

Chapter Five

The Moral Economy Reviewed

I

The foregoing chapter was first published as an article in *Past and Present* in 1971. I have republished it without revision. I see no reason to retreat from its findings. And it has now entered into the stream of subsequent historical scholarship — it has been criticised and extensions of its theses have been proposed. It would confuse the record if I were to alter a text upon which commentary depends.

But some comment on my commentators is required. And also upon significant work which approaches the same problems, with little or no reference to my own. This is not a simple matter. For the “market” turns out to be a junction-point between social, economic and intellectual histories, and a sensitive metaphor for many kinds of exchange. The “moral economy” leads us not into a single argument but into a concourse of arguments, and it will not be possible to do justice to every voice.

A word first about my essay. Although first published in 1971 I commenced work on it in 1963 while awaiting proofs of *The Making of the English Working Class*. The project started then, for a joint study of British and French grain riots in the 1790s, in collaboration with Richard Cobb whose fine *Terreur et Subsistances, 1793-1795* came out in 1964. He was then in Leeds and I was in Halifax and Gwyn A. Williams (then in Aberystwyth) was also enlisted as a collaborator in the project. I don't remember how or when the project fell through, except that each member of the triumvirate moved in a different direction, Richard Cobb to Oxford, Gwyn Williams to York and myself to the University



HINTS TO FORESTALLERS, OR A SURE WAY TO reduce the PRICE OF GRAIN!!

Based on an incident in Bishop's-Clyst, Devon, in August 1800. There was a long tradition in Devon of crowds scouring the countryside and visiting farmers reputed to be hoarding corn, and threatening them with rope. Women are shown to be prominent in this action.

of Warwick. By 1970, when Cobb published his *The Police and the People*, our plan had certainly been dropped. There need be no regret for the failure of my part in that project to come to a conclusion, since Roger Wells has now explored every aspect of food and its mediations in England in the 1790s in copious detail in his *Wretched Faces* (1988).

But this explanation serves to place my essay, which was an enterprise not marginal but central to my research interests for nearly ten years. My files bulge with material collected on mills and marketing and meal mobs, etc., but since much of this repeats the evidence adduced in my article, it need not now be deployed. But a lot of work underlay my findings, and I may be forgiven if I am impatient with trivial objections.

II

It may be necessary to restate what my essay was about. It was not about *all* kinds of crowd, and a reader would have to be unusually thick-headed who supposed so.¹ It was about the crowd's "moral economy" in a context which the article defines. Nor was it about English and Welsh food riots in the eighteenth century — their where, why and when? — although it was certainly concerned with these. My object of analysis was the *mentalité*, or, as I would prefer, the political culture, the expectations, traditions, and, indeed, superstitions of the working population most frequently involved in actions in the market; and the relations — sometimes negotiations — between crowd and rulers which go under the unsatisfactory term of "riot". My method was to reconstruct a paternalist model of food marketing, with protective institutional expression and with emergency

¹ Mark Harrison reprimands me for applying the term "crowd" to what was "a very specific category of mass formation": *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790-1835* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 13. I followed George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm in preferring the term "crowd" to the pejorative "mob" which some previous historians had used. No-one ever supposed that all crowds were riotous, although Harrison's attention to their variety is helpful. Harrison also pronounces that my article "has a number of shortcomings, which will be examined more fully in chapter 6". Since chapter 6 does not mention my article, and the shortcomings are identified nowhere else in his book, I am still waiting for the blow to fall.

routines in time of dearth, which derived in part from earlier Edwardian and Tudor policies of provision and market-regulation; to contrast this with the new political economy of the free market in grain, associated above all with *The Wealth of Nations*; and to show how, in times of high prices and of hardship, the crowd might enforce, with a robust direct action, protective market-control and the regulation of prices, sometimes claiming a legitimacy derived from the paternalist model.

To understand the actions of any particular crowd may require attention to particular market-places and particular practices in dealing. But to understand the "political" space in which the crowd might act and might negotiate with the authorities must attend upon a larger analysis of the relations between the two. The findings in "The Moral Economy" cannot be taken straight across to any "peasant market" nor to all proto-industrial market-places nor to Revolutionary France in the Years II and II nor to nineteenth-century Madras. Some of the encounters between growers, dealers and consumers were markedly similar, but I have described them as they were worked out within the given field-of-force of eighteenth-century English relations.

My essay did not offer a comprehensive overview of food riots in England in that century; it did not (for example) correlate the incidence of riots with price movements, nor explain why riot was more common in some regions than in others, nor attempt to chart a dozen other variables. Abundant new evidence on such questions has been brought forward in recent years, and much of it has been helpfully brought under examination in Andrew Charlesworth's *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548-1900* (1983). Dr John Stevenson complains that "The Moral Economy" tells us "virtually nothing about why some places were almost perennially subject to disturbances, whilst others remained almost completely undisturbed",¹ but this was not the

¹ J. Stevenson, "Food Riots in England, 1792-1818", in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), p. 67. Also J. Stevenson, "The 'Moral Economy' of the English Crowd: Myth and Reality", in Anthony Fletcher and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985) — an essay which adds little to the discussion.

essay's theme. Nor is there any sense in which the findings of scholars (such as Dr Stevenson) who have been addressing such themes must necessarily contradict or compete with my own. Economic and social historians are not engaged in rival party-political performances, although one might sometimes suppose so. The study of wages and prices and the study of norms and expectations can complement each other.

There are still a few ineducable positivists lingering about who do not so much disagree with the findings of social historians as they wish to disallow their questions. They propose that only one set of directly economic explanations of food riots — questions relating to the grain trade, harvests, market prices, etc., is needed or is even proper to be asked. An odd example is a short essay published by Dale Williams in 1976 entitled "Were 'Hunger' Rioters Really Hungry?".¹ In this he described my "moral economy" as intended as "a replacement" for an economic or quantitative approach. He had somehow got it into his head that riots must *either* be about hunger *or* about "social issues involving local usages and traditional rights". But it will be recalled that I warn against precisely this confusion at the outset of my essay, using the analogy of a sexual tension chart: "the objection is that such a chart, if used unwisely, may conclude investigation at the exact point at which it becomes of serious sociological or cultural interest: being hungry (or being sexy), what do people do?" (p. 187). *Of course* food rioters were hungry — and on occasion coming close to starvation. But this does not tell us how their behaviour is "modified by custom, culture and reason".

Nevertheless, this illustrates one point which we take far too easily for granted. Comparative study of food riots has been, inevitably, into the history of nations which *had* riots. There has been less comparative reflection upon national histories which afford evidence — and sometimes evidence sadly plentiful — of dearth passing into famine without passing through any phase in which riots of the West-European kind have been noted. Famines have been suffered in the past (as in Ireland and in India) and are suffered today

in several parts of Africa, as our television screens reveal, with a fatalism sometimes mistaken for apathy or resignation. It is not only that beyond a certain point the undernourished have no physical or emotional resources for riot. (For this reason riot must take place *before* people are so weakened, and it may presuppose a watchful estimate of future supply and of market prices.) It is also that riot is a group, community, or class response to crisis; it is not within the power of a few individuals to riot. Nor need it be the only or the most obvious form of collective action — there may be alternatives such as the mass-petitioning of the authorities, fast days, sacrifices and prayer; perambulation of the houses of the rich; or the migration of whole villages.

Riot need not be favoured within the culture of the poor. It might provoke the gods (who had already sent dearth as a "Judgement"), and it could certainly alienate the governors or the rich from whom alone some small relief might come. An oncoming harvest failure would be watched with fear and awe. "Hunger employs its own outriders. Those who have already experienced it can see it announced, not only in the sky, but in the fields, scrutinized each year with increasing anxiety, week by week during the hot summer months. . ."¹ In the eighteenth century Britain was only emerging from the "demographic *ancien régime*", with its periodical visitations of famine and of plague, and dearth revived age-old memories and fears. Famine could place the whole social order on the rack, and the rulers were tested by their response to it. Indeed, by visible and well-advertised exertions the rulers might actually strengthen their authority during dearth, as John Walter and Keith Wrightson have argued from seventeenth-century examples. Central government, by issuing proclamations, invoking the successive regulations which became known as the *Book of Orders*, and proclaiming national days of fast, and the local authorities by a flurry of highly-visible activity against petty offenders ranging from badgers, forestallers and regrators to drunkards, swearers, sabbath-breakers, gamblers and rogues, might actually gain

¹ *Past and Present*, no. 71, May 1976.

¹ R. C. Cobb, *The Police and the People* (Oxford, 1970), p. 323. For a comparative overview, see David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (Oxford, 1988).

credibility among that part of the population persuaded that dearth was a judgement of God.¹ At the least, the authorities made a public display of their concern. At the best, they might restrain rising prices or persuade farmers to release stocks to the open market.

Riot may even be a signal that the *ancien régime* is ending, since there is food in barns or granaries or barges to be seized or to be got to market, and some bargaining to be done about its price. True famine (where there really is no stock of food) is not often attended with riot, since there are few rational targets for the rioters. In the pastoral North-West of England as late as the 1590s and 1620s the population appears to have suffered from famine mortality. But "the poor. . . starved to death quietly, & created no problems of order for their governors".² In the Irish famine of 1845-7 there were a few anti-export riots in the early stages,³ but the Irish people could be congratulated in the Queen's speech in 1847 for having suffered with "patience and resignation". Riot is

¹ John Walter and Keith Wrightson, "Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England", *Past and Present*, 71 (1976). See also (for a sharper assertion of authority) John Walter, "Grain Riots and Popular Attitudes to the Law: Maldon and the Crisis of 1629" in John Brewer and John Styles (eds.), *An Ungovernable People* (1980). For the *Book of Orders*, see A. Everitt, "The Marketing of Agricultural Produce", in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. iv, 1500-1640 (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 581-6; P. Slack, "The Book of Orders: The Making of English Social Policy, 1577-1631", *TRHS*, xxx (1980); R. B. Outhwaite, "Food Crisis in Early Modern England: Patterns of Public Response", *Proceedings of the Seventh International Economic History Congress* (Edinburgh, 1978), pp. 367-74; R. B. Outhwaite, "Dearth and Government Intervention in English Grain Markets, 1590-1700", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, xxxiii, 3 (1981); and Buchanan Sharp, "Popular Protest in 17th-Century England", in Barry Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in 17th-Century England* (1985), esp. pp. 274-289. Sharp argues (p. 279) that seventeenth century food riots "were often attempts to enforce officially-sanctioned market regulations and can be regarded, in many instances, not as attacks upon established order but as efforts to reinforce it".

² Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 275; A. B. Appleby, in the classic account of famine mortality in Cumberland and Westmorland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, reports no disturbances: see *Famine in Tudor and Stuart England* (Liverpool, 1978).

³ Cecil Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger* (1970), pp. 120-1; James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork* (1975), pp. 89-91.

usually a rational response, and it takes place, not among helpless or hopeless people, but among those groups who sense that they have a little power to help themselves, as prices soar, employment fails, and they can see their staple food supply being exported from the district.

The passivity of the victims of famine is noted also in Asia. Under the *ancien régime* of famine in the East (as in the terrible Orissa famine of 1770) districts were depopulated by deaths and fugitives. The ryots fled the land to which they were tied. "Day and night a torrent of famished and disease-stricken wretches poured into the great cities." Those who stayed on the land

Sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed-grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till at length no buyer of children could be found; they ate the leaves of the trees and the grass of the field. . .

But they did not (in the sense that we have been using) riot. Nor did they riot in the Bengal famine of 1866, when "many a rural household starved slowly to death without uttering a complaint or making a sign", just as there are tales of the West of Ireland in 1847 where whole families walled themselves up in their cabins to die.¹

In the Bengal famine of 1873-4, the people turned to government as the only possible provider. Over 400,000 settled down along the lines of relief roads, pleading for relief and work: "they dreaded quitting the road, which they imagined to be the only place where subsistence could be obtained". At one place the line of carts bringing in the famine-struck from the villages stretched for twenty miles. At first there was screaming from the women and children, and begging for coin or grain. Later, the people were "seated on the ground, row after row, thousand upon thousand, in silence. . .".²

¹ W. H. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (1883), i, pp. 26-27. Many of the poor in the western counties of Ireland were overcome by fever in their own homes: see Sir W. P. MacArthur, "Medical History of the Famine", in R. D. Edwards and T. D. Williams (eds.), *The Great Famine* (Dublin, 1956), esp. pp. 270-89.

² Sir Richard Temple, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, memorandum on the scarcity of 1873-4, *Extra Supplement of the Gazette of India*, 26 Feb. 1875, pp. 25, 56-7.

There is not one simple, "animal", response to hunger. Even in Bengal the evidence is contradictory and difficult to interpret. There is some evidence of the male heads of household abandoning their families (below p. 347), and other accounts of intense familial solidarities and of self-abnegation. A relief worker in rural Bengal in 1915 gives us a common story:

At noon I sat down at the foot of a tree to eat my bit of lunch. . . . The people spotted me and long before I had finished there was a crowd of starving people around me. I did not finish it. I had a loaf of bread with me and. . . I gave the rest to the children. One little chap took his share and immediately broke it up into four pieces for his mother, two sisters and himself, leaving by far the smallest portion for himself.¹

This is a learned response to hunger, which even the small children know. Begging, in which the children again are assigned their roles, is another learned response, or strategy. So also may be threats to the wealthy, or the theft of food-stuffs.²

"Riot" — itself a clumsy term which may conceal more than it reveals — is not a "natural" or "obvious" response to hunger but a sophisticated pattern of collective behaviour, a collective alternative to individualistic and familial strategies of survival. Of course hunger rioters were hungry, but hunger does not dictate that they must riot nor does it determine riot's forms.

In 1984 Dale E. Williams launched a direct assault on "The Moral Economy" in an article in *Past and Present* under the title "Morals, Markets and the English Crowd in 1766".³ The article draws a little upon his own substantial doctoral thesis on "English Hunger Riots in 1766" presented in 1978. But its intent is mainly polemical, and it is tedious to find that, after nearly two decades, one is invited to return to square one and to argue everything through again.

Andrew Charlesworth and Adrian Randall have been kind enough to correct the record and to point out Williams's

¹J. Mitchell, *Bankura Wesleyan College Magazine*, January 1916.

²Much curious and contradictory evidence as to responses to famine is in Robert Dirks, "Social Response during Severe Food Shortages and Famines", *Current Anthropology*, xxi (1980), pp. 21-44.

³*Past and Present*, 104 (1984).

self-contradictions.¹ To their critique I will only add that several of his sallies appear to be directed against his own findings in his doctoral thesis. So far from refuting my account of norms and behaviour, the crowds in Williams's thesis conform to the account in "The Moral Economy". Given high prices and the advance signals of dearth, the West of England clothing workers inhibited further exports of grain from the district, regulated markets with unusual discipline, forcibly persuaded farmers to send supplies to market, made certain of the authorities — including Mr Dalloway, the High Sheriff of Gloucestershire — for a time the "prisoners" of their demands, stimulated local measures of charity and relief, and (if I read Dr Williams aright) may have prevented dearth from passing into famine. And if Dale Williams wants examples of the crowd being informed by concern for "local usages and traditional rights" he need only turn to Dale Williams's thesis where he will find sufficient examples, such as the crowd punishing millers by destroying their bolting machinery, as well as an Appendix of anonymous letters full of threats against broggers, fore-stallers, regrators, corn hoarders, sample sales, and the rest.²

Dr Williams has brought no issues of principle into debate, he is simply confused as to the questions which he is asking. There may also be a little ideological pressure behind his polemic. When I first published "The Moral Economy", "the market" was not flying as high in the ideological firmament as it is today. In the 1970s something called "modernisation theory" swept through some undefended minds in Western academies, and subsequently the celebration of "the market economy" has become triumphal and almost universal. This renewed confidence in "the market" can be found in

¹A. Charlesworth and Adrian Randall, "Morals, Markets and the English Crowd in 1766", *Past and Present*, 114 (1987), pp. 200-13. On the 1766 riots see also A. J. Randall, "The Gloucestershire Food Riots in 1766", *Midland History*, x (1985); W. J. Shelton, *English Hunger & Industrial Disorder* (1973), and reviews of Shelton by myself in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd series, xxvii (1974), pp. 480-4 and by Peter Linebaugh in *Bull. Soc. Lab. Hist.*, 28 (1974), pp. 57-61.

²Univ. of Wales Ph.D. thesis, 1978. Dale Williams's excellent article on "Midland Hunger Riots in 1766" in *Midland History*, iii, 4 (1976), might even have been written in illustration of the moral economy thesis. What happened between 1976 and 1984 to change the events of 1766?

Dr Williams's article, where I am rebuked for failing to pay "sufficient attention to the *systems* which produce wealth". "The riot groups of 1766 were. . . all participants in a capitalist market system which, by the 1760s, was developed to a pitch of refinement unmatched elsewhere in the world." "The Moral Economy" has become suspect because it explored with sympathy alternative economic imperatives to those of the capitalist market "system". . . and offered one or two sceptical comments as to the infallibility of Adam Smith.

Similar questions worried more courteous critics shortly after "The Moral Economy" was published: Professors A. W. Coats and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. I did not reply to either comment, since the arrows flew past my ear. Professor Coats¹ devoted his comment to rehearsing Smithian doctrine on the internal trade in grain, in terms of its logical consistency (but without recourse to empirical confirmation), and he repeated uncritically the statement that "high prices resulted mainly from physical shortages", as if this explanation of price movements suffices for all cases. But, as we shall see (pp. 283-7), it does not. Then Coats debated my notion as to the "de-moralizing of the theory of trade and consumption" implicit in the model of the new political economy. What I say (above, pp. 201-2) is this:

By 'de-moralising' it is not suggested that Smith and his colleagues were immoral or were unconcerned for the public good. It is meant, rather, that the new political economy was disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives. The old pamphleteers were moralists first and economists second. In the new economic theory questions as to the moral polity of marketing do not enter, unless as preamble and peroration.

Coats takes this to imply an acceptance on my part of the credentials of "positive" economics, as a science purged of norms, and he reminds me of the "moral background and implications of Smith's economic analysis". But I had not forgotten that Smith was also author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). I had supposed that Coats's point had been met in a footnote (above p. 202) in which I had allowed Smith's intention to serve the public good but had added that "intention is a bad measure of ideological interest and of

¹A. W. Coats, "Contrary Moralities: Plebs, Paternalists and Political Economists", *Past and Present*, 54 (1972), pp. 130-3.

historical consequences". It is perfectly possible that *laissez-faire* doctrines as to the food trade could have been *both* normative in intent (i.e. Adam Smith believed they would encourage cheap and abundant food) *and* ideological in outcome (i.e. in the result their supposedly de-moralised scientism was used to mask and to apologise for other self-interested operations).

I would have thought that my views were commonplace. The Tudor policies of "provision" cannot be seen, in a modern sense, as an "economic" strategy only: they depended also on theories of the State, of the reciprocal obligations and duties of governors and governed in times of dearth, and of paternalist social control; they still, in the early seventeenth century, had strong religious or magical components. In the period 1700-1760, with the dominance of mercantilist theory, we are in a kind of middle passage of theory. The magical components of the Tudor theory became much weaker. And the social location of the theory became more ambiguous; while some traditionalist gentry and magistrates invoked it in times of dearth, the authority of the theory was fast eroding as any acceptable account of normal marketing practice. The paternal obligations of "provision" were at odds with the mercantilist imperative to maximise the export of grain. At the same time there was a certain migration of the theory from the rulers to the crowd.

Nevertheless, the form of much economic argument remained (on all sides) moralistic: it validated itself at most points with reference to moral imperatives (what obligations the state, or the landowners, or the dealers *ought* to obey). Such imperatives permeated economic thinking very generally, and this is familiar to any student of economic thought. One historian has written that

Economic theory owes its present development to the fact that some men, in thinking of economic phenomena, forcefully suspended all judgments of theology, morality, and justice, were willing to consider the economy as nothing more than an intricate mechanism, refraining for the while from asking whether the mechanism worked for good or evil.¹

¹W. Letwin, *The Origins of Scientific Economics* (1963), pp. 147-8. See however Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 258-9 for qualifications.

Joyce Appleby has shown the moral economy "in retreat" in the mid-seventeenth century, but the tension between norms and "mechanism" once again became marked in the eighteenth. A *locus classicus* is the scandal provoked by Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, which, by its equation private vices = public benefits, sought exactly to divorce moral imperatives on the one hand and economic process on the other. This was felt by some to be an outrage to official morality; by demystifying economic process it would strip authority of its paternal legitimacy; and the book was presented, in 1723, by the Grand Jury of Middlesex as a public nuisance.

Thus the notion of "economics" as a non-normative object of study, with objective-mechanism independent of moral imperatives, was separating itself off from traditionalist theory during the mercantilist period, and with great difficulty: in some areas it did this with less difficulty (national book-keeping, arguments about trade and bullion), but in areas which related to internal distribution of the prime necessities of life the difficulties were immense. For if the rulers were to deny their own duties and functions in protecting the poor in time of dearth, then they might devalue the legitimacy of their rule. So tenaciously and strongly was this view held that as late as 1800 the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Kenyon, pronounced that the fact that forestalling remained an offence at Common Law "is a thing most essential to the existence of the country". "When the people knew there was a law to resort to, it composed their minds" and removed the threat of "insurrection".¹ This is an argument, not from economics and not even from law, but from the highest reasons of State.

The "morality" of Adam Smith was never the matter at issue, but — in relation to the internal trade in grain — the terms and the vocabulary, indeed the problematic of that argument. "The market economy created new moral problems", Professor Atiyah has written, and "it may not have been so obvious then, as it became later, that this was not so much to separate morality and economics, as to adopt

¹Douglas Hay, "The State and the Market: Lord Kenyon and Mr. Waddington", *Past and Present* (forthcoming).

a particular type of morality in the interests of a particular type of economy".¹ Perhaps I might have made it more clear that "preamble and peroration" had real significance in the intentions of the classical political economists: these were something more than rhetorical devices. Professor Coats's reminder that Smithian economics "were securely grounded in the liberal-moral philosophy of the eighteenth-century enlightenment" has in recent years become a centre for intense academic interest and we will return to it.

Maybe the trouble lies with the word "moral". "Moral" is a signal which brings on a rush of polemical blood to the academic head. Nothing has made my critics angrier than the notion that a food rioter might have been more "moral" than a disciple of Dr Adam Smith. But that was not my meaning (whatever the judgement might have been in the eye of God). I was discriminating between two different sets of assumptions, two differing discourses, and the evidence for the difference is abundant. I wrote of "a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor" (above p. 188). To this were added a dense tissue of precedents and of practices in the sequence of food marketing. I could perhaps have called this "a socio-logical economy", and an economy in its original meaning (*oeconomy*) as the due organisation of a household, in which each part is related to the whole and each member acknowledges her/his several duties and obligations. That, indeed, is as much, or more, "political" than is "political economy", but by usage the classical economists have carried off the term.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's arrow flies past my ear for much the same reason.² She finds that both traditional and classical economics can be said to be "moral" (at least in their own self-image) and also that both were "part of larger ruling class ideologies". There is not much here that conflicts with,

¹P. S. Atiyah, *The Rise and Fall of Freedom of Contract* (Oxford, 1979), p. 84.

²Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Many Faces of Moral Economy", *Past and Present*, 58 (1973).

or even engages with, my arguments, and perhaps Fox-Genovese's real difference of emphasis lies in her feeling that I "lean towards a romantic view of the traditionalists". My tendency "to favour the paternalists" leads me to overlook that "if the rise of a market society brought indisputable horrors, it also brought an emphasis on individual freedom of choice, the right to self-betterment, eventually the opportunity to political participation".

That is also what we are assured — or used to be assured — by the modernisation theorists. And *of course* the rioters were already deeply involved, in some part of their lives, in a market economy's exchanges of labour, services, and of goods. (I will refrain from mentioning those critics who have put up the fat-headed notion that there has been proposed an absolute segregation between a moral and a market economy, to save their blushes.¹) But before we go on to consider all these undoubted human goods we should delay with the market as dispenser of subsistence in time of dearth, which alone is relevant to my theme. For despite all the discourse that goes on about "the market" or "market relations", historiographical interest in the actual marketing of grain, flour or bread is little more evident today than it was in 1971.²

¹One is reminded of David Thorner's wise caveat: "We are sure to go astray, if we try to conceive of peasant economies as exclusively 'subsistence' oriented and to suspect capitalism wherever the peasants show evidence of being 'market' oriented. It is much sounder to take it for granted, as a starting point, that for ages peasant economies have had a double orientation towards both. In this way, much fruitless discussion about the nature of so-called 'subsistence' economies can be avoided". Would that the same warning was borne in mind in discussions of "proto-industrial" economies! See "Peasant Economy as a Category in History", in Teodor Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1987), p. 65.

²The outstanding exception is Wendy Thwaites, "The Marketing of Agricultural Produce in Eighteenth Century Oxfordshire" (Univ. of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 1980). See also the same author's "Dearth and the Marketing of Agricultural Produce: Oxfordshire, c. 1750-1800", *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xxxiii (1985), pt. ii; John Chartres, "Markets and Marketing in Metropolitan Western England in the late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", in Michael Havinden (ed.), *Husbandry and Marketing in the South-West* (Exeter, 1973), pp. 63-74, and John Chartres, "The Marketing of Agricultural Produce", in Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. v, pt. 2 (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 17. The silence as

Is market *a* market or is market a metaphor? Of course it can be both, but too often discourse about "the market" conveys the sense of something definite — a space or institution of exchange (perhaps London's Corn Exchange at Mark Lane?) — when in fact, sometimes unknown to the term's user, it is being employed as a metaphor of economic process, or an idealisation or abstraction from that process. Perhaps to acknowledge this second usage, Burke sometimes employed the word without the definite article:

Market is the meeting and conference of the *consumer* and *producer*, when they mutually discover each other's wants. Nobody, I believe, has observed with any reflection what market is, without being astonished at the truth, the correctness, the civility, the general equity, with which the balance of wants is settled. . . The moment that government appears at market, all the principles of market will be subverted.¹

That is loop-language: it is wholly self-fulfilling. And much the same feedback loop-language is being used today in the higher theorising of market relations. Political economy has its sophisticated intellectual genealogies, and the history of political economy is a vigorous academic discourse with its own journals and its controversies and conferences, in which changes are rung on approved themes: Pufendorf, Virtue, natural law, Pocock, Grotius, the Physiocrats, Pocock, Adam Smith. These chimes have fascination, and for the bell-ringers it is an admirable mental exercise, but the peal can become so compelling that it drowns out other sounds. Intellectual history, like economic history before it, becomes imperialist and seeks to over-run all social life. It is necessary to pause, from time to time, to recall that how people thought their times need not have been the same as how those times eventuated. And how some people thought "market" does not prove that market took place in that way. Because Adam Smith offered "a clear analytical demonstration of

to corn milling has at last broken by John Orbell, "The Corn Milling Industry, 1750-1820", in C. H. Feinstein and S. Pollard (eds.), *Studies in Capital Formation in the United Kingdom* (Oxford, 1988), which shows (p. 162) the rapidly rising rate of annual capital investment in milling, from 1761 rising to a peak in the dearth (and riot) year of 1801.

¹Edmund Burke, "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity" (1795), in *Works* (1801), vii, pp. 348-51.

how markets in subsistence goods and labour could balance themselves out in a manner consistent with strict justice and the natural law of humanity"¹ this does not show that any empirically observable market worked out in that way. Nor does it tell us how strict justice to the rights of property could balance with natural humanity to labouring people.

Messrs Hont and Ignatieff, in the course of a prestigious research project into "Political Economy and Society, 1750-1850" at King's College, Cambridge, have fallen across my "Moral Economy" article and they rebuke it for failing to conform to the parameters of Cambridge political thought:

By recovering the moral economy of the poor and the regulatory system to which they made appeal, Thompson has set the iconoclasm of the Smithian position in sharp relief, crediting him with the first theory to revoke the traditional social responsibility attached to property. Yet the antinomy — moral economy versus political economy — caricatures both positions. The one becomes a vestigial, traditional moralism, the other a science 'disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives'. To the extent that favouring an adequate subsistence for the poor can be called a moral imperative, it was one shared by paternalists and political economists alike. . . . On the other hand, to call the moral economy traditionalist is to portray it simply as a set of vestigial moral preferences innocent of substantive argument about the working of markets. In fact, so-called traditionalists were quite capable of arguing their position on the same terrain as their political economist opponents. Indeed, and this is the crucial point, debate over market or 'police' strategies for providing subsistence for the poor divided philosophers and political economists among themselves no less deeply than it divided the crowd for Smith. Indeed, it makes no sense to take Smith as typical of the range of opinion within the European Enlightenment camp. This becomes apparent if one moves beyond the English context, to which Thompson confines his discussion, and considers the debate in its full European setting. The crucial context for Smith's 'Digression on Grain' was not the encounter with the English or Scottish crowd, but the French debates over the liberalization of the internal trade in 1764-6, which occurred. . . . when Smith himself was in France.²

There are some wilful confusions here. The first point to make about this passage is that, just as much as with the ineducable positivists, it is not so much offering to debate my

views as to disallow my questions. Hont and Ignatieff prefer to operate in a detached discipline of political ideas and rhetoric. They do not wish to know how ideas presented themselves as actors in the market-place, between producers, middlemen and consumers, and they imply that this is an improper light in which to view them. It may be "the crucial point" for Hont and Ignatieff that debate over market strategies divided philosophers among themselves no less deeply than it divided the crowd from Smith, but my essay is about the crowd and not about philosophers. Hont and Ignatieff are rebuking me for writing an essay in social history and in popular culture instead of in approved Cambridge themes. I ought to have grabbed a bell-rope and pealed out Quesnay along with Pufendorf, Pocock, Grotius, Hume and the rest.

Even so, Hont and Ignatieff's censures are sloppier than the case calls for. So far from "crediting" Adam Smith "with the first theory to revoke the traditional social responsibility attached to property" (their words, not mine) I am at pains to note the opposite, describing the *Wealth of Nations* "not only as a point of departure but also as a grand central terminus to which many important lines of discussion in the middle of the eighteenth century. . . all run". (Above p. 201.) It is in fact Hont and Ignatieff, and not Thompson, who write that "by 1776, Smith remained the only standard-bearer for 'natural liberty' in grain",¹ a spectacular misstatement which they reach by confusing the British context with the French context in the aftermath of the *guerre des farines*. As for portraying the "moral economy" as "a set of vestigial moral preferences innocent of substantive argument about the working of markets", the trouble is, once again, the vulgarity of the crowd. They were not philosophers. They did, as my essay shows, have substantive and knowledgeable arguments about the working of markets, but about actual markets rather than theorised market relations. I am not persuaded that Hont and Ignatieff have read very far in the pamphlets and newspapers — let alone in the crowd relations — where these arguments will be found and I do not know what business they have to put me, or the crowd, down.

¹Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, "Needs and Justice in *The Wealth of Nations*", in I. Hont and M. Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 42.

I did not, of course, take Smith as "typical of the range of opinion within the European Enlightenment camp". I took Smith's "Digression Concerning the Corn Trade" in Book Four, Chapter 5, of *The Wealth of Nations* as being the most lucid expression in English of the standpoint of the new political economy upon market relations in subsistence food-stuffs. As such it was profoundly influential within British governmental circles, and few chapters can have had a more palpable influence upon policies or have been used more extensively to justify policies which were already being enacted. Pitt and Grenville read it together in the 1780s and became wholly converted; when Pitt wavered in the crisis year 1800 Grenville called him back to their old faith.¹ Burke was an ardent adherent and had reached similar positions independently; he had been, in 1772, a prime mover in the repeal of the ancient forestalling legislation, and he was to moralise the "laws" of political economy and nominate them to be divine.² In the nineteenth century class after class of administrators were sent out to India, fully indoctrinated at Haileybury College in Smith's "Digression", and ready to respond to the vast exigencies of Indian famine by resolutely resisting any improper interventions in the free operation of the market. T. R. Malthus, appointed Professor of Political Economy at Haileybury in 1805, was an early and apt instructor.

Hont and Ignatieff know that "the crucial context" for Smith's digression "was not the encounter with the English or Scottish crowd, but the French debates over the liberalization of the internal trade in 1764-6". I wonder how they know? A French philosophic influence is more reputable than an English or Scottish crowd, and of course Adam Smith was profoundly influenced by physiocratic thought. The influence of "the French debates" may be guessed at, but is not evident in the few pages of Smith's digression. The debate about the liberalisation of trade had proceeded in England

¹ See Roger Wells, *Wretched Faces* (Gloucester, 1988), p. 88.

² See Douglas Hay, "The State and the Market", *op. cit.*; C. B. Macpherson, *Burke* (Oxford, 1980), *passim*; Burke, "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity", p. 354: "the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God".

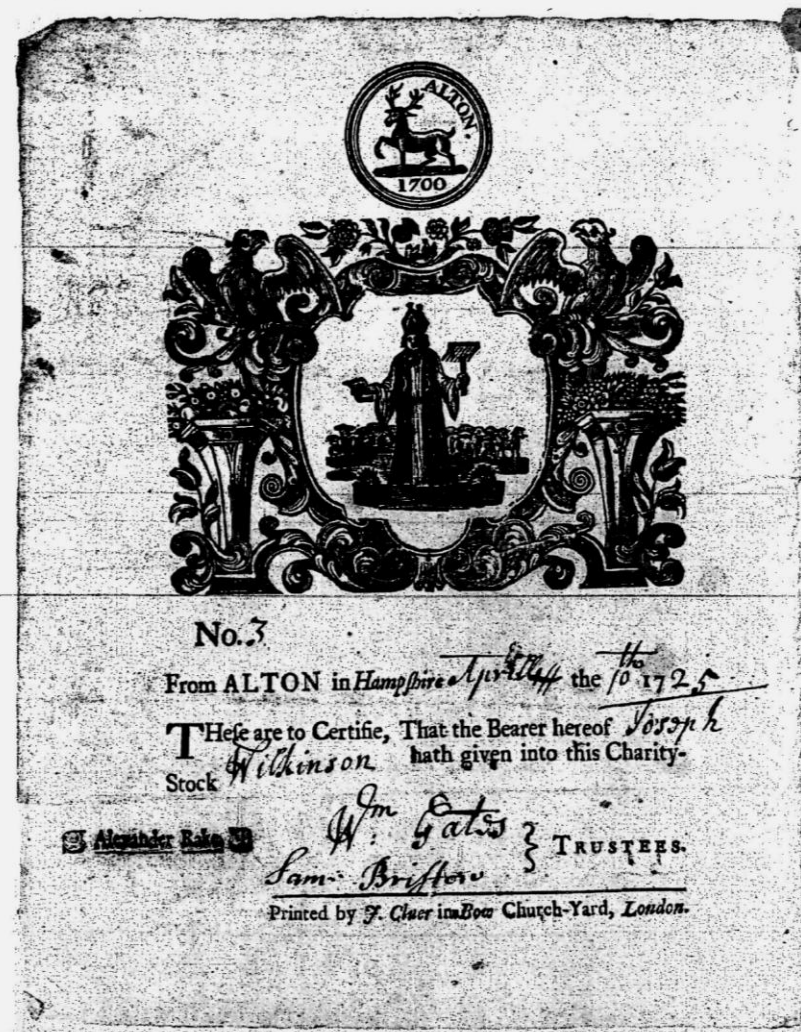


Plate I. One of the earliest surviving trade union cards, which was filed among the Crown's affidavits when woolcombers were prosecuted in 1725 in Alton, Hants. (See p. 59.) Note that the union (or "Charity") has a London printer and claims to have been founded in 1700. Bishop Blaize, the patron of the woolcombers, is in the centre.



Plate XXXII. *Punch's* "physiology of courtship": it is intended to typify the English manner of courtship as conceived by the French and Germans. The scene is Smithfield market: on the right "Lord the Honourable Sir Brown (eldest son of the Lord Mayor) is making in the cold and formal fashion of his compatriots, a declaration of his sentiments to a young miss, daughter of a duke. . ." On the left "may be perceived a church dignitary in a fit of the spleen disposing of his wife, for ready cash, to a field-marshal — sad, but only too frequent Result, of our insular Incompatability of Temper".

and Scotland also, and had become more heated at the time of the dearth of 1756-7, when many English local authorities had symbolically enforced some of the old protective legislation.¹ As it happens the only authority cited by Smith in his digression is not a French physiocrat but Charles Smith, whose *Three Tracts on the Corn Trade* date from 1758 (above p. 201). Adam Smith is likely to have been influenced in his market theories by Scottish experience as well as French, but the digression is argued almost wholly in terms of English practices and laws.²

My essay was taken by some to be derogatory both to Adam Smith and to the "free market", which is a very great personage these days. But my comments were deferential, mild and agnostic. They were offered

Not in refutation of Adam Smith, but simply to indicate places where caution should be exercised until our knowledge is greater. We need say only of the *laissez-faire* model that it is empirically unproven; inherently unlikely; and that there is some evidence on the other side (p. 207).

There is no final historical verdict after more than two hundred years, because Adam Smith theorised a state of perfect competition and the world is still waiting for this state to arrive.

But, even if we were to suppose market conditions more perfect, there are peculiarities in the market for the necessities of subsistence which raise their own theoretical

¹Adam Smith's "real contact" with the French thinkers came during his visit to Paris, December 1765 to October 1766: see Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford, 1976), i, pp. 22-3, note 8. He will therefore have been absent from Britain during the height of the 1766 rioting. But Smith himself insisted that his views of *laissez-faire* were already formed in 1749: see Jacob Viner, *The Long View and the Short* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1958), p. 215.

²Even Smith's famous comparison of the popular prejudices against forestallers to belief in "witchcraft" might have been borrowed from an earlier pamphleteer: see *Reflections on the Present High Price of Provisions; and the complaints and disturbances arising therefrom* (1766), p. 39, which refers also to witchcraft and notes that in the Commission for the appointment of magistrates "inchantments, sorceries, arts of magic, forestalling, regratings, and ingrossings are ranged together, as offences of a similar nature, because they were committed by wicked persons, in a manner both amazing and unknown".

problems. The question is not whether, in the long run, it is not advantageous to all parties for communications to be improved and for national and, in the end, international markets in grain or in rice to be formed. As soon as that question is proposed the answer is self-evident. . . and we are into a feedback loop. Direct obstruction of this flow, whether by local authorities or by the crowd, could be plainly reactionary. But dearth and famine are always in the short run and not the long. And Adam Smith has only long-run remedies (such as high prices encouraging the breaking-up of more acres for grain) for short-run crisis. By 1776, when *The Wealth of Nations* was published, the desirability of a more fluent national commerce in grain had become a truism. What were disputed (in France as in England), were the measures the authorities might or should take in times of high prices and dearth. Here there were wide disagreements, not only between traditionalists (and of course the crowd) and political economists, but also — as Hont and Ignatieff very helpfully show — within the ranks of the political economists.¹

Adam Smith took a sterner and more doctrinaire position on the inviolability of *laissez-faire* even during times of dearth than did many of his colleagues. He insisted that the interests of dealers (inland) and the “great body of the people” were “exactly the same”, “even in years of the greatest scarcity”. “The unlimited, unrestricted freedom of the corn trade, as it is the only effectual preventive of the miseries of a famine so it is the best palliative of the inconvenience of a dearth.”² Smith was not, “the only standard-bearer for ‘natural liberty’ in grain” but he was one of the more extreme standard-bearers for this liberty to remain uncontrolled even in times of great scarcity. And he must have known very well that it was exactly this point of emergency measures in time of dearth that was most controversial. His notable forerunner in developing *Political Oeconomy*, Sir James Steuart, had refused this fence, and

¹Hont and Ignatieff, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-19.

²These passages are selected for emphasis by Salim Rashid in “The Policy of *Laissez-faire* during Scarcities”, *Economic Journal*, 90 (1980), pp. 493-503.

was an advocate of the stockpiling of grain in public granaries for sale in time of dearth.¹ Smith's successor and biographer, Dugald Stewart, was a true executor when he lectured in unqualified terms on the “unlimited liberty of the corn trade” right through the crisis year of 1800.² On this question Adam Smith was neither “vulgarised” nor “misunderstood”.

It is not (as some accounts imply) the total theoretical structure of *The Wealth of Nations* which is at issue, but the few pages of Smith's digression on the corn trade in that treatise. These pages acquired oracular authority, and in each episode of scarcity — in Britain in 1795 and 1800, in Ireland, India and the Colonial Empire through much of the nineteenth century — these were the arguments which politicians and administrators rehearsed. In Britain in the 1790s both Government and Foxite opposition endorsed these arguments, and when the Home Secretary, the duke of Portland, harried traditionalist Lords Lieutenant, magistrates and local authorities with homilies on political economy and instructions to preserve the freedom of markets, he was not vulgarising the views of Dr Smith but enforcing these strictly.

Thus when the Nottingham Corporation endorsed the crowd's imposition of price ceilings and brought pressure onto local farmers to supply the market at these rates, Portland insisted, in Smithian terms, that

Whenever any reduction in the price of a Commodity has been effected by intimidation it has never been of any duration, and besides, by having things out of their natural and orderly courses, it almost necessarily happens that the evil, instead of being remedied returns with increased violence.³

To this Portland added, but with his own special vehemence, the Smithian theme of natural justice to the rights of property: there should be a “religious observance of the respect. . . due to private property”, and the Lord

¹Sir James Steuart, “A dissertation on the policy of grain”, in *Works* (1805; reprint 1967), v, pp. 347-77. Steuart's proposal was first made in 1757, but was maintained in subsequent years.

²Dugald Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy* (Edinburgh, 1855; reprint 1968), ii, p. 52.

³Wells, *Wretched Faces*, p. 238.

Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, the duke of Marlborough — a traditionalist and paternalist — was instructed that:

If the employment of Property is not secure, if every Man does not feel that he has power to retain what he possesses so long as he pleases and dispense it at the time, in the manner and for the Price he chuses to fix upon it, there must be an end of Confidence in Industry and of all valuable and virtuous Exertions of all descriptions. . . the whole Order of things must be overturned and destroyed.

All must "maintain the Principle of perfect Freedom of Property".¹

It was the same principle and the same authority that was appealed to during famine conditions in Western India in 1812. The judge and magistrate of Kaira had urged the government to intervene by importing grain and selling it to retailers at little over its cost price. The proposal was rejected:

The Right Honourable the Governor in Council is disposed to think. . . that those approved and recognised principles. . . which prescribe an entire and unrestricted freedom in the grain trade, as best adapted to the relief of any existing scarcity and to the prevention of famine, are particularly applicable to the dealers in grain in the province of Gozerat. . . The digression of the celebrated author of the *Wealth of Nations* concerning the Corn-Trade. . . particularly as far as respects the inland Trader, is forcibly and irresistibly applicable to every state of society where merchants, or dealers, in grain may be established.²

Similar homilies were expressed in orders of the Madras Government in 1833 which argued that high prices constitute the best security against famine: "The interference of Government in such emergencies. . . disturbs the natural current (by which, where trade is free, the demands of any commodity is sure to meet, as far as circumstances will allow, with a corresponding supply) and has a tendency to convert a

¹Roger Wells, "The Grain Crisis in England, 1794-96, 1799-1801" (Univ. of York Ph.D. thesis, 1978), pp. 472-3. Also Wells, *Wretched Faces*, pp. 238-9.

²Srinivasa Ambirajan, "Economic Ideas and Indian Economic Policies in the 19th Century" (Manchester Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1964), pp. 363-4. A similar circular, quoting almost verbatim from *The Wealth of Nations*, originated from the Board of Revenue in Madras in 1811; Arnold, *Famine*, p. 113. See also Ambirajan, S., *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge, 1978).

season of scarcity into one of absolute famine".¹

Despite the appalling example of the great Irish famine, Smithian imperatives continued to inform policies in India during the famines of the 1860s and 1870s. Baird Smith, reporting on the famine of 1860-1, applauded the non-interventionist principles of *The Wealth of Nations* and advised that the remedy for dearth be left to "the order of nature [which] if it occasionally produces dire sufferings, does also provide generally the most effective means for their mitigation".² (In Orissa alone, in 1860, famine deaths were estimated at 1,364,529.³) It has been suggested that some administrators were fortified in policies of non-interference by literal-minded assent to Malthusian doctrines.⁴ The magistrate at Patna was advised by the Governor-General that, while it was "beyond the power. . . of the public authorities to remedy the unfortunate dearth of grain", yet the magistrates may "effect much to soften the distress and calm the irritation of the people":

¹*Ibid.*, p. 366. The view that famines were always the consequence of well-intentioned interventions by the authorities which disrupted the "natural" flow of trade is one of Adam Smith's least well-supported assertions: "Whoever examines, with attention, the history of the dearths and famines which have afflicted any part of Europe during either the course of the present, or that of the two preceding centuries" will find that dearths arise in a few cases from the waste of war but in the greatest number of cases "by the fault of the seasons; and that a famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconvenience of dearth". (My italics.) Upon this pretence to omniscience, Smith and his disciples could denounce protective measures as iniquitous. Smith also asserted that "the drought in Bengal, a few years ago, might probably have occasioned a very great dearth. Some improper regulations, some injudicious restraints, imposed by the servants of the East India Company upon the rice trade, contributed, perhaps, to turn that dearth into a famine." This assertion has been challenged by H. Sur, "The Bihar Famine of 1770", *Indian Econ. & Social Hist. Review*, xiii, 4 (1976), who finds a better explanation in the collapse of the traditional Moghul administration and the ensuing vacuum.

²B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India* (Bombay, 1967), p. 105.

³Ambirajan, thesis, p. 367.

⁴See S. Ambirajan, "Malthusian Population Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the 19th Century", *Population Studies*, xxx, 1 (1976).

By manifesting a sympathy in their sufferings, by a humane, patient and indulgent hearing of their complaints, by encouraging them to look forward to the approaching harvest. . . they may be persuaded to bear with resignation the inevitable calamities under which they labour.¹

This throws one back, not only to Smith and to Malthus, but also to Edmund Burke's *Thoughts on Scarcity*.

What political economy forbade was any "violent interferences with the course of trade", including the prosecution of profiteers or hoarders, the fixing of maximum prices, and government intervention in grain or rice dealing.² Relief exercises must take the form of distributing a pittance of purchase money (at whatever height "the order of nature" had brought prices to) to those whose need passed the examination of labour on public-relief works.³ These policies, or negatives in the place of policies, were based upon theories which — however elaborated by other authors — rested upon the few pages of Adam Smith's digression.

These pages, then, were among the most influential writings in history, with a global influence which was sometimes baneful. Their arguments discredited or disallowed traditional protective interventions in time of dearth, could be used to justify profiteering and hoarding, and could serve as apologetics to soothe the troubled consciences of the authorities by commending inactivity as correct political economy. Two Indian economists who have had the temerity to question their profession's habitual complacency about Smith's views on the grain trade receive a lofty rebuke from Hont and Ignatieff: they have "overlooked" "the traditional theory of justice framing Smith's discourse of free trade in subsistence goods during dearth and famines". And they cite this passage of the digression:

To hinder. . . the farmer from sending his goods at all times to the best market, is evidently to sacrifice the ordinary laws of justice to an idea of public utility, to a sort of reasons of state — an act of legislative

¹ Ambirajan, thesis, pp. 366-7.

² See Bhatia, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

³ The absolutes of political economy were modified by the Famine Code of 1880, although the general principle of non-intervention in the grain trade "remained inviolate until the Second World War": Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

authority which ought to be exercised only, which can be pardoned only, in cases of the most urgent necessity.

And somehow or other Hont and Ignatieff find this passage endorsement of their conclusion that "Smith's discourse was not about the conditions of actual famines, which belonged to the discourse on grave necessity which 'breaks all laws' ". But one may search in vain in the digression or anywhere in *The Wealth of Nations* for any such "discourse on grave necessity". What is pretentiously named as a "discourse" is, at most, a brief saving clause (measures "which can be pardoned only in cases of the most urgent necessity") and a prolonged silence as to what these measures might be.¹

As for "the traditional theory of justice framing Smith's discourse of free trade", the justice is to the rights of property. As Hont and Ignatieff acknowledge elsewhere, Smith "insisted on the all but absolute priority of the property rights of grain merchants and farmers over the claims of need made by poor labourers". This position was more extreme than that of many contemporary political economists and physiocrats; indeed, Diderot considered the privileging of private property above need in times of famine to be a "cannibal principle".²

My argument is not (as it happens) intended to show that Dr Adam Smith was a cannibal. Smithian advocacy of free trade in grain had evident virtues in the long run but had only negative relevance in times of crisis, since his remedies — such as increasing cereal production — were long-run remedies or — such as very high prices — were not remedies at all. Among the deficiencies of Smithian doctrine were 1) that it *was* doctrinaire and counter-empirical. It did not want to know how actual markets worked, any more than its disciples do today. As dogma it could serve as an apologia for inactivity, as exemplified in several Irish and Indian disasters. 2) It promoted the notion that high prices were a (painful) remedy for dearth, in drawing supplies to the afflicted region

¹ Hont and Ignatieff, *op. cit.*, p. 20. Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), p. 27, found "violent hunger" to be an offence against "propriety". Though sometimes "unavoidable" it "is always indecent".

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

of scarcity. But what draws supply are not high prices but people with sufficient money in their purses to pay high prices. A characteristic phenomenon in times of dearth is that it generates unemployment and empty purses; in purchasing necessities at inflated prices people cease to be able to buy inessentials, and the shoemaker, the weaver, the stockinger, the fisherman, the barber, the transport worker, and many others fall on hard times.¹ Hence the number of those able to pay the inflated prices declines in the afflicted regions, and food may be exported to neighbouring, less afflicted, regions where employment is holding up and consumers still have money with which to pay. In this sequence, high prices can actually withdraw supply from the most afflicted. A leading authority on recent famines, Dr Amartya Sen, notes that in a slump hunger and even starvation have "little market pull" and in many famines food was exported from the famine-stricken country or region. This was notoriously the case in Ireland in the 1840s and was observed in Indian famines also:

Adam Smith's proposition is, in fact, concerned with efficiency in meeting a market demand, but it says nothing on meeting a need that has not been translated into effective demand because of lack of market-based entitlement and shortage of purchasing power.²

3) The most unhappy error flows from Smith's metaphor of price as a means of rationing. Smith argues that high prices discourage consumption, putting "everybody more or less, but particularly the inferior ranks of people, upon thrift and good management". By comparing the dealer who raises prices to the "prudent master of a vessel" rationing his crew, there is a persuasive suggestion of a fair distribution of limited resources. These resources will be rationed not only between individual consumers but also over time, dividing "the inconveniences" of scarcity "as equally as possible

¹Thus in Bengal in 1873 the first to starve were "non-agricultural classes" — weavers, metal workers, carpenters, fishermen, menials. The field labourers and small cultivators followed: *Extra Supplement to the Gazette of India*, 26 Feb. 1875, p. 33.

²Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 161-2. "Food being exported from famine-stricken areas may be a 'natural' characteristic of the market, which respects entitlement rather than needs."

through all the different months and weeks and days of the year.

However persuasive the metaphor, there is an elision of the real relationships assigned by price, which suggests — for the argument has been repeated ever since and may still be heard today — ideological sleight-of-mind. Rationing by price does not allocate resources equally among those in need; it reserves the supply to those who can pay the price and excludes those who can't. Perhaps one-fifth or one-quarter of the English population in the eighteenth century rubbed along on the edge of bare subsistence, and was in danger of falling below this whenever prices rose. In a recent authoritative study it is shown that

In hard years perhaps 20 per cent of the population could not, unaided, have bought sufficient bread even if they had been able to eliminate all other expenditure; and... in a very hard year, 45 per cent of the entire population could be thrown into such destitution.¹

What Hay finds for eighteenth-century England, Sir William Hunter and other observers found for nineteenth-century India. Even in normal years one-fifth of the population "went through life on insufficient food".² The raising of prices during dearth could "ration" them out of the market altogether.

This is something one must hold steadily in view. High prices of bread mattered little to the rich, were inconvenient to the middling sort, were painful to steadily-employed labourers, but could threaten the survival of the poor. That is why they were at once a matter of "politics". It was against this socially-unequal "rationing" by purse that the food riot was a protest and perhaps a remedy.

This may remind us that the world has not done yet with dearth or with famine. The problem occupies many able minds and, as one might expect, some of the most relevant work comes from Indian economists and historians, for whom famine is not so distant a problem and yet who share with Britain some common histories of administration, law, and ideology. One arresting approach is that of Amartya Sen,

¹Douglas Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft in the Eighteenth Century", *Past and Present*, 95 (1982), p. 132.

²See Bhatia, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

in his *Poverty and Famines* (1981), which employs "entitlement theory" and also an advanced statistical apparatus. "Entitlement" indicates all the various means by which people gain access to essential food supply, whether this is through direct subsistence farming or through the provision by an employer or master (in his household) or by purchase in the market. A famine is triggered by the breakdown of such entitlements and the merit of this approach is that it does not only tell us that there has been a decline in the amount of food available but it also examines "why some groups had to starve while others could feed themselves. . . . What allows one group rather than another to get hold of the food that is there?"¹

Dr Sen examines twentieth-century famines in Asia and Africa, for which the statistical data is more reliable than any we have for the eighteenth century, and he concludes that, in the greater number of cases examined, famine cannot be simply attributed to "food availability decline". Where there had been a crop failure, "a moderate short-fall in production" was "translated into an exceptional short-fall in market release". The market cannot be isolated and abstracted from the network of political, social and legal relations in which it is situated. Once the downward spiral of famine is entered, the process can become cumulative, and "no matter how a famine is caused, methods of breaking it call for a large supply of food in the public distribution system".²

This approach is relevant to dearth in eighteenth-century Europe also,³ and is preferable to the one most commonly adopted, which focuses on harvest failures as if these could supply not only necessary but also sufficient explanation of all that followed. Dr Sen argues that this "FAD" (food availability decline) approach

Gives little clue to the causal mechanism of starvation, since it does not go into the *relationship* of people to food. Whatever may be the

¹Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 75, 79.

³See Louise Tilly, "Food Entitlement, Famine, and Conflict", in R. I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (eds.), *Hunger and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 135-152.

oracular power of the FAD view, it is certainly Delphic in its reticence.¹

In general the eighteenth-century English poor were sheltered by poor laws and charity from outright starvation, but Dr Sen's argument remains valid. Smithian and Malthusian explanations of years of dearth rest heavily upon crop failures (FAD) and remain "Delphic" as to the relationship of people to food and the socially-differential entitlements that obtained.

The "relationship of people to food" involves systems of power, property and law. Conflict over entitlement to food in the market might be seen as a forum of class struggle, if most historians were not too prissy nowadays to use the term. It may also be seen as a forum for the conflict of interests, "Town" versus "Country", as manufacturing workers, woollen workers, or colliers, confronted farmers and dealers.

Both forms of conflict can be observed in England during the high-price years of the Napoleonic Wars, and as government intervened with doctrine and with armed force in support of the unfettered operation of agrarian capitalism there can be no doubt which classes and interests were winners. Professor Mingay has estimated that, in areas which he has investigated, rents rose between 40 per cent and 50 per cent between 1750 and 1790; and between 1790 and 1815 rents rose by a further 80 per cent to 90 per cent.² At the same time (as the substantial farm buildings of that period remain to witness) the middling and larger farmers were well able to pay these enhanced rentals and were rising in prosperity and in assumptions of social status. Rent was the means by which the landowners clawed back their share of farming profits. These rentals indicated a very considerable rise in the wealth of the agrarian capitalist classes (in which affluence the agricultural labourers had no share), and this was supported in its turn by the sale of food — and especially cereals — to the consumers of the "Town". The wealth of the landowners

¹See Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 154. And see A. K. Ghose, "Food Supply and Starvation: a Study of Famines with reference to the Indian Sub-Continent", *Oxford Economic Papers*, xxxiv (1982).

²G. E. Mingay, "The Course of Rents in the Age of Malthus", in Michael Turner (ed.), *Malthus in his Time* (Basingstoke, 1986), pp. 90-1.

was further supported by enclosures, which reached a peak in the war years when three million acres, or 9 per cent of the land area of England, came under parliamentary enclosure, much of this coming under the plough for cereal crops.¹

This prosperity did not pass unnoticed among the woollen workers, colliers and "proto-industrial" manufacturers who lived adjacent to prospering farming areas. It is in this context that the confrontations of 1795-96 and 1800-1 must be seen. Dr Roger Wells's *Wretched Faces* (1988) is the most copiously documented study of every aspect of these years of dearth that we have or are ever likely to have, and one must express gratitude to him for his archival industry and for the illumination that flows from many of his pages. Yet certain of his conclusions seem to be to be wrong-headed and to be contradicted by his own evidence, and this may be because even Dr Wells has been unduly influenced by the seeming common-sense of the Smithian (FAD)-approach.

There were of course serious harvest short-falls in these years, and the country might have faced real famine conditions if there had not been considerable foreign imports.² But when Roger Wells writes that the implementation of "the moral economy" was "a recipe for disaster"³ he is taking too narrow a view of the question. His case against "the moral economy" — a catch-all term which he uses throughout his major study to indicate *any* measures taken by the authorities or imposed by the crowd to protect the consumer, to regulate markets or to control price — is at times as alarmist as that of Edmund Burke or the duke of Portland. He argues that market disturbances "decimated

¹Michael Turner, "Corn Crises in Britain in the Age of Malthus", in Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

²Adam Smith's doctrine of non-interference in the grain trade was limited, in his digression, to the inland trader. Wells is mistaken when he supposes (e.g. *Wretched Faces*, p. 7) that vigorous governmental exercises in the import of corn during a time of shortage was in breach of Smithian precepts. But (in Smith's doctrine) government must not then intervene in the internal market by selling off imports beneath the self-regulating market rate, and this was generally avoided in the 1790s by selling off the cargo immediately at the port of arrival, at which sales representatives from inland towns and parishes often attended.

³Roger Wells, "The Revolt of the South-West, 1800-01", *Social History*, 6 (1977), p. 743; Wells, *Wretched Faces*, p. 230.

future supplies and then accelerated inflation", that "price controls aggravated the impact of violence", that "havoc followed where the Assize of Bread operated", and that the moral economy "directly stimulated violent populist intervention while simultaneously weakening community resolve to contain disorder".¹ And he conjures-up visions of a vicious circle with "riot deterring supplies, empty markets stimulating renewed violence, and further disturbances annihilating commercial confidence":

Ultimately, from a global perspective, the entire country would be affected. In this context the 'positive' aspects of popular intervention, discouraging mercantile malpractice, militating against maximum exploitation, rivetting public attention on the poor's plight and galvanising greater relief measures, pale in significance. For these latter characteristics of protest, however important, were essentially localised. The historian's assessment of riot must also adopt governmental criteria. Macro, as opposed to micro economic examination of the grain trade reveals the dangers of protest to national subsistence in general, and the consumption centres in particular. Staving off starvation in the most vulnerable locations necessitated the speediest suppression of riot.²

The trouble is that hunger is usually "localised" (in the stomach). Deaths from starvation appear as localised micro-dots. Roger Wells has been reading too many state papers of Pitt's war administration and has been drawn into their feedback loops. Moreover in his over-coloured language ("disaster", "decimated", "violence", "violent populist intervention", "annihilating") we have moved a long way from the self-disciplined and often bloodless direct actions of the crowd, with its "protocol" and "orderly disorder"³ which recent historiography has disclosed and which Dr Wells's own researches confirm, and have moved back to the bad old school when every crowd was recorded as a violent gullible "mob".

There is something in Wells's case, and it is strongest when he cites — especially in the summer of 1795 — the widespread crowd blockades of the passage of grain by water or

¹*Ibid.*, pp. 178-181, 230-6.

²*Ibid.*, p. 181.

³John Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1810* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 27.

by road. This embargo could have precipitated disaster in large centres of consumption such as Birmingham, Nottingham and Leicester, although it did not. In other matters Wells (uncharacteristically) offers thin and uncertain evidence. His few examples do not persuade that price regulation always "decimated" the future supply of those markets. Where towns or manufacturing districts depended upon a local food supply, the farmers also depended upon their local custom; and the crowd might visit the farmers with threats to requisition supplies. In the end the farmers must go back to the market and there was a complexity of influences upon their behaviour: relationships with the consumers, with their landlords, with their own consciences.

Roger Wells's assertion that "havoc" followed where the Assize of Bread operated" is supported by a single anecdote from Oxfordshire in 1800. But as it happens Oxford is the one centre for which we have a careful study of the operation of the Assize in the eighteenth century, and this by no means supports the ascription of "havoc". Dr Wendy Thwaites's research suggests that the operation of the Assize may have marginally raised the price of bread in Oxford in normal years but restrained the rise in years of dearth. It afforded to the market authorities, the bakers and the consumers "a sense of security in relation to each other",¹ and it should in any case be seen not in isolation but as part of a wider regulation which included weight and quality control. London also set an Assize of Bread throughout the eighteenth century, and so far from "havoc" food riots in the capital were rare.²

Roger Wells draws too one-sided a balance. It is true that Pickard, Birmingham's biggest merchant-miller, was forced out of business by the hostility of the crowd in September 1800.³ But this did not leave Birmingham provisionless. There was another steam mill, the "Union Mill", although

¹W. Thwaites, "The Assize of Bread in 18th-Century Oxfordshire", *Oxoniensia*, li (1986), pp. 171-81.

²Differing explanations for the rarity of food riots in London are to be found in George Rudé, *Paris and London in the 18th Century* (1970), pp. 55-7; John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870* (1979), pp. 99-100; Bohstedt, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-9. Undoubtedly securing the provisioning of London was a priority of State.

³See Wells, *Wretched Faces*, pp. 180-1.

this mainly supplied bread to its numerous tradesmen and operative subscribers, and at prime cost — perhaps a translation of "moral economy" principles into early co-operation.¹ And Pickard's mill was not closed: it was rented to a new company, as an emergency measure, to ensure the continued supply of the town. Pickard's son, Edward, recorded the erratic fluctuations in the fortunes of this emergency Company of "benevolent gentlemen":

One of the gentlemen was at Hull soon after the first term [of six month's rental] commenced, and having left Birmingham under a fearful impression that the town would be really without a supply of food, ventured to make a very large purchase of wheat. . . which had just arrived from the Baltic, and sent it to Birmingham on account of this new Company. How the wheat was paid for or by whom I know not: I presume their banker accommodated them with the money. . . . Exorbitant as was the price of wheat at that time, it unexpectedly rose considerably higher: and although the Company was thus enabled to provide a large quantity of flour weekly to the poor at a lower rate than the general dealers, yet at the end of the first six months, they found their profits so large, that they feared some popular indignation on the exhibition of their accounts. They therefore applied to my father to prolong their term, which he did, to enable them, as they said, to make some diminution in their gains, and thus present to the public a more satisfactory statement. About the period of the renewal of the term, the price of wheat began to give way, and continued falling into the end of it: in consequence of which, and also from losses sustained on other large purchases again made early in their last term, these benevolent men sunk not only all their first six months profits, but also lost all the capital they had advanced.²

This story conforms to the properties of neither Smithian nor "moral economy" doctrine. It suggests that in these eccentric wartime conditions all parties in the grain market were playing blind man's buff. In any case, generalisations as to the characteristics and functions of food riots are risky if taken only from these war years, since they are a special case:

¹Anon., "A Record of the Staff of Life from 1796 to 1900: at the Old Mill of the City", *Birmingham Magazine of Arts and Industries*, iii (1899). See also J. Tann, "Co-operative Corn Milling; Self-help during the grain crises of the Napoleonic Wars", *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 28 (1980), p. 52; the Union Mill was founded in 1796 with 1360 subscribers, principally labouring workmen.

²MS notebook of Edward Pickard, Birmingham Reference Library, MS 22/11.

both the climax and the terminus of the riot tradition, in a context of war and invasion fears, with the gentry and their retainers under arms (as Yeomanry) and in a state of anti-Jacobin panic. These last years of the eighteenth century were also a watershed in marketing constituencies and practices, mid-way between the locally-supplied markets where consumers and farmers, magistrates and dealers, all knew something of each other, might come face to face with each other, and could "negotiate" prices, even by "riot"; and the more impersonal relations of the large urban markets which farmers rarely visited, supplied by dealers who purchased in distant markets.¹ Moreover the 1790s experience is further complicated by the deep inner divisions within the ruling authorities, with central government imposing *laissez-faire* dogmas but with some local authorities and traditionalist landowners attempting to control prices by persuasion, and giving a nod and a wink to the crowd. In such confused conditions we are likely to come up with contradictory findings, and with some examples of "havoc".

It is over the long view through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the strongest case can be made for riot's "success". Two historians of the seventeenth century conclude that riots were "invariably successful in stimulating authoritative actions to alleviate grievances".² This is true in general of the eighteenth century also. Price regulation might even succeed, and the most persuasive analysis of the crowd's success will be found in John Bohstedt's chapter on "Devon's Classic Food Riots" in his *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1810* (1983). He shows the small or medium-sized market town to be the classic site of crowd direct action (supported by the visitation of farmers in the neighbourhood), and suggests that such actions were supported by both horizontal and vertical networks of relationship within communities which had their own traditions and remembered their own precedents. In the

¹ These points are developed by Bohstedt, *op. cit.*, *passim*, especially in his contrast between Manchester and Devon's markets. Still in 1800 the Birmingham Union Mill normally obtained their supply in Birmingham market or within a radius of twenty miles: J. Tann, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

² Walter and Wrightson, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

vertical relationships he suggests that "social patronage" may be a more helpful term than "paternalism", a patronage which however entailed reciprocal duties and obligations. While riot, or direct action to bring down prices, was by no means legitimate, yet both the authorities and the crowd abided by a recognised "protocol". Rioters "did not challenge directly the whole system of property and power", and so long as this was so, and violence was avoided, the authorities were sometimes accomplices to price-fixing, recognising that "social peace was more important than absolute property rights or, rather, profit rights". Hence rioters "modified the property rights of farmers and food dealers. . . and their exertion of force at the margin of legitimacy and illegality was a real if limited exercise of political power". Indeed, "riots were a dynamic constituent moment in the system of property and power".¹

John Bohstedt claims with confidence the Devon rioters' success: "riot would have been neither so frequent nor so orderly had there been no payoff". Food rioting of course appears in other national histories also, first in Europe and China,² subsequently in India and elsewhere. There is some suggestion that it marks a transitional phase between the

¹ Bohstedt, *op. cit.*, esp. chs. 2 and 9 and pp. 54, 202, 220-1. Cf. Thwaites, thesis, pp. 522-7, for an estimate of riot's effectiveness in prompting consumer protection.

² China provides an example of successful bureaucratic management of food supplies, during the Qing dynasty in the eighteenth century. The Chinese state undertook far-reaching measures to feed the people during times of scarcity; these included public granaries, the provision of loans, discouragement of hoarders, encouragement of circulation by canals and roads. This was supported by a "Confucian" value-system which endorsed the imperative of "benevolence", and by the popular belief that any regime which presided over disasters such as famine and flood had "lost the mandate of heaven". Hence everything to do with the distribution of food in time of scarcity was of highly-sensitive political import. The Chinese peasant did not beg for charity, he demanded relief and saw the bureaucracy as bound by its office to provide this, and the rich as bound by duty. Many actions of Chinese food rioters closely resembled European riots — blockading transport, attacking hoarders, lobbying bureaucrats and the rich — and riot was a recognised way of putting the state measures of relief in motion: Lillian M. Li, "Introduction: Food, Famine and the Chinese State"; R. Bin Wong, "Food Riots in the Qing dynasty"; Paul R. Greenough, "Comment"; all in *Journal of Asian Studies*, August 1982.

locally-based demographic *ancien régime* of absolute subsistence crises and the "modern" national "free market" regulated by price and by police alone.¹ Riot is unlikely to have had so universal an emergence if there had not been some "payoff", some space in which direct action was a protection from the newly-liberated appetites of agrarian interests, a warning to speculators and profiteers and an alarm signal to the authorities to set emergency measures and charities into motion. Such action could (and can) take many forms, from humble petitions to threatening letters and arson,² or to blockades and attacks on mills, but it was always a profoundly political as well as economic event.

Riot, as "a dynamic constituent moment in the system of property and power", has obviously taken different forms and significance in different national histories, and in the English case must be seen within the particular structure of patrician/plebeian relations which we have examined (chapter two), with its limits and its space for licence. But let us read back from the Indian and Irish evidence to the English. In a lucid study David Arnold has looked into the emergence of a food riot tradition in India, perhaps commencing in the Madras Presidency in 1876. Some 120 incidents swept South India in 1918-19, with similar characteristics and objectives to their counterparts in eighteenth-century England and France: the prevention of exports, forcing down of prices, and pressing local officials to take measures to ensure provision. Just as in England two centuries before, the "looting" of food shops did not result usually in the theft but in the spoiling of goods, and its intention was to humiliate dealers whom the crowd held to be guilty of profiteering and hoarding at a time of extreme hardship. Thus one function of riot was to moderate the appetite for profit unleashed by the developing "free market", and Arnold relates its assertiveness to the

¹For the interplay of other factors in different national histories, see Charles Tilly, "Food Supply and Public Order in Modern Europe", in C. Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Europe* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 380-455; and Louise Tilly in Rotberg and Rabb (eds.), *Hunger and History*, pp. 143-8.

²For threatening letters, see my "The Crime of Anonymity", in Douglas Hay et al., *Albion's Fatal Tree*, pp. 325-41. For arson, see Wells, *Wretched Faces*, pp. 165-7.

transitional moment between locally-based markets and an emergent national grain market — a transition accompanied by sudden fluctuations of price, by the export of grain from areas affected by dearth, and ruptures of the customary channels of communication. He also suggests that, at least in the short term, riot was successful, in terms of its own objectives.¹ What this may suggest is that riot is functional, and may be expected to show itself at the same transitional moment in many national histories.

Why, then, does it not assert itself in Irish history? There were severe episodes of famine in Ireland in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, long before the "Great Hunger". But the Irish case is not as clear as it has sometimes been made to seem. It is often stated that there is not a tradition of food rioting in Ireland.² Yet during the serious famine of 1740-1, the Dublin paper, *Pue's Occurrences*, reported bakers' and mealmen's shops broken open by the Dublin mob, and the boarding of a ship on the Liffey (June 1740), an anti-export riot in Galway quelled by the army (August), anti-export and price-setting riots in Youghal and generally in Munster (December), shops in Limerick broken into (March 1741), and a boat loaded with oats for Waterford stopped on the river at Carrick-on-Suir, with troops firing on the crowd (April 1741).³ That does not sound like a nation with no food riot tradition. Women were reported as rioters in Wexford in 1757⁴ and in 1758 John Wesley found "the mob" busy in Sligo harbour, unloading a Dutch ship of corn bought up by forestallers "to starve the poor" — the mob brought it all to the market and "sold it for the owners at the common price. And this they did with all the calmness and composure imaginable, and without striking or hurting anyone".⁵

Thus the "classical" food riot was certainly known to the

¹David Arnold, "Looting, Grain Riots and Government Policy in South India, 1918", *Past and Present*, 84 (1979).

²See for example George Rudé, *Protest and Punishment* (Oxford, 1978), p. 57, who says that food riot "played little part" before 1829-31.

³These examples were collected in a pamphlet published by the Foreign Office and Irish Office, *Famine in Ireland, 1740-41* (1847).

⁴*Gentleman's Magazine*, May (1757).

⁵Wesley's *Journal*, 27 May 1758.

eighteenth-century Irish, and it may be under-reported in general histories. If food riot failed to prevent exports and to relieve famine (as in 1740-1) this might account for a weakening of the tradition as the century wore on.¹ And one can only speculate as to the reasons for the divergent national traditions. Perhaps food rioters had less "political" clout in Ireland, since they did not threaten in the same direct way the stability and "face" of a resident governing gentry. Nor (in the absence of poor laws) did they stimulate in the same way an apparatus of relief, nor even (despite some examples) of gentry charity.²

Thus in Ireland food riots did not "work", partly because there was no political space (as in England) within which the plebs could exert pressure on their rulers. Arguing backwards from these cases we may pass the English evidence under review once more. Twenty years ago the notion that food riots could have served any positive function could scarcely gain the attention of historians. Smithian doctrine saw them as examples of social malfunction, while also postulating harvest short-fall (FAD) as sufficient explanation for most surges in the price of grain. What one scholar has called "an anachronistic reading of early modern society as a market society marked by the triumph of economic individualism", has given credibility to "a Malthusian model of social and economic change", which proposes an unproblematic and un-mediated relationship between harvest, price, and (until the seventeenth century) mortality.³

But recent advances in historical demography are now showing us a more complex set of events. A. B. Appleby clearly identified regional famine in the north-west in 1596-7 and 1622-3, and raised in interesting ways the question as to

¹But food riots are reported in 1792, Samuel Clark and J. S. Donnelly (eds.), *Irish Peasants* (Manchester, 1983), p. 55; and in 1793, C. H. E. Philpin (ed.), *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 196 (counties Cork and Waterford).

²See L. M. Cullen and T. C. Smout, *Comparative Aspects of Scottish and Irish Economic and Social History* (Edinburgh, 1977), p. 10 and ch. 2.

³John Walter, "The Social Economy of Dearth in Early Modern England", in John Walter and Roger Schofield (eds.), *Famine, Disease, and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 82, 121.

why the rest of England had managed to escape starvation. Several cogent reasons have been proposed for the difference in the "ecology of famine" between the north-west and the south. And to these may be added the differential effectiveness of measures of relief, which ensured that what little surplus grain was available was brought to market or transferred at subsidised rates to those in most need. The *Book of Orders* may have had more than symbolic functions and (with the aid of poor relief and charities) have mitigated the effects of dearth in the south, whereas the north-western region was not only pastoral and corn-poor, it also lacked the administrative and financial structures to set the *Book of Orders* in motion.¹

Wrigley and Schofield's important *Population History of England* enables us to pursue these arguments further. While it is usually argued that the threat of famine had passed from England by 1650, a weak relation between grain prices and mortality can be shown until 1745. A weak relation (when generalised across the nation) might mask sharp local crises, or differential mortality in which the excess deaths fell chiefly among "the poor", or certain exposed groups. Moreover, the threat of famine had not moved far away. Wrigley and Schofield examine a sample of 404 parishes between 1541 and 1871 for years in which the death rate in many parishes was markedly above trend; 1727-9 and 1741-2, which are dearth and riot years, appear high on the table (with death rates from 30 to 40 per cent above trend), although other riot years — 1709, 1757, and 1795 — do not.² But these cannot be confidently identified as local subsistence crises, since epidemics may have caused the high mortality.³

These are complex questions. For the purposes of our argument it is sufficient to note that local crises persist into the eighteenth century, that harvest shortfall or high prices have a differential impact upon different (even neighbouring) communities, and that insignificant movements in national

¹John Walter and Roger Schofield, "Famine, Disease and Crisis Mortality in Early Modern Society", in *ibid.*, p. 47.

²E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population of England, 1541-1871* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 653. The riot years 1766-7 show a death rate 10.4% above trend.

³See *ibid.*, pp. 668-9.

statistical series may mask very sharp local suffering. Moreover, "by far the highest overall incidence of [local] crisis mortality occurred in the south-west, in an area extending from south Gloucestershire and west Wiltshire through Dorset to Devon": i.e. precisely one of the strongest food riot areas in the eighteenth century.¹

This suggests that rioters had good reasons for concern, and for actions in self-defence. And that in high-price years they were pressed close to a margin, so that even small modifications of their market situation might make a mortal difference. There were many ways of obtaining subsistence, not all of which depended upon the market,² and in emergency "the poor" were not altogether without resources. A correspondent writing from "a manufacturing neighbourhood" in the West at a time of low employment and high prices (1741), concluded:

The poor every month grow poorer, for their clothes apparently wear into rags and they are in no capacity of buying new ones. They have sold almost all their little superfluities already, or perhaps one had a gold ring, another two or three pewter dishes, a third a brass pot or kettle; these they have been disposing of to buy bread for themselves and families. . . .³

That is not (yet) a crisis of subsistence, but it is the context for chronic malnutrition.

One should not misread "entitlement theory" to conclude that there were no such things as failures of grain supply, and that every dearth is man-made. What Sen shows is that, given a shortfall in harvest, the way in which the supply is distributed between social groups is decidedly man-made, and depends upon choices between means of allocation, of which market price is only one among many. Even in times of dearth there was always some supply, and the problem was how to squeeze this surplus out of granaries and barns and

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 692.

² See John Walter, "The Social Economy of Dearth", a good deal of which still applies in the early eighteenth century.

³ "Philo-Georgius" to duke of Newcastle, 7 Dec. 1741, Brit. Lib. Add MS 32, 698, f. 496.

direct it to those in most need.¹ The measures comprised in the *Book of Orders* worked reasonably well, and it is not clear why they lapsed after 1630. In a clearly-argued essay, Dr Outhwaite has suggested that the complexity and inefficiency of their operation resulted in "disenchantment".² But interest and ideology might also be awarded a role, as the market oriented, cereal-growing landed classes became more influential in the state. For long periods after 1660 the problem was not dearth but abundant production, low prices and rent arrears, and mercantilist theory was preoccupied with cereal export (and bounties). In such conditions the Tudor measures of provision lay dormant, although they were not forgotten in high-price years. In 1693 in Oxfordshire the crowd took the corn "as it was carrying away by the ingrossers, saying they were resolved to put the law in execution since the magistrates neglected it".³ "Some of our rioters" (a dealer wrote in 1766) "have been so infatuated as to think they were only assisting the execution of wholesome laws. . . ."⁴

What may have eased the abrogation of the *Book of Orders* was the growing effectiveness of the poor laws in providing an institutional safety-net for those with a settlement. The responsibility which the central authorities refused was taken back to the parish or to the urban corporation. And alongside this limited relief, in times of dearth the local traditions of charity had more vitality than they are sometimes credited with. In a sense the Tudor practices of "house-keeping" and of hospitality were extended into the eighteenth-century landed gentleman's contest, through large

¹ Professor Sen continues to lay great stress on the *political* context of famine in the twentieth century. Governments which are accountable to public opinion are more likely to exert themselves in relief measures than those which are not, and "it is hard to find a case in which a famine has occurred in a country with a free press and an active opposition within a democratic system": Amartya Sen, "Individual Freedom as a Social Commitment", *New York Review of Books*, 14 June, 1990.

² Outhwaite, "Dearth and Government Intervention", p. 404.

³ "The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary of Oxford, 1632-95", ed. A. Clark, cited in W. Thwaites, "The Corn Market and Economic Change: Oxford in the 18th Century", *Midland History* (forthcoming).

⁴ *Reflections on the Present High Price of Provisions*, p. 27.

gestures of "liberality", for local influence.¹

In every high-price year — at least until the 1760s — substantial landowners came forward in most parts of the country, sending corn at reduced rates to market as an example to others, selling off cheap grain at their gates, ordering their tenants to supply the market at moderate rates, entering into county agreements to reduce prices and to prosecute those who sold by sample, forestallers, etc., and so on. (By the 1780s and 1790s opinion was more divided, and those — like the earl of Warwick — who continued the old charitable gestures, tended to mark themselves out as traditional "Tory" paternalists.) This tradition of highly-visible charity may in part be ascribed to humanitarian motives and to an approved self-image of the gentry as protectors of the poor against heartless employers, mean parish overseers and grasping middlemen. But it was also a calculated stance in the culturally-constructed alliance between patricians and plebs against the middling orders, and it distracted attention from the landowners' prosperity to point to prominent Dissenters and Quakers among the profiteering food dealers.²

Viewed from this aspect, poor laws and emergency charities were constituent components of the system of property and power. Indeed, subsidies and subscriptions can often be seen as direct moves to buy off riot, or even as a reward for not rioting.³ John Bohstedt has warned us:

¹Much of what John Walter writes about seventeenth-century charities in time of dearth applies equally to the first seven decades of the eighteenth century: Walter, "Social Economy of Dearth".

²So widespread was the abuse of Quaker dealers that the Friends issued a public statement in 1800: "The Society of Friends. . . having been for some time calumniated as oppressors of the laborious and indigent classes of the community, by combining to monopolize those necessary articles of life, Corn and Flour, think themselves called upon to vindicate their own innocence and integrity. . .": *Meetings for Sufferings*, xl, pp. 404-6, 6 October 1800 (Friends House Library, London). My thanks to the Librarian, Malcolm Thomas.

³In 1766 local gentry raised a subscription in Melksham "in consideration of the poor not having joined in the late riots which occurred all round the town", and beef was distributed to over 1,600 poor persons. But the beef was given in November, months after the height of the crisis had passed. Dr Randall suggests that the riotous poor of Chippenham,

It is not historically useful to separate the undoubted humanitarianism of these charities from their function in preserving class rule. Plebeian misery assaulted the conscience of the wealthy and challenged their capacity for remedy, just as it threatened to assault their property and challenge the legitimacy of their political monopoly.

In the 1790s "a waning 'paternalism'. . . was merely thinly-disguised self-preservation".¹

From the 1790s this was the case, and the supposed threat of "Jacobinism" provided an additional spur. But in earlier decades one can perceive a kind of social bargain, less calculating and more unconscious — a kind of obligatory dues paid for the everyday exercise of hegemony. It gave a character of liberality to some country gentry which allows one to forgive them other sins. "In this sense", John Walter has written, "years of dearth continued to provide an arena in which the nature of social responsibilities between the poor and their betters could be continually re-negotiated". But over the longer course, what had been once perceived as reciprocal duties (and by the labourers as rights) became re-defined as "discriminatory and discretionary charity". If "the poor" escaped "vulnerability to crises of sub-subsistence" it was at the cost of becoming "enmeshed in a web of deference and dependence".² Yet if this is true of rural England — and perhaps of some towns — the record of food riot shows an alternative.

In any case, relief measures cannot be shrugged off as only a matter of gestures or as an exercise in social control. There is reason to suppose that they may have mitigated crises of subsistence. If the margin between a poor subsistence and (for groups at risk) famine was small, then marginal

Stroud, Frome or Bradford (Wiltshire) might have done better: A. J. Randall, "Labour and the Industrial Revolution in the West of England Woollen Industry" (Univ. of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 1979), p. 166.

¹Bohstedt, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-7, 48. See also Peter Mandler's discussion of the conversion of the landed gentry in these years from a weak paternalism which acknowledged the customary rights of the poor to a language of the "natural order" (as defined by Smith and by Malthus) in which "the only true natural right" is that of property: "The Making of the New Poor Law *Redivivus*", *Past and Present*, 117 (November 1987).

²Walter, "Social Economy of Dearth", pp. 127-8; Walter and Schofield, "Famine, Disease and Crisis Mortality", p. 48.

redistribution to those in most need may have mattered enough to have shifted a demographic digit. Even between neighbouring towns the different profile of riot/relief might have influenced mortality. The patchwork of poor laws, charities, subsidies — even petty measures like limits upon malting, banning hair-powder, or commending austere diets to the deferential middling orders — might have added their mite to someone's survival.

This is simply to rehearse that food supply (and indeed demography) have their own kind of politics, in which riot may be seen as a rational and effective agent. If there had been no food riots then this whole elaborate patchwork of protection might never have come into being. If we say, with Roger Wells, that "staving off starvation in the most vulnerable locations necessitated the speediest suppression of riot", then we are taking a short-term view of the need, in emergency, to force the traffic in grain through a popular blockade. Over the longer-term view of two centuries and more, riot and the threat of riot may have staved off starvation, sometimes by actually forcing prices down, and more generally by forcing Government to attend to the plight of the poor, and by stimulating parish relief and local charity. The thesis then must be that the solidarities and collective actions of the urban working people, and in the manufacturing and mining districts, did something to bring the crisis of subsistence to an end. And conversely — but as a more tentative hypothesis — it might be that the comparative *absence* of riot in nineteenth-century Ireland and India was one factor (among others) which allowed dearth to pass into famine. And if this is the case, then the best thing that we, in our affluence, can do to help the hungry nations is to send them experts in the promotion of riot.¹

¹Wendy Thwaites, who kindly read these pages in manuscript, has very sensibly rebuked me for even making this joke. She points out that the resources of modernised hungry nations have advanced since the eighteenth century, and (citing Nigel Twose, *Cultivating Hunger* (Oxfam, 1984)) describes a vehicle developed to deter food rioters in the Dominican Republic of Haiti: "the AMAC-1 has nineteen weapon points, four multiple grenade launchers, a water canon, an infra-red video camera for surveillance, and its bodywork can be electrified with a 7,000 volt charge". She concludes that for riot to work there "have to be certain constraints on

I say this only partly in jest, for what are at issue are the community defences and the political influence of the working people. At the very least, rulers are likely to be more busy with the relief of the poor if they fear that otherwise their rule may be endangered by riot. I don't, of course, suppose that there was (and is) one alternative and universal set of remedies, "the moral economy", for the successful overcoming of dearth and the prevention of famine. It is exactly against such universalist dogma (the "free market") that I have been arguing. Perhaps all that can be expected in times of crisis is energetic improvisation, using whatever resources and options lie to hand. If political economy rests upon persuasive but misleading metaphors (such as "rationing"), the moral economy nourished its own irrationalisms and superstitions, such as the popular conviction that every dearth was the consequence of hoarding and speculation, "artificial scarcity", or even some malevolent *pacte de famine*.

A case can always be made on both sides of the question. The exemplary punishment of profiteers¹ or fraudulent dealers has sometimes had a beneficent effect upon prices, but the draconian imposition of price maximums has on occasion summoned forth a black market or a producers' strike (the peasants withholding supply) with consequences

how far the authorities will go in repression". I have left my jest in because it enables me also to include her thoughtful caution.

¹Adam Smith in his digression took a benign view of profiteers, since (a) the high profits of years of scarcity compensated dealers for the modest returns of normal years, and (b) the excessive profits of a few might be the inevitable price to pay for the market's functions for the general public. In any case, hoarders and profiteers (if they misjudged the market) would be caught out when prices fell. No-one has as yet succeeded in finding a way to study systematically the question of hoarding and profiteering in eighteenth-century high-price years, nor is it easy to see how it could be done. But that is no reason for the widely-held dogma that its effect (if it happened at all) was insignificant, and that no case can be made for excessive prices (in a seller's market, shored up by Corn Laws) which transferred wealth from the petty consumers to the grain-growing interests. Some scholars show great expertise in such matters as the behaviour of rats and fleas, or in the ratios of seed-corn to available harvest surplus, while stubbornly refusing to acknowledge rather large factors such as human greed.

no less baneful than those of doctrinaire *laissez-faire*. The mentality of urban revolutionaries has sometimes been profoundly hostile to the peasantry, and in the twentieth century collectivist states have precipitated famines as appalling as those presided over by complacent political economy. Some theorists today are interested in remembering the first, and in forgetting the second, which are tidied away as unmentionable in little exercises of political thought. For that reason I have redressed the account, to show that rioters had their reasons.

And (in conclusion) more caution might be proper in the use of the term, "market". I return to my earlier question: is market an actual market or is it a metaphor? One hears on every side these days talk of "a market economy". When this is contrasted with the centralised direction of old-style collectivist states one understands what is being described. And, very certainly, the "market" here is beneficial and can also be democratic, in stimulating variety and in expressing consumer choice. But I cannot clearly say what was "a market economy" in eighteenth-century England; or, rather, I cannot find a non-market-economy to contrast it with. One cannot think of an economy without a market; and even the most zealous food rioters, such as Cornish tinnies or Kingswood miners or West of England clothing workers,¹ were inextricably committed to the market, both as producers and as consumers. How could they have existed for a month or a week without it? What we can find are different ways of regulating the market or of manipulating exchanges between producers and consumers, to the advantage of one party or the other. It is with the special case of the marketing of "necessities" in time of dearth that we have been concerned,

¹We are fortunate in having excellent studies of these groups of workers, both in their capacities as (hard-bargaining) producers and (riotous) consumers. Even "custom" was not pre-market or non-market but a particular community consensus as to the regulation of wages and prices. See J. G. Rule, "The Labouring Miner in Cornwall, c. 1740-1820", (Univ. of Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 1971), esp. pp. 116-80; R. W. Malcolmsen, "A Set of Ungovernable People", in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds.), *An Ungovernable People* (1980) (the mining population of Kingswood); A. J. Randall, "Labour and the Industrial Revolution in the West of England Woollen Industry" (Univ. of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 1979).

and the crowd's preferred model was precisely the "open market" in which the petty producers freely competed, rather than the closed market when large dealers conducted private bargains over samples in the back parlours of inns.¹

The "market economy", I suspect, is often a metaphor (or mask) for capitalist process. It may even be employed as myth. The most ideologically-compelling form of the myth lies in the notion of the market as some supposedly-neutral but (by accident) beneficent entity; or, if not an entity (since it can be found in no space but the head) then an energising spirit — of differentiation, social mobility, individualisation, innovation, growth, freedom — like a kind of postal sorting-station with magical magnifying powers, which transforms each letter into a package and each package into a parcel. This "market" may be projected as a benign consensual force, which involuntarily maximises the best interests of the nation. It may even seem that it is the "market system" which has "produced" the nation's wealth — perhaps "the market" grew all that grain?

Market is indeed a superb and mystifying metaphor for the energies released and the new needs (and choices) opened up by capitalist forms of exchange, with all conflicts and contradictions withdrawn from view. Market is (when viewed from this aspect) a mask worn by particular interests, which are not coincident with those of "the nation" or "the community", but which are interested, above all, in being mistaken to be so. Historians who suppose that such a market really could be found must show it to us in the records. A metaphor, no matter how grand its intellectual pedigree, is not enough.

III

Let us next take the question of the role of women in food riots. In 1982 Jennifer Grimmett and M. I. Thomis published a helpful chapter on the theme,² in which they raised but left

¹*Mist's Weekly Journal*, 12 March 1726 reported that the mob rose on market days in Northampton, Kettering, Oundle, Wellingborough, Stony Stratford, because farmers would not bring corn to the market-place "but kept it in the Inns". At Towcester a riot was prevented by the Cryer giving notice that corn must be brought "into open market".

²Malcolm I. Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett, *Women in Protest, 1800-1850* (1982), ch. 2. This is based on a survey of published sources and some use of newspapers in 1800 and 1812.