

WORKSHOP 2: THE CROWD AND THE MOB

Structure:

- Definitions of the crowd and the mob
- 'the moral economy' and food riots

Definitions:

George Rude, *The Crowd in History* (1964):

1. Crowds were not a homogeneous body.....
2. Crowds were not irrational.....
3. Crowds were not spontaneous.....
4. Yet nor was there a concerted conspiracy or secret hand behind crowds.....

1715 Riot Act

The moral economy and food riots

An anonymous letter dropped in 1795 by the door of the Mayor of Salisbury:

Gentlemen of the Corperation I pray you put a stop to that practice which is made use of in our Markits by Rook and other carriers in your giving them the Liberty to Scower the Market of every thing so as the Inhabitance cannot buy a single Artickel without going to the Dealers for it and Pay what Extortionat price they think proper and even Domineer over the Peopel as thow they was not Whorthy to Look on them. But their time will soon be at an End as soon as the Solders ear gon out of town.

The Corporation is asked to order carriers out of the market until the townspeople have been served, 'and stop all the Butchers from sending the meat away by a Carces at a time But make them cut it up in the Markit and sarve the Town first'. The letter informs the Mayor that upwards of three hundred citizens have 'posetively swor to be trow to each other for the Distruction of the Carriers'.¹

¹ Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd', 101.

E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (Feb. 1971), 78

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimizing notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of licence afforded by the authorities. More commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference. The food riot in eighteenth-century England was a highly-complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives.

Features of the moral economy model:

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
4.

Primary source 1: text of the Riot Act: Edward Wise, *The law relating to riots and unlawful assemblies* (London, 1848), pp. 41-44.

The definition of a riot is also explained on the Old Bailey online site - <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Crimes.jsp#riot>

Primary source 2: tract - 'The Riot: or Half a loaf is better than no bread' (Cheap Repository Tract, 1795) Who was this aimed at? Why? How would it be used? Do you think its readers would be convinced?

Primary source 3: cartoon: Isaac Cruikshank, 'Hints to forestallers, or a sure way to reduce the price of grain!!', 1800

Primary source 4: newspaper article: *True Briton*, 4 August 1795 [British Library newspapers online]