Revel, Riot & Rebellion: A Sense of Scale

One of the more unusual, if rarely commented-on, aspects of *Revel, Riot & Rebellion* is David Underdown's choice of setting for his study of early modern popular politics: the three south-western English counties of Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire. Underdown was explicit that he needed to concentrate on 'one region' containing a diversity of topography to test his hypotheses.[1] This regional framework had conceptual, methodological and historiographical origins, consideration of which can help situate the book in its intellectual genealogy and calibrate its influence on subsequent scholarship. Attending to the question of scale within the work also helps identify some of the key assumptions and preoccupations which accompanied the move from studying the elite politics of early modern England to its popular political culture; a shift in which Underdown's scholarship was influential, and of which it was in many ways emblematic. *Revel* foregrounds the three counties as its arena of analysis, but frequently moves downwards spatially to plot cultural change at a parish level, and upwards too in its discussions of events such as the Restoration. Scale is thus central to the presentation of the book's findings and also to its historiographical novelty. In *Revel*, Underdown made a case for the connecting the politics of the parish to the seismic events of the 1640s and 1650s, but also argued that both were equally worthy of analysis and attention.

Alan Everitt's thesis of the 'county community' had influenced Underdown's previous work.[2] *Pride's Purge*, in particular, betrayed a debt to the idea that England was a collection of separate county communities, and that part of the story to be told about the 1640s was the periphery's 'subordination to Westminster, and the destruction of the comfortable independence of county communities'.[3] Underdown then pursued an Everittian-style county study of his native Somerset during the civil wars and Interregnum, but it was during work on this project that he became increasingly aware of cultural and political differences *within* the

confines of the shire.[4] In developing his interest in the origins, nature and dynamics of these differences, which would eventually bear fruit as *Revel, Riot & Rebellion*, he made a precocious effort to move beyond prevailing understandings of the centre-locality dyad and consider the ideological and political valency of social and cultural difference on the wider panorama of a regional history. Moreover, he chose three shires which did not form an immediately recognisable region such as Clive Holmes' East Anglia.[5] Instead of seeing the region and the centre as being oppositional, as had been the case with Everitt, Underdown rather explored the ways in which they connected and influenced one another.[6] In adopting this lens of study Underdown pursued one strand of local history as it developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s which, drawing on the example of W.G. Hoskins and the Leicester School of Local History, looked to 'counter parochialism in local studies, to promote a consideration of theoretical issues, and to encourage through the local focus the development of history in the round'.[7]

Revel certainly managed such feats. However, its intellectual and methodological heritage was complex, and informed Underdown's approach as one of those early 'regionalists' who sought 'illumination in that often undefined territory between national affairs and the parish pump'.[8] The complexity of the relationship between place and method in the book derived from the fact that Underdown drew not only on the landscape studies of Joan Thirsk (and indeed the later work of Alan Everitt), but also on the parish-centred methodologies of Keith Wrightson and The Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure, the micro-historical attention to symbolic meaning deriving from Geertzian anthropology, and the *Annaliste* emphasis on the *pays*. Mixed in was Underdown's own deep knowledge of national politics and a desire to attach local developments to wider political currents. It is not surprising, then, that *Revel* frequently zooms in and out in its spatial frames of reference, and

part of the book's enduring significance and fecundity lies in the bravura with which scales are mixed and, consequently, the subjects it brings under review. *Revel* is, therefore, partly an attempt to synthesise the scalar diversity of early modern social and political history, and thus belongs in the company of E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* as a programmatic text for connecting cultures with their contexts, places with their politics.

A good deal of criticism levelled at the book focused on Underdown's use of the forest-field dichotomy of land use developed by Thirsk to explain religio-political difference, and few scholars supported its more strident claims on this basis.[9] However, Underdown made no assertions about the typicality of his theatre of study, and explicitly invited 'cross-regional comparison' as a way of testing his claims.[10] His foregrounding of a regional framework anticipated Charles Phythian-Adams' elaboration of the idea of 'cultural provinces' in English local history, and also spoke to Underdown's interest in the French model of contrasting *pays* as the basis for historical investigation, something which had also attracted Everitt by the late 1970s.[11] Associated with the founder of French geography, Paul Vidal de la Blache, the *pays* had been taken up by *Annales* historians such Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Pierre Goubert, and the attempts to connect geography and local mentalities in *Revel* can be seen as a form of *Annaliste* investigation. The hierarchies of investigation characteristic of some *Annales* scholarship, from the ecology of the landscape to the culture of the parish, were reflected closely in the structures of *Revel*. While never acknowledged explicitly in the text, the *Annales* approach to environment and its culture formed one link in the work's methodological DNA.[12]

Although Underdown argued his case at a regional level, he made no claim for his three counties as a distinctive cultural province. He required a finer grain for uncovering the dynamics of popular culture and so looked to Thirsk's field-forest dichotomy. However, although this aspect has drawn most attention, scholars have rarely noticed that the ecological

typology was itself supported by a Wrightsonian model of the socially-variegated parish. It is this parochial dimension, along with its frequent elision into the nebulous space of the 'community', which actually stands at the heart of the work. Keith Wrightson's research into social division within English parishes and the economic, social and religious developments which both drove and attended this development, are crucial in Underdown's elaboration of a narrative of social change and politico-cultural polarisation.[13] Time and again *Revel* deploys parish evidence to support its broader claims. However, it is clear that Underdown viewed the pre-Reformation parish – and its religiously conservative, festive, successor – as an idealised type, a kind of organic hierarchical community which was being eroded in the early modern period by the corrosive dual influence of proto-capitalism and the ideologies of puritan control.

Consciously or not, Underdown was arguing through the typologies of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* ('community' and 'society') conceptualised by Ferdinand Tönnies, which had informed the approaches of R.H. Tawney and Underdown's research mentor, Christopher Hill. This school presented the early modern period as one of disorienting transition from the normative equable social relations of the late medieval hierarchy to something more turbulent and confrontational, where horizontal relationships of economic and ideological interest reshaped the structures of 'community'. Here, then, we encounter problems with Underdown's idealisation of a pre-Reformation local culture that was, in fact, more disputatious and nationally-integrated than Underdown allowed.[14] The text invokes a 'previously homogenous village community' characterised by unity and neighbourliness, whose festive culture was 'appropriate to this older kind of society'. By contrast rapid economic change, population growth and the development of a market economy gave such practices 'less meaning' in many areas, and some parochial leaders consequently looked to puritanism as a 'more disciplined way of ordering their and their neighbours' lives'.[15] Social relations at the level of the parish are

thus seen as structured by a form of functionalism and more than a dash of neo-Weberianism. These forces combine to narrate a story of the disintegration of local communal values in the face of a more individual, commercialised, and indeed national set of solidarities in some areas, and their aggressive politicisation in others. In both of these scenarios, the politics of the parish helps shape, and is profoundly shaped by, broader ideological currents.

One neglected but important reading of *Revel*, then, is as a study of the fragmentation of local structures of belonging in the face of politicised languages of identity that operate nationally. While there is far from a simple transition from parishioner to parliamentarian, there is nevertheless a narrative here of 'the erosion of parochial identity' by wider social, economic and political forces.[16] The ideologies of royalism and parliamentarianism are portrayed as confronting the 'stubborn narrowness of provincial horizons', with villagers being 'politicized by the war'.[17] At times the centre-locality relationship proceeds in a kind of inequitable and unidirectional manner as in Everitt's work, where the politics of the centre overcomes the provincialism of the locality, although in Underdown's iteration analysis is conducted at the level of the parish rather than the county.[18] More usually, however, the exchange operates in both directions and produces a more complex set of relationships. Such an approach underpins the book's highly original discussion of political stereotypes during the civil wars, seen as badges of national ideology forged from languages of local cultural experience.[19] *Revel* is thus partly about seeing the mid-seventeenth century crisis as a significant moment in the integration of local and national political cultures. Part of royalism's force, for example, is seen to derive from a type of 'community spirit', which can be channelled into a vigorous anti-puritanism and emerge as the dominant force at the Restoration.[20] From the perspective of the 1660s, Underdown surveys what has gone before to suggest that his book has

examined a struggle over 'the moral basis of English society' and the 'contrasting assumptions … about the nature of the kingdom and community'.[21]

As this final phrase suggests, one of the elements with which *Revel* grappled was the different scales at which politics operated in early modern England: the kingdom and the community. In this respect, it is interesting to consider the work as it stood in dialogue with revisionism, at its high watermark when *Revel* was published in 1985. Conrad Russell's influential *Parliament and English Politics, 1621-1629* spent many pages elaborating the relationship between parliament and the localities. However, he was keen to emphasise the 'obstructive localism' and provincial insularity of England and Wales as the dominant strain in the kingdom's politics.[22] He too had read Everitt, but inverted his argument to project a form of apolitical provincialism into parliament. Underdown, by contrast, portrayed a local society that was *already* riven by ideological and cultural fissures in the early seventeenth century, and his job was to chart the political ramifications of this throughout the social order, and also to connect these earlier Stuart roots with the struggles of the later seventeenth century. Post-revisionist scholars have followed up many of the leads that Underdown first laid down in terms of the connections between local and national politics. In the process, they have dismantled much of the revisionist paradigm which had served to perpetuate the Everittian division of centre and locality.

Underdown's work was not particularly influential in terms of its ecological thesis, but adaptations of his model emphasising the connections the between structures of local life and the broader currents of politics have left a lasting mark. Scholars such as Mark Stoyle, Ann Hughes, Andy Wood and Andy Hopper have all considered the complex interactions between local cultures and national politics during the seventeenth century.[23] The development of post-revisionist scholarship has engaged with aspects of the cultural turn and network theory that

find important wellsprings in *Revel*.[24] Recent scholarship on the 'public sphere' attempts to link various scales of political action in a manner anticipated by many passages in *Revel*.[25] The 'New British History' approach, however, had not gathered much momentum by the mid-1980s and left no discernible trace on Underdown's work, and today seems an important absence in the book. Studies of Scotland, Ireland and Wales could profitably develop some of the Underdown's lines of enquiry relating to the relationship between local cultures and national politics (however defined). Moreover, as transnational histories become increasingly influential, the regional dimension foregrounded in *Revel* suggests ways in which boundaries other than those of the nation might be exploited and enhanced by applying such methodologies. In its attention to scale, as in much else, then, we have yet to exhaust the rich and suggestive seams of insight and scholarship found in the pages of *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*.

[1] David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603-1660* (Oxford, 1985), p. ix.

[2] Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion* (Leicester, 1966); idem, *The Local Community and the Great Rebellion* (London, 1969).

[3] David Underdown, *Pride's Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1971), p. 39.

[4] David Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum* (Newton Abbot, 1973), esp. pp. 115-17; idem, *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996), p. v.

[5] Clive Holmes, *The Eastern Association in the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1974).

[6] See Underdown's review of Andrew Coleby's book on Hampshire which he criticised as 'unimaginative' and having 'no underlying conceptual framework beyond the conventional model of center-local relations developed by earlier localists': *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19 (1989), p. 672.

[7] 'Introduction', in Adrian Green and A.J. Pollard (eds), *Regional Identities in North-East England, 1300-200* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 5. This summarises the aims of the Conference of Regional and Local Historians (CORAL) established in 1978.

[8] J.D. Marshall, 'The Study of Local and Regional "Communities": Some Problems and Possibilities', *Northern History*, 17 (1981), p. 220.

[9] Telling critiques of this aspect include John Morrill, 'The Ecology of Allegiance in the English Revolution', *Journal of British Studies*, 26 (1987), pp. 451-67; Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 137-48; Neil Davie, 'Chalk and Cheese? "Fielden" and "Forest" Communities in Early Modern England', *The Journal of Historical Sociology*, 4

(1991), pp. 1-31; Mark Stoyle, *Loyalty and Locality Popular Allegiance in Devon during the English Civil War* (Exeter, 1994).

[10] Underdown, *Revel*, p. x.

[11] Charles Phythian-Adams, *Societies, Cultures and Kinship, 1580-1850: Cultural Provinces in English Local History* (Leicester, 1992); Alan Everitt, 'Country, County and Town: Patterns of Regional Evolution in England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 29 (1979), p. 82. For Underdown's interest in the *pays*, see his 'Regional Cultures? Local Variations in Popular Culture during the Early Modern Period', in Tim Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 33-4.

[12] In 1980, however, he had called for an '*Annales* type of "total" history' in this area: David Underdown, 'Community and Class: Theories of Popular Politics in the English Revolution', in Barbara Malament (ed.), *After the Reformation: Essays in Honour of J.H. Hexeter* (Manchester, 1980), p. 161.

[13] For Wrightson, see Steve Hindle, Alexandra Shepard and John Walter, ''The Making and Remaking of Early Modern English Social History', in eadem (eds), *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 1-40.

[14] See, for example, John Watts, 'Public or Plebs: The Changing Meaning of "The Commons", 1381-1549', in idem and Huw Pryce (eds), *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 242-60.

[15] Underdown, *Revel*, pp. 28, 41.

[16] Ibid., p. 89.

[17] Ibid., p. 218.

[18] A few years before the publication of *Revel*, Underdown had written positively of Clive Holmes' work on Lincolnshire as charting the '*intrusion* of a national political culture into the locality': *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), p. 446 (emphasis mine).

[19] Underdown, *Revel*, pp. 142-5, 164, 217-18, 258, 268, 278, 289-90.

[20] Ibid., p. 267.

[21] Ibid., p. 275.

[22] Conrad Russell, *Parliament and English Politics, 1621-1629* (Oxrford, 1979), p. 8.

[23] Ann Hughes, *Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620-1660* (Cambridge, 1987); Stoyle, *Loyalty and Locality*; Andy Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770* (Cambridge, 1999); Andy Hopper, *"The Readiness of the People": The Formation and Emergence of the Army of the Fairfaxes, 1642-3* (York, 1997).

[24] For example, in Underdown's attention to libel as connecting local and national cultures: Alastair Bellany, 'Railing Rhymes Revisited: Libels, Scandals and Early Stuart Politics', *History Compass* 5 (2007), pp. 1136-79, and sources cited.

[25] Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (eds), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007).