

debat anmeldelser

MEDIEVAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENCE AGAINST OBJECTS

What tactics are available to those who would build a world significantly better than our own?¹ What is there between the potent, blood-drenched option of civil war, and the pointless, bloodless option of shitposting on social media? A century ago, one might answer “electoralism”, but this has proved a weak weapon in the face of coups, hostile media environments, and a dollop of our own incompetence. Here, I will describe an under-utilised tactic: Violence against inanimate objects, coupled with a deliberate avoidance of violence against people. I will reflect on this tactic from the vantage point of a medievalist. My final destination will be the raid on the Capitol Building of the 6th January 2021. This essay is a sketch of thoughts that were put in motion as I listened to radio coverage of the attack. However, like the figurative scientist boiling his unfortunate figurative frog, I have no desire to plunge the reader straight into such seething waters. Let us start at a gentle heat, with a matter that is less topical: Medieval peasant uprisings.

It is easy to romanticise a medieval peasant uprising. Indeed, many of the pioneers of research into feudal unrest were left-wing, sometimes communists e.g.

1 At the time of writing, my library access has been severely disturbed by the pandemic. I offer my apologies to those who have written on these topics but are not cited here, and also for the attendant *Geschmacksprüfung*-like choice of my historical examples. I have chosen my English, Icelandic, and Italian case studies based partly on what I could remember, and partly on what I could cite in the books around my flat. I am thankful for comments offered by Charlotte Appel, Thorsten Borring Olesen, Nicole Burgoyne, Alexis Hatto, Mary Hilson, Tom Hoctor, Frederik Lynge Vognsen, Bertel Nygaard, Maria Nørby Pedersen, Bjørn Poulsen, Pete Sandberg, and Mikkel Thelle. Any shortcomings are my own.

Marc Bloch, Rodney Hilton, Ernst Werner.² I suppose these scholars were looking to medieval revolts for confirmation of their politics, even if Bloch in particular ended up gloomy about the chances for success.³ Doubtless, participation in a peasant revolt must have been a heady experience. But I suspect that it also had the sharp-edged, nihilistic, unhinged *jouissance* that emerges when people know they have fatally transgressed the rules, and now they must do what they can before brutal punishment ensues. For most people in the post-feudal Global North, there is no accessible analogy. Perhaps, at certain phases, peasant revolts had the feeling of ecstatic camaraderie, mixed with "what-have-we-to-lose?" vandalism, that one can experience in a demonstration, just before the riot police close with horses. Naturally, this comparison will only be useful for those who have taken part in mass protests that were crushed by state violence. For those who have avoided struggle in the streets, the best I can offer is this: A peasant uprising must have felt a bit like celebrating Guy Fawkes Night in the impact zone of an incoming asteroid.

CADE AND THE CIOMPI

This desperate defeatist ecstasy, combined with the capacity of medieval people for performative forms of cruelty, explains the off-putting violence common in rebellions – violence which often gives the impression not merely of blind rage, but of being grotesquely calculated to elicit maximum possible horror and disgust. I think of the Jack Cade Rebellion in England in 1450. A mysterious Kentish commoner (in some sources, Irish) known either as Jack Cade, John Amend-all, or by the alias John Mortimer, led a rebel army on London. The bloodshed was intense. For their abhorrence, I recall the multiple sources which record Lord Saye and his son-in-law, Sir William Crowmer, being beheaded by the rebels, after which: "as they passed the streets, [they] joined the poles together and caused either dead mouth to kiss the other many different times".⁴ Not only corpse desecration, but an incestuous Punch-and-Judy show; Idealists who seek inspiration in medieval insurrection will not find it here. They may have better luck with an account of an uprising from Florence in 1378. The following source was a diary written by one of the disgruntled Ciompi (workers unaffiliated to guilds), the men who lead the rebellion. In what follows, the Ciompi are referred to as "guildsmen", because the diarist's profession (wool-shearer) became a recognised guild after the revolt:

(...) the insurgents left the Palace of the Prior but went and attacked the [Palace of] the Executor [of the Ordinances of Justice,] where they ripped off the banner of justice. They then burnt [the house] of Alessandro di Niccolao degli Alessandri; then [those

² Hilton: *Bond Men*; Werner: *Pauperes Christi*.

³ Bloch: *French Rural History*, 169-173.

⁴ Kaufman (ed.): *Jack Cade*, 75. See also 62, 69, 85.

of] the Ridolfi and Corsini families, Lord Coppo, Andrea di Segnino, Moscone and Simone di Rinieri Peruzzi, Ser Piero, the government's notary, Domenico di Berto and *Ser Nuto* (...) with the banner, they stormed the Palace of the Podestà; the fighting lasted for more than an hour. The podestà gave himself up with oral agreements made to the priors. Except for these ones and the government functionaries who had slipped out, all the guildsmen entered the palace with the banner and burnt all the furniture, books, and charters.⁵

There is remarkable restraint here. The podestà, the ruler of Florence, is captured, but allowed to walk free, as are the civil servants. In raiding the palace, the target of the Ciompi's wrath becomes not people, but inanimate objects. Some of this violence was instrumental. Burning books and charters was a common strategy in uprisings of the lower orders. It held the allure of obliterating official proof of feudal privileges, or at least causing a considerable administrative headache for the authorities after the rebellion.⁶ Some of the violence was resentment at the superior material conditions of the elite, particularly the attacks on the furniture: Why should the rich sit on fancy chairs? Should they not be brought low, like us? Our diarist conveys the impression that during the invasion of the palace, objects were always the intended victims. Any persons injured during the scuffle were collateral damage.

Alas, before we get carried away praising the Ciompi for their restraint, let us remember one of the men (italicised for emphasis above) whose houses were burnt down by the rebels: *Ser Nuto*. Like the others listed, he had gone to ground. *Ser Nuto* had particular reason to be afraid. He was the public executioner. The pro-Ciompi diarist records that "the wool shearers ran him [*Ser Nuto*] down, seized and killed him, dragged him into the Piazza of the priors and hanged him by his feet. Blessed were the ones who could have a little piece of him; no more than a foot and half a leg remained of him".⁷ An anti-Ciompi diarist elaborates that *Ser Nuto* was struck: "with an axe across the head, chopping him in two; then they tore him apart at the armpit with his brains spurting out and blood spewing all across the street".⁸

The optimistic message of the Ciompi revolt is that it constitutes an uprising that was largely successful in its goals (the Ciompi were incorporated as guildsmen, until a counter-revolution in 1381).⁹ It was also well organised, and disciplined in its use of violence. On the other hand, the Ciompi revolt of 1378 was violent exclusively against objects only in one, pivotal phase. Presumably the Ciompi

5 Cohn, Jr. (ed.): *Popular Protest*, 254.

6 The *locus classicus* is the English Peasant's Revolt of 1381, Justice: *Writing and Rebellion*. Elsewhere in Europe, Mauntel: "Charters".

7 Cohn, Jr. (ed.): *Popular Protest*, 255.

8 Cohn, Jr. (ed.): *Popular Protest*, 219.

9 Samuel K. Cohn, Jr.: *Lust for Liberty*, 58-62.

realised that executing the podestà and the civil service would be an act so shocking that other Italian city states might intervene, or it would provoke a specially horrific degree of recrimination should the revolt fail. On its own, the Ciompi cannot speak for the effectiveness of violence against objects *sans* violence against people, even if it has some encouraging qualities.

SOME SUCCESS IN THE SAGAS?

Violence against objects, but not people, is also attested as an intermediary strategy in the Icelandic *samtíðarsögur*, a genre of sagas depicting the feuds which were descending into civil war from the late 1100s to 1262. Our Icelandic representative is a case of magnate-on-magnate dispute, not revolution from below. Nonetheless, it is a rare example of deliberately non-fatal, non-wounding violence in medieval conflict.¹⁰ The dispute was complex, but we will begin with a big man in western Iceland named Einarr Þorgilsson (d. 1185).¹¹ Einarr was upset that his sister, Yngvildr, had eloped with a man named Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson. Þorvarðr was the brother-in-law and retainer of a magnate called Hvamm-Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1183), and this Hvamm-Sturla took over the management of Yngvildr's financial affairs. Einarr directed his ire both at Þorvarðr and Hvamm-Sturla. In 1160, Einarr decided to teach the latter a lesson by attacking his manor at Hvammr:

They ate supper at Sauðafell and rode through the night to Hvammr. Before they rode to the farmstead Einarr said: "What I really want now is for us to burn them at Hvammr without restraint tonight, so they'll remember our visit". Most of the people with him didn't object to this very much. And when they arrived at Hvammr, they led all the people into the church, but they stole all the cattle and they burnt the farm, and brought it all westwards to Saurbær and made known their deeds.¹²

Einarr says that he wants to burn the farm "without restraint", but actually there is a great deal of restraint here. There was a particular type of violence in medieval Scandinavia, called in Old Icelandic a *brenna* / *húsbrenna*, or in East Norse *morthbrand*.¹³ The principle was to surround the enemy's farmhouse with armed

10 The study of medieval feud has at least two tendencies, one centred on northern Germany and mainland Scandinavia and the other focussed on the Icelandic sagas. On the Icelandic tradition, see for example Miller: *Eye for an Eye*; Byock, *Feud*. On non-fatal humiliation in the continental tradition, Zmora: *State and Nobility*, 20-21. Relevant to my purposes, there is a Scandinavian tendency to integrate what some would rather call "peasant revolts" into feud studies: Büchert Netterstrøm: 'Feud', 46-48; By the same: *Værnsforholdet*, 69; Cederholm, *Bondemotstånd*, 40-41, 364-369.

11 Andersson: *Partisan Muse*, 11-14.

12 Kälund (ed.): *Sturlunga Saga*, 69 [my translation].

13 Skautrup (ed.): *Jyske Lov*, 160; Hemmer, Hødnebo, and Magnús Már Lárusson: 'Mordbrand'.

men, plug the windows with tar and hay, offer truce to selected occupants, then burn the house with the intended victims still inside. The occupants had two choices: Run out and die at the arms of their enemies, or choke to death in the flames. Einarr was perfectly placed to execute a *brenna* at Hvammr that night. He had the element of surprise, and encountered no armed resistance. But this was no traditional *brenna*. Quite the opposite, he guaranteed the lives of every one of the occupants. One wonders if Einarr was issuing an order by euphemism when he proposed the attack. Did he say that the people of Hvammr were to be burnt “without restraint” to make himself look menacing? Einarr otherwise suffered from a speech-impediment and was not taken seriously as a leader by the saga narrator.¹⁴

Perhaps the real order was contained in the qualifier “so they’ll remember our visit”. After all, they can only remember it if they’re not dead. Nobody explicitly says they will adopt non-fatal Rules of Engagement, but there seems to be unspoken agreement on this point: “Most of the people with him didn’t object to this very much” (the saga style is fond of understatement. Our author may be indicating unanimity here). That Einarr does not need to spell this out, and yet no-one gets hurt, suggests that non-fatal violence was a known tactic in medieval Iceland, even if it lacked a name. As we saw with the Ciompi, this is probably a case of avoiding escalating the conflict too much, too soon – not an example of a humane spirit. Nonetheless, if the storming of the podestà’s palace during the Ciompi uprising was one mostly non-lethal phase in an otherwise lethal conflict, then Einarr’s attack is a marginal improvement: an entirely non-lethal phase in an otherwise lethal conflict.

RAIDING AND WRITING

From Florence to Hvammr, our next stop is Thanet in Kent, during the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. We will consider a distinctive form of violence against objects, namely the destruction of the written word, especially governmental documents. We mentioned earlier that burning paperwork (sometimes actual paper, sometimes vellum) was a recurrent theme in uprisings.¹⁵ Sources for the 1381 rising record theatrical displays in this regard. On the road from Chelmsford to London, for example, legal records were impaled on sticks to form a triumphant boulevard.¹⁶ This was a deliberate sign to those who were sceptical of the rebellion that the world was turned upside down. An order built on obligations and strictures attested by documents was to come crashing down. Our Kentish example was part of this. The following is from a prosecution after the rebellion was defeated:

14 Bragg: ‘Disfigurement’, 27-32.

15 In an article currently under review, I survey the extent of this practice in the Danish Peasants’ Revolt of 1438-1441. See also Würtz Sørensen: ‘Budstikken’, 31 n3, 40.

16 Mauntel: ‘Charters’, 100.

the aforesaid men [rebels] raised [a] cry, on the day of the feast of Corpus Christi, in the above-said year [13th June, 1381] at St. Laurence in Thanet, [today on the western outskirts of Ramsgate] that every liege man of our Lord the King ought to go to the house of William Medmenham, and demolish his house and level it with the ground, and fling out the books and rolls found there, and to burn them with fire, and, if the said William could be found, that they should kill him and cut off his head from his body (...) By virtues of which cry, the Jurors of the hundred of Ryngslo say, that these same [rebels] entered the house of the said William, and burnt the aforementioned rolls and books, and did no other harm to the said William.¹⁷

As with the Ciompi, bureaucracy *qua* its manifestation as a collection of inanimate objects was attacked. The prosecution alleged that the rebels had also received orders to kill the bureaucrat in question, William Medmenham. But William survived, either because the charge was spurious and the rebels never had lethal orders from the outset, or because they chose to disobey their instructions. Other Kentish court records show that ca. 10th-13th June there were at least eight similar attacks on the homes of other administrators and repositories of documents in the region.¹⁸ Of all these, there was only one fatality, the unfortunate John Tebbe, who was the member of parliament for Canterbury amongst other positions.¹⁹

This relative bloodlessness suggests that the orders to kill William Medmenham were phoney charges, and that John Tebbe was killed as a result of local resentments that pre-existed the revolutionary programme of 1381. My reasoning is that it would be strange if multiple groups had received orders to kill administrators and virtually all had disobeyed them. A simpler explanation is that none had orders to kill in the first place. Tellingly, only one of the four accused of Tebbe's murder ("John London of Otehill (...) Henry Whyte (...) William Cymekyn (...) John Cook")²⁰ was indicted for destruction of property, that being Henry Whyte. That is to say, three of the mob that apparently pulled Tebbe from his horse had nothing to do with destroying paperwork. The prosecuted Kentish rebels of 1381 may have enjoyed scaring bureaucrats, but they did not mean to kill them. There has been debate over how far the peasants wanted to eradicate *all* paperwork, or whether they only wished to target particular documents, especially contracts which stipulated feudal dues, or limited peasant liberties to do things like col-

17 Flaherty: 'Rebellion', 72.

18 Dobson (ed. and trans.): *Peasants' Revolt*, 146. These were "Thomas Oteryngton (...) Thomas Holte, William de Medmenham, John Tebbe, the castle of Canterbury, the town hall of Canterbury (...) Richard de Hoo, knight Thomas de Garwenton and Sir Thomas Fog, knight".

19 Mate: 'Economy', 16.

20 Dobson (ed. and trans.): *Peasant's Revolt*, 146-147.

lect firewood, hunt small game, etc.²¹ Regardless, the cases which were punished in eastern Kent reveal an attempt to use violence against objects, coupled with a rejection of violence against people (poor Tebbe potentially notwithstanding, depending on how far we accept his death as separate to the rebellion).

More importantly, this violence was instrumental: The rebels saw something about the world they did not like, and they destroyed the things that underpinned it. In doing so, they targeted objects over humans. Looking at how rare fatality seems to have been during the Kentish summer phase of the uprising, I suspect that, like Einarr Þorgilsson's men in *Sturlu saga*, it was not only that they did not have orders to kill. They had orders *not to kill*. After all, insubordination in any sizeable organisation tends to be perpetrated by a minority of people receiving orders, and then by rogue individuals before whole groups. Contrary to the dodgy charge concerning a plot to behead William Medmenham, the killer Henry Whyte was the rebel disobeying commands, not all the men of Thanet who spared William.

I am tempted to attribute the relative bloodlessness of our Kentish example to 1) the rebels there being focussed on their goals: They hated paperwork, whether universally or specific local documents, and their attention towards destroying it rendered violence against individual bureaucrats superfluous, 2) Incipient Christian pacifist trends in the Lollard strain of the 1381 rising. This second explanation is more controversial. After all, violence against objects is still violence. However, I am not suggesting that the prosecuted Kentish rebels were beatific, gentle souls. Rather, it is known that there was a Lollard element to the English Peasant's Revolt, even if it was not the dominant element.²² Lollardy included a distaste for bloodshed as part of its social agitation.²³ As the Lollards' *Twelve Conclusions* (1395) put it: "manslaute be batayle or pretense lawe of rythwysnesse for temporal cause or spirituel with outen special reuelaciun is expres contrarius to þe newe testment, þe qwiche is a lawe of grace and ful of mercy".²⁴ Indeed, Cohn notes that non-fatal protest was known in the Middle Ages, albeit as a marginal trend.²⁵ Lollard pacifism in 1381 was probably grudging, but present as one strand in the ideological tapestry of the rising. The case of William Medmenham, like others who saw their documents burnt but were deliberately allowed to live to tell the tale, is arguably the case we have seen which strikes the best balance between mercy and revolutionary effectiveness.

21 Justice: *Writing and Rebellion*, 41, 46-47; Mauntel: 'Charters', esp. 96; Ormrod: 'Government', 14-15.

22 Hilton: *Bond Men*, 212-213; Aston: 'Corpus Christi', esp. 35-47.

23 Lowe: 'Schole of Christ'; Aston: 'Lollardy', 7-8; Ormrod: 'Knights of Venus', 300 n7.

24 Cronin (ed.): 'Twelve Conclusions', 302.

25 Cohn: *Lust for Liberty*, 4-5.

6TH JANUARY 2021: THE GHOST OF JACK CADE

We are about to turn up the heat and cook our unlucky frog, moving from the Middle Ages to today. To ease this temporal transition, we will distil the general principles of the sort of violence that has been illustrated above. Afterwards, we will apply those principles to examples from our own time. The advantages of violence against objects, with a deliberate avoidance of violence against peoples are threefold:

- 1) As Einarr Porgilsson and the Ciompi both show, this tactic slows escalation with ones enemy, whether that enemy is another magnate, an elite class, or the state.
- 2) It bestows a degree of moral superiority, relative to forms of violence which consciously seek humans as their targets. I doubt that any reader feels positively disposed towards the Jack Cade rebels and their grisly puppetry - but I hazard a guess that the reader feels more warmly towards the Ciompi, Einarr, and especially the men of Thanet?
- 3) At its best, it avoids the toothlessness of complete pacifism by focussing on practical changes that can be made to the world. Put another way, it barges past the security guards, does them no harm, and then takes matters into its own hands. You don't like bureaucracy? Fine - burn the bureaucracy, not the bureaucrats. This is not only symbolic protest. It is also change.

The Black Lives Matter (henceforth BLM) protests have done much to perfect this tactic, particularly actions which defaced or toppled statues.²⁶ As far as I can see from data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), there were no fatalities at all in connection with BLM actions of this type.²⁷ There have been deaths at other BLM protests, but always either on the part of protesters attacked by police, or in cases of bystanders being mistaken for looters. So far as I can see only one member of the state security apparatus has been killed during BLM unrest: A Department of Homeland Security Federal Protective Service officer, David Patrick Underwood, shot by an anti-government counter-protestor.²⁸ No BLM activist has been found to have killed anyone during more than 7,000 protests globally.²⁹ The obvious inference is that, like those who burnt Wil-

26 Previous engagements with BLM statue protests by medievalists include *Public Books* 14.2.2019, Seeta Chaganti: "Chaucer's "The House of Fame"; Marjorie Housley: Uneasy presences: Revulsion and the necropolitics of attachment, *Postmedieval* 11, 2020, 438-439.

27 Kishi, Roudabeh, and Jones, Sam: *Demonstrations and Political Violence in America. New Data for Summer 2020*, ACLED report (September 2020), <https://bit.ly/2YWaqp8> (9.2.2021). See also the online dashboard: <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard> (9.2.2021).

28 *BBC News* 17.6.2020: "US Air Force Sergeant Charged in Boogaloo Bois Murder".

29 *The Guardian* 5.9.2020, Lois Beckett: "Nearly all Black Lives Matter Protests are Peaceful Despite Trump Narrative, report finds".



Fig. 1. Furniture destroyed in the US Capitol after the invasion of 6th January 2021. Photograph courtesy of Jason Andrew.

liam Medmenham's documents, they have absolutely no *intention* of killing anyone.

If the matter of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol is anything to go by, they have exemplified the points above: In Bristol, people identified the objects that were causing a problem (namely, that commemorating slave owners is obviously not conducive to the wellbeing of Black Bristolians, who of course have as much right to enjoy public space as anyone else. Simultaneously, no right-thinking White Bristolian can seriously rely on a statue of a slave trader for their wellbeing). Presentations to the liberal-bureaucratic authorities achieved nothing (the interests of Black Bristolians are obviously valid interests, but they are minority interests, while liberal bureaucracy requires overwhelming majority pressure to achieve action, let alone the pernicious effects of structural racism).³⁰ BLM activists therefore acted. In fact, they have done much better than the 1381 rebels in eastern Kent; BLM has no counterpart to John Tebbe.

I raise BLM only in passing to bring into relief the differences with what happened during the invasion of the United States Capitol on the 6th January 2021. If, hundreds of years from now, a historian had only a few photographs to go on,

³⁰ Telling experiences of Bristolians of colour are presented by *The Guardian* 29.1.2021, Aamna Mohdin and Rhi Storer: "The Reckoning: The Toppling of Monuments to Slavery in the UK". By historians, see *The Guardian* 8.6.2020, David Olusoga: "The Toppling of Edward Colston's Statue is not an Aattack on History. It is History"; Woodhouse: "Civic Memory". Olusoga's position that statue-toppling re-enforces historical memory, rather than obscures it, is echoed in a Danish context by Ifversen: 'Statuekampe', esp. 200-201.

they might wrongly conclude that this was a raid not unlike that of the Ciompi on the Palace of the Podestà (see fig. 1, for example). But sadly, it was something quite different. From my experiences knowing Trump loyalists, I would wager that many of the Capitol-raiders looked approvingly upon “Blue Lives Matter” paraphernalia, and subscribed to the misguided view that BLM activists wish to kill the police. Nonetheless, it was the Capitol-raiders whose actions in the space of a few hours led to deaths of policemen (Brian Sicknick died of his injuries. Howard Liebengood and Jeffrey Smith committed suicide in the following days).³¹ This was despite a surprisingly hands-off approach from the police, given that the legislature of a superpower was being invaded. Minute for minute, the Capitol raid was many times bloodier than anything that occurred during a BLM protest, or the medieval examples above.

Why then might a hypothetical future historian miscategorise this as a disturbance that was primarily violent towards objects? The raiders *did* seize objects with symbolic value. An amusing photograph shows “Florida man” Adam Johnson making off with the Speaker’s Lectern, presumably a periphrastic delegitimation of Nancy Pelosi, a figure hated by Republican extremists (see fig. 2). A laptop was also stolen, intended to be sold but nonetheless resonant with the tradition of medieval document removal.³² This was the modern counterpart of the charters that disgruntled peasants hated. Strictly-speaking, e-mails, pdfs or online portals would be the better equivalents, but these do not lend themselves to theatrical displays of larceny or destruction. A cryptic act of defacement was the smearing of the mouth of the statue of President Zachary Taylor (r. 1849-1850) with blood.³³ Taylor was an obscure president with no discernable political programme, so it seems unlikely that the person who attacked his statue knew whose image this was. Did the attacker mistake Taylor for a president detested by extremists, such as Abraham Lincoln or Jimmy Carter? Maybe this was an act fuelled more by emotion than reason, while the perpetrator was both wounded and giddy with the excitement of an uprising.

We should remember that sense of unbalanced giddiness, suggested both in the actions of the raiders and images like fig. 2. There was none of the restraint of BLM, or Thanet in 1381. As Elaine Godfrey and others have pointed out, the raiders 1) left behind two pipe bombs, 2) brought with them at least one rifle

31 *BBC News* 8.1.2021: “US Capitol Riot: Police Officer Dies amid Pressure on Trump over Inciting Violence”; *BBC News* 12.1.21, Holly Honerich: “Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman Hailed as ‘a Hero’”; *Politico* 27.1.2021, Caitlin Emma, and Sarah Ferris: “Second Police Officer Died by Suicide Following Capitol Attack”.

32 *BBC News* 9.1.2021, Tara McKelvey: “Capitol Riots: The Hunt to Identify and Arrest the Rioters”; *BBC News* 19.1.21: “US Capitol Riots: Trump Supporter Arrested after Pelosi ‘Data Theft’”.

33 Finnegan: ‘Capitol Artwork’.

and eleven petrol bombs, 3) brought zip ties.³⁴ Outside of their utility in organising computer cables, these ties are a commonly used, effective, uncomfortable and humiliating way to restrain a captive. The term “US Capitol Riots” has become the preferred way to refer to the invasion, but it is a severe misnomer. The violence was more a frustrated massacre than a successful riot. Violence against objects was the runner-up prize. I do not intend to be lurid, but I ask the reader to think for a moment what would have transpired if the invaders had taken control of the building before despised-to-the-point-of-mythology congresswomen like Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez were evacuated. I am confident we would have witnessed theatrical, horrid violence of a type that would have been instantly intelligible to Jack Cade’s rebels in 1450.



Fig. 2. Adam Johnson of Florida with Speaker Pelosi’s lectern. Photograph courtesy of Win McNamee.

Indeed, there was more Jack Cade than Thanet rebel to the Capitol attack in other regards too. The exuberant doomedness of the Cade rebellion gave it an absurd bathetic drama, verging on derangement. One of the immediate forerunners of Cade in the rebellion, for example, was a man named Thomas Cheyne (d. 1450) “who called himself ‘Bluebeard’ ... [and] said that he was servant of the King of Faerie”.³⁵ Robert Bale’s (fl. 1460s) chronicle depicts the victorious Cade on a procession through Southwark, heading to St. Paul’s: “in a blue gown of velvet, with

³⁴ *The Atlantic* 9.1.2021, Elaine Godfrey: “It Was Supposed to Be So Much Worse”.

³⁵ Kaufman (ed.): *Jack Cade Rebellion*, 19. The political valences of invoking Fairyland are a riddle for another day.

fur sables and a straw hat upon his head and a sword drawn in his hand".³⁶ With a sword, a mantle and, in other sources, armour looted from slain aristocrats, Cade still incongruously sported the headgear of a peasant.³⁷ One thinks of clownish, preening, comically-dressed figures like the "Q Shaman", Jacob Chansley. Pantomime is not a laughable side-effect of the angriest, most nihilistic revolts, but instead an integral feature thereof. It is another symptom that marks the difference between uprisings that thirst for blood as their primary objective, and the cleverness of uprisings that take aim first at inanimate objects.

EPILOGUE: DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

At the outset, I said I would *describe* the tactic of violence against objects, paired with non-violence towards people. It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that in the present study this is a tactic that has come off well, compared to deliberate bloodshed on the one hand and tepid campaigning on the other. Implicitly, I also *evaluated* the approach in question, although it was not my chief purpose. I must repeat, then, that I realise that violence against objects is still violence. Nobody wants to live in a violent society. One might protest that, by legitimising this particular type of dissent, the door would be opened to escalation which would either end in killing or extreme social instability.

If we were living in a society that did not already suffer from hegemonic violence, this would be a valid criticism. To take the example of BLM, one might worry that by effectively saying "it's ok to harm statues as a form of political expression", a tit-for-tat struggle would be initiated that would lead to statues of people of colour being attacked. This has not happened. The only example of which I am aware is the toppling of a statue of Frederick Douglass in Rochester NY.³⁸ Why was there virtually no retribution in kind? The answer must be that a white hegemony over public space is already total in all of the countries with active BLM movements. There just isn't much for White Supremacists to tear down. There are extraordinarily few statues of Black Britons in the UK, for example. One study counted six in a country of around 94,000 square miles.³⁹ Where there *are* statues of people of colour, the equivalence is missing. A statue of someone like Edward Colston has an effect in public space: To the vast majority of White Britons, it means nothing at all. To many Black Britons, it is a painful reminder that the society they inhabit has no problem glorifying someone who contributed to a historical situation which still has dramatic implications for the health, life expectancy and prosperity of today's Black population. Even for a White Supremacist,

36 Kaufman (ed.): *Jack Cade Rebellion*, 14.

37 Kaufman (ed.): *Jack Cade Rebellion*, 30, 55, 61, 67, 84.

38 *BBC News* 6.7.2021: "Frederick Douglass: Historic US Black Activist's Statue Toppled".

39 *BBC News* 15.6.2021, Ben Butcher, and Alice Aitken: "How Many Statues of Black People Does the UK Have?".

pulling down a statue of, say, Nelson Mandela is not a symmetrical act. Mandela does not do for Black and White people what Colston did for Black and White people. I do not say that in the future not a single statue of a person of colour will join the Rochester example, but it is obvious that even violent racists are not putting any effort into this tactic.

To my mind, the chief justification for violence against objects is the recognition that we already live in a violent society – one that is actually violent against people. How many have died of the coronavirus because our current mode of production means that, at the time of writing, only one vaccine-producing company has said it will not enforce patents?⁴⁰ How many die making the crossing to Europe because NATO countries have established border regimes after years of war-mongering in the Middle East? How many die in liberalised economies such as America and Britain as a result of financial woes that could be alleviated by proper labour regulation? To say nothing of how many die because of the anti-black police brutality protested by BLM? Even ardent defenders of the status quo will admit that the answer is not zero. Under these circumstances, violence against objects paradoxically becomes an act of deescalation. BLM has shown that it is possible to perfect a type of rebellion which was only half-dreamt in the Middle Ages. I hope I have shown that the rare, bloodless dreams of the Middle Ages are worth pursuing; Not least if they can help us avoid the nightmare of Jack Cade.

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40 *Biopharma Dive* 8.10.2020, Jon Gardner: "Moderna Says it Won't Enforce Coronavirus Vaccine Patents during Pandemic". That same company, like other vaccine producers, has provided very little stock to developing countries, *Washington Post* 13.2.2021, Emily Rauhala: "Moderna Agreed to 'Equitable Access' for its Coronavirus vaccine, but Most of its Doses are Going to Wealthy Countries". I am grateful to Shalini Iyengar for pointing this out to me.

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