,” in Schwartz, ed., Tropical Babylons, 289-330, esp. 306; cf. Curtin, Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex, 73.
failure, and underclass rebellion—constantly frustrate colonization. Barbados is a contingent space, a state of exception shot through with *fortuna*. And this is only exacerbated by the ambitious new process of sugar cultivation, which required unprecedented levels of investment, precision, and urgency, the careful integration of a number of moving parts (human, natural, industrial), and a high margin of error. Ligon praises the masters for successfully managing “a work, that depends upon so many contingents.” His account of the challenges of colonial rule and wealth extraction is thus intended “to stop those men’s mouths, that lie here at home, and expect great profit.” But I would argue that those “contingents” also evidence the incriminating novelty of planter practices insofar as they are invited by the masters’ exploitative overreaching. This sense of damning colonial novelty coalesces with broader metropolitan anxieties about creolization—one more expression, I would argue, of the innovation prohibition.17

Like earlier colonial reporters, Ligon attempts to convert this human-made contingency into a mandate for top-down innovation by appealing to the epistemic and political authority granted by eyewitness experience. Even as he proposes to reform the slave system, he is largely content to defend or even expand the planters’ power as the necessary response to unprecedented circumstances. Corroborating this assessment via

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17 Ligon, *History*, 13, 95, 164, and 196 (“accidents”), 86, 108, and 109 (“mischances”), 108 and 192 (“casualties”), 40 (“changes and chances”), 109 (“a work”; “to stop”). For a reading of Ligon’s *History* focused on anxieties about creolization see Keith Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 24-40; more broadly see Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Larry Gragg’s *Englishmen Transplanted* seeks to defend the planters from scholarly aspersion by insisting that they were not innovators: he “challenges the view that the seventeenth-century English sugar planters of Barbados were architects of a social disaster” by claiming that they “eagerly transformed their island colony into as close an approximation of England as the tropical environment and racial mix of their workforce would permit” (vii). Gragg’s strange apology echoes the planters’ claim that their departures from metropolitan norms were the necessary response to unique conditions, even as those conditions proved not to be natural and pre-existing (“the tropical environment”) but of their own making (the “racial mix of their workforce”).
first-hand reportage is the essential step in the elaboration of colonial elite sovereignty: slave-master virtù parries Caribbean fortuna in accordance with the dialectic traced in previous chapters, wherein elite innovation meets with underclass counter-innovation and empirical engagement with that counter-innovation authorizes further elite innovation.

II. Empiricism, Emblems, and “Extravagant Digressions”

Given his role as a naturalist—a participant in the Scientific Revolution observing plants and wildlife and conducting explicitly Baconian experiments in the New World—Ligon’s empiricist commitments are more immediately apparent than Strachey’s or Winthrop’s. Likewise, Ligon’s clear investment in political science need not be belabored. Nonetheless, I want to sketch out a few of the formal features that make the History an exemplary work of natural-political empiricism. Ligon explicitly claims the authority that derives from “experience” rendered in “plain language.” And crucially, he predicates his turn to empiricism on the island’s strangeness and novelty. Differing from England’s by virtue of the island’s latitude, the beauty of the Barbadian sunset, for example, is “not possible to be believed by him that hath not seen it.” Similarly, the taste of the pineapple, grown only in the New World and notoriously “impossible” to export to the Old, functions in the History—as it would in John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689)—as a testament to the primacy of sense-based knowledge. Ligon insists that those who haven’t experienced the genuine articles first-hand “never came to [i.e., never understood] their full taste” and even laments that the fruit defies literary representation: “I must acknowledge my self to be downright lame, in the expression.”

18 Ligon, History, 92, 157, 180, and 192 (“experience”), 67 and 182 (“plain language”), 63 (“not possible”), 146 (“impossible”; “never came”), 144 (“I must”). For Ligon’s attempt to conduct one of “Sir
Ligon’s empiricism conditions his literary style. He often writes in the present tense and in the second-person or first-person plural case, and he frequently blurs the line between his journey and its retrospective narration by dramatizing textual transitions as geographic ones (“before we arrive at our next Harbour…”). He addresses the reader directly, employs deictics to vivify the spatial positioning of the objects he describes, and even presents his narration as a kind of virtual experience: “Having given you a taste of the Bread and Drink this Island affords…” In keeping with Steven Shapin’s account of the mid-seventeenth-century scientific “antiauthor,” Ligon freely confesses his epistemological limitations, noting when a lack of first-hand experience has required second-hand testimony, qualification, cautious conjecture, or performative silence. Doing so lends authority to his more forceful assertions by rendering his experience plausibly bounded; it also emphasizes his metropolitan readers’ greater sensory limitations.

Kathleen Donegan contends that Ligon’s History inhabits “a discursive framework of extremity and extravagance through which West Indian colonials described lives that could not be imagined in England.” This highly empiricist tactic, I would argue, allows him to legitimize colonial departures from precedent like slavery.19

Ligon’s empiricism yields two competing forms of literary organization. At times, the History is a travelogue, sequenced according to his itinerary: objects enter the narrative purview in the order of his encounter with them. At other moments, Ligon deploys a kind of questionnaire form that obliges him to treat related material—all of the 

Francis Bacon’s experiment[s],” see History, 170. Locke would famously write that “no body gets the relish of a Pine-apple, till he goes to the Indies, where it is, and tastes it.” See An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter Nidditch (1689; New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), IV:XI:4; p. 632.  
island’s trees, for example—in clusters that subordinate particularizing anecdotal evidence to generalization. Intrusions of one of these narratological modes into the other are major sites of engagement with the threat of slave revolt in the text. Ligon can be quite self-conscious about these intrusions: in one instance, he laments, “I am too apt to fly out in extravagant digressions.” The phrase “extravagant digressions” names those moments when Ligon’s empiricism and the richly associative properties of Caribbean objects of knowledge—plants with the native people who know how to use them, the mechanisms of sugar production with the laborers who sometimes sabotage them—erode disciplinary boundaries and lead Ligon to say more than he intended. In this sense, the History’s “digressions” are an inadvertent effect of the “empirical imperative” we saw at work in Strachey and Winthrop’s texts: the need to “deale Clearely” with distant readers and the risks of “hazardous specularity” attending candid colonial reportage.20

The phrase “extravagant digressions” merits further unpacking. Etymologically, the word “extravagant” suggests a wandering beyond established boundaries (as in the related word “vagrant”), a playful reference to Ligon’s travels perhaps. Indeed, the phrase is essentially redundant since “digression” also metaphorizes outré behavior as a “going astray.” The virtue of pairing the terms lies in their ability to yoke together literary and geographic deviation. Both words describe a departure from the tried and true, and while there is certainly an emergent sense of the value of doing so in the period, this more often connoted transgression in the era of the innovation prohibition. For innovation is precisely what “extravagance” and “digression” describe, albeit in less intensely

pejorative terms—hence both terms’ surprisingly negative connotations in Ligon’s moment: strangeness, heterodoxy, abnormalcy, deviance, impropriety, absurdity, excess, immoderation. These words not only harken back to the transgressive associations of long-distance sea travel at the outset of the age of New World “discovery,” they also look ahead to the discourses of creole degeneracy that would emerge in response to the prodigal lifestyles practiced in places like Barbados. The terms’ moral overtones become especially apparent when a particularly lurid digression about the physical beauty of two “young Negro Virgins” elicits the following apology: “I hope that you will pardon my wild extravagancy.” Ligon isn’t too sorry, of course: the episode is clearly meant to titillate his reader and to render the island attractive to potential investors and settlers by associating its natural abundance with exotic sexuality. But the remark also confirms metropolitan expectations about Caribbean debauchery. Digressions dramatize the New World’s ability to compromise the settler’s bodily, moral, and intellectual integrity and the socio-political order that depends thereon. They imply irrelevance but actually reveal hidden connections and disavowed novelty.21

Even more illuminating are those moments of “extravagant digression” that Ligon doesn’t announce. While the explicitly political-scientific sections of the text approach the problem of slave revolt head-on, Ligon’s digressions allow the topic to emerge elsewhere as a disruptive subtext. An unselfconscious digression will serve to illustrate this general tendency. Because Barbados lacks “Springs and Rivers,” its inhabitants must “rely upon … rain water.” As he describes the method for collecting this water, the narrative attention drifts, first to the architectural idiosyncrasies of the planters’ houses

and, ultimately, to the threat of revolt that prompts them:

Water they [i.e., the planters] save likewise from their houses, by gutters at the eves, which carry it down to cisterns. And the water which is kept there, being within the limits of their houses, many of which are built in manner of Fortifications, and have Lines, Bulwarks, and Bastions to defend themselves, in case there should be any uproar or commotion in the Island, either by Christian servants, or Negro slaves; serves them for drink whilst they are besieged; as also, to throw down upon the naked bodies of the Negroes, scalding hot; which is as good a defence against their underminings, as any other weapons.

Note how the “many of which” clause interrupts the sentence, swerving it from its avowed subject and toward insurrection. Observe too how, even when the sentence proper resumes, it remains unshakably focused on rebellion: it’s not simply that the water “serves them for drink” but that it serves them “whilst they are besieged.” Thus Ligon’s rambling remarks conclude by embracing slave revolt as their explicit subject, converting cool, nourishing drinking water into a “scalding hot” “weapon,” a tool of warfare that recalls—like the planters’ “Lines, Bulwarks, and Bastions”—the Civil War violence he had left behind. Even the succeeding paragraph remains trapped in this mode, describing the “Alarm” system the planters have developed to quickly spread news of “tumult or disorder” across “the whole Island,” before the text finally recovers and resumes its discussion of “Meat and Drink” in the colony. Ligon will shortly claim that there are no slave insurrections in Barbados, but the normalization of that threat accomplished here—as a foundational aspect of the colony’s very architecture—suggests otherwise.  

Like Strachey and Winthrop, Ligon adverts to an older tradition of emblematic reading. Yet the newer empirical imperative under which he labors tends to short-circuit this hermeneutic by particularizing abstract tropes in ways that bring their contradictions troubingly to the fore. The colonial elite recourse to the historical ground zero of nature

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22 Ligon, *History*, 74 (“Springs and”; “rely upon”), 75 (“Water they”; “Alarm”; “tumult or”; “the whole”; “Meat and”).
(trees, bodies politic) or the unprecedented contingency of the state of exception (ships of state) offered a way to conceal colonialism’s top-down innovations, but the literalization of such tropes in eyewitness narratives (commodified trees, exploited bodies, untried ship routes) tended to accentuate those innovations all the more.23

Ligon’s problematic emblematic technique is on full display in his inaugural depiction of Barbados. As his ship approaches the shore, he fuses an empirical natural-historical description of the Caribbean ecosystem with a spiritual-political interpretation:

Being now come in sight of this happy island, the nearer we came, the more beautiful it appeared to our eyes, for that being in it self extremely beautiful, was best discerned and judged of, when our eyes became full Masters of the object; there we saw the high large and lofty trees, with their spreading branches and flourishing tops, [which] seemed to be beholding [i.e., beholden] to the earth and roots that gave them such plenty of sap for their nourishment, as to grow to that perfection of beauty and largeness, whilst they in gratitude return their cool shade to secure and shelter them from the Sun’s heat, which without it would scorched and dry away; so that the bounty and goodness in the one, and gratefulness of the other, serve to make up this beauty, which otherwise would lie empty and waste; and truly these Vegetatives may teach both the sensible and reasonable creatures, what it is that makes up wealth, beauty, and all harmony in that Leviathan, a well governed Common-wealth, where the Mighty men and Rulers of the earth by their prudent and careful protection, secure them from harms, whilst they retribute [i.e., repay] their pains, and faithful obedience, to serve them in all just commands. And both these, interchangeably and mutually in love, which is the Cord that binds up all in perfect Harmony. And where these are wanting, the roots dry, and leaves fall away, and a general decay, and devastation ensues. Witness the woeful experience of these sad times we live in.

The passage argues that the hierarchical-yet-mutual relations between the different parts of the specimen guarantee its thriving—the tree’s roots nourish the branches, which shade the roots in return—and that this arrangement constitutes a providential lesson about the nature of “a well governed Common-wealth.” Ligon understands his emblem to

exist entirely independent of human artifice; the resemblance between nature and politics
is not rhetorical or metaphorical, not overlaid from without, but rather a kind of built-in
or inherent allegory orchestrated by God. Ligon’s emblem recalls Bacon’s account of
“Royal or Political Motion,” mirrors Strachey’s remarks about Bermuda’s “Palme Trees,”
and in its emphasis on “love, which is the Cord that binds up all in perfect Harmony,”
echoes Winthrop’s projection of a hierarchical body politic whose members are “knit
together” in “perfeccion” by the “ligamentes” of Christ’s “love.” Moreover, just as
Strachey’s palm tree and ship of state and Winthrop’s chrisitic body politic each
summoned the specter of its own perverse inversion (the “decapitated” tree, the storm and
shipwreck, the antinomian monstrous birth), so too do Ligon’s trees imply a cautionary
antithesis (a former forest now “[lying] empty and waste,” “a general decay, and
devastation”), which demands the maintenance of normative relations. Ligon argues that
political life ought to emulate nature’s stratified interdependence and bemoans the fact
that it doesn’t. The alignment of natural emblem and political referent bespeaks a world
in harmony with God’s design; their misalignment bespeaks a world in ruin—something
Ligon and his readers had seen first-hand in England during the Civil Wars: “Witness the
woeful experience of these sad times we live in.”24

Yet Ligon’s ostensibly simple natural-political emblem breaks down in the face of
eyewitness experience—that is, precisely “when our eyes became full Masters of the

24 Ligon, History, 64-65 (“Being now); Francis Bacon, The Instauratio Magna Part II: Novum Organum,
or”); William Strachey, “A True Reportory of the Wracke, and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight,”
in Captain John Smith, Writings with Other Narratives of Roanoke, Jamestown, and the First English
Settlement of America, ed. James Horn (New York: Library of America, 2007), 979-1037, quotation on 991
“ligamentes”). Ligon’s text bears out Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra’s argument for the hermeneutic
commonalities across the reformed-unreformed spectrum; see Cañizares-Esguerra, Puritan Conquistadors,
esp. the discussion of Catholic emblematic reading on 146-154.
object.” For the very thing in which Ligon anchors his vision of a static, natural, universal political order—“these Vegetatives”—is precisely what England’s rising Atlantic empire was so dramatically altering via agricultural “improvement.” Far from heralding discrete spheres—the natural, the political—the two halves of Ligon’s allegory (the “branches” and “roots”; the “Rulers of the earth” and their subordinates) meet in the project of plantation cultivation, such that the flourishing of the first term (natural production) becomes predicated on the flourishing of the second (political stability). Regarded in this conspicuous light, Ligon’s emblem becomes ambiguous; for it becomes impossible to tell if the branches shade the roots out of benevolence and “gratefulness” or if they do so because, without reciprocating the services performed by those beneath them, they would themselves perish. The attempt to narrate the mutual relations between roots and branches can only begin in media res, obscuring motive, complicating causality, and thereby rendering the preservation of the self and the exploitation of the other indistinguishable. The magnanimity of a master class reformed along the lines Ligon proposes shades into self-interest, either as the avoidance of “devastation” or as the accumulation of untold profits through slave labor. As the unprecedented scale of both outcomes—profit and devastation, absolute rule and slave rebellion—becomes clearer, the particularization of the emblem effected by Ligon’s empiricism highlights precisely what it is intended to disavow: the innovativeness of plantation society.25

III. Protection and Obedience: Hobbes, Servants, Slaves

Ligon’s account of the Barbadian trees not only evokes the empirically-

25 Ligon, History, 64 (“when our”; “branches”), 65 (“these Vegetatives”; “roots”; “Rulers of”; “gratefulness”; “devastation”).
compromised emblems of his political-scientific predecessors but also the influential political thought of Thomas Hobbes, whose controversial recent book Ligon explicitly references in the latter term of his allegory, “that Leviathan, a well governed Commonwealth.” As Susan Scott Parrish argues, Ligon conceived his text as a response to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), a work that this dissertation has taken to be exemplary of the deductive, rationalist genre of metropolitan political philosophy, as distinguished from the inductive, empiricist genre of colonial political science. Parrish has laid much of the groundwork for my consideration of Ligon’s methodological disagreement with Hobbes, but I believe she misrepresents their ideological disagreement. For far from approaching Hobbes adversarially, Ligon here approvingly cites *Leviathan’s* conception of the polity as based on the consensual collective relinquishment of individual authority to a sovereign who oversees the hierarchical-yet-reciprocal relations that would otherwise break down. Ligon’s account of the tree’s branches and roots exchanging “careful protection” for “faithful obedience” closely resembles Hobbes’s claim that the commonwealth is predicated upon a “mutuall Relation between Protection and Obedience.” Ligon’s demand for “reciprocity between the rulers and the ruled” is thus not a repudiation of Hobbes but instead a deeper reading of him. Rather than ameliorating the plantation regime, I would argue, Ligon’s conception of slave-mastery actually outdoes *Leviathan* in absolutism. Precisely because of his commitment to the empirical methodology, New World archive, and Christian theology that *Leviathan* avoids, Ligon is able to imagine slave-mastery as a form of sovereignty that surpasses Hobbes’s in its capacity for legitimate innovation.26

Hobbes is rightly known for his absolutism. But while the Hobbesian sovereign is technically capable of anything, even innovation, he is also installed precisely to maintain political stability, which Hobbes conventionally saw as imperiled by the innate human love of novelty. Hence *Leviathan* expresses disapproval not only of the “sawcie behavior” of “men of low degree … towards their betters” but also of “the barbarous state of men in power, towards their inferiors.” In Chapter Three we saw how a genuine respect for electoral consent could coexist with virtually unlimited discretionary powers. Hobbes might be said to have perfected this move by relocating that moment of initial consent to a mythic past. But his pragmatic approach to politics would not allow him to treat consent so lightly: while brute force can attain power, an authentically mutual arrangement is more stable. Ligon shares this emphasis on reciprocity, but the mutuality he has in mind paradoxically promises to further absolutize master-slave relations by routing them through theological concepts that Hobbes explicitly rejects.\(^27\)

Hobbes’s entire theory turns on his claim that there is one right the individual can never forfeit: the right to self-preservation. As he unequivocally puts it, “no man is supposed at the making of a Common-wealth, to have abandoned the defence of his life, or limbes”; “A Covenant not to defend my selfe from force, by force, is alwayes voyd.” The striking corollary of this assumption is that Hobbes’s absolute ruler can actually be legitimately resisted under certain circumstances: “If the Soveraign command a man (though justly condemned,) to kill, wound, or mayme himselfe; or not to resist those that

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assault him … yet hath that man liberty to disobey.” The fundamental natural right “to defend our selves” undergirds Hobbes’s remarkable distinction between servants and slaves, a distinction informed by his knowledge of ancient Roman war captive slavery yet perilously out of touch with the realities of the New World plantation:

Dominion acquired by Conquest, or Victory in war, is … acquired to the Victor, when the Vanquished to avoyd the present stroke of death, covenanteth either in expresse words, or by other sufficient signes of the Will, that so long as his life, and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the Victor shall have the use thereof, at his pleasure. And after such Covenant [has been] made, the Vanquished is a SERVANT, and not before: for by the word Servant … is not meant a Captive, which is kept in prison, or in bonds, till … [he] that took him, or bought him of one that did, shall consider what to do with him: (for such men, (commonly called Slaves,) have no obligation at all; but may break their bonds, or the prison; and kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly:) but one, that being taken, hath corporall liberty allowed him; and upon promise not to run away, nor to do violence to his Master is trusted by him.

Hobbes’s distinction between servants, who contract with their captors to exchange obedience for protection, and slaves, who make no such agreement and thus have no obligation to their masters, reflects his belief that mere physical force cannot secure absolute power. The additional ingredient of consent is required to prevent captives not only from “kill[ing] their Master[s]” but from doing so “justly.” Far from requiring that the captive alienate the inalienable right of self-preservation, the scene of initial consent that transforms slave into servant secures both the captive and the captor’s lives. The slave and her master, by contrast, remain in a state of nature, where “danger of violent death” is the order of the day. For Hobbes, the micro-level mastery enjoyed by private persons must uphold the same consent requirement that exists at the macro-level of the polity: “The Obligation of Subjects to the Soveraign, is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which he is able to protect them … [since] the end of Obedience is Protection.” Thus does the pretension to an unalloyed absolutism undermine
itself by placing the master within striking distance of a slave who literally has nothing to lose but her chains. The logical conclusion of Hobbes’s deductions is that, while servant revolt is unjust, slave revolt is virtually inevitable and essentially unimpeachable.\(^{28}\)

It is this insight that Ligon is most concerned to overcome in his engagement with *Leviathan*. His challenge is to develop a form of consent that will transform Caribbean slaves into Hobbesian servants without reducing their terms or granting them any actual rights. But because Hobbes convincingly argues that no one would (or even could) consent to an enslavement that promised to consume her very life, Ligon must look beyond the usual earthly blandishments (the threat of punishment, the promise of eventual manumission) to an otherworldly one: salvation. Put another way, Ligon’s attempt to make the master-slave relationship more mutual by making Christian doctrine part of the “protection” masters exchange for their slaves’ “obedience” constitutes his response to Hobbes’s disconcerting claim that slaves can “kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly.” Far from signaling an ameliorationist stance on slavery, the Christianization that Ligon proposes actually ups the absolutist ante by elevating mastery from a matter of brute force to a matter of metaphysics.\(^{29}\)

Hobbes’s non-providentialist account of obligation—wherein questions of eschatology are tabled and all obedience is due to the “Leviathan,” that “Mortall God, to which wee owe under the Immortal God, our peace and defence”—has often seemed a perfect illustration of Carl Schmitt’s oft-cited claim that “All significant concepts of the

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modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” But in its fraught
dialogue with *Leviathan*, Ligon’s *History* reveals that all theorizations of absolute power
remain fundamentally theological. Hobbes’s inattention to religious and colonial matters
left him ill-equipped to appreciate the unrestrained power that could be exercised when
bearers of the Absolute Christian God put an ocean between themselves and their kings.
In this sense, Ligon’s vision of slave-mastery as the apex of colonial elite sovereignty
perfectly illustrates Jared Hickman’s redefinition of secularity: “From the standpoint of
globalization … secularization narratives can be shown in fact to be divinization
narratives—self-cloaking accounts of the apotheosis of Euro-Christians at the expense of
non-Euro-Christians.” If “Secularity … is a genuine effect of the experience of godlike
being-in-the world—a disenchantment of the world by virtue of its seeming
responsiveness to one’s creative will,” that experience derives from the Euro-Christian
monopoly on the formerly divine right to innovate. Hobbes granted this right solely to the
sovereign; Ligon isolates it on the plantation and grants it to the entire master class.30

Perhaps with *Leviathan* in mind, Ligon makes a great deal of the distinction
between the island’s African slaves and its European indentured servants. The former,
along with “their posterity,” are “subject to their Masters for ever” and so are “preserved
with greater care,” whereas the latter belong to their masters “but for five years” and thus
“have the worser lives.” Ligon’s distinction troubles Hobbes’s by showing that the
contractualism that Hobbes promotes fails to safeguard even *non-captive* contractors
from excessive exploitation, much less captive ones (the servants “have the worser lives”

*Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 2006), 36 (“All significant”); Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, 54 (“From the”; “Secularity … is”). See
also Hickman’s engagement with Schmitt in “Political Theology,” in *The Routledge Companion to
precisely because of their term limits). As Stephen Hopkins had warned in Bermuda, unscrupulous masters simply respond to briefer indentures with harsher work quotas. Of course, the African slaves would “have the worser lives” soon enough, since they were beginning to predominate over indentured servants and thus to seem more expendable in this period. Even at the early point in this transition that Ligon witnessed it is clear that the distinction between slaves and servants had attained a racial cast overlooked by Hobbes, as physical, ethnic, and cultural difference was mapped onto assumptions about who was or was not enslavable and who was or was not capable of making contracts.

Attempts to date the advent of racial ideology have produced a great deal of controversy, as scholars have sought to explain why codified ideologies of racial difference so often lagged behind practices that seem to take them for granted. As Hickman shows, this controversy is due in large part to scholars’ assumption that race is a secular, rather than a theological, category. Even as we recognize race’s entirely ideological basis and biological nonexistence, reconceiving it as a material signifier in the eschatology of Euro-Christian hegemony helps to explain the fact that the fundamental racial distinction Ligon highlights (inheritable lifetime servitude for some) was in place over a decade before he arrived in the Caribbean. Recognizing that the distinction between Christian and heathen did not merely precede but in fact structured the distinction between white and black, we can better understand both the absolutism of the relationship between Euro-Christian masters and non-Euro-Christian slaves and the perceived impossibility of extending that absolutism to the relationship between Euro-Christian masters and servants.  

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31 Ligon, History, 93 (“their posterity”; “subject to”; “preserved with”; “but for”; “have the”). As Richard Sheridan notes, “Chattel slavery was given legal sanction in Barbados on 21 July 1636, when the Governor and Council ‘resolved that Negroes and Indians, that came here to be sold, should serve for Life, unless a Contract was before made to the contrary’” (Sugar and Slavery, 236, quoting Anon., Some Memoirs of the
Ligon directly correlates the differential treatment of Euro-Christian indentured servants and African slaves with their propensity toward insurrection, but he arrives at precisely the opposite conclusion as Hobbes. The slaves are a “happy people, who so little contents,” while the servants have proven themselves capable of great violence: “some cruel Masters will provoke their Servants so, by extreme ill usage, and often and cruel beating them, as they grow desperate and so join together to revenge themselves upon them.” Ligon sympathetically reports that he has “seen such cruelty there done to Servants, as I did not think one Christian could have done to another,” but this hardly mitigates his condemnation of those “mischiefs that often happen” when the highly “combustible” materials of sugar production are “negligently” or deliberately set on fire by the servants “to the utter ruin and undoing of their Masters.” While he optimistically claims that, “as discreeter and better natured men have come to rule there, the servants’ lives have been much bettered,” those fires nonetheless remind him of the Civil War violence he has fled: “such a noise it makes, as if two Armies, with a thousand shot on either side, were continually giving fire, every knot of every Cane, giving as great a report as a Pistol.” Much as Strachey had figured the storm that wrecked the Sea Venture in Bermuda as a kind of natural rebellion, Ligon associates these fires with insurrection. Yet they also have an upside. The instances of incendiary revolt make it easier to “foresee[] and prevent[] [similar] mischiefs” in the future, and they offer an opportunity to...
test the loyalty of the enslaved: “I have seen some *Negroes* so earnest to stop this fire as with their naked feet to tread, and with their naked bodies to tumble, and roll upon it; so little they regard their own smart or safety, in respect of their Master’s benefit.”

Ultimately, Ligon’s racial political science will shore up the ideology of slavery by reading these attributes—extreme bodily endurance, proto-Christian selflessness, limited political capacity—as evidence of Africans’ constitutional fitness for bondage.32

A full-blown servants’ revolt nearly transpired during Ligon’s time in Barbados, and his account of the plot captures the racial differentiation happening at this early moment. Led by those “amongst them, whose spirits were not able to endure such slavery,” the servants engage in an unprecedented conspiracy: “such a combination … as the like was never seen there before.” The conspirators nearly succeed in enacting their plot to “to fall upon their Masters, and cut all their throats, and by that means, to make themselves [not] only freemen, but Masters of the Island.” But as this dissertation’s literary history of rebellion has taught us to expect, “the day before they were to put it in act … one of them, either by the failing of his courage, or some new obligation from the love of his Master, revealed this long plotted conspiracy; and so by this timely advertisement, the Masters were saved.” While this dénouement suggests that there is still enough loyalty among the servants to ensure obedience, the very occasion for that loyalty undercuts Hobbes’s claim that the contractual nature of servitude eliminates revolt. The propensity to demand liberty begins to seem not experiential but constitutional, racial.33

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32 Ligon, *History*, 94 (“happy people”; “seen such”; “as discreeter”), 96 (“some cruel”), 95 (“mischiefs that”; “combustible”; “negligently”; “to the utter”; “such a”; “forsee[]” and”; “I have seen”).

33 Ligon, *History*, 96 (“amongst them”; “such a”; “to fall”; “the day”). Jill Sheppard has shown that early historians misrepresented this servants’ rebellion as a slave revolt; see “The Slave Conspiracy That Never Was,” *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 34:4 (1974): 190-197. On the island’s servant population, which included many political prisoners, see Pestana, *The English Atlantic*, 188-190.
Like Strachey and Winthrop’s reports, Ligon’s account focuses on the efficacy of the conspirators’ semi-public speech in garnering support for their cause. Despite any compassion he may feel for the servants’ “sufferings,” Ligon’s sympathies clearly lie with the masters, or at least with the peace he understands to attend their rule. Yet he is also impressed with the extensive influence attained by the servants’ “daily complainings to one another,” by the ability of their voices to “spread throughout the Island” in the attempt to “draw as many of the discontented party into this plot, as possibly they could.” He links the near-success of the servants’ revolt with their persuasive rhetorical eloquence, capable (like that of Anne Hutchinson and Stephen Hopkins) of spanning demographic differences and geographic distances. Ligon evinces a kind of begrudging respect for these acts of incendiary oratory, even as he notes that it was by tracing them back to their sources that the planters were able to identify the plot’s ringleaders in order to “put [them] to death, for example to the rest,” thereby transforming counter-innovation into precedent through exemplary execution.34

The text turns next to the island’s enslaved Africans and, in so doing, clarifies the distinction between them and the European indentured servants. “It has been accounted a strange thing,” Ligon writes, “that the Negroes, being more than double the numbers of the Christians that are there, and they accounted a bloody people, where they think they have power or advantages … should not commit some horrid massacre upon the Christians, thereby to enfranchise themselves, and become Masters of the Island.” His most significant explanation for why there are no slave revolts is that the slaves, who “are fetched from several parts of Africa, … speak several languages, and by that means, one

34 Ligon, History, 96 (“sufferings”; “daily complainings”; “spread throughout”; “draw as”; “put [them]”).
of them understands not another.” In contrast to the indentured servants, the enslaved Africans explicitly lack the capacity for semi-public speech and thus for collective action. This fact operates at a practical level: Ligon blends the traumatic effects of the Middle Passage with what he takes to be the primitive illiteracy of African culture (“what can a poor people do, that are without Letters and Numbers, which is the soul of all business that is acted by Mortals, upon the Globe of this World[?]”). But disabling African linguistic heterogeneity also takes on a more metaphoric valence insofar as it links up with an enduring strand of western political thought that made persuasive rhetorical eloquence the *sine qua non* of political personhood. Hobbes, for example, contends that without speech, “there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society, nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears, and Wolves.”

But while Ligon is eager to substantiate the planters’ racializing assumptions through his firsthand accounts of the failure of African speech, the nagging Hobbesian problem of consent also leads him to conceive a form of *disempowering* black speech achieved via slave Christianization. Where the rebellious European servants’ oratorical capacity seemed to signify their possession of “spirits … not able to endure such slavery,” Ligon imagines the African slaves verbally renouncing the right to self-preservation in exchange for a greater reward: the salvation of their “spirits” through catechization by their godly, godlike masters. The exchange of enslavement for Christianization thus becomes a kind of transcendent *quid pro quo* to be squared only after all terrestrial struggles have come to an end: “when the great Leveller of the world,

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35 Ligon, *History*, 96 (“It has”), 97 (“are fetched”), 103 (“what can”); Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I:IV:12; p. 24 (“there had”). Dunn notes that Ligon mistakes the island’s population ratios here: the African population did not surpass the European one in Barbados until around 1660; see *Sugar and Slaves* 55, 74-76, 237.
Death, shall run his progress, all Estates will be laid even.”

IV. Instrumentum Vocale? Experiments with African Speech

This section takes as its title the ancient Roman writer Marcus Terentius Varro’s term for the slave as an “articulate tool,” instrumentum vocale. While the term can be of limited utility to considerations of New World slavery, it proves relevant to Ligon’s History insofar as it keys the problem of slave subjectivity—the conflict between the slave’s total domination and the human attributes that made her a more useful “tool” than a mere beast of burden—to the issue of speech. As we have seen, Ligon thematizes discursive capability as a marker of political agency. In this spirit, virtually all of his encounters with African individuals involve an attempt to elicit speech from them, a form of proto-ethnographic observation that accords with his natural and political empiricism and fuels his theorization of slave-master sovereignty-as-innovation.

The Portuguese-controlled island of St. Jago serves as a kind of laboratory where Ligon can test out his theories about African speech on black subjects who are not enslaved. Dining with the governor of the island, he becomes infatuated with the man’s free black “Mistress,” a “Negro of the greatest beauty and majesty together: that ever I saw in one woman” and one whose “gracefulness” rivals that of “Queen Anne.” He routes his attraction to the mistress through a nearly obsessive desire to see and hear her speak, and crucially, he presents this as a kind of Baconian experiment or “Essay” motivated by the emergent scientific stance of “Curiosity.” Initially, Ligon’s curiosity alights on a

36 Ligon, History, 96 (“spirits … not”), 198 (“when the”).
question that would seem to involve the homogenizing logic of race as a secular, quasi-biological category: he wishes to engage the mistress in conversation in order to test “a general opinion,” of which he is skeptical, “that all Negroes have white teeth.” But this, he explains, “was not the main end of my enquiry.” Instead, he is most eager to experience “her language, and graceful delivery.” Awaiting the mistress after the meal has concluded, he plies her with gifts (“Novelt[ies]”) and employs a translator to render his own speech comprehensible to her, but to no avail. He fails to elicit a verbal response from the mistress, who instead displays “the loveliest smile that I have ever seen” and “turn[s] … up” her eyes to “[give] me such a look, as was a sufficient return for a far greater present, and withall wished, I would think of somewhat wherein she might pleasure me, and I should find her both ready & willing.” The narration is somewhat ambiguous about whether or not the mistress actually speaks, turning on the word “withal,” which could mean “additionally” or “thereupon” but here seems to bear the older meaning of “thereby.” On my reading, the mistress speaks solely through her “look,” but the ambiguity may itself be the point: the tantalizing possibility of speech recreates the experience of her flirtatious presence; the episode’s sexual energy seems to depend entirely upon its non-consummation. Ligon gets thus far and no further—a smile but not speech, the promise of requital but not requital itself—and his narration fittingly caps the exchange with a non-verbal adieu: “And so with a graceful bow of her neck, she took her way towards her own house; … Other addresses were not to be made.”38

Given the widespread anxieties in the period about women’s public speech and conversation with strangers—on full display in Winthrop’s Short Story—gender would

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38 Ligon, History, 54 (“Mistress”; “Negro of”), 55 (“gracefulness”; “Queen Anne”; “Essay”; “Curiosity”; “a general”; “that all”; “was not”; “her language”; “Novelt[ies]”; “the loveliest”; “turn[s] … up”), 55-56 (“[give] me such”); 56 (“And so”). See “withal, adv. and prep.,” OED Online (2017).
seem a plausible explanation for the mistress’s reticence. Still, her unabashed
sexualization in Ligon’s account suggests that decorum cannot be entirely responsible for
the experiment’s outcome. High status could authorize female public speech, but it fails
to do so here. For while the mistress’s freeness and ties to the governor are central to her
allure for Ligon, he is interested not in the content of her speech so much as the embodied
experience of exotic interaction. Far from invoking the context of rational discourse and
civic oratory at play in the indentured servants’ plot, his account objectifies the mistress
in ways it never would Queen Anne. This objectification is accomplished by way of a
racializing association of the mistress with the captivating material wealth of the extra-
European world. And this association—which functions through, rather than despite, her
high status—undercuts any agency she might have enjoyed by virtue of that status. Thus,
“her language” takes its place among the many other objectified aspects of her person. To
provide but a sampling of Ligon’s breathless description:

Her stature … well favored, full eyed, and admirably graced; she wore on her
head a roll of green Taffeta striped with white and Philliamort, made up in
manner of a Turban[;] … On her body … a Petticoat of Orange Tawny and Sky
color; … and upon that a mantle of purple silk, … with a rich Jewel on her right
shoulder[;] … Her shoes, of white Leather … In her ears, … large Pendants …
But her eyes were her richest Jewels.

The description culminates with the mistress’s smile, which proves a substitute, rather
than an access-point, for her speech. The narrative attention thus turns from what Ligon
had called the “main end of my enquiry”—“her language” as opposed to the question of
whether “all Negroes have white teeth”—to the mistress’s exotic body. And that body
becomes indistinguishable from its adornments, themselves metonyms for the extra-
European world’s natural resources: “the loveliest smile that I have ever seen … rows of
pearls, so clean, white, orient, and well-shaped.” The effect is to transform the mistress
into a commodity, a specimen, a *novelty*, an object of economic, scientific, and sexual desire by virtue of its unfamiliarity to the perceiver.\(^{39}\)

Ligon’s vaguely effeminizing objectification of the African body as a disempowered and manipulable source of wealth, knowledge, and power precludes the capacity for political speech associated with male Euro-Christian mastery. In this sense his rendering of the mistress might be said to figure the condition of all Atlantic slaves, who as he had explained, are incapable of organizing rebellions because they “speak several languages, and by that means, one of them understands not another.” Ligon is not arguing that Africans literally cannot speak, then, but rather that their speech fails to graduate to a level that would empower them politically. Their funerals, for example, find them “making a doleful sound with their voices,” but Ligon denigrates this as so much senseless noise. A second example of the failure of rational black discourse—this time enslaved, male, and Barbadian—will serve to illustrate these political stakes:

We had an excellent *Negro* in the Plantation, whose name was *Macaw*, and was our chief Musician; a very valiant man, and was keeper of our Plantain-Grove. This *Negro’s* Wife was brought to bed of two Children [i.e., gave birth to twins], and her Husband, as their manner is, had provided a cord to hang her. But the Overseer finding what he was about to do, informed the Master of it, who sent for *Macaw*, to dissuade him from this cruel act, of murdering his Wife, and used all persuasions that possibly he could, to let him see, that such double births are in Nature, and that diverse precedents were to be found amongst us of the like; so that we rather praised our Wives, for their fertility, than blamed them for their falseness. But this prevailed little with him, upon whom custom had taken so deep an impression; but resolved, the next thing he did, should be to hang her. Which when the Master perceived, and that the ignorance of the man, should take away the life of the woman, who was innocent of the crime her Husband condemned her for, told him plainly, that if he hanged her he himself should be hanged by

her, upon the same bough … This threatening wrought more with him than all the reasons of Philosophy that could be given him; and so [he] let her alone; but he never cared much for her afterward, but chose another which he liked better.

At one level, the episode argues the inferiority of African superstition to Euro-Christian ethics. The master’s response to the murderous Macaw performs western rationality and rhetorical eloquence. And yet these “persuasions” fail to persuade. At a second level, then, the episode dramatizes the failure of white rational discourse—the failure, that is, of the civilizing impact that Euro-Christian colonialism fancied itself as having on those it exploited. And yet, at a third level, the scene transforms that failure into a justification of planter violence as the necessary response to African “ignorance.” Protecting Macaw’s wife—who “innocen[ce]” should of course be understood to euphemize her value as chattel property, the real reason her master wants to save her life—demonstrates the greater utility of “threatening” than “reason[ing]” in masters’ interactions with their slaves. Moreover, the episode reveals New World Euro-Christians to have conceived of Africans, much like Native Americans, as a key exception to the innovation prohibition, as primitives in need of transformation by an ostensibly benevolent white “Philosophy” that happened to countenance a plantation regime eager to protect fertile slave women and otherwise untroubled by black mass death.40

Macaw’s failure to speak is crucial to the alchemy whereby the stubbornness of African cultural survivals (the “deep … impression” of “custom,” “as their manner is”) becomes the occasion for the innovative imposition, by force rather than rational discourse, of an alternative Euro-Christian culture rooted in deeper and truer “precedents.” This aspect of the interaction is not reducible to Ligon’s decision not to

40 Ligon, History, 97 (“speak several”), 103 (“making a”), 97-98 (“We had”).
represent whatever speaking Macaw may have done but is, instead, more fundamental insofar as Macaw’s failure to be persuaded by the master’s eloquence or to offer a coherent counter-argument can be figured as a failure to “speak” at all. It is this failure to “speak the language,” in the metaphorical sense, that licenses the master’s turn to coercive violence, which Ligon presents as something like “the only language black men understand,” much as flirtatious gift-giving had earlier seemed “the only language black women understand.” In both cases Ligon presents gesture as the form of communication best suited to white-black relations, and this commonality objectifies Macaw in the manner of the mistress, transforming him into an entirely inert thing: a corpse, living (as a slave) or dead (“hanged by her, upon the same bough”). But what, then, are we to make of Ligon’s decision to deem Macaw—the would-be uxoricide who responds only to violence—“an excellent Negro”? The comment bears out Parrish’s argument that certain nonwhite Barbadians elicited a cross-cultural respect from Ligon for their technical knowledge (in Macaw’s case, his ostensibly precocious appreciation of western music and all the metaphors of political “harmony” implied therein). But Ligon’s comment also reflects his sense that Africans’ incapacity for political speech rendered them fit for lifelong servitude: Macaw is described not as an excellent person but as an “excellent Negro,” whose responsiveness to “threatening” makes him the perfect subject of the innovative processes of enslavement and plantation re-acculturation. Ligon’s emphasis on Macaw’s equal readiness to ritually murder his wife and to discard his own heritage in the face of planter coercion casts master-slave relations as a key site of legitimate elite innovation conducted under the sign of Christian reason.

V. “He looks up to Heaven”: African Spirituality and the Call to Conversion

Ligon’s empirical inquiry into Africans’ incapacity for political speech ratifies their disempowered position within the model polity the History imagines. But, as we saw above, the Hobbesian provocation of the slave who can rebel “justly” because enslavement fails to offer a genuinely “mutuall Relation between Protection and Obedience” obliged slavery’s apologists to employ a wider frame of reference. Enter Ligon’s ostensibly benevolent insistence upon the catechization of the enslaved. Steeped in the eschatology of colonialism, the History imagines salvation as a fitting recompense for the unprecedentedly brutal and life-ending labor endured by Barbados’s slaves, who, he muses, “set no great value upon their lives” anyway. Thus, alongside the question of black speech, Ligon investigates black religiosity in order to argue that Africans arrive in the New World already predisposed toward Christian instruction. The controversial project of slave conversion makes possible a metaphysical, as well as physical, form of colonial elite domination. For while conversion would seem to imply an equality between masters and slaves—best expressed by the dictum that Christians could not enslave coreligionists—he imagines that it will have precisely the opposite effect: the non-European Christian novice will learn to subordinate herself to the Absolute God by subordinating herself to that God’s Euro-Christian bearers, whose own subordination to the Absolute paradoxically empowers them vis-à-vis non-Europeans in accordance with the cosmic double-standard of race. In this way, conversion-as-innovation opens up a space for disempowering black public speech, for the willful renunciation of one’s will.42

The constitutive openendedness of Ligon’s empiricism produces contradictory findings about African spirituality. On the one hand, he sees profound difference, which his racial political science equates with inferiority. On the other hand, the enslaved are not so alien as to be unconvertible; in fact, they often seem primed for Christianization:

What their other opinions are in matter of Religion, I know not; but certainly, they are not altogether of the sect of the Sadducees: For, they believe a Resurrection, and that they shall go into their own Country again, and have their youth renewed. And lodging this opinion in their hearts, they make it an ordinary practice, upon any great fright, or threatening of their Masters, to hang themselves.

Initially, Ligon attempts to demonstrate the amenability of African beliefs to Christian ones in order to argue for slave catechization. But he soon reveals those beliefs to countenance a response to worldly suffering that is out of step with Christian orthodoxy: suicide. He represents the slaves’ tendency “to hang themselves” as essentially an act of cowardice not all that different from the dishonorable fact of having been enslaved, presumably as war captives, in the first place. But we would do well to understand slave suicide instead as a political-theological rejection of the new metaphysical regime of Atlantic slavery, as a denial of the masters’ quasi-divine power to change the world. Indeed, slave suicide represents an especially poignant instance of counter-innovation, a form of resistance to colonial elite innovation accomplished through a quite literal attempt to return to a point of origin (the slave’s African homeland-as-afterlife).43

The metaphysical rebellion of slave suicide elicited a proportionate response from the planters. As Vincent Brown argues, the master class matched the dual provocation of suicide—as both a material and a supernatural form of contestation—by deploying not only “physical force” but also “spiritual terror” or “government magic,” “project[ing]

43 Ligon, History, 102 (“What their”).
their authority symbolically through punishment wreaked upon the bodies of the dead” in order “to deter Africans from self-destruction.” Thus, as the passage quoted above continues, Ligon reveals that the masters’ efforts to alter the slaves’ heretical beliefs involves an equally heretical presumption of a godlike power to innovate:

But Colonel Walrond having lost three or four of his best Negroes this way [i.e., to suicide], and in a very little time, caused one of their [i.e., the suicides’] heads to be cut off, and set upon a pole a dozen foot high; and having done that, caused all his Negroes to come forth, and march round about this head, and bid them look on it, whether this were not the head of such a one that hanged himself. Which they acknowledging, he told them, That they were in a main error, in thinking they went into their own Countries, after they were dead; for, this mans head was here, as they all were witnesses of; and how was it possible, the body could go without a head. Being convinced by this sad, yet lively spectacle, they changed their opinions; and after that, no more hanged themselves.

The passage describes a revealing variation on the increasingly common plantation practice of exhibiting the mutilated bodies of resistant slaves as a warning to others—first, because the slave has not been killed by the master but rather has killed himself, and second, because displaying the suicide’s head is intended to argue the futility not merely of earthly revolt but also of the belief in an embodied afterlife to which suicide is an avenue. The grisly “spectacle” orchestrated by Walrond, who would lead the royalist coup recounted in Foster’s Briefe Relation, is not so much an exemplary execution (since death is what the slaves desire rather than fear) as an exemplary damnation—in Brown’s words, a performance of “the slaveholders’ power over the spiritual fate of the enslaved.” Walrond’s actions seem disenchanting insofar as the enforced “witness[ing]” of a present material signifier (“this mans head”) that contradicts an absent spiritual signified (his soul’s return to its “own Countr[y]”) refutes a non-Christian theology without offering orthodox Christian doctrine as a substitute. But his actions are in fact re-enchanting insofar as they relocate the entire cosmic drama of life, death, and salvation to the
planted, where the only afterlife the disobedient slave can expect is as a stubbornly material cautionary tale orchestrated by the divinized master who “causes” his severed head to be set “upon a pole.” One would be hard-pressed to find a better illustration of secularity as Hickman redefines it: as the Euro-Christian’s “experience of godlike being-in-the-world.” While this gruesome, heretical display actually aligns Walrond himself with “the Sadducees” invoked at the outset of the passage—who famously denied the immortality of the soul and the existence of an afterlife—it nonetheless confirms the empowering effects of Euro-Christianity: Walrond’s nominal subordination to God makes him a god, much as his royalism would allow him to become Barbados’s tyrant.44

Ligon seems to have had a more orthodox form of religious instruction in mind. Yet his proposed catechization is meant to achieve an effect fundamentally similar to Walrond’s exhibition. In another moment of theological comparativism, Ligon writes:

most of them [i.e., the Africans] are as near beasts as may be, setting their souls aside. Religion they know none; yet most of them acknowledge a God, as appears by their motions and gestures: For, if one of them do another wrong, and he cannot revenge himself, he looks up to Heaven for vengeance, and holds up both his hands, as if the power must come from thence, that must do him right.

Ligon’s remarks exhibit the kind of contradiction that was colonialism’s Eurocentric specialty: the Africans “are as near beasts as may be” so long as one ignores “their souls”; they “acknowledge” and even seem to pray to “a God” yet have no “Religion.” These contradictions are deeply enabling, however, since they represent the enslaved as ideal recipients of Christian instruction but not as partakers in the empowerment that Europeans derive therefrom. Predisposed toward Christian doctrine, the Africans are

nonetheless primitive in their religiosity, which renders them perennially disempowered. At no point does Ligon understand the behavior he reports to bespeak a genuinely alternative faith, which might entail its own rival forms of empowerment. He can read the African’s skyward appeal only as a turn to “Heaven”—to the Christian God—never as a turn to the heavens—to the sky, the sun, the stars, or any number of non-absolute gods that might inhabit them. As Ligon imagines it, the slaves’ conversion from (read: the innovation of their) paganism would guarantee, rather than imperil, their continued subordination to their Euro-Christian catechizers. And crucially this claim depends upon their disempowering propensity toward the non-verbal (“their motions and gestures”), evidenced in his earlier experiments with the mistress and Macaw and here in the generic African’s skyward appeal. The slaves’ infacility with political speech marks them both as barbarians (“as near beasts as may be”) barred from a neo-classical public arena and as proto-Christians, meek and apolitical subjects who are “in but not of” the Augustinean “City of Man” that was Barbados. Preferring deferred divine justice over immediate earthly justice (“he looks up to Heaven for vengeance”) in situations of conflict imagined exclusively as ones between fellow slaves (“if one of them do another wrong”) rather than between slaves and masters, the African convert becomes the perfect subject of enslavement precisely because of her possession of a “soul.”

Ligon makes his case for slave Christianization explicit in his emblematic reading of the Barbadian banana. He notes that while the banana’s fruit be not so useful a good for the belly, as that of the Plantain, yet she has somewhat to delight the eyes, which the other wants, and that is the picture of Christ upon the Cross; so lively expressed, as no Limner can do it (with one color) more exactly; and this is seen, when you cut the fruit just across as you do the root

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45 Ligon, History, 97 (“most of”).
of Fern, to find a spread Eagle: but this is much more perfect, the head hanging
down, the arms extended to the full length, with some little elevation; and the feet
cross one upon another.

The “picture of Christ” in the half-peeled banana functions as a natural revelation, and
just as we saw in puritan New England in the previous chapter, empirical detail is
essential rather than inimical to the communication of that higher meaning. Moreover, as
with the tree emblem discussed above, the banana’s good example points to a failure
within the Barbadian social order and demands its rectification. According to Ligon, God
has “set up his own Cross” within the fruit “to reproach” Christian slave-owners who
refuse “to preach to those poor ignorant harmless souls the Negroes, the doctrine of
Christ Crucified, which must convert many of them to his worship,” out of fear that “they
will lose the hold they have of them as slaves” by doing so. As Christopher Iannini
argues, this passage is exemplary of natural history’s use of the “specimen-as-emblem”
as “a heuristic lens for contemplating the moral and ideological conundrum of colonial
slavery.” It is also, as Iannini notes, a classic instance of the stance that Christopher
Leslie Brown terms “antislavery without abolitionism,” a critical attitude toward the slave
system that nonetheless fails to produce “comprehensive antislavery initiatives.” Indeed, I
would argue that it is precisely the emblem’s theological basis that allows Ligon to align
slavery, rather than abolitionism, with the absolute right to innovate.46

VI. Sambo’s Compass: Euro-Christian Apotheosis and the Problem of Conversion

As politically innocuous as Ligon’s vision of instinctual black Christianity may
seem, he encountered a great deal of resistance when he broached the issue of African

46 Ligon, History, 142 (“fruit be”), 144 (“set up”; “to reproach”; “they will”), 143-144 (“to preach”);
Iannini, Fatal Revolutions, 27 (“specimen-as-emblem”; “a heuristic”); Brown, Moral Capital, 17-18n14,
33-101, 29 (“antislavery without”; “comprehensive antislavery”).
conversion with the planters. This is because, at least theoretically, Christianization promised a kind of egalitarianism at odds with enslavement. As Christopher Leslie Brown notes, “Converting heathens into Christians risked removing a fundamental marker of difference.” There was also Protestantism’s ambiguous relationship to political resistance, from John Calvin’s hedging take on Romans 13 to Stephen Hopkins reading sea storms as contract-breaking acts of God to Anne Hutchinson’s antinomian curse on the Massachusetts Bay General Court. Ligon is therefore at pains to demonstrate that the same faith that empowers whites will have the opposite effect on nonwhites. While Christianity granted Europeans the legitimate right to innovate—to approach “the non-European world and its peoples as a bad immanent sphere they were in a position to save,” a “wilderness that needed to be transformed into a garden”—Ligon must show that Christianization will thwart non-European political innovation, especially slave revolt.47

The history of African conversion in the Americas is, accordingly, a fraught one. It took a long time for enslaved conversion to gain acceptance and when it did it was accompanied in virtually every instance by “laws … stipulating that baptism would not affect an enslaved person’s status.” While some scholars have viewed the planters’ belief that baptism automatically entailed freedom as a piece of “insular legal misinformation,” others have noted its consistency with the prohibition on enslaving fellow Christians. The latter camp has usefully emphasized slavery’s complex place in Christian theology: sin was conceived as “free[dom] from righteousness” and slavery as punishment for sin, while grace was conceived as “slave[ry] … [to] righteousness” and Christian “liberty … [as] conformity to God’s will.” These scholars have also traced the opposition to slave

conversion to the overlap between racial and religious identifiers in the period. As David Brion Davis notes, “The fact that Africans had traditionally been associated with Moorish infidelity and with Noah’s curse of Canaan may have disposed some Europeans to regard them as fit for bondage.” Doctrinal differences between Protestantism and Catholicism may explain differential rates of nonwhite conversion in the British and Iberian colonies, but the more fundamental point is that “unbelievers … were usually thought to be undeserving of freedom” and vice-versa. The planters espoused the belief that Rebecca Goetz calls “hereditary heathenism,” “the notion that Indians and Africans could never become Christians.” Indeed, what Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra terms the Euro-Christian “geopolitics of evil” dictated that “Blacks and mulattoes in particular were considered potential allies of the devil.” While northern colonies saw some calls for slave conversion, that “movement … hardly touch the West Indies, and it languished in Maryland and Virginia.” As late as 1681, “the Barbados Assembly declared that the Negroes’ ‘Savage Brutishness renders them wholly incapable’ of conversion.” Even after royal decree required it in Jamaica in 1688, the “planters of Barbados were still resisting … the conversion of Negroes in 1695.”

Ligon’s case for slave Christianization comes to a head in his interactions with a slave named Sambo. Impressed by Ligon’s esoteric use of a compass, Sambo “desired me [i.e., requested of Ligon], that he might be made a Christian; for he [i.e., Sambo] thought

[that] to be Christian, was to be endued with all those knowledges he wanted.” Where Ligon has thus far employed the tropes of reticence and incoherent speech to argue for Africans’ natural disposition toward Christianity and enslavement, he here offers an account of coherent black discourse directed toward those same ends. Sambo may misconceive the “knowledges” he so desires, but the exchange nonetheless complicates the text’s predominant depiction of Africans as unassuming in their silence—at least until Ligon shows that pious black speakers like Sambo will, paradoxically, use their eloquence to relinquish the right to political participation eloquence usually entails.49

While Ligon regards this exchange as a straightforward instance of a non-Euro-Christian humbly soliciting instruction in orthodox doctrine from a Euro-Christian, the circumstances of the exchange actually suggest that Sambo regards Christianity as one spiritual force among many, albeit a particularly advantageous one to “know” since it is the special property of the master class. Indeed, Ligon’s compass is a particularly useful example of how early moderns could construe a form of knowledge we now regard as secular as a source of spiritual power capable of manipulating material reality. I want to suggest that Sambo understands the compass as something like a Christian fetish: “seeing the needle wag, [Sambo] desired to know the reason of its stirring, and whether it were alive.” Much as earlier explorers like Thomas Hariot had indulged certain non-Euro-Christian misapprehensions of the trappings of colonist culture—bullets, Bibles—as having a kind of “life” in order to facilitate conversion and assimilation, Ligon fails to correct Sambo’s misunderstanding of the compass as “alive.” The “Compass” was, after all, one of the three markers of modernity’s salutary novelty singled out for special praise.

49 Ligon, History, 101 (“desired me”).
by that defender of innovation, promoter of colonialism, and architect of the Scientific Revolution Francis Bacon (the other two “innovations” being, as Hariot’s text foretells, “Printing” and “Gunpowder”). Ligon’s relationship to the compass is scientific and technological, but it is no less theological and political for that since, like an African fetish, the compass could be said to immanentize a spiritual force with the power to impact human relations in the material world. This happens not, as Sambo imagines, through the compass’s routine operations but rather, as Bacon had suggested, through the providential fact of its modern Euro-Christian invention and subsequent role in the New World’s “discovery.” Although the spiritual force it manifests is the “one true God” rather than some “lesser” heathen divinity, Sambo’s sense of the fundamental connection between compass and Christian is entirely sound.50

The scene’s continuation deepens this connection. When Ligon’s explanation of the compass’s seeming self-movement only perplexes Sambo further—“This point of Philosophy was a little too hard for him, and so he stood in a strange muse”—Ligon physically demonstrates its manipulability: “I bade him reach [for] his axe, and put it near to the Compass, and remove it about; and as he did so, the Needle turned with it, which put him in the greatest admiration that ever I saw [in] a man, and so [he] quite gave over his questions, and desired me, that he might be made a Christian…” Far from being a secularizing act of disenchantment, Ligon’s demonstration is actually a performance of “Euro-Christian apotheosis,” the godlike power to control non-Europeans and non-human nature paradoxically gained through one’s subordination to the Absolute God. Perhaps the best example of this dynamic—of the disavowed fetishism of Euro-Christian global

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dominance—is Sambo himself, the self-moving chattel who seems to have a will of his own but in fact only actuates his master’s wishes. Might not the Atlantic slave have been added to Bacon’s triumvirate of modern “innovations”? Small wonder that Sambo asks to “be made a Christian,” since he understands this to entail not a theological indoctrination so much as the earthly supremacy that comes with access to Ligon’s “knowledges.”

I am arguing, in short, that Sambo’s conception of Christianity is not really a misunderstanding and that Ligon fundamentally shares it. In the era when “Christian” was the preferred term for “European,” access to the “knowledges” epitomized by the compass meant the power to legitimately innovate. This explains the frustratingly circular exchange that takes place when Ligon seeks to have Sambo Christianized. In response to this request, Sambo’s master explains

That the people of that Island were governed by the Laws of England, and by those Laws, we could not make a Christian a slave. I [i.e., Ligon] told him [i.e., the master], my request was far different than that, for I desired him to make a Slave a Christian. His [i.e., the master’s] answer was, That it was true, there was a great difference in that: But, being once a Christian, he could no more account him a Slave, and so lose the hold they had of them as Slaves … So I was struck mute, and poor Sambo kept out of the Church; as ingenious, as honest, and as good a natured poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green.

What we witness here is a stuttering, incoherent instance of ideology in formation. Ligon asks the master to Christianize a slave, and the master says he is unable to enslave a Christian. Ligon insists that the terms of his formulation cannot be inverted in this way without altering their meaning, but his frustration only deepens when the master agrees and yet remains unwilling to pursue the issue further. Because slave conversion would eventually gain acceptance, once it could be reconceived as compatible with enslavement, modern readers may be inclined to assume that Ligon is “right” here and

51 Ligon, History, 101 (“This point”; “I bade”; “be made”; “knowledges”); Hickman, Black Prometheus, 61 (“Euro-Christian apotheosis”). On “slavery” as a “bad fetish,” see Hickman, Black Prometheus, 23.
thus to share in his palpable irritation. But what if we instead regarded Sambo’s master as technically “correct”? What if we resisted the temptation to view early modern Caribbean slavery through the unrepresentative lens of antebellum U.S. slavery, where slave Christianity was the norm? What if we took seriously the pro-conversion Anglican clergyman Morgan Godwyn’s 1680 claim that African and native Christianization was slandered in the period as “an Innovation,” “altogether new and without precedent”?52

Ligon’s suit on behalf of Sambo illuminates the complexities of legal identity in the period. Since “Christian” means “European,” it is an identity that one is believed to possess from birth. The master understands religion to outweigh enslavement by preceding it, and the colony’s English “Laws”—which he anxiously invokes to buttress the profoundly innovative institution of slavery—ensure that that precedence is preserved by forbidding the enslavement of Christians. The prospect of conversion, by contrast, requires that religion be reimagined as an identity one might choose and change—a notion at odds with the idea of “hereditary heathenism.” Sambo’s master fears that, by undermining the inheritability of religious identity, slave Christianization will also undermine the inheritability of slave status—will reveal enslavement for what it is: a matter of accident rather than birth, a human innovation rather than a natural or providential designation. The children of Christianized slaves would paradoxically be born both Christians and slaves, which would not only contradict the law against enslaving Christians but might also countenance an analogous form of transformation: “conversion” from enslavement (i.e., emancipation). This was a very real possibility, since a political theology of resistance was latent in Protestant orthodoxy; indeed, it was

more than a possibility since, as far as Sambo (mis)understands it, Christianity and its “knowledges” are the very source of the masters’ power to innovate, to manipulate persons, places, and things, to exercise sovereignty, to be free. In sum, the master warns that Christianizing the enslaved will subvert rather than fulfill the divinely ordained social order emblematized by Ligon’s tree branches and roots. In the end, rational discourse between two empowered white speakers breaks down, and crucially, it is Ligon, rather than the Africans, who is “struck mute.”

Decades later, Ligon’s stance would prevail in the form of new laws permitting the Christianization of the enslaved. But taking seriously the master’s not-yet-obsolescent position reveals that Ligon’s stance demanded a more thorough commitment to the idea of race—a concept that “remained inflected by religious ways of marking difference” even as it proved capable of weathering the transformative process of conversion. That is, the master’s stubborn insistence upon the primacy of religious identity forces a recognition that, in order to Christianize the enslaved without problematizing their slave status (or rendering Euro-Christians enslavable), an equally stubborn insistence on the primacy of observable ethnic identity, divorceable from religious identity and place of birth or residence, would be required. Yet to read the scene this way is not to fall into the common scholarly trap of assuming what we might call a “succession model” of identity, where race replaces religious identity as part of a broader process of secularization. Rather, it is to show that the political theology of Euro-Christian global ascendancy was elastic enough to make Christianity empowering for Europeans and, simultaneously, disempowering for non-Europeans. This is the only way Ligon can claim that Sambo is

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the equal in body and soul of Euro-Christians (“as good a natured poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green”) and, in the same breath, affirm the righteousness of his continued enslavement. For what Christianization accomplishes for Ligon, finally, is to accentuate those qualities that already befit Africans for both faith and servitude: the selflessness they evince in their loyal efforts to put out fires, their instinct to surrender their own wills to divine justice, and their preference for a form of communication capable of short-circuiting its own empowering effects. The upshot of Ligon’s political science is a political theology of slave-master sovereignty-as-innovation in which the subordination of non-Europeans to the arbitrary powers of Euro-Christians graduates to the level of “cosmic status quo.” Barbados becomes a model polity—“a Scale for those that go upon the like”—insofar as it meets the Hobbesian requirement of mutuality by exchanging the transcendent gift of salvation for Africans’ earthly self-sacrifice.54

VII. “In but not of” the Polity: Slave Conspiracy and Pious Informancy

If Ligon’s History sometimes makes the “cosmic status quo” of Anglo-Caribbean hegemony seem like a foregone conclusion, we need only return to the “contingents” that threatened it to see how utterly unforeordained it was. And it is here that Ligon’s empiricism re-enters the story with a vengeance to undermine the very sovereignty it had enabled. For if empiricism was the crucial engine of the political theology of race—whereby the material signifiers of ethnic and religious difference allowed Euro-Christians to read new hierarchies as natural and transcendental—it was also capable of recording moments when those hierarchies were subverted. Ligon’s report may substantiate self-

54 Kopelson, Faithful Bodies, 17 (“remained inflected”); Ligon, History, 101 (“as good”), 67 (“a Scale”); Hickman, Black Prometheus, 16 (“cosmic status”). On the succession model of identity, see Hickman, Black Prometheus, 48-51.
serving colonial elite claims about the New World’s novelty, but it also highlights various forms of human and nonhuman resistance to the colonial project.\textsuperscript{55}

Ligon’s empiricism militated against simple racial generalizations. In a passage that evokes black violence more frankly than the text yet has, he voices the contradictions of his transitional moment:

\begin{quote}
Though there be a mark set upon these people [i.e., the Africans], which will hardly ever be wiped off, as of their cruelties when they have advantages, and of their fearfulness and falseness; yet no rule so general but hath his exception: for I believe … that there are as honest, faithful, and conscionable people amongst them, as amongst those of \textit{Europe}, or any other part of the world.
\end{quote}

In its initial flirtation with an understanding of difference as bodily and immutable, the passage might seem one of the text’s more straightforward articulations of racial ideology. Much as he is said to have secreted a “picture of Christ” within the banana, God is understood to have set an indelible “mark” on all African people, à la the Biblical Ham, in order to signal their inferiority, their “cruelt[y],” “fearfulness,” and “falseness.” But just as he begins to essentialize, Ligon pulls back and emphasizes the “exception[s]” eyewitnessing so often revealed. Africans are as capable of Christian virtue as Europeans and thus their Christianization will not prompt revolt.\textsuperscript{56}

It is telling, however, that the “lively example” Ligon uses to illustrate this “honest[y], faithful[ness], and consci[ence]” is one that involves an equivalent amount of “cruelt[y]” and “falseness.” For while he had earlier argued that African slaves never plot revolts like the white servants do, he now launches into an account of just such a “plot”; “no rule so general but hath his exception,” indeed. During a famine in 1649, “some of the high spirited and turbulent amongst” the enslaved plan to “mutiny” by setting fire to

\textsuperscript{55} Ligon, \textit{History}, 109 (“contingents”).
\textsuperscript{56} Ligon, \textit{History}, 105 (“Though there”), 142 (“picture of”).
the sugar works. The plot is revealed to their master at the eleventh hour, however, “by some of the others [i.e., other slaves] who hated mischief,” and as a reward, the informants are given “a day’s liberty” from work and “a double portion of victual for three days, both [of] which they refused.” Confounded by this refusal and “suspecting some discontent,” the planters inquire about it, receiving the following explanation:

they [i.e., the slave informants] told us, it was not sullenness, or slighting the gratuity their Master bestowed on them, but they would not accept anything as a recompence for doing that which [it] became them in their duties to do, nor would they have him [i.e., their master] think, it was hope of reward, that made them to accuse their fellow servants, but [instead] an act of Justice.

While the passage is written in the third-person, it comes closer to a transcription of black speech than any other moment in the text. Like Smith’s account of Powhatan’s coronation speech, Strachey’s account of Stephen Hopkins’ mutinous murmurings, and Winthrop’s account of Anne Hutchinson’s courtroom heterodoxy, this moment reveals how the empirical imperative could provide inadvertent access to the voices of those subjugated by colonialism. Unlike those earlier instances, however, this one can hardly be said to trouble the colonial project. Instead, I want to situate the passage as one last self-fulfilling experiment with black speech—indeed, as the text’s crowning such experiment. Ligon describes the passage as a kind of translation of what “they delivered” in “such language as they had.” And crucially, he notes that none other than “poor Sambo was the Orator, by whose example the others were led both in the discovery of the Plot, and refusal of the gratuity”—“act[s] [that] might have beseemed the best Christians, though some of them were denied Christianity.” Surely it is more than coincidental that the very slave for whose conversion Ligon had so strenuously argued reappears at this moment as the key informant and spokesperson responsible for preventing the sole
Barbadian slave revolt discussed in the text. This turn of events suggest that even a small amount of the Christian instruction Ligon proposes can accomplish the same thing as Humphrey Walrond’s postmortem mutilations of slave suicides: catechization secures obedience by convincing the enslaved that their masters wield “power over the[ir] spiritual fates.” Such a conception of slave conversion goes well beyond familiar caricatures of Christianity as a manipulative mass opiate nurturing Uncle Tom quietism; instead, it shows that Euro-Christian hegemony had become eschatological.57

The slave conspiracy inverts the paradigm of the white servants’ plot discussed above. Black rational discourse and persuasive eloquence prove essential not to a revolt’s (near) success but, rather, to one’s prevention. Like Ligon’s earlier depiction of Africans “look[ing] up to Heaven for vengeance,” Sambo’s oration becomes proof of the informants’ fitness for Christian apprenticeship. Of course, the very existence of the plot also contradicts Ligon’s earlier assertion that slave insurrection is impossible because the Africans in Barbados lack a common language through which to organize themselves. But the narration avoids this inconsistency by according no direct attention to the rebel leaders’ speech, focusing instead on Sambo verbally rousing his fellows to their “duties,” reporting the plot to the master, and explaining the refusal of “recompence.” In this way, Ligon renders public speech compatible with submission and Christianization compatible with enslavement, theorizing Sambo and his cohort as political actors paradoxically defined by the christic abnegation of their political selves. Rendering unto their Christian caesars that which is caesars’ (Matthew 22:21-22), the informants obediently protect

57 Ligon, History, 105 (“lively example”; “honest[y], faithful[ness]”; “cruelt[y]”; “falseness”; “plot”; “no rule”; “some of”; “mutiny”; “by some”; “a day’s”; “a double”; “suspecting some”), 105-106 (“they told”), 106 (“they delivered”; “such language”; “poor Sambo”; “act[s] [that]”); Brown, Reaper’s Garden, 133 (“power over”).
others while enjoying no protection for themselves; they are in the polity but not of it.\textsuperscript{58} 

Ligon’s bitterness about the fact that the informants continue to be “denied Christianity” arises in part from his acute awareness of the Hobbesian problem of mutuality. “Justice” demands that they receive an otherworldly reward for their worldly obedience. In this way, Sambo’s pious informancy anticipates the arguments of Morgan Godwyn, who would articulate even more clearly than Ligon the belief that African salvation is the key to slavery’s reciprocity and that conversion will accomplish the transcendent disempowerment, rather than the terrestrial empowerment, of the enslaved vis-à-vis their apotheosized masters: “It [i.e., slave conversion] presseth \textit{absolute} and entire \textit{Obedience to Rulers} and \textit{Superiours},” Morgan would write, even “giv[ing] [them] the Title of \textit{Gods}”; “so far it is from encouraging Resistance, that it allows them [i.e., the slaves] not the \textit{liberty} of \textit{Gainsaying} … their Masters” but instead “refer[s] them to \textit{future recompence in Heaven}, for their \textit{faithful} services done to them upon \textit{Earth}.” Hobbes cannot match Ligon’s absolutism because he is insufficiently empirical and insufficiently theological; conversely, Hobbes doesn’t need to reason from observed particulars—cases like Sambo’s, the material signifiers of race—because he is not trying to justify so absolute a sovereignty as Ligon’s empirical political theology produces. In short, their methodological differences are inextricable from their ideological ones. Where Hobbes’s political philosophy produces the single “\textit{Mortall God},” “\textit{Leviathan},” Ligon’s political science endows every master with what Godwyn would call “the Title of \textit{Gods}.”\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{59} Ligon, \textit{History}, 106 (“Justice”); Godwyn, \textit{Negro’s & Indians Advocate}, 112 (“It presseth”; “giv[ing] [them] the”; “so far”; “refer[s] them”; “the Title”); Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, II:XVII:87, p. 120 (“\textit{Mortall God}”; “\textit{Leviathan}”).
Ligon’s Christian slave is an ideal anti-citizen. His pious self-abnegation yields none of the benefits that thereby accrue to Euro-Christians because his conversion constitutes an act of grace on the part of the master. Slave Christianization is not a meritorious requital for selfless acts like Sambo’s but instead a transcendent display of Euro-Christian sovereignty. Conversion promises to reframe underclass obedience as grateful worship and to transform colonial elite innovation into a providential (i.e., non-innovative) expression of God’s will. The political theology of slavery that emerges from Ligon’s political science thus prompts us to reconsider Richard Dunn’s claim that the Barbadians failed to “build palm-fringed Cities on a Hill” and to ponder how Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh could describe the planters as “secular” and yet deem the Sugar Revolution an “agricultural and industrial miracle.” This is what Francis Bacon meant when he said that European “innovations” would prove that “Man is a God to man.”

VIII. The Fantasy of Consensual Enslavement and the Threat of Insurrection

Despite his optimism about the effects of slave Christianization, the threat of slave revolt continues to shadow Ligon’s History. His empiricism reveals that the exceptional circumstances which seemed to call for colonial elite sovereignty were actually the product of Euro-Christian innovation, the heretical assumption of the divine right to transform the world. Moreover, that innovation elicited counter-innovation, which Ligon likewise cannot help but record. For example, amidst the aforementioned account of the many “mischances” that “retard the work of Sugar-making,” Ligon digresses into a second direct discussion of slave insurrection. The “Master of a ship”

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60 Ligon, History, 106 (“denied Christianity”); Dunn, Sugar and Slaves, xv (“build palm-fringed”); Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh, No Peace Beyond the Line, 4 and 377 (“secular”), 69 (“agricultural and”); Bacon, Instauratio Magna, 195 (“innovations”, “Man is”).
departing the African coast for the West Indies laden with a cargo of slaves, he explains,

did not, as the manner is, shackle one [slave] to another, and make them sure; but
having an opinion of their honesty and faithfulness to him, as they had promised;
and he being a credulous man, and himself good natured and merciful, suffered
them to go loose, and they being double the number of those in the Ship, found
advantages, got weapons in their hands, and fell upon the Sailors, knocking them
on the heads, and cutting their throats so fast, as the Master found they were all
lost, out of any possibility of saving; and so went down into the Hold, and blew
all up with himself.

Following so closely on the heels of Ligon’s account of the “honest, faithful, and
conscionable” “exception[s]” to Africans’ habitual “cruelt[y],” “fearfulness,” and
“falseness,” the episode cannot fail to trouble his theory of slave docility. Black
eloquent here proves an agent of rebellion after all, as the shipmaster is shown to
foolishly credit what turns out to be a false “promise[].” What is there, one wonders, to
prevent Sambo’s similar promises from being a cover for a broader insurrection? While
this would seem highly unlikely in Sambo’s case, it was nonetheless a possibility the
master class had to take seriously. Ligon’s political science thus looks ahead to the
incongruous planter epistemology found in subsequent slave revolt reportage, which
combined tremendous paranoia about insurrections and rigorous forensic efforts to
uncover conspiracies with a tendency to disavow the possibility of slave revolt precisely
when it has just reared its head. Read as one more Atlantic “ship of state”—complete
with a perilously unbalanced demography resembling the black majority sugar islands—
the slave ship undermines Ligon’s political theology of slavery, illustrating Hickman’s
claim that, “Afro-Atlantic slave … rebellion comes to signify … as an affront to and limit
on Euro-Christians’ attempt to become the gods of this world.” The shipmaster
manifestly lacks the sovereignty the History elsewhere insists he should possess, and his
response to the successful revolt becomes a perverse inversion of “Euro-Christian
apotheosis”: deliberately exploding the slave ship that stands in for the state, the world, or even the cosmos, the shipmaster thwarts the rebels only through an act of totalizing apocalyptic destruction that terminates even as it manifests his godlike power.⁶¹

It is in the context of the Barbadian slave conspiracy and slave ship revolt that we should read those passages that seek to naturalize the willful submission exhibited by Sambo. Take the experiments Ligon conducts with the island’s ants and the emblematic interpretations he derives from their results. Marveling at the ants’ “industry,” he stages a reproducible “trial” that doubles as an allegory of Barbados’s colonization:

Take a Pewter dish, and fill it half full of water, into which put a little Gally pot filled with Sugar, and the Ants will presently find it, and come upon the Table; but when they perceive it environed with water, they try about the brims of the dish, where the Gally pot is nearest, and there the most venturous amongst them, commits himself to the water, though he be conscious how ill a swimmer he is, and is drowned in the adventure; the next is not warned by his example, but ventures too; and is alike drowned, and many more, so that there is a small foundation of their bodies to venture on; and then they come faster than ever, and so make a bridge of their own bodies, for their friends to pass on; neglecting their lives for the good of the public; for before they make an end, they will make way for the rest, and become Masters of the Prize.

The experiment resonates back across the two earlier instances of suicide discuss above: the misguided suicide of the African slaves, who needed to be brutally disabused of the heretical notion that death would save them from captivity and return them to their ancestral homelands, and the valiant suicide of the English shipmaster who “blew all up with himself” when he realized an onboard insurrection could not be quelled. While the ant experiment’s endorsement of a kind of suicide begs the question of why one (white) instance of desperate self-destruction is laudable while the other (black) one is deplorable, it also reveals that, far from being sinful or illicit, suicide is in fact a crucial

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part of colonialism, the ultimate expression of the godlike power to innovate that colonial
elites enjoyed vis-à-vis their subordinates. The passage could be read as an allegory of
the heroic self-sacrifice of white colonists like the shipmaster, but slavery is the more
obvious referent for Ligon’s account of innumerable, expendable black bodies dying en
masse on an island so that others can “become Masters of the Prize,” “Sugar.” This
reading reminds us that slavery substituted one form of death for another, the slow death
entailed in a lifetime of labor for the immediate death from which slaves had supposedly
been spared as war captives. Ligon’s ability to regard slavery as a form of virtuous
suicide rather than, say, murder depends upon his belief that Christianization will make
the master-slave relationship mutual. For what the ant experiment ultimately fantasizes is
what for Hobbes was an utter contradiction in terms: consensual enslavement.62

The ant experiment troubles the natural-political emblems found elsewhere in the
text because, unlike the trees’ roots and branches, the principle of reciprocity is entirely
absent. Certain individual ants forfeit to the collective not what those who enter into the
Hobbesian obedience-protection contract forfeit—their right to determine the mode of
their self-preservation—but rather, the ostensibly inalienable right of self-preservation
itself: that is, their actual lives. In sum, Ligon’s emblematic ants allow him to reimagine
the enslaved as individuals empowered just enough to be able to willfully relinquish their
own political agency. Christianization makes possible this idealized vision of the slave as
instrumentum vocale—“a vocal instrument without will except where this worked against
the slave”—already glimpsed in the images of Africans “look[ing] up to Heaven” for
justice, putting out fires “with their naked bodies,” and informing on would-be rebels via

self-abnegating christic public speech. While it is clearly not the case that every slave conforms to this paradigm—witness the conspiracies discussed in the History and throughout the Caribbean archive—this is ultimately the model polity Ligon imagines.\(^{63}\)

And yet, because Christian hermeneutics relied upon the empirical perception of material signifiers subject to contingency, it could sometimes signify in opposition to the eschatology of Euro-Christian hegemony. A second encounter with the island’s ants allows us to glimpse this interpretive possibility. Eager to keep the ants away from a small amount of “white sugar,” Ligon “lock[s]” it inside “a large shell of a fish” suspended from a ceiling “beam” by “a thread.” He then departs, “thinking it safe; but when I returned, I found three quarters of my sugar gone, and the Ants in abundance, ascending and descending, like the Angels on Jacob’s Ladder, as I have seen it painted, so that I found no place safe, from these … busy Creatures.” Unlike the first experiment, Ligon here seeks to deprive the ants of sugar, and accordingly, he vilifies rather than applauds them when they seize it. Yet the form that that vilification takes is paradoxically a scriptural tableau that features the ants—stand-ins, as we have seen, for the island’s African slaves—as “Angels on Jacob’s Ladder.” A reference to the Israelite patriarch’s dream of a ladder to heaven as recounted in Genesis 28:10-19, this image has been understood by the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian traditions as a sign of divine immanence in the world in the form of a path to salvation laid out for a Chosen people: either a life of virtue as prescribed by ecclesiastical guidance or divine law, or the very existence of the human soul and prospect of an afterlife, or via the direct intervention of the angels, Christ, or God into human affairs. A related tradition conceives Jacob’s ladder

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\(^{63}\) Ligon, History, 118 (“conscious how”; “friends”), 117 (“ready assistants”; “Officers that”), 97 (“look[ing] up”), 95 (“with their”); Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 204 (“a vocal”).
as metaphoric of the earthly trials and tribulations—the ups and downs—experienced by that Chosen people or its members, which themselves constitute the route to salvation. In this sense, the ladder might be viewed as a monotheist take on fortune’s wheel, which we have of course seen to elicit both fatalistic passivity and Machiavellian innovation.64

What does it mean, then, for Ligon to figure the ants’/slaves’ illicit theft of the sugar as their ascent and descent of Jacob’s ladder? This would seem to imply either the masters’ stance, that salvation will be denied to the enslaved (they don’t belong on the thread/ladder), or Ligon’s, that the enslaved will receive salvation in lieu of the material rewards of colonial cultivation (heaven is preferable to the sugar), or a third option, that the enslaved will seize both material and spiritual rewards (the slaves, rather than the masters, are the Chosen people who will ultimately prevail in this world and the next). In its intermingling of natural-political experiment and scriptural citation, the passage thus obliquely broaches the prospect of slave revolt imagined in unmistakably cosmic terms. Ligon lets down his guard, but he finds his trust rewarded in much the same way as the shipmaster’s: he finds “no place safe” from the threat of “abundance, ascending.” His political theology thus proves to be both a tool of plantocratic oppression and part of a variable metaphysical repertoire that would eventuate in numerous instances of slave revolt articulated in a theological vocabulary, Christian or otherwise.65

The apocalyptic revolt augured by Ligon’s West Indian Jacob’s ladder shared the same condition of possibility as the Euro-Christian sovereignty to which it responded: the exceptional space of the Americas. New World innovation and counter-innovation alike depended upon the fact of distance from the metropole, which amplified contingency,

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64 Ligon, *History*, 118 (“white sugar”; “lock[s]”; “a large”; “beam”; “a thread”; “thinking it”).
65 Ligon, *History*, 118 (“no place”; “abundance, ascending”).
unsettled hierarchies, disproved traditional axioms, gave eyewitnessing its value, and made improvisation tenable. As the century progressed, however, the most effective way to prevent slave insurrection became the normalization of Atlantic slavery. As scientific, technological, and economic progress were divorced from their political side effects, innovation began to take on more positive valences. Still, precedent remained crucial. Thus, as Barbadian ways of life were replicated elsewhere in the Caribbean, as New World commodities like sugar were domesticated in Europe, and as the plantation regime received legal codification in the form of various slave codes, Euro-Christian hegemony in the Americas graduated to the stature of “cosmic status quo.”

The latter step was especially important. As in New England and the greater Chesapeake, colonial elites in the West Indies legitimized their innovations through legislation. Converting empirical reportage into new axioms, legislation promised to force a conformity between orderly ideal and unruly reality through prohibitions and punishments. The Barbadian Assembly adopted the first comprehensive English slave code, *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes*, in 1661. A milestone in the legitimation of Anglo-American slavery, the document seeks at once to demonstrate its conformity to metropolitan legal norms and to justify departures therefrom as the necessary response to exceptional circumstances: the preamble insists that its provisions are “not … contradictory to the Laws of England” while also contending that there is “in all the body of that Law no track to guide us where to walk nor any rule set us how to govern such Slaves.” The unprecedentedly harsh punishments prescribed for disobedient slaves take their cue from the *Act’s* exceptionalizing account of the “Negroes” as “an heathenish brutish and an uncertain dangerous pride of people.” Thus did the planters
carve out their own “track.”

The Barbadian precedent helped to establish slavery elsewhere in the region. Ligon’s former employer Thomas Modyford brought both slavery and the Barbadian slave codes with him when he relocated to Jamaica and became the colony’s second governor. A largely unaltered reproduction of the 1661 Barbados Act, Jamaica’s 1664 Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negro Slaves would in turn form the core of the slave codes enacted in Antigua and South Carolina through a process of “innovative borrowing.” In its role as what D. W. Meinig calls a “cultural hearth,” “an area wherein new basic cultural systems and configurations are developed and nurtured before spreading vigorously outward to alter the character of much larger areas,” Barbados thus served to normalize an otherwise unprecedented regime. And yet, a powerful sense of “slavery as innovation” remained even as the “innovation of slavery” seemed less significant. As John Taylor’s 1687 account of Jamaica demonstrates, brutal new punishments failed to deter resistance: while slave insubordination is met with “excessive torturs,” he reports, “yett still Negroas revolt and dayly run away.” Likewise, Taylor shows that what Ligon saw as the key impediment to revolt would ultimately disappear: while the slaves’ “severall language[s]” currently divide them, “tis [not] to be doubted in the next age the Crebolian [i.e., creole] Negroas will be propagated to a generall insurrection … which God in mercey prevent.” In this way, the threat of slave revolt

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would remain as a check on the political theology of Euro-Christian sovereignty-as-innovation and, ultimately, as a powerful vision of an alternative state of affairs—that is, not only as a form of restorative counter-innovation but as a form of radicalism as well. 67

IX. Toward an Alternative Genealogy of Radicalism

On October 21, 1692 slave insurrection once again threatened Barbados. Richard Ligon had long since left the island, but the polity he had described in its disorienting state of transition over forty years earlier had continued to confront vexing questions about protection and obedience, self-preservation and exploitation, suicide and salvation, political participation and public speech. A 1693 broadside entitled *A Briefe but most True Relation of the late Barbarous and Bloody Plot of the Negro’s in the Island of Barbados* recounts the discovery of the plot the night before it was to have been enacted. The narrator explains that some of the whites “very providentially” “overheard” two slaves “talking of … their wicked Design” to “Kill the Governour and all the Planters, and so destroy the Government there Established, and to set up a New Governour and Government of their own.” The slaves confess upon questioning, and the planters try and condemn a number of conspirators—hanging some, burning others, and leaving “seven

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Hanging in Chains, alive, and so Starving to Death” as a “Terror” to the rest.68

The idea that the rebels intended “to set up a New … Government of their own” receives little direct elaboration, but a few stray remarks can nonetheless illuminate the histories of both slave revolt and its literary representation as they had proceeded over the latter half of the century. The revolt is said to have been planned exclusively by “Negro’s that were born in the Island and no imported Negro was to have been Admitted to partake of the Freedom they intended to gain.” The conspiracy would thus seem emblematic of the transition from what historians identify as an early, African-style phase of revolt to a later, creole phase. Yet scholars have also questioned so schematic an account, offering in its stead the idea of “a continuum of active slave resistance,” which emphasizes the “interrelation, rather than the separation, of types and phases of revolt.” The utility of the continuum concept and the need for a sceptical approach to the 1693 Relation are evidenced by two contradictions it exhibits. The broadside claims that, after they had “distroy’d all the Christians,” the rebel slaves “design’d to have taken on the Sirnames and Offices of the Principal Planters and men in the Island, to have Enslaved all the Black men and Women tothem [sic], and to have taken the White Women for their Wives.” The phrase “all the Black men and Women” seems intended to describe only the African-born slaves, but this linguistic imprecision troubles the African/creole distinction. Likewise, the claim that the rebels wished to exterminate “the Christians” yet sought to replicate the Christian regime by retaining their masters’ names, wives, and slaves suggests that the planter imaginary could conceive of slave revolt as aiming only at a perverse inversion of the “cosmic status quo” of slave-mastery, a “world turned upside

68 Anon., A Briefe but most True Relation of the late Barbarous and Bloody Plot of the Negro’s in the Island of Barbados (London: 1693), unpaginated (“very providentially”; “overheard”; “talking of”; “Kill the”; “seven Hanging”; “Terror”).
down.” Where writers had eagerly tarred Euro-Christian mutiny and heresy with the brush of innovation, the absence of that term here suggests that a refusal to grant nonwhites the capacity to enact political change had become useful to the plantocracy.69

Although it differed substantially from the 1692 plot, another slave conspiracy, this one discovered in 1675, elicited similar representational strategies. A 1676 pamphlet entitled Great Newes from the Barbadoes describes the plot as an African rather than a creole revolt. Following a preamble that expatiates on the colony’s agricultural potential with nods to all that the “Ingenious Mr. Ligon” has already said on “that subject,” Great Newes reports on the conspiracy’s discovery, the brutal punishments meted out to the conspirators, and the rebels’ aims. The latter details are of special interest:

Their grand design was to choose them a King, one Coffee an Ancient Gold-Cost [sic] Negro, who should have been Crowned the 12th of June last past in a Chair of State exquisitely wrought and Carved after their Mode; with Bowes and Arrowes to be likewise carried in State before his Majesty their intended King: Trumpets to be made of Elephants Teeth and Gourdes to be found on several Hills to give Notice of their general Rising, with a full intention to fire the Sugar-Canes, and so run in and Cut their Masters the Planters Throats.

The narrator’s emphasis on the conspirators’ intended reproduction of African political ritual crowds out discussion of the particular ideals—beyond monarchism—that will organize their replacement polity. The rebels’ eagerness to replicate the almost fetishistic trappings of primitive political pageantry—the throne or “Chair of State,” the “Bowes and Arrowes,” the “Elephants Teeth and Gourdes”—relegates their polity to the distant past, associates the violence that founds it with savagery, and implies a kind of heretical king-worship. Indeed, their reported preference for what Michael Craton terms a

69 Anon., A Briefe but most True Relation, unpaginated (“to set”; “Negro’s that”; “distroy’d all”; “design’d to”); Craton, Testing the Chains, 17 (“a continuum”), 15 (“interrelation, rather”). For Susan Dwyer Amussen, the 1692 conspiracy is a “classic ritual of inversion, where inferiors turned the social order upside down but kept the existing structure” (Caribbean Exchanges, 162-163).
reconstituted “Akan-style autocracy” seems an attempt to associate Africans with a tyrannical form of governance that was said to predispose non-Europeans to enslavement. Despite their differences then, the 1676 and 1693 reports both depict the rebel slaves as incapable of imagining new forms of governance, defaulting to primitive regimes or pale imitations of their masters’. The capacity for political innovation—properly practiced by Euro-Christians through their paradoxical subordination to the Absolute God who once monopolized it—is denied to all Africans, creole and otherwise.⁷⁰

Like the 1692 conspiracy, however, the earlier plot was more complex than its early reporters let on. For there is evidence that the African-born 1675 conspirators had undergone something like a “cultural creolization.” For instance, the pamphlet quotes one slave as saying, “The Devil was in the Englishman”: “he makes everything work; he makes the Negro work, the Horse work, the Ass work, the Wood work, the Water work and the Winde work.” Creatively deploying the very Christian theology the planters sought to deny him, the slave’s remark captures the plantation regime’s otherworldly strangeness for the enslaved, and it does so by describing the masters’ ability to innovate as a kind of demonic power to make matter, animals, and persons “work” their wills. Phrasing an equally cosmological critique in more defiant terms, a slave conspirator named Tony firmly checked the planters’ pretensions to omnipotence while being burned at the stake by announcing, “If you Roast me to day, you cannot Roast me tomorrow.”⁷¹

We find further evidence to complicate the rebels’ unalloyed Africanness when we look beyond the 1676 pamphlet. Take, for example, the legislation the Barbadian

⁷¹ Craton, Testing the Chains, 111 (“creole”; “Africans”); Anon., Great Newes from the Barbadoes, 6-7 (“The Devil”), 12 (“If you”).
Assembly passed in the wake of the plot’s discovery forbidding Quakers from bringing slaves to their meetings. As Katharine Gerbner has shown, the planters scapegoated the Quakers, contending that the slaves’ exposure to Christian theology, and especially so unorthodox a version thereof, had prompted the plot. Following Jerome Handler, who speculates that the rebels’ intended king “may have been an obeah man,” Gerbner argues that Quaker theology was especially amenable to incorporation within Coromantee belief systems. Quaker meetings might have served “both religious and political functions,” as the slaves’ attempts to negotiate with the Spirit(s) shaded into discussions of “revolt, escape, or a post-rebellion form of government.” More broadly, John Thornton has characterized Coromantee political thought as “change-oriented.” He stresses obeah’s emphasis on “flexibility” and suggests that the very experience of “enslavement and transportation … reinforced the tendency toward changed-ordered norms.” By Thornton’s account, Coromantee coronation ceremonies like Coffee’s were all about a kind of “social mobility,” a democratic rather than “autocratic” claim to the right to enact changes of status under the auspices of various gods. The creolization of this adaptive political theology may have conditioned New World Africans “not [to] regard the status of slave as permanent or binding.” Caribbean slaves thus arrived at a positive conception of innovation denied them in the reportage on the 1675 and 1692 plots and based not on Christianity’s absolutism but on a more inclusive, decentralized spirituality.72

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Thus far my account of slave revolt as an exemplary form of counter-innovation has followed Eugene Genovese’s classic rebellion/revolution typology. Slave “rebellion” evinces a fundamentally “restorationist” character, whereas slave “revolution” exhibits a positive conception of political change. The former predominated in “the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century” and sought to “secure freedom from slavery,” whereas the latter arose at “the end of the eighteenth century” and sought “to overthrow slavery as a social system.” Genovese’s key example of slave rebellion is maroonage, which attempted the “re-creation of traditional [African] communities,” while his signal instance of slave revolution is the Haitian Revolution: “The restorationist vision gave way in Saint-Domingue.” This distinction is not predicated on an Arendtian segregation of “political” from “social” questions, nor on a given revolt’s historical timing, demographic makeup, scale, aims, or success (although these factors often overlap with it). Instead, Genovese’s terminology turns on the rebels’ ideas about political change: “revolution” is non-pejorative innovation; “rebellion” is what I call counter-innovation.\^73

As we have seen, however, there is much in the annals of enslaved resistance to complicate this distinction. On the one hand, revolution could be quite conservative. Genovese’s account of the Haitian Revolution as “post-restorationist” fails to explain the fact that the first independent black republic in the western hemisphere adopted the long-eclipsed indigenous Taíno toponym “Haiti” or the fact that its Declaration of Independence engages in a kind of ancestor worship. Nor can his Marxian narrative of progress account for Haiti’s “tragic” post-revolutionary history, wherein “the dream of a

modern black state drowned in the tragic hunger of an ex-slave population for a piece of land and a chance to live in old ways or ways perceived as old.” On the other hand, Genovese concedes that “restorationist rebellions” always involved inadvertent forms of political change: the “attempt to resurrect an archaic social order often perceived as traditionally African … invariably [produced] a distinct Afro-American creation.” The slave rebellion/revolution binary thus gives way to a dialectic of imitation and innovation intended not, as was its Euro-Christian counterpart, to disguise innovation as imitation but, instead, to move beyond the atrocities of Euro-Christian hegemony toward an open-ended future while maintaining vital contact with the past.74

Innovation’s centrality to New World plantation slavery thus stands as a referendum on late modernity’s unquestioning pro-innovation bias, which needs not only to be historicized as an artifact of a particular moment but also to be exposed for what it is: a residual eschatology of Euro-Christian global hegemony that justifies one group’s monopoly on the sovereign right to enact change. Genovese’s account has the unfortunate effect of making the existence of large-scale slave insurrections dependent upon earlier, supposedly “secular” Euro-Christian bids for political change, especially the French Revolution. This approach is manifestly inadequate for several reasons. First, it has been extensively qualified by subsequent historians. Second, it risks upholding the plantocratic myth—espoused by Ligon’s History, the 1676 pamphlet, and the 1693 broadside—that enslaved Africans were incapable of achieving or even imagining political change. Most

importantly, Genovese’s approach is inadequate because it models antislavery resistance on the very concept of innovation that made slavery possible in the first place. This was the same concept of innovation that undergirded all attempts to cloak Euro-Christian apotheosis in the universalizing garb of humanism, from the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution to New World “discovery” and colonization to the English, Sugar, and Industrial Revolutions to the Enlightenment, American and French Revolutions, and beyond. Perhaps the best argument against assimilating slave revolt to Euro-American radicalism lies in the fact that, even when it opposed slavery as an innovation, abolitionism would itself become one more staging ground for Euro-Christian apotheosis. In tracking an alternative form of radicalism we would thus do well to look to what Robin Blackburn calls “the anti-slavery of the slaves themselves.”75

Where the term counter-innovation has served throughout this dissertation to name a form of restorative resistance to colonial elite innovation, I would like to argue, finally, that rebel slaves developed a rival conception of salutary political change by rejecting the absolutism at the heart of their masters’ innovations. Informed by an adaptive African spiritual and political repertoire and by their recognition that Euro-Christian hegemony had been so thoroughly transformative as to make simple restoration impossible, Atlantic slave rebels reconceived innovation as something more contingent than the fulfillment of providence or progress, as something humbler than the hubristic fantasy of “humanity’s” power to remake the world, as something more cosmologically democratic than an engine of Euro-Christian apotheosis via subordination to the Absolute

God. Ultimately, the political theology of slave insurrection recorded in works of Atlantic political science allows us to reimagine radicalism as a distinctly modern dialogue between past and future, restoration and revolution, imitation and innovation.