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The analysis of popular collective action

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Abstract: Most models of popular collective action treat it as the behavior of single social units having unitary dispositions that explain the behavior. Since in fact it consists largely of strategic interaction among several parties, activates and builds on existing social networks, and follows a dynamic that no single-actor model can represent, available models are inadequate. Through sustained discussion of the rural conflicts of 1830 in England, this paper illustrates the critique, sketches an alternative approach centering on the analysis of repertoires of contention, and describes techniques for standardizing narratives of contention that are compatible with the alternative approach.

Keywords: History, social, government

During the fall of 1830, popular collective action intensified in England. Fresh from national struggles over the political rights of Catholics and Protestant Dissenters, critics of the ruling classes again started calling for parliamentary reform. After many previous failures, the great new mobilization for reform that began in 1830 would culminate two years later in the passage of a major bill greatly reducing the place in Parliament of members who represented individual families or small corporate bodies and greatly increasing the representation of merchants, petty bourgeois, leaseholders, and people from industrial areas. In the meantime, local conflicts and threats of unruly popular action proliferated. As Norman Gash describes the situation:

"In the late autumn of 1830 the country was sullen with unrest. The depressed agricultural labourers in the southern counties had broken out in widespread rioting and machine-breaking; and though the disorder in the industrial areas had died down, the stimulus given to radical propaganda by the continental revolutions threatened for the first time in a decade to renew the dangerous link between industrial and political agitation. While Peel was directing the work of police and military authorities in meeting the agricultural rioting, the ultraradicals in London were holding nightly meetings at which excited crowds listened to the oratory of Cobbett, Carlile and other demagogues, pinned up tricolour cockades, and demonstrated in the streets afterwards. Menacing letters and warnings of conspiracies began to arrive at the Home Office. The new Metropolitan Police, their resources strained to the limit, were made the object of violent propaganda and physical attacks. On the night of 2 November, after the royal procession to open parliament, there were sixty-six cases of assaults on policemen. Attempts were made to rescue pickpockets arrested on the streets and the civic authorities showed a nervous desire to call in the military, despite Rowan's plea to let his men do their work alone" [3, 135–136].

Gash's evident distaste for 'rioting', 'agitation', and 'demagogues' should not blind us to his adoption of an analytic approach that he shares with populist historians, crowd sociologists, and most other specialists in popular collective action: the implicit assumption that the phenomenon to be explained is a series of single acts of single actors, expressing unitary dispositions of those actors.

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(The 'actor' in question may, of course, be an individual or a set of individuals who share the same disposition.) At the lowest level, in Gash's analysis, we have individuals such as Cobbett, Carlile and other popular orators. One level up, separate groups of laborers, crowds, and the anonymous authors of attacks on police. More broadly, by implication, a whole people beset by unrest. Shared dispositions sum from individual to group to mass.

Faced with the actual complexity of popular collective action, most analysts have simplified their task by postulating a hierarchy of individuals responding to unitary orientations: from the individual person at a single instant motivated by a momentary impulse to an entire people durably informed by a shared ethos. The simplification permits the adoption of an epidemiological mode of analysis, in which the thing to be explained is the incidence and severity of an infection—one form or another of collective action—within a population at risk to that infection. But such a postulate lends itself to dynamic analysis only with difficulty, since the transitions from one state to the next occur via changes of disposition. And it leaves little room for interaction among multiple parties.

This brief paper uses British experience in the fall of 1830 to illustrate the difficulties of such an approach, and to sketch an alternative way of analyzing the same phenomena. The alternative begins with the assumption that what we commonly portray as riot, protest, disorder, collective behavior, or collective action actually consists of strategic *inter*actions among two or more parties, activates and builds on existing social networks, and follows a dynamic that no single-actor model can possibly encompass. My presentation of the alternative will stress problems of conceptualization and measurement rather than of modelling. Such modeling of popular collective action as appears in the paper will be crude, informal, and/or metaphorical. But the implications of the argument will, I hope, be clear.

Before plunging into that argument, however, we need a more concrete sense of the actual events at issue. "The poor and ill-disposed of this and several of the adjoining parishes", said the account clipped from the *Maidstone Journal* by London's *Times*,

"rose *en masse* on Tuesday last to demand higher wages and a proportionate rise in the scale of parish relief, work or no work. Their mode of assembling was riotous and alarming to the timid, and their invitations to the gentleman and farmers to meet them were not of the most courteous descriptions. The news which arrived that morning from London, and a little violence having taken place the day before at Robertsbridge, with the fires, and a knowledge that no force was at hand, created fear, and they were suffered to proceed without interruption, and their demands were ultimately complied with. The state of these affairs is now materially altered, and, in case of a second rise, the result will be very different. They coolly destroyed a thrashing [*sic*] machine at Longhurst farm, and no doubt the ringleaders will be made a severe example of. A similar scene has been acted at Sandhurst, Ewhurst, Bodlam, Newenden, Salehurst, Ticehurst, and other places, with the same effect. At Rolvenden, Mr. Forbes and Capt. Monypenny exerted all their influence with the farmers in their neighbourhoods not to yield, offering all their assistance, and declaring that nothing should induce them to comply if the farmers would hold out; but it was unavailing, and the rioters obtained their object. At Benenden they delayed their attempt until the military arrived at Cranbrook, and the gentlemen then having protection refused to yield to their demands. The mobites made a little show of fight, but the appearance of Captain King, as magistrate, with two or three soldiers at his heels, soon set that matter at rest, and they quietly dispersed. These would-be legislators, encouraged by their success, have extended their interference to the payment of tithes, and some gross cases have occurred, which, it is understood, are not to pass unpunished. The magistrates have had a rare week of it, and the public must be much indebted to them for their exertions and manly conduct." [7]

In Benenden, another account says, the night raiders also destroyed Mr. Luck's threshing machine. The events in question took place in and around Hawkhurst and Benenden, Kent, some 35 miles southeast of central London, on 9 November 1830. On the 9th, 10th, or 11th, almost every village in that borderland of Kent and Sussex had its own version of Hawkhurst's and Benenden's conflicts. In some of them, the workers drove the

overseer of the poor from the village. In others, they demanded, and got, a lowering of the tithe.

Meanwhile, the gentry began organizing prosecution of the offending workers. Repression was selective. Magistrate Collingwood of Hawkhurst wrote that:

"During our riot at Hawkhurst on the 9th of this month a threshing machine was broken. As soon as we had sworn in Special Constables, I personally, acting on my single discretion, selected a number of persons who had been engaged or present at this felony for prosecution. I thought it expedient to select not agricultural labourers but artizans, carpenters, tailors, bricklayers & a smuggler, because I thought they had nothing to do with a threshing machine and could therefore have no possible palliation for such an outrage" [6, 18 November 1830].

Nor was Collingwood an exceptionally hard man; indeed, the Home Secretary admonished him later for his lack of firmness in dealing with the rebels of his district [4: 188].

On the 11th, local landowner Thomas Twisden Hodges (son of a Kent Member of Parliament, and alter an M.P. himself) reported meeting crowds going from farm to farm in Benenden, turning out the laborers, asking for drink and money, demanding that thithe- and tax-payments be suspended until laborers' wages were raised, and announcing their intention to meet at the Bull Inn, Benenden, on Saturday the 13th, "to compel the Parishioners to raise wages" [6, 11 November 1830]. Soon after the conflicts around Hawkhurst, Collingwood and other magistrates began organizing tighter control over local laborers: on 12 November, the region's Justices of the Peace met in Tunbridge Wells and declared "It having been represented to the Meeting, that large Bodies of the Agricultural and other Labouring Classes have recently assembled at various Places in this Division, and endangered the Public Peace, as well as the Persons and Property of His Majesty's Loyal and Peaceable Subjects", they ordered a detailed census of agricultural laborers and called for parish assemblies "to devise the most effectual means of Employing the Labourers belonging thereto, at proper and sufficient Wages" [6, 12 November 1830].

Local action, however, had not ended. In Benenden, on 13 November, local officials had the foolhardiness to hold a tithe-feast in the Bull Inn —the same day and place the local laborers had chosen for their own meeting. Then:

"a number of men assembled, exhibiting a strong disposition to riot. A messenger was accordingly sent to Cranbrook for the military. In the mean time the labourers proceeded to acts of violence. They broke into Mr. Santer's house, and having found their way into the room where the magistrates and others were assembled, extinguished the lights. At this moment the soldiers arrived" [7].

The troops arrested four men, and carted them off to jail in Maidstone.

Between the end of August and late December, over a thousand such confrontations—concerted wage demands by agricultural laborers, attacks on threshing machines, and related activities—occurred in southeastern England. They came in the company of widespread arson of haystacks, field crops, farm equipment and buildings. Collectively they have come to be known as the Swing Rebellion, for the mythical Captain Swing in whose name a few threatening letters circulated. Almost 2000 people came to trial for participation in Swing. Of them, 252 were sentenced to death, 19 of whom were actually executed. Of the remainder, 505 were sentenced to transportation overseas, 644 to prison, 7 fined, 1 whipped, and 800 acquitted or bound over [5, p. 262]. That was powerful repression.

Benenden and Hawkhurst were agricultural villages teeming with poor, and frequently unemployed, wage-laborers [5, pp. 73, 75]. The Swing rebellion as a whole took place mainly in large agricultural villages in the hinterland of London, and the chief actors were landless day-laborers. Another common name for Swing, in fact, is "the last labòrers' revolt".

The geography and timing of this large rural rebellion have some interesting features. As Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, the rebellion's major historians, summarize the characteristics of a participating village:

"It would tend to be above average in size, to contain a higher ratio of labourers to employing farmers than the average, and a distinctly higher number of local artisans; perhaps also of such members of rural society as were economically, socially and ideologically independent of squire,

parson and large farmer: small family cultivators, shopkeepers and the like. Certainly the potentially riotous village also contained groups with a greater than average disposition to religious independence. So far as landownership is concerned, it was more likely to be 'open' or mixed than the rest. Local centers of communication such as markets and fairs were more likely to riot than others, but there were too few of these to explain the prevalence of unrest. It might well contain rather more pauperism and unemployment than the tranquil village, but there is no reason to assume that it was normally *much* more miserable than its miserable neighbours. We need hardly add that it was more likely to be engaged in tillage and especially grain farming, or in the production of specialised crops with a highly fluctuating demand for labour, and less likely to be engaged in pastoral farming. If it had a history of local disputes—most likely over enclosures, perhaps also over local politics and administration—this would increase its propensity to riot; and in some cases, for which no generalisations are possible, it might actually become one of those local centres of militancy whence riot radiated out over the surrounding region" [5, pp. 188–189].

On this last point, Andrew Charlesworth has found that generalizations *are* possible: proximity to the London highway facilitated participation in the rebellion in general and spread of rebellious action among adjacent villages in particular; attacks on the clergy, gentry, and aristocracy became more common features of those local actions that were closer to the London highway; prior connections among villages as witnessed by such matters as intermarriage facilitated the spread of participation; villages with many craftsmen joined the rebellion earlier; and so on.

Within Kent, Thomas Buoye has found that 'Swing' events of any sort rarely occurred in regions of intensive farming close to London or extensive farming far from London, but clustered in the areas of mixed farming between the two. Within those areas, furthermore, arson and threatening letters concentrated in the relatively commercialized agricultural areas just beyond the marketgardening band around London and near London's satellite cities, concerted demands for wages clustered in cash-crop areas (especially those growing hops for brewing) further out, and machine-breaking prevailed in the regions of larger-scale grain production for the London market, which were on the average most distant of all. On the whole, the evidence accumulated so far points to the activation of a farflung network of communication tied to the London market, mediated by previously-formed local groups of dissidents, differentiated according to local agrarian conflicts, and favorable to close observation of the successes and failures of nearby people in similar circumstances.

Let us look back at what actually happened in Hawkhurst, Benenden and nearby villages. Toward 1:00 A.M. on Tuesday 9 November a group of artisans and agricultural laborers gathered in Hawkhurst and went about rousing their fellows for a tramp to Longhurst farm. At the farm, they took a dismantled threshing machine from a farm building and destroyed its pieces. Then they smashed Mr. Luck's threshing machine in Benenden. Later that day, they went from farm to farm demanding agreement to a general increase in wages and a rise in parish relief for the unemployed. At first they were successful, but as troops approached the local farms stiffened their resistance. A magistrate backed by a few troops persuaded them to disband. Four days later, a group of workers interrupted a tithe-feast attended by Benenden's farmers and gentry, but troops blocked them again—this time arresting four of them. In nearby villages, similar events were occurring, and some workers were adding demands for remission of the ecclesiastical tithe.

Authorities had little doubt how to label these events. They were riots, disorders, disturbances, or outrages. Historians and social scientists treating the same sorts of events sometimes adopt the authorities' pejorative labels, and sometimes translate them into more sympathetic terms such as protest, movement, or action. Even the most neutral of these terms, however, imply a single actor and suggest a unitary disposition on the part of that actor. Yet the bare facts make it clear that more than one actor and more than one disposition were at work. They reveal, furthermore, a strategic interaction whose continuity, sophistication, and complexity the conventional labels obscure.

How might we try to capture that complexity without being overwhelmed by it? The first step is to displace the analytic focus from action to inter-

action. We single out those actions that bear on the welfare of other people, especially those that involve direct communication with the people in question. Within the set, we concentrate on discontinuous, claim-making interactions: ones which have relatively well-marked beginnings and endings, and give their object a choice between response and a change in welfare. Thus attacks, applications of force, demands, petitions, and supplications will qualify, while workaday conversations will not.

The second step is to confine our attention to *collective* interactions: those in which at least one of the actors is a set of people who are themselves connected by interaction and who share some interest. (In order to avoid ruling out irrationalist-spontaneous accounts of popular collective action by definition, we must keep low the thresholds for number, extent of interaction, and degree of shared interest.) Thus we search for bounded interactions in the course of which linked sets of people make claims on individuals or sets of individuals outside their own number. *Contention* is a general term for that sort of interaction.

In our own time, such interactions ordinarily take one of a rather limited set of forms: strikes, demonstrations, electoral rallies, public meetings, petition marches, planned insurrections, invasions of official assemblies, occupations of premises or public places, electoral campaigns, and social movements and a few related kinds of action. Any pair of actors who are at risk to such an interaction, furthermore, characteristically engage in only a subset of the forms. That subset is their *repertoire of contention*. Since similar pairs within any particular time and place tend to have similar repertoires, we can speak more loosely of a general repertoire that is characteristic of the time and place.

Repertoires of contention are learned, negotiable, and changing. That is true both on the small scale and the large. On the small scale, we find antagonists and allies constantly innovating, testing, and bargaining within (or at the edge of) the limits set by the existing repertoire; even hostile demonstrators, for example, characteristically work out some sort of agreement with police and other authorities, if not with counter-demonstrators. On the large scale, major changes in the structure of power, the organization of major actors, the strategies of repression, and the interests at play in contention alter the very forms of contention. In eighteenth-century Europe and America, for example, the general repertoires did not include demonstrations of firm-by-firm strikes, but they did include grain seizures, collective invasions of fields, destruction of toll gates and other barriers, attacks on machines, charivaris, serenades, expulsions of tax officials and other outsiders, tendentious holiday parades, intervilllage battles, pulling down and sacking of private houses, forced illuminations, acting out of popular judicial proceedings, turnouts, and several other forms of action that now seem colorful, antique, and irrelevant to contemporary concerns.

At Hawkhurst and Benenden in 1830, the relevant repertoires linked day-laborers, farmers, landowners, magistrates, government troops, and parsons. Most important for present purposes, the laborers and farmers connected by means of a set of routines in which laborers assembled, formulated demands, then did some combination of the following: (a) demanded that farmers institute some improvement in their condition, including the abandonment of techniques or machinery, (b) threatened destruction of crops or farm property if their demands were not met, (c) went from farm in a band, turning out the laborers who had not yet joined them, presenting their demands and asking for gifts.

All these routines were well known in Kent and the rest of southern England, in the same way that grain seizures, invasions of fields, or attacks on toll gates were then known in various parts of England. Like present-day industrial employers faced with the threat of a strike, the farmers who saw these routines beginning again knew the sequences, odds, and options well. They had the choice of resisting directly, calling in outside force, or bargaining. At Hawkhurst and Benenden, farmers did all three at various times.

For all the mystifying language employed by farmers and magistrates, the routines were not unilateral actions of the laborers, 'disorders' to which the farmers simply had to respond; they were embedded in the complex social network that tied farmers to laborers. At that point in history, the regular strike—which did, in fact, become an important strategy of action among England's agricultural laborers a half-century later—did not belong to their repertoire. This repertoire, like others, was learned, negotiable and changing.

How might we try to operationalize these general ideas? As part of an analysis of the impact of changing forms of production and state power on popular collective action, my research group has been attempting to capture the complexity of events like those of Kent in November 1830. For the seven turbulent and critical years from 1828 through 1834, we have gone systematically through seven British periodicals, copying all mentions of actions occurring in Great Britain during those years which might, according to a standard set of rules, be part of a 'contentious gathering': an occasion on which ten or more people gathered in a publicly-accessible place and visibly (through word, deed, or both) made claims that, if realized, would affect the interests of one more persons outside their own number. Clearly, many of the words in this definition—publicly-accessible place, claims, and so on—require further definitions and rules of application. We also have to set boundaries in time and space around single contentious gatherings.

Our readings of the seven periodicals produced something like 150000 mentions of events that might have been contentious gatherings. The definitions, rules, and procedures have identified about 6900 events, almost 1000 per year, meeting our criteria. The enormous number of mentions that do not qualify have gone into files that serve to describe the routine assemblies and gatherings amid which contentious gatherings occurred; we have not, however, prepared machine-readable transcriptions of those voluminous files. Having put copies of all mentions referring to a single contentious gathering in a separate dossier, we have then organized a transcription of the texts in machine-readable files:

- roughly 6900 general descriptions of *contentious gatherings*, including geocoded notations of their locations
- descriptions of about 22800 *formations*—sets of one or more people whose relationships to the making of claims and the actions of other formations our texts leave indistinguishable
- further descriptions of approximately 42700 *action-phases* each beginning when at least one of the formations changes its relationship to the claims being made
- identifications of the *sources* of some 18000 individual mentions from which we have built up these descriptions
- notations of just over 2300 additional *locations* into which formations moved while a contentious gathering was proceeding.

In addition, the machine-readable dossiers include explanatory comments on sources and events, as well as information about the process of transcription itself.

The action-phase sequences for the Hawkhurst and Benenden events of 9 November, run as follows:

Hawkhurst (Formations: (1) the poor, (2) [farmer of] Longhurst farm, (3) farmers and others)

1. The poor gather ("The poor and ill-disposed...rose en mass");
2. The poor destroy a threshing machine ("They destroyed a thrashing machine at Longhurst farm");

Benenden (Formations: (1) labourers, (2) Mr. Luck, (3) farmers and others, (4) Magistrate [and troops])

1. Labourers assemble ("labourers . . . assembling");
2. Labourers destroy threshing machine ("destroyed a thrashing machine... belonging to Mr. Luck");
3. Labourers demand [Object: farmers and others] ("demand higher wages, and a proportionate rise in the scale of parish relief");
4. Farmers and others refuse ("gentlemen...refused to yield to their demands");
5. Magistrate and troops appear ("the appearance of Captain King...with two or three soldiers");
6. Labourers disperse ("they quietly dispersed").

Although the transcriptions leave out considerable detail and make some debatable choices, in general they capture the sequence of action and interaction rather well.

Perhaps the next steps are obvious. Although the actual manipulation of such large, dense files requires considerable effort, it is easy in principle to recompound descriptions of action-phases and formations in several different ways: into reconstituted events, into connected series of events such as strike waves, electoral campaigns, and social movements, into recurring sequences, into repertoires, into characteristics of populations.

Summarized by the key verb within each action-phase, the catalog of all 42700 actions in the full seven-year file begins alphabetically as follows:

adjourn	1.0%
assemble	3.9
attack, break, wound, etc.	7.4
block, interfere, prevent, etc.	0.6
'bracket': desist, finish, etc.	0.3
chair	3.8
cheer	1.6
communicate, announce, read, etc.	3.6
control, order, secure, etc.	10.6
decry, assail, insult, etc.	1.2
deliberate, address, convene, etc.	1.5

Although 'attack' and 'block' are familiar, the overall picture does not correspond closely to what we have seen in the Kent of 1830. As compared with the experience of laborers and farmers in Hawkhurst and Benenden, the repertoire implied by the verb frequencies strongly emphasizes public meetings and assemblies of various kinds. It entails, furthermore, relatively little overt coercion.

That lack of correspondence, indeed, has two important lessons to teach. First, in the 1830s the standard routines of contention varied significantly from one social setting to another, and especially from village to metropolis. Quantitatively speaking, the characteristic urban forms of action predominated in Great Britain, and predominate correspondingly in this diagram. Second, between 1828 and 1834, Great Britain as a whole experienced a dramatic shift toward the repertoires with which we are familiar today: toward meetings, demonstrations, marches, and similar actions. In summarizing the whole sevenyear period, the tabulation shows the consequences of that shift.

I resort to narratives, conceptual glosses, and simple frequency distributions because our research group stands at the brink, but only at the brink, of serious analysis of the evidence it has so painstakingly assembled. We have important problems to pursue: to what and how governmental repression damped or diverted popular collective action; whether the relative success of the earlier campaigns for the rights of Catholics and Dissenters established the model, precedent, and political opening for the great reform campaign; to what degree the broadening of political rights through parliamentary reform altered the collective-action strategies of the newly-enfranchised classes and their allies; how tight and effective was the internal communication among groups and localities within the Swing rebellion; whether the severe repression of Swing changed the character of rural collective action as a whole; how rapidly, where, and when the prevailing repertoires shifted toward the meetings, parades, rallies, demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of interaction with which we are familiar today. These questions bear at once on the nature of British politics in a crucial period and on the dynamics of popular collective action in general.

This recasting of the evidence on popular collective action is, to be sure, only the start of the revision needed in order to overcome the static, single-actor conventional representations of protest, disorder, and collective behavior. But it is, I submit, a reasonable start.

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