Political Space in Preindustrial Europe

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Under the auspices of the academic network 'Social Sites – Öffentliche Räume – Lieux d' Échanges' a four-day workshop on 'Political Space in Preindustrial Europe' took place at the University of Warwick from 3-6 November 2005. The workshop forms part of the network's ongoing investigation into the consequences of the 'spatial turn' for scholars of the early modern era. Underlying this engagement is a twofold interest: on the one hand, the network seeks to exploit the potential of various spatial approaches to gain and/or re-evaluate historical knowledge; on the other hand, the network is interested in – explicit or implicit – uses and understandings of space in past societies.[1] The inaugural workshop was co-ordinated by Beat Kümin (History, Warwick), supported by network facilitator Tobias Hug (History, Warwick), and received generous financial and institutional support from the Leverhulme Trust and Warwick's Humanities Research Centre. Fourteen scholars from various European and US universities contributed conference papers on how spatial approaches can be utilised in the study of early modern political practices and ideas.

James C. Scott (Political Science/ Anthropology, Yale), whose concept of 'social sites' inspired the name of the network, delivered a public lecture on 'Fleeing the State in Southeast Asia' and provided a theoretical basis for the workshop. Drawing on his earlier work, Scott discussed two main questions with special regard to hill people and valley people: how does the state manage control over people? And how do people counter state attempts to appropriate them? Underpinning his discussion was the insight that varieties of people 'on the move' were regarded as menaces that endangered social order by South Asian authorities. Moving people often escaped taxation and other state-imposed burdens, and in political discourse were regularly called 'barbarians'. While the state could quite effectively control people living in the valleys it experienced major difficulties in the control of hill people. Indeed, fleeing to the hills can be regarded as the most important escape strategy for people living in the valleys. Scott thus proposed a hierarchy of space: the higher people fled the more secure they were from state pressure. It could therefore be quite attractive for people to move into the realm of 'barbarianism' as it secured them a certain amount of independence. With this introductory lecture, Scott demonstrated the appropriation of space by moving people as well as the state's political agenda of limiting people's room to move.

'Political Sites' in a diverse range of contexts formed the theme of the first day's communications, chaired by Susanne Rau (History, Dresden). With his paper 'Politics, Clubs and Social Space' Peter Clark (History, Helsinki) opened proceedings with a tightly argued case for clubs and societies as distinctive political sites in later Stuart and Hanoverian Britain. Comparing them with other instances of voluntary association (medieval confraternities and continental academies), and resisting the dematerialising tendencies of an abstracted 'public sphere', Clark argued that it was the very embeddedness of British clubs and societies in various kinds of respectable urban 'social space' (inns, taverns and coffee houses) that facilitated their political functioning. Moving from town to countryside, Ian Whyte (Geography, Lancaster) offered a historical-geographical analysis of 'Political Spaces of Parliamentary Enclosure in an Upland Environment: Cumbria c. 1760-1800'. Drawing on the diary of customary tenant Tom Rumney, Whyte disclosed two types of political site: the commons themselves (even though their enclosure was not as contested as in the south), as well as the different meeting places, including public drinking houses, utilised by Rumney for related discussion and debate. The spatial attributes of these ve-

[1] For further information on the Network and its activities see: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/researchcentres/socialsites/.

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nues were again foregrounded as constitutive of the composition of participants; in particular, 'outdoor' sites were seen as more socially heterogeneous than their exclusive and bounded 'indoor' equivalents.

The next two papers were concerned with the sites and stages of 'high politics'. Engaging Niklas Luhmann's sociological understanding of the Holy Roman Empire as a system rather than a state, Henry Cohn (History, Warwick) provided an authoritative account of the difficulties posed by roving imperial diets in his paper 'Representing Political Space at a Political Site: The Diets of the Holy Roman Empire in the Sixteenth Century'. Although envisaged in a highly spatial way as symbol-laden arenas for close proximity and face-to-face interaction between ruling elites, space also contributed to their practical and political malfunctioning; problems of distance meant princes would often send delegates, while the highly ceremonialised spatial configuration of the formal sessions promoted quarrels over precedence. Ronald Asch (History, Freiburg) also highlighted some problems of spatial management in his wide-ranging analysis of 'The Princely Court and Political Space in Early Modern Europe'. Within these carefully orchestrated sites competition among courtiers was closely related to access to the monarch. However, the politics of propinquity had to be carefully maintained; too much access meant over-generosity and excessive time for opposing court factions, while too little risked loss of control and the development of a fronde. Likewise, while courts sought to awe visitors with the sheer space provided for ceremonial pursuits, in a version of *horror vacui* such settings only impressed when filled with courtiers. Even when royal government became more closely tied to court structures with the ceasing of itinerancy in the seventeenth century, the lack of a monarch's physical presence in the localities necessitated new representational strategies in the far corners of the realm (statues, coats of arms, paintings and triumphal arches). Summarising the day's papers, Christopher Dyer (Local History, Leicester) integrated his comments into a multi-layered analysis of the political sites in medieval English villages. This formed the basis for a thoughtful discussion that turned on the form and typicality of church houses and the contested role of spatial theory in historians' handling of pre-industrial sites and structures.

Gerd Schwerhoff (History, Dresden) chaired the second day's session, which took 'Spatial Politics' as its theme. Resisting most recent treatments of space, which have tended to focus on its perceptual and symbolic dimensions, Christine Carpenter (History, Cambridge) powerfully reasserted 'real, geographical space' in a paper on 'Political and Geographical Space: the Geopolitics of Late Medieval England'. As England was based on a centralised model, the king was regularly confronted by geographical problems. Foremost among them was the question of how he could secure obedience for his commands in distant regions. Carpenter showed that local noblemen were the central transmitters of the king's commands and that the king had to ensure their support in order to surmount the problems of distance. It would therefore be mistaken to interpret the king's use of local nobles as a sign of weak power. Rather, it has to be seen as an integral political strategy to counter problems posed by space. David Zaret (Sociology, Indiana) provided a spatial analysis of the credibility of opinion in his contribution entitled 'Political Spaces and the Credibility of Opinion in the English Revolution'. Focussing on the case of petitions, he argued that the emplacement of the popular political conversations that preceded them could jeopardise their credibility. As a reaction, individuals drafting petitions would attempt to conceal petitioning places by relocating them to a virtual space. Such a virtual space was offered by the emergence of print. In conclusion, Zaret argued that because the context provided by discrete places of sociability either furthered or jeopardised the credibility of petitions historians should closely examine those different layers of meaning inscribed in concrete places.

During a field trip to the parish churches of St Mary in Warwick and St John the Baptist in Berkswell, both in the county of Warwickshire, Beat Kümin and Steve Hindle (both History, Warwick) offered insights into 'Spatial Politics in the English Parish, c. 1300-1700'. In the Beauchamp chantry cha-

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pel at St Mary, Kümin discussed, on a first level, various possible fields of tension that were inscribed in church space; between clergy and laity, between the poor and respected churchgoers, between men and women. Secondly, he accounted for tensions between different churches in the same parish, or between the church and other political bodies. Thirdly, he discussed the tension between sacred and profane dimensions as well as component virtual spaces such as hell, purgatory, and heaven. In the nave of St John the Baptist, Hindle considered the various political functions fulfilled by the parish church and its eminent role as a political actor. It played, for example, important roles in the selection of local officials, or in defining the region's boundaries through such rituals as perambulation. Hindle also provided an account of the consequences of the Reformation for the church's inner space and highlighted the effects of whitewashing and the substitution of saints' images by royal arms.

Andreas Würgler's (History, Bern) starting point in his paper 'Which Switzerland? Contrasting Conceptions of the Early Modern Swiss Confederation in Minds and Maps' was the observation that the boundaries of the old Swiss Confederation were never precisely fixed before 1798. Rather, there existed a variety of different confessional conceptions as well as different cartographic visualisations. Regarding the latter, Würgler argued that the surroundings of maps – such as coats of arms, or drawings of cities – seem to have been more important features for contemporaries than the territorial borders which before the late eighteenth century were often not even depicted. Antony Black (Political Science, Dundee) widened the workshop's perspective by taking a comparative look at 'Political Terminology in Europe and Islam'. Focussing mainly on Middle Eastern communities, he underlined that clans and personal bonds were of particular importance for the political sphere in Islamic countries. Also, in contrast to the European context, an independent public sphere could never emerge while the bazaar took a central stage in the political space of the countries under consideration.

The third and final day of the workshop, chaired by Wolfgang Kaiser (History, Paris), was devoted to responses and reflection. Michael Crang (Geography, Durham) offered a geographer's perspective on the workshop's theme and summarised recent currents of spatial approaches. He emphasised that further clarifications are needed as to what difference space makes to places, and that the influence of the built environment on politics remained an open question. He suggested that Bruno Latour's emphasis on objects and the ways in which they are adopted in different spatial contexts might offer valuable hints in this direction. He also stressed the importance of analysing actual processes of spacing, ordering and putting in place for a better understanding of the performative acts that evolve in and around spaces. Reviewing proceedings from a historical stance, Bernard Capp (History, Warwick) recapitulated the speakers' insights with some striking new examples drawn from his own research on early modern England while identifying some other species of 'political spaces' not represented at the workshop. He explored the notion that a crucial form of 'political space' related not to discrete sites or the relationship between them but to the *vacuums* created by varieties of absence in the workings of power; the lack of a legitimate male heir, for example, or of representative institutions in some scenarios (e.g. the Estates General in France between 1614 to 1789). Capp also pointed to gaps in thematic coverage (spatial politics in the non-elite household, spaces of resistance) and expressed concern that the priorities of the workshop series as a whole (dealing in turn with political, religious and economic space) might marginalise pre-industrial 'social space', especially in its gendered manifestations.

These concluding remarks from two disciplinary perspectives initiated a lively and reflexive plenary discussion in which the usefulness of the 'spatial turn' for the investigation of early modern political practice was robustly questioned by workshop members. Some participants were troubled by the multiple meanings of 'space', and by the resulting imprecision that often attends the use of modish spatialised vocabularies. In particular, there was confusion about whether the 'space' of the workshop represented a metaphorised under-

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standing of a sphere of discourse/activity (as in the 'public sphere') or referred to material issues of siting and scale. If the latter was intended, it was proposed that a less 'slippery' terminology might have been applied, with 'site' and 'place' being suggested as more concrete alternatives. On a closely related issue, other commentators were uneasy about the all-encompassing character of spatial rubric and its tendency to authorise a welter of discordant approaches and topics united only by the fact that they all take place in space; is there a danger of brewing an academically opportunistic 'space porridge', as one workshop member has warned? It was also argued that a 'postmodern' preoccupation with the social construction of space is profoundly despatialising because it elides of the manifold ways in which 'real' geographical space enters into human affairs.

However, it was suggested that not only does most work in the field point to the inescapably spatial constitution of social exchange (as well as social conceptualisations of space), but that it is neither possible nor desirable to distinguish between these two attributes, especially not in simplistic and unhelpful 'real space good, perceptual space bad' formulations. Historical actors engaged with their geographical circumstances in their own – and in socially constructed – ways. Material conditions were not simply 'given' but interpreted and dealt with individually. Thus, historians who mobilise spatial approaches, far from neglecting the 'social' element in their studies, actually root their very analyses in the socially mediated character of the spaces under discussion. Recent spatial theorists (e.g. Martina Löw) have also provided a well-defined terminology that might reduce some participants' feelings of elusiveness.

Despite critical comments from some participants, all involved felt that the various handlings of pre-industrial political space exhibited at the workshop were worthy of wider dissemination; it is thus envisaged to publish the proceedings. Overall the workshop was quite successful, both in terms of teasing out the substantive spatial dimensions of early modern political conduct as well as demonstrating the potentialities of space, employed critically and with care, as a conceptual tool for the interrogation of early modern phenomena. It bodes well for the ensuing Leverhulme-funded network workshops, to be held on mainland Europe over the next two years, which address two other pervasive categories of pre-industrial space: 'Social Space and Religious Culture (1300-1800)'; and 'Economic Space' (Aix-en-Provence, 2007).

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