

ORDER AND DISORDER

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In the twenty-first century government has an almost obsessive interest in mapping social change. The seventeenth-century state was rarely interested in collecting information about ordinary people, unless it related to taxation. The government received a considerable amount of unsolicited information, in petitions from anyone from maimed soldiers and war widows to imprisoned Quakers, but this information cannot be assumed to be accurate or impartial. A significant amount of information about 'ordinary people' survives, but it is scattered through parish registers, legal records (including those of the church courts) and the muniments of corporate towns. Rather more detailed traces can be found in the archives of private families, but these are more likely to include title deeds and rent rolls than correspondence, diaries or anything that will shed light on the personal lives of family members. There was also a huge increase in the volume of printed material, but this tended to focus on theory rather than reality, or to stress the exceptional rather than the everyday: sensational murders and trials, monstrous births, battles, serious riots. The everyday was rarely recorded, except by foreign visitors or because it involved behaviour of which godly people disapproved: Sunday sports and drinking, for example. Only towards the end of the century did antiquarians begin to record customs which seemed to them 'curious'.

This is not to suggest that one cannot find evidence of the lives of ordinary people, but it often appears only incidentally in material generated for another purpose. Relatively little such material appears in the State Papers. The offices of the secretaries of state, which received and produced most of the State Papers, did not generate systematic records of people on the scale found in parish registers or quarter sessions records; they lacked the necessary manpower and anyway had no interest in doing so. Their main concern was public order and disorder. The English had the reputation of being an excitable and violent people, especially when drunk. Small incidents, often triggered by real or perceived insults, could erupt into violence, as apprentices, soldiers, butchers or students from the Inns of Court rushed to the aid of their colleagues.¹ The level of violence increased from 1640, as political and religious hatreds divided the nation and as the burden of taxation increased massively. Not that young - and not so young - men necessarily needed a reason to fight. Public holidays found young

men with little to do except drink, and they needed little excuse to start fighting or smashing property, especially semi-legitimate targets like brothels.² The majority of years between 1603 and 1640 saw significant riots in London on Shrove Tuesday.³ The 'Bawdy House Riots' in London in 1668 seriously alarmed the government and some of the rioters were charged with treason. But sometimes serious fights developed, including one at a fair in Glamorgan in 1666 in which two people were killed, where the participants seemed to have no idea what they were fighting about.⁴ In 1670 some apprentices told the mayor of Bristol simply that they wanted to fight.⁵

Apparently aimless violence was by no means uncommon, but it was not the norm. Most disorder stemmed from perceived injustices, especially in the economic sphere. In years of dearth, town magistrates and the central government attached a high priority to feeding the towns, especially London, where disorder could pose more serious problems than in the countryside. High food prices were anyway blamed on the misdeeds of farmers, millers and grain dealers - not least by the central government - and the inhabitants of grain-growing areas deeply resented seeing the grain that had been grown locally being transported to the larger towns, or abroad. Local magistrates shared the prevailing explanation of dearth in terms of human greed and often took the rioters' side.⁶ In the countryside, landlords were accused, often with good reason, of destroying common rights of grazing or access to forest or fen which sometimes went back centuries. Industrial employers were accused of arbitrarily increasing demands on their workers or cutting their pay, especially when faced with a slump in demand, or paying their men in kind rather than in cash. Some disputes continued over generations, such as those between the Newcastle coal-owners and the keelmen.⁷ Those who felt aggrieved appealed to the proper authorities - local magistrates, or ultimately the king. If they received no satisfaction, they might riot. This did not necessarily involve violence: the legal definition of a riot was a gathering of three or more people to commit an illegal act. It said much for English respect for the law that often rioters broke up into groups of two to pull down fences or drainage works. Food riots often consisted of women and children standing in front of a grain convoy and preventing it from moving. But frustration could lead to violence: sometimes, indeed, in the fens it was the drainers who resorted to violence first.⁸ Cloth workers could react violently to those they saw as threatening their livelihood. When a group of French cloth workers tried to settle in Norwich in 1683, they were driven out violently and one of them was killed.⁹ Even if there was no violence against people, unpopular landlords or those involved in forest clearance could be burned in effigy. By the early eighteenth century,

there was an increased incidence of anonymous letters, attacks on property (including arson) and cattle maiming. Even food riots became violent: ships carrying grain down the Severn were attacked and women in Northampton came to market with knives and threatened grain sellers.¹⁰

Even if food riots and the rioters often had a strong case (protests about the loss of common rights and industrial disputes were mostly non-violent) both the central and the local authorities found them worrying. The forces of order were flimsy. For much the century the standing army was small or non-existent and was not intended for riot control: indeed, before the Riot Act of 1715, soldiers who killed rioters could be indicted for murder. The militia, except in London, was disorganised. In most towns the watch and the constables were incapable of dealing with determined rioters - and often sympathised with them. More worrying were disorders with overtones of sedition. The authorities often suspected that shadowy troublemakers were inciting simple people to take to the streets. Such suspicions were already present in the early part of the century and focused on those at odds with the religious establishment - Catholics or Puritans. Occasionally disorders had clear political overtones, as with the lynching of the duke of Buckingham's astrologer in 1628; he was accused of enabling the duke to bewitch the king.¹¹ But from 1640 the political and religious divisions within English society became stronger and more brutal. In May 1640 angry crowds besieged Lambeth Palace, calling for the head of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The calling of the Long Parliament encouraged hopes that all wrongs would be righted and many took the opportunity to pay off scores, without waiting for Parliament to act. Deer parks were attacked, manorial and ecclesiastical records destroyed. Violent disorder was directed not only against the misuse of economic power, or the abuses of government, but against those holding different political or religious views. Local animosities were reinforced by the sense, actively encouraged by the House of Commons, that Protestantism and Parliament were threatened by a 'popish plot'.¹² Even before the civil wars started, supporters of Parliament targeted Catholics and those seen as promoting 'Catholic' practices within the Church of England. Altar rails were smashed, Catholics and courtiers were roughly treated.¹³ The visceral fears of anarchy created by this explosion of violence and disorder were one major reason for the emergence of a Royalist party by 1642.

The animosities aroused in the 1640s continued well into the eighteenth century, when Tory crowds on election days often shouted 'Down with the Roundheads!' Ideological divisions

created an uncompromising ferocity and hatred that were missing from most food riots, and indeed riots driven by political and religious partisanship became far commoner than those which were purely economic. These were disputes about religious truth, about who was to rule the country, and the survival of the rights and liberties of Englishmen; and these were national, not local, issues. Political and religious dissidents were suspected of plotting against the state. The 1660s were rife with stories of old Parliamentarians conspiring to rebel against Charles II. In 1678 the nation was convulsed with allegations of a Popish Plot to assassinate the king and impose 'popery and arbitrary government'. In the early 1680s the talk was of Nonconformist or 'republican' plots, of which one (the Rye House Plot of 1683) had some substance. After the expulsion of the Catholic James II in 1688, which itself gave rise to substantial disorder, the Protestant establishment feared that his supporters and those of his son - the Jacobites - were planning to overthrow the government. This mutual sense of threat, compounded by the fierce mutual hatreds of Tory and Whig, High and Low Church, created continual tensions and occasional violence, which erupted especially in parliamentary elections. But other disorders also became more violent, as we have seen with food riots. The colliers of Kingswood near Bristol were a rough and fearsome body of men.¹⁴ In 1709 they came to Bristol complaining that they could not afford to buy bread: the city authorities thought it wise to listen. In 1713 they arrived unbidden at the election in Bristol bearing large sticks, and beat up any Whig foolhardy enough to attempt to vote; fewer than 200 did so, out of an electorate of at least 2,500.¹⁵ The level of partisan violence at Bristol in 1713 was exceptional, but it was by no means unique. Party violence also spilled over into what should have been days of civic celebration and unity, as rival groups paraded (or burned) effigies, shouted party slogans, and beat those who refused to drink the health of their heroes or damnation to their enemies. Similarly, in London in 1679-82, passers-by were stopped and ordered to drink the health of the Duke of York or the Duke of Monmouth - and forced to drink water from the gutter if they refused. After James II banned bonfires on 5 November it became customary for people to put candles in their windows on days of civic, or partisan, celebration. Partisan crowds roamed the streets smashing the windows of those who illuminated - or failed to illuminate.

But there were also violent riots against the government, mostly against taxation. Until the 1640s the poor paid very little or nothing in taxation, but Parliament hugely increased the level of taxation in order to fight the civil war. Above all it introduced the excise, taxes on beer, cider and other commodities bought and sold within England. As always with such

indirect taxes, these fell more heavily on the poor than on the rich and they protested accordingly. Butchers had a reputation for violence, they worked with cleavers and knives, and in most markets they were grouped together in the shambles. A butchers' riot in Smithfield in London in 1647 led to the withdrawal of the excise on meat. People also protested against the hearth tax, established in 1662,. Even though the very poorest were exempt, anyone with more than one hearth in their home was obliged to pay and this included many, like the cutlers of Sheffield, who used their hearths to make their living. The hearth tax was especially hated because the collectors had the right to enter people's homes. Several hearth tax collectors were killed and the local magistrates seemed unable, or more likely unwilling, to protect them.¹⁶ The hearth tax was abandoned in 1689 , but excise and customs duties continued to multiply. Smuggling became big business and smugglers organised in large and well-armed bands which the local authorities could not cope with: regular troops had to be used. At the same time there were significant, if sporadic outbreaks of deer-stealing, often involving violence against gamekeepers and the burning of buildings.¹⁷

Such brazen and brutal defiance worried the government, and it suspected that it had political undertones: this was especially plausible in the case of smugglers, with their foreign contacts. It thus had a vested interest in gathering information about such disorders, or threatened disorders, whereas it had no interest in the doings of peaceable, dutiful subjects. Some information of political intrigues, whether 'republican' or Jacobite, came from spies. These might be employed by the government or freelance 'intelligence' gatherers, but either way they expected to be paid for their trouble and needed to produce 'results'. The management of these spies and the sifting of their intelligence was one of the prime duties of the secretaries of state and their offices.¹⁸ They had access to the post office and the power to intercept and open letters. But their resources in terms of men and money were pitifully small by modern standards and they also needed the services of 'well affected' citizens in the provinces. These were often employees of the crown: postmasters, revenue officers and magistrates. Some were driven by genuine anxieties, like the Westmorland magistrates Sir Philip Musgrave and Daniel Fleming, who were desperately anxious about the danger of sedition in the early 1660s.¹⁹

Unlike spies, who had a vested interest in exaggerating the significance of their information (or in making it up), the secretaries' informants in the provinces usually had no startling news. Those in port towns sent details of the weather and the names of merchant ships

passing by. Some also sent accounts of events in their towns: minor riots, quarrels, or incidents which just seemed interesting. From garrison towns there were occasional complaints of the misdeeds of soldiers, but under Charles II these were few and quickly dealt with. When soldiers of Colonel Stradling's regiment maltreated the people of Huntingdon (which he described as Cromwell's town) he was promptly cashiered.²⁰ Under James II soldiers could get away with much more, provided that they could persuade the king that those complaining against them were 'disaffected'; this was not usually difficult.²¹ The incidents reported by the secretaries' correspondents might involve an element of disorder but usually posed no threat to the government. Where the disorders were more serious, the incidental information given might throw light on how people lived and spent their time. Once gets glimpses of the brutal street politics of London or Bristol in the early 1680s: the Tory Duke of Beaufort organised the Bristol Artillery Company, a paramilitary force designed to wrest control of the streets from the Whigs. In 1682 Beaufort mustered the militia outside the council house (town hall) on the day of the mayoral election; his candidate was chosen.²² One can also learn about coffee houses, and their importance in the dissemination and discussion of news.²³ The Quakers, by far the most organised Nonconformist denomination, produced petitions giving details of their 'sufferings' and, in the process, their relations with the rest of the community, from constables who refused to seize the property of their Quaker neighbours in lieu of unpaid fines, to youths who revelled in their freedom to beat Quakers up with impunity. In the early 1680s, attempts to persecute other Nonconformists sometimes met stubborn resistance. At Taunton in 1683 the Dissenters celebrated the lifting of the Royalist siege in the Civil War, despite the best efforts of the mayor.²⁴ He had his revenge, however, by pulling down the Presbyterian chapel with the help of the some of the county militia, and burning the fitments in the market place. The divisive, corrosive power of political and religious passions gave an added edge of bitterness and violence which was rarely found in food riots and was uncommon in riots of any sort in the early seventeenth century.

Citation

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Notes

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- ¹ SP 29/238, item 141, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1667-8*, p. 348 (soldiers); SP 16/148, item no. 9, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles I, 1629-31*, p. 29, (Inns of Court) see also SP 29/336, item no.17. For the last of these items there is no entry in the Calendar, because the document had already been printed in full: *Letters addressed from London to Sir Joseph Williamson, 1673-4*, ed. W. D. Christie (2 vols, Camden Society, 1874) i. 52.
- ² SP 29/193, item 113, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1666-7*, p. 560.
- ³ K. J. Lindley, 'Riot Prevention and Control in early Stuart London', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series 33 (1983), pp. 109-26.
- ⁴ SP 29/168, item no. 120, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1666-7*, p. 61.
- ⁵ SP 29/273, item no. 59.
- ⁶ K. Wrightson and J. Walter, 'Dearth and the Social Order in early modern England', *Past and Present*, no. 71 (1976), pp. 21-42.
- ⁷ SP 34/13, ff. 24-6. These documents are from 1710 and so are not covered by the Calendars. [Publisher's note: the cataloguing here is from The National Archives' online catalogue].
- ⁸ K. J. Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (London, 1982), pp. 57-8, 72-6.
- ⁹ SP 29/431, item no. 88, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, July-September 1683*, p. 363.
- ¹⁰ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of William and Mary, 1693*, p. 397 and *ibid*, 1695, pp. 262-3. These documents, from the Greenwich Hospital newsletter collection, are included in the Calendars, but are in the Admiralty papers in the National Archives, not the State Papers.
- ¹¹ SP 16/107, item no.78, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles I, 1628-9*, p. 169.
- ¹² J. Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: the Colchester Plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999).
- ¹³ See D. Cressy, *England on Edge: Crisis and Revolution 1640-2* (Oxford, 2006); Walter (see note 7 above).
- ¹⁴ SP/29/278, item no. 164, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1670*, pp. 435-6.
- ¹⁵ J. Miller, *Cities Divided: Politics and Religion in English Provincial Towns, 1660-c.1722* (Oxford, 2007), p. 279.
- ¹⁶ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1667-8*, p. 224.
- ¹⁷ SP 29/77, item no. 64, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1663-4*, p. 219, and SP 29/411, item no. 158, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1679-80*, p. 186.
- ¹⁸ See A. Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II* (Cambridge, 1994).
- ¹⁹ SP/29/83, item no. 98, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1663-4*, p. 340.
- ²⁰ SP 29/313, item no. 115, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1672*, p. 416. See also SP 29/314, item no.146A, *ibid*, p 550.
- ²¹ SP 31/3, item no. 77-8; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of James II, 1686-7*, no. 157.
- ²² SP 29/420, item no. 64, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1682*, p. 392.
- ²³ SP 29/415, item no.142, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1680-1*, p. 251.
- ²⁴ SP 29/424, item no. 62, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, January-June 1683*, p. 250.