Ritual Aspects of Popular Politics in England (c. 1700-1830)

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Resumen: En este artículo el autor trata sobre de las discusiones teóricas actuales sobre el ritual político popular antes de emprender una breve revisión de su campo de estudio. Esto incluye un examen y una explicación de aquellos aspectos de las política popular, a las que las actividades rituales llegan a estar asociadas. Esto conduce hacia una discusión sobre el estado de la historiografía del ritual. Además este artículo analiza el contexto, tanto del calendario, como geográfico, en el cual se desarrolla la actividad ritual; luego se procede a analizar los componentes del ritual (incluyendo paradas, procesiones, mítines, discursos, cenas y bebidas, e incluyendo actividades tales como dar regalos o quema de efigies. También incluye una sección al respecto desde diferentes puntos de vista: el ritual como espectáculo (incluyendo el del color, luz y música); ritual como carnaval (incluyendo sátira, crítica social e inversión social); ritual como simbolismo. Por último el prof. O’Gorman investiga acerca de la audiencia ritual antes de estudiar la decadencia del ritual tradicional.

Palabras claves: Ritual político, historiografía del ritual, contexto del ritual, componentes del ritual, carnaval, simbolismo, audiencia del ritual.

Abstract: In this article the author investigates the status of current theoretical discussions of popular political ritual before embarking on a brief review of the field of study. This includes an examination and an explanation of those aspects of popular politics to which ritual activities becomes associated. This leads on to a discussion of the current state of the historiography of ritual. Thereafter the article examines the context, both calendrical and geographical, in which ritual activity occurs, then proceeding to analyse the components of ritual, (including parades, processions, meetings, speeches, dining and drinking, and including such activities as gift giving and effigy burnings. He also includes a section regarding ritual from a variety of standpoints. These include: Ritual as spectacle (including the deployment of colour, light and music); Ritual as carnival (including satire, social criticism and social inversion); Ritual as symbolism. Finally prof. O’Gorman investigates about the ritual audience, before addressing the decline of traditional Ritual.

Key words: Political Ritual, Historiography of ritual, Context of ritual, components of ritual, spectacles, carnival, symbolysm, ritual audience.

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1. Popular politics

The study of popular politics during the long eighteenth century has benefited from successive waves of historiographical interest. In the 19th and 20th centuries Whig historiography tended to privilege a politically driven radical/sectarian conception of popular politics. In the middle decades of the 20th century neo-marxist historiography located popular politics within the context of growing economic and social inequalities and the function of the middle and working classes in achieving political democracy. At the end of the 20th century historians have come to deploy concepts derived from the social sciences (e.g. ritual and symbol) in order to establish an approach to popular politics which is more challenging but yet also more rounded. Thanks to these influences the historical study of ritual is unquestionably more widespread and better established than it has ever been.

Few historians now believe that the dynamic shaping popular politics was in any sense a simple emulation of ‘high politics’. Popular politics should not be conceived as a constant and permanent opposite pole to elite politics. Nor should it be assumed that in any sense ‘popular politics’ is automatically and exclusively the politics of protest and reform. Historians accept that politics—in the sense of shaping and debating the uses to which power was put—penetrated the social hierarchy of every locality. Indeed, politics constituted the practices which related the local community to the great national institutions of the monarchy, parliament, the law, the church and, not least, to local government. But politics also embraced the local, popular celebration

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of local and national events and the local expressions of protest, and thus of riot, of demonstration and even of mockery and insult. Indeed, English society at all levels in the long eighteenth century was organised for regular displays of performance and magnificence. ‘The life of most towns and cities revolved around a complex pattern of social performance –the pageantry of the assize and of local and Westminster elections, the macabre ‘show’ of public executions, the highly ritualized ‘counter theatre’ of riot, and the carnivalesque of plebeian events such as fairs and sports’\(^2\). Yet most such events, with the exception of royal events such as coronations, together with some particularly interesting examples of ‘radical’ action, have been either ignored or downgraded as mere anecdote. Yet to incorporate such activities within a broad definition of politics removes the binary, and totally arbitrary, differentiation between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics. Just as important, to incorporate ritual action vastly extends the definition of popular politics.

2. The concept of ritual

If people in the past went to such lengths to advertise themselves and their society in ritual ways then the least that the historian can do is to try to make sense of those rituals and the people and the events to which they refer. Nevertheless, not every public and symbolic act is a ritual. Indeed, many such actions may be either customary or even merely habitual. A ‘valid’ ritual may be defined as a sequence of repetitive and patterned public actions of an exaggerated and symbolic kind. Those actions go well beyond the purely functional and are often ornate and elaborate, employing a wide variety of supporting effects, such as music, colour and light. The physical setting is often imposing, (such as a church, a hall, a market square), the events are compelling and dramatic, and they frequently employ symbols and references to historic events and individuals\(^3\).

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So far as the popular political rituals of England in the long eighteenth century are concerned, the functions of ritual may be divided for convenience into three categories. First, rituals assert normative standards of belief and behaviour and thus the boundaries of what may be deemed socially and politically acceptable. They thus subtly endeavour to promote not to impose —consensus, harmony and agreement. Although rituals are highly specific and almost always have a local and particular context they thus come to have broad implications to matters of great significance, such as community solidarity, social and political control and national identity. Ritual are thus used by governments, by political parties and by other groups to assert their power and to challenge that of others. "Through symbolism we recognize who are the powerful and who are the weak." Rituals are thus employed to heighten respect for the established order among individuals and to deepen acceptance of the procedures used to maintain continuity and stability. Serious divisions and problems are subsumed and neutralized during rituals, which may thus be identified as collective acts of renewal. In this sense, ritual amounts to a symbolic representation of an idealised social and political order, depicting in a venerable and compelling manner a society which might be hierarchical, authoritarian and unequal.

Second, at the same time rituals may seek to subvert the ‘official’ ceremony and to promote competition to it. Some rituals, for example, the Mock Elections at Garratt, subvert the official ceremony by subjecting it to mockery and ridicule. At the same time, some events promote competitive ritual. The Peterloo Massacre at Manchester in 1819 was at once followed by the wearing of the radical colour, white, by all who sympathised with the rioters, to which loyalist responded with their own sartorial and musical motifs, a dramatic ritualised intervention into daily life which itself became a stage for ritual con-

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4 David I. KERTZER, Ritual, Politics and Power, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, p.5. See also pp.3-4 and c. One in general.

Thus ritual does far more than generate counter-ritual. Competing rituals symbolise different social models or paradigms of how society ought to be organised.

Third, in a society increasingly driven by immediate market and occupational values rituals admit and promote a relationship of individuals and events with less transient values and ideologies. This is nothing less than a cognitive function. By recalling past events, ritual serves to link the actions, groups and individuals of the present to the past and future of a society in some intelligible, if often mythical, narrative. People thus participate in ritual forms which are more enduring than are and over whose origins and development they have had nothing to do. In this way, collective rituals represent an attempt by society to impart meaning and even control to certain aspects of social activity. They enable the public to think through vital issues to do with power, politics, obedience and harmony. In this way, ritual provides access to the 'sacred' elements in the social imaginary. These play on the irrational aspects of personality while providing access for the individual to timeless values and community myths, enabling individuals to pass into a realm of time less absolutes which transcend social practicalities. Ritual thus renders society intelligible and goes far towards organising public knowledge of its past, present and future.

For the historian of popular politics, such ritualistic perspectives can facilitate a broad understanding of the political culture in which the ritual occurs and thus of eighteenth English society more generally. After all, through its symbolic forms we can begin to understand a popular political culture because the rituals are nothing less than its own commentary upon itself.

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6 See the interesting accounts of competitive ritual after Peterloo in the editions of the Manchester Observer of 2 and 9 October 1819.

7 For a valuable discussion of ritual from this standpoint see Roberto da Matta, 'Ritual in Complex and Tribal Societies' Current Anthropology, 20, 1979, 589-590.

8 For some interesting ideas of these aspects of ritual see P. Connerton, How Societies Remember, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; B. J. Stoeltje, 'Cultural Frames and Reflections: Ritual, Drama and Spectacle' Current Anthropology, 10, 1978.
3. The historiography of ritual

Much of the academic literature on ritual originates in the social sciences. In particular, social anthropologists and sociologists have sought to establish what the meaning and significance of rituals has been. Their work, however, has been dominated by a somewhat superficial functionalist reading which treats ritual as representing social realities. One such example is the approach to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II adopted by Edward Shils and Michael Young, who claim that the coronation ceremonial affirmed ‘the moral values necessary to a well-governed and good society’ which were ‘shared and celebrated’ by the vast majority of the population. In this process ‘people became more aware of their dependence on each other’ and ‘sensed some connection between this and their relationship to the Queen’. Such a reading underlines the effectiveness of ritual in reaffirming the collective values and sentiments of society and serving as a stabilising mechanism which aids adaptive response to change. But such a reading may also be regarded as partial deconstructions of the obvious. It has little to say either about the multiple meanings or layers of ritual or about processes of ritual change. As Victor Turner noted: ‘In an Nedembu ritual context, almost very article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time, by convention stands for something other than itself’. Such a simplistic reading may also exaggerate the role of ritual in maintaining social consensus. Some rituals in religiously divided societies, for example, play a significant role in promoting the separateness of certain groups. It may be that for the historian the usefulness of social science approaches to ritual lies less in the area of constructing artificial

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11 V. TURNER, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Scripture, Chicago, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, p.15. Turner’s work, perhaps because of its accessibility, has been profoundly important in popularising the concept of ritual.
models of ritual activity than in opening up classes of hitherto neglected historical record to new possibilities of interpretation, of feeding in ideas and concepts which may extend the richness of concepts like ritual and in emphasising the flexibility and variability of such concepts themselves.

For their part, academic historians of early modern England have also at times adopted a simplistic and functional view of ritual, especially studies of royal ritual which have stressed the symbolic representation of existing power relations. More recently, however, many historians, alive to developments in such social science disciplines as anthropology, have been less inclined to see ritual as having an objective and agreed 'meaning' than to place it in a much more flexible conceptual context, to see it as a site for controverted and disputed meanings and to attempt to reconstruct its possible social meanings and functions. Furthermore, historians of England have been profoundly influenced by historians of the French Revolution, who have stressed the flexibility of ritual actions which are open to a variety of interpretations. But for all their flexibility—or their 'multivocality',
as Robert Darnton terms, rituals cannot mean anything and everything. There are limits to their meaning because they depended on ‘fixed patterns of behaviour and an established range of meanings’\textsuperscript{15}. Historians would do well to note such warnings and to resist the temptation to assume that rituals could acquire an infinite variety of meanings.

4. The context of ritual

The pattern of ritual events in England in the long eighteenth century was regulated by at least two powerful considerations: calendar and place\textsuperscript{16}. Of these, only the first has attracted detailed research. Consequently, it has been widely that it is the most important.


\textsuperscript{16} There may be a third variable but too little research has been undertaken to advance it at this time. It is likely that the time of day and the day of the week were important factors in determining the pattern of ritual. Ritual events needed careful organisation and needed to occur at the most favourable time to have the maximum effect. For example, crowd rituals in Bristol between 1790 and 1835 occurred most frequently on St. Monday, next on Tuesday (because of the pattern of elections in Bristol) and on Saturdays (which for many people was a half working day). Sunday remained a day for domestic diversion. M. HARRISON, ‘The Ordering of the Urban Environment: Time, Work and the Occurrence of Crowds, 1790-1835’, \textit{Past and Present}, 110, Feb. 1986. This is confirmed by Vernon’s analysis of 38 election rituals which shows that St. Monday was by far the most popular day (probably because candidates’ formal entries tended to occur at the beginning of the week). None at all occurred on Sunday. There was, furthermore, a seasonal bias. An analysis of 48 election rituals in 24 different constituencies suggests that the peak period for their occurrence was May to July, almost disappears, and then revives to half the spring rate in the autumn months of September to November. J. VERNON, \textit{Politics and the people : a study in English political culture, c. 1815-1867}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993., Appendix.
Research has shown repeatedly that ritual events did not occur randomly but in conformity to strict seasonal patterns. As Machiavelli put it, the Prince should 'at appropriate times of the year keep the people occupied with festivals and shows'. The pattern of these festivals and shows had long been laid down. Every stage in the life cycle of English society in the long eighteenth century was marked by rituals which occurred through calendrical patterning. 'The annual cycle of festivals synchronized the life rhythm of all members of the community'\(^{17}\). There were at least three such calendars. The first was the calendar of rural society, with its emphasis on seasonal celebrations such as harvest feast and suppers. Few of these are of immediate interest to the historians of popular politics, although the compulsion felt on members of the community to participate may be important. The second was the christian calendar. Indeed, the christian year chimed in closely with its rural counterpart so that the two can sometimes be distinguished only with difficulty. For example it was common on the religious festival of Ascension day for parishes to beat their bounds. Thus, the great feasts of the christian year, Christmas, The Epiphany, Easter, Whitsuntide, All Saints, fell naturally into the rhythm of rural society. In addition to these, local ceremonies such as rushbearing, which occurred on the anniversary of the day on which the parish church was consecrated, gave local variety to national, and indeed, international patterns of ritual. It is, however, dangerous to conclude that such events were of much political significance. Furthermore, although the calendrical cycle might suggest a universality of ritual, the saints to be honoured, and thus the hymns to be sung, the service to be consecrated and the forms to be observed were generated by local traditions and expectations. The third calendar which conditioned the patterning of ritual—and obviously of more interest to the historian of popular politics—was the political calendar. This consisted of recurring national and local rituals supplemented increasingly by particular celebrations. Examples of the first include: the birthday of Queen Elizabeth I on 7 September, Guy Fawkes Day on 5 November and the accession of the Queen on 17 November. Examples of the second include occasional royal celebrations, such as those at George III's recovery in 1789, his Jubilee in 1809, and Royal Visits, such as

that of the Prince Regent to Liverpool in 1807. It also includes particular anniversaries such as the centennial of the Glorious Revolution 1788 as well as an ever lengthening calendar of celebrations of military victories such as those of Valenciennes (1793), Trafalgar (1805) and Waterloo (1815). The steady expansion of this calendar, the increasingly elaborate character of the ritual performances and the huge increase in popular participation in such events are collectively of the first importance to the historian of English popular politics.

Of the importance of the calendrical patterning of rituals there can be no doubt. Such ritual behaviour not only marked the change of seasons and the passage of time but also exhibited the ability of that society to accommodate that change. By so doing the continuity and even permanence of the social order could be intimated.

Rituals were regularised, secondly, according to the place in which they occurred. This spatial aspect of ritual has attracted little attention from historians. It embraces at least two distinct sets of issues. The first is the simple of question of location: where did rituals occur in England during the long eighteenth century? Official meetings customarily occurred in places of civic significance such as a town hall or market hall. Because such places were almost always located at the heart of the parochial or urban landscape their communal significance would be familiar to the population. Although such locations were normally the preserve of the political and social elite, meetings of a wide variety of political persuasions, and certainly all communal gatherings, were usually permitted inside them, thus establishing an ongoing popular claim to citizenship and participation. Similarly, external mass meetings involving official celebrations, royal tributes and contested elections usually occurred in a central part of a town, such as the town hall or council house or other buildings of civic importance. The fact that such places symbolised the town was enough to

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attract a popular audience to these occasions. In the same way, the routes of processions were traditionally prescribed. In most places, election and other processions tended to conform to a customary route which might change little over time

However, meetings of non-official groups might occur in other, distinctly recognisable places, such as the tendency of London radicals to meet at the Crown and Anchor Tavern. The second aspect of spatial significance is the issue of occupation, by which one group or party would attempt to dominate a particular place, street or even a whole area. The occupation of space is an issue of importance to a community. In this sense, buildings, streets, and parts of towns and villages may be viewed usefully as a site upon which political competition might be pursued, a dramatic stage for the enactment of political drama. Competitive processioning is a vitally important feature of popular politics in England in this period, in particular popular electioneering, which has its origins at least as far back as the second half of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, certain areas of a town might become identified with particular political allegiances and thus become no-go areas to opponents, such as the persistently radical nature of St. Peters Fields and the New Cross districts of Manchester and the Sandybrow district of Stockport. Such political mapping of the urban landscape is a striking testament to the influence of spatial factors in patterns of popular politics.


5. Types of ritual

In spite of the tendency of much recent literature to emphasise the currency of national rituals\textsuperscript{21} most ritual acts in England during the long eighteenth century were performed in a local community before a local audience. Civic processions and even meetings of municipal sessions were always splendid affairs with plate, maces and charters on display and officials in full regalia, the whole lovingly reported in great detail. Such civic days usually began with bell ringing early in the morning, went on through the day with lengthy processions, services and meetings and often concluded with dinners, speeches and (usually interminable toasts). Even when the occasion had a religious theme, such as the great annual procession at Canterbury to celebrate St. Thomas a Becket on 6 July, the event clearly had enormous secular significance involving as it did the local civic elite. The same would be true of religious festivals, saint days and mystery plays elsewhere\textsuperscript{22}. The ritual experience was richly localised.

There is certainly nothing to suggest that rituals were in decline in England during the long eighteenth century. In an increasingly consumer-conscious society rituals provided an effective mechanism of self advertisement, whether of individuals, groups or the entire community. Local identities were thus established and modernised through such aspects of the market as print culture, press advertisement, civic buildings and visible technological advances, such as bridge building. It was the function of civic ritual to advertise this modernising local community through a celebration of its past, its present and its future. Such performances not only helped to establish a civic identity, but also to generate acceptance of and enthusiasm for that identity. But they also served to position the city in relation to other cities in a regional and even a national context\textsuperscript{23}. In this way,

\textsuperscript{23} In this I have been much influenced by Helen HILL, ‘Mapping the Early Modern City’, \textit{Urban History}, 23, 1996, pp.145-170.
civic rituals not only reflected the town but also did much to create and to confirm the town’s conception of itself. Cities loved to advertise their public credentials. Even such harmless gestures as drinking the King’s health acknowledge a town’s membership of a national community. Indeed, no event of national significance occurred without some formal response—address, petition or even protest—from towns and even villages.

Civic rituals were designed to evoke awe and admiration but observers were not simply to be left awestruck but, ideally, to be brought into the celebrations through their own festive participation. Members of all social ranks were expected to involve themselves. Even by the end of this period the fiction of aristocratic and upper class largesse was keenly retained. This was after all an organic society. By the end of the long eighteenth century, however, there were clear signs that the classes were mixing less freely and this and this was sometimes openly lamented. As J. H. Tremayne remarked of the St. Austell feasts on Cornwall: ‘My opinion is that it is greatly to be lamented that the higher classes mix so little as they do with those who in a worldly point of view may be considered their inferiors’ 24. One of the consequences of the decline of upper class involvement and control was that it became correspondingly easier for dissident voices to make themselves heard. Formal civic events could become derailed by protest and mockery and could even be subverted by the holding of mock rituals. They tended to follow any action which could be construed as a slight to the town, its pride, its people or its history or by an untoward action on the part of an unpopular individual, family or group.

For evidential reasons, it is easier for historians to reconstruct the ritual community in a civic context. Yet millions of people lived still in rural parishes. Inevitably, ritual experience would be much less rich in rural villages but it would be an error totally to exclude the parish from the consideration of rituals. Bells were used to communicate news of events, local and national, and bonfires were frequently used to celebrate them. More formally, sermons were systematically employed to communicate news and often to celebrate it. The religious and secular elite of the parish self-consciously took it upon itself to

24 J. H. Tremayne to M. J. Allen, c.1834-1835, Tremayne MSS, 2795, Cornwall R.O.
provide a semi-formal commentary on events local and national and thus to define themselves and to an extent their community. Long into the nineteenth century—and in many cases even into the twentieth, many parishes fostered their own rituals, such as rushbearing and beating the bounds.

Civic ritual may have been the dominant form of festive celebration in England during the long eighteenth century but it was coming to be rivalled by occasions of national celebration. These could be of several kinds. First in terms of importance were rituals concerning royalty. There was massive traditional enthusiasm for the Protestant monarchy. Visits by monarchs to members of the aristocracy were great and magnificent occasions. That of George III to Beaulieu in July 1789 witnessed the King arriving on horseback with a large retinue with no fewer than 60 men, dressed in white, bearing colours, and white wands, preceded the royall carriage, followed by all the Duke of Montagu's tenants, followed by, as did six running footmen, dressed also in white, with scarlet livery caps and a flag. The immediate audience for such an event may have been limited to those with some connection with the estate. Yet so detailed are the surviving accounts of such events that it some reporting form tens of thousands must have been informed of them.

There is an assumption in the literature that popular royal ceremonial originated in the reign of George III. This is a serious error. However, the long eighteenth century was remarkable for its relish for royal events of all types: celebrations of new reigns and coronations, royal birthdays and anniversaries, royal illnesses and funerals. The recovery of George III from his indisposition over the winter of 1788

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26 Salisbury and Winchester Journal, 4 July 1789.
to 1789 appears to have evoked an unprecedented wave of sympathy which would repay scholarly investigation\textsuperscript{29}. Even this, however, did not compare with the nationwide celebration of the Kings’ jubilee in 1809\textsuperscript{30}.

His successor was even more aware of the significance of royal ceremonial and his first opening of parliament in 1820 saw the customary procession, which ran only from St. James Part to Westminster, switched to a much more extensive route which brought him into contact with hundreds of thousands of his subjects. The king’s coronation in 1821 was even more opulent, with George IV playing the part of a male Gloriana. All reporters commented on the unprecedented magnificence. Of more widespread significance and more immediate effect, arguably, was the growing fashion for royal visits, visits, such as that of the Prince Regent to Liverpool in 1807 or that of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822. This latter is particularly important as a safe celebration of different versions of Scottishness within a safe Britannic context. It is difficult to exaggerate the excitement caused by such visits and the highly detailed and descriptive coverage which they received in the press. It was by no means uncommon for such reports to be collected and published, such as that of the Prince Regent to Portsmouth in 1814\textsuperscript{31}. Most localities were officially at least grateful for such visits, which generated not merely extensive descriptions but considerable local business with the manufacture and distribution of all manner of memorabilia of the event. In this way were such ritual events marked, commodified and marketed by small entrepreneurs of all kinds. In the same way, many royal visits were opportunities for the local elite to preen itself and lay itself out for self-inspection\textsuperscript{32}. These were in many ways civic just as much as national events.

\textsuperscript{29} Most of the newspapers which I have seen carried very detailed accounts of local and national celebrations as do local histories.

\textsuperscript{30} L. COLLEY, 'The Apotheosis of George III', loc cit.

\textsuperscript{31} Henry Moses. An Original and Descriptive Account of the Imperial and Royal Visit to Portsmouth on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of June and three subsequent days (Portsmouth, 1814).

\textsuperscript{32} G. TRESIDER, op. cit., pp.10-12.
The enthusiasm of contemporary reports, however, should not blind us to the fact that such ceremonies could act as vehicles for protest and disorder. The coronation of George I in 1714 was accompanied by around thirty disturbances often provoked by intense party feeling. Similar reservation were manifested at the coronation of George IV in 1821 when acclamations for Caroline accompanied the official celebrations.33

The second type of nationally orientated ritual in England during the long eighteenth century which were celebrations of naval and military victories, notably those associated with admirals, many of whom became national heroes in the eighteenth century. There were, for example, over 50 distinct celebrations of Admiral Vernon in 1740-41 and in many of these places the celebrations were regularly repeated in subsequent years. These celebrations set out to project Vernon as a bluff John Bull character, incorruptible and honourable. Yet such seemingly ‘patriotic’ occasions could be appropriated by those opposed to the government of the day. Vernon’s patriotic qualities could readily be placed within an anti-Walpolean paradigm and he could be invested with country qualities. Much the same thing happened with Nelson over sixty years later.34 There were, however, many other celebrations of naval and military victories, especially during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, from Valenciennes in 1793 through Trafalgar in 1805 to Waterloo in 1815. Interestingly, the Chronological History of Great Yarmouth includes no references to any celebrations of military victory during the eighteenth century until no fewer than four are recorded between 1798 and 1802,

33 See Vernon’s account of William IV’s visit to Lewes in 1820, Politics and People, pp.76-78.

and three more in 1813-14. There were yet other ritual events associated with the war, particularly the enormous scenes in London in August 1814 to celebrate the defeat of Napoleon. Although this was a remarkably popular and patriotic affair it nevertheless included a discernible counter-theatre which included protests against the government and demands for peace. Such celebrations could make a palpable effect on those who were present. In Oldham Public Library there is a late 19th century map of the celebrations of the battle of Waterloo on which John Phillips Brierly has written 'I remember as well as yesterday'.

A third type of regular, national ritual occurred during general election campaigns. Acting as a vital interface between civic and national rituals, electoral rituals became familiar after the passing of the Triennial Act in 1694, later amended to a Septennial Act in 1716. Once elections became a regular political event the rituals accompanying them could establish themselves. The most important of these were: the ceremonial and processional arrival of the candidates at the start of the election; rituals associated with canvassing; treating rituals; rituals of nominating the candidates; rituals associated with the poll; nightly speeches and demonstrations during the period of the poll; the chairing of the victorious candidates and, finally, the departure rituals of all the candidates. Election rituals reflected the need felt by members of the political nation to appeal to a popular audience not only for votes but also for the endorsements not only of their candidates but of their politics and indeed their political and social status. Consequently, they had of necessity to involve mass participation, of

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35 *Chronological History of Yarmouth*, pp.58-59, 68-69. See also A. YARRINGTON, 'Nelson, the Citizen Hero: State and the public patronage of Monumental Sculpture, 1805-1818, *Art History*, vi for a discussion of the way that hero-worship acquired permanent, sculptural form reflecting both national as well as civic pride.


37 1815, Brierly Map of Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives.

the non-voters as well as the voters. Elections became rowdy and often undisciplined. Indeed, the electoral campaign was regarded as a period in which normal social relationships were inverted. As with so many other forms of ritual, electoral ritual embraced elements of the official, political culture of the patronal classes, on the one hand, and, on the other, elements of the potentially subversive traditions of popular culture. More specifically, electors and non-electors threw themselves with relish into rituals of social inversion, by which social relations were reversed, the lower classes being served and petitioned by the upper classes. This demonstrates that the electors were not passive recipients of the culture of the upper classes but that they professed and practised traditions of independent political behaviour of their own.

Finally, nationally directed popular rituals derived from the conflict between political groups, Whigs, Tories and Jacobites, and from organised groups of reformers and loyalists. Popular politics at this level was rarely indiscriminate. The basic rituals of popular partisan politics were well established by the middle of the eighteenth century: parades and processions, meetings and demonstrations, speeches, drinking and toasts. In situations of ritualised rivalry, party passions ran high. What is perhaps remarkable is that with rival parades and processions, rival speech making, rival dining and all the rest that violence so rarely occurred. As we have seen, parades and processions usually occurred before a mass audience. Before the 1830s, when tickets were often needed to attend meetings, attendances were usually quite large. Most meetings were well organised and carefully regu-

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39 We might place in this category the nationwide celebrations in November 1788 to commemorate the Glorious Revolution. See, for example, the Derby Mercury of 25 September 1788 reporting on a meeting ‘to conduct and manage’ the celebration, including a detailed plan of the route, the events and inviting the presence of ‘all Friends of the Revolution’. The same newspaper on 6 November reported a plan to erect a monument and the progress of a subscription to fund the same, maximum contribution five guineas. Later editions described the celebrations with very great details, including those of the route, with description of flags and banners. According to these reports, 2,000 people attended ‘each having a white wand in his band with blue and orange tops and favours’, with ‘The Revolution stamped upon them’. There were no fewer than 18 toasts.
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lated. Mass meetings and demonstrations were usually characterised by good order, music and singing and the deployment of colour and light. Symbolic artifacts of one group or another were common. These included the white cap of liberty of the reformers and the union flags of the Loyalists. Almost all meetings included oratorical rituals in which patterns of rhetoric varied from the fiery, libertarian rhetoric of reformers and the union flags of the Loyalists. Almost all meetings included oratorical rituals in which patterns of rhetoric varied from the fiery, libertarian rhetoric of reformers, accompanied by audience intervention via heckling, cheering, clapping and booing, to the more ordered and disciplined rhetoric of the parliamentary parties. Indeed, there is a vast and unresearched reservoir of popular political ritual generated by political parties. Jacobitism has been well served through the work of Paul Monod but there is practically no research on the rituals associated with popular Toryism and popular Whiggism during the long eighteenth century.

6. Ritual as spectacle

The politics of ritual is the politics of spectacle. The magnificence, the display, the colour and the overall aesthetic effect involved in ritual display are not trimmings. They are of the essence of the event itself. Rituals were intended to be spectacular. If they were spectacular then they would be effective, draw crowds, affirm political values, satisfy the populace, generate popularity, and, perhaps, be recorded and remembered. Indeed, it was the spectacle of the Peterloo meeting which panicked the yeomanry, who charged into the crowd crying ‘Have at Their Flags’ and it was those members of the crowd with banners and flags who received rough treatment. And rituals were remembered. J. S. Percy’s History of Retford published in 1828, contains a passage from the author concerning the contested election in the town 1796. He remembered it well. ‘I was there at the time –6 years old, I well remember having an orange ribbon, (‘Petrie for Ever on it’) and many events that occurred during the week’. Indeed, many rituals must have been utterly memorable. No wonder spectacle which

40 Paul MONOD, op. cit.
41 D. READ, Peterloo, the Massacre and its Background, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1958, p.136.
could be mobilised against the government, was feared by the authorities. This explains the otherwise inexplicable attempt to legislate against such apparently harmless practices as the wearing of ribbons on political occasions. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for inhabitants to be required to illuminate their homes to please one party or another. Such demands often met with firm resistance and generated considerable resentment.

The effective deployment of colour was vital if the spectacle was to remain fixed in the minds of onlookers. At the Chester election of 1784 no fewer than 13,000 favours and 2,500 cockades were provided. At tiny Totnes the festivities at the close of the Napoleonic Wars were so extraordinary that details of this, 'the happiest day in the annals of Totnes' were published. Over £300 was collected to fund the event, a huge procession was led by Britannia, Neptune and Brutus, and joined by the local dignitaries, the military and local schoolchildren, local trades with the banners, was watched by 15,000 people. In addition, the town enjoyed a fireworks display, rural sports, a huge outdoor dinner at which four oxen were slaughtered. The streets of the town were bedecked in oaks, laurels and evergreens, flags 'in almost countless variety' were flown, bells were rung. No wonder such occasions were lodged in the local folk memory and committed to posterity by print.

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43 For such an example, in Bungay in November 1820, see the handbills at Suffolk Record Office.
45 G. DYER, Festivities at Totnes on the Return of Peace, Devon Record Office. See also the account of the (very similar) festivities to celebrate the Reform Act in 1832. R. MARTYN, Totnes and Bridgetown Reform Festival, 19 and 20 July 1832 (1832), This account is particularly detailed on the order of procession, on the reading the banners, on the colours worn and displayed. No fewer than 5,000 enjoyed the dinner. The festivities lasted two days. There is a copy of Dyer's book in the Devon Record Office.
Light and music were further essential ingredients of memorable spectacle. During the Caroline affair in 1820-21 radicals wished to show through illumination their support for the Queen. In many communities it was the battle for illumination which symbolised the battle over the Queen’s cause. Thus through the use of fire and light, reformers could make a cause their own. The use of naked fire, the holding of lighted candles or, especially, the use of bonfires, were common features of spectacular ritual in England during the long eighteenth century. Indeed, there was a perceptible increase in the deployment of bonfires during the long eighteenth century and certainly no diminution of the custom of burning hated figures in effigy. Tom Paine was burned in effigy in around five hundred communities in a period of four months during the winter of 1792 to 1793 to symbolise the unacceptability of his person and his doctrines. Refusal to participate in such burnings was deemed to be a challenge to the social and political principles involved.

Whatever the politics, music was a universal and integral element in spectacular ritual. Bellringing was almost always a signal for an upcoming ritual. Traditionally, bellringing was used to summon parishioners to mass, and, after the Reformation, to prayers, and, after the Reformation, to prayers and services, an important function when most people had no clocks. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries bellringing was used to announce funerals. Later bells were used for other purposes. By the seventeenth century they were being used on celebratory occasions. By the later seventeenth century, bellringing was universal. In 1679 bells were rung to celebrate the recovery of Charles II from a severe bout of fever. In the eighteenth century bells were rung on every conceivable occasion. For example in Manchester in 1745 ‘They (the rebels) have order’d the bells to ring. The Bellman is going with orders for us to illuminate our houses, which must be done’. It was no just bellringing but the playing of music more generally, by the middle of the eighteenth century, list of election

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48 London Evening Post, 30 December 1745.
expenses are full of references to payments to bellringers, singers, musicians, town bands, fife and drum bands. The Tremayne MSS at the Cornwall R.O. contain references to payments to trumpeters on civic occasions, such as the Assizes\(^49\).

7. **Ritual as symbol**

Political culture is always some kind of combination of the political actions of individuals and groups together with the symbolic meaning of the representations of that action. Indeed, symbolism can only operate in the sphere of what Sperber has termed 'conceptual representations' and these are by nature implicit and dependent on reconstructions performed by individuals and thus unstable\(^50\). Symbolic performance was always necessary to the maintenance –and subverting- of political power. This could be of two types of the person and of the artefact.

Fortunately, anthropology has opened up a number of interesting avenues of interpretation in recent years devoted to the analysis of symbols and of which historians ought to make use\(^51\). Symbolic activity, for Sperber, is 'all activity where the means put into play seems to me be clearly disproportionate to the explicit or implicit end'\(^52\). For Turner there are three layers of symbolism: the exegetical, where the meaning of a symbol is derived from narrative accounts, the operational, where meaning is equated with use, and appropriate and relevant inferences drawn, and positional, where an activity is viewed in relation to other such activities\(^53\). All three need to be employed if the varied elements in symbolic ritual are to be identified.

It is impossible to dispute the importance of symbolic characters in popular politics in eighteenth century England, whether these were

\(^{49}\) See Tremayne MSS for 1815, 1825, 1834.


\(^{52}\) D. SPERBER, *op. cit.*, p.4

\(^{53}\) V. TURNER, *op. cit.*, p.58
mythical, non-existent persons, such as John Bull, Britannia, or whether they were real, such as Sir Robert Walpole, John Wilkes, Tom Paine, Henry Hunt and Queen Caroline. Although it is possible for us to make this distinction between the mythical and the real, contemporaries were not so sure. 'Real' characters were depicted as altogether larger than life, such as depictions of Tom Paine as the devil incarnate in the 1790s. Such 'real' characters clearly stand for a complex variety of meanings, both political, moral and, indeed, national. John Bull was clearly a depiction in English identity but he could be a representation of bluff 'Free Born Englishness' (in the first half of the eighteenth century), a study radical (in the Wilkiter period) and a loyal patriot (in the 1790s). Similarly, Britannia could be a representation of Englishness, of femininity and, in the guise of Queen Caroline, of radicalism. All political groups could appropriate such symbols for their own purposes, and usually did. During the Seven Years War, for example, opposition groups built up Frederick the Great as a popular symbolism of Protestantism. In the absence of a compelling 'official' Protestant hero, the Prussian King became a popular hero between 1758 and 1760. Frederick was widely commemorated on festive occasions, in bonfires and fireworks, in print, in paintings and in physical commodities such as plates, medallions and porcelain.

Symbolic ritual thus depended on a broad range of artefacts which added to the repertoire of political actors. As we have already noticed, civic artefacts —cloaks, maces, seals— not only identified the location of power but conveyed awe and mystery upon those who wielded it. Family artefacts —coats of arms, portraits, statues, even buildings— achieved the same objective of publicising and renewing the possession of power, providing a focus for occasions of celebration and loyalty and conveying the impression of permanence and longevity. Even such quaint customs as the Wroth silver ceremony, by which the Duke of Buccleuch received payments from certain parishes in the Hundred of Knightlow did something to confirm aristocratic superiority annually on martinmas eve.

Symbolic artefacts were not confined to those who enjoyed the possession of power. Those who opposed authority were no less inclined to employ them. The history of the Wilkite agitation would not be complete without constant reference to candles in windows, to the wearing of colours and to the shouting of catch phrases like 'Wilkes and Liberty'. James Epstein has drawn attention to the importance during the period 1815-20 'flags and banners, hats and caps, ribbons and medals, songs and toasts'. He describes the radical symbol of the cap of liberty from its French revolutionary origins to its symbol of heroic resistance to English radicals. On a less exciting scale, election cups, mugs, glasses and ceramics of all sorts testifies to the market for permanent mementoes of competitive popular political events. Whatever else they were, ritual events were not intended to be transient.

8. The ritual audience

Essential to any ritual occasion was an audience, preferably a large one. Ritual audiences were by no means passive and helpless. Indeed, it was not expected that they would be. As we have seen, whether it was through taking part in a procession or meeting, the wearing of colours, the singing of songs, through clapping, cheering or even heckling there is plentiful evidence that the audience could become involved in the shared emotions and the contested meanings which are integral to ritual performances. Indeed, ritual performances were put on for the audience with the intention of involving the audience, usually as a means of redefining that audience as loyal citizens, loyal patriots or loyal supporters of one political group or another. It is of the essence of ritual to seek to impose identities on people by emphasising their group membership. Inevitably, perhaps, in a hierarchical society, that membership was almost always defined in terms of the inferiority of the audience. To some extent the audience at rituals was self-selecting and self-defining. The hierarchical organisation of processions tended to reflect the status patterns of the local community. Certainly, the tendency for trade and friendly associations, guilds and

political and religious groups to walk and process together often carrying their own banners leads to this conclusion. Significantly, women were usually absent from the procession, although they sometimes appear as shepherds to herds of children, including charity school and Sunday school children, who might form a conspicuous sub group within the event. In Britain, however, children were not used the extent that gangs of boys were in the colonies before and during the American Revolution 56. Nevertheless, no fewer than 24,000 children were involved in the celebrations at George IV's coronation in Manchester 57.

Ritual events, then, underlines the marginality and subservience of huge sections of the population. Yet it was precisely their constantly redefined subservience which might encourage such groups to protest against it and to use their numbers to reinforce their resentment. Furthermore, patterns of socially inverted behaviour positively generated such resentment. For example, the energetic manner in which parliamentary candidates were quizzed and tested during the ritual of canvassing, by electors and non-electors alike indicated their capacity for publicising their hostility to the patronal classes.

9. Conclusion

Throughout the long eighteenth century ritual remained a vigorous and essential ingredient in English popular politics. Indeed, there was no sign that this was likely to change during the nineteenth century, as modernising political parties and extra-parliamentary pressure groups competed for new constituencies of support. Groups like Chartists adapted old narratives of English history and appropriated and modernised the customary forms of ritual life in their search for popular political support. The continuous spread of print culture served to popularise and perpetuate traditional ritual forms. There is not the space here to argue the case that nineteenth century popular politics in England was dominated by traditional ritual practices but until the last decades of the century, at least, the pattern of traditional

57 Astons's Exchange Herald, 24 July 1821
electoral cultural was little changed\textsuperscript{58}. That, like so much else, was only to be abandoned when the political elite came to be embarrassed by the traditional ways and found alternative means—often bureaucratic ones—of achieving the same objectives.

Our brief analysis of the character and role of ritual in English popular politics, nevertheless, has underlined its centrality and its indispensability. But ritual elements in popular politics cannot be penetrated solely by empirical research and by heaping instance upon instance. Insights to be derived from other disciplines, particularly Sociology and Anthropology, must be deployed in order to scrutinise ritual practices profitably. We must surely accept that ritual is a dynamic form of communicating information, at local as well as national level, about society, its view of itself and the world around, its structural relationships and its forms of social organisation. No less important, however, ritual communicates information about the competitive interaction between dominant and alternative views of society and its organisation not only in the present but in the pasts and, it follows, in its futures.

\textsuperscript{58} F. O’GORMAN, \textit{op. cit.}