Introduction

> An event is a portentous outcome . . . It is not just a happening there to be narrated but a happening to which cultural significance has successfully been assigned. And its identity and significance are established primarily in terms of its location in time, in relation to a course or chain of other happenings. Both their internal design and their assigned significance mark events as in the first instance matters of sequence, of the organisation and meaning of action in time. Events, indeed, are our principal points of access to the structuring of social action in time . . . Events, however detailed, are constructed not observed.
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> Philip Abrams, 'Explaining Events: A Problem of Method'[1]

When the Colchester gentleman, Sir John Lucas, stepped out of his back gate shortly after midnight on 22 August 1642, he stepped almost immediately into the pages of history: his secret attempt to take aid to Charles I on the eve of civil war aroused the hostility of the townsfolk and raised crowds numbered, it was said, in their thousands. These crowds plundered and vandalised his house and subjected Sir John and his family to a series of indignities that transgressed boundaries of status and gender in early modern society. Thereafter attacks on noble and gentry households spread out into the counties of Essex and Suffolk. The scale of popular 'violence' ensured that the episode figured prominently in the contemporary record and secured for Sir John a place in the hagiography of the Revolution's victims. In turn, the prominence of the event in contemporary print culture ensured its writing into the later historiography of the English Revolution. When historians of the English

Place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.
[1] P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet, 1988), p. 191

Revolution talk of class conflict being a determinant of plebeian political behaviour, it is almost always to the 'Stour Valley riots' to which they turn in support of their argument. The case of the Colchester Plunderers is now taken to be *the* example of class hostility as the determinant of a popular role in the English Revolution. This study – an exercise in micro-history – offers a critical re-evaluation of the episode, the uses to which it has been put in the historiography of early modern England and the uses to which it can be put in recovering evidence of a popular political culture in early modern England.

The scale of the attacks and the level of destruction in the summer of 1642 was unprecedented. Not even in the rebellions of the sixteenth century had the gentry been the targets of such popular fury. The attacks represented a decisive break with the pre-revolutionary tradition of protest. In that tradition, early modern crowds, operating within a culture of obedience which placed a premium on securing legitimacy for their actions, had sought to defend their rights and to seek justice by negotiating with, rather than challenging, authority. They deliberately fashioned their protest to assert the legitimacy of their actions and demands. In so doing, they often mimicked the role required of the local magistracy by the English Crown. Food rioters 'confiscated' grain being illegally transported or traded and either returned it to the authorities in pointed criticism of their inactivity or sold it at a 'just price'. Protestors against enclosure took direct action by pulling down hedges *and* sought to embarrass both encloser and authority by a (selective) appropriation of laws designed to regulate enclosure and by appeals to a moral economy, in the early modern period as much that of the Crown (and church) as crowd. Riot was the last, rather than first, resort. While protestors employed on occasion a rhetoric of violence, violence, where it occurred, was directed against property, not persons, or displaced symbolically through the use of proxies, such as effigies of enclosers.[2]

While studies of the early modern crowd have challenged earlier stereotypes and established that there was a politics informing and shaping the protest, they have seen that politics as generally limited and largely instrumental. Thus in recent and well-received studies of agrarian protests in the fens of the east and forests of the west that began during the Personal Rule and extended into the English Revolution we are told that the riots were essentially defensive and conservative. Rioters in the

[2] J. Walter, 'Crown and crowd: popular culture and popular protest in early modern England (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)' in *Sotsial'naia istoriia: problemy sinteza* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 235–48. This article develops some of the subsequent comments made here at greater length.

fens did not give expression to political feelings, but contented themselves with drawing attention to specific grievances of immediate concern; there was little to suggest any generalised political stance. Similarly, protestors in the western forests manifested positive political indifference. Rural disorders there were 'essentially non-ideological and non-revolutionary' in character.[3] These judgements were endorsed in a general study of 'village revolts' from the early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries. While acknowledging the sophistication with which protest could be organised, a consistent (and troubling) refrain in Professor R. B. Manning's study is that protestors are 'devoid of political consciousness and their writings or utterances do not employ a political vocabulary'; in effect riots displayed 'primitive or pre-political behaviour because they failed to develop into some modern form of protest or participation in the political nation'.[4] Inasmuch then as riots could be said to represent a form of popular political action this was 'traditional', 'customary' or even 'reactionary'. David Underdown's most recent work offers a sensitive analysis of popular politics and a convincing demonstration of the spread of political consciousness beyond the political nation, narrowly conceived. But Underdown too sees this politics as conservative, if not universally deferential. It was grounded in a normative (and mythical) conception of a just society. Popular protest reflected a localist orientation and drew on the legitimising force of custom.[5]

In 1642 violence was directed against the property and persons of the landed class and in so doing threatened to turn the world upside down. What then explains the seemingly sharp disjuncture between the Stour Valley attacks and the preceding pattern of protest? David Underdown has suggested that there have been three models by which historians have sought to explain the popular role in the English Revolution: deference (which has been largely used to explain royalist success in acquiring an army), localism, and class (which has been used to explain popular Parliamentarianism). Of these, it is the last which has been held to explain the turn of events in Essex and Suffolk in the summer of 1642. It was, in Underdown's words, 'class hatred of the gentry' that prompted popular violence.[6] This has for a long time been the commonly accepted

[3] B. Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley and London, 1980); K. Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (1982).
[4] R. B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509–1640* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 2–3, 309–11, 318–19.
[5] D. Underdown, *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996), pp. vii, ix, 59.
[6] D. Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), ch. 1 and p. 169.

interpretation. Most firmly developed by Marxist historians of the English Revolution, and in particular in the work of Brian Manning, this consensus represents a rare point of historiographical agreement amongst revisionists and post-revisionists alike.[7] This study questions that orthodoxy. It does so by subjecting the consensus on both the 'politics' of the early modern crowd and the role of class in explaining the exceptionalism of the Stour Valley attacks to a critical re-examination.

The emphasis on a backward-looking politics is a common trope in studies of primitive and 'pre-political' protest in European and other societies. Undoubtedly, protestors drew on the image of a normative past to defend their rights. But the interpretation of this in terms of custom and conservatism is unnecessarily constraining. It is not always appreciated that appeals to an often imagined past could produce radical, not conservative, protest when used to confront change. Indeed work on the ability of peasants to selectively appropriate, even to invent, custom suggests the dangers of conflating custom with conservatism.[8] Fracturing crowd actions by classifying them according to a typology of riot (food, enclosure, etc.) almost inevitably produces an analysis which emphasises their limited and instrumental nature. Similarly, labelling protests non-political is accomplished by a questionable reference to their failure to engage with 'high politics'. But if we abandon the typologies by which protest has been dissected, and replace the teleological hierarchies implicit in defining the political with a focus on how power was constituted and contested in early modern society, then we can begin to uncover the often complex politics behind crowd actions.

It is possible to suggest a reading of popular protest in early modern England that offers a more integrated and dynamic reading of popular politics. English monarchs, all too aware of the limited forces of repression at their control, sought to police social and economic change in order to minimise the threat of popular disorder. They did so within the terms of a public discourse that repeatedly stressed that the rationale for royal policies was to protect their subjects and, in particular, the weak and poor. By so doing, they sought to transmute power into authority and thereby secure popular consent to their rule. A provincial magistracy, drawn from a landed class with attenuated seigneurial powers,

[7] B. Manning, *The English People and the English Revolution* (1976), pp. 171–83.

[8] See, for example, R. Faith, '"The Great Rumour" of 1377 and Peasant Ideology' in R. Hilton (ed.), *The English Rising of 1381* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 43–73; Faith, 'The class struggle in fourteenth-century England' in R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (1981), pp. 50–60; R. M. Smith, 'Some thoughts on "hereditary" and "proprietary" rights in land under customary law in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England', *Law and History Review*, 1 (1983), pp. 60–82. I am grateful to Richard Smith for discussion on this point.

needed also to secure their authority by a visible attentiveness to popular grievances. Thus, the formal weakness of the state's repressive force, coupled with an acute awareness (even moral panic) about increasing social tensions, made authority ready to respond to popular grievances. In turn, the dependence of power holders from monarch to magistrates on the maintenance of respect for their authority placed a premium on rule by law, and through the law courts. At the same time, lacking a professional bureaucracy, royal government sought to enlist popular support by publicising its policies to police economic change, even inviting the people's co-operation in the detection of wrongdoing. Out of this was created a strong sense of legitimation for those who engaged in protest. Central then to popular political culture was a set of expectations about the proper exercise of authority. Central to these was the idea of a just king whose rule, by definition, could not tolerate oppression of his people since monarchy existed to deliver justice to all its subjects. protestors invoked, rather than challenged, royal authority; protest was studded with expressions of loyalty to the monarch.

Parallel to the politics of subsistence represented by opposition to enclosure and defence of the priorities of poorer consumers, there was another strand of popular politics. This saw a more formal engagement with the political and religious policies of the English Crown. Both the politics of subsistence and this more formal politics could be comprehended within a broader popular political culture. This was not a recent creation, but the demands of the Tudor state and the confessional consequences of the Reformation had increased both its depth and the level of political consciousness. This development could also be partly located in the structural weaknesses of the English monarchy. The Crown's lack of professional bureaucracy or a standing army led in part to the communal and associative character of a political rule that required, as well as promoted, a high degree of semi-autonomous government.[9] Thus, crowds that expressed a belief in their right to police the grain market could also advance claims to police confessional boundaries.

A popular political culture that had at its core a series of expectations about the responsibilities of the good king (or good lord) carried with it the possibility of a rejection of respect for that authority. To label popular politics conservative underestimates its capacity for critical analysis. The 1630s saw Charles I pursuing policies, not least in forest and fen, which challenged his image as a just king and transgressed this

[9] P. Collinson, *De Republica Anglorum: or History with the Politics Put Back* (Cambridge, 1990).

broader sense of popular rights. The popular experience of the 1630s as a period when religious and political liberties were also challenged, mediated from 1640 by denunciations in Parliament, pulpit and press, of the *ancien régime* of Charles I's Personal Rule, threatened a challenge to the earlier tradition of loyalty to the king. There was, therefore, the possibility that the new political space represented by the criticism and collapse of authority at the onset of the English Revolution would see a realisation of the potentially radical critique inherent within this tradition of popular political culture. The events of the summer of 1642 might have been taken as the start of just such a process. But if so, that potential was not realised. This study seeks to explain the outbreak of popular violence, and its ultimate containment, in the critical early months of the Revolution in terms of a popular (and Parliamentary) political culture that legitimised attacks on the political, but not the social, order.

This study did not start life as a book. It was to be one of a number of discrete article-length studies of the various forms of crowd action in early modern England that were intended to be, and remain, preliminary statements to a larger study of popular political culture in early modern England.[10] Each of these studies was designed to support an argument for the importance of contextualising crowd actions. This was to be a double contextualisation. The first was to be a contextualisation of the social dramas represented by crowd action within the immediate context of local social, economic and political structures and relationships. This represented an attempt to get behind the impoverishing and power-saturated records of authority that labelled protest as riot in order to recover the fuller meaning of the actions so stereotyped. The second was to be an examination of the political meaning of crowd action within the broader context of a political culture characterised both by popular participation therein and knowledge thereof. This was a culture which formally proscribed riot, but acknowledged the responsibilities of power within a public discourse in such a way that it could be appropriated to legitimise independent popular action.

Crowd actions, these studies argued, have too often been ripped from their immediate integument, and used to support (sometimes merely to

[10] J. Walter, 'Grain riots and popular attitudes to the law: Maldon and the crisis of 1629' in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds.), *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1980), pp. 47–84; 'A "Rising of the People"? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596', *P&P*, 107 (1985), pp. 90–143. A further study re-examining the late sixteenth-century disorders over food, presented as a paper to the 1985 Medieval and Tudor London seminar, Institute of Historical Research, has not yet been published.

decorate) macro-historical analyses and their master narratives in ways that misread the complexity of their meanings. The case studies were designed to show that an insensitivity to these contexts had led to misunderstandings of the individual episodes that were their subject. This too was the case with the attack on Sir John Lucas. Once begun, work on the episode recovered a larger roll-call of attacks than had previously been known and added complex layers of meaning to that conflict. The 'Stour Valley riots' were not restricted to the Stour Valley. Nor were the 'riots' largely spontaneous attacks in which class hostility masqueraded as anti-popery. The crowd actions were not unexpected and they involved either directly or indirectly an alliance which brought together political figures like the Earl of Warwick and ministers and the middling sort, who in turn had links with the godly radicals of London. All this suggested the need for a deeper contextualisation, one that not only located the attacks within the micro-politics of local and regional society but which also traced important developments over a longer time span and engaged more directly with the dense political developments of the 1630s and early 1640s. Thus this book grew from the chrysalis of an article (though not I hope like Topsy).

Writing the history of an event and eventful history have attracted recently a more theoretically informed discussion.[11] This study uses the immediate event represented by the attacks to examine the interplay between structure and process and within that the role of popular agency in early modern England. The analysis operates at several levels and within various time spans to offer a 'braided narrative'.[12] An exercise in micro-history, it offers a thickened description of the event. That micro-history is paralleled by a concern with broader historical trends in the period and with the interrelationships between the local and 'national', particularly in the political and religious history of the 1630s. Thus, in order fully to comprehend the meanings of the attacks it draws on, and in its turn contributes to, the analysis of a large number of specific themes in the history of early modern England and the English Revolution; among these, the social relationships of production in rural

[11] L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative', *P&P*, 85 (1979), pp. 3–24; P. Burke, 'History of events and the revival of narrative' in Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 233–48; W. H. Sewell, 'Three temporalities: towards an eventful sociology' in T. J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historical Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, 1996), pp. 245–80; L. J. Griffin, 'Temporalities, events and explanation in historical sociology: an introduction', *Sociological Methods and Research*, 20 (1992), pp. 403–27. P. Abrams, 'Explaining events: a problem of method' in his *Historical Sociology*, pp. 190–226, remains one of the most incisive discussions of the potentialities of eventful history.

[12] The phrase is Peter Burke's: Burke, 'History of events', p. 163.

industrialisation; the dissemination of news through a developing communications infrastructure and the growth of a political public; the resistance of reformed religion to the challenge of Arminianism and ceremonialism and the conflicts this produced at the level of the parish; the provincial politics of Personal Rule in the 1630s and the impact of the collapse of the *ancien régime* in the early 1640s. In doing so, the micro-history marries the concerns of the political historian with the techniques and sources of the social historian to present a more detailed picture at a more intimate level of the impact of the events of the 1630s and early 1640s.

It is not just in the large number of topics that the study covers, nor in the rich detail that it permits, that the advantage of micro-history can be seen. The power of historical analysis has been significantly advanced by the specialised sub-disciplines that have proliferated. But these advances have not been without cost. The heuristic abstractions practised by these 'adjectival histories' carry with them the danger of failing to recognise the interrelatedness of the past, sometimes in ways that threaten the value of their analyses.[13] The book argues that to understand the attacks in terms of their causation and meaning we need to recognise the ways in which for contemporaries the discrete abstractions of history's sub-disciplines – economic, religious, political, cultural history – were experienced not as discrete subjects. A contextualised analysis allows us to pay attention to how their meanings converged with, and contaminated, each other.

One other powerful gain offered by micro-historical analysis is that it restores to history, and a role in its making, those groups whose marginality and subordinate status threaten their exclusion.[14] A contextualised micro-history allows us to reconstruct the lived experience of the actors in the narrative. It also allows us to see not only how they experienced the larger historical processes and events, but how their understandings (and misunderstandings) influenced how they responded to, and participated in, them. If contemporary perception played an important part in determining what form their agency would take, then the tighter focus of micro-history makes it possible to grasp the interrelatedness of factors in lived experience that informed contemporary perception. As the example of the Colchester Plunderers makes clear, popular 'violence' was neither

[13] For the phrase 'adjectival histories', see A. Wilson, *Re-Thinking Social History: English Society 1570–1920 and its Interpretation* (Manchester, 1993), p. 20. For a discussion of the dangers of narrow specialisation in a mature social history, see K. Wrightson, 'The enclosure of English social history', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), pp. 73–81.

[14] See the collection of essays in E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (eds.), *Micro-history and the Lost People of Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1991); G. Levi, 'On microhistory', in Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives*, pp. 93–113.

simply reactive nor narrowly instrumental. The shape of the crowds' actions and their choice of targets were informed by their construction of the crisis of the early 1640s, a crisis simultaneously experienced as a threat to both livelihoods and liberties. Their understanding of the crisis drew on their recent experience of the impact of the period of Personal Rule and its collapse, experience mediated (for some) by a classed reading of those events and by a cultural inheritance of anti-popery, a tradition of political participation, and the discourses of an emerging Parliamentary political culture.

This study, then, uses local knowledge to address larger historical issues. Central to these is an attempt to understand the meaning of popular violence in early modern England. The book advances a series of arguments as to how we should read crowd actions. In turn, central to this is an emphasis upon the existence of a popular political culture, a political culture which the book reconstructs within the specific conjunctures of the early 1640s. It was this political culture, I argue, and the identities it underwrote, that informed the crowds' actions in the attacks of the summer of 1642. The book offers a critical reflection on the relative roles of the languages of class and anti-popery in constructing those identities and prompting the attacks. At the same time, as well as being a contribution to writing the history of the English Revolution, this study is also intended to be a critical contribution to how that history has been written. It examines how the definition of what happened in the event, and why, became the focus of political struggle within contemporary polemic, and how in turn the interpretations this created were absorbed uncritically into later historical narratives. Exposing the genealogy of the narratives of the Colchester Plunderers, the study uses this to offer a wider critical reflection on how the history of the popular role within the English Revolution has been, and might be, constructed.

Part 1

The event