Introduction

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The papers published in this volume were, with two exceptions, presented to the annual conference organized by *Past and Present* in 1981. We were able to expand the unavoidably restricted coverage of the events of 1381 by obtaining two subsequent contributions by R. B. Dobson and A. Harding. An obvious gap remains, that is, a study of the June events in London itself, though this was almost simultaneously covered by Caroline Barron's interesting study published by the Museum of London.[1]

Our title was the 'English Rising' rather than the 'Peasants' Revolt'. It was felt that, although, as C. C. Dyer cogently argues, the main drive behind the rebellion came from the peasantry, urban involvement was of considerable importance and perhaps hitherto rather neglected. Consequently, while two contributions analyse peasant discontents and aspirations, another two deal with important instances of rebellion in provincial towns, which have been less closely studied than they deserve, in comparison, for example, with London or Bury St Edmunds. Having also decided that the rebellion should be put in the context of the wider European social conflicts of the period, we were fortunate in obtaining contributions from Raymond Cazelles on the Jacquerie – a rural rebellion much in the thoughts of England's rulers at this time – and from Samuel Cohn on the classic urban rebellion of the Florentine Ciompi.

It will be remembered that *Past and Present*'s commemoration of the rising of 1381 was by no means the only one in 1981. Popular and scholarly interest was widespread, as many meetings, conferences and festivals throughout the country bore witness. No doubt an analysis of this present fascination would be worthwhile. This lively interest also poses a problem for the historians of the event itself, for since the late nineteenth century there has been an interesting

[1] *Revolt in London: 11th to 15th June, 1381* (London, 1981).

shift in interpretations of the rebellion and perhaps another shift in the reverse direction is now taking place. That seventeenth-century founding father of agrarian history, John Smyth of Nibley, wrote in his *Lives of the Berkeleys*: 'Then the times began to change and he [Thomas, 4th Lord Berkeley] with them . . . much occasioned by the insurrection of Wat Tyler and all the commons in the land.' For J. Thorold Rogers, the 'solid fruits of victory rested with the insurgents of June 1381 . . . the peril had been so great and the success of the insurrection was so near that wise men saw that it was better silently to grant that which they had stoutly refused in Parliament to concede'. For William Stubbs, the rising was 'one of the most portentous events in the whole of our history . . . although the villeins had failed to obtain their charters . . . they had struck a vital blow at villeinage . . . thus indirectly the balance of power among the three estates began to vary'. William Cunningham wrote that 'although the outbreak was suppressed there is no reason to believe that the old institutions which had maintained order and enforced morality recovered an effective sway'. Nevertheless, Cunningham seems to have initiated what became the prevailing (non-Marxist) economic determinist interpretation. For he also added: 'the slow agricultural revolution which rendered their services less useful to the manorial lords, gradually set the villeins free by removing the interest their masters had in retaining a hold on them'. E. Lipson challenged Thorold Rogers's view that the landlords were afraid after 1381, so that villeinage died out because of the insurrection. May McKisack concluded: 'the Rising itself had no perceptible effect on the disabilities of peasants or artisans, nor . . . on the social and economic forces which were slowly transforming conditions of life in town and countryside'. And more recently, two eminent historians have echoed the point made by McKisack. M. M. Postan considered that 'historians are now in general agreement that it was a passing episode in the social history of the late middle ages'. R. B. Dobson wrote that the results of the revolt were 'negative where they were not negligible' – it was a 'historically unnecessary catastrophe'.[2]

[2] J. Smyth, *The Lives of the Berkeleys*, ed. J. Maclean, 3 vols. (Gloucester, 1883–5), ii, p. 5; J. Thorold Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, 7th edn (London, 1903; 1st edn 1884), p. 265; W. Cunningham, *Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, 5th edn, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1910; 1st edn 1882), i, pp. 375–6; E. Lipson, *Economic History of England*, 7th edn, 3 vols. (London, 1937; 1st edn 1915), i, pp. 93–4; M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1959), p. 422;

The view that the conditions of peasants, artisans and wage-labourers depended on economic factors outside human control would seem to be supported by such indices of long-term economic trends as movements of rents, wages and prices (not to speak of demographic fluctuations) as have been constructed over the years by economic historians. Nevertheless, as will appear from the contributions to this collection, the economic relationship between feudal landlord and villein tenant cannot simply be explained in terms of the supply of, and the demand for, land, or the (highly dubious) supply and demand for the benevolent protection of the lord. It emerges clearly that there was a 'political' element in the economic relationship of the main classes of medieval English society, due to the jurisdictional domination by the lord over the tenant, whether at the manorial, county or national level.

There were, of course, economic as well as political factors in the determination of rent levels. The changing land:labour ratio in the fourteenth century obviously made it more difficult for landowners to use coercion in obtaining labour services and rents. The growth of money rent, with all its implications, was clearly linked with the development of the market in agricultural produce. Nevertheless it must be obvious that the strength or weakness of manorial jurisdiction was a crucial element in deciding rent levels, whether because of the actual power of individual lords over their tenants or because of a more general weakening of lords' legal powers through the attenuation of the terms of full servile villeinage. If this is accepted, shifts in the balance of power between landlords and tenants would be as important as purely economic factors in shaping the conditions of the late medieval peasantry. This is what Stubbs implied and it restores the rising of 1381 from an irrelevancy to an event of considerable economic and social significance.[3]

It should also be borne in mind that the 1381 rising may best be regarded not so much as an unexpected explosion of popular resentment against various forms of repression but as simply a high point in the struggle between landlords and tenants which had been going on at a local and uncoordinated level for at least two hundred years and which would continue after 1381 for as long again. If it is argued that 'there was a general movement towards the commuta-

M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1972), p. 154; *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London, 1970), pp. 27–8.

[3] *Constitutional History of England*, 4th edn, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1896), ii, p. 485.

tion of labour services and the emancipation of serfs'[4] before the rising of 1381, earlier rebellions and protests must have contributed substantially to that 'general movement', just as it can be shown that continuing demonstrations of peasant anti-seigneurialism after 1381 helped further to push down rents and services. It might also be added that not only was the 1381 revolt a high point in a very long and historically significant conflict between peasants and landlords, but should also be seen in the European context of widespread social conflict, so well illustrated, in different ways, by the contributions here on the Jacquerie and Ciompi.[5]

One of the problems of the analysis of the events of 1381 is, as one might expect, a considerable ambiguity about the source material. This relates, in particular, to our appreciation of the rising as a coherent movement with more or less clearly defined goals. Earlier historians, quite naturally, relied on the many and varying accounts by the chroniclers. Did these writers endow the rebels with coherent aims which came out of their (the chroniclers') own fears? The chroniclers certainly give the general impression that this was a mass rising of rustics whose primary and coherent aim was the achievement of free tenure and status for all. And, as Dr Dyer shows in his contribution, this and other specific demands of the rebel leaders at Mile End and Smithfield appeared, well before the writings of the chroniclers, as issues in manor after manor in south-eastern England. Substantial evidence of a widespread ideology of freedom, even if 'conservative' in form, is produced by Dr Faith from the southern and south-western counties in the 1370s, echoing more scattered evidence which goes back to the thirteenth century. Nor can the existence of this widespread ideology of freedom be minimized by pointing to the fact that unfree villeins were a minority of the peasant population. Court rolls were burnt, evidently as a symbolic anti-seigneurial gesture in tenurially free Kent. 'Freedom' was conceived in much more general terms than freedom of tenure, being as much freedom from the tax-collector,

[4] Postan, *loc. cit.*

[5] For movements before 1381, see R. H. Hilton, 'Peasant Movements before 1381', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., ii (1949); for movements after 1381 see Christopher Dyer, 'A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth Century England', *Past and Present*, no. 39 (Apr. 1968), pp. 11–33, and R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), ch. 4. Late medieval rebellions in Europe are also described by M. Mollat and P. Wolff in *Ongles bleus, Jacques et Ciompi: les révolutions populaires en Europe au XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Paris, 1970).

from the royal official, from the justice of the peace or of trailbaston as from the local lord. No doubt preachers like John Ball helped to knit together strands of popular demand into something approaching a coherent programme, but their moral doctrine of the freedom and equality of the descendants of Adam and Eve would not have been so readily received had it not fitted into an old demand for freedom expressed in many conflicts at law between lord and tenants.

There is another type of source material which, if uncritically used, could lead the historian towards an interpretation of the rising as an incoherent riot. I refer to the indictments against the rebels in the royal courts after the insurrection had been crushed. These were already used many years ago by André Réville and led him to describe the rebellion in Norfolk as 'an immense pillage'.[6] Although this evidence is of vital importance in tracking down named individuals, it deserves as much critical scrutiny as do the chronicles. There are few grounds for supposing that indictment juries necessarily told the truth about those whom they accused; they – the 'questmongers' so hated by the rebels – could be expected to be revengeful; and naturally they would emphasize the element of pillage and self-seeking among those they accused. Concentration on the indictments, therefore, without due concern for context and background, can too easily produce a picture of fragmented episodes which do little more than confirm prejudices that rebels are simply criminals. On the other hand, if the indictments are used with discrimination, and named individuals in them are linked with reference in other sources, a picture of, for instance, the changing pattern of social conflict can be drawn, as Dr Butcher has done for Canterbury and its region. Above all, one must perceive the judicial process not simply as a generator of documentation, but as Professor Harding shows, as one of the major elements in the widening of the social gulf which ended in rebellion.

An analysis of the tensions in rural society, of the grievances of the peasants, rural wage workers and artisans and of their social and even political aspirations, can bring us close to an understanding of the English rising. This is, to a considerable extent, due not merely to the fact that some of the best-informed chroniclers wrote intelligently from the standpoint of the landowners and of the state, but

[6] A. Réville and C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Le soulèvement des travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898), p. 85.

that the manorial documentation, especially court records, is strikingly rich as compared with that available in any other European country. This is clear from the contributions of Dr Dyer and Dr Faith, as well as from many earlier writings on the subject. In comparison, our understanding of the part played by urban societies in the rising is by no means clear. This is partly due to the fragmentary and uneven survivals of the documentation of many important medieval towns. Records of administration and judicial proceedings are often discontinuous. The records of courts leet, for example, which can be very informative on social and economic matters, do not survive on the same scale for urban as they do for rural societies. The economic activity of merchants and craftsmen (especially the latter) often has to be deduced from indirect evidence, such as urban regulation, which can be very equivocal. Conclusions are difficult to arrive at concerning the precise nature of urban discontents, as both Professor Dobson and Dr Butcher make clear. Perhaps one of the problems, in addition to gaps in the documentation, is that research into the social history of medieval English towns has lagged behind that into agrarian history, a lag which may soon be overcome.

Whatever the state of research, conclusions have been drawn about the nature of urban involvement in the rising. A view commonly held is that tensions in urban society were specific to them, and that issues such as freedom and serfdom and the burden of rent, so important in the countryside, would be irrelevant in the town. The main urban tensions were of a political character, that is, the exclusion of the craftsmen and lesser traders from participation in town government, which was dominated by faction-ridden mercantile oligarchs. Added to these would be the discontents of urban communities which were under the lordship of monastic corporations (such as Bury St Edmunds and St Albans) or which were in conflict with ecclesiastical franchises – a widespread phenomenon illustrated by some of the northern towns. The breakdown of authority which was the consequence of a peasant uprising would then act as a trigger to simmering urban conflicts.

Such an interpretation, perhaps over-simply presented here, is inadequate and its inadequacy is made clear, directly and indirectly, in the contributions to this volume. Grievances such as the operation of the Statute of Labourers, judicial and official oppression and the unequal distribution of the burden of taxation were common to

both town and country. Furthermore, as Dr Butcher has implied, the above interpretation assumes a separation of urban and rural societies which hardly existed. This does not mean, of course, that there was nothing specific about large and small towns where non-agricultural occupations predominated. It does mean, however, that the differing demographic patterns of town and country led to a constant flow into towns of rural immigrants, from all social strata. These immigrants often retained connections with their native villages, not to speak of 'rural' cultural, social and political attitudes. In the demographic crisis of the second half of the fourteenth century, the interpenetration of town and country populations was even more marked. Whether there was such a shift in other towns in the nature of class relationships as is suggested for Canterbury and its hinterland cannot confidently be demonstrated, but the question is suggestive for further research.

Dr Tuck, in his essay on the reactions of the ruling class to the rebellion, suggests that, at any rate in the short term, the consequences of the revolt were 'political' rather than 'manorial'. In particular, he observes that the members of the House of Commons – representing the interests of the middling landowners – saw excessive taxation as the cause of the rebellion. In order to deal with the situation they proposed not only the abandonment of tax innovations but strong measures to enforce order and obedience. Hence the Statute of 1388 with its reaffirmation of the labour legislation and the inquiry into the guilds, regarded as being hives of subversion. But, as we have observed, the concept of the rising having political implications can be extended well beyond these suggestions.

Attention has already been drawn to the 'political' nature of the exercise of jurisdictional power in medieval society. This is observable at the manorial level (especially where lords had the combined jurisdiction of court leet and court baron); at the county level with the J.P.s; and nationally with the court of King's Bench and the various judicial commissions such as oyer and terminer and trailbaston. It could be expected therefore that the reactions of those oppressed by jurisdiction would be similarly political in character, though the sophistication of the programmes put forward in 1381 is striking, especially now that it has been demonstrated that these demands were not chroniclers' rationalizations but reflected grass-roots opinion. The advance from earlier demands for tenurial

freedom to what Professor Harding has called 'civic' freedom is an interesting aspect of this increasing sophistication.

To sum up: the rising of 1381 has usually been treated as an expression of grievances which were essentially economic or social in character – the attempt of landowners to recuperate rent income in a period when the overall trend of rents was downwards; their renewed emphasis on servile villeinage; the operation of the labour legislation which attempted to counter the upward trend in wages; the attempt by the government to impose a series of taxes which were clearly discriminatory against the lower income groups. No analysis of the events could fail to place these factors at the forefront. What is interesting is that the response was so political – even though naïve. We have suggested that this was to some extent the consequence of the political character of all the essential relationships between the ruling class of late medieval England and those subordinated to it. In addition, any challenge to the authority of the state and of the class which controlled the state was bound to be political, and not only in the middle ages.

1. *The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381**

CHRISTOPHER DYER

Was the revolt of 1381 merely a 'passing episode' in English history, an irrational aberration, or was it deeply rooted in the economic and social life of the later middle ages?[1] The frustration of historians who despair of finding a social explanation of the rising is understandable, as causes suggested in the past have been shown to be inadequate. There is little evidence to support the theory that labour services increased in the late fourteenth century, and we can no longer accept the view that the revolt was caused by the dissolution of the traditional feudal order by the advance of a money economy.[2] There is now general agreement that the conditions of peasants as well as wage-earners tended to improve after the plague of 1348–9, so that any economic explanation of the revolt

* I have received help from too many people to be able to thank them all individually. The British Academy made the research possible by providing a generous grant. I found various unpublished theses of value, notably that of D. A. Crowley, and a fellowship essay by L. Poos. I owe a special debt to Professor A. L. Brown of Glasgow University, who gave me access to his extensive researches in the public records. Abbreviations used in footnote references to manuscript sources: B.L.: British Library; Bodl. Lib.: Bodleian Library; C.C.L.: Canterbury Cathedral Library; C.U.L.: Cambridge University Library; E.R.O.: Essex Record Office; G.L.: Guildhall Library, London; H.R.O.: Hertfordshire Record Office; N.C.: New College, Oxford; P.R.O.: Public Record Office; S.R.O.B.: Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch; S.R.O.I.: Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch; St J.C.: St John's College, Cambridge; W.C.: Wadham College, Oxford.

[1] M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1972), pp. 153–4.

[2] For older interpretations, see J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, 7 vols. (Oxford, 1866), i, pp. 80–3; D. Petrushevsky, *Wat Tyler's Rebellion*, reviewed by A. Savine in *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xvii (1902), pp. 780–2; this work is also discussed in P. Gatrell, 'Studies of Medieval English Society in a Russian Context', *Past and Present*, no. 96 (Aug. 1982), pp. 35–7. Rogers's explanation was criticized effectively in C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Studies and Notes Supplementary to Stubbs' Constitutional History*, 3 vols. (Manchester, 1914), ii, pp. 252–304. For more recent explanations, see *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London, 1970), pp. 1–31; R. H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 1973).

must be expressed in terms of rising expectations. Did the actions of landlords frustrate these expectations? Was there a seigneurial reaction in the post-plague decades? In order to consider these problems it is necessary to define more closely the groups who made up the rebel ranks, and to examine their motives and aims. These questions are too numerous to receive a full answer in a single essay. In concentrating on them here, the political and religious aspects of the revolt, which deserve to be properly considered in any full assessment of the complex events of 1381, will be unavoidably neglected.

Much of the literature on the 1381 rising was published before 1907, when most of the chronicle sources were already in print, and many of the relevant classes of public records were available for research. The main sources for investigating the social and economic background, the manorial records, lay scattered in the muniment rooms of country houses and the offices of local solicitors. This study is based on the mass of this local material which is now more readily available. Such is its bulk that it has been necessary to concentrate on the four counties of Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Suffolk. The method of research has been to compile an index of non-urban places affected by the revolt, and then to look for manorial records of those places, or at least for manors in their vicinity. The manorial records were used to compile biographical studies of individual rebels (supplemented by some information from the archives of central government), and to examine the changes in rural society in the forty years before the revolt. The records of more than a hundred manors have been consulted, though many more sources for the four counties are known to exist.[3]

THE RURAL REVOLT OF 1381

Accounts of the revolt naturally concentrate on the events in London and, although we cannot be sure of the precise numbers involved, the large crowds of countrymen assembled there provide some indication of the mass support that the revolt received, particularly from Essex and Kent. Much of the rebellious activity

[3] The large St Albans Abbey estate in Hertfordshire has been excluded from this study because the large numbers of records involved, and the complexities of their interpretation, deserve separate study.