

Citation style

Gurney, Peter: review of: John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions. Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550-1850*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 2012, 04, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189736597, downloaded from recensio.net

First published: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/81345.pdf>



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions. Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550–1850*, Ashgate, Farnham/Burlington 2010, XI + 312 S., geb., 65,00 £.

In this wide-ranging synthesis of existing scholarship and his own original research, John Bohstedt traces the rise and fall of “the politics of provisions” in England over three centuries. He divides this *longue durée* into three separate periods. In the first of these, 1580–1650, increasing commercialisation exposed more workers to the vicissitudes of markets and a calamitous fall in their purchasing power made survival tough. Rising population also put increased strain on food supplies. Late Tudor and early Stuart food rioters mostly intercepted shipments of grain out of the region or country. Exports rather than ‘immoral’ market practices such as forestalling and regrating thus provided the main focus of their actions. In the second period, 1650–1739, the frequency of food riots declined markedly as population growth levelled off and agricultural productivity increased. Tudor-Stuart paternalism was reversed as pressure lessened and after the Restoration of the Crown relinquished the right to ban exports in time of dearth. The third period, 1740–1820, witnessed the ‘golden age’ of provision politics. Food riots spread from ‘veteran communities’ such as the Peak District miners and Cornish tanners to new groups including woollen workers in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The context of imperial war, demographic pressure and price increases served to inflame popular indignation. Government responded by redeploying the rhetoric and practice of paternalism, denouncing corrupt middlemen and closing ports in 1740. The export trade remained a major source of friction, hence rioters frequently attacked bolting mills. During the worst years of famine at the end of the century, central and local power elites placated a highly dangerous situation by means of extensive relief measures, including soup kitchens and co-operative mills, as well as resorting to harsh repression when such strategies failed. The tenure of the paternalist Lord Kenyon as Chief Justice (1788–1802) was symptomatic of the careful approach taken. The worst danger passed as wages recovered in the early nineteenth century and the “politics of provisions” went into decline thereafter. Rioters’ actions lost focus as shops replaced markets, working people became more concerned with wages than with prices and food issues entered the national political arena after the passing of the Corn Law in 1815. Most importantly, the strengthening of the machinery of public order also served to constrain the ability of rioters to shape events.

The work has many strengths, not least the long perspective it provides on this important subject. Bohstedt usefully links quantitative with qualitative approaches and has counted more than 700 riots across the whole period. He cautions against lumping all these complex events together in an amorphous mass and differentiates meticulously between riots, looking closely at what happened and where as well as who was involved. Bohstedt also convincingly demonstrates how market relations were subject to continual negotiation between rulers and ruled. Markets were thus simultaneously political as well as economic forms: the ‘free’ market he pithily concludes was “a political and military construct underwritten by force of arms, not the neutral ‘natural order’ of *laissez-faire* mythology” (p. 218). Nevertheless, there are many unresolved problems with this work. The first concerns organisation. The book largely consists of three long substantive chapters, the first of which is understandably based mainly on secondary sources as it covers a period outside the author’s area of expertise. The second period in Bohstedt’s schema is treated perfunctorily, as is the period from the early nineteenth century onwards, which was marked by some serious food riots as Bohstedt briefly notes. Indeed, Chartism it could be argued represented the zenith of food politics and the Chartist intellectual James Bronterre O’Brien, it may be recalled, was among those who actually first invented the concept of ‘moral economy’ in the late 1830s, as a stick with which to beat the new ‘political economy’. Not only the structure or absences give cause for concern either. Conceptually, the book “Politics of Provisions” represents a sustained engagement with Edward Thompson’s influential writings on the ‘moral econ-

omy' of the eighteenth century crowd. Bohstedt readily admits his debt to Thompson's work but argues forcefully against his notion on various counts. First, he maintains that 'moral economy' activities such as price setting were not limited to the eighteenth century but can be found as far back as 1347. In other words, what historians are dealing with are not the defensive actions of workers fighting to protect their customary rights and communities against the juggernaut of *laissez faire* capitalism as Thompson maintained but "nearly universal" phenomena prompted by the "law of necessity" (p. 262). In line with this smoothing out of difference, like many other professional historians Bohstedt substitutes the spread of 'commercialisation' for the rise of capitalism, which has become an increasingly unfashionable concept as the contemporary political culture has shifted to the right. Second, Bohstedt argues that even when it can be convincingly demonstrated that the desire to moralise market relations influenced rioters, which is only rarely according to him, crowd action was not motivated but merely 'lubricated' by ideas of moral economy, a rather fine distinction some might think. This is not a question of slavishly defending Thompson against critics who now routinely cast doubt on the validity of the idea of a moral economy – the capitalist market itself, we are frequently reminded, has always had its own moral underpinning. Thompson's seminal article was undoubtedly too broad brush, admittedly raising as many problems as it solved and Bohstedt has significantly deepened our understanding of the complex phenomena that comprised food riots with his painstaking research over the last three decades. However, the fact that the 'golden age' of food riots coincided with the triumphant advance of capitalist social relations was not accidental surely. War and food crises played a vital part certainly but the crowd's anger was no doubt sharpened by the determination of increasing numbers of the dominant elite to unashamedly defend the emerging new order. This included the Home Secretary, the Duke of Portland, who underlined in 1800 how important it was "to suppress at once, and by force, if it shall unhappily be necessary, every attempt to impede, by open acts of violence, or by intimidation, the [...] business of the Markets" (p. 230).

Peter Gurney, Colchester

Zitierempfehlung:

Peter Gurney: Rezension von: John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions. Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550–1850*, Ashgate, Farnham/Burlington 2010, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (online) 52, 2012, URL: <<http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/afs.cgi?id=81345>> [23.4.2012].