

# H-Net Reviews

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**Caroline Boswell.** *Disaffection and Everyday Life in Interregnum England.* Studies in Early Modern Cultural, Political and Social History Series. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2017. 272 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78327-045-3.

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Anyone who has read the social history of seventeenth-century England produced over recent decades knows that scholars have unearthed a rich archive of confrontations in marketplaces, animated disagreements in taverns, and riots in the streets. Such moments of social and political tension come to the attention of the authorities, make their way into court documents and other sources, and await industrious modern researchers' efforts to come again to light. Numerous works recount such tales, in order to understand attitudes toward gender, economic justice, and a host of other issues. In these sources, the voices of common men and women emerge, mediated though they are by the often fraught occasions that caused them to be recorded.

Caroline Boswell invites us to consider what tales from these archives can reveal of disaffection and popular politics. Examining the interregnum years—that eleven-year period between the 1649 execution of Charles I and the advent on the throne of his son Charles II in 1660—*Disaffection and Everyday Life in Interregnum England* wades into a complicated and contentious political environment. Generally Boswell does not avoid that complexity but instead provides a nuanced treatment of the issues raised by her selected stories of estrangement.

In taking disaffection as her subject, Boswell has set herself a difficult task. In the 1650s, a vast array of English people felt some degree of unhappiness with the current government or its policies. Diehard royalists hated those who opposed the king from the first signs of conflict in the late 1630s, to the outbreak of civil war in the 1640s, through the various attempts to settle a gov-

ernment that could permanently and effectively replace monarchy in the 1650s. Others hoped for positive change out of the civil wars and even the execution of the king but lost faith in the governmental forms that replaced monarchy over the decade that followed Charles's death. Some thought little about the larger issues but objected to events within their local community that directly affected them. The collection of excise taxes offers an example of the last, narrowest case. Individuals disliked the excise under the Stuarts both before and after the revolution created interregnum regimes that also endorsed the hated excise. While royalist pamphleteers might seize on excise abuses to foment opposition to Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, or interpret the hostility to excise men as an indication of widespread royalism, hatred of the tax man could be nonideological.

*Disaffection and Everyday Life in Interregnum England* is divided into two parts, one on sites and the other on objects. In the first section, Boswell explores cases that occurred in the streets and marketplaces (basically shared spaces out of doors), and those that occurred in taverns and similar locations where drink was imbibed in company with others. Both marketplaces and businesses that purveyed drink had long been regulated by the central state or the local government, and scrutiny of activities that occurred in such public spaces continued under the interregnum. Part 2, on objects of disaffection, identified three types of men—soldiers, excise men, and fanatics. Soldiers represented a problematic group specific to the era: after the civil wars of the 1640s ended, the army never disbanded, and England dealt with the presence of a standing army in what was ostensibly peace-

time. Soldiers were unpopular on their own merits but also because they were expensive to keep and they sometimes implemented policies (like collection of the excise) that were objectionable. Excise men, in contrast, were a familiar feature of English life, but their longevity did not improve their reputations.

Although the first two categories were self-evident occupational groups, the final “object” of disaffection—the fanatic—occupied a position identified (indeed, arguably, manufactured) by royalist propagandists. According to Boswell, the “phanatic” image drew on the idea that the interregnum regimes and the army that served them promoted religious radicalism. Royalists defined and promoted the fanatic as a category only in the lead up to the Restoration, designating all the new and different religious groups as falling into this group. They attacked the interregnum project by characterizing its supporters and spawns as extremists, beginning in 1659. In so doing, they anticipated their own analysis of the interregnum that would become prominent in the Restoration era. Although Boswell unearths opposition to innovative religious groups among the populace, her discussion of this category tilts more toward the royalist agenda than her treatments elsewhere had done. In most cases, she concentrates her analysis on the popular expressions articulated in her chosen spaces or leveled at her unpopular objects, but in discussing fanatics she turns quickly to the royalists who managed the discussion around this image. In that sense, the final chapter moves toward both royalism and Restoration, and somewhat away from the focus on everyday exchanges that make up most of the book’s concern.

Boswell rightly cautions us against seeing every tale of hostility to the regime or its policies as royalism. That warning is well taken indeed: historians’ desire to find expressions of popular political views tempts us to see each critical statement as arising out of a full-blown ideological position engaged in the politics of the moment. For their own part, royalist propagandists eagerly seized upon the evidence of dissatisfaction and folded the critique into their own accounts of the perfidy of the regime and the necessity of a return to monarchy. Boswell usually holds off consideration of the royalist appropriation

of each area of discontent, allowing the popular expression and the use to which royalists put it to remain distinct elements in her account. The possibility that the protestors entirely endorsed the royalist interpretation of their activities exists, of course, but Boswell does not assume a complete unanimity. The disgruntled might have been equally unhappy with royalist rule, for instance, or unconcerned with the larger political struggles going on around them.

In common with many works of English social history over recent decades, Boswell plumbs the rich records of English localities to uncover arresting stories. The book includes many vignettes. Altercations in streets, taverns, doorways of private homes, and elsewhere all came to the attention of authorities who recorded them for Boswell’s perusal. She offers thoughtful and sensible analysis of these altercations and their meanings, by and large.

The focus on the interregnum creates a particular political context for Boswell’s analysis, and it is not clear that she has entirely considered its implications. Disaffection in an era of repeated regime change and political polarization raises the question of the relationship between that upheaval and the disillusionment expressed in the records. Royalists were confident that they understood the connection: fanatics killed the king, took over the nation, and perpetuated various abuses that riled up the common people in defense of traditional liberties and practices. Yet, as Boswell well knows, disaffection of the sort she studies was not unique to her period. With the case of the excise men she most directly confronts that issue: taxes outraged people before, during, and after the interregnum. Yet Boswell sometimes falls back on the logic of extraordinary times: she cannot always maintain the effort required in following her own advice not to read all dissatisfaction as royalism. Perhaps taking her focus on disaffection as potentially nonpolitical (or at least as not simply political in the most obvious way) to other eras and other clusters of stories from the rich early modern English archive of discontent would provide a context in which to understand the animosity expressed against policies and people in this era. A broader comparative assessment of this idea might prove revealing.

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