

Teaching the Age of Revolutions

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2018 (Secondary)

Ben Walsh

Week 5: British Politics, Riot and Reform

For Week 5 the focus was on British politics in the Age of Revolutions, particularly the early 19th century although some Fellows ranged more widely. The title given was set up as an item to be challenged. Fellows were asked to consider the work of Robert Poole and also an episode from the popular history broadcast *The Radical North* by Melvyn Bragg. They were then asked to consider how far these works challenged the traditional school history view or indeed their own views.

Several Fellows commented on how the reading had made them rethink their existing knowledge:

- As my understanding of this period of British politics is largely restricted to the textbook narrative and a vague recollection from university about the Whig ‘march of progress’ interpretation, I thoroughly enjoyed the reading this week. While attempting to consider how we might characterise this period and use it to inform students understanding of broader developments in British history, I found that I had lots of questions and potential trends to explore, rather than a coherent characterisation.

1. The Geography of protest and reform

- Poole’s 2006 article suggests that while the agency for reform necessarily had to come from a local level, after the 1792 Seditious Societies Act prohibited national political organisation, the communication of these groups and the organisation of petitioning is suggestive of an ‘underlying coherence’ if not a single movement. The dynamic between London and ‘the provinces’ in terms of the impetus for reform could also be a fruitful area of enquiry, which would enable students to engage in a bigger picture.

- The more local aspect of the geography of protest explored in Bragg’s podcast, from the mass meetings held on the moors to the fact that cavalrymen facing protestors on cobbled streets could be likened to the experience guerrilla warfare during the Peninsular war, could help give students a tangible starting point for their exploration of protest (though perhaps the specific reference to the Peninsular War!)

2. The nature and historical context of protest

- As other contributions have mentioned that fact that reformers were placing themselves within a broader historical context of British protest, by referencing Magna Carta, the Peasants Revolt and legislation of the Stuart Restoration, rather than drawing parallels between the recent French Revolution would lend itself to a broader understanding of developments and protests through time.

- I found it interesting reading Poole (2008) to be reminded of three things: (i) that available models for political change in the early nineteenth century were all sudden; (ii) that reformers consistently evoked memories of Magna Carta and the Peasants' Revolt, not so much the French Revolution, in their calls for reform (in the 1810s and 1820s at least); and (iii) that petitioning the crown was seen as an important means of protest after petitioning parliament, belying the power the monarch held. These points are clearly all interlinked and show the particular political landscape of Britain. I think (iii) is particularly important to emphasise to students, given our different relationship with petitioning today.
- One of the other interesting things that cropped up in much of the reading was the pervasive perception of the times that this was a period of radical plots and government lethargy and corruption. I found Bush and Poole's articles very insightful in the first case: Bush for bringing attention to the role of women in the reform movement, and in inadvertently provoking hostility from the yeomanry and special constables; Poole for fiercely challenging revisionist accounts both at the time and since. His use of letters could make a fascinating lesson or series of lessons on the back and forth between ministers and local law enforcement leading up to August 1819. He seems to suggest that the response of the magistrates at Peterloo in 1819 was almost an instinctive reflex or even a pre-emptive strike, so deeply did they expect a riot to occur – even if the evidence before their eyes might have suggested otherwise. I am hoping next week the reading on print and media might help to explain why these views were so widely held. The coda to this – the court case – is a really fantastic illustration of how a government constructed a riot out of a peaceable assembly, and could be a great focus for students. The second intriguing issue is that many people – or at least those in favour of reform – were most vocally calling for an end to government inefficiency at just the time when the government was itself doing most in this direction. Roger Knight is very thorough and pretty emphatic on this. He claims that the 'quiet labour' of initial reform before the Napoleonic Wars were key to the survival of Britain during them. And during them, Pitt's simplification of the tax system, the energetic figures in the Victualling Board and Ordnance Board, the reliance on the private sector for industrial scale military production, the close relationship between the Bank of England and city financiers, for instance, indicate that the modern bureaucratic state was to an extent created during this period.
- Balancing what is significant now against what was significant at the time is a challenging task. This also applies to change and continuity which is perhaps more obvious in retrospect although the extent of change is open to interpretation. I think this period should be characterised by riot and reform, with the people demanding a fairer distribution of power; seeing wealth created but not distributed, corruption of the monarchy, high taxation and a bloated state which benefited the rich not the poor. However, people in power never want to give it up, so there is an immediate reaction or limitation of change. Listening to Melvyn Bragg's podcast I am surprised that Peterloo is not more celebrated for its significance now, even though they were careful about how to report it at the time. The podcast implies a sense of urgency within the people to break the monopoly of the bankers and property owners (which seems very resonant today). Poole says there was a naïve faith in Parliamentary Reform from the economic powerhouse of the radical north, taking power from the few to the many. Poole believed the government were unable to cope with this demonstration as there had been no real precedent; implying the level of protest marks a

change. Reading both the Poole and Bush extracts you would have to reject the revisionist case that Peterloo was a “tragedy” but not a massacre. Bush’s account of the woman’s injuries is graphic and shocking along with the fact they were disproportionately attacked as part of a counter revolution, with the military seeing the provocative women’s protest (many were dressed in white) as an attack on their sense of manhood. It marked a progressive achievement for women and developed into Chartism. Bush states women were politicised long before they aspired to vote and the role of women in protest would certainly be engaging and relevant for the students. However, it failed to bring about reform because the government tightened its grip afterwards, all public meetings were banned, indicating it did not lead to the desired changes

One of the Fellows was anxious NOT to bring a more nuanced terminology into the lexicon, but for the best of pedagogical reasons:

- I am really interested in the intelligent discussions in so many posts above about the use of the word ‘riot’. However, as a side note, I was wondering whether, or to what extent, there is a place for using exiting words in History? My students of the French Revolution, are always so excited to get onto “The Terror” (!) and even after we unpick the term and probe the problems with it, it does little to diminish their particular relish for the unit. I am convinced that part of the reason why, is the terminology. I think it would be a shame if we were so concerned to use nuanced language in History lessons, that we missed out the words that help make History a fun and engaging subject. So I would argue, let’s talk of riots, and once we’ve got them hooked, then develop and unpick this. In the reading this week, I too was struck by the theme of continuity over change.

References

Core resources

- Poole, Robert (2009) French revolution or peasants' revolt? Petitioners and rebels from the Blanketeers to the Chartists. Labour History Review, 74 (1). pp. 6-26. ISSN 0961-5652: <http://clou.uclan.ac.uk/6682/1/Poole%202009%20LHR.pdf>
- Podcast by Melvyn Bragg – The Matter of the North: The Radical North <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07syyrh>
- Burns, A, Corruption in Late Georgian England (lecture for 6th form students)

Secondary sources

- Burns, A and Innes, I (eds) (2003) Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850 Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-03949-9. Introduction pp. 1-70 but also explores wider themes of reform.
- Robert Poole 'By the Law or the Sword': Peterloo Revisited (History, 2006, pp. 254-276)
- ML Bush 'The Women at Peterloo: The Impact of Female Reform on the Manchester Meeting of 16 August 1819' History Vol. 89, No. 2 (294) (April 2004), pp. 209-232
- Teaching History Polychronicon considering ideas for re-thinking Waterloo
- http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/2771/1/Poole_ReinterpretingPeterloo.pdf
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02jg2hp> - school child explores the Peterloo massacre and is introduced to primary sources by Robert Poole and Katrina Navickas

Primary sources

These websites offer some excellent links to primary sources concerning Peterloo and some of the wider themes of the history of protest.

- <http://peterloowitness1819.weebly.com/>
- <http://www.peterloomassacre.org/>
- <http://protesthistory.org.uk/peterloo-massacre>