

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Carl J. Griffin**, *The Rural War: Captain Swing and the Politics of Protest*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-7190-8626-7 (cloth)

In 1830 after destroying a threshing machine at Barham in Kent, the Elham gang shouted out to farmer Sankey to “get up and bring us some Beer for we have been to work damn hard” (p. 175). At Stockbridge, protestors demanded four sovereigns from a Reverend Cutlet as “remuneration for their day’s work”. These actions capture both the ‘audacity’ and claims to legitimacy of those known as Captain Swing, the popular, myth-inspiring name used by bands of agricultural labourers who roamed the English countryside in the 1830s smashing threshing machines and firing ricks of hay. By asserting that “forms of protesting were also ‘work’”, as Carl Griffin notes here, “Swing groups could claim moral legitimacy in their actions”.

*The Rural War* is the first major monograph on the subject to be published since *Captain Swing* - Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé’s (1973: xxi) study of what they termed “the most impressive episode in the English farm-labourers’ long and doomed struggle against poverty and degradation”. A classic of the ‘history from below’ tradition, it was often singled out in Hobsawm’s obituary notices and tributes as a particularly important achievement in his oeuvre. Writing in the shadows cast by such a work presents challenges which Griffin deals with in robust fashion. He confidently asserts that *The Rural War* not only ‘fills’ gaps he identifies in Hobsbawm and Rudé’s account but also “asks new questions of Swing’s archive” (p. 6).

The book is structured around four sections. The first section places ‘Swing in context’, particularly in relation to modes of rural resistance in the 1810s and 1820s. The second section on ‘Swing as movement’ explores the movement dynamics and diffusion and mechanisms. A third section ‘Chopsticks’ Politics’ explores the politics of the parish and includes a fascinating, if rather short, chapter on the ‘gender politics of swing’. Finally, a section on ‘Responses to Swing’ explores both the repression of Swing and the impact of the protests on social policy.

Through this engagement with social policy Griffin's account also positions important ways of recognizing the long-term impacts of the Swing protests. Rather than accepting accounts which view Swing as a failure, Griffin argues that the fact that "many labourers were willing to dispute their wages, openly question the nature of authority, and even join forbidden political unions, is testimony to a collective will that refused to be beaten into submission by the combined might of capitalist 'logic' and state terror" (p. 314).

A key strength of the book is Griffin's detailed engagement with local contexts and archives, particularly in Kent and other Southern counties. This allows him to decisively refute Hobsbawm and Rude's construction of Swing as a 'bolt from the blue'. Rather, he situates Swing in relation to long histories of rural protest through the 1810s and 1820s, and the importance of forms such as incendiarism that would be central to Swing's repertoire. Such detailed local engagements also allow Griffin to reconstruct detailed trajectories of some of the rioters. Thus he notes that the Elham machine breakers "were a gang as opposed to a merely temporary alignment of like-minded individuals. Through personnel and kinship links it is evident that the Elham gang was, in part, born out of the collapse of the Aldington gang of smugglers, also known as 'the Blues' - the most notorious of all smuggling gangs in the post-Napoleonic period" (p. 130-131). Griffin argues that the Blues' activities in the mid-to late 1820s set "the blueprint for the machine-breaking gang" and through so doing gives a fascinating sense of the continuities, contexts and trajectories of subaltern organization which shaped the Swing riots.

Attentiveness to the spatial practices and contexts of Swing also permits a real engagement with the conduct of Swing rioters. To explore the spatial practices through which Swing moved, Griffin draws on classic social movement theory models of diffusion such as Sidney Tarrow's work. This helps to transcend Hobsbawm and Rudé's reliance on problematic metaphors of contagion (even if they did place the term in scare quotes). Such an invocation of diffusion, however, has its limitations. For me it tends to obscure some of the more dynamic spatial practices of Swing rioters. The reliance on analytics of diffusion forecloses more generative articulations of relations and the ways that mobilities were central to and constitutive of Swing's political presence and agency. Griffin's account gives many instances where such mobility is clearly used in very strategic and inventive ways. Vestry meetings, for example, emerge as key sites of grievance where considerable pressure becomes exerted through mobile rioters. I also thought the creative dynamics of mimicry and appropriation at work in the

production of a 'movement' which clearly links different places but without a centralized structure demanded more sustained reflection in terms of their implications for the relations between subaltern politics and spatiality.

The engagement with particular local contexts also gives a sense of how Swing Rioters negotiated, and intervened in, diverse conflicts in particular places. One key area in which I felt this could have been addressed in more depth is the implications of antagonism towards Irish harvest workers for the terms on which place is constructed through Swing protest. Griffin's work in this regard is arguably marked by an assumption that conflict between Irish migrant workers and other rural labourers was rather inevitable. I would have liked the terms of these disputes to have interrogated in more depth. The context of Irish agrarian disturbances in the early nineteenth century could also have usefully been engaged with. Early on in the text we are told that Swing was seen as "Ned Ludd's grandson" or "an English Captain Rock" (p. 3). This last name is a reference to the traditions of agrarian secret societies in Ireland such as Whiteboys and Captain Rock who had a formidable reputation. Indeed, gangs of Irish coal heavers on the Thames in 1768 had "bragg'd and given it out themselves" that they were from "the gangs of Whiteboys in Ireland" (see Linebaugh 1992). I also found it curious that no consideration is given to the repression meted out to these groups in a discussion of the means and practices used to quell and repress Captain Swing.

In general, Griffin's criticisms of Hobsbawm and Rudé's text are careful and well made. In one crucial respect, though, Griffin underestimates the significance of their work. This was a text which positioned Swing in terms of a transnational terrain of scholarship and debates on the politics of the peasantry and asserting 'history from below'. Its reception and the critical debates and discourses it generated were equally internationalist. Thus Ranajit Guha's (1983: 6) critique of their treatment of the Swing rioters in 1830 as "spontaneous and disorganised" has a pivotal place in his book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, one of the foundational texts of the Subaltern Studies collective. Guha insists by contrast on the importance of understanding the relational contexts through which peasant resistance, and subaltern politics in more general terms, was constituted (see Guha 1983: 5). He also arguably shifts the engagement with the text on to a more theoretical terrain than Griffin's reading allows.

If Hobsbawm and Rudé's work forms an inevitable point of departure here, it is arguably E.P. Thompson's work which is positioned as the more significant intellectual adversary and

context. This is most notably through detailed and persuasive critical engagements with Thompson's (1991) account of the moral economy of the English countryside. It is this re-imagining of certain aspects of the functioning of protest in relation to arguments about the 'moral economy' that is one of the books most significant contributions. Through thinking about the diverse spatial contexts and terrains through which such political interventions were made Griffin makes some incisive contributions to probing the limits of Thompson's work, but also to re-asserting its importance for understanding rural protest. While I think Griffin broadly succeeds in foregrounding the agency of Swing rioters, at times I felt that the peasantry were treated as rather passive political agents. I would have liked to have known more about what they made of agitators such as Richard Price, the rather politically active Maidstone Shoemaker who appears in various intriguing guises here in collaboration with Swing protests, or more of how they viewed and understood radical figures such as Henry Hunt or William Cobbett.

In this work Griffin has provided a compelling reappraisal of Swing which is a major contribution to geographies of rural protest. It also offers a vision for a post-Thompsonian way of thinking about the forms of subaltern political activity in English countryside. If questions persist and aspects of the protest remain elusive it is a testament to Swing rioters' ability to hide their tracks.

## References

- Guha R (1983) *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Hobsbawm E J and Rudé G (1973) *Captain Swing*. London: Penguin
- Linebaugh P (1992) *The London Hanged*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Thompson E P (1991) *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. New York: The New Press

*Dave Featherstone*  
*School of Geographical and Earth Sciences*

*University of Glasgow*  
*David.Featherstone@glasgow.ac.uk*

*April 2013*