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Edited by Michael J. Braddick and John Walter

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Introduction. Grids of power: order, hierarchy and subordination in early modern society

Michael J. Braddick and John Walter

Recent work in social history has given great emphasis both to the variety of forms of hierarchy in early modern society and to the ways in which the experience of hierarchy and subordination was negotiated. At the same time historians, influenced perhaps by the linguistic turn, have become more sensitive to the fact that order was culturally constructed and that life chances were affected not just by material issues but also by the ways in which the social world was imagined and described. We are now confronted by a picture of the early modern world in which there existed a variety of hierarchies – class, status (variously determined), gender and age – justified with reference to a variety of languages which were all, to some degree, unstable and contested. Recognition of the polyphony that this has created has important consequences for a broader understanding of how the social order was represented and constructed. The underlying picture of how power operated and was experienced in the early modern period is, accordingly, more complex. The chapters in this volume offer an alternative reading of the political relationships between dominant and subordinate groups in the construction of social order. By examining this process across a variety of arenas, the essays challenge the appropriateness of a series of binary models (of which the elite/popular dyad is only the most familiar) for capturing the multiplicity of exchanges by which domination was achieved and subordination negotiated. By turning to micro-sociologies of power and of social roles, they seek to develop an account of early modern social order which is sensitive both to the variety of forms of hierarchy and to the possibilities available to the relatively weak for limiting its effects on their lives. The disadvantaged in early modern society navigated their way in a world which afforded many sources of influence to their more powerful contemporaries. But in negotiating

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their way around these potential dangers they did not lack negotiating powers of their own.

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Advances in the social history of the period derived considerable impetus from the interest in ‘history from below’. As such, they were primarily concerned with the consequences of (increasing) inequalities in wealth and *formal* political power. Drawing on a model of social structure for which contemporary evidence was thought to provide warrant, these studies saw the key dividing line to fall along the axis of gentle/non-gentle status. Gender-blind, this model privileged differences in wealth, and their relationship to social status, as the fundamental factors in determining the distribution of political power. This elite/popular model had, of course, much to recommend it. Under the influence of a concern with the recovery of ‘the popular’ in a society where the people were thought to have been rendered inarticulate (by inequalities in literacy and access to the written record) and invisible (by their relative powerlessness), it began to challenge an earlier social history which too often allowed the comments of a literate elite on their inferiors to masquerade as a history of society. A history from below began to read critically the evidence of literate contemporaries, to recognise the normative nature of much social comment – more prescription than description – and to locate its expression within a print culture whose political projects it sought to decode. Rediscovering an earlier, unsung and aborted, attempt in the early twentieth century to write the social history of the period from the archive, not the study, social historians returned to archival research in an endeavour to write a history of society.¹ But this time they pursued a systematic analysis of serial, and overlapping, sources in the courts of church, state and manor, and they deployed both quantitative and qualitative techniques in pursuit of their quarry.² The return to the archive also allowed historians working on epistolary and diurnal records to restore the corrupted texts or partial editions in print, or in moving beyond them, to begin to recognise the (patchy) survival in the archive of these sources for groups below the ranks of the gentry. At the same time, under the influence of important shifts in social theory and lived experience, the subject matter of what constituted a social history was being radically rethought and the range of topics thought

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to be historically recoverable rapidly extended, a tradition continued in this volume by Martin Ingram's pioneering essay on child abuse in early modern society.

The recovery of 'the popular' had begun as an attempt to recover non-elite groups and their social experiences from the condescensions of their contemporaries (and prejudices of an earlier generation of historians), but it came eventually to problematise that endeavour. Advances in social history have challenged the appropriateness of a simple dichotomy between elite and popular as a model of early modern social structure. Even in terms of a social hierarchy conceived largely in terms of wealth and status, the growing recognition of the importance of the middling sort posed problems. They were increasingly wealthy and able to exercise considerable local influence, increasingly literate and able to respond to key shifts in the cultural and mental worlds, and they enjoyed growing influence in the political nation. Our awareness of these things represents a fundamental challenge to the view that the essential division in early modern society lay between gentle and non-gentle status.³ While the re-insertion of the middling sort into a general social history of the period casts doubt on one of the dominant modes for framing an analysis of social structuring, their 'rediscovery' within central topics of the new social history also questioned that model's utility for capturing differences in social experience. The attempt to write a social history in terms of an elite and popular culture with identifiable social bases has proved notoriously problematic.⁴

At the same time, the social history of the period responded to shifts in social theory which redrew the boundaries of the political to include sites like the family and categories besides those of class. Work on gender and youth has pointed to ways in which other kinds of experience were shared across the social boundaries of class or status, while work on confessional identities and political solidarities has shown that they, too, crossed those boundaries. The linguistic turn has also sharpened historians' sense of the importance of normative vocabularies and their manipulation. The significance of, and ambiguities in, discourses have figured in much recent work on early modern society, leading to a greater emphasis on the complex nature of expressions of power, and of resistance to it. The essays by Champion and McNulty, Lake, and Walter, in particular, show how appropriations of these languages could pose serious problems for the power of the Church to enforce doctrinal uniformity or for the

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attempt to use state power to maintain subordination as the assigned political role for the people.

The critical re-evaluation of the sources and nature of power in recent social theory has encouraged historians to recognise the multiple locations and sources of non-formal power in early modern England. For example, the limits of studies based on a straightforward division between elite and popular, rulers and ruled, are exposed in Keith Wrightson's far more subtle account both of the multiple forms of politics that co-existed at the level of local society and of their relationship to more formal political processes.⁵ The chapters in this volume demonstrate that there were several kinds of domination and subordination and that they were not coterminous. Although these sets of power relationships were held within overarching general conceptions of order, they were unlikely in any particular context to be easily reduced to a straightforward division between elite and popular. For example, claims to the status of respectability, godliness, masculinity or loyalty to established religious authority might be empowering for those who were otherwise relatively powerless.

The elite/popular model of early modern society therefore simplifies problems of hierarchy in a social order whose gradations were both more complex and finer-grained than this model suggests. Even in terms of formal political processes and institutional power, there is now a recognition that power was more widely distributed. An awareness that the problems of governance in early modern society necessitated a level of participation from below poses a challenge to assumptions that those below the level of the gentry did not share in formal power. Acknowledgement of the political power exercised by the middling sort at the level of local and county society and its consequences for governance is reflected in recent publications.⁶ While participation was by no means restricted to the middling sort, the understanding of the role they played in the extension and enforcement of state authority, and the developing awareness of the significance of their emergence for early modern political history, have played a part in the growing recognition of their importance. At the same time, the growing shift of focus in the historiography from political institutions to political culture has encouraged historians to recognise still greater depth to political participation in early modern societies.⁷

Recent work in social history has, then, emphasised the complexity

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and variety of early modern hierarchies, and this makes it increasingly difficult to capture early modern social relations within simple dichotomies. At the same time, great emphasis has been placed on the extent to which power relations were continually negotiated. Historians in search of popular belief initially focused on riot as a moment in which those normally rendered silent were given a historical voice. But this emphasis on riot tended to create another constraining dichotomy – that between deference and confrontation. Recent work on a variety of power relations in early modern society has demonstrated how the relatively weak could claim agency through the manipulation of the texts, languages and performances which were intended to explain, demonstrate and justify the power of their superiors. In seeking to understand these complexities in the negotiation of power relations, an increasing number of social historians have turned to the work of James C. Scott.⁸ In particular, Scott has been able, in the course of his fieldwork among the peasantries of south-east Asia, to get behind the façade of normal social interactions in an attempt to understand what the relatively powerless really think, something which has proved very difficult for historians to achieve. In doing so he has thrown new light on a number of crucial, and perennial, questions in history and social theory, not least among them the nature of hegemony and the origin of challenges to established social and political order.

The key concept here is his distinction between the ‘public transcript’ – the repertoire of acceptable public behaviour between superior and subordinate in face-to-face contexts – and the ‘hidden transcripts’ – what each side may say or think when they are off-stage. One of Scott’s central findings is that behind the public transcript of compliance and deference lies a more knowing and manipulative consciousness. The public transcript encourages in observers (and, to some extent, in participants) a belief that the existing social order is consensual. While he acknowledges that the public transcript – which we define as the acceptable public version of relations of domination and subordination – is largely the work of politically dominant elites, Scott argues that both its boundaries and content were, to an extent, the outcome of negotiation between dominant and subordinate groups.

In situations where direct physical coercion is not routine, ‘domination is not simply imposed by force but must assume a form that gains social compliance.’⁹ The apparent hegemony of values which

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serve the interest of dominant groups is a product of the need to normalise relations, either to compensate for the absence of, or to avoid the political costs of, rule by coercion. In making authority appear natural, these modes of self-presentation by elite groups serve to ‘euphemise’ power. But Scott is able to show, empirically, that it is not true that this version of events is accepted by the poor. ‘[T]he key symbols animating class relations . . . do not constitute a set of given rules or principles that actors simply follow. They are instead the normative raw material that is created, maintained, changed, and above all manipulated in daily human activity.’ The objective of a social analysis of these rules is not, therefore, to reconstruct the agreed-upon consensus, ‘but rather to understand how divergent constructions of those rules and their application are related to class interests’.¹⁰ Behavioural conformity, and use of dominant discourses, does not necessarily signal ideological commitment to the stated order of things. It is clear, as Scott argues, that ruling ideas are routinely penetrated in the villages he studied. Nor does the inevitability of domination mean that it is accepted as just – the rich tradition of millenarian fantasy in peasant societies bears testimony to the possibility of imagining other social orders. Moreover, the creation of a hegemonic discourse does not rule out the possibility of conflict: ‘a hegemonic ideology requires, by definition, that what are in fact particular interests be reformulated and presented as general interests.’ In doing so, it must first claim that the system it defends ‘operates in the interest not only of elites but also of subordinate groups whose compliance or support is being elicited.’ It must, in effect ‘make implicit promises of benefits for subordinate groups that will serve as the stake which they too have in the prevailing order’, and some, at least, of these promises must be delivered upon, ‘if it is to have the slightest hope of gaining compliance.’¹¹ In sum, hegemonic ideas ‘are not only the moral categories in which villagers actually think; they also allow the poor to appropriate, as it were, the ideological resources of the well-off and turn them to good advantage. Finally, by remaining prudently within the accepted and familiar categories of moral discourse, the poor minimize the risks of a more dramatic confrontation’.¹² Both sides participate, then, in the production of a public transcript which facilitates everyday interaction without revealing diverging social values or prompting confrontation. The expression of divergent views is restricted to the hidden transcripts of, in the case of subordinates, dissident political

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spaces where the risk of retribution is largely absent. But this does not reflect complete acceptance of ruling class ideas or the absence of agency in everyday situations. Scott's work, then, underwrites a redefinition of the political which makes it difficult to sustain the claim that subordinate groups in early modern society were entirely powerless or lacked agency.

The potential for disruption in these public performances alerts us to the tactics by which the relatively powerless seek to defend their interests and demonstrates in compelling detail that outward expressions of conformity do not necessarily reflect ideological commitment to the *status quo*. Dominance may deliver behavioural conformity without delivering ideological hegemony. Scott's insights rest on fieldwork in south-east Asian villages, but he has elaborated them with reference to other societies marked by extreme inequality. In doing so, we believe, he underestimates the difficulties of recovering what he calls popular consciousness in past, as opposed to present, societies, contaminated as many of the early modern sources are by the power relations inscribed in their recording and, where not, plagued by problems of typicality. But his notion of the 'hidden transcript' invites historians to be more sensitive in reading the evidence, sometimes against the grain, to recover attitudes and ideas whose open expression would have invited swift retaliation. At the same time, his analysis of the 'weapons of the weak' draws attention to the ways in which apparently hegemonic statements are often, in practice, the result of negotiation.

An awareness that the public transcript is the outcome of regular, not episodic, negotiation between dominant and subordinate groups extends the range of forms that negotiation and resistance might take. The earlier model of power relationships, which emphasised inequalities in wealth and formal political power, encouraged historians in search of evidence of the consciousness of the historically inarticulate and their ability to challenge the exercise of power to focus on resistance. This, and a loose alliance between history from below and a *marxist* history in common pursuit of immanent class conflict and a radical political culture, tended to pose inappropriate and teleological questions, and it privileged certain forms of political activity whose interpretation was, in reality, problematic. Crowds were seen to give a collective voice to the dispossessed and the disenfranchised, their claims punctuating the silence imposed by subordination and exclusion. But this led to a tendency to treat *the*

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crowd as an overly reified surrogate for popular political consciousness. In reality, there were crowds, not one crowd, and their social composition shifted according to the cause of assembling and the object of action.¹³ Moreover, while some crowds, for example those operating within the politics of subsistence, might be taken to represent broader attitudes, others were more partisan. The elision between the crowd and the popular had the further disadvantage of encouraging historians to conceive of popular politics in terms of long periods of subordination, punctuated by moments of agency in rebellion and riot. But, as Scott's work shows, the absence of the crowd should not be equated with political quiescence.

One of the central contentions of this volume is that the crowd was not the only site for 'popular politics'. Within the power relations dealt with in individual essays, negotiation operated continuously, being inscribed in the everyday politics of relationships of domination and subordination. The relatively weak had available to them means of affecting the terms of their subordination that were both less dramatic and more continuous than riot. Some of these might be so casual as to escape the historical, if not the sociological, record. For example, subtle inflections undercutting the fulfilment of the gestural and verbal acknowledgements of deference certainly helped to take the edge off subordination and might also place subtle limits on the power of the dominant. To confront power is to invite a potentially wide range of unintended consequences, and minor forms of resistance might achieve more with less risk. On the other hand, however, the same is true of those confronting such minor sleights. Paradoxically, publicly to acknowledge the sleight by seeking to punish the perpetrator might put at peril an individual's claim to superiority. Much, then, of the everyday negotiations went unremarked and unrecorded.¹⁴ Scott's findings, as a participant-observer in the sociological present, sensitise historians to the need to search imaginatively for the techniques of resistance which the weak can use without risking confrontation with power.

Social historians have, in recent years, begun to recognise the ways in which social orders are imaginative constructions rather than simply material realities. In doing so they have paid more attention to normative vocabularies, ritual expressions of power, and the role of text, performance and ideology in constructing social worlds. The public transcript is a concept that can embrace these dimensions of social life, of course, but we would wish to emphasise

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the utility of the concept of legitimation as well. The further elaboration of Scott's thinking about hegemony between the key studies of *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* seems to have occurred rather at the expense of the concept of legitimacy, a concept which does not figure prominently in the later work. We suggest here that legitimacy is one way of dealing with the greater variety of power relations being considered in the chapters that follow.

Legitimation is, of course, a notoriously slippery concept. Discussions of the legitimation of political power give rise to general observations which are valuable for understanding the legitimation of the other kinds of power. Legitimacy is not the same as legality, since actions can clearly be legal without being seen as legitimate and *vice versa*. Moreover, following Beetham, we would argue that 'a given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs'.¹⁵ The exercise of legitimation entails an act of persuasion about its justifiability. The success of this act of persuasion is manifest in actions 'which are understood as demonstrating consent'.¹⁶ If someone does something knowing that it will be regarded as reflecting consent, they will have, at some level, actually consented to the power relationship in which they are involved. Such consent can, of course, spring from a number of motives, but the sincerity or otherwise of these professions of principle is not necessarily their most important feature. Legitimizing languages may be used tactically by both the powerful and the weak; the crucial issue is the plausibility of their use and the extent to which their invocation elicits consent.

The behavioural conformity of the weak, or the use of the discourses which ultimately justify their subordination, does not necessarily imply acceptance of the existing order as natural, inevitable or just. The fact that, as Hindle shows in his contribution, petitioners for poor relief found it more profitable to 'perform due deference than to plead legal entitlement',¹⁷ might register only an acute plebeian reading of the power play represented by this exchange. Whether petitioners saw poor relief as part of a broader moral economy of the rural poor remains concealed within a plebeian hidden transcript. The key issue is not, therefore, the 'real' intention of a political actor, but the meaning claimed for, and attributed, to their actions. As Skinner argues, even if motivated by

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the most nefarious of purposes, ‘any agent possesses a standard motive for attempting to legitimate his untoward social or political actions. This implies first of all that he will be committed to claiming that his apparently untoward actions were in fact motivated by some accepted set of social or political principles.’ Moreover, even if these principles did not have any role in motivating his behaviour, he will still be committed to behaving in such a way that makes it plausible to claim that they did. Legitimizing ideas are constraining because there are limits to the range of actions that can plausibly be claimed to lie within their bounds: ‘to recover the nature of the normative vocabulary available to an agent for the description and appraisal of his conduct is at the same time to indicate one of the constraints on his conduct itself’.¹⁸ To assert legitimacy, therefore, is not only to create a publicly acceptable version of relations of domination and subordination, but it is also to offer a standard against which conduct can be measured.

Critically important here is the fact that the ideas in terms of which actions are justified are defined intersubjectively – their meaning is collectively attributed, and an individual laying claim to them cannot simply change that meaning to suit his or her immediate purposes. The public transcript could be interpreted as such an act of legitimation – the process by which a set of power relations are presented in such a way as to make them acceptable. The use of the term legitimacy does not imply a commitment to the notion of hegemony that Scott criticises. Instead, legitimation in this sense points up the fact that, in rendering social relations acceptable, legitimating ideas offer a means by which dominant groups can be held to account. The legitimation of power, the creation of a public transcript, both empowers and constrains. Here the emphasis will be on constraint. As Scott himself wryly observes, ‘the masks domination wear are, under certain conditions, also traps’.¹⁹

In considering these manipulations and negotiations over the terms of subordination Scott’s micro-sociology is extremely helpful. We have also noted, however, that social historians have increasingly been writing about varieties of hierarchy which were not coterminous. Scott’s work is perhaps less directly helpful in the construction of a more elaborate model of the multivalency of power relations. His concern is primarily with economic inequality and the associated distribution of political and ritual power. In the communities and societies discussed by Scott, the public transcript is a version of social