

Introduction

Leeds, 1844: Hobson's challenge

Contemporaneous with the right to meet is the right of free discussion. The one right necessarily implies the other. The right to meet would be nothing without the right to speak; neither would the right to speak without the right to meet ... Both are necessary for the very existence of freedom; and both are guaranteed to Englishmen by the common law of the land.¹

Joshua Hobson made this strident declaration at a Leeds town council meeting on 17 July 1844. Hobson and his compatriot on the council John Jackson were leading West Riding radicals who took the label of Chartist in the 1840s. Chartism was the largest mass working-class political movement of the nineteenth century. The movement is best known for its national petitions to parliament demanding universal manhood suffrage and parliamentary reform, but it drew its strength from local networks and institutions. Hobson and Jackson had been elected as councillors for the industrial district of Holbeck in 1843.² At the council meeting, they put forward a resolution calling for an investigation into the conduct of the mayor of Leeds. The mayor had prohibited Chartist meetings at the Free Market near the parish church, as well as miners' meetings during their strike in June.³ Hobson claimed that a previous Chartist meeting held at the Free Market was 'a Public Meeting of the Inhabitants, for a legal purpose and legally convened, in a Market to all intents and purposes Public Property, having been purchased at the public expense, and held in Trust by the Council for the use and [on] behalf of the public, as a Public Market'. Hobson continued, 'If the public are not allowed to meet in the only place which

¹ NS, 20 July 1844.

² D. Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England: The Structure of Politics in Victorian Cities* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1976), p. 259.

³ J. Mayhall, *The Annals and History of Leeds and Other Places in the County of York* (Leeds, 1860), p. 505; LM, 15 June 1844.

belongs to them – in the Market Place – the place of public resort – a severe blow is at once struck at an “undoubted” right’. The Chartists had to hold their meeting in another commercial site, the Bazaar arcade off Briggate. The resolutions passed at that meeting provided the basis of Hobson’s speech. The first resolution asserted ‘the right to meet publicly, in a peaceable manner, for the consideration or discussion of any legal object, being a right guaranteed to all Englishmen by the constitution and laws of this realm, and being furthermore the most important of all the safeguards of public liberty’.⁴ Liberty, public, law, constitution and rights were central principles of radical movements in England throughout the ‘age of reform’.

This was an issue that involved much more than the semantics of the word ‘public’. Hobson and Jackson’s claim to the right to use the market, declared within the civic arena of the council chamber, was a contest over who controlled both the uses of public space and the meaning of its places. Hobson emphasised that the market was ‘the only place which belongs to them’ because it had been indeed one of the few sites available for political meetings outside the buildings and squares owned and controlled by the Corporation and the other elites of the town. All new markets and commercial halls and most civic buildings in Leeds were privately funded by joint-stock companies or subscription. Over two-thirds of spending on civic buildings, markets, commercial exchanges and assembly rooms in the West Riding came from private sources, especially subscriptions and joint-stock shares as well as charity. The Free Market was a rare exception, constructed by an improvement commission elected by ratepayers.⁵ ‘Public’ buildings in the inclusive sense of the term thus hardly existed in northern towns before the 1840s. To take an earlier example, on 30 January 1801, the ‘clergy, landowners, merchants, woolstaplers and tradesmen’ of Wakefield issued an ‘open protest’ against the reformers who held a meeting at the Moot Hall to petition parliament for peace with France. Magistrate William Dawson complained to the Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding that ‘the meeting ought not to have been called in the Moothall, wh[ich] they improperly considered as the public hall of the Town tho’ in fact [it is] his Grace of Leeds’s Court House which he is so kind as to lend to the Magistrates

⁴ NS, 20 July 1844.

⁵ K. Grady, *Georgian Public Buildings of Leeds and the West Riding* (Leeds: Thoresby Society Publications, 1989), pp. 58–9; K. Grady, ‘Commercial, marketing and retail amenities, 1700–1914’, in D. Fraser (ed.), *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), pp. 183–4, 275.

at their sessions and indeed to the Town at any time any meetings may be too numerous'.⁶ Dawson pointed to a central feature shaping the location of political meetings throughout this period: sites that appeared to be 'public' were in fact private, and their uses determined by a land-owner or the dominant elite. And even at the turn of the century, there were still very few separate buildings where the different operations of the civic body politic could be conducted.

The more 'civic' buildings and open spaces were constructed, the fewer 'public' spaces there were for all sections of society to use. The old sites of meeting, especially market places and bullrings, were increasingly removed out of town centres. Many streets and squares were in effect 'privatised' by being railed off or overlooked by new Palladian-fronted townhouses built for wealthy bourgeois inhabitants. Improvement commissioners generally shied away from using their rating powers to fund the new public buildings, fearful of upsetting middle-class and gentry pockets. Improvement was haphazard, however, and any Benthamite visions of straight and clean streets were soon dashed by the realities of industrial pollution and the rapid rise of the population overcrowded in hastily built terraces and courts. From the 1830s onwards, the funding of civic buildings began to shift sources. Aided by the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, new local authorities increasingly used town rates for building projects.⁷ Thus began the grand age of Victorian town halls and civic pride in public spaces. As Hobson's challenge illustrated, and as this book examines, local elites' attempts to exert exclusionary control over these new halls and squares led to important contests over the meaning of public space and who had the right to form that 'public'.

Hobson's challenge was not just over the uses of public space. Throughout this period, working-class groups used protests in public sites as part of a much broader contest over elite power and against exclusion from local institutions of power. In the case of Leeds, in 1840, an alliance of Whigs, radicals and Chartists had combined to elect John Jackson to the board of improvement commissioners, a body that importantly had control of the market. In January 1842, the Chartists won a resounding victory over the whole board, drawing considerable support among small shopkeeping ratepayers. But the Liberals countered through legal means. The improvement act of July 1842 took

⁶ Sheffield Archives, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, WWM F 45/30, Dawson to Fitzwilliam, 1 February 1801.

⁷ Grady, *Georgian Public Buildings*, p. 68.

away the right of ratepayers' election to the commission.⁸ Radicals were thus excluded from the board and could no longer get their supporters to elect them. Hobson and Jackson moved on to their next goal, election for churchwardens of the parish church. The Chartists achieved this *en bloc* from 1842 to 1845. In 1843, they achieved election to the town council. The battle between the factions therefore used the market as a physical and symbolic arena for the claims of power, reaching its climax at the meetings of June and July 1844. After Hobson's motion to the council failed, no further political meetings were recorded on the site until June 1845, when the Chartists held a religious-style Sunday camp meeting. The site then seems to have been quiet until the spring of 1848, when the Chartists almost took over the site to hold regular meetings during the push for their third petition to parliament.⁹

Class, words and actions, 1789–1848

This book examines how and why social and political movements in northern England from 1789 to 1848 fought for the right to meet as well as to speak and to publish. Historians of political movements in this period have generally focused on the latter. The American and French revolutions inspired the writing of thousands of discourses on both sides of the debates. Studies of the effects of these revolutions on British popular politics highlight the flourishing of the radical press and consequent government attempts to shut down freedom of speech in this period. Hobson was a printer, publishing the main Chartist newspaper the *Northern Star* from 1837 as well as Robert Owen's *New Moral World*. He earned his activist stripes in Huddersfield earlier in the decade by publishing the reformist newspaper, the *Voice of the West Riding*.¹⁰ His defence of the right to speak was a natural corollary to his role spearheading the 'war of the unstamped' press. Text and propaganda are an important part of collective action and form a major source for historians of popular politics. Historians are still influenced by the 'linguistic turn', the post-structuralist approach of the early 1990s that challenged

⁸ R. J. Morris, *Class Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 124; J. F. C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leeds', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 86.

⁹ NS, 7 June 1845; Leeds Local Studies, SR 920.4 H247, R. B. Harrison's diary, 1848.

¹⁰ M. Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 16.

old debates about revolution and class by examining how words shaped identities and provided opportunities for popular agency and class.¹¹ We now read between the lines much more closely. Moreover, with the advent of digital resources, many of which aggregate eighteenth and nineteenth-century sources, historians have seemingly (and indeed deceptively) unlimited collections of literary material accessible on the internet, with all the potential that new methodologies of text-mining and corpus linguistics promise for new historical research.¹²

But popular politics was not solely conducted within the leaves of a pamphlet. As Hobson's challenge demonstrated, it was whether the 'debate' spilled off the page and into action that really mattered. Words and language were uttered in a space and were associated with a place. Anti-radical governing elites reacted first to the 'seditious' theories emanating from the French Revolution, as interpreted by Thomas Paine, but they soon realised that they were also contending with the rise of mass collective action and demands for representation. Radical printers, reform societies, Chartists, trade unions and many other bodies challenged the authority and exclusive representation of local and national governments. They did so by drawing from a wide repertoire of protest and organisation: meeting in groups ranging from small cells in back rooms of pubs to 'national conventions' of delegates from across the country, going on strike, marching and processing, petitioning parliament, occupying squares and churches, attacking property, and organising mass meetings on fields and in their own specially constructed buildings. Radicals also attempted to gain access to representation directly, through participation in the hustings of unreformed elections, contesting positions in local government and, ultimately, standing in general elections.

This is a narrative of the closing down of public space from the

¹¹ A. Goodrich, *Debating England's Aristocracy in the 1790s: Pamphlets, Polemics and Political Ideas* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005); K. Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J. Vernon, 'Who's afraid of the linguistic turn? The politics of social history and its discontents', *SH*, 19:1 (1994).

¹² T. Hitchcock, 'Academic history writing and its disconnects', *Journal of Digital Humanities*, 1:1 (2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/academic-history-writing-and-its-disconnects-by-tim-hitchcock/>, accessed 14 September 2014.

1790s, a process that affected all oppositional political groups up to 1848. Government and local elites excluded opposition from sites they could control in town centres; they also intruded into spaces previously considered to be private. Legislation passed throughout this period increasingly restricted when and where political groups could meet and defined what constituted ‘legitimate’ as opposed to ‘seditious’ collective action. The attitude of William Pitt the Younger’s government to the rise of mass public meetings was encapsulated in the 1795 Seditious Meetings Act and further legislation in 1799 against corresponding societies. Reaction to organised labour took the form of the Combination Acts of 1799–1800, which prohibited oath-bound groups from collective bargaining. Lord Liverpool’s Tory government reacted to the postwar ‘mass platform’ radical movement with another seditious meetings act in 1817. The Peterloo Massacre on 16 August 1819 gave them the ideal opportunity to clamp down on collective action further in the ‘Six Acts’ passed at the end of that year. 1819 indeed marked a turning point, as the events of that year shifted governments’ focus away from prosecuting for seditious libel towards the problem of unlawful assembly. Radical action was muted in the 1820s, but in response to the rise of Chartism, Viscount Melbourne’s government passed two royal proclamations, firstly against night-time meetings in November 1838, and secondly in May 1839, which enabled magistrates to ban day-time Chartist meetings virtually at will.¹³

Christina Parolin, examining the spaces of early nineteenth-century radical London, argues that a ‘key aim’ of the anti-seditious legislation throughout this period ‘was to restrict outlets for expression, including access to spaces in which to assemble, in order to curtail the expansion of the political nation beyond the narrow confines of the aristocratic elite’.¹⁴ The political nation in northern English towns was, however, wider than the aristocratic elite of Westminster. The legislation in fact had many loopholes, and as we will see, the government still felt bound to protect the constitutional right to petition. Local loyalist elites however were keener to enact total reaction against radicals and trade unions on the ground. The ‘principal inhabitants’ of towns – the gentry, magistrates, clergy, merchants and wealthy employers – allied with

¹³ E. Yeo, ‘Culture and constraint in working-class movements, 1830–1855’, in E. and S. Yeo (eds), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590–1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 160.

¹⁴ C. Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790–1845* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2010), p. 5.

publicans, postmasters and other active loyalists, monitored and where possible prosecuted or shut down oppositional activity in a variety of public, and increasingly, private spaces. Magistrates and employers relied on a network of paid informers to spy on and attempt to suppress collective political and trades' activity. They did so on a much more direct, prolonged and intimate scale than the occasional waves of state repression involving legislation and trials of radical leaders.

What were social movements challenging? Moving away from previous Marxist interpretations of class struggle in the industrial town of Oldham in Lancashire, James Vernon argued that elites and their opponents were 'contesting each other's definitions of the political public sphere according to their interpretation of the constitution'. Patrick Joyce has come to similar conclusions concerning popular politics in Victorian Manchester.¹⁵ The 'public sphere' is still a dominant model in histories of society and politics in the 'long eighteenth century'. Jurgen Habermas defined it specifically as an arena of bourgeois power outside the royal Court created by coffee house discussion and transmitted nationally through debates in newspapers and pamphlets.¹⁶ Historians stretched Habermas's model to encompass other eras of popular politics and other classes. They have been keen to speak of multiple and conflicting 'public spheres' to account for working-class opinions, and they have also spatialised the term. James Epstein concludes that, 'in large part the history of popular radicalism can indeed be written as a contest to gain access to and to appropriate sites of assembly and expression, to produce, at least potentially, a "plebeian counter-public sphere"'.¹⁷ Christina Parolin argues overtly that the model of plebeian counter-public spheres is applicable to sites where radicals congregated in early nineteenth-century London, including Newgate gaol where the London reformers were imprisoned.¹⁸

The original model has been stretched so far that it has lost its original

¹⁵ J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 7; P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (New York: Verso, 2007).

¹⁶ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

¹⁷ J. Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 113.

¹⁸ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, p. 10.

purpose and coherence. Describing politics as being conducted within multiple public spheres or a dichotomy of public versus private risks making the term methodologically useless. This is not to reject it completely: indeed, as in the case of Hobson's challenge in 1844, much of the debate over the politics of space concerned the meaning of the word 'public'. The working classes used instruments of the public sphere – newspapers, pamphlets and political debates – to declare their opinions and rights: the 'war of the unstamped' conducted by publishers like Hobson in the 1830s shows the centrality of the written word and the freedom of speech to political movements. But popular politics did not solely aim to enter a world of middle-class liberalism. The term sidesteps the divisive conflicts in the nineteenth century between classes over rights and economic conditions. Habermas's model is difficult to apply to non-textual forms of working-class collective action, especially the politics of the street.¹⁹ Tim Harris and other historians of early modern Europe have shown how a sophisticated and complex politics of the subaltern or 'excluded' existed well before the eighteenth century, and was shaped by and expressed in ways other than the press and text.²⁰ These influences included a legacy of custom and memory which continued into the supposed new era of modernity and the public sphere of the 'age of reform'.

Popular political movements contested exclusion from representation in the civic body politic. The body politic offers an alternative model for understanding popular politics in the first half of the nineteenth century. The civic body politic represented in microcosm what the national body politic should be.²¹ It was not an overly common term in this period, in part because its associations with commonality and counsel – potent concepts during the Commonwealth – no longer accorded with the two central constitutional developments that changed the character of the British state from 1688. The inward-looking ideal of a body politic did not fit the forthright and expansive vision of a British 'fiscal-military state' and its empire.²² Yet 'unreformed' electoral politics and forms of local govern-

¹⁹ G. Eley, 'Nations, publics and political cultures: placing Habermas in the nineteenth century', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 304–6; H. Mah, 'Phantasies of the public sphere: rethinking the Habermas of historians', *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000).

²⁰ T. Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 8.

²¹ P. H. Halliday, *Dismembering the Body Politic: Partisan Politics in England's Towns, 1650–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 41.

²² L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale

ment were not centralised, and many aspects continued to be conducted locally. The body politic describes this participatory political culture. Local and national elites defended their own ideal of the body politic, based as it was on privilege and property. The composition of local government came under intense debate as towns expanded and different interests sought to rationalise or control their patchwork of powers. Mark Harrison and Steve Poole have examined the role of corporate bodies in relation to space and crowd events in eighteenth-century Bristol. Poole argues (albeit with a tinge of Habermasian phrasing) that citizenship ‘meant more than just membership of the political nation; it meant active, visible and unrestricted access to the public and civic domain, symbolically represented, in social conflicts over particularly resonant topographies and spaces’.²³ Middle and working-class political groups struggled for inclusion within the body politic. They sought to widen its definition to include those who were not propertied or titled. The end goal was the franchise, but important struggles were also fought over the right to sit on local government bodies and use civic sites for meetings.

Contests over the body politic and its spaces were contests between classes. E. P. Thompson identified the social and political development of the working class reaching a vital stage in the period 1780 to 1832. His book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963 and revised in 1968, and his later work on eighteenth-century society, moved away from the economic determinism of traditional Marxist models of class formation by describing class as a process rather than a fixed economic category. Class was a set of identities that was shaped not just by individuals’ positions within an economic hierarchy and struggle with hegemonic elites, but also by collective and cultural interpretations of historic political rights. He showed how Thomas Paine’s interpretation of liberty and equality shaped the working classes’ conception of themselves and their demand for rights from the 1790s onwards, but also how these ideas dovetailed into a much longer tradition of English constitutionalism drawn from myths about Magna Carta and the liberties of the Anglo-Saxons.²⁴

University Press, 1992); J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1788* (London: Century Hutchinson, 1988).

²³ S. Poole, “‘Till our liberties be secure’: popular sovereignty and public space in Bristol, 1750–1850”, *Urban History*, 26 (1999), 54; M. Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 196–7.

²⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2nd edn, 1968).

Thompson ‘found’ the making of the English working class in the Pennine villages and townships of the West Riding and south-east Lancashire. More orthodox Marxist historians followed in Friedrich Engels’s footsteps by focusing rather on the development of industrial working-class districts and the Victorian slum, and searching for class conflict in patterns of residential segregation. Theodore Koditschek’s and John Foster’s studies of Bradford and Oldham respectively argued that mass urban growth and consequent social dislocation resulted in class consciousness. Popular protest thus demonstrated the revolutionary potential of the working class.²⁵ Koditschek’s and Foster’s imposition of a Marxist superstructure upon Bradford and Oldham grated with their highly observant accounts of local events and social relations in the towns. They over-exaggerated the abruptness of social disruption caused by urbanisation. Later non-Marxist historians critiqued Thompson’s neglect of multiple identities, especially of women and the Irish.²⁶ Some looked towards ‘community’ to replace class, but also perpetuated the connection between the physical environment and social relations. John Bohstedt compared riots in Manchester and villages in Devon between 1790 and 1810, concluding that new urban environments produced a fractured and atomised proletariat prone to violence. Industrialisation involved a destruction of community values whereas rural villages were able to sustain traditional social relations and thereby prevent violence getting out of hand.²⁷ But as Andrew Charlesworth contended, the working classes were able to adapt to the new urban conditions to form new communities; they also maintained more continuity with rural life in the surrounding ‘neighbourhood’ than Bohstedt presumes.²⁸ Furthermore, such studies of residential segregation led to geographic determinism: an assumption that working-class inhabitants were powerless against the changes in their urban envi-

²⁵ J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974); T. Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban-Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁶ H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the English Working Class* (London: University of California Press, 1995).

²⁷ J. Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

²⁸ A. Charlesworth, ‘From the moral economy of Devon to the political economy of Manchester, 1790–1812’, *SH*, 18:2 (1993), 211.

ronment. This book shows that this lack of agency was far from the case.

Another approach to understanding the development of social movements was quantitative analysis of the frequency and types of protest events. Historical sociologist Charles Tilly employed statistical analysis of changes in the language used by newspapers to describe ‘contentious gatherings’, arguably prefiguring the vogue for text-mining in digital history twenty years later. He categorised the ‘contentious repertoire widely available to ordinary people’ in the eighteenth century as predominantly violent and riotous, featuring carnivalesque celebration and other locally distinct forms of expression, and claim-making using intermediary authorities to intercede with parliament. He argued that by the early nineteenth century, modes of protest had changed to become much less violent, more national and bureaucratised, and involving special-interest associations employing forms of claim-making directly to parliament in petitions and elections.²⁹ Tilly in effect replaced Marxist structuralism with another teleological progression thesis. As this book will show, Tilly’s model is a reductive understanding of protest and underestimates the extent of continuity of the tactics and organisation of social movements between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Thompson’s model of class as a cultural process has regained its influence, as have his other works on custom and the law moulding the beliefs and practices of the working class. Adrian Randall’s examination of ‘riotous assemblies’ in the eighteenth century employs Thompson’s concepts of ‘moral economy’ and a popular defence of customary rights expressed in riots.³⁰ Malcolm Chase’s histories of Chartism and the events of 1820, and Robert Poole’s work on Peterloo illustrate how historians have developed new understandings of the social, cultural and economic contexts of reform movements, while maintaining Thompson’s emphasis on the cultural constructions of class identity.³¹ The Anglo-centricism of Thompson’s work

²⁹ C. Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 258, 393; C. Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 46.

³⁰ A. Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³¹ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991); Chase, *Chartism*; M. Chase, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); R. Poole, ‘The march to Peterloo: politics and festivity in late Georgian England’, *P & P*, 192 (2006).

has not hindered his legacy among historians of subaltern protest, especially in India.³² In a field traditionally dominated by labour and urban historians, moreover, it is significant that historians of rural and early modern society have developed new ways of understanding protest. In particular, Carl Griffin, Steve Poole and others have revised the methods and conclusions of Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé's classic 1969 monograph, *Captain Swing*.³³ Their regionally based examinations of the arson and machine-breaking agitation of the early 1830s have shown how open acts of protest and resistance should be understood more holistically, within the broader and longer socio-economic context of everyday life, with distinctive regional patterns and modes of repression.³⁴ Studies by K. Snell, Barry Reay and others of rural protest similarly draw from Thompson's ideas about custom and patrician-plebeian relations.³⁵ They also draw from the anthropologist James C. Scott's theory that subaltern groups used 'weapons of the weak'. Individuals and communities had agency in forms of action not recorded by newspapers or in official minutes, the 'hidden transcripts' of small forms of resistance in everyday life.³⁶ Such smaller, less obvious or openly political actions were part of the 'repertoire of contention' not recognised by Tilly. There are precedents to this approach in Thompson's emphasis on whole communities fostering political action: for example, the conspiracy of silence that surrounded Luddism in the Pennine villages, although

³² R. Chandavarkar, 'The making of the English working class: E. P. Thompson and Indian history', in V. Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 50.

³³ E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969).

³⁴ C. Griffin, *The Rural War: Captain Swing and the Politics of Protest* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); S. Poole and A. Spicer (eds), *Captain Swing Reconsidered: Forty Years of Rural History From Below*, special issue of *Southern History*, 32 (2010). See K. Navickas, 'What happened to class? New histories of labour and collective action in Britain', *SH*, 36:2 (2011).

³⁵ K. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); B. Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); B. McDonagh, 'Making and breaking property: negotiating enclosure and common rights in sixteenth-century England', *HWJ*, 76 (2013).

³⁶ J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

this was admittedly spurred on by fear as much as by defiance of authority.³⁷

Resistance formed part of the wider context of the struggles of everyday life. It could take the form of reactionary defence of common rights, enacted by trespass in enclosed fields and taking firewood from plantations, or a defence of practices and customs in the workplace. Or it could be idealistic and build towards a utopia: the shared song at a Methodist camp meeting, investment in the Chartist Land Plan, or self-reliance through friendly societies and auto-didacticism. As Rosa Congost commented in her study of conflicts over property rights, 'The historian's major challenge is to incorporate the study of the whole set of everyday practices and weapons – of the weak, but also of the not so weak and of the strongest – into the analysis of apparently peaceful areas in which nevertheless the long term view reveals deep transformations in the definition of social groups'.³⁸ So this book seeks to uncover some voices of the excluded and those outside more organised forms of popular politics and protest. But popular politics was not always a one-sided case of 'us and them'. Elites could protest too. Indeed some elite-led campaigns, notably the Anti-Corn Law League and the movement for the abolition of slavery, were the most successful, as they were able to gain substantial influence among MPs in parliament. From the mid-1830s to the end of the 1840s, magistrates and local authorities faced new challenges from above as well as from below. The reformed Whig government of the 1830s passed wide-reaching legislation which, though permissive in nature, was perceived by the provinces as imposed and a route to state centralisation. After decades of stemming resistance from their own inhabitants, local authorities now resisted what they regarded as threats to their own independence and control over place. As we will see in chapter 5, protests against the new poor law and the new police involved local elites as well as working-class inhabitants in defending their sense of place and local systems of government.

Space and place

Space used to be treated as a neutral, abstract and uniform medium in which action and social relations operated; place was the 'bare stage on

³⁷ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 637.

³⁸ R. Congost, 'Property rights and historical analysis: what rights? What history?', *P & P*, 181 (2003), 93, 95.

which the historical drama was enacted'.³⁹ Cultural geographers were the first to take the 'spatial turn', and historians are now examining the cultural representations and meanings of space. Space is now defined as a social construction, formed by culture and in itself forming culture, shaping power and enabling agency. Both Epstein's and Parolin's studies of radical politics in 1790s London cite sociologists Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's assertion that: 'Each site of assembly constitutes a nucleus of material and cultural conditions which regulate what may and may not be said, who may speak, how people may communicate and what importance must be given to what is said'.⁴⁰ This succinctly explains the choice of sites for political meetings and of the routes taken by processions, the way in which meetings were run and who participated, and the ways in which those meetings were commemorated with reference to the spaces in which they took place. Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann and Victoria Morgan have 'spatialised' patterns of consumption in eighteenth-century English towns, arguing that shops and advertisements were 'spaces of representation' in which consumers negotiated a range of spatial meanings in displays and advertisements.⁴¹ Like many historians taking the spatial turn, they apply the definitions of space developed by philosopher Henri Lefebvre and postmodern geographer Edward Soja. Lefebvre and Soja both devised a tripartite model of space. They categorised space firstly as material and concrete, secondly as symbolic and representative, and thirdly, as lived within a combination of the material and representative.⁴² Soja's notion of 'thirdspace' is useful for understanding how plebeian protesters could subvert the symbolism associated with buildings constructed by elites. Michel Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' is a related description of ephemeral

³⁹ S. Gunn and R. J. Morris, *Identities in Space: Contested Terrain in the Western City since 1850* (Farnham: Ashgate 2001), pp. 2–4.

⁴⁰ P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 80; Epstein, *In Practice*, p. 113; Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, p. 7. The same line is also quoted in A. Müller and I. Karremann (eds), *Mediating Identities in Eighteenth-century England: Public Negotiations, Literary Discourses, Topography* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 101, among others in the series.

⁴¹ J. Stobart, A. Hann and V. Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c.1680–1830* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 22.

⁴² H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (London: Wiley, 1992); E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

locations of a ‘world-turned-upside-down’ in particular situations such as demonstrations or riots.⁴³

The spatial turn suggests that space gives protesters agency. William Sewell has argued in his study of space in protest that by ‘changing the meanings and strategic uses of their environments’, protesters exercise spatial agency and produce their own spaces.⁴⁴ For example, subversion can be achieved by occupying a square at the ‘wrong’ time or by sitting in the ‘wrong’ seats in a meeting. Power lay in the hands of those who decided what time or place was ‘right’. As sociologist Fran Tonkiss notes, spaces are ‘not merely locations in which politics take place, but frequently constitute objects of struggle in their own right’.⁴⁵ Structural restrictions on their uses of space could however counter-balance any agency that oppositional movements may have. Drawing from resource mobilisation theory, in which participation in social movements is shaped by access to resources and sites of power, Sewell notes that oppositional social movements tend to be ‘resource poor’, both in terms of capital and time.⁴⁶ So propertied elites or whoever owned and controlled sites of meeting had the upper hand in deciding who could meet where.

But the historical spatial turn often confuses the meaning of space with place. Influenced by Lefebvre’s and Soja’s emphasis on representation, many studies assume that the space of the spatial turn is the same as the text in the linguistic turn and culture in the cultural turn, both of which centre on semiotics. Yet this focus ignores the very matter that is being experienced and represented. As Leif Jerram has warned in his critique of the historical spatial turn, space shapes physical action by its materiality not by its symbolism. Jerram powerfully argues that terms such as ‘male space’ or ‘sacred space’ are wrong: spaces themselves do not possess inherent qualities of gender or religion.⁴⁷ This is not to deny that buildings and streets are culturally constructed by people, who themselves are defined by underlining economic and political power structures. Spaces produce ‘effects beyond their symbolic functions’,

⁴³ M. Foucault, ‘Of other spaces’, *Diacritics*, 16:1 (1986), 24.

⁴⁴ W. Sewell, ‘Space in contentious politics’, in R. Aminzade, J. Goldstone, D. McAdam et al. (eds), *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 62, 64.

⁴⁵ F. Tonkiss, *Space, The City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 59.

⁴⁶ Sewell, ‘Space in contentious politics’, p. 55.

⁴⁷ L. Jerram, ‘Space: a useless category for historical analysis?’, *History and Theory*, 52:3 (2013), 404, 410–11.

such as shaping the direction of a march or the experience of a demonstration in an enclosed square. Cultural geographers argue that place, rather than space, is invested with meaning, associations, performances and codes.⁴⁸ Hobson was not simply asking for recognition of the Free Market as a public space (the term is contemporary, but in this formulation it should really be public place); his challenge was also a matter of being able to use and occupy the place physically. The form of Chartist meetings was shaped by a combination of material space, geographical location, connotations associated with place and memory of previous events. We should thus examine the whole environment in which protesters acted: its space *and* place.

Geographers Tim Ingold and Nigel Thrift have gone further, suggesting the notion of ‘dwelling’ as a way of breaking down Soja’s binary between representation and experience of space. Ingold conceives of the land as a ‘taskscape’, lived and worked by its inhabitants.⁴⁹ Iain Robertson applies this theory to the Highland Land Wars in early twentieth-century Scotland, showing how crofters’ forms and locations of protest were drawn from collective memory of customary uses of their ancestors’ farms.⁵⁰ I apply this concept to the actions of the Luddites and rural protesters in chapter 8. Geographers of resistance also conceive space as being produced by bodily practices and performances. They argue that protest is a form of embodied geography, producing space through gestures such as parading, processing or trespassing, which in turn gives protesters the agency to change the meaning or uses of politically resonant places.⁵¹ Chapter 4 examines bodily protest and the creation of embodied spaces, especially by trade unions in the 1830s.

Notions of place were shaped by early modern conceptions of custom

⁴⁸ K. Olwig, ‘Recovering the substantive meaning of landscape’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 86:4 (1996), 645; T. Cresswell, *Place: a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 12; Jerram, ‘Space’, 403.

⁴⁹ J. Wylie, *Landscape* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 166; T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 195; N. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, new edn, 2007).

⁵⁰ Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 11; I. Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

⁵¹ M. Keith and S. Pile (eds), *Geographies of Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1997); M. Rose, ‘The seduction of resistance: power, politics and a performative style of systems’, *E & P D*, 20:4 (2002), 390; C. Griffin and A. Evans, ‘On historical geographies of embodied practice and performance’, *Historical Geography*, 36 (2008).

and practice, which, I argue, continued well into the nineteenth century. Andy Wood argues that customary practices and laws helped to define the distinctiveness of places. Custom established what rights were attached to inhabitants of a locality (for example, the use of a common for gleaning or fuel gathering), and thereby defined the particular culture of that locality. Custom defined the identity of individuals and communities in relation to place, as ‘the inheritors of tradition, rights, and duties’. This included plebeians as well as elites. For Wood, customary practices associated with the landscape gave inhabitants a channel of agency. He employs Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, and argues that particularly by using customary law against their opponents, early modern subaltern groups were able to ‘carve out a space beyond domination, generating partial counter-hegemonies that emerge from day to day lived experience’.⁵² An important part of this process was memory, the manipulation of the past and representations of the past in the landscape and law. A perennial phrase in documents and testimonies about common rights was ‘from time immemorial’, particularly employed in disputes over enclosure and pauper settlement. Yet unlike Bob Bushaway’s Durkheimian interpretation of custom and the law as being socially integrative, Wood draws from Thompson’s emphasis on custom as an interface that set patrician against plebeian. Custom was not ideal or representative of equality, as it was defined by hierarchies of gender, status and lineage.⁵³ It often defined the rights of working men through the exclusion of women, migrants, paupers and other groups regarded as marginal or threatening to livelihoods. Yet because custom and its practices defined inequalities, it was used as a tool to contest those exclusions from power.

From the later eighteenth century, moreover, this definition of custom as place was pitted against global processes of free trade political economy, trading and manufacturing practices, as well as mobility and migration, empire and the breaking down of traditional boundaries such as the poor law parishes. It is at this juncture of challenges to customary understandings of place that mass collective action emerged. But it

⁵² A. Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 11–12.

⁵³ Wood, *The Memory of the People*, p. 32; B. Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700–1880* (London: Junction Books, 1982); Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 97; J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 34.

did not arise because of the breakdown of custom, but rather in defence of it. Inhabitants used customary rights and practices to challenge the political hegemony of elites. Carl Griffin's work on rural protest shows how custom and popular notions of place continued to play a central role in shaping resistance in the nineteenth century. Echoing Thompson on the working class, he argues that subaltern groups employed a 'language of rights' that was in itself shaped by custom, religion and local-political conflict.⁵⁴ As we have seen in the case of Hobson in Leeds, the politics of the parish was still important in the nineteenth century. Though the rate of urbanisation in the northern industrial areas was rapid, it did not obliterate older forms of administrative geographies and territorial belonging overnight.

Finally, although custom, local rights and exclusion were crucial layers forming the palimpsest of place, this book does not assume that protest is bounded or reactionary. A search for a wider class identity and solidarity could co-exist with a defence of place. Raymond Williams's concept of 'militant particularism', drawn from his observations of communities in south Wales, suggested that class and place were two processes that shaped each other. Some sociologists, notably David Harvey in his study of labour relations at the Cowley motor works in Oxford, interpreted Williams's model as a dichotomy between local and (inter)national, empirical and abstract, place and space. Harvey argued that place-bound political groups cannot achieve their goals, or indeed class consciousness, until they shift from focusing on particular grievances towards uniting with other groups under more abstract political ideologies.⁵⁵ Doreen Massey and David Featherstone have rejected this interpretation of militant particularism. They argue that the development of shared class and political identities was not antithetical to a strong attachment to place. Featherstone examines the London port strikes and agitation for the renegade politician John Wilkes in 1768. The riots involved specific groups of workers attached to particular areas, but who were connected by various subaltern groups defined by their mobilities, especially sailors and colonial inhabitants, who

⁵⁴ C. Griffin, 'Becoming private property: custom, law, and the geographies of "ownership" in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England', *E & P A*, 42:3 (2010), 753.

⁵⁵ D. Harvey, 'Militant particularism and global ambition: the conceptual politics of place, space and environment in the work of Raymond Williams', *Social Text*, 42 (1995), 80; R. Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 115.

contested 'the material and social orderings of mercantile networks'.⁵⁶ Massey posits a relational definition of space, in which boundaries are continually made and remade by various practices (such as bodily movements in protest, representations of spaces in newspaper reports or maps and the physical materiality of objects such as fences or railway lines). Space is a 'product of practices, trajectories and interrelations'.⁵⁷ Nigel Thrift similarly suggests that space is relational and embodied rather than representational, emphasising the 'flow of practice in everyday life' rather than 'consciously planned codings or symbols'.⁵⁸ We should not reject the representational entirely: social movements were keenly aware of the power of symbols associated with protests and their places. But historians should also examine protests within their multi-layered and changing spaces. Strategies of resistance were in part shaped by underlying spatial structures, buildings, streets and connections dominated by hegemonic elites; these spaces were never static and in struggling for power in those spaces, social movements created their own spaces and forms of spatial practice.

Structure

Part I explores spaces of exclusions, intrusions and negotiations from 1789 to 1830. It examines the impact of the first French Revolution upon popular politics in England, showing how government and local elites increasingly sought to exclude opposition from public space and intruded into what was previously considered private space. Following this process of exclusion in the 1790s, a new generation of 'mass platform' radicals defended the liberty to meet in protest by holding mass demonstrations and creating new meeting sites. The Peterloo Massacre and the Six Acts of 1819 are a major turning point in the narrative, impacting massively upon this nascent mass protest. The part concludes

⁵⁶ D. Featherstone, 'Towards the relational construction of militant particularisms: or why the geographies of past struggles matter for resistance to neoliberal globalisation', *Antipode*, 37:2 (2005), 252–3, 263; D. Featherstone, *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: the Making of Counter-Global Networks* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2008), chapter 1.

⁵⁷ A. Saldanha, 'Power-geography as philosophy of space', in D. Featherstone and J. Painter (eds), *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 46; D. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 5.

⁵⁸ N. Thrift and J. D. Dewsbury, 'Dead geographies and how to make them live again', *E & P D*, 18:4 (2000), 415.

with a ‘vignette’, outside the main narrative, a short case study of the political sites in the locale of north Manchester, showing the centrality of neighbourhood in fostering a continuity of collective action. Part II focuses on protests involving the body and civic body politic from the 1830s to the 1840s. It starts with a ‘prelude’ examining the revival of radical agitation leading to the passage of the Reform Act in 1832. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the popular reaction to the new Whig reforms of the 1830s, and the vital role of the anti-new poor law campaign in consolidating mass working-class collective action. Radicals, Chartists and Tories contested the Whig regime by standing for elections and attempting to change modes of representation in local bodies. The second vignette considers the procession as politics on the move, comparing loyalists’ and radicals’ contrasting uses of the streetscape. The story then enters the later 1830s and 1840s, with the rise of Chartism and Owenite socialism. In response to continued restrictions on the use of civic and public spaces, social movements constructed their own spaces. Spaces of education, religion, alternative consumption and entertainment offered inclusive ways of weaving politics into everyday life.

Part III surveys protest in rural spaces and the ‘neighbourhood’ of urban areas throughout this period. Inhabitants’ sense of connection with the environment and landscapes shaped their actions in protest and help to explain the popularity of the Chartist Land Plan. Chapter 8 explores wider forms of resistance in rural areas, including the Captain Swing agitation of the 1830s. It considers why Chartism was weak in some parts of the North, whereas older customary forms of protest, including arson, threatening letters and tree maiming, persisted. The final chapter surveys battles over territory between Chartists and trade unions and the tense triangle of authority of magistrates, military and the Home Office in 1839, 1842 and 1848. It concludes with a vignette that considers wider horizons outside the North, particularly radicals’ utopian visions of North America. Their disillusionment with the progress of land reform and democracy illustrated that the differences between restrictions on liberty in the United States and those back home were not as stark as they imagined.