In Search of the ‘Moral Economy’: Food Scarcity in 1756–57 and the Crowd

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Food or scarcity riots were not common events in eighteenth-century Ireland but they were one response to the famines and dearths which marked that century. When L. A. Clarkson looked at the outbreaks of famine and subsistence crises over the millennium of 900 AD to 1900 the eighteenth century was shown to be far from immune. The 1720s, 1740s and 1750s were among the worst decades of the century, including as they do the 1740–41 famine which may have cost the lives of up to 20 per cent of Ireland’s population. All these subsistence crises were accompanied by crowd protests against the prices of food and fuel and the export of such goods. On first examination these protest crowds appear to have been ‘pre-modern’ or even ‘reactionary’ in the sense of these terms used by Charles Tilly. Without going into the detail of his theories, the key point about such crowds was that they desired to restore perceived conditions or sought to prevent change. The latter included the substitution of tillage by grazing or attempts to increase taxes, rents or tithes when the economy was improving. If such beliefs in fairness or unfairness existed during food riots then this is where the search for what has become known as the ‘moral economy’ begins.

The concept of a moral economy was the historiographical innovation of E. P. Thompson in a seminal 1971 article dealing with food riots in eighteenth-century England. Part of the strength of Thompson’s thesis was its apparent applicability to many different times and geographical settings. According to Thompson the crowd acted with a ‘legitimising notion’. During food riots their grievances
operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon 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.

In other words, Thompson was arguing that the poor (and also some of the elite who remained bound to paternalist ideas), especially in crowd actions, believed in an alternative to the market economy and its practices, especially during times of scarcity. Thompson’s moral economy thesis was a hugely successful one and quickly became the dominant means for interpreting not only English food riots but also European, American and Asian disturbances of the pre-industrial era.

Yet the concept has not gone unchallenged. A recent article on riots in Germany cautioned that the concept is a ‘point of departure’ for further research and not definitive. The author also cautions against ‘a series of diverging interpretations, modifications, expansions, and even misinterpretations’. One of Thompson’s most trenchant critics is Mark Harrison who has attacked the concept of moral economy both in the way that it was formulated in 1971 and in the way that he believes it has been ‘vulgarised’ since. One of the accurate points that Harrison and others make is that food riots were comparatively rare. In the context of all types of crowds this is true, although an insistence on this much broader perspective does not mean that there was no such thing as a moral economy. Harrison also argues that Thompson was guilty not only of the sin of omission but also of ignoring the way in which ritual and ceremony in crowd actions actually establish or reinforce consensus between different social groups rather than posing alternatives or hearkening back to previous realities. More importantly for the study of crowds as a whole, Harrison points out that talk of such consensus and challenges to it imply a monolithic view of crowds that is probably far from the truth. These points, like Thompson’s assumptions, are difficult, if not impossible, to prove definitively one way or another.

What is perhaps a greater problem for Thompson’s ideas is the way in which they have sometimes been misapplied. Unfortunately this is also true for Ireland. In a 1983 article Thomas Bartlett dates the death of the moral economy at 1793 and the anti-militia riots of that year. Professor Bartlett shows how the anti-militia riots were different from what had gone before in terms of their violence, their geographical spread and