Reviews in History

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Popular Cultures in England 1550-1750

Review Number:
65
Publish date:
Friday, 1 January, 1999
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ISBN:
9780582489547
Date of Publication:
1998
Price:
£24.99
Pages:
248pp.
Publisher:
Longman
Publisher url:
http://vig.pearsoned.co.uk/catalog/academic/product/0,1144,0582489547-FEA,00.html
Place of Publication:
London and New York
Reviewer:
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There has, in recent years, been a proliferation of work on popular culture in early modern England. Barry Reay?s *Popular Cultures in England 1550-1750* (London and New York: Longman 1998. Pp. ix + 235) is a perceptive and engaging synthesis, rooted in a thorough knowledge of recent work. The book is in a series aimed at ?a student and non-specialist readership?, but there will be few specialists who will not learn something from the book and who will not find themselves reflecting on the historiography of popular cultures.

Reay starts briskly with a working definition of ?popular cultures? as ?widely held and commonly expressed thoughts and actions?, the plural of cultures representing ?the subcultural splinterings (or segmentation) of locality, age, gender, religion, and class? (1). His method is to devote a chapter to ?different facets of early modern culture?: in turn, ?sexualities?, ?orality, literacy, and print?, ?religions?, ?witchcraft?, ?festive drama and ritual?, and ?riots and the law?. In his final chapter he gives himself space to reflect on ?popular cultures?. The individual chapters can be read as self-contained studies, and one can foresee that some of them, perhaps particularly ?sexualities? and ?witchcraft?, will become common items on history undergraduate and graduate reading lists. There are occasional cross-references from one chapter to another,

but the overall reflection is held back until the concluding chapter. There are, however, certain common emphases, and it is not difficult for readers to identify Reay?s approach to the study of popular cultures.

Reay on p.1. helpfully lists what he calls the key-words for his history: ?ambiguous, complex, contradictory, divided, dynamic, fluid, fractured, gendered, hybrid, interacting, multiple, multivalent, overlapping, plural, resistant, and shared?. In Reay?s early modern England there are no boundaried Leavisite organic communities; instead the early modern world is subject to a process of post-modernization. The key-words are those which self-regarding students of cultural studies scatter freely among their work.

The insights to be gained from such an approach are many. In the chapter on sexualities, Reay argues that, across social boundaries, early modern sexuality was focused on marriage and procreation, and that a male language of sexuality ?saw courtship in terms of siege warfare and martial combat? (18). Misogyny was rife. Women?s sexuality was openly acknowledged, but, in male eyes, as a danger - and as an excuse for rape. Homosexual acts carried no implication of being ?a homosexual?, the latter a cultural construct of much later times.

Reay successfully demonstrates the intermeshing of orality and literacy, writing of ?the orality of print?. By this phrase he refers to the ways in which print (ballads, chapbooks, plays) was read aloud, sung, and performed. An ability to read was much more common than an ability to write, and, amongst readers, there were vastly different levels of ability, ?a hierarchy of print consumption? (48), but no ?simple division between elite and popular literature? (55).

The chapter on religions is perhaps the least successful, if only because of the difficulty of compressing the religious experience of the English people across these tumultuous centuries into thirty pages. Reay?s argument is that despite the sensational changes in public belief systems, English people had a capacity to absorb and transmute what they found valuable, such as a residual Catholicism in both belief and ritual, and to reject doctrines however fiercely preached if, like predestination, they carried little appeal; on the basis of religious ballads and chapbooks, England remained firmly Pelagian.

In the witchcraft chapter, Reay?s key achievement is to rescue witches from the status of victim, and to restore some agency to them - in effect to take them seriously as witches, that is as people who over a long period had acquired and perhaps traded on a reputation for an ability to do harm if crossed, an ability which often ran in families. Witches? confessions at trials, Reay argues, were their own ways of coming to terms with their actions. He takes issue with those who suggest a sharp division between beliefs of this kind and the belief of the learned that witches were agents of Satan, arguing an intermeshing of beliefs.

In ?Festive drama and ritual? Reay starts with the rituals of calendar customs, noting some changes under the Puritan impact, for example in the practice of holding church ales, but equally emphasising that old practices might resurface in a marginally different form. He then subjects to closer analysis both civic pageantry and what he terms ?folk-ordered summer games and charivaris? (143). He argues that civic pageants were all-inclusive in their appeal, but that different sections of society responded to them at different levels, the classical allusions, for example, being caught only by the elite. As to the summer games and charivaris, we tend to know of them only when they came before the courts. The evidence from that source suggests that communities had ways of punishing behaviour which met with the disapproval of some group with a modicum of power, but that the punishment was also an occasion for revelry. ?The carnivalesque?, writes Reay, ?was central to early modern English culture? (165), but it tended to be a form of carnival which reinforced ?male dominance and social hierarchy? (167).

Rather less of a clear theme, though much telling detail, emerges from the chapter on riots and the law. Reay surveys judiciously the evidence on food riots and on anti-enclosure riots, drawing attention to the stress by participants on the legality of their actions, and to the participation by women. He goes on to note how ordinary people would resort to the law to settle grievances. But these emphases, as he notes, can make ?riots? seem altogether too orderly and law-abiding: there was violence in crowd actions, there was an overall dominance by the authorities, and there was a wide variety of ?crime? such as poaching which

suggested a gap between popular and elite perceptions of rightful behaviour..

If one stands back from Reay?s analysis what is striking is the distance travelled in this field of study since such enormously influential works as Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1973), Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), and Edward Thompson?s reflections on patricians and plebeians. In a sense the book is an extended criticism of an approach seen to be embodied in those works. They are thought to contain both a grand narrative approach, a disabling separation of elite and popular culture, and a treatment of popular culture as a residue. The criticism of them is rarely directly with their evidence. And though Reay is scrupulous in noting, for example, the care with which Burke formulated his distinctions between elite and popular, these keynote works are written of as belonging to a world of historiography now firmly in the past. I cannot imagine that a student coming fresh to these topics will feel, after reading Reay, any great necessity or urge to actually read Thomas or Burke or Thompson. What is curiously lacking is what one might call any hand-to-hand engagement with these writers (one can imagine how Thompson might have relished that!). Instead they are criticised out of hand for what is seen as a flawed methodology. But is Reay?s methodology any better?

It may be taken as fundamental to any historiography that it should have a means of explaining both continuity and change. Reay comments that his ?brief? is the period 1550-1750 (3), and urges readers to be ?relaxed? about these dates and about his excursions outside them. The latter are considerable. In the chapter on festive drama and ritual he starts with Samuel Bamford?s recollections of late eighteenth-century Middleton (though noting that Bamford?s account is not entirely consistent with earlier ones); in the chapter on orality and literacy he jumps forward a further fifty years and uses Mayhew?s interviews with London street vendors; and in the chapter on witchcraft he lights upon choice examples from late nineteenth-century Essex and Cambridgeshire. We are left wondering whether 1750 is in any way a meaningful endpoint: in terms of riots Reay notes that the second half of the eighteenth century was ?the real age of rioting? (197), but offers no explanation for the change in tempo. A disadvantage of ending in 1750 is that Reay can avoid the argument of Peter Burke that in the second half of the eighteenth century the divide between elite and popular cultures had become so wide that scholars began to rediscover ?the people? and their ways. How, one may ask, would Reay explain this pervasive sense of rediscovery?

For the most part the two hundred years from 1550 to 1750 are treated as ones without any significant change. The major exception to this is the chapter on religions where Reay arrestingly outlines the changes which would have been experienced by imaginary 60-year-olds in 1558, in the 1630s, and in 1720. Other changes are also noted: for example, the Puritan impact on civic ritual (161-2), and a change in the character of food riots after 1660, with the stopping of transport more common after 1660 than before (172). But the general tone is to downplay the extent and nature of change (210-2). In the chapters on sexualities and witchcraft (this surely very odd) it makes no appearance. And we are left wondering whether continuities may have endured way beyond 1750.

The truth is that in Reay?s approach there is no easily available explanation for change. In the bad old days when many scholars employed some notion, crude or refined, of base and superstructure (and where culture was the superstructure), cultural change could be explained by change at the level of the base. And one would expect to see a period of economic change reflected in change in the superstructure. We have, of course, learned to avoid such crude determinism, and the emphasis in cultural studies is both on culture as agency and on the relative independence of ?culture? as an arena of human thought and activity. Change, if it happens therefore, will be generated from within the sphere of culture not from something outside it. That phrases it too starkly, but it may serve to highlight the difficulty of explaining cultural change in the kind of approach adopted by Reay. Hence, not surprisingly, not much change happens, and where it does, as in religion, that change (?reformations?) may have much less impact on day-to-day life than one might expect (85-90).

Part of the difficulty in recognizing or explaining change stems from the argument that the boundaries between elite and popular cultures were fluid. Reay would like to do away with that kind of bipolarity altogether, partly because it fails to give weight to a (third) culture of ?the middling sorts?, but mainly

because of the boundary-crossing and intermeshing of elite and popular. One of the explanations for cultural change in the late eighteenth century, embodied for example in Robert Malcolmson?s *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850* (1973), was that an elite separated itself off from the ?common people? and bore down upon many of the latter?s cultural practices. But, given Reay?s strong assertions about intermeshing, this kind of explanation is hardly permissible. In the chapter on sexualities, for example, there is no mention of those trying to control sexuality and sexual behaviour. Reay is very unwilling to recognise that anything which might be called ?social control? could have a lasting effect on popular culture - he has little time, for example, for the evidence to this effect assembled by Keith Wrightson and David Levine in their study of Terling. As an agent of change, elite, or for that matter Puritan, reforming impulses are downplayed.

Reay?s working definition of popular cultures, quoted above, is at first sight commonsensical. What, however, it avoids is any engagement with the possibility that there were cultures which were in any sense ?ways of life? rather than simply ?commonly expressed thoughts and actions?. The only instance in which he is willing to admit this seems to be the ?culture of Puritanism, a distinct lifestyle? (83).The overall structure of the book directs us away from lifestyles to consideration of specific facets of life. The analyses within them often suggest ambiguity and ambivalence within those restricted spheres, and they are unable to connect, say, sexuality and religion. ?Fracture?, that favoured word of modern cultural studies, is built into the mode of analysis, and of course discovered: there is a circularity in the argument. Reay is often trying to get inside the heads of his early modern subjects, and often succeeds, puzzled and worried when he fails to do so as in his discussion of witchcraft. But the successes are only very partial because they relate to one aspect only of a person?s life or a community?s existence.

For a more rounded picture it is probably necessary to engage in studies of particular communities - the kind of study which Reay himself, in his *Microhistories: demography, society, and culture in rural England, 1800-1930* (1996), has so notably carried out for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for an area of rural Kent almost visible from where I write this review. Reay is of course aware (208-10) that regional differences may cut across any generalisations he makes, but he uses this insight as grist to his mill of an emphasis on the ?fissures? within popular cultures rather than envisaging that there might be relatively self-contained cultures (whole ways of life) rooted in a particular environment.

I have argued that Reay?s approach makes any recognition and explanation of continuity and change problematic. Since a base/superstructure model of explanation is rightly rejected, one is left asking how this fundamental issue of history as it applies to culture can be addressed. The answer, I believe, lies in contextualisation. Reay refreshingly approaches directly the thoughts and actions that go to the making of his popular cultures, but the cost of this is that he ignores or underplays context: the context of geography, the context of power, the context of the ways in which livings were made, the context of the economic changes consequent on England?s interaction with the rest of the world. At the very least such factors shape, though they do not determine, popular cultures. They receive only the most casual attention in this book.

Authors work to word limits, and those word limits impose choices. Reay has chosen to focus on those aspects of popular culture on which recent scholarship has been most lively, and the synthesis he has made of it is rich and stimulating. It is as much the scholarship on which he draws as his own use of it which prompts my critique. For a book of quality of this kind, written with authority, can become a benchmark for future research, perhaps on a par with Peter Burke?s work twenty years ago. For all its strengths and insights, Reay?s choice of approach to the study of popular cultures embodies some fundamental weaknesses, and is too dismissive of the contributions of earlier scholars. At the most fundamental level, in its relative neglect of context, it is in danger of dehistoricising the past. There is an irony here. Reay ends forcefully, noting how efforts to embody some history into contemporary cultural studies have an extremely foreshortened view of history, one which certainly does not stretch back to the early modern centuries. Reay argues for a greater historicity in such studies, an alertness to the strangeness of the past; and yet, what it strikes me that he has done is to make his early modern people just like our post-modern selves: ?complex?, ?contradictory?, ?divided?, and ?fractured? .

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