
13.1 Round table: conceptualising ‘class’ in the English countryside

Room 103

Convener and chair: Carl Griffin

Participants: Alun Howkins, Steve Hindle, Peter Jones and Andy Wood

Arguably the most influential publication of the past half-century in English rural social history was a book that contained only one chapter explicitly devoted to the study of rural life, E. P. Thompson’s seminal *Making of the English Working Class*. Rooted in what emerged as a distinctly Thompsonian take on (cultural) Marxism, *MEWC* by virtue of its sheer exuberance and force of historical argument forced subsequent scholars to think about both the processes of class formation and rural class consciousness. Without *MEWC* there is no *Captain Swing*, Hobsbawm and Rudé’s classic study of the rural revolt of 1830, nor any of the subsequent generation of rural historians whose call to the archive came on reading Thompson’s first classic. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, though, studies emerged that sought to problematise class as a ‘metanarrative’ and question the applicability of this structural concept (or conceit as some saw it) to communities and community relations always in a state of flux, studies that followed on from the work of historians such as Underdown, Calhoun, and Stedman Jones. Consequently, much rural history, if not all, has tended to either use diffuse terms in conceptualising social relations and self-identification, or has altogether avoided such issues, as the work of Howkins and Wells attests. And yet there are flickers of change. In the past decade, historians, working in many different time periods and intellectual idioms have attempted to reformulate understandings of class: from Wood’s studies of conflict in the early modern Peak District to Rogaly and Taylor’s studies of the politics of belonging in twentieth century Britain. What then is the place – both literally and intellectually – of class in rural historical analysis? Should we be afraid of using potentially totalising concepts? Should we mobilise the language(s) of the archive in determining our own socio-conceptual dictionaries? This session does not necessarily seek answers, or even accord. Instead, it attempts to provide an opportunity for the open discussion of a subject which has too often been avoided as we have choreographed our ever more complex rural historical jigs.

Alun Howkins is Professor Emeritus of Social History at the University of Sussex. He has published several books including: *Poor Labouring Men; Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1872-1925*, (Routledge, 1985); *Reshaping Rural England 1850-1925*, (Collins Harvill 1991/Routledge, 1992) and most recently *The Death of Rural England: a Social History of the Countryside Since 1900* (Routledge, 2003). He was a section editor and author of the social history section of *Agrarian History of England and Wales Vol. VII* (CUP, 2000). He is currently working on two projects: one on the enclosure of villages to the East of Oxford in the period 1850-1900, the other on the survival of farm service in England and Wales. In addition to numerous radio and television appearances on such programmes ‘Nightwaves’, ‘Today’, ‘World Tonight’, and ‘Newnight’, he was the writer and presenter of ‘Fruitful Earth’, a series of four programs on the history of British agriculture broadcast on BBC2 in August 1999, and recently contributed to ‘Mud, Sweat and Tractors – The Story of Agriculture’.

Steve Hindle is Professor of Social and Economic History in the Department of History at the University of Warwick, where he has taught early modern history and historiography since 1995. He is the author of *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England* (2000); *On the Parish?* (2004); and several articles on rural social relations, including most recently ‘Imagining Insurrection in Seventeenth-Century England’ (*Hist. Workshop J.* 2008). He is the co-editor of *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (1996) and of *The Layston Parish Memorandum Book* (2004). Since 2007 he has been editor of the *Economic History Review*. He is currently working on the social and spatial distribution of wealth and authority in the parish of Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire in the period c.1670-1710.

Peter Jones is currently a Lecturer in History and the History of Medicine at Oxford Brookes University. Before taking up this post, he was a Research Fellow for three years on the Westminster Pauper Lives Project (<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/pauperlives/>). His research interests lie in two distinct but related areas of demotic history: popular protest and popular consciousness in the early-nineteenth century (and in particular, the Swing risings in the south of England), and the experience of the old poor laws in Hanoverian England. His most recent publications are ‘Finding Captain Swing: protest, parish relations and the state of the public mind in 1830’, in the *International Review*

of *Social History* (2009), and “‘I Cannot Keep My Place Without Being Deacent’”: pauper letters, parish clothing and pragmatism in the South of England, 1750-1830’ in *Rural History* (2009).

Andy Wood is Professor of Social History at the University of East Anglia. After completing his PhD at Jesus College, Cambridge, he held a Scouloudi Research Fellowship at the Institute of Historical Research and a British Academy Research Fellowship at University College London. He has also taught at the Universities of East London and Liverpool before moving to UEA in 1996. As well as writing numerous book chapters and papers – in such journals as *Past and Present*, *International Review of Social History*, *Historical Journal*, and *Social History* – he is the author of *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Palgrave, 2002), and *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). He is currently working on a Leverhulme Trust-funded project exploring ‘social memory’ and uses of the past.

Carl Griffin is a Lecturer in Human Geography at Queen’s University, Belfast. He trained as a historical geographer at the University of Bristol, and held post-doctoral positions at the universities of Bristol, Southampton and Oxford. His research embraces studies of popular protest, as well as cultures of unemployment, human-environment interactions, and the history of political economy. He has published papers in, amongst other places, *Rural History*, *Journal of Historical Geography*, *International Review of Social History*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, and *Past and Present*. As well as finishing writing a book on the Swing quasi-insurrection of the early 1830s, he is starting a research project on labour regulation and proto trade unionism in the early nineteenth century English west.