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Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1810 by John Bohstedt

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in his *History of the House of Douglas and Angus* or his *De Familia Humia*. Companion to Archibald Douglas, the eighth earl of Angus, and young contemporary to these events, his remarkable writings describe the politics and interrelations of the various branches of the Humes, the varying attitudes of "our folk," and their connection to the great families of Scotland. *All the Queen's Men* sorely needs this dimension.

Yet despite these shortcomings and these might-have-beens, this engaging little book's varied achievements are substantive and undeniable. Its truly vast learning no less than its legitimist commitments make it an altogether appropriate work from Scotland's historiographer royal.

ARTHUR H. WILLIAMSON

*New York University*

**Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810.** By *John Bohstedt*.

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983. Pp. x + 310. \$37.50.

For a time in eighteenth-century Britain (and much of Europe), riots became a major part of the popular political repertory. This has fascinated historians and social scientists, for it has seemed to cast some light on broader questions of revolutionary mobilization, the development of popular democracy, and the dislocations brought by industrial revolution. To many writers, it has seemed that riots were clear evidence of the "breakdown" of public order, the crudity and lack of self-control of the "dangerous classes," and in some cases even of the psychological debasement any of us might suffer if we allowed our higher sensibilities to be sacrificed to incorporation into the group psychology of a crowd. These writers often assimilated all direct political action on the part of large numbers of "common people," peasants or members of the working classes, to the model of riot as psychological collapse.

Often writers have tried to show how much organization, active intention, and even deliberation were necessary for successful riots. They have stressed the long traditions of riot in market towns as a means of bargaining over food prices and suggested that something of the same sort of collective bargaining by riot underpinned the early labor violence of Luddites and similar craftsmen and outworkers. Concerned to rehabilitate the popular image of the poor, benighted, even psychologically defective rioter, they have assimilated riots to the notion of class struggle as a rational, progressive, and by implication almost inevitable collective enterprise.

With careful empirical research and thoughtful analysis, John Bohstedt charts a middle path. In particular, he demonstrates both the diversity of riots and the historical and sociological specificity of their occurrence. We see, for example, how bounded is the applicability of any account of riots in terms of consensual notions of a "moral economy," how breakdowns of order are important on occasion, and how little "classic" riots have to do with the emergence of class struggle in the modern sense.

Bohstedt draws on a wide variety of both secondary and primary materials in describing riots throughout England and Wales between 1790 and 1810. His primary analysis is based, however, on a blend of qualitative and quantitative data from Devon and the Southeast Lancashire region. These two districts are

taken to represent two major types of setting for community politics that might involve riots. Manchester (rather inadequately differentiated from the smaller towns of its region) represents the extreme of industrialization, dislocation, and rapid social change. Devonshire market towns are representative of the continuing importance of a "moral economy" in which rioters represented an identifiable part of the political public, able successfully to bargain with elites, especially over food prices and military conscription.

Riots, for Bohstedt, are neither mere expressions of frustration nor intrinsically radical attempts to change political arrangements. They are organized responses to concrete problems: "the most common and effective form of popular politics" at the end of the eighteenth century (p. 202). Riots are a form of collective action that only works well, however, in certain sorts of community settings and for certain sorts of issues. The issues Bohstedt finds prominent are food prices, military conscription, and wages and terms of labor, more or less in that order. His survey of available sources on just where and for what reason riots took place is quite valuable, but his main contribution lies in his analysis of the situation of riots amid community politics.

Here Bohstedt's analysis reveals four main findings: (1) Riots occur in towns. Agrarian settings are a sort of negative case; they yield few and ineffective riots. Their poorer residents had little autonomy from social control and only sparse bonds of solidarity linking the sizable publics necessary to riot. (2) While great cities do witness riots, these decline in importance through the eighteenth century, especially in the rapidly growing provincial manufacturing centers. Urban populations are disconnected from elites (who remain unsympathetic and who have a variety of resources at their disposal) and unable to rely on strong community bonds with each other. When they riot they are unable to maintain good organization and are relatively ineffective in gaining their objectives. (3) Small towns with relatively stable populations are the main settings for effective riots. Market towns, especially, offer a focus for public action. Substantial groups of nonelite citizens can gather, organized through strong communal networks, with relative autonomy from social control, but still with vertical links to some elites. Relatively stable populations, known to one another, are able to bargain through traditionally recognized "protocols of riot." Small town riots are distinctively public. Unlike urban and rural rioters, their protagonists (who are typically "one rank above the poor") both consider themselves full members of the community and are so considered by elites; they seldom seek the cover of anonymity. (4) Riots occur where a volatile issue can split community elites. The hardship brought to workers and their families by a rapid increase in food prices, for example, is a good theme for a riot. A local gentry may be persuaded to bring pressure on middlemen or farmers to sell their grain at reduced prices.

The rioters Bohstedt studied were pragmatic bargainers, not revolutionaries. As the possibility of securing collective goods through riotous bargaining was reduced, they shifted tactics. Riots lost ground not only because cities grew but also because the possible solutions to rioters' grievances were removed more and more from the local level of action. The elites they could reach directly not only came to believe in the sanctity of market prices determined by supply and demand but also lost much of their power to alter either production or especially consumption relations.

Implicitly, thus, Bohstedt points out the considerable disjuncture between riots and community politics on the one hand and the emergence of national political organizations, trade unions, and other new vehicles for collective action

on the other. Riots would still occur, indeed do still occur, but outside the communal relations that made them a peculiarly effective political tool at the end of the eighteenth century. The change is not just in the orientations of the actors, but in the social foundations and contexts of their actions, and, not least of all, in the nature of their grievances. Food riots declined in considerable part because food price fluctuations ceased to be the major determinant of standard of living. Expansion of markets and productivity helped to eliminate a major cause of riots, as well as to remove local targets, and the local elites who had previously mediated between rioters and those holding food supplies.

Bohstedt does not choose to pursue either the extent to which his findings demand revision of conventional wisdom concerning popular collective action or to delve very far into the broader social changes that surround the decline of both riots and community politics. His account is of the end of the eighteenth-century pattern of riot, not the emergence of nineteenth-century forms of action. There are, for example, no more than hints, sometimes a bit fuzzy, about the nature of the changes under way in Lancashire. He tends to hold that the industrial revolution was very far along indeed by 1812, rather overestimating the rate of factory growth and social change. The reader ought not to complain, however, for Bohstedt has done a first-rate job in marshaling and analyzing his evidence. Those of us who try to draw broader conclusions are in his debt.

CRAIG CALHOUN

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**John Stuart Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue.** By *Bernard Semmel*.  
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983. Pp. xi + 212. \$17.50.

This book attempts to identify John Stuart Mill with a liberal position that is not a halfway house on the way to materialism, epicureanism, necessitarianism, behaviorism, Marxism, or any of the other progressive illiberalisms with which liberal reformers have, time out of mind, been getting themselves entangled. The chief virtue of Bernard Semmel's study is that its touchstone of interpretation is Mill's warning against the vicious and coercive tendencies of modern reformist movements: "Almost all the projects of social reformers of these days are really *liberticide*," Mill wrote in 1855, "Comte's particularly so."

Semmel argues that for Mill the necessary safeguard against illiberal progressivism was not the "negative" liberty to do as one likes but the stern preference of virtue over happiness. He insists on the permanent centrality in Mill's mental universe of the myth of Hercules at a crossroads where two beautiful young women beckon him toward different paths. The first offers easy happiness through sensual pleasure, the second the virtue that is honored by the gods but comes through hard toil. Mill himself described the tale as "one of the most impressive exhortations in ancient literature to a life of labour and self-denial in preference to one of ease and pleasure."

Semmel believes that Mill's mental crisis of 1826 freed him from the Benthamite commitment to organize society in the interests of the greatest happiness of the greatest number and enabled the full flowering of his philosophy of individual freedom of the will and liberty. The book's lengthy first chapter, "The Burden of John Stuart Mill," shows how Mill's willed (not logical) decision to cast off