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Review Article: Radicalism and Protest

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Robert Poole

The clash between radicalism and loyalism in the early industrial revolution period created the basic progressive-conservative political divide that was to structure British politics until the fall of communism. This is the perspective of Gareth Stedman Jones in his recent book *An End to Poverty*, which for a landmark work by a major historian has received surprisingly little notice.⁽¹⁾ Discussing it at a seminar in Manchester, Stedman Jones remarked that he couldn't really fathom pre-Chartist popular radicalism – a disarming confession from the author of *Languages of Class*. He was talking about the early 19th-century generation, between the Paineites and the Chartists, and he had put his finger on something: the popular politics of the early industrial revolution just don't fit progressive models. This is particularly true (oddly enough) in

Lancashire, the home of the factory system.

The two books under review here show in different ways why the history of popular protest has proved so resistant to progressive models. Adrian Randall's *Riotous Assemblies* represents the capstone to the great wave of research on English crowds and popular politics that was stimulated by the work of E. P. Thompson in the 1960s and 1970s. Somewhere between a monograph, a textbook and a collection of essays, its form testifies to the range and vitality of its subject. Katrina Navickas's *Radicalism and Loyalty in Lancashire* is an integrated account of politics, war and industrialisation during the Napoleonic period which explores and challenges both Linda Colley's account of the forging of British identity and E. P. Thompson's account of *The Making of the English Working Class*, quietly jettisoning a whole truckload of traditional assumptions. As it does so for a place and a period generally regarded as being at the core of the industrial revolution it is of much wider interest than its title might suggest.

Riotous Assemblies consists of four elements. First, several chapters spread across the book cover a great variety of popular disturbances, including the Jacobite, Wilkite and Gordon riots, rural protest, election riots, militia riots, turnpike riots, and a great deal else. Second, there is an extended three-chapter account of 18th-century food riots and the 'moral economy', synthesising a small mountain of work on a field in which Randall himself has been a leading figure. Third, there is a two-chapter account of Randall's own work on machine breaking and Luddism, which he sees as a kind of 'industrial moral economy'. Either food riots or Luddism could have made a textbook in itself, and to boil them down to chapters which still contain much original work is quite a feat. Fourth there are the opening and closing chapters, 'Reading the riot' and 'Riotous assemblies', which offer between them an historiographical survey and an interpretive overview of the whole field. Together they amount to a rich, powerful and definitive survey of 18th-century popular protest.

While the Hanoverian state liked to see itself as founded on the Glorious Revolution of 1688, it was equally founded on the Whig coup of 1714–5, symbolised by the 1715 Riot Act. Randall provides a valuable summary of the workings of the Act, which clears up a great many old saws and misunderstandings. This runs into an outline of the structures of central and local power which existed to maintain order and defend the state from its internal enemies. The resources of the authorities were severely limited, so where unrest had no serious political implications (which usually meant Jacobitism) it was generally tolerated. It stood a significant chance of success where the issues divided the propertied classes and there was some magisterial sympathy for the popular cause. Rioters thus always had 'one eye on the justices' (pp. 148–51, 313). Randall provides numerous case studies of 'riotous assemblies': the 1737 riots of footmen at the Drury Lane theatre (who successfully defended their customary privilege of attending their masters in the boxes), Jacobite and religious disturbances, tax riots, election riots, and the Wilkite riots. Randall also offers a novel category of 'riots of petty producers', reacting to the threats to their livelihoods posed by problems as diverse as rabbit warrens, road charges and militia service. Again and again we find syntheses illuminated by fresh insights.

Randall's book-within-a-book on food riots falls neatly into three chapters. The first, on 'Food, Market, Custom and Protest', explains the early modern system of regulated food marketing and how it came to be supplanted by the free market system. It should be welcomed by undergraduates who (to the bemusement of tutors weaned on it) often find Thompson's seminal 'Moral Economy' article long and forbidding. A second chapter, 'Setting the Price', deals with the food riots themselves, focusing mainly on the 1766 wave of disturbances when, for perhaps the last time, the protestors enjoyed widespread support from the authorities, right up to government level. The centrepiece here is a remarkable insider's account of food riots in Wiltshire by 'A Mobber'. Randall stresses the complexity of the disturbances and the mixed attitudes and behaviour of both protestors and authorities. Rioters were not just a 'civic moral enforcement unit' but genuinely feared starvation; on the other hand, 'paternalism could be a nasty business'. Finally, 'The Repudiation of Moral Economy' deals with the more serious and politically threatening food riots of 1795–1801. Randall considers but rejects Bohstedt's argument that the old moral economy broke down in Manchester as a result of the social fragmentation and alienation accompanying the industrial revolution. Rather, the riots were severe because the two worst subsistence crises of the age arrived during wartime, and because they met a severe response after free market economics had become an orthodoxy at virtually all

levels of government.

A parallel breakdown of economic paternalism in the industrial field brought Luddism. It was E. P. Thompson's insight that 'political' and 'economic' protest were often two sides of the same coin. Petitioning for regulation and (when this failed) for political reform interlocked with strikes and machine-breaking. Randall's contribution has been to connect the 'consumer' and 'producer' elements of economic protest, developing the concept of an 'industrial moral economy' (although, as he ruefully notes, this received a 'less than ringing endorsement' from Thompson himself). Food rioters and machine breakers were often the same people, working in the same ways, on the same principles, and sometimes at the same time. While Thompson worked on the Pennine manufacturing districts, Randall's base is in the West Country weaving districts, and his two chapters here on machine breaking provide a richly-documented account of the upheavals accompanying the decline of the regulated economy and the rise of free market capitalism. They usefully sum up his book *Before the Luddites* and extend the analysis through to 1812 and Luddism proper. The 'decisive sea change' in the attitude of the state towards economic protection was now combined with a 'new ferocity' towards unrest of all kinds. 1812 in this perspective was a late and desperate attempt to re-open the 'dialogue of disorder'; no-one was listening.

The opening and closing surveys of *Riotous Assemblies* emphasise that it was the actions of the authorities as much as the concerns of the people that determined whether discontent turned to riot, and with what outcome. The role of the press was important, both in communicating information and in forming opinion. So too was that of the national political climate, which could both provoke rioters to action and give them hope of redress, and which determined the context in which riots were understood by the authorities. This climate changed for the worse in the 1780s when government was first badly frightened by the Gordon riots of 1780 (at once comprehensive and incomprehensible) and then defeated by rebellious subjects in America. After 1789, government took an almost suicidally principled stand against any further concessions to popular unrest. The 'dialogue of disorder' was over, but it took another generation for the penny to drop lower down.

If *Riotous Assemblies* is a work of social and economic history enlarged by political perspectives, Katrina Navickas's *Loyalism and Radicalism* is a political history enlarged by social and economic perspectives. Its subject is not popular unrest but politics in all its manifestations, popular protest and labour movements as well as patriotism and loyalism. It achieves a rounded and grounded view of its subject by focusing on Lancashire during the French and Napoleonic wars and the early industrial revolution. Both place and period are historically regarded as being of particular significance for the birth of modern Britain, and indeed of the modern world. It is a county which has attracted more than its fair share of sociologists but Navickas shows just what a peculiar place Lancashire was in this period, and in doing so forces us to reassess traditional approaches of all kinds.

Navickas opens by outlining the case for the development of 'a Lancashire Britishness', a portfolio of loyalist and radical elements which the contending interests were able to use against each other, against central government, and even occasionally against the French. There follows a multi-faceted account of the north-west region in the period of industrial revolution and war, drawing on a deep knowledge of the landscape, which will surprise many who still think of it in terms of cotton factories and class conflict. Like Thompson she emphasises the importance of the handloom weaving communities, although landlords and factories also feature in her portrait which usefully updates the existing reference point, John Walton's social history of Lancashire.[\(2\)](#)

The account of politics opens with a thought-provoking chapter on 'Patriotism', which Navickas sees as a battleground fought over by both radicalism and loyalism. Recalling the political alignments of a century before, she suggests that these two competing creeds found common ground in a kind of 'country' opposition (p. 77). She looks in some depth at the volunteer movement, the militia riots, and popular patriotism, offering a sardonic revision of Colley's famous argument about patriotism as the main generator of solidarity; rather, 'fear of the militia ballot was probably the most common experience for all the inhabitants of the region and country during the wars' (p. 61). Lancashire had its own 'John Bull' in the

form of 'Jone o' Grinfilt', the subject of a phenomenally popular series of dialect broadsides, who sought to escape privation at home by enlisting to fight the French, an undefined enemy situated somewhere to the south of Oldham. Here Navickas nicely teases out a story about the strengthening of provincial identities, underpinned by the regional nature of industrialisation (p. 78).

The chapter on loyalism is the longest in the book, and one soon sees why. Lancashire was a stronghold of 'Church and King' loyalism, built on Manchester's obstinate high church/Jacobite traditions and the parallel presence of religious and political dissent. Lancashire's 'other' was thus largely internal. In Manchester, where there were few civic institutions to mediate between magistrates and their subjects, ritual and ceremony developed as a means of controlling public discourse. Vulgar conservatism, unleashed in the Paine burnings of 1792–3, became part of the problem. In the 1800s the Orange movement provided a new and safer focus for Lancashire's loyalist elite. Many of the most active magistrates and commanders had been involved in putting down the Irish rebellion of 1798, and the military experience and political prejudices they acquired in this role were brought to bear on the job of hunting down Lancashire's United Englishmen, trade unionists, dissenters and reformers (a process whose climax came in 1819 at Peterloo). Lancashire's internal 'other' was increasingly likely to be equated with its working classes and (although Navickas does not go so far as to say it) if class consciousness began anywhere, it was with the propertied.

Lancashire did have its radical moment in the 1790s, and (despite the more restricted dates of the title) the book does deal with this, as it does with the later United Englishmen of 1798–1801. Navickas's point, however, is that political opposition was effectively silenced in public after the mid-1790s, and the movement which emerged a decade later was different in both ideology and personnel. In between, the reform movement consisted of a few islands of resistance defined mainly by their relationship to the dominant loyalism: the odd village of obstinate gauls (radical Royton and millennial Ashton), local bards who refused to be silenced (Robert Walker and the Wilsons), a heroic opposition newspaper (Cowdroy's *Manchester Gazette*), and passing waves of food rioters with an alarming propensity to turn on magistrates and employers. Liverpool meanwhile had the best-organised political dissent in the form of the 'friends of peace'. In stressing the separateness of this movement from popular radicalism (and from Manchester), Navickas parts company from Peter Spence's 'romantic radicalism' thesis which in other respects her work seems to support.

What of E. P. Thompson's 'radical underground', the submerged river of defiance where proscribed rebels of all kinds met and merged during these cold war years? Navickas has looked extensively at the sources, both local and national, and in some respects her work does support Thompson's suggestion. The political presence of organised labour was strong, with extensive petitions to parliament against the Combination Acts ('the equivalent for workers of Pitt's anti-seditious legislation of 1795 for radicals' (p. 179)), for the protection of weavers, and against the economic effects of war. There were regionally-co-ordinated strike campaigns by both spinners and weavers, led by experienced and politically aware leaders; for Gravenor Henson read James Holcroft, the handloom weavers' leader. Political radicalism, however, enjoyed much less continuity and the reform movement remained on the whole distinct from trade unionism. Indeed, in 1799–1802 'striking weavers apparently regarded themselves as loyalists' (p. 202). Randall too fails to find evidence of any radical underground during this period despite a great deal of turbulence

What revived the reform movement was the 1807–8 petitioning campaign for peace, which coincided but did not directly ally with a wave of industrial unrest. In 1812 the various strands of protest did come together as formidably organised waves of machine-breaking accompanied a hybrid movement for peace, reform and economic protection which was able to mobilise entire communities across the usual boundaries, prefiguring the mass reform movement of 1816–20. The new generation of radical leaders had little connection with those of the 1790s and this time round steered well clear of Jacobinism. Navickas characterises their ideology as 'an alternative loyalism' born of 'anti-corruption patriotism and constitutional radicalism' (p. 209). In the end neither the radical challenge of the 1790s nor the loyalist victory that followed it proved enduring: 'Lancashire radicalism and loyalism were redefined in the region's own image' (p. 248).

Both books inevitably have gaps in their coverage. Randall's book is lighter on politics and religion. The

1715 Jacobite rising is covered only in ripples and the '45 hardly at all, reflecting the tendency of the labour history tradition to regard Jacobitism as the politics of fools and popular monarchism as anomalous or sub-political.⁽³⁾ The extensive 'Jew bill' riots of 1753 are also passed over briefly, and attacks on dissenters and Catholics tend to be assimilated to the defence of the 'liberties of the free-born Englishman' (pp. 53, 67) – which if so was a majority rather than a universal tradition. The press gang and smuggling were also fertile generators of politically-charged unrest over the century.⁽⁴⁾ The sympathetic discussion of the mythical calendar rioters of 1752 indicate that at least one toiler in the field has laboured in vain.⁽⁵⁾ The bibliography has few works published since 2000, Andy Wood's important *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics* being a notable absentee.⁽⁶⁾ Navickas is perhaps a little too ready to discuss the politics of war and hard cheese in terms of 'identity' and 'self-identification'. There is little discussion of victory celebrations such as Trafalgar, which might have counterbalanced the emphasis on local patriotism, and (more surprisingly) of Major Cartwright's tours of 1812 and 1814 which seeded numerous Hampden clubs. Theatre bills and popular prints generally are less well used than they might be, despite the fruitful emphasis on dialect literature, and (OUP please note) the well-chosen maps are too tiny to read.⁽⁷⁾

Travelling by different routes over different territory, Randall and Navickas arrive at some strikingly similar end points. I will pick out three. The first is the need for popular protest to be seen in relation to politics and authority, and vice versa. As both these writers (but especially Navickas) show, popular protest and popular politics were in their nature a dialogue with authority. We cannot study *just* 'popular protest'. Rather, whatever the immediate subject of study, the field of inquiry needs to be drawn eclectically around a particular period and place. Randall's varied case studies gain depth from the massing of West Country material over a long period, while Navickas's whole book is set up this way. She shows that many of the political phenomena once attributed to industrialisation had more to do with the politics of war, and that those politics were about patriotism, loyalism and radicalism together. In 1983 John Bohstedt argued that moral economy worked in the rural communities of the Southwest but broke down in urban-industrial Manchester, the 'city of strangers'. Interestingly, both writers find this view wanting: the character of popular unrest was determined by much more than social and economic context, which was not in any case as different as it might seem.⁽⁸⁾

Secondly, both authors are in agreement on the significance of the events of 1812. For Randall, 'the Luddite disturbances marked a decisive sea change in the relationship between the crowd and the authorities ... Ned Ludd, like Robin Hood, epitomized a rejection of the law of the jungle where the rich and powerful might ride roughshod over the rights of lesser mortals' (pp. 300–1). He could have been summarising Navickas's important 'Ned Ludd' article, except that it came out too late.⁽⁹⁾ In Lancashire, writes Navickas, 1812 was 'the year of nemesis for loyalist ruling elites' (p. 237) (although it has to be said that they survived it). For all the supposed immaturity of the rebels, with widespread rebellion coinciding with war on two fronts, economic collapse and the assassination of the prime minister (a 'multiple disfunction' if ever there was one) it may be that Britain was closer to breakdown in 1812 than at any other time in its pitiless 'age of reform'.

Third, it appears that E. P. Thompson's 18th-century 'moral economy' framework has proved more successful than his 19th-century class perspective in explaining popular protest in both periods. The late Georgian period saw a vogue for systematic solutions of all kinds, whether to crime, the economy or the poor. These tended to involve forced deregulation, so that the power of the market was backed by the power of the state. As with Thatcherism, clashes with vested interests were not so much a side effect as a performance indicator. The most obstinate of all these vested interests were those of the working population itself, which remained wedded to 'customs in common', and indeed continued to generate new ones. Both Randall and Navickas highlight the importance of ritual and the language of morality and custom in mobilising popular discontent. The Paine burnings of 1792–3 took the form of rough music as the public dispensed symbolic justice to a convicted malefactor. Ned Ludd and his followers attacked other enemies of the community. The radicals of 1808, 1812 and 1819 all sought to confront a corrupt and profiteering government with the unavoidable force of public anger. Perhaps, even in our own day, a little more moral economy would not be a bad thing.

The authors have not responded to this review.

Notes

1. Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (London, 2004).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John K. Walton, *Lancashire: a Social History* (Manchester, 1983).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For recent exceptions see Paul A. Pickering, “‘The hearts of the millions’: Chartism and popular monarchism in the 1840s”, *History*, 88 (2003), 227–48; R. Poole, ‘French Revolution or peasants’ revolt? Rebels and petitioners from the Blanketeers to the Chartists’, *Labour History Review*, 74, 1 (April 2009), 6–26.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London, 2009); Paul Monod, ‘Dangerous merchandise : smuggling, Jacobitism, and commercial culture in southeast England, 1690–1760’. *Journal of British Studies*, 30 (1991), 150–82.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R. Poole, *Time’s Alteration: Calendar Reform in Early Modern England* (London, 1998).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics* (Basingstoke, 2003).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Both books are printed in small and sometimes faint type on bright white paper which is hard to read in artificial light, and my print-on-demand copy of Randall was bound in printed cardboard: a paperback would be welcome.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. John Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810* (Cambridge, MA, 1983).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Katrina Navickas, ‘The search for “General Ludd”: the mythology of Luddism’, *Social History* 30, 3 (August 2005), 281-95.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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