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978-0-521-03772-3 - The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770

Andy Wood

Excerpt

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Introduction ‘Terms we did not understand’: landscape, place and perceptions

In 1724, Daniel Defoe published an account of his recent journey through the Peak Country of north-west Derbyshire.¹ In his mind’s eye, he re-crossed the ‘black mountains’ which separated the Peak Country from its neighbours, and entered the hills and valleys of that region. Here Defoe saw again the dominant lead mining industry in its full bloom, moved through the small, compact, poverty-stricken mining villages, and encountered the ‘Peakrills’ (‘the subterranean wretches . . . who work in the mines’) who dwelt there. Yet for all its flair, Defoe’s oft-cited responses to the Peak and its people followed a script established by earlier accounts of the place, and by the prejudices of his class.² Like so many other visitors to the region, Defoe was shown its geological and architectural ‘wonders’ – the baths at Buxton, the Duke of Devonshire’s great mansion at Chatsworth, the immense cave known as the Devil’s Arse at Castleton – and commented upon the folk-beliefs which attached to some of these sites. In leading his readers on a journey ‘through this howling wilderness in your imagination’, Defoe knew that he was speaking to prior assumptions held by his polite, educated readership about the Peak Country in particular, and about upland, industrial areas in general. In large measure, the Peak Country which Defoe invoked was not one which most of its inhabitants would have recognized. None the less, social historians of early modern England have all too easily turned to contemporary elite antiquaries and travellers for descriptions of local cultures. The result has been the unwitting reproduction of elite prejudices towards the plebeian inhabitants of regions perceived of as marginal, dangerous or backward.³ This book will attempt to redress that balance.

¹ D. Defoe, *A tour through the whole island of Great Britain* (1724–6; abridged edn, London, 1971), 460–79.

² See for instance M. Berg, *The age of manufactures, 1700–1820* (London, 1985), 110–11.

³ A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson, ‘Introduction’, in A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Order and disorder in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), 39; C. Hill, *The world turned upside down: radical ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1972), 13–56, 73–86;

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Although few of Defoe's literate, urban readers were likely to have visited the place, the Peak Country was not unknown to them. Tutored by Thomas Hobbes' and Charles Cotton's published accounts of the region, the middling sort of Augustan England knew the Peak to be a backward, barbarous place inhabited by unruly miners and illiterate peasants. Famously, its hills contained the finest lead ore in Britain, from which was manufactured the pewter vessels which sat upon their table and the shot which their armies used to dominate Europe and the New World. But the hills also appeared to succour a peculiar, dangerous local culture. The thin resources of the wide, barren moors seemed to be given over to common use by poor households. Within those hills, and down below in the valleys, the men of the villages laboured in mineworkings. Here educated readers understood the miners to dig for lead under a custom of free mining which overrode private property in land. The polite culture of the early eighteenth century followed its forebears of the seventeenth century in seeing in material environment the germs of popular culture. Moors, fens and forests were thought to breed a rebellious and independent culture amongst the lower orders. Like the East Anglian fens or the forests of western England, the Peak Country was perceived by upper-class outsiders as a dark corner of the land occupied by troublesome people whose local cultures were nourished by the black water of custom.⁴ In all of these regions, local customary law gave wide freedoms to poor people. But the customary laws of the Peak Country enshrined a special, almost unique, right: that of free mining. In many manors within the Peak Country, any man (whether newcomer or settled inhabitant) enjoyed the right to dig for lead on any land, regardless of its ownership. This right of free mining was guaranteed by a body of laws which dated back to 1288. Unsurprisingly, the right had been the subject of intense dispute between lord and miner for generations before Defoe's visit to the region. In the Peak Country more than perhaps anywhere else, therefore, early modern elite perceptions of environment helped to reproduce a larger social conflict.

That the Peak was also an industrial region spoke to other fears. The fiction of social hierarchy upon which early modern England's traditional elite founded their rule rested upon a perception of society and economy as simple, unchanging and non-industrial. Before the civil wars, patriarchal

D.E. Underdown, *Revel, riot and rebellion: popular politics and culture in England, 1603-1660* (Oxford, 1987), esp. chs. 2-4.

⁴ W.C. Carroll, "The nursery of beggary": enclosure, vagrancy and sedition in the Tudor-Stuart period', in R. Burt and J.M. Archer (eds.), *Enclosure acts: sexuality, property and culture in early modern England* (Ithaca, 1994), 34-47; C. Hill, 'Puritans and "the dark corners of the land"', in his *Change and continuity in seventeenth century England* (London, 1974), 3-47; K. Thomas, *Man and the natural world: changing attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth, 1983), 242-86.

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theorists closed their eyes to the flux of social mobility and economic change which moved about them. Yet the increasingly numerous industrial communities of the period could not fit into the neat boxes prescribed by patriarchal theory. England's governors therefore tended to imagine industrial workers as disorderly, indolent and dangerous. This was as true of the miners of the Derbyshire Peak Country as it was of other industrial groups.⁵ The poverty of upland, industrial areas tended to exacerbate such prejudices. Mining villages were seen by gentlemen and nobles as lawless places, and mining workforces presented as an undifferentiated, intimidating mass. Writing in 1700, Leigh commented that 'there is scarce a vicious act but [the Derbyshire miners] are guilty of it, their folly is as notorious as their vice'.⁶ The absence of any significant elite presence in such areas was presented as a further cause for concern. Early seventeenth-century commentators observed 'the rudenes, incivility & disobedience of divers of the inhabitants of that country of the Peake' and connected this to 'the scarsetie of Noblemen and Gentlemen' there.⁷ The absence of gentry meant that reports of crowd gatherings were greeted with concern. In the 1520s, the Duchy of Lancaster's officials were worrying over 'Love Ale', gatherings in the High Peak 'Whereby have growne amongst them many myschevous deds as riotts assaltes affrayes murdres and other many in conveences'. In the late sixteenth century, when John Tunstead was appointed as Bailiff of the High Peak by the Earl of Shrewsbury, the peer warned him that it was an office of much 'creditt thear by reason that few Justices doe inhabitt that wyld country'. In the 1690s, worries over 'how barren this Country is of gentlemen' were expressed in a letter telling of crowd gatherings against re-coinage.⁸

Defoe's descriptions of the Peak miners he encountered built on such perceptions. In his recollections, the 'Peakrills' were 'subterranean wretches . . . a rude, boorish kind of people'. Defoe pulled his audience's attention to one of the most remarkable features of local customary culture in the Peak:

⁵ On stereotypes of early modern mining communities, see D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The making of an industrial society: Whickham, 1560–1765* (Oxford, 1991), 274–8; A. Wood, 'Custom, identity and resistance: English free miners and their law, 1550–1800', in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle (eds.), *The experience of authority in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), 254–6; M. Stoye, *Loyalty and locality: popular allegiance in Devon during the English civil war* (Exeter, 1994), 208. On stereotypes of industrial workers more generally, see A. Randall, *Before the Luddities: custom, community and machinery in the English woollen industry, 1776–1809* (Cambridge, 1991), 30–1.

⁶ C. Leigh, *The natural history of Lancashire, Cheshire and the Peak in Derbyshire* (London, 1700), 79. For earlier versions of these prejudices, see PRO, E134/13 Jas I/Mich 3; DRO, D258M/59/13L.

⁷ R. Meredith, 'The Eyres of Hassop, 1470–1640: II', *DAJ*, 2nd ser., 85 (1965), 49, 67.

⁸ PRO, DL37/62, fols. 23, 25; W. Braylesford Bunting, *Chapel-en-le-Frith: its history and its people* (Manchester, 1940), 187; BL, Add. MS 6668, fol. 211.

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the administrative structure which attached to the customs of free mining.⁹ Recalling his visit to Wirksworth town, the ancient heart of the mining industry, Defoe stated that ‘The Barmoot Court kept here to judge controversies among the miners . . . is very remarkable.’ Ordered by an officer called the barmaster, a jury of twenty-four miners constituted the barmote. Defoe briefly explained the laws of the industry, which in his recollection allowed ‘any man’ to dig ‘in another man’s ground, except orchards and gardens’, and which regulated the disposal of mineshares, the conduct of the miners and a host of other matters: ‘This court also prescribes rules to the mines, and limits their proceedings in the works under ground; also they are judges of all their little quarrels and disputes in the mines, as well as out and, in a word, keep the peace among them.’ Through their control of the barmote court, the miners became ‘judges of all their little quarrels and disputes’. Defoe had been taken to the moothall in Wirksworth, where the barmote for the manor of Wirksworth sat. It was here that the mining customs of that manor had been explained to him, and which he simplified and confused in his account.

Like other visitors, Defoe misunderstood the complex web of conflicting jurisdictions and customs within which the Derbyshire lead industry operated. For all that Defoe and others spoke easily of the operation of the custom of free mining across the whole of the lead field of the Peak, by 1724 the spatial and social operation of that custom was much more restricted than he thought. None the less, and for all the heavy condescension of his tone, Defoe’s recognition of the large degree of control enjoyed by the miners over matters of custom is important. We will return frequently in the course of this book to the moothall in Wirksworth, and to equivalent sites in other jurisdictions within the Peak, to hear the ‘little quarrels’ fought out therein, and to witness the ‘strange, turbulent, quarrelsome temper’ of the miners. The moothall, and the customs it supported, will emerge as one of the key centres of plebeian politics in the Peak.

Social historians of the early modern period are currently redefining politics as inherent to everyday life and communal practice. Thus, what went on in places like the Wirksworth moothall could be just as political as the affairs of state conducted in the great houses of the gentry and nobility. Yet most contemporary political theorists would not have agreed with such an assessment of politics. Instead, patriarchal theorists presupposed a rigid social polarity, in which the gentry and nobility were born to command and the common people to obey. For all that patriarchalism was challenged after the mid-seventeenth century by more liberal models of political participation, a rigid perception of the socio-political order remained

⁹ Defoe, *Tour*, 460–2.

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written into elite perceptions of landscape and local culture. Upon encountering the ordered, rational environment of Chatsworth House, seat of the Duke of Devonshire, both Defoe's and Charles Cotton's accounts of the Peak Country evidence a similar sense of relief.¹⁰ Defoe contrasted this 'most regular piece of architect[ure]' to the 'waste and howling wilderness' which surrounded it, while Cotton saw the natural environment as a diseased, contorted body. For Cotton, the 'rudeness' of the hills mirrored a 'rudeness' and 'incivility' on the part of the 'Hob-nail Peakrills' and the 'Peak highlander'. The landscaped environment of Chatsworth helped to sequester its noble inhabitants from their lower-class neighbours. Defoe noted how a wood had been planted so as to exclude the surrounding hills and industry from the Duke's sight. Cotton observed 'A Tower of Antick model' at the entry to the House whose purpose was to 'securely shut' out the 'Peak rabble'.

The Duke of Devonshire tried to close out the plebeian world of the Peak by constructing physical barriers to social intercourse. By the early eighteenth century the Manners Dukes of Rutland, the other great noble family of the region, had removed themselves from their Peak estates to the more ordered environment of Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire. The political and social exclusions by which the gentry and nobility of early modern England defined their authority were therefore encoded upon the landscape of the Peak. Yet the authority of such exclusions could never be taken for granted. As we shall see, the conceptual and physical boundaries which separated plebeian from elite could be ruptured. The plebeian politics of the Peak spoke in a diversity of voices. These find an unequal expression in this book, and were articulated in diverse places: in the moothall, at the manor court, before the common law, before commissions of central law courts, before the Privy Council or the parliament, at the porch of the parish church, at the doorway, in the alehouse, the marketplace, the field and the street.

The politics of social conflict found their clearest expression in the historically retrievable encounter between the opposed interests of plebeian and elite. That opposition was at its clearest in disputes over free mining custom, as lords and entrepreneurs sought to undermine the miners' claims to custom, and as the miners responded with riot, petition, demonstration and litigation. The twists and turns of that long-running conflict over local custom and material resources are charted in Part III of this book. In that encounter, the miners in particular created a political culture which bore

¹⁰ C. Cotton, *The wonders of the Peak* (London, 1681). For a fuller study of the relationship between elite values and the landscape park, see T. Williamson, *Polite landscapes: gardens and society in eighteenth century England* (Stroud, 1995).

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distinct similarities to the artisanal politics of the early Industrial Revolution. In excluding women and unskilled men from participation in the institutions of their trade, the miners helped to define their own political identity. The structural and cultural processes by which that identity was created and reworked between 1520 and 1770 is explored in Part II. But the book begins with a consideration of the economics of the Peak Country. Part I describes the Peak's movement from early sixteenth-century isolation to become an industrial region by the mid-seventeenth century. Fundamental to that movement was the creation of an early form of industrial capitalism. Although the social structures of this poor, industrial region constrained human agency, so the distribution of wealth, resources and power were simultaneously produced and renewed out of conflict and political engagement. The book therefore explores the changing point of interconnection between politics, law, ideology, culture, economics and identity over some two and a half centuries as they developed within a region which has largely escaped the attentions of professional historians. Moreover, it approaches that story from the perspective of the Peak's plebeian inhabitants. That perspective has been chosen in deliberate reversal of the conventional historical privileging of the concerns of governing elites at the expense of people like the 'subterranean wretches' whom Daniel Defoe encountered.

Defoe's account of the 'Peakrills' was constructed through the establishment of social and cultural difference. On barren Brassington moor, he was surprised to discover a mining family living in a cave.¹¹ Defoe provides his readers with a sympathetic description of the woman of the house. He recalls discussing with the woman first her husband's earnings as a miner, and then her own as one who 'washed the ore' after it was brought to the surface. He noted that the family cultivated barley on a smallholding, and kept a cow and a few pigs. As such, the economic historian is provided with a pen-portrait of that now well-known species: the poor, near-landless rural household, dependent upon the exercise of common rights and industrial waged labour. We will occupy ourselves with the changing fortunes and structural typologies of such households in the Peak Country in Chapters 2 to 5. But for now we are concerned with the distance which Defoe placed between himself and the woman. For Defoe, the woman was a paid-up member of the deserving poor. In his memory, she was

tall, well shaped, clean and (for the place) a very well looking, comely woman; nor was there any thing [about her home that] looked like the dirt and nastiness of the miserable cottages of the poor; though many of them spend more money in strong drink than this poor woman had to maintain five children with.

¹¹ Defoe, *Tour*, 463–5.

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Defoe recognized the Brassington woman as a fellow human being. There is nothing here of John Aubrey's nasty account of the people of north Wiltshire, or of Cotton's harsh contempt for the Peakrills.¹² None the less, his recollections were bred within a close recognition of social and cultural difference. This perceived difference becomes most evident as he recalls his subsequent encounter with a miner, who appeared suddenly out of a mine-shaft on Brassington moor.¹³ Defoe remembered the man as a 'subterranean creature' and 'a most uncouth spectacle':

he was clothed all in leather, had a cap of the same without brims, some tools in a little basket . . . not one of the names of which we could understand but by the help of an interpreter . . . he was as lean as a skeleton, pale as a dead corpse, his hair and beard deep black, his flesh lank . . . he looked like an inhabitant of the dark regions below.

Defoe and his companions tried to speak with the miner but found that though he 'was pretty free of his tongue . . . He answered us in terms we did not understand.'¹⁴ Communication was only possible through an 'interpreter'. But it was not only the terms of the miner's speech which Defoe misunderstood; it was the terms of his culture. Just as Defoe and his readers imagined the material world of the Peak Country as constituted by threatening hills, strange geology and natural wonders, so they anticipated a social world of illiterate, stupid, isolated and potentially rebellious 'Peakrills'. Prebendary Gilpin spoke for his class when he looked first upon the Peak and then upon the Peakrills and concluded that 'the inhabitants of these scenes were as savage as the scenes themselves'.¹⁵ To the gentry outsider, the Peak Country and its plebeian people were therefore defined within the interlocking of geological and social difference.

This study will reveal a considerable degree of heterogeneity within Peak society between 1520 and 1770. Yet contemporary elite travellers closed their eyes to the finer distinctions which the Peak's inhabitants drew between one another on the basis of gender, place, skill, status, age and class. Inspired by Cotton, Defoe and Hobbes, the eighteenth-century gentry visitor to the Peak came expecting to find 'subterranean people' inhabiting 'these territories of Satan'. And so they did, discovering that 'These People resemble the Troglodytes, or Cunicular Men who . . . lived under Ground

¹² D. Rollison, *The local origins of modern society: Gloucestershire, 1500-1800* (London, 1992), 254-8.

¹³ Defoe, *Tour*, 465-7.

¹⁴ For similar incomprehension of a 'Peakrill', see C.B. Andrews and F. Andrews (eds.), *The Torrington diaries: a selection from the tours of the Hon. John Byng (later Fifth Viscount Torrington) between the years 1781 and 1794* (London, 1954), 187.

¹⁵ W. Gilpin, *Observations, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty made in the year 1772 on several parts of England*, 2 vols. (3rd edn, London, 1792), I, 212.

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like Rabbits.’¹⁶ But the subterranean people found their own voices. One such voice was that of William Hooson, a miner of Youghreave, who in 1747 published a diverse book dealing with mining method, tradition, law and history. He made it clear that he was aware of the stereotypes offered of his region and his trade: ‘I know that Miners are accounted at this Day by many who reap great benefit from their Endeavours to be a Set of dispiseable Men of no good Characters, but Tools to be imployed on Occasions in the Mines, and a great deal more they brand them with.’ Yet Hooson did not regard himself as a ‘Tool’ of any mine-owner. He concluded his book with a series of remarks which speak volumes for the pride he took in his occupation:

WHETHER there be any Practical Miners that have written any thing of mining, is more than I yet know, but several Gentlemen have furnished us with bits and scrips taken on Information mixt and wrought up with [perhaps] some Guesswork of their own; but I do not see that a Man is either the wiser or better for them, for what I have delivered, is the very Practice as the Experienced Miner well knows . . . If any shall object against my Rough, yet Plain way of Writing &c., he may easily excuse me, when I tell him, I always was, am and hope by God’s help so to continue the remainder of my days A MINER.¹⁷

Much of this book will be preoccupied with the origins and nature of the Peak miners’ identity. We will see how the formation of that identity had larger implications for the region’s social, cultural and political history. In the years *c.* 1590–1610, a closer sense of collective identity developed amongst the skilled free miners. The harder edge thereby given to the miners’ identity resulted from the specification of skill and custom as the property of settled, plebeian adult men. This had important implications for gender relations and for understandings of work, law and local identity. The hardening of the miners’ identity was bound up with a gathering political contest over material resources. After the 1570s, involvement in the lead industry became increasingly profitable. The vague customary laws by which free mining had hitherto been allowed to dominate the lead industry were challenged by wealthy gentlemen and nobles, anxious both to exert control over the industrial workforce and to gain possession of the lead mining industry. In developing a tradition of resistance to their rulers, the miners redefined themselves as a social group. From that confrontation emerged a plebeian political project which, although defined through the exclusion of women and of the unskilled men, set itself in overt and public opposition to the interests of the ‘great men’ of the Peak.

¹⁶ BL, Add. MS 6670, fols. 333–53. See also BL, Add. MS 6668, fols. 477–9; Anon., *Account of the wonders of Derbyshire* (London, 1779); W. Bray, *Sketch of a tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire* (London, 1777), for equivalent accounts.

¹⁷ W. Hooson, *The miner’s dictionary* (1747; repr. Ilkley, 1979), 198, 197.

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The conflict of the *c.* 1590–1660 period raises important questions about the nature of social relations in early modern England. Still more important was the language in which plebeians came to describe that conflict, which identified society as harshly and simply divided into ‘rich’ and ‘poor’. Local conflict was defined as the encounter of opposed social groups over the conceptual and legal battleground of custom. The stress placed by Peak plebeians upon custom and locality gives the disputes over mining rights a distinctly early modern feel. But other aspects of the politics of social conflict as practised in the Peak Country sit less easily upon the established foundations of early modern social history. For the polarized confrontation over free mining custom produced definitions of social conflict which anticipate nineteenth-century languages of class.

It is a central argument of this book that early modern plebeian cultures bequeathed important habits and traditions to the working-class culture of the early nineteenth century. Social historians have failed to communicate across the historiographical and conceptual divide of the Industrial Revolution. Early modern social historians have long been hesitant in using the term ‘class’ as an analytical category, convinced that it was a product of nineteenth-century modernity. Meanwhile, modern social historians are currently persuading themselves of the emptiness of the term. This book tries to speak to the agendas of both modern and early modern social history. In order to establish how its findings contribute to historical understandings of class identity and social conflict, we must turn first to how social historians have dealt with the issue of class.

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Social relations and popular culture in early modern England

CLASS AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Class, we are told, is dead. It has been excised from contemporary political discourse, and is being torn from its place at the heart of the social history of modern Britain. For many observers, rapid deindustrialization and the decline of mass society have removed the structural context within which class identities thrived. Shorn of Marxist certainties, social historians of modern Britain have come under the influence of new postmodern socio-logies. Whereas Marxian social history had perceived of class as an embedded, material fact produced out of exploitation, immiseration and resistance, for their postmodernist successors class exists nowhere but in discourse. Earlier histories which saw working-class identity as a social fact born within the cradle of the early factory system and given voice in political radicalism and organized labour are now disparaged. Instead, class is seen as ‘an imagined form, not something given in a “real” world beyond this form’.¹ To the postmodern historian, the force possessed by class in the nineteenth century came from its wide acceptance as a material fact, yet its only reality lay in discourse.² Hence the language of class is seen as having provided momentary expression to the social opposition imagined by socialists and radicals. That language enabled socialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to construct universal claims to political and economic equality. Postmodernist historians of the industrial period now reveal that universalism to have been a mere discursive tissue which covered over differences of gender, ethnicity, locality and religion.³ Having done battle with the ghost of Marxist historiography, the

¹ P. Joyce, *Democratic subjects: the self and the social in nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 1.

² P. Joyce, ‘The end of social history?’, *Social History*, 20, 1 (1995), 82.

³ P. Joyce, *Visions of the people: industrial England and the question of class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); J. Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993). On the unravelling of materialist definitions of class