

Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England

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Author:

John Walter

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Keith Lindley

This collection of essays is the latest contribution to the series published by Manchester University Press which focuses on the interactions, interconnections, and challenges between politics, culture, and society in early-modern Britain. 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 1960s new studies emerged with the common core that there was a politics to rebellion. Anxious to avoid the dreadful fate awaiting rebels, Church and state promoted a 'culture of obedience'. Yet there was an insistence by some historians (most notably M. E. 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. The 1970s witnessed the next stage in a changing understanding with 'the crowd in history'. 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. To this was added the emergence of class-consciousness as an essential element in the beliefs of the crowd and the labelling of earlier stages as 'pre-modern'.

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 respects—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 revealed—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. Walter condemns the way in which some contemporary historians, as he sees it, have produced definitions of the political which restricts popular politics to the realm of ‘high politics’.

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. Faced with popular disorder, the gentry castigated rioters as the ‘many-headed monster’ or ‘brute beasts’ and denied the great majority of people both political participation and political consciousness. However, Walter and others have challenged this view, reminding historians of the roles and importance of the ‘middling sort’ as voters, local office-holders, and other active members of the polity. 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.

More recent studies have focussed on crowds engaged in smaller-scale forms of collective action usually termed ‘riots’. 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. However, a reification of ‘the crowd’ probably encourages a tendency to see the people as fickle in their political beliefs and allegiances. 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 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. Protesters could draw upon the central idea of the ‘good king’ who would not tolerate the oppression of his people. 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. When food riots took place those engaged could draw upon the notion of the ‘just price’ which gave the poor a form of preferential treatment in the market-place.

Chapter two affords an opportunity to provide a case study of two grain riots in the Essex port of Maldon, in the crisis of 1629. Our knowledge of food riots, and their absence during periods of dearth, already owes a great debt to the earlier joint research of Walter and Keith Wrightson who have established that years of harvest failure in England in this period did not produce widespread food riots, and that when disorder did

take place it was 'largely confined to the weak points within an as-yet immature national marketing structure'. Furthermore, when the authorities did take action they did so with a surprising sensitivity. Riot was seldom a simple and unpremeditated reaction to hunger and starvation; it was often the culmination of earlier exchanges between the poor and the authorities designed to coerce the latter into taking remedial action on the former's behalf.

There were, in fact, two grain riots in Maldon in 1629. 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 200–300 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. But utmost significance was attached to the fact that this was a second riot, others might be about to follow and there were suspected political/rebellious overtones. 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 200–300 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 1585–1649 is attempted in chapter three. Yet this chapter fits uncomfortably into the structure of the book; it is only six pages in length and, 'because of their number and detail', there are no footnotes. 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. The first was the small market and/or industrial centre which drew in grain from its rural hinterland, thereby easing its passage to the larger urban centres. 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 1596. 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 1596, there were the first rumblings of discontent with talk of a lack of work and threats to knock down gentlemen and the rich. An Oxfordshire servant, Bartholomew Steer, put himself forward as the rising's leader and, with three others, sought to rally local support. 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 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. If enclosure was a genuine grievance, therefore, other explanations have to be found for the inactivity of the poor and the most important was the rising's failure to attract sufficient initial support. Both socially and geographically support for the rising was limited; there was no urban support, no gentry leadership, no clerical involvement, and, more surprisingly, no support from the 'middling sort'. Few of Steer's supporters had land and most were artisans or servants. 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. Furthermore, years of harvest failure were not marked by widespread and frequent foot riots, although there was a sharp growth in the proportion of the population that could be described as 'harvest sensitive'. 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. So far as expenditure on food is concerned, it is suggested that it probably accounted for just over one-half of the poorer households' expenditure and therefore would have allowed greater flexibility in the face of harvest failure. 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 1640s 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 mid-1640s, political agitation in the New Model Army in 1647, and harvest failures in 1647 and 1649 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 1640s 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.

In his final chapter, Walter largely draws upon the previous work of James Scott and his delineation of the 'weapons of the weak'. The first of such weapons was 'grumbling', which was least likely to have left an historical trace. Grumbling took place in unregulated venues such as the alehouse or at the bakehouse or market. Years of dearth undoubtedly led to increased grumbling as the poor called for contributions from the rich and drew upon this weapon. Grumbling might in turn shade into 'cursing'. The ritual curse might be deployed against enclosers, middlemen, and those who refused requests for relief. It gained considerable strength from the belief that God had given the poor's curse its power. The 'appeal' was a more formal negotiation and it might be made directly to named individuals or addressed to intermediaries such as neighbouring gentry or local clergy. A more formal weapon, and hence one which has left more historical evidence, was the 'petition' which might be made in person or in number. In view of the duty of crown and magistracy to prevent dearth, it comes as no surprise that petitions to authority were frequent in years of harvest failure. The last major 'weapon of the weak' was 'coercion' which might be delivered in person to the subject of popular grievance or be drawn from a sympathetic audience or when deploying the 'crime of anonymity'. The text could be familiar and powerful such as 'necessity hath no law'.

This book will become required reading for those historians working in the broad field of early-modern English social history. It will provide convenient access to some seminal articles and bring together the results of long-term sustained research. However, there are some criticisms so far as presentation is concerned. There is no bibliography and two of the chapters have no references. I also wish that Manchester University Press would provide footnotes rather than endnotes. Finally, the index is weak and generally unhelpful.

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