Locating Agency

Locating Agency:
Space, Power and Popular Politics

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CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

SPACE, POPULAR POLITICS AND AGENCY

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In the latter half of the twentieth century, "politics" has come to mean more than simply the formal institutions and apparatus of government, run by small minority of wealthy, educated elite men. The word has been adopted by historians of different genres as synonymous with power, or agency, and the scope for "political" activity has been widened to incorporate a variety of everyday events and ordinary people. Keith Wrightson, Steve Hindle, Michael Braddick, John Walter and Mark Goldie amongst others, have all produced innovative interpretations of social politics and plebeian agency during the last three decades since Patrick Collinson's call to "put the politics back into social history".[1] Adopting a micro-historical and "bottom up" perspective, they have demonstrated how non-elite society functioned in practice, highlighting the important role of the middling-sorts in local power relations, and pointing to instances when even people of relatively low status could became minor office-holders in religious or secular positions, thus gaining a stake in the wider national polity.

Historians have challenged the way the past has traditionally been "read" in concert with interdisciplinary theory, emphasising the role played by ordinary people. James C. Scott's pioneering work on peasant communities, for example, presents strong evidence for the benefits of interdisciplinary research in exploring ideas of plebeian agency.[2] Scott argued that outright resistance to authority, such as rebellions, were exceptions to the rule which tell us little about the real workings of power in any given society.[3] Instead, he argues, we should consider the small and apparently insignificant everyday acts such as foot dragging, feigned compliance or slander, as they cumulatively acted to limit arbitrary authority in the long-term. As a result of similar research, early-modern power relationships are now considered far more complex than the traditional unidirectional flow implied by simple 'top-down' models.

Governing elites were restricted in their use of power by both common law and parliamentary restrictions on the legitimate use of their authority. Their rule was, to a point, grounded in the notion of conciliation rather than outright oppression. Explorations of this practice have led to a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of agency based on a two-way process of negotiation and reciprocity between the social ranks. Such insights offer a new way of interpreting relations of power in society, effectively suggesting that public deference did not equate to acceptance of the established order.[4] Andy Wood, for example, has drawn from this premise, proposing that outward behavioural forms of deference were often ritualized and habitual, functioning within a tradition of behavioural expectations rather than real sentiments and are, therefore, inadequate for measuring the extent to which the ruling order was accepted.[5]

This collection represents the proceedings of a conference held on these themes in March 2008 at the University of East Anglia. The symposium brought together social historians with a shared interest in recent socio-political historical perspectives and an understanding of the importance of using inter-disciplinary methodologies to explore the past. These collected essays thus explore the quotidian experience of social politics, religion, and popular culture, looking beyond conventional definitions of politics, to "re-conceptualise" the application of the term. The contributors consider, for example; the politics of the alehouse, the politics of Methodism, the interrelationship between plebeian agency, custom and memory, the politics of economics, dramatic agency and the politics of the spiritual parish. Collectively they suggest that political activity was embedded in almost every aspect of life, and that our understanding of individual agency should include a broad spectrum of social actors and interactions.

The collection as a whole expands current research on plebeian agency, and either directly or indirectly, questions Scott's conceptualisation of power which appears to set ruler and ruled in opposition, ignoring the true complexity of society.[6] It explores how far people of modest means and without a formal office could, to any degree, effect change or challenge authority within their own spheres of contact; in short, their capacity for the exercise of "agency". The notion of "agency", in this context, describes the ability (or inability) of a person or a group to influence the conditions in which they live or work, building on the premise that a large proportion of the population were active agents in the determination of local, political affairs. This is not to suggest, however, that all members of a community enjoyed the same capacity in this respect or that the exercise of such "agency" was always intentional. Instead, these essays propose

that the reach of both elite and plebeian agency was often circumstantial, limited by individual events and personalities. Broadly speaking, the lower an individual or group's social status, the more limited were their opportunities to effect change. Without holding a formal office, the tools available to negotiate the terms of authority were often ineffective, or worse, may have resulted in punishment and greater social marginalisation. Indeed, the possibility of collective or individual agency for ordinary people was often only expressed through the ability to improve one aspect of their immediate situation, rather than overtly challenging the social order as a whole. For the very poor, verbal criticism of policy or physical violence against property or persons were part of a limited repertoire of resistance, but these methods were as likely to invoke harsh reprimand as they were to improve conditions in the short-term. Indeed, in the absence of a police force, or standing army, order, more often than not, relied on a populace who actively "bought into" consensus.

Although some discretion must be exercised before applying potentially incongruent or anachronistic modern anthropological or sociological theories to early modern English society, there remains, nonetheless, much value in considering different conceptual approaches. Whilst we should not look to appropriate totalising theoretical frameworks, such work, adopted selectively, can provide fresh insight. This collection, therefore, focuses not only on a broader definition of agency, but also on the "spatial turn", a term which requires further explanation.

Pierre Bourdieu, Michel De Certeau and Henri Lefebvre have all provided inspiration for social historians to consider the role of "space" as the setting for all social interactions and events. This "space" could be as simple as a room in a house, a building, a street, or an alehouse. Rather than seeing space as a "passive" backdrop, however, such theorists have conceptualised space as an active component in the shaping of individual and communal identities; a "medium through which society ... can be created and reproduced".[7] Spatial theory thus explores the significance of the environment and the connection between landscape and the people who lived within it. Buildings and landscapes developed in line with practical requirements, but also specific cultural traditions and values, the most obvious examples being segregation, or the sub-division of houses for greater privacy. Thus we can understand much about a society through its use of space. Writing extensively on the production of space as *habitus*, Bourdieu suggested that each space contains its own unique echo of the past, a "spatial identity". Conceived as such, spatial identities are traceable, not only in the style, layout and use of buildings and land, but

also in how people subsequently understood that space or created new spaces around them.

The specific social, cultural or political identities spaces reflected were sometimes uniquely localised, but more often than not were constructed in terms anyone could have understood.[8] Most medieval and early modern urban dwellers, for example, would have recognised the powerful symbolism of a city's walls. They exuded civic wealth and importance, but also amplified local identity. The walls represented the embodiment of strategies of inclusion and belonging within any given community; a corporeal border beyond which people would be judged "outsiders".[9] Spatial meanings, however, were also conveyed in less tangible ways. Notorious streets or alehouses might only be known to locals by reputation, for example. These leave little trace in surviving documentation, but might occasionally be preserved in a street name, recorded in diaries or travel literature, or mentioned in a court case.

A more subjective reading of spatial identities is also possible. If, as is suggested by Bourdieu, spaces retain elements of their social and cultural origins and have a specific "spatial identity", this could in turn affect the activities and mindset of people using those spaces in a reciprocal process of interaction.[10] Historians have been keen to investigate connections between spatial and social identities, evidence of such abstract ideas being relatively abundant in extant documentation of the period. Any "illusion of transparency" quickly becomes decipherable in the record of events.[11] In practical terms this entails examining how people behaved in, used, or spoke about different places. Theoretically almost any record could be used which has some grounding in physical space, for example, the record of a crime which happened on a particular street, or the slander of an office-holder at the local market. Research has often involved the examination of court records, wills or inventories. Court cases, for instance, noted location as standard practice, facilitating comparative analysis concerning the relation of gender or social position to certain places, or whether place changed people's attitudes towards one another. As such it should be possible to consider, not only how people acted in different places, but also the extent to which this activity reflected, and was reflected in, their wider socio-cultural beliefs.

Social historians have explored the relationship between space and society by considering how contemporaries, whether consciously or not, used their environment to convey certain messages. Most obviously, how the show of civic power in the placement and design of grand buildings, ceremonial sites and prisons articulated political relationships.[12] More recently, historians also have considered how contemporary attitudes

relating to questions of gender or poverty, for example, were expressed in the physical make-up of the city. Approaching sources with an awareness of how people interacted with their environment suggests that surroundings played some part in the ordering and creation of identities, and thus the subsequent performance of social relationships.[13]

It would be wise however to add a precautionary note. The spatial dominance of wealthier elites is more evident in records, especially in urban areas, as they were predominantly responsible for civic building, architecture and planning.[14] Grand building projects and civic buildings have also proved more durable than the more vernacular architecture of ordinary housing.[15] Despite the abundance of resources, uncovering popular ideas about space and its uses can be a difficult task. Socio-cultural perceptions of space were often sub-conscious or inferred, understandable only in context, or have been obscured entirely from our retrospective gaze.[16] It is thus important to recognise that our source material may present an unbalanced picture of social relations, one which privileges rich over poor and public over private space.

The nature of these problems, therefore, might help to explain why, despite the potential of spatial theories for examining past societies, only a handful of social historians have yet taken up the challenge. Paul Griffiths, for example, explored how contemporaries understood the relationship between space, crime and civic authority.[17] He investigated "penal spaces", that is the corporeal sites of punishment which symbolised and reinforced civic order, and discussed how the perception of city streets changed after dark. Robert Tittler has considered civic symbolism, showing how urban elites reinforced their position and encouraged deference by expenditure on lavish civic buildings, public ceremonies and processions.[18] Laura Gowing and Robert Shoemaker have both undertaken ambitious and comprehensive surveys of attitudes towards gender in the streets of early modern London.[19] Interested in how space influenced perceptions of gender identity; Gowing concentrated on uncovering attitudes towards women in public space using libel records and literature, concluding that women were likely to be judged more critically in public, than in private. This, she argues, was due to the prevailing attitude that women's proper place was in the home, in combination with a sexual double standard which endangered "visible" women. Shoemaker, on the other hand, explored how people moved about the city. He demonstrated that women's movements were largely unrestricted, and that middling-sort women actually enjoyed greater freedom of movement than their male counterparts. His research suggests that supposed negative perceptions of "visible" or "publically active" women may not have actually restricted

what they did on a daily basis, a finding which questions the impact of those attitudes in the first place.[20] Amanda Flather undertook a geographically broader survey of space and identity in Essex. Like Shoemaker, she researched the use of space by gender with surprising results. Indeed, she argues that women enjoyed active social lives in areas traditionally thought to be male preserves, such as alehouses.[21] Pamela Graves, Christopher Marsh and Robert Tittler all considered the significance of church interior space.[22] Seating arrangements, for example, mirrored the parish hierarchy, a powerful reminder of social divisions. Church space represented a microcosmic ideal of community, symbolising order, belonging and traditional values. The expression of space in contemporary literature has also proved fruitful; Joseph Monteyne, for example, has considered the representation of urban space in printed images and the visual culture of early modern society, but also explored print and its relationship with space and social identity.[23] Finally, David Rollison and David Postles have explored landscape, space and mobility in a move away from urban led research, a theme which is picked up in this collection by Rob Lee, Simon Sandall and Andy Wood.[24] This is not a comprehensive account of all the research in this area, a survey of which would be outside the scope of this introduction, but serves to introduce the variety of ways space has been explored. The essays in this collection do not explicitly deal with space as their central theme, but aim to show how the "spatial turn" can be incorporated within an ongoing dialogue on agency or politics.

This collection also addresses change and continuity. The time frame of the essays extends through the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and into the nineteenth centuries, so it is possible to compare and contrast society over a long period. The most striking points to arise are first, the endurance of the same social problems and second, the continuity of methods available to ordinary people to articulate their own agency in the face of these concerns, despite the passage of three hundred years. Simon Sandall's essay, for instance, explores how Elizabethan customs endured throughout the seventeenth century, forming the basis of people's inherited memories of their local customary rights. Similarly, Andy Wood explores the longevity of folklore in collective memories, which acted to legitimise and strengthen plebeian agency. Rob Lee demonstrates that the problems familiar to sixteenth-century peasants would not have been out of place in the nineteenth; the same concerns over basic rights endured or resurfaced under different guises. The contributions in this book thus collectively make a persuasive argument for expanding our sense of plebeian agency and political engagement, and the extent to which space

and social interaction connected. What emerges from these is a greater awareness of contemporaries own self-motivated ability to challenge and question the world around them and the tools available to them to do so.

George Oppitz-Trotman's distinctive literary approach engages productively with interdisciplinary theory, offering a re-reading of agency and demonstrating its interconnectedness with the immediate spatial environment. In his own words, he attempts to "posit a materialist understanding of generic origin" by uncovering the close relationship between genre, violence, peripherality and plebeian protest. His argument begins with a discussion of the spatial orientation of the play's protagonist, which is often obscured or ignored, adeptly demonstrating the centrality of space as the context behind all forms of human interaction. Without this knowledge the reader is unable to fully understand the origin or meaning of violence in the sixteenth-century revenge genre. Thus he asserts that the study of revenge tragedies should be both historically and spatially located, so as not to abstract them from real-life social relationships. Based on Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, a play which he argues marked a turning point in English theatre, he demonstrates how concepts of space were embedded within language and then disseminated within performance literature.

Oppitz-Trotman draws a direct correlation between agency and social space, showing how space "underpins" all social relationships. The spatial disenfranchisement of *The Spanish Tragedy's* protagonist Hieronimo has a direct affect on his ability to seek justice for wrongdoing, distorting his actions into revenge. Hieronimo begins to experience a sense of spatial exclusion, not only from the formal channels of power, but from society as a whole, his character exaggeratedly mirroring the experiences of the social and economic outsiders in Waddell's discussion of exclusive communities.

Oppitz-Trotman also contemplates the revenge tragedy in its wider context; taking into account the impact of the changing legal system in later sixteenth-century society and proposing that this "crisis of legal and social participation in the commonwealth state...exists concomitantly with a fundamentally spatial crisis". He challenges the suggestion that the middling-sorts widening participation in formal offices and the law granted a larger social group access to the formal channels of power, and therefore, allowed them greater potential for agency. This change was reflected by popular protest gradually moving out of the streets and fields and into the law courts, and a concomitant decline in landowner led rebellions, such as had been popular in the mid-sixteenth century.

However, it could be argued that this effectively curtailed plebeian's potential to exert "true" agency, often without their conscious realisation, as their power to act was now directed within regulated channels.

Finally, he uses the social space of the theatre as the background to discuss popular agency and sedition. The *Spanish Tragedy's* content echoed plebeian ability to counter authority, and the fears and actions of those same authorities in response. In the same way that contemporary playwrights were exploring themes of petition, protest and royal power; real life issues were being acted out around them, as theatres were being criticised for encouraging idleness and sedition; resembling official concerns over other social spaces, such as the alehouse, which is the focus of Mark Hailwood's contribution.

With similar motives, Hailwood demonstrates how the study of alehouses can help us understand the broader social, political and cultural concerns of the later Stuart period. In particular, he argues that the history of drinking houses parallels changes in society and culture, and mirrored extant political tensions. The first part of his essay considers the problematic historiography of the alehouse, which has generated several competing frameworks of discussion. The first, popularised by Peter Clark, is probably the most well-known. Clark's formative research influenced the idea that alehouses were seen akin to "alternative societies" by Godly reformers and wealthy "chief inhabitants" who sought to suppress alehouse culture in what can only be interpreted within a cultural framework of middling polarisation. The second, borrowed from the work of anthropologist James C. Scott, speaks of alehouses as "sequestered sites" in which the disenfranchised masses acted out their "hidden transcripts" largely free from the eyes of the law. The final, far more pessimistic perspective is that promoted by James Brown and Andy Wood, who argue that alehouses were "sites of surveillance" closely monitored by governing elites as part of a wider drive to police plebeian politics. The historiography plays a crucial part in Hailwood's essay as it rests on a re-conceptualisation of these competing models. He does this by considering the alehouse as an important symbolic space, encapsulating a microcosm of society at any given time. Thus, his emphasis on the "spatial turn" allows him to conclude that it is near impossible to apply any one over-arching framework to capture all the dynamics at work in early modern alehouse culture. Indeed, he argues that the particularities of time and space undermined all the given models at different times, as regularly as the changing customers in the alehouse itself altered the dynamics of individual interactions. To support his conclusion, he uses empirical examples of seditious speech, in conjunction with alehouse licensing laws

which were on the rise throughout the Stuart period. Taken together, they offer a tantalising view of both popular and official attitudes towards alehouse policing, which show that the competing desires for freedom or regulation of alehouses did not emanate from any one social group, or set of motivations.

My own chapter begins by questioning the understanding of agency as essentially political. To be true to the theme of "re-conceptualisation", I have considered the "politics" of the spiritual parish by examining the relationship between the minister and his congregation. Ministers held a position of leadership within their community, but Church court records show his authority was often challenged. These attacks were generally documented under the heading of libel, but were more often than not tied in with genuine complaints concerning his performance and behaviour, mirroring the style of speech against authority figures in the secular world. However, it would seem that distinct to attacks on secular officers, often considered seditious, libels cases dealing with ministers were treated far less seriously. I posit that this was because of the often tenuous nature of a minister's status, combined with the legitimacy of the complaints themselves. The relationship between minister and congregation, therefore, offers an exceptional insight into how early modern offices were legitimised, and reflects on how different social groups could exercise agency in the face of formal authority.

Starting from the position that early modern society was not dualistic, with rich set against poor, but inherently more complex, I argue such ideas about agency and authority should re-evaluated. If the social background of the people involved in contesting, or supporting authority are explored, they reveal a large overlap in status between those challenging, and those challenged. To this end, my essay investigates who was raising and pursuing local disputes with ministers, and it shows that the majority of people challenging the clergy were from a similar background, if not slightly higher. The importance of this simple conclusion for the study of agency, however, should not be underestimated. It challenges traditional assumptions of social conflict as a battle between rich and poor, whilst at the same time showing the difficulty of applying generalisations to early modern society. However, I also demonstrate that when poorer people did challenge their local minister, their reasons for so doing were not always to subvert the social order, but to support it.

Brodie Waddell explores community belonging and identity, and their polar opposite, social exclusion. The historiography of "inclusion" and "exclusion" is well-established, influenced first and foremost by Keith Wrightson's work on parish identities.[25] Waddell's essay deigns not

simply to extend this historiography, but to explore the practical implications of social exclusivity on the local economy. As Waddell explains, much remains subjective, yet, it is undeniable that there was a real impact. His broad "holistic" approach therefore takes into account the complex factors which defined communal identity and how these identities were subsequently expressed in material and economic terms. He breaks this down into three main areas.

First, he explores cultural expressions of identity. These, he explains, were communicated and refined by popular mediums such as sermons, ballads, oaths, rituals and festivals. He suggests that cultural expressions of "localism" were ingrained into the customary uses of the immediate environment. "Beating the bounds" at Rogationtide, for example, endorsed local boundaries on the one hand, and reinforced social distinctions in the processional line-up on the other. Rogation demonstrates the importance of place, solidifying communal identities in the symbolic assertion of boundaries; the corporeal manifestation of belonging. This discussion leads into the second part of his essay, which explores the structures and institutions of community.

The next section advances his economic premise, illustrating how local identities were inseparable from traditional parish based economic provision; individual entitlement to poor relief, for example, was based around the extent the poor were perceived to "belong". Community membership legitimised requests for assistance, normally built on residence qualifications, but also made tough distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving poor". The poor were expected to prove their worthiness by their religiosity, morality and behaviour. Travellers and vagrants were stigmatised as "strangers" and often unwelcome. In towns and cities, vagrants suffered harsh punishments, set on hard labour or even whipped before being sent away and there was another complication: citizenship. This added a final caveat for belonging, formalising expectations which in rural areas were based on subjectivity. This restricted "un-free" city dwellers by economic sanctions, whilst protecting the privileges of the citizenry.

Finally, Waddell examines evidence that these collective identities were, on occasion, violently reinforced. He suggests communities experiencing stress resorted to their own methods of economic redress when normative systems of regulation were ineffective or insufficient. Formal community boundaries became "flashpoints" at which the collective agency of parishioners clashed with that of outsiders. In these cases it was not the poor vagrant who was the target for community angst, but official representatives of the state. The most obvious example was

resisting tax officers, which showed as much about community solidarity against non-local collectors, as animosity towards state policy. However, it could also be viewed as part of a wider popular movement to protect traditional common rights against central encroachment such as had been taking place with enclosure, fen drainage or the restriction of forested areas. Waddell suggests that these communal expressions of solidarity allowed ordinary people to take the law into their own hands, arguably a form of agency asserted in self-defence.

Overall, Waddell introduces two very salient points. First, he posits a link between space, identity and agency which on the one hand reinforced social distinctions, yet on the other empowered individuals otherwise excluded from formal channels of power and authority. Second, he highlights the inadequacy of teleological community narratives which suggest their gradual decline in a changing society, offering another revisionist critique of Tönnies model. In its place, he shows the complexity of community during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, explaining why one over-arching narrative of change is inappropriate to describe early modern society.

Simon Sandall looks at the changing relationship between popular agency, local communities and custom from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. His central premise is that the social practice of custom widens the range of activity which can be considered "political", allowing involvement in the negotiation of local rights and privileges by poorer men, women and children. Informed by the importance of "negotiation" as a way of understanding the operation of power in society, he looks to Antonio Gramsci's theories of hegemony. He argues that the authority of rule had to be actively supported by the populace, who legitimised or criticised power through a variety of methods, including customary rights and traditions ingrained in the collective memory of their local communities. Based on a case-study of a free mining community in the Forest of Dean, he explores the social composition, legality and authority of the local Mine Law Court which resolved conflicts between miners and other parties over customary law. Overall, he argues that the process of law was more socially inclusive than has perhaps been thought; his study demonstrating some degree of local autonomy, influence and negotiation in the formation and operation of legal practice. Laws were not always created by the elite. Many laws and legal practices had their precedent in the popular customs and rights retrieved from the memory of individuals and communities from "time out of mind". His model stresses the interplay of popular oral culture with formal written records.

Sandall's case study focuses on the gradual erosion of customary rights
in the Forest and the attempts of local elites to impose their own version of
customary law upon the perceived rights of the "vulgar sort". Working
thus within the perimeters of oppositional politics; the local elite, in
particular Sir Edward Winter, worked to polarise their position by
undermining the legitimate concerns of the commons. Openly attacking
his rivals in terms which cast himself as protector of the "commonweale"
against the assault of disorderly, lewd and seditious criminals, Winter
conveniently typecast the "commons" as one social body, avoiding any
discussion of their actual social composition which ranged from the very
poor to middling gentlemen. Similar to the essays by Hailwood, Lee, and
myself; Sandall points out that opposition to elite policy cannot be
simplified to a struggle between rich and poor, as the middling sorts
played a large role in conflicts with authority. Nonetheless, popular speech
incorporated stereotypes of the social orders which obscured the real
dynamics of social protest and negotiation.

Sandall also considers the spatial context of customary memory,
working from David Rollison's claim that landscape is "a memory palace"
which harbours the collective memories of local communities.[26] In so
doing, he underlines the importance of inherited knowledge of boundaries
and land rights in the formation of customary and common law. The
spatial context is a crucial part of the argument for plebeian agency, as
"the poor" were able to exercise power in the collective spatial memories
of the landscape around them, in direct conflict with the desires of the
local elite.

Nonetheless, Sandall points out that by the eighteenth century, the
transfer of previously oral traditions to the written record in an attempt to
preserve local rights gradually took autonomy out of the hands of the
commons and placed it into the keeping of the lawyers and courts. The
formalisation of collective memory effectively closed the channels within
which ordinary people had previously worked. Nonetheless, a strong sense
of local custom and the legitimacy of common action survived well into
the nineteenth century, when, like the protagonists of Rob Lee's or Andy
Woods's essays, rural workers used such traditions to their own ends as
part of a radicalised agenda.

Andy Wood explores connections between popular agency and
folklore, opening with a story from Norfolk about the re-building of
Swaffham church during the mid-fifteenth century. According to local
legend, John Chapman, a poor pedlar, donated a large sum of money to re-
build the north aisle. Tradition states that he had found his sudden great
wealth in unusual, and magical, circumstances. Wood extrapolates from

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this example that to contemporaries, folklore was more than simply entertainment, but a way of understanding the world around them. In the story of John Chapman, for instance, Wood sees the broader context of a growing "non-gentry lay piety" and popular agency in the face of villainous local gentry land-owners; a direct reflection of the rising social importance and wealth of the new middling sorts, perceived as a threat by the traditional ruling classes who realised this challenge to their own place in the traditional feudal hierarchy. Stories like Chapman's provided a basis for a local "plebeian identity" which extolled Christian values and solidarity within their own ranks, rather than allegiance to an exploitative ruling elite.

In his subsequent narrative, Wood evokes several local myths from East Anglia and the north of England, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Each stories origin was contiguous with the time and space of important local rebellions and traditions of oppressive local lordships and each endured, embedded within features of the landscape, a cross-pollination of oral and written traditions, physical space, memory, common rights, community, kinship, customary law, locality and identity. Their careful selection shows the importance of folkloristic culture to a widespread plebeian cultural assertiveness, arguably a form of agency, in the expression of a distinct culture separate and often more pervasive than that of the elite. Drawing from the inter-disciplinary theories of Maurice Halbwachs and Antonio Gramsci, he argues that folklore should not be considered valueless because of its inherent unreliability, but should instead be seen as a "basis for popular solidarity and action".

Wood shows how the coercive role of the state is at its most effective when it secures the active consent of the populace whom it governs. Therefore challenges to that state should be considered within the broader framework of a functioning cultural hegemony, which works to limit popular agency by framing authority as natural. Nonetheless, there is some suggestion that this process worked both ways, as I argue in my own contribution; plebeian challenges to authority were more successful when they adopted traditional, conservative aims, although it could be argued that this avenue of agency simply reinforces the cultural hegemony of the dominant class still further. However, Wood sees room for movement. Subaltern politics, is in itself, proof of the mitigating, shifting and competing circumstances which informed, circumscribed and enabled elite rule; traceable through the processes of everyday life, in this case, collective memory. Many traditional tales persisted into the twentieth century in rural areas, and were, in the case of the "Riding of the Black Lad" evoked time and again as symbolic of peasant/landowner relations

during the working-class radical movements of the later nineteenth century. Wood's essay thus explicates the relationship between collective memory, social identity and agency, suggesting that memories and folklore were at their most powerful when embedded in physical location.

Rob Lee bases his essay on a case study of two seemingly contrasting areas, Norfolk and County Durham, arguing that they shared a tradition of political radicalism and non-conformist religion. In particular, he stresses the link between Methodism and an evolving labour politics. He concentrates on the middle decades of the nineteenth century, which he contends are often ignored in favour of the more sensational Swing Riots and Chartist movements of the 30s and 40s and trade union activism in the 70s. However, the 50s and 60s were characterised by "paternalistic neglect", deserving of study in their own right. Lee underlines the continuance of strategies of social exclusion, also highlighted by Waddell, exacerbated in this period by open and closed parish divisions. However, Lee's essay is not about continuity. Making good use of the "spatial turn", Lee shows how social relationships and power structures were reflected in the enclosed rural landscape, the Methodist Church emerging as a centre for a "new politics of resistance" instigated by the neglected poor.

From 1834, he contends that the New Poor Law had recreated the spatial landscape, privileging privatisation over public, common rights, which were gradually lost from oral history in the transference to written law. The Poor Law contributed to a volatile situation, exacerbating existing social tensions, as well as creating new ones. Although heralded as a salvation for the poor, in many cases it granted landowners greater rights to move the labouring classes, benefiting the few who were able to live within closed parishes. For the rest, like the Jarvis family of Corpusty, the benefits of closed parishes were hard to see. By the 1860s, Lee posits that paternalist provisions had almost entirely broken down. Left to their own devices, the poor sought out new ways to improve their own situation, which often meant resisting traditional support networks, such as the Church of England, which some believed had failed them. Regarded more and more as sharing the values of the landed elites and industrial giants, the Church and its representatives were shunned, despite their (largely symbolic) efforts to "include" their congregations. Instead, parishioners sought alternative political and spiritual sustenance in a telling expression of their own agency. Drawing on the tragic circumstances of one family, Lee's essay offers a unique perspective on poverty, deprivation and society, but also contributes to the wider narrative of politics and religion at this time; showing how resistance to the established church became synonymous with political allegiance.

Lee offers a final say on all the themes which this collection has raised: agency, space, custom, belonging, popular politics and religion. The Methodist movement's aims shared striking similarities with the seventeenth century non-conformists, for example, many of whom championed social and political reform. As such, Lee's contribution offers a welcome dialogue on continuity and change, illustrating the permanence of the methods of the poor in previous centuries to challenge authority, as well as showing how the clashes over land use and custom, such as in Sandall's study of the Forest of Dean, served as a precursor to Lee's tale of class conflicts in the nineteenth century. It goes to show that despite the progress of time, social progress did not follow suit: the complaints of the nineteenth-century labouring classes mirroring those of previous generations. Perhaps it would be pertinent here to mention Scott one more time. For many poor people, agency did not mean change; it only meant the ability to negotiate the terms of their own subordination.

Notes

[1] P. Collinson, *De Republica Anglorum: Or, History with the Politics Put Back* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Some seminal works would include K. Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (London: Routledge, 1982); K. Wrightson, 'Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England' in P. Corfield, ed., *Language, History, & Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30-52; P. Griffiths, A. Fox, and S. Hindle eds, *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); M. J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1700,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); T. Harris ed., *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); M. J. Braddick and J. Walter, eds, *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); P. Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and A. Wood, "Fear, Hatred and the Hidden Injuries of Class in Early Modern England", *Journal of Social History* 39:3 (2006): 803-26. This list is by no means exhaustive.

[2] Scott's ideas were the inspiration for the important collection of essays edited by Braddick and Walter, *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society*.

[3] Scott's ideas are best laid out in J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[4] See F. D. Colburn, ed., *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (London and New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), ix-x.

[5] Wood suggests that deference was a known "behavioural code" which could be knowingly appropriated to achieve certain ends, see Wood, "Poore men woll speke one daye", in ed. Tim Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded*, 67-99. See also H. Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17:2 (1975): 139-164.

[6] Although it has proved useful, initial enthusiasm about Scott's approach has dampened in recent years, attracting a few critics. Andy Wood, for example, has criticised Scott for not taking Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony into account. See A. Wood, "Subordination, Solidarity and the Limits of Popular Agency in a Yorkshire Valley, c. 1596-1615", *Past and Present* 193 (2006): 41-72, especially 41-5.

[7] C. P. Graves, "Social Space in the English Medieval Parish Church", *Economy and Society* 18:3 (1989): 297. For spatial theory see P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[8] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

[9] The importance of "belonging" to early modern communities is explored by Brodie Waddell in his contribution to this collection. Inspired by Steve Hindle and Keith Wrightson, he sees communities as "exclusive". In part this resulted from suspicion of "outsiders" in places with established families and local traditions, but it was also economic protectionism; poor relief was only granted to those with residential rights. In rapidly growing towns and cities protectionism was motivated less by self-interest, than by practical necessity.

[10] Lefebvre discussed how social identities became inscribed in space and "in the process producing that space itself". Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 129. See especially 68-169 for an explanation of the social production of space and place. Bourdieu claimed that spaces retain unique "signification codes" through which "through the intermediary of the divisions and hierarchies" set up "between things, persons and practices" creates a "tangible, classifying system". Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

[11] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* 28.

[12] See, for example, R. Tittler, *Architecture and Power: the Town Hall and the English Urban Community, c. 1500-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[13] J. Epstein, "Spatial Practices/Democratic Vistas", *Social History* 24 (1999): 294-310, 301.

[14] P. Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 1989), 47-48.

[15] Robert Tittler has discussed civic symbolism in the urban environment. See in particular R. Tittler, "Seats of Honour, Seats of Power: The Symbolism of Public Seating in the English Urban Community, c. 1560-1620", *Albion* 24:2 (2002): 205-223 or R. Tittler, *Architecture and Power: the Town Hall and the English Urban Community, c. 1500-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[16] See R. J. Johnston, *A Question of Place: Exploring the Practice of Human Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) and J. Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space and Architecture in Regency London* (London: The Athlone Press, 2002).

[17] P. Griffiths, 'Meanings of Nightwalking in Early Modern England,' *Seventeenth-Century* 13:2 (1998): 212-38; P. Griffiths, 'Bodies and Souls in Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century England: Punishing Petty Crime, 1540-1700' in eds S. Devereaux and P. Griffiths, *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1900: Punishing the English* (London: Palgrave, 2004), 85-120; P. Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City, 1550-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[18] Tittler, *Architecture and Power.*

[19] L. Gowing, "The Freedom of the Streets: Women and Social Space, 1560-1640" in eds P. Griffiths, and M. Jenner, *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[20] R. Shoemaker, "Gendered Spaces: Patterns of Mobility and Perceptions of London's geography, 1660-1750" in ed. J. F. Merritt, *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[21] A. Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England,* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007)*,* 110-120. See also Lena Cowen-Orlin's work on public and private space: L. Cowen-Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[22] Graves, "Social Space in the English Medieval Parish Church"; C. Marsh, 'Sacred Space in England, 1560-1640: The View from the Pew', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53:2 (April, 2002): 286-311; R. Tittler, 'Seats of Honour, Seats of Power: The Symbolism of Public Seating in the English Urban Community, c. 1560-1620', *Albion* 24:2 (2002): 205-223 and C. Marsh, 'Order and Place in England, 1580-1640: The View from the Pew', *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005): 3-26.

[23] J. Montayne, *The Printed Image in Early Modern London: Urban Space, Visual Representation, and Social Exchange* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

[24] D. A. Postles, *Social Geographies in England, 1200-1640* (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2007) and D. Rollison, "Exploding England: the Dialectics of Mobility and Settlement in Early Modern England", *Social History* 24 (1999): 1-16.

[25] Steve Hindle, *On the Parish?: The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[26] David Rollison, *The Local Origins of Modern Society: Gloucestershire, 1500-1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 70.

SPACE, AGENCY AND GENRE:
REVENGE TRAGEDY IN *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY* (1587?)*

GEORGE OPPITZ-TROTMAN

Eubulus:	Though kings forget to govern as they ought,
	Yet Subjects must obey as they are bound.
	Gorboduc (1561), V.i.50-1

King:	No place indeed should murder sanctuarize;
	Revenge should have no bounds.
	Hamlet (1601), IV.vii.125-6

Revenge is a kind of wild justice … For as for the first wrong, it does but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office.
Sir Francis Bacon, "Of Revenge" (1625)[1]

The great achievements of the English theatre after the 1580s derived from the socio-economic rationalisation of theatrical activity of such an extent as to be impoverishing. The following article investigates dramatic genre's relationship to the space of theatrical performance, and to the agent of that performance, the actor, in the light of the relatively rapid reorganization and professionalization of English theatre. It argues that the imaginative power of early modern dramatic performance was reliant on the continually mediating role of the actor, whose work produced the space of the stage as much as the fictional courts, forests and houses of early modern plays. Most of the playwrights of the Shakespearean era were also actors; texts were produced with the prospect and practicalities of near performance in mind. As a result, historical analysis of such plays should not assume that they simply reflected anterior social practice from a position without; rather, history related to such plays through the mediated immediacy of performance, in which real and imaginary spaces were negotiated simultaneously and in relation to one another.

This hypothesis is tested below in a study of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, a crucial early tragedy that also crystallized the generic

characteristics of what would become the immensely popular revenge tragedy form. Whilst shedding new light on the play itself by situating it in relation to early modern problems of law, domesticity and sedition, this article suggests that to use such plays for the purposes of historical exemplification, as cultural history tends to do, may actually remove the play from its space and agents, in effect constituting a dehistoricisation of the play itself and thus a distortion of its actual representation of extra-dramatic history. In other words, the model of criticism in which drama is seen to have reflected or stored an anterior social reality at the whim of its authors bypasses the changing formal conditions that enabled sixteenth century dramatic performance. As Bertolt Brecht would remark in his challenge to György Lukács during the Marxist debates concerning *avant-garde* art in the early twentieth century, literary critics are all too predisposed to ignore the problems and contingencies of production that are central to the sociality of drama, yet for the dramatist these are of primary creative concern. The aim, then, is to think about drama's relationship to history in terms of the historical construction of dramatic space: "Art is the social antithesis of society, from which it cannot be deduced immediately", wrote Theodor Adorno.[2]

This essay attempts to organize an idea of genre linked to the sociality of formal playing conditions. The problem of genre lies to some extent in its tendency to obliterate difference. Yet clearly some kind of vocabulary is needed to describe how common historical experience was abstracted into the apparently unrelated sphere of literary form. Too often one is forced to resort to the poverties of the 'thematic' or 'emblematic' to establish a common generic language, leaving untouched the greater problems of formal continuity or similarity brought about by the circumstances of English dramatic production in the late sixteenth century. The connections manifested by a play—between protagonist and court, for example—were abstracted from concrete social relationships, underpinned by space. A materialist theory of genre, to which the following article aims to contribute, would seek to expose the differences and contradictions in the generic schema that it attempts to posit; would allow the historical movement free play within the apparently fixed generic criteria; would find a way to express the work's total generic effect with reference to the work's peculiar development in performance.[3] Even in the individual work, genre has to be located spatially and historically, and the contradictions, unevenness and mutability of the history from which it is abstracted permitted to inform our understanding of the work's generic voice.

Genre is simultaneously interior and exterior to the dramatic work; at once its subject and object, it works on the play and is worked on by it: this work is of authorship, of course, but it is also that of performance.[4] Performance describes agency's relationship to space. It is from Henri Lefèbvre's conclusions that "no social relationship can exist without an underpinning", and that this underpinning is spatial, that the contemplation of early modern revenge tragedy is taken up below.[5] An emphasis on performance—a productive act in a peculiar sense—takes another cue from Lefèbvre:

> How does [...] space, which we have described as at once homogeneous and broken up, maintain itself in view of the formal irreconcilability of these two characteristics? […] Only an act can hold—and hold together—such fragments in a homogeneous totality. Only action can prevent dispersion, like a fist clenched around sand.[6]

Returning to consider how the actor's 'action' constructed a relationship of real space to fictional or imagined spaces, the closing passages of this article will attempt to recover the actor's agency in order to propose that genre encodes lived historical experience. It will be clear that words in plays are inscribed with an expectation of where and how they be spoken and heard. Slavoj Žižek has described "[the object's] tautological gesture of positing […] external conditions as the conditions-components of the thing and, simultaneously, of presupposing the existence of ground which holds together this multitude of conditions."[7] This technical explanation has here prompted an understanding of theatre's historical existence as comprising a special kind of relationship between language and space that cannot be redacted fully from purely textual analysis. "Theatricality" is a function of historical space and historical relationships of agency to that space (the stage). Historical spaces themselves are embedded within words as formal suppositions. This paper attempts to construe Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586-7?), generally considered to be the foundational revenge tragedy in England, as an act of speaking and moving within historical space.

The Spanish Tragedy occupies a crucial place in the history of English theatre. Along with Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* it completely transformed the dramatic landscape in England, paving the way for a new type of theatre. "With his mad Hieronymo", Kyd is often considered "the principal developer of 'personation' besides Shakespeare", and his most famous play the first to represent human causality fully on the English stage.[8] There is no known source for the play, which is relatively unusual for the time, although the influence of Seneca is quite pronounced (ten

English versions of Senecan plays had been produced in 1581 alone). The
complicated action takes place in the aftermath of a battle between Spain
and Portugal. It is introduced by the ghost of Don Andrea—who was
killed by the Portuguese Viceroy's son Balthazar during the fighting—and
the figure of Revenge—a highly ambiguous remnant of the morality play
tradition. The action is thus enframed by these two figures, who are
reminiscent of a chorus. Returning victoriously to the Spanish Court,
Hieronimo's son, Horatio, and the king's nephew, Lorenzo, contest the
victory over Balthazar, whom they have brought back as prisoner. Horatio
subsequently falls in love with Don Andrea's beloved Bel-imperia but,
betrayed by their servant Pedringano, who is tasked to watch over their
secret meetings, they are attacked in Hieronimo's garden by Lorenzo and
Balthazar. For, in the meantime, the realms of Portugal and Spain have
deemed a marriage between Balthazar and Bel-imperia diplomatically
judicious (a decision that happily coincides with Balthazar's own
inclinations). Stabbing and hanging Horatio, the villains take and imprison
Bel-imperia. Discovering Horatio's body after hearing Bel-imperia's
screams, Hieronimo, grief-stricken, investigates the crime, discovers the
culprits and, after first vainly appealing to the king for justice, designs a
revenge against his enemies using his trusted position at court. As the play
ends, Hieronimo, Bel-imperia, Lorenzo and Balthazar lie dead in the
presence of Horatio's corpse, which Hieronimo had presented during
revelations to the court after his retaliatory murders.[9]

Hieronimo perceives that "justice is exiled from the earth" (III.xiii.140).
Accordingly, he too occupies an exilic space as justice-seeker. This
situation is revealed by *The Spanish Tragedy* in a sophisticated dialectic of
stage position that also hints at the crises and vacillations of social agency
that will be discussed below. In III.xii, Hieronimo considers suicide, but is
interrupted by the arrival of the court:

> No, no! fie, no! pardon me, I'll none of that:
> > *He flings away the dagger and halter.*
> This way I'll take, and this way comes the king;
> > *He takes them up again.*
> And here I'll have a fling at him, that's flat;
> And, Balthazar, I'll be with thee to bring,
> And thee, Lorenzo! Here's the king; nay, stay,
> And here, ay here; there goes the hare away.
>
> > (III.xii.19-24)