

*The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy and Market Transition in England, c.1550-1850.* By John Bohstedt. Farnham: Ashgate. 2010. 332p. £65 (hb). ISBN 978-0754665816.

Food riots are a perennial topic in histories of eighteenth-century protest. In *The Politics of Provisions*, John Bohstedt challenges E. P. Thompson's influential model of the 'moral economy' by examining the relationship between food riots and the market from the early modern period to the mid-nineteenth century. Bohstedt claims that the 'law of necessity' was a more powerful motive to riot (with crowds throughout this period repeating the refrain 'we'd rather be hanged than starved') than was popular attachment to Tudor-Stuart marketing customs and regulations. His central argument is intriguing. He suggests that food riots fitted within the 'mixed economy of welfare' as identified by historians of poverty. Food rioters claimed 'entitlements' in order to avoid the subordination implicit in the receipt of charity or poor relief; crowds acted in the manner of 'we'd rather be hanged than pauperized' [p. 236]). In so doing, they responded to, and shaped, the nature of the early modern state and political economy.

The book is structured chronologically, although the chapters are uneven in length and depth. Chapter three, for example, covering the period 1650-1739, is only twelve pages long; by contrast, chapter five, discussing 1782-1812, is a densely-packed eighty pages. Bohstedt is, as his previous work attests, most comfortable in the late eighteenth century. Chapter four unpicks the effects of the increasing rate of urbanization and commercialization of the market in the mid-eighteenth century. Bohstedt here argues that the 'crowd' were not the progenitors of the 'moral economy'. Rather it was the country

gentlemen who fostered an idea of paternalism whilst being somewhat removed from the realities of over-stretched urban food supplies or mounting popular unrest. Chapter five charts the ‘beginning of the end for viable bargaining by bread riot’ [p. 240] during the French Wars. Local government effectively placated desperate inhabitants with soup kitchens and provision politics was undermined by discretionary relief.

In the outlying chapters, Bohstedt conveys the impression that that this is still work in progress. His analysis of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries is predominantly based on secondary sources and in places feels thin. There are also some oddly-phrased analogies which do not fit with the more measured prose of the central chapters; for example: ‘sixteenth-century food riots [...] were like furry little mammals overshadowed by the great crashing dinosaurs of peasant and dynastic rebellions and enclosure battles’ [p. 27]. In many ways, this is not an easy read, and one has to work hard to uncover the overall arguments from amongst the detail.

The lack of archival references in parts of the book also raises problems. Most of the data analyses and diagrams (except, oddly, in chapter five) are referenced with ‘see my riots census online’. The website address cited for the ‘riots census’ requires a password. I contacted Professor Bohstedt, who directed me to his new website: <http://web.utk.edu/~bohstedt/test>. However, at the time of writing (December 2010), the databases were only complete until 1767, and I was therefore unable to see the evidence and sources for 1768 to 1850, the main period covered by the book. This is a minor point, but it does raise questions about the longevity of the data source. Perhaps when his website becomes unavailable in the future (for example, after he retires from his university), large sections of the analysis might be left unreferenced. The book does not

explicitly define what sample has been made and the bibliography of archives is truncated, with only the names of the repositories listed. The sense that this is a rushed production is compounded by several careless typographical errors and poorly formatted diagrams (for example, map 3.1 of food riots, 1740-1773, is seemingly titled 'Navigable waterways by 1766' by virtue of its point size).