

Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas

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The term 'early modern' was introduced into mainstream historical analysis during the 1940s as a catch-all description for the changes that had occurred between the 16th and 18th centuries. With its rise in the 1970s to predominance as a category of periodisation and its promotion by historians such as Keith Thomas, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Peter Burke, early modern has come to represent a significant period in our history. However, the term, as used by scholars today, is not without its detractors and it is often viewed with caution and suspicion for its links to other concepts such as disenchantment and secularisation. Early modern is a category that emphasises progression and advancement above all else and therefore has often restricted historical enquiry to an altogether ill-conceived labelling of elements existing in the period as either 'medieval' or modern in nature.

The term 'society' is generally less controversial, although it is again a loaded term for historians. The rise of social history as a legitimate topic of study combined with contemporary use of the term may sometimes lead to its overuse (and indeed misuse) but is generally accepted as a useful category for analysis. One thing these two terms have in common is their increasing prevalence in scholarly debate, with increasing importance being put on the need to inform students as to the problems inherent in our terminology, especially where it has an impact on research methodology and interpretation.

Phil Withington's excellent book is therefore timely as it provides a welcome reassessment of the terms 'early modern' and 'society' as used by scholars. However, the book is just as important for its assessment of the concept of 'modernity' and its epistemology as it is for the history of the phrase 'early modern' itself. At the centre of this study is a methodology that centres upon a clear understanding that human communities create constructs around their lives and that these constructs are reflected in linguistic usage. The term 'early modern' is therefore not so much assessed for its usefulness or limitations as an historical categorisation as it is for its historical antecedence. This is an important work for early modernists, modernists and anyone interested in the concepts and ideas of periodisation and social constructs that are pervasive in historical and English studies today.

Phil Withington's book is important as it helps to refocus the debate away from the problematic 'modernisation' theories and unto a different battleground: historical linguistics. The key concept behind this

book is that we can best understand the past through understanding linguistic changes and the rise and fall of particular words as means of description and socio-political relationships. Withington tells us that both 'modern' and 'society' were words introduced into 16th-century English at the same time and that study of the words' prevalence and use will inform us about distinctive social and cultural changes and enables us to do so in terms that had meaning at the time. Our current understanding of 'society' for instance is very different to its original meaning, which Withington argues was much closer to what we now understand by the word 'commonwealth'.

Withington begins with the history of our present-day concept of early modernity in the 20th century before tracing its antecedence to the 19th century where the category was both alien and familiar to contemporary theories and then tracing it and other related terms back through to the present day. The book is separated into three parts. The first 'The history of an historical category' focuses on the term 'early modern' and how our use of it remains founded upon Victorian and Edwardian articulation of the 16th and 17th centuries as a period of decisive cultural, economic and social change. That Withington confirms that the term is controversial because from its earliest manifestations it represented not just a category of periodisation but also a framework for understanding the 'modern' world, is nothing new, but Withington's approach brings to focus why this is the case and how this has impacted on historical and contemporary interpretations.

The first chapter traces the early history of the term 'early modern' from its initial appearance in print in 1869 to the end of the 19th century. The chapter is as interesting for its insight into Victorian thought and historiography as it is for its appraisal of the early history of 'early modern'. It is indeed interesting and (as Withington himself notes) somewhat an 'unexpected context' that early modern was first coined in the mid-19th century as an alternative viewpoint to the romanticism revival of medieval Gothic and its hostility to its loss during the renaissance and reformation periods. William Johnson was the first to use the term in his 1869 *Early Modern Europe: an introduction to a Course of Lecture on the Sixteenth Century* where he approached early modern for its classical sensibility rather than economic and social change. For Johnson early modern was only a cultural analysis. Withington's research here, acts as a corrective to the general belief that early modern was first developed in the mid 20th century, which is the focus of his second chapter.

The 20th century development of 'early modern' is well known and Withington describes it well. Beginning with the advancement of early modern by the senior partners of the *Economic History Review* (ECHR), J. H. Chapham, Richard Tawney, and Eileen Power, then later by John U. Nef, the intellectual discussion is shown to have assumed an economic model of history. Interestingly the debates of the ECHR in the 1930s focused on the ideas of sociologist Werner Sombart rather than his rival, the now more well-known Max Weber or the earlier arguments of Karl Marx. It is of interest that the uptake of early modern in the 1970s and the debates surrounding it are seen by Withington to have more in common with William Johnson's original expression of the term in the 19th century than might have been expected.

Taken together these early chapters tell a story of early modern as a problematic term but also one that represents 'a formative period of transition' which cannot be entirely ignored. The first part of this book is therefore essential reading for students grappling with key concepts and a helpful summary and corrective for established historians that should at the very least keep in mind the methodological issues.

The second part of the book focuses on the keywords 'modern' (chapter three) and 'society' (chapter four) and attempts to show how they were introduced and progressed through the period. Using printed title-pages listed on the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) Withington highlights the role of English humanism and reflects on how humanist writers interpreted 'modern' as implying a direct link with classical culture and learning and how this subsequently informed their understanding of commonwealth and commonweal. 'Society' is a problematic term to analyse in this period as its meaning changed as the period progressed. Withington therefore uses the ESTC to compare 'society' with similar terms and most particularly 'company'. Society in this period was more often used to denote a corporate activity, while 'company' was understood to depict informal social activities. The final chapter in this part refocuses the discussion to commonwealth

and commonweal; the terms more representative of our concept of society today. In doing so, Withington builds upon his previous book on the politics of commonwealth which delved into the corporate identities of commonwealth and society, and takes a new perspective on research into society begun in the 1970s and 1980s.⁽¹⁾ In an earlier deliberation on this topic, Keith Wrightson aptly stated that 'society is a process. It is never static'.⁽²⁾ As Withington now shows, this is equally true of words and their meaning societies and individuals give them. It is also true for the word 'society' itself.

Section three of the book entitled 'practice' takes a different approach to the rest of the book and in many ways is its most important contribution to the discussion on early modern and society. Chapter six focuses on inter-relationships in society especially personal relations, behavioural norms and the emerging notions of the self. The use of the word 'company' is vital in denoting both informal interactions and formal corporations. The chapter deals with power, structures and communal roles and explains how they were enacted and understood in the period. The rise of civility, manners, and 'wit' are considered by Withington to represent distinctly 'modern' forms of sociability during this period. Chapter seven focuses on English colonialism and national incorporation as a way of proving that this period's obsession with classical authority was fundamental to defining and indeed progressing England's imperial agenda. The example of Ireland is used in this chapter to define imperialism and nationalism as more than the experience of the state but also that of a belief in early modernism in approach if not in name. This is the crux of Withington's argument: that early modernism can mean for historians something other than a progressive modernity. That it can represent real linguistic and social expectations and realities existent in the period itself.

Withington has made extensive use of recent digital resources; most specifically ESTC and Early English Books Online (EEBO). Indeed, this study could not have been achieved just a decade ago. Reference after reference to relevant published texts provides weight to the argument and provides ample evidence for the use of the word on the title page. Yet, by the author's own admission, these resources do have their shortcomings. In his introduction Withington notes that ESTC and EEBO are limited as they only cover print and not non-printed sources; because not all literature survives (especially more ephemeral sorts) and because as catalogues they are not entirely complete. In general, this is a reasonable trade; however as a guide to the content within these texts, these resources are less useful. Although EEBO provides full title-page searches it does not have the capacity to systematically search the content within these texts. Only a fraction of its database is searchable in this way. In each chapter the author importantly does look inside the covers of a selection of early modern publications but it is slightly frustrating that little is generally given to explain each choice or to deal head-on with the potential variance between title page and content. Nor are the difficulties of such a study investigated or explained beyond the introduction. Of course the main problem here lies, in part, due to the arbitrary selection of transcripts provided by EEBO but one is left with the feeling that a little additional discussion of methodology here and there would have strengthened the arguments. Reliance on title pages does pose a risk that important evidence is missed or incorrectly categorised if the use of the word on the title page is not compared to the content of each work, and similarly that the word might not appear on the title page itself, but play an important role within the text. Of course, such a systematic study may need to wait until all early modern publications can be digitally searched, and its absence here does not detract from Withington's results. However, it would have been nice if more was said on these issues. It should be noted that, for the most part, Withington manages to balance the necessity of covering a large body of published texts whilst also homing in on one or two examples.

As a whole this book is an important addition to the debate concerning early modernity and modernity. It provides primarily an alternative way of using these terms that partly avoids the major issue of progressive history. The recognition that 'society' and 'commonwealth' have changed their meaning over the centuries is an important one and the research carried out in this book usefully adds to our understanding of how communities conceived of themselves through a period of change and transformation. Withington therefore provides an excellent guide to key terms that historians of this period come across on a regular basis and his ideas should be borne in mind when using these terms. The book will be highly useful for students grappling with linguistic changes and terminology explicit in the discipline but it will be equally useful to scholars

wishing to engage with the words that they themselves use.

Notes

1. P. Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth; Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London, 1982).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment.

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