1

Introduction: historiography, sources and methods

The study of popular protest and social unrest has burgeoned since the 1960s. Before then only a handful of historians had shown any inclination either for rescuing the masses as historical actors in their own right, or for allowing acts of protest any historical significance or importance. 'High politics' with the mob playing a subsidiary walk-on role had, until then, dominated historical writing. There were exceptions, such as the Hammonds (1920), Darvall (1936) and Wearmouth (1945). Their work, however, failed to establish the sub-genre of social history which the study of protest was to become. The belief that protest in the form of riots and social movements has much to tell us of society, particularly of the masses who normally left little historical record, was championed by a triumvirate of British marxist social historians: George Rudé, E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Possessing the same motivation for writing 'history from below' and rescuing, in the now-famous phrase of Thompson, 'the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity' (1968: 13), these three historians made distinctive but complementary contributions to our understanding of popular protest. In the process they generated a continuing interest from a new generation of researchers and scholars.

Rudé has been credited with identifying the 'faces in the crowd', as has Hobsbawm for the phrase and the concept of 'bargaining by riot', whilst Thompson is remembered both for his 'making of the working class' thesis and for the influential 'moral economy' concept, which was originally attached to food rioting but has since been developed and deployed in the interpretation of many other

1

protest gatherings. What these three, and subsequent historians, have been doing is trying to answer what appear to be simple questions: namely the 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'why' and 'how' of protest. Such questions have produced answers which have led both to serious academic debate and disagreement, and to complex and sophisticated analysis and methodology. Consequently, historians now specialise in increasingly narrow fields of protest study. The one major exception is John Stevenson, whose work *Popular Disturbances in England 1700–1832* (1992) provides the fullest synthesis of protest in all its forms.

The question that primarily interested Rudé was who formed the mob. In fact, he suggested that the very terminology of 'mob', 'rabble', 'swinish multitude' (1964: 7–8) required greater critical examination because these descriptions were so resonant of contemporary elite prejudices and values. The negative connotations of mindless, ugly and anarchic violence, which many contemporaries associated with the 'mob', seemed inappropriate following closer historical research of riotous events such as the 1780 Gordon Riots. Rudé's pre-industrial urban crowd was, he found, composed not of the unemployed or the criminal sub-stratum, but of wage earners with rational beliefs and value systems who were in fact disciplined in their actions, in so far as they directed their anger at specific targets, and usually at property rather than people. Moreover, they were often attempting to re-establish the status quo, not to challenge it. Thompson, with his sophisticated 'moral economy' thesis, reinforced and added to this interpretation of the rational crowd by highlighting the ideology which motivated and activated protesters and which, by implication, accepted Hobsbawm's notion of the crowd bargaining with the authorities.

The crowd, or a collective gathering which riots or protests, is largely seen as the typical example of popular protest during this period. Recently Tilly has used the term 'contentious gathering' to describe much the same sort of phenomenon. The hijacking of the word 'crowd' as a methodological descriptor of a protest group has come under heavy criticism from Holton (1978) and Harrison (1988). The former argued that Rudé had failed to be exact or systematic enough in defining or conceptualising the notion of a crowd and that labour and social historians too narrowly regarded crowds solely as protesting crowds. In a similar vein Harrison has

argued that people living in increasingly urbanising environments came together for a whole host of reasons: to celebrate or to spectate for example, as well as to protest. His was the first attempt, by a historian, to undertake a systematic study of 'mass phenomena' – his even more neutral term for crowds – in which the protesting or riotous crowd (which are not necessarily the same) are placed in the context of all forms of mass gatherings.

In many ways Harrison's most original and interesting contribution to the study of popular protest concerned the questions of at what time of the day and on what day of the week protest meetings took place. He discovered that three-quarters of Bristol's riotous crowds between 1790 and 1835 occurred outside working hours, either in the lunch break or in the evening, which implied that the participants were not the unemployed, but people in work who could not afford to take time off to form a riotous crowd during working hours (1988: 127). Moreover Monday, a non-working day for many (ibid.: 121–4), was the most frequent rioting day of the week. By way of emphasising the 'respectability' of the rioters Harrison has argued that the contemporary term 'rabble' specifically referred to the unemployed. Consequently, a riotous crowd which formed during working hours was perceived by the civic authorities to be more threatening than one organised in the evening when working people were able to attend.

The notion of a disciplined crowd even within a riot has been discussed and debated in the context of what Bohstedt has termed 'community' politics, class formation and conflict towards the end of the eighteenth century. He argued that popular mobilisation tended to be more violent and disorderly in industrial towns such as Manchester than in market towns in Devon, for example. This violence indicated, Bohstedt maintained, a breakdown in 'community' politics, social networks and local patronage (1983: 69–83). Riots were, in other words, more violent and threatening in the newly emerging towns and cities than in the older provincial centres. Industrialisation and urbanisation were disrupting traditional social relations and contributing to rising class conflict (ibid.: 99). Underpinning this debate is the issue of evolution and change in popular protest (Charlesworth 1993: 205–12). Was protest 'modernising' or 'progressing' towards more modern forms such as trade unions or political associations which were more organised,

permanent and formal than the temporary, informal and mostly spontaneous riots of the eighteenth century?

The American historian Charles Tilly has spent thirty years tracing the changing features of British and European protest. Originally his highly teleological model identified 'reactive' or reactionary and defensive actions such as food rioting which evolved into more modern 'proactive' forms such as the trade union strike weapon (Tilly, Tilly and Tilly 1975: 250–1). Such an approach was implicitly endorsed in the model adopted by Geary (1981), who wrote of the development from pre-industrial to early industrial and finally modern labour protests. Both recognised the shortcomings of the evolutionary models, none more so than Tilly, who recently acknowledged the limitations of labels such as forward- and backward-looking protest (1995: 46–8). He has presented a more sophisticated model of change in 'contentious gatherings' between 1750 and the 1830s. These changes owed more to such impersonal forces as the growth of the state than to changes in popular culture. Whilst his approach is not wholly or solely 'history from below', he is clearly indebted to Thompson, Rule and Wells, for example, who have related protest to the emergence of a working class. In so doing they have viewed the 1790s as a crucial decade when the 'consumerist mentality' of food rioters gave way to democratic political and proletarian demands and principles (Wells 1988: 74–5). Although this decade has been identified as something of a watershed, most historians tend to emphasise the lack of a clean break in protest methods between the middle of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. Elements of continuity in industrial protest, for example, are discernible and, more importantly, so is the propensity of rioters to utilise different methods of protest during disputes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the industrialising North, where food riots, industrial strife and secret political associations were so intermixed as to make it impossible to separate the various protest strands. Debate has arisen, for example, over Luddism, between Thomis and Thompson to name but two protagonists; the point at issue is the former's separation of the phenomenon of Luddism from underlying radical and conspiratorial manifestations of social and political unrest. The general consensus appears to favour those who put forward a more sophisticated and multi-

faceted picture of popular unrest that includes a community as well
as a class analysis. In a critique of Thompson, Colhoun (1982)
jettisoned the class-based model of Luddism for one reliant on
defensive community traditionalism.

The question as to where protest occurred has attracted new
approaches, not least from the historical geographer Charlesworth,
who has been able to provide several insights (1983, 1993; Charles-
worth *et al.* 1996). By locating disturbances more precisely and
placing them in their regional context, he has been able to identify
strong communal and local solidarities during disputes. Even the
most basic question, 'what', is still attracting new research that lies
far beyond the limited confines of this short study. Riots over the
price of tickets at Covent Garden Theatre in the early nineteenth
century (Baer 1992) or against the Irish (Neal 1988) have, for
example, been neglected by socialist-inclined historians who fa-
voured the more politically attractive labour struggles, but these
deserve to be viewed as manifestations of popular protest. A fuller
account, which takes in a variety of grievances or 'manifold dis-
orders', can be found in Stevenson (1992).

Sources, problems and methodologies

A wide range of sources has been examined by historians over the
years. By far the most important and extensive are the varied official
documents held in the Public Record Office. Most useful have been
the Home Office (HO) Papers, particularly HO 40–45, which con-
tain correspondence between the home secretary and local magis-
trates and other provincial dignitaries on disturbances in their
locales. Further provincial correspondence on riots can be found
under HO 52 and, where trials arose, the Treasury Solicitor's
Papers occasionally add details to those in the Assize Papers.

County record offices can hold a wealth of valuable material, not
least the Quarter Sessions and local yeomanry records, and the
correspondence of Lord Lieutenants, who were the county leaders
responsible for upholding law and order and liaising with govern-
ment. In recent years, the most popular source for scholars has been
the local press, usually weekly newspapers, which provide a fund of

detail on riots, incendiary fires and trials arising out of popular disturbances. For major outbreaks of trouble, the national daily press, such as *The Times*, carried reports. One biweekly usefully mined by E. P. Thompson (1975a) was *The Weekly Gazette*, which published transcriptions of threatening and anonymous letters carrying government rewards. These letters offer historians an insight into the thoughts of those who rarely left any other historical trace, whilst memoirs by radicals like Samuel Bamford offer authentic eyewitness accounts relating to political protest which counterbalance the official view, as indeed does the radical press of which Cobbett's *Political Register* is the most famous. Students with access to the internet will find web sites such as www.spartacus.school-net.co.uk useful, as this provides documentary extracts relating, for example, to Luddism and Peterloo.

The most important drawback to local and national records is their provenance. They largely represent the views of authority. Whilst historians are aware of this bias and can take it into account, they cannot always gauge the accuracy of such reports, particularly those which attempted to estimate numbers involved in demonstrations and riots. Likewise, the veracity of some records has to be questioned if the author was a government spy. A further problem arises from the possible exaggeration contained in letters to the Home Office from nervous magistrates who could, on occasion, exaggerate the scale of the disorder in their attempt to have troops deployed to their area. The biggest and most insurmountable problem relates to the 'dark figure', that is those popular disturbances which were unreported and have left no literary trace. Occasionally, historians discern hints in press reports of events having taken place but, because of their relative insignificance or the fear that their reports might lead to 'copy-cat' riots elsewhere, newspapers failed to divulge further details.

This lack of definitive and comprehensive information can have important and damaging repercussions for those historians who employ a quantifying methodology. This is especially applicable to the American school of Bohstedt, Munger and Tilly, who appear more willing than their British counterparts to use computers in creating their datasets. For Bohstedt (1983), a riot constituted 50 or more persons, and for Tilly (1995: appendix 1) just ten or more qualified as a contentious gathering. One immediate problem in

adopting this kind of approach lies in the fact that press and official reports were never detailed enough to allow for such exact numbers. More importantly, by defining popular disturbances and contentions as involving a group of people – Stevenson, for example, has argued that the defining characteristics of popular disturbances are 'numbers and violence' (1992: 12) – these historians are neglecting individual acts of protest such as arson and animal maiming, which arguably became the hallmark of rural protest from 1830. The most critical response to what might be termed the quantifying historians is that of Wells, who has emphasised the imprecision in this respect of the PRO records (1978: 68–72). The historian's judgement is crucial in assessing the veracity and accuracy of the source materials and in imposing an imaginative and empathetic but critical interpretation. It would be fair to conclude this chapter by observing that this branch of social history has, over the years, produced a host of very fine historians whose work this book now reviews.

2
Agricultural protest

The rural labouring communities of the Southern and Eastern counties of England not only entered the darkest decades of their history between the late eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, they also suffered far more hardship and oppression than any other occupational group. Given the appalling state of rural England, the specific history of rural protest has not attracted, until recently, quite the same interest as have the Luddites or political reform. This is all the more surprising when it is remembered that rural Southern England was the arena both for the most widespread popular uprising of the nineteenth century – Captain Swing – and also for one of the bloodiest in the strange tale of Bosenden Wood. There have been two major exceptions to this neglect, first the Hammonds' study of 1911 (1920) and the more influential work on *Captain Swing* by Hobsbawm and Rudé (1973). For many years it was believed that, with the exception of Swing and Tolpuddle, there were few rural events worth investigating. This changed when the followers of E. P. Thompson, and of Hobsbawm and Rudé, armed with doctorates covering most grain-growing counties of Southern and Eastern England, set about destroying the English rural idyll so resonant in earlier histories. Figuratively speaking, the 'ploughs and cows' economically oriented histories (the phrase is Snell's), were smashed or maimed by this younger generation of historians.

There is, however, a large measure of agreement on the condition of the farm labourers who, during the course of the eighteenth century, experienced a progressive deterioration in terms of both their standard of living and their quality of life (Reed and Wells 1990: 29-53). Three words would seem to describe the downward spiral into which they were sucked: proletarianisation, pauperisa-

8

tion and disinheritance. Such alterations were both the cause and the consequence of wider social and economic structural changes. These changes affected all social groups, including the ruling gentry and farmers, whose attitudes towards the poor increasingly included the rejection of the paternalistic code of previous centuries in favour of market and individualistic values. There was, in effect, a transformation in social relations which most historians locate as having occurred by the period of the Napoleonic wars.

Farm labour, particularly in East Anglia, was progressively switching from live-in farm service, in which labourers shared the same table and slept under the same roof as their masters, to casual weekly and day labour. The demographic pressures of enormous population growth, combined with the huge rise in food prices, especially wheat, between the 1790s and 1815, meant that employers found it more economical and socially attractive to make this switch. Younger labourers for the most part welcomed the move, since many found life in the farmhouse irksome and constricting. A number of effects resulted from this change, not least the lowering of the age of marriage which fed further population growth and, in time, a growing pool of under- and unemployed labour (Snell 1987: 67–103). The seasonality of arable agriculture meant that farmers could draw on an increasing body of labour in the peak months and then lay them off in winter. This was especially true in the years after the Napoleonic wars when over a quarter of a million labourers were demobilised. Unemployment and underemployment had, by the time of the 1830 Swing Riots, become permanent features of arable England, which was then experiencing some of the darkest years of the century.

Wages followed a similar downward spiral. In 1780, East Anglia was one of the highest wage regions in the country but had, by the 1830s, slipped to being the lowest. Only the Northern and industrialising regions kept up relatively high wages because of the alternative employment opportunities available to rural communities. Moreover, with the progressive casualisation of day labouring and the huge rise in prices between 1780 and 1815, farmworkers could no longer command 'just' or living wages. T. L. Richardson (1993), in his study of Lincolnshire, has shown that wages failed to keep pace with the volatile movement in prices, particularly wheat, and that this had a dreadful impact on the standard of living of farmworkers.

Traditional mechanisms for linking wages to the cost of wheat were simply jettisoned by farmers, who responded to the market forces of supply and demand. Labourers found that they were no longer 'worthy of their hire'. This becomes especially evident when the farmers' manipulation of the Poor Law is examined. The Speenhamland system of 1795, which was devised to meet the short-term emergency of high food prices, was a paternalistic attempt to stop labouring families from starving by tying the amount of relief to the price of bread and the size of their families. However, in time this and more stringent variants, such as the roundsman system, were utilised by farmers to push down wages to absolute minima in the full knowledge that other non-employing ratepayers would have to subsidise the wages of their workforce (Snell 1987: 104–14).

The labourer and his family were, as a result, reduced to the status of paupers, with all the connotations of idleness, immorality and depravity attached to that label. For the labourer's part, notions of self-respect and dignity could be kept up only through displays of deference on the one hand or through acts of protest on the other. It would be erroneous to assume that the former mode of behaviour was anything other than a role acted out by the poor, who in many circumstances came to realise that charity and relief were dependent upon externalised patterns of behaviour. This explains to a great extent the shocked surprise often expressed by ruling elites whenever major outbursts of rustic anger occurred. They had simply misread deferential behaviour for deferential attitudes.

Enclosures and lost rights

Much controversy and debate have surrounded the poor's disinheritance from the land and from traditional customary rights such as gleaning, wood collecting, commoning and village festivities. The Hammonds (1920), more than anyone else, set out the thesis that enclosure was of central importance to rural protest. The core of their argument laid stress on the disappearance of the eighteenth-century peasantry who in turn became a disinherited landless proletariat. Over six million acres, or a quarter of the country's cultivated area, were enclosed under parliamentary acts between 1750 and 1850, the majority of both the acts and the enclosures