Afterword: landscapes, memories and texts

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This volume forms a powerful antidote to the view that human life is determined by apparently impersonal forces such as price movements and demographics.[1] Rather, it represents a decisive statement as to the political agency and cultural creativity of working people over five hundred years of English history. Throughout, the radical imagination is at work. Memory appears as politicized: detailed examples of early modern commoners and nineteenth-century radicals mustering memories of earlier struggles in the legitimation of their own conflicts demonstrate the point.

In contrast to the current historiographical domination exercised by global history, many of the stories told here are determinedly local. This is important: this book does not comprise a set of 'case-studies' of a pre-determined theme or question. The claims that can be made as to the value of micro-historical studies of ordinary people and their worlds should be ambitious. In a perceptive discussion, Ben Griffin observes that 'studies of popular memory are a vital way in which big stories, which necessarily ride roughshod over difference – whether different experiences or difference over space and time – can be dismantled'. The local emerges from the studies presented here as the field within which everyday life unfolded. In this respect, the collection represents a departure from that social-scientific mode of analysis that saw the locality as a methodological focus, a way of narrowing the quantity of research necessary for a defined project. Rather, for the historians represented in this collection, the 'local' is a substantive social presence – it is the thing in itself, not just a slice of data.[2]

Local stories matter because they illuminate the worlds within which everyday life was lived. It was also the site within which popular politics was most closely manifest. McDonagh and Rodda's essay on the deep context of the 1607 Midland

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[1] Jeremy Boulton observes that in the early modern period 'The fortunes of labouring people were ultimately determined by population trends'. See J. Boulton, 'The "meaner sort": labouring people and the poor', in K.E. Wrightson (ed.), A social history of England, 1500-1750 (Cambridge, 2017), 314. The chapters gathered in the current collection suggest a very different picture.

[2] This is true of some important recent work by contemporary social historians: see, for instance, B. Rogaly and B. Taylor, Moving histories of class and community: identity, place and belonging in contemporary England (Basingstoke, 2009); B. Jones, The working class in mid twentieth-century England: community, identity and social memory (Manchester, 2012).

Rising allows us to locate that major rising alongside earlier and subsequent village protests that found their way before central courts. Utilizing the difficult records of the Elizabethan Star Chamber, this forensic essay represents not just an important empirical recovery, but also a model of how to conduct micro-historical research. Likewise, Simon Sandall's chapter draws on his distinct knowledge of the Forest of Dean. There is a powerful sense in this piece of the richness and texture of local identities and of how a particular sense of place and an embedded social memory underwrote popular agency. The volume presents itself as a contribution to the 'new protest history'. As such, it engages explicitly with questions of agency, power, subordination and resistance. A large question hovers over the local: did it represent a challenge to popular politics, or the basis of that politics? Keith Snell argued that the localism of nineteenth-century rural workers undermined their politics, impairing a wider sense of class identity.[3] In a somewhat similar way, Antonio Gramsci, whose theorization of domination and resistance forms any starting-point for the issues raised in this volume, also understood the local as a limitation to subaltern politics. As Kate Crehan puts it, 'As far as Gramsci is concerned, subaltern people may well be capable of seeing the little valley they inhabit very clearly, but they remain incapable of seeing beyond their valley walls and understanding how their little world fits into the greater one beyond it'.[4] Yet other writers disagree: Mike Savage is just one sociologist who has argued for the local as the basis for class solidarities.[5]

The everyday world experienced by workers has been that of the field, the village, the office or the factory. Here, subalterns might engage in those daily moments of resistance described by James C. Scott – resistance that might keep their dignity intact, and which might incrementally shift a local balance of power, but where any wider, strategic challenge was difficult.[6] The political culture of poorer people in the historical past drew upon this engagement with micro-politics. It was also coloured by locally distinct forms of exploitation, subordination and resistance, and might sometimes be built upon a wider critique of that social order.[7] Somewhere between 1789 and 1832, fundamental discontinuities opened up in the political culture of working-class people. It was not just that nineteenth-century radicalism anticipated a wider restructuring of English society in favour of working people and their families. Another historically distinctive characteristic of working-class radicalism lay in the understanding of how that restructuring might be achieved. This represented a break with the past. Early modern plebeian politics also had some rough sense of an alternative world, but this had been confined to the local: to the reordering of the small world of the village, the common, or the town. This could change: but only rarely. There were moments – the 1549 rebellions are the best example – where for a few weeks popular politics became more ambitious. General demands were not as

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[3] K.D.M. Snell, 'The culture of local xenophobia', Social History, 28, 1 (2003), 1-30.
[4] K. Crehan, Gramsci, culture and anthropology (London, 2002), 104.
[5] M. Savage, 'Space, networks and class formation', in N. Kirk (ed.), Social class and Marxism: defences and challenges (Aldershot, 1996), 58-86.
[6] J.C. Scott, Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transctipts (New Haven: Conn., 1991).
[7] For a study that emphasizes both the formation of subaltern politics within a locality, and the practical difficulties it faced in advancing beyond that locality, see A.E. Kaye, 'Neighbourhoods and Nat Turner: the making of a slave rebel and the unmaking of a slave rebellion', Journal of the Early Republic, 27, 4 (2007), 705-20.

distant as might be imagined from early modern popular politics. In their Mousehold articles, after all, Kett's rebels famously demanded in 1549 that all bondmen may be made free, not merely those of a particular village. But what is seen as the 'making' of the English working class represented a fundamental broadening of the imagined and material sites within which plebeian politics worked: class formation occurred in space as well as in time.

Rose Wallis's essay reminds us that elites had their own social memory. Pointing to the ways in which the Norfolk magistracy's actions during the Swing riots in 1830 were coloured by the experience of the 'bread or blood' riots of 1816 and the disturbances of 1822, she illuminates the bitter social conflicts in early nineteenth-century East Anglia. In the later Victorian and Edwardian periods, this was to be followed by the 'revolt of the field', with attempts at forming agricultural trade unions leading to a long history of strikes and lockouts that could devestate the rural working class household economies. An important question concerns that of the ways in which the early ninteenth century protests were remembered in the Victorian and Edwardian periods: stories collected in the 1960s by the folklorist Enid Porter suggest that in Littleport (Cambridgeshire) the vicious repression of 1816 quelled rural resistance for generations.[8] If we are to deal with memories of protest, we need often to deal with the experience of defeat, and with the ways in which subordination might be imposed upon working people by a victorious governing class. This, too, should be part of the 'new protest history'.

It may be that historians of popular politics need new sources. Ruther Mather's transformative essay suggests an exciting way forward in studies of popular memory. Her argument that the home formed a key location in which memory was communicated, nurtured and elaborated is of importance not just for historians of the period spanned by the early industrial revolution.[9] Mather's suggestion that memories of critical events such as Peterloo were maintained in domestic pottery, and hence that radical memorialization was embedded in the material practices of the proletarian home, is significant enough in its own right, representing a different way of thinking about the making of the English working class. But for historians interested in the communication of custom, folklore and local tradition, it has an added significance. Witnesses in customary disputes repeatedly made the point that they had learnt about a particular right or entitlement from their aged relatives. And broader instruction in historical narratives may have been formed within the family: Samuel Bamford discusses his early instruction in English history as taking place within his childhood home. Affective ties based upon kinship and household therefore formed part of the social web within which memory was communicated and given meaning. Here is an opportunity: further research in the relationship between family, kin, community and memory would be very valuable, especially in contexts where entire communities

[8] For popular memories of the 1816 Littleport riots, see A. Wood, 'Five swans over Littleport: fenland folklore and popular memory, c. 1810-1978', in J.H. Arnold, M. Hilton and J. Ruger (eds), History after Hobsbawm: writing the past for the twenty-first century (Oxford, 2018), 225-41.

[9] For more on memory and the home, see C. Steedman, Landscape for a good woman: a story of two lives (London, 1986); J. Bahloul, The architecture of memory: a Jewish-Muslim household in colonial Algeria, 1937-1962 (1992; Eng trans., Cambridge, 1996).

were engaged in persistent struggles over issues such as common land, employment rights or working conditions.[10]

Many of the essays in this collection present powerful examples of earlier resistance becoming embedded in local memory. Sandall's study shows convincingly how solidarities in the Forest of Dean were generated in the articulation and defence of custom, and the ways in which these inflected notions of entitlement and local belonging. In the remembered history of perhaps every village, certain individuals stood out: Nicola Whyte presents us with memories of 'stowte' John Bussey who 'cared not for the lord' and who continued to assert his entitlements on Mousehold Heath. Memory, a number of the chapters assert, had a politics. The historiographical convenience that separates the early modern and modern periods can in this context be frustrating. More research needs to be conducted into how the plebeian solidarities of the 1500-1770 period fed into radical, Chartist and socialist politics in the nineteenth centuries.

There are few too social historians researching the period 1500-1900. Why not? The consequences of engaging with this great arch might be revolutionary for our understanding of the political culture of English working people. The sources are there to do it, and with a local or regional focus, and a clear sense of questions, this could make for an amazing project. Medievalists manage to work across this kind of span of time to great effect. Early modern and modern social historians – perhaps especially those of rural communities – ought to speak to each other more. Maybe this excellent collection, with its wide focus, might mark the beginning of such a conversation. Fundamental to this is the question of how political activity was spatially imagined. An important aspect of the reformulation of social identities in the early industrial revolution lay in the articulation of national class loyalties. The new modeling of working-class memory was an integral part of this process of class formation. In this collection, Poole shows clearly how memorialization fed into radical politics and proletarian solidarities. Yet senses of a national radical history developed alongside the endurance of powerful local memories. The large-scale enclosure of common land in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a fundamental part of this story. Enclosure, of course, had a long history, and for centuries generated angry protest; but there was something distinctly aggressive about large-scale parliamentary enclosure that imprinted itself on working-class memory as a moment of profound rupture. More work on working class and radical discussions of enclosure would be really valuable: it seems to have been represented and remembered as a watershed moment, a moment of permanent discontinuity and a formative experience in the politics of many rural communities.

Enclosure shattered taskscapes – by which I mean the spatial organization and experience of labour, and of movement upon the land – and it remodeled social relations. In some places, senses of entitlement might be obliterated, especially where the destruction of common resources was followed by increased in- and out-migration following the generation of a mobile agricultural workforce. This, too, was a form of

[10] Dave Douglass's essay is full of implications: '"Worms of the earth": the miners' own story', in R. Samuel (ed.), People's history and socialist theory (London, 1981), 61-7

alienation, and there should be ways of charting its meanings.[11] Part of the history of memory is, as a number of pieces in this volume emphasize, a struggle against forgetting.[12] And as anthropologists and archaeologists have argued, and as a number of pieces in this collection testify, early modern popular memory was embedded in a distinct sense of the land. Elly Robson has recently written very powerfully about the ways in which 'early modern landscapes [were] socially constituted', engendering distinct 'ways of seeing and knowing' and supplying the 'critical means by which spatialized social relations were produced, reproduced, defended and transformed'.[13] In many of the pieces in this volume, there is a similar appreciation of the ways in which landscape was imbricated in local struggles, as in many instances conflicts over (for example) gleaning, fuel rights, pannage or pasture reveal contending understandings of the material world.

As Nicola Whyte's brilliant essay demonstrates, landscapes were palimpsests: the map of Mousehold Heath drawn in 1589, along with its attendant depositions, illuminate not just the environment of that late Tudor taskscape, but also its prior meanings – the pit where lollards and protestants had been burnt; the Oak of Reformation under which Kett's rebels had gathered; the site of the discovery of the body of St William of Norwich, which resulted in England's first pogrom; pre-reformation chapels; lime-pits exploited by poor people from the suburb of Pockthorpe; sheep-runs used by wealthier farmers. As the depositions set before the Court of Exchequer revealed, and as the map produced in those proceedings made clear, late sixteenth-century Mousehold could be read and experienced in multiple ways: as a memorial to earlier events in the history of the city that adjoined it; as a body of resources; as a landscape of multi-dimensional conflict between lords, sheep farmers and the poor. Whyte's methodological achievement, in reading cartographic and textual evidence alongside one another, is to reconstruct something of the manifold meanings that lay upon the land, and how ordinary people encountered and experienced it.[14]

Which leads us to questions of sources and methods, and to the recoverability of the subaltern voice. Heather Falvey's contribution develops a legalistic re-reading of the witness testimonies (depositions) that social historians (myself included) have utilized. Implicitly, her chapter represents the empirical lintel of this collection. It poses a basic question: how, as historians of protest and memory, are we to access those subjects prior to the advent of mass literacy? In her search for 'authenticity', Falvey shows that depositions were multi-vocal: they contained the words not just of

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[11] That utter alienation is made clear in C.J. Griffin, '"Cut down by some cowardly miscreants": plant maiming, or the malicious cutting of flora, as an act of protest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural Englnad', Rural History, 19, 1 (2008), 29-54.
[12] I draw here on Milan Kundera in his Book of laughter and forgetting: 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'.
[13] E. Robson, 'Improvement and epistemologies of landscape in seventeenth-century English forest enclosure', Historical Journal, 60, 3 (2017), 604.
[14] Mousehold Heath cries out for a long-term social and environmental history. Whyte's essay in this volume is, amongst other things, a highly significant contribution to the currently limited literature on urban commons. On this subject, see most recently C.D. Liddy, 'Urban enclosure riots: risings of the commons in English towns, 1480–1525', Past & Present, 226, 1, (2015), 41–77.

the witness (deponent), but also of the authors of the interrogatory, the commissioners for depositions and the clerk of the court. The same may also, in different forms, be true of depositions taken before church courts, criminal courts and borough courts. But is the search for 'authenticity' in the early modern legal process the best place from which to start? At the centre of this view of court testimony sits some notion of the modern subject. Yet as regards manorial and parochial custom, the historian is more often confronted with collective opinion – what contemporaries called the 'common voice', 'common repute' or 'common rumour' of a 'neighbourhood' or 'country'. It is for this reason that depositions concerning local memory are so repetitious – only secondarily are we encountering the voice of the individual witness. Perhaps this is especially true of issues such as communal boundaries and use-rights, where deponents repeatedly emphasized how collective opinion was habitually and repetively inscribed, year on year, in permabulations, labour and instruction by elders. Visions of landscape in depositions, then, form memory texts within communities in which memory was more often conceived in collective terms than in our own individualized sense of the concept.

Falvey's striking essay opens up a new areas of potential research. In addressing questions of authorship, she makes us think more carefully about our own ideas concerning the 'voice of the country'. Falvey's chapter implicitly addresses the power relations inherent in the legal narratives on which we depend, and the question of agency within the historical record.[15] These are big questions, and demand an approach that links social, legal and local history.

Perhaps more than anything else, this collection suggests that, at least for the 'new protest history, the cultural turn of the 1990s is over. What we have in this remarkably rich volume is a new social history of protest that is can be about culture, memory, belief, landscape, economics, politics and social structure all at once. Rather than taking yet another one-dimensional 'turn', this seems to me to be the way forward in historical research: we need a social history that strategically integrates all aspects of human behaviour and mentalities in pursuit of worlds that we have lost.

[15] The best discussion of these issues is John Arnold's inspirational book, Inquisition and power: Catharism and the confessing subject in medieval Languedoc (Philadelphia: Penn., 2001).