Community memories of protest history in rural England: forgetting, un-forgetting and the politics of ‘Instant History’

Dr. Carl J. Griffin, University of Sussex
Carl.Griffin@sussex.ac.uk

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Memory work – *four plays*

1) Memorialisation (‘casting into stone’ - Nuala Johnson, 1995) & commemoration (‘official’ and practices of ‘heritage from below’ – Iain Robertson 2012)

2) Political presentism

3) ‘Official’ telling of events in our ‘national stories’ (Mandler 2002)

And…
Memory work – *four plays*

4) Custom – perhaps the critical arena…

Work focused on how custom:

- was shaped and inscribed (orally, textually, materially)

- was mobilised as i) the wellspring of particular claims to the idealised, cohesive community; and, 
  ii) the (moral) justification for forms of social conflict

Custom works because the community is constantly reminded of memories – *memory is performed and performative*
Remembering acts of protest arguably more complex... protests catastrophic in that signalled a breakdown in assumed social relations

Point of departure:

the ways in which communities selectively invoked the memory of past protests and just as selectively acted to ‘forget’, or rather performed the exclusion of certain memories

Not claiming that past studies not attentive to the selective ways in which past protests have been inscribed, e.g. Woods on the telling of Kett’s Rebellion

Paper not concerned with elite attempts to hijack meaning and frame collective memory but rather local and demotic workings of memory
Knowing, telling, ‘forgetting’, revising

‘A miner born in 1750, would have childhood memories of the food riots of 1757, and could have participated in food riots in 1773, 1793, 1795, 1796 and 1801. If he were lucky enough to live to be 62, then he could also have experienced the food riots of 1812. Apart from food rioting, he would have been a youth at the time of the pottery smashing, and [may] have participated in the riots of the 1780s’.

According to John Aubrey…

‘the [community] history was handed downe from mother to daughter… [the practice for] the maydes to sitt-up late by the fire [to] tell old romantique stories of the old time’.

Katherine Bushell of Ford, near Chippenham, ‘being excellent at these old stories… had the history from the conquest downe to Carl. I in ballad’

Evolving scripts – the example of food rioting

Adrian Randall (2006, p.112): ‘folk memory and sense of confidence that came from previous actions... [was a] strong mobilizing agency’

Andrew Charlesworth (1993, p.210): culture of food rioting ‘grew stronger and was enriched as a cumulative collective memory of previous struggles’ as the eighteenth century unfurled

But what of communities that had no history of ‘success’? What of failure?
‘…seven hundred men drilled at Tandle Hill as well as any army regiment would…’
Evolving scripts – the example of rural terror

Threatening letter sent to Mr. Ridge, the keeper of the forest of the Isle of Wight in the early 1730s:

‘Remember the Walton (sic) Blacks’

The Newnham (Kent) fires of 1757 and 1823; Hound farm, Hamble in 1828 and 1830
Evolving scripts – the Swing Riots (1830-1)

1) Forgetting and agency

2) Instant histories

3) Ignoring Swing
Swing’s instant histories

Stylistic forms:

1) Theatricals e.g. C.Z. Barnett, “Swing!” A farce, in one act (London, 1830).

2) Pseudo-biographicals, e.g. ‘Francis Swing’ (pseud.), The history of Swing, the noted Kent Rick Burner. Written by himself (London, 1830).

3) Social investigations, e.g. J. Parker, Machine-breaking and the changes occasioned by it in the village of Turvey Down. A tale of the times (Oxford, November 1831).
Conclusions

Non-linearity of memory

Multiple memories = multiple narratives

Remembering to forget just as important as remembering to remember