

*Disaffection in Everyday Life in Interregnum England*

by Caroline Boswell (The Boydell Press, 2017)

Review by Rebecca Warren (Nov. 2018)

This book is an interesting discussion of how ‘ordinary people’ expressed antagonism towards the political regimes of the 1650s. Noting, rightly, the relative sparsity of research on this subject, Caroline Boswell takes her lead from the more numerous studies of popular political engagement within the public sphere during the Restoration period, by historians such as Tim Harris. She does recognise, however, that works by scholars, including Jason Peacey’s investigations of print and popular politics and Bernard Capp’s *England’s Culture Wars*, provide alternative approaches to her own.

Boswell’s book is divided into two main sections. The first examines the two physical spaces which, she suggests, formed the most important locations of public disaffection: streets and markets, and inns and taverns. She offers several case studies of clashes between those who inhabited these spaces daily and those in authority, to discuss these places as arenas for political dissent. These studies include the battle by the City of London to relocate the fruit and flower markets away from the central thoroughfare of Cheapside; the commandeering of public spaces and transport corridors in the capital by the Levellers, to publicise their aims and activities; and the conflicts which flared up in civic spaces where traditionally government proclamations were made, such as outside the guildhall in Exeter.

Turning her focus then to the ale-house, Boswell examines the links between alcohol, argument and outright conflict. She argues that the Cromwellian regime's clamp-down on inns disturbed the traditional patterns of social drinking, which led in some cases to acts of sedition. She looks at the role of informers, and the disruptive impact of locally-billeted soldiers in drinking houses, suggesting that resentment of these strangers triggered an increase in expressions of royalism. She also analyses the fraught experience of toasting with drink, which helped to uncover political dissatisfaction, especially royalism, a theme which she helpfully traces into the early Restoration.

The second part of this book considers 'objects' of disaffection: soldiers, excisemen and religious 'fanatics'. The standing army represented much that was hated about the 1650s - high taxation, the intrusion of aliens into communities, the imposition of behavioural regulation, the fear of religious sects, and of plunder and physical violence - so Boswell is right to identify them as stimulants to disaffection. Her examination of the relationship between soldiers and communities is done with care -for example, she identifies the way royalist polemicists subverted reports of soldiers' actions by exaggerating their impact upon the poor or on women. Turning to the role of excisemen - then as now unpopular figures in society - she argues that the collection of the hated excise throughout the 1650s both drew on and encouraged the accusations of illegitimacy that faced the Interregnum regimes. She explores the way some royalists re-fashioned reported assaults on excisemen to present such struggles as 'the commons' against 'the authorities', and she notes that outbursts of violence sometimes involved disaffected supporters of the regime, as well as its opponents. The section concludes

with a consideration of religious ‘fanatics’, from ejected Anglican ministers to the radical sects. She suggests that many communities conflated the threat posed by such sects with the Cromwellian regime itself, through its promise to uphold liberty of conscience and its support of the army. She ends this section with a consideration of the ‘fanatic’ as a general term for the religious and political opponents of monarchy and Restoration, during the unstable events of 1659-60.

This book has many strengths: it is intelligently researched and well-articulated. The author has done impressive research in a range of specialist areas - from taxation to gesture and speech, from sociological approaches to physical space to religious fanaticism - besides investigating a wide range of archival resources. The individual case-studies offer fascinating snap-shots of communities, individuals and authorities in conflict. Her ability to clarify complex local events will be of value to scholars interested in social relations as well as political disaffection, and she is scrupulous in drawing conclusions from each incident. Furthermore, she helpfully devotes considerable space to the confused period from 1659-1660, which is so often neglected by historians.

Where the volume stumbles, however, is the problematic nature of its overall structure. The categorisation of her material into ‘places’ and ‘objects’ (people) results in a text that dips awkwardly in and out of the decade and offers repetitive sociological explanations. Moreover, whilst some of her case studies do indeed show that the political climate of the interregnum imposed unique catalysts for conflict, others do not make the case so convincingly: the conflict over the Cheapside markets closely mirrors

similar conflicts between citizens and civic governments during the late medieval period and seems to have involved little that was genuinely specific to the interregnum. The second part of this volume stronger, giving her some scope for examining the themes which underlay disaffection. For example, her discussion of the excisemen allows her to reflect more fully on the long history of links between prerogative taxation, accusations of political illegitimacy, financial necessity and the intrusion of government impositions on local communities. However, although she is to be congratulated on her identification of the neglected 1660 trope of the religious 'fanatic', her exploration of the conflicts resulting from religious conformity and non-conformity, in particular the experience of ejected Anglican ministers, is problematic and would have benefited from a more detailed understanding of the subject. Nevertheless, this is a richly detailed volume that will be of interest to readers who seek to understand popular responses to unpopular political regimes.