

REBELLION, POPULAR PROTEST, AND THE SOCIAL ORDER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND pdf

1: Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England | Reviews in History

Rebellion, popular protest and the social order in early modern England J.A. Sharpe | Published in *It is a commonplace (and, indeed, a reflection of how things should be) that history as it is defined and interpreted at the universities is usually about two decades in front of how it appears before the wider world of the schools or the public.*

University of Ulster at Coleraine Citation: The author, John Walter, has over the last twenty years or so established himself as one of the most perceptive historians researching in the broad fields of popular politics, crowds, and riots. In his introduction, Walter provides an historiographical overview for the study of popular politics in early-modern England. The starting-point was the belief that most popular protest in early-modern England was small-scale and endemic and, as such, required little in the way of explanation. Popular protest, it was argued, had its roots in the social and economic changes of the period and was, politically, virtually powerless. Lives were dominated by the continuous struggle for subsistence and, for most, political matters scarcely existed. However, in the late s new studies emerged with the common core that there was a politics to rebellion. Yet there was an insistence by some historians most notably M. James that rebellion could only be fully understood in the context of a political culture and the range of institutions and sources required for the reconstruction of that culture. Charles Tilly and others vested crowds, composed of respectable figures, with a sense of purpose and rationality, replacing the slum-dwellers and criminals of myth. It was at this stage that Walter began to make his scholarly presence felt. He began by developing an interest in the study of lesser riots and popular disorders and how problematic sources could be interpreted. He was fortunate in two respectsâ€”he benefited both from the influences of the new social history at Cambridge and the interdisciplinary approach encouraged by his home university, Essex. His research led him to two early conclusions. Despite contemporary fears, work on the actual sources did not support the view that riots in the period were frequent events. Furthermore, their regional distribution was uneven, as the study of the geography of early-modern food riots has revealedâ€”they were more frequent, but never common, in some areas, and totally absent from others. Developing these themes, Walter has also gone on to challenge the idea that there was an automatic connection between economic crisis and collective protest. Instead he argues that the key to whether or not grievances led to collective protest is to be found in popular beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and the experience of change. It was the very effectiveness in securing concessions and redress that made the resort to popular protest an exceptional event. One of the major themes developed in the essays is that crowd actions were by their very nature political, and that they need to be viewed and understood in the context of a popular political culture. Monarchs, only too aware of their own limitations when it came to coercing or repressing unruly or rebellious subjects, sought to head off the threat of popular disorder by endeavouring to police social and economic change. This they did in a public manner when they espoused policies to protect their subjects, especially the weak and poor, and thereby secured popular legitimacy for their rule. Chapter one examines popular culture and popular protest in early-modern England. England in this period, it is argued, was undergoing changes which, by the later-seventeenth century, had left about a half of the population landless or land-poor. This in turn shaped the way in which the gentry viewed the poor in a state that possessed neither a standing army nor a police force. Recent studies of English rebellions make it clear that people of below gentry level were quite capable of developing their own leadership and infrastructure often based on their experience in provincial government and in the process proved themselves to be politically well-informed and articulate. These were riots against enclosure, the price and distribution of food, religion, and taxes, and they could be regarded as being more frequent, more representative, and more contextual. In this context, the present reviewer and others have subscribed to the view that riots were essentially defensive and conservative events in which rioters did not express political feelings but drew attention to specific grievances of immediate concern, and that there is little to suggest any generalized political stance. Thus rural riots were essentially non-ideological and non-revolutionary in character. The two

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most common forms of riot in the period were enclosure riots and food riots. In both cases, those engaged in protest enjoyed a strong sense of legitimation as they took direct action. In enclosure riots, rioters were keen to display themselves as obedient subjects rather than rioters. In the case of food riots, whenever the harvest failed the government ordered the putting into effect of the requisite measures contained within the Book of Orders regulating the movement and market of grain. Chapter two affords an opportunity to provide a case study of two grain riots in the Essex port of Maldon, in the crisis of 1646. Furthermore, when the authorities did take action they did so with a surprising sensitivity. There were, in fact, two grain riots in Maldon in 1646. In March, over one hundred women and their children boarded a Flemish ship and forced its crew to fill their caps and aprons with grain from its hold. In the following May, a much larger crowd, composed mainly of unemployed clothworkers, again attacked ships taking on grain. The essential background to the disorder was industrial depression and death; an increase in the price of basic foodstuffs; and the extensive buying up of grain within Essex for export to European markets. In the first Maldon riot it was the failure of the government to take action against rising food prices that prompted the action. Yet, in addition, some of the women, and their husbands, had already earned local notoriety for being previously found guilty of a range of petty offences in the town. It is also noteworthy that it was a crowd of women, for women were involved in almost every food riot in the period. In the short term, the riot was successful in its aims and the main grievances were removed. Grain was to be kept within the local economy and purchased for distribution to the poor at favourable rates. The second riot took place after a worsening slump prompted poor clothworkers to petition the authorities and even to address the king directly. With no adequate response to their pleas, they resorted to direct action, boarding a ship taking on grain, assaulting the crew, taking away some of the grain, and forcing the ship to put to sea. This riot alarmed the government; a large number of people had been involved, nor was it just a matter of staying some grain, as some of the rioters had taken away a considerable quantity. Furthermore, property had been challenged when a house had been broken into. The government took firm action, arresting and interrogating alleged ringleaders and hanging four of them. Yet very few of them in fact ended up in court eight of the rioters. The government took swift reprisals in a show of strength, but also displayed mercy in the case of three of the prisoners. A preliminary study of the geography of food riots during the years 1640-50 is attempted in chapter three. From his research Walter has reached some familiar and important conclusions. Firstly, grain riots were generally geographically limited and mostly confined to years of crisis. Secondly, there were areas where food riots were noticeably absent as, for example, the northern upland and the Midlands. However, in the latter case, disorder took a different form in enclosure riots. Larger urban centres were also generally free of food riots because the government took care to satisfy their grievances. In contrast, grain riots were most likely to occur in areas bordering on traditional arable regions which normally produced surpluses which went on to feed larger towns. Riots ensued when local grain supplies were siphoned off to meet urban demand. However, urban demand provides only part of the explanation and disorder was most likely to occur in two areas. And the second was in areas of proto-industrialization in the countryside where grain often had to pass through regions that were equally dependent upon imported grain but, faced with dearth, could not compete with urban demand. Chapter four is a thoroughly-researched and incisive piece. Its subject is the Oxfordshire rising of 1649. The precise nature and scale of the rising has been open to doubt, but Walter has been able to combine together local and other forms of evidence which permit him to study the rising in its immediate context. As a third year of harvest failure was being endured in England in 1649, there were the first rumblings of discontent with talk of a lack of work and threats to knock down gentlemen and the rich. In November, as the dearth continued to worsen, there were threats against enclosing gentry and reports of procuring armour for one hundred men as well as artillery and horse. Once armed, the plan was to advance towards London where apprentices would be ready to join up with them. Steer and three of his supporters waited for two hours before they disbanded and were subsequently arrested by the authorities. Walter devotes the rest of his chapter to explaining why Steer and his fellows failed. The failure was not due to a lack of planning, but Steer might have misread the amount of discontent

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that dearth and enclosure had produced. Those denounced by Steer and others were all recent enclosers in areas of Oxfordshire with a history of enclosure. Most were young and unmarried, and there were no women involved. The rising was prosecuted as treason for compassing to levy war against the queen, but no further details about the trial or executions have survived. Yet the uncovering of the rising did have some positive outcomes; it encouraged the government to launch a general enquiry into enclosure and also to reform abuses in the grain trade. Chapter five returns to a broader spectrum with an account of the social economy of dearth in early-modern England. Walter argues that, by the middle decades of the sixteenth century, crises of subsistence were absent from the record of many regions of early-modern England and, after the mid-seventeenth century, even areas that had earlier experienced such crises were free of them. The authorities feared that harvest failure threatened the very fabric of the social order. Yet improvements in agricultural techniques in the seventeenth century lifted population pressure on food resources and by the end of the century England had become a net exporter of grain. Walter accuses historians of exaggerating levels of poverty in the later-seventeenth century. In particular, there was the ability of poorer consumers to trade down to less expensive grains and grow spring-sown crops of oats and barley. Communities most seriously hit by harvest failure were those practising monoculture but fortunately much of English agriculture was mixed. Further protection was afforded by the high numbers of both agricultural and urban workers who lived in the households of their employers. Rural labourers might purchase grain from their employers, often at below market prices, or negotiate forms of credit. The households of the gentry continued to give bread doles and other forms of relief against market failure until well into the eighteenth century. Other sources of help were charity, an observing of neighbourliness, toleration of local begging, and the continuance of informal relief alongside of parochial levies. The social impact of the English Civil War, and the extent to which it seemed to threaten social inversion, is the theme explored in chapter six. Walter lays stress on the necessity to achieve a balance between those changes that seemed to presage a social revolution and those which help to explain the failure of a revolution within the revolution. Thus the early s saw widespread crowd action with the collapse of the personal rule, the end of Laud, protests and demonstrations, and attacks on enclosures. However, the latter were not indiscriminate attacks on the landed classes but were aimed at those who were royal courtiers and others who were behind the enclosures in fens and forests. The image of the king as protector of his people, and the maintenance of social deference, also suffered. The civil war itself brought further violence as troops pulled down altar rails and killed a Catholic officer. There were clubman risings in the mids, political agitation in the New Model Army in , and harvest failures in and from which the Levellers and Diggers might have hoped to benefit. There was an attempted cultural revolution, sects with radical social views too, and some limited opportunities for women. But the stress was on spiritual equality. The political revolution saw the execution of the king, the abolition of monarchy and the House of Lords, and the end of bishops, and it was accompanied by a moral panic. Yet leading radicals like the Independents sought godly reformation and not social revolution. So far as enclosure riots in the s were concerned, they posed less of a threat than has been supposed. There was no general rising of the countryside and most riots were a continuation of an earlier tradition of rural protest. The Levellers gave only limited attention to enclosures, while the Diggers ignored the importance attached to common rights.

2: Paul Slack - Wikipedia

Rebellion, riot and popular unrest have been the theme of a succession of stimulating and influential articles in Past and Present. This selection shows how the various forms of popular protest in England from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries have been reinterpreted by modern scholars.

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