

The battle of Orgreave: Afterword

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Afterword: The Battle of Orgreave

David Waddington

I had been told to expect something of a 'cushy number' during the interview which led to my appointment as postdoctoral research assistant on a project called 'Communication processes within and around flashpoints of public disorder', which was due to be carried out by a small research team at what was then known as Sheffield City Polytechnic. My eventual colleagues (Chas Critcher and Karen Jones) had made it apparent from the outset that one major reason given by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding this research as part of its 'Crowd in Contemporary Britain' initiative was that, unlike other major English cities, Sheffield had been virtually unaffected by the nationwide urban disorders of 1981. The remit we were given was, not only to uncover possible reasons for this variation, but also to explain the absence of any tradition of collective violence in the city and its surrounding communities. Thus, on taking up my post on 1 March 1983, I spent the first twelve months of my contract trying to discover why, with the exception of a handful of local confrontations during the 1980 steel strike, and a small town-centre fracas involving the police and African Caribbean youths one year later, ours was such a politically vibrant, yet essentially placid, place in which to live.

This somewhat cosy and predictable form of academic existence was suddenly undermined by the onset of the year-long miners' strike. Starting in March 1983, I defied ESRC advice to 'steer well clear' of any possible conflict by spending virtually every day on some form of picket line, march or demonstration. The data deriving from this process of participant observation was used alongside interviews with pickets, police and other 'key informants' (e.g. local politicians and journalists) as the basis of several published case studies of 'set piece' confrontations, such as the 'Battle of Orgreave', and community disorders occurring in South Yorkshire pit villages, like Grimethorpe and Maltby. [NOTE 1] Not surprisingly, this constituted an extremely enriching and illuminating experience, which gave me an unrivalled insight, both into the nature and causation of the strike, and the disfiguring and destructive long-term impact it had on community and family life.

Martyn Bedford's chapter focuses, not surprisingly, on this fundamentally divisive nature of the strike: of the tragic way in which it created lasting social schisms, not only in the 'split' communities of areas like North Derbyshire, but also in the solidly pro-strike coalfields of Scotland, Yorkshire and South Wales. The roots of such divisions were primarily ideological. Very few strikers and their wives or partners would have contested the popular notion (subscribed to by the members of Matt's immediate family) that the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher had provoked the strike with the deliberate intention of 'smashing' the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). However, there were countless opponents of strike action who shared with Matt's Aunt Sylvia the conviction that Arthur Scargill had been too blinded by personal vanity or reckless political ambition to resist leading the miners into a conflict in which the odds were so patently and insurmountably stacked against them.

It is now evident with the benefit of twenty-twenty hindsight that the reality of the situation was actually far more complicated than it might have seemed back then. Evidence has since emerged [NOTE 2] that, whilst the Thatcher government was

undoubtedly well-prepared for a possible showdown with the miners, the strike was not intentionally provoked in the manner presumed by the popular conspiracy theory of the day. Rather, it was a bungled and unauthorised decision by the management of the Yorkshire Area of the National Coal Board (NCB) to announce the closure of the Cortonwood colliery in South Yorkshire which acted as the trigger for the ensuing year-long struggle. Far from seeking to engineer or encourage immediate strike action, Mr Scargill's NUM National Executive tried, albeit in vain, to strategically contain the momentum already being generated among the rank-and-file within the increasingly irate Scottish and Yorkshire Areas of the union. It must also be remembered that the 'flying pickets' who poured over the border from Yorkshire into Nottinghamshire the instant that strike action was formally authorised (thus setting the scene for confrontations between police and pickets and strikers and working miners) did so in contravention of official NUM directives.

The controversial issue of strikebreaking (or 'scabbing', to employ the more emotive parlance of the day) is handled with particularly commendable sensitivity [in Bedford's story](#). The type of violence meted out by Matt and Rich to Uncle Peter and his family was seldom undertaken lightly or in any arbitrary manner. Indeed, this particular example exemplifies the fact that there were invariably additional emotional factors involved which made the perceived betrayal of one's fellow workers seem all the more reprehensible and unforgivable.

An actual example of this kind concerns the well-publicised sequence of events which unfolded in the small pit village of Fryston, in my home town of Castleford, West Yorkshire, when convoys of heavily-protected police vehicles became involved in the daily ritual of escorting a solitary 'super scab' back into work - presumably in the hope that this would provide the catalyst for a much wider abandonment of strike action. Local residents and strike supporters eventually responded to this tactic by bombarding the police convoys with bricks, and by vandalising the colliery's management office block, and then setting it alight - **all under the cover of early morning darkness**. When this deterrent activity failed to have the desired effect, a dozen or more strikers forced their way into the strikebreaker's home and gave him a savage beating, a crime for which they were all later imprisoned.

The NCB Chairperson, Mr Ian MacGregor, subsequently, visited the victim of this violence to 'thank him' in full view of national television reporters and proclaim him as a hero. [NOTE 3] One thing that Mr MacGregor was either unaware of at the time or just 'strategically failed' to mention was that, prior to the strike, the so-called super scab had been on the verge of being sacked because of repeated absenteeism, and that it was only due to the intervention of local NUM officials that he had been able to continue in his job. It was this additional piece of local knowledge which had inspired so much hostility towards him.

'[Withen](#)' also trains an extremely illuminating spotlight on the plight and anguish of those miners and their families who suffered torturous crises of conscience, relating to the possibility of going back to work in order to deal with increasing levels of poverty, ill-health or the fear of losing one's job. [In Bedford's story](#), we saw how Uncle Peter [returns](#) to work (much to his eternal suffering and regret) primarily because he [is](#) 'skint', the gas and electricity [has](#) been cut off, the kids [have](#) outgrown their school clothes, and one of them (Fiona) [has](#) become clinically malnourished.

The potency of this dilemma was explicitly recognised in 'split' communities, such as those of North Derbyshire, where miners who held out to the last adopted a relatively forgiving attitude to 'hunger scabs' - i.e. those men perceived to have been 'driven back' out of unbearable necessity. **Perhaps one of the most moving sights of the entire dispute coincided with what the NUM referred to as the 'orderly return' to work, on the morning of 5 March 1985, when returning strikers at some Derbyshire mines not only clapped but also invited those colleagues whose resolve had been worn down in this way to walk alongside them back into the pit.**

Bedford's account of Orgreave is sprinkled with important details **that I can personally verify** (such as the presence of the ice-cream van, the youths rolling the tractor tyre towards police lines, and the sinister reverberation of the horses' hooves as they close in on the pickets), all of which further imbue his **story** with such a satisfying flavour of authenticity.

For perfectly understandable reasons, Bedford's narrative lacks the requisite legroom in which to convey the predominantly quiescent nature of a conflict episode which actually began as a brief confrontation between handfuls of police and pickets on 23 May, and was marked by various peaks and troughs in the ensuing violence, which concluded in the cataclysmic encounter of 18 June. Most of the day-to-day picket-line encounters at Orgreave consisted of angry, but largely ritualistic bouts of pushing and shoving which coincided with the twice-daily arrival of the convoys of lorries which were responsible for collecting coke for the Scunthorpe steel works. Such was their almost instinctive grasp of the relevant 'rules of engagement' that the pickets and police invariably backed off from one another whenever the cry of 'Man down!' rang out; and both sides would break into mutual bouts of laughter at the shout (for example) of 'Hands up! Who's lost a brown brogue, size 9?'

It is **perhaps** misleading **to** suggest that the large numbers of pickets gathering at Orgreave on 18 June did so as part of a carefully planned trade union exercise. True, in the early hours of that morning, two dozen or more NUM activists from nearby Doncaster had succeeded in wrong-footing the token police presence and **entered** the plant virtually unopposed in an attempt to appeal to the coke workers for a show of solidarity. However, many of those pickets arriving later in the day claimed that they had originally been despatched to the Nottinghamshire coalfield, only to find all access roads blocked off by the police. Such men were therefore directed to fall back on Orgreave, a destination to which all roads remained relatively accessible (suspiciously so, in fact) - fuelling subsequent conspiracy theories that **it was** the police, **and not the miners, who** were intent on a set-piece 'showdown' **that day**.

Certainly, there can be no disputing that what happened on 18 June could be justifiably described as a 'police riot', insofar as the officers concerned clearly chased down pickets with the avowed intention of vengefully meting out the type of 'punishment' exacted on the likes of Matt's father, and of indiscriminately arresting anyone too slow or unsuspecting to evade them. In one particularly memorable instance, I saw a mounted police officer chase a group of pickets right up to the entrance of the nearby Asda supermarket. As the latter were about to disappear through the automatic sliding doors, the mounted policeman ducked down with the apparent intention of pursuing them into the busy shopping area. Following two

more abortive attempts, he clearly thought better of it, turned and cantered off in search of easier forms of quarry. Other miners were not so lucky. At one point, I stopped to sympathise with a picket who was standing on a grass verge, supporting with his own hand an injured arm that was clearly dislocated at the elbow. 'It's alright, cock,' he responded to my expression of concern. 'Our First Aid lads are on their way. They should be arriving anytime now.'

Afterwards, while in the process of fleeing from charging police officers, I found myself suddenly propelled ten yards forward by what I had first taken to be an almighty push from behind. An eye-witness later pointed out that a police officer had used his short shield to club me in the back. My instinct for self-preservation being already paramount, I carried on running into the nearby Handsworth housing estate and eventually took refuge alongside a miner from North Derbyshire in the passageway separating two houses. A makeshift barricade, comprising two dustbins and some empty Ikea-like cardboard packaging, was all that stood between us and the menacing glare and intentions of marauding police 'infantrymen' who looked (and, frankly, acted) like something out of Star Wars.

We must be careful not to underestimate the extent of the psychological trauma induced by the experience of being assaulted and/or arrested at Orgreave, and later tried in court. The distressing range of psychological symptoms continuing to affect Matt's father, decades after he was assaulted and taken into custody simply for being present on the Orgreave picket line, approximate to those actually associated with one particular Yorkshire miner (Russell Broomhead) who developed a nervous stammer and chronic agoraphobia as a result of being repeatedly beaten about the head by a police officer (in an incident appearing on that night's television news) and subsequently brought to court on the extremely serious charge of 'riot'.

TV evening news broadcasts on 18 June projected a deliberately misleading representation of the day's events, in that they falsely indicated that the police had only been *reacting* (in what was portrayed as a highly controlled and well-disciplined manner) to the intense violence and provocation they had been subjected to by the miners. The credibility of this generalised media account was fatally undermined at the subsequent trial (and acquittal) of 15 miners who had been brought to court on charges of riot. It was during these proceedings that defence lawyers produced evidence - in the form of an unedited police video - which showed that the day's violence had been both instigated and prolonged as a result of *unprovoked police aggression*. Officers called as witnesses admitted under oath that they had behaved indiscriminately in beating or arresting anyone who just happened to be in their way. They also conceded that they had signed specially prepared, incriminating statements of encounters they had witnessed and/or been involved in – in some cases, several weeks after the 'incident' in question had supposedly taken place.

[NOTE 4]

SYP experienced a second, self-inflicted public relations *disgrace* four years later when the mishandling by their officers of a sudden build-up of crowd congestion just before the kick-off of the 1989 FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Sheffield Wednesday's Hillsborough stadium resulted in the deaths of 96 football fans. Senior SYP spokespersons wasted no time in disingenuously, attributing the fatal *crushing to* the collective impatience of scores of Liverpool

supporters who had allegedly forced their way through a forbidden exit gate. However, a subsequent judicial inquiry chaired by Lord Justice Taylor laid the blame for the disaster squarely at the feet of the match-day commanders, who were said to have 'frozen' to such a degree that their decision-making capacity was correspondingly paralysed.* [NOTE 5]

The ongoing repercussions of Orgreave and Hillsborough remain potent enough to ensure that SYP are still striving, decades later, to recover the loss of public confidence and perceived legitimacy resulting from these infamies. The onset of social media and rise of citizen journalism are helping to ensure that the police now occupy a societal goldfish bowl in which any possible atrocities committed during public protest will be closely scrutinised and brought to public attention. Had the Battle of Orgreave occurred only yesterday, it is unlikely that the police would have dared to engage in such openly aggressive and repressive behaviour. As things stand, the events which Martyn Bedford has re-imagined in such eloquent and compelling fashion will continue to reverberate for many [decades to come](#).

Notes

[1] For relevant examples of our work see: Waddington, D.P., Jones, K. and Critcher, C. (1989) *Flashpoints: Studies in Public Disorder*. London: Routledge.

[2] See, for example: Beckett, F. and Hencke, D. (2009) *Marching to the Fault Line: The 1984 Miners' Strike and the Death of Industrial Britain*. London: Constable.

[3] Mr MacGregor refers to this incident in his memoirs: MacGregor, I. (1986) *The Enemies Within: The Story of the Miners' Strike, 1984-5*. London: Collins, p. 334.

[4] A first-hand account of these trials is available in: Jackson, B. with Wardle, T. (1987) *The Battle for Orgreave*. Brighton: Vanson Wardle Productions Ltd.

[5] For a fuller discussion of the nature and implications of South Yorkshire Police's handling of Orgreave and Hillsborough see my own article: Waddington, D.P. (2011) 'Public order policing in South Yorkshire, 1984-2011: the case for a permissive approach to crowd control', *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, 6(3): 309-24.