Christina Parolin. *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790 - c. 1845.* Acton: ANU E Press, 2010. 352 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-921862-00-7.

Reviewed by James Baker (University of Kent)
Published on H-Albion (June, 2012)
Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

"This study," Christina Parolin writes in her concluding remarks, "has argued that ... there is a dynamic, dialectical and symbiotic relationship between radical culture and the sites in which it operated" (p. 279). Taking the complex interactions between radicalism, space, and power in Georgian and early Victorian London as its focus, this ambitious study negotiates and consolidates, under the auspices of a spatial approach, the histories (and historiographies) of radicalism, identity, the public sphere, gender, performance, justice, protest, science, memory, publishing, theatre, and graphic satire. Such an approach should, and rightly has been, applauded, yet it is also the source of the monograph's shortcomings.[1] If indeed *Radical Spaces* is the spatial turn in action (more on which later), it demonstrates that more work is needed to integrate such analyses into the canon of social and cultural history.

This approachable and accessibly written study proceeds in three main parts. The first, broken into three separate chapters, examines the encounters of radicals with prison cells, spaces which were, Parolin writes, "not one of any radical's choosing" (p. 12). The familiar site of Newgate prison greets the reader in the first of these chapters, and what follows is an analysis of the methods by which radical inmates of the 1820s attempted to negotiate for themselves the same spatial freedoms over living arrangements and lifestyle as their predecessors in the 1790s. Chapter 2 looks at the "English Bastille," Coldbath Fields House of Correction, a institution known for "brutality and severity" since shortly after its opening in 1794 (p. 51). Parolin describes how radical prisoners at Coldbath Fields unpicked the spatial rigidity and uniformity of the institution by appealing to their status as political prisoners. By 1823 their creeping success was codified in an Additional Rules amendment which "officially recognised the existence of radical prisoners as a distinct category even from other

'misdemeanours', making specific reference to those in 'State Rooms' and allowing special provisions for such prisoners" (p. 71). The final chapter of this section uses the case of Susannah Wright, a radical imprisoned at both Newgate and Coldbath Fields, as a means of drawing together the differences and continuities between the two establishments. Wright usefully connects the two spaces, not least by virtue of her passage through Richard Carlile's Fleet Street bookshop (at which she worked) and the court of the King's Bench (at which she was tried for blasphemy).

Section 2 examines a more deliberate beacon of radicalism and reform–the Crown and Anchor tavern. Chapter 4 attempts to map the tavern as a physical, temporal, and a symbolic space through an analysis of graphic satire. Above all, Parolin here offers a useful reminder that spatially the Crown and Anchor was much more than a mere "tavern" but rather a sprawling forum for debate whose internal factions defied the rhetorical shorthand to which the satires of the day reduced it to. Chapter 5 takes a further shorthand, that of the Crown and Anchor as an alternative parliament, and traces the venue's fluctuating association between, on one hand, reform, and on the other, radicalism.

The third section of the study crosses the Thames at Blackfriars to discuss the Rotunda, a radical space that was not only public (like the Crown and Anchor, and to a lesser degree Newgate prison) but also a commercial concern. Three distinct approaches are deployed in unpacking the Rotunda. Chapter 6 examines the educational/intellectual heritage of the site as the Leverian and the Surrey Institution prior to Richard Carlile's assumption of control in 1830. This is *Radical Spaces* at its most sophisticated, a spatial analysis which carefully massages together elements of memory, physical structures, identity, and archi-

tectural utility. It also provides a necessary backdrop to the following chapter's close reading of the exuberant period between 1830 and 1832 when the Rotunda, with Carlile at the helm, briefly eclipsed the Crown and Anchor as the seat of metropolitan radicalism. Finally, and fittingly, chapter 8 examines Eliza Sharples and the disconnect between commercial viability and radical entertainment. Much like Susannah Wright before her, Sharples's identity as a female radical teased at the margins of the public sphere, challenging and problematizing gendered associations with intellectual performance.

Given the concerns of these chapters, the reader will not be surprised to find Parolin write that "[t]he radical spaces themselves are of uppermost concern and drive the analysis" (p. 15). Leaving aside the logical quandary of inanimate objects driving any historical analysis, the selection of sites does make for a compelling read. Comparable yet individual, significant yet not resistant to fresh insight, the sites complement each other with ease and allow for some insightful cross-commentary. Indeed, the Crown and Anchor, Parolin writes, performed in graphic satire "a function analogous to the building itself: it provided a framework, a location, a venue" (p. 146). *Radical Spaces* demonstrates that sites such as these can provide a not dissimilar framing device for the study of metropolitan radicalism as a whole.

This spatial drive is most effective when combined with memory work. During the first chapter, Parolin delightfully elucidates how not only "the existence of the *Newgate Monthly Magazine* highlights the continuities with older radical prison traditions" (p. 43), but also how the subversion and positive reappropriation of the word "Newgate" connected these imprisoned publishers to that radical tradition. The observance of ceremonies such as the birth of Thomas Paine in 1826 fostered radical camaraderie and a sense of fraternity within the prison, and a shared collective identity both with earlier generations of radical prisoners and with the radical community beyond the prison walls (p. 46).

The spatial analyses within *Radical Spaces* also offer important qualifications to some scholarly orthodoxies. In relation to prisons, Parolin insightfully notes that a focus on space can usefully replace the "dearth of writings from within the prisons from 'common' criminals," which has led, she continues, "to a heavy reliance on the writings of prison reformers and official prison records, which often fail to consider ...

the agency of prisoners themselves to effect change to prison routines and regimes" (p. 63). *Radical Spaces* renders such analyses unsustainable. Similarly, chapter 6 offers a welcome qualification to the assumption that the "march of mind" was facilitated by an increase in printing and associated decline in knowledge transmission by traditional oral means. In turn this problematizes the dichotomous nature of the Habermasian public sphere, a critique of which bubbles away beneath much of the text:

The increase in literacy levels in this period, the emphasis in early radical historiography on the role of the press in the "march of mind," as well as the prominence of the battle for the freedom of the press in the story of the 1820s have tended to overshadow both the continuation of traditional modes of communication and new forums for working-class rational discourse and debate. It also perhaps obscured Habermas's view of Britain's expanding political nation when he sought to define the nature of the public sphere (pp. 210-211).

Radical Spaces is also effective when exploring female radicalism. In particular, Parolin gains much success by refusing, as feminist historiography has hitherto attempted, to "deny the influence of Carlile" on Susannah Wright and Eliza Sharples (p. 247). Indeed, given the confluence of space both women enjoyed with Carlile, to do so in a spatial study would be absurd. Instead, by seeing both women as collaborative and collective actors, Parolin is able to tantalizingly extrapolate interpersonal gender relations onto those of the radical community as a whole. In doing so, chapter 8 in particular reveals the importance to radical spaces of not only female patronage but also the continuity of that patronage. The same chapter also questions the deployment of Habermas by Catherine Hall when making observations about gender in the public sphere as a whole, pointing out that middle-class-centric analyses such as Hall's fail "to differentiate how different sites engaged or appealed to women of different social rank" (p. 254).

Regrettably, the text contains some problems and factual errors. Both the author and publisher must be cautioned in their use of digital resources. One resource, "The Diaries of John Cam Hobhouse," is no longer available at the listed URL, and the URL for a second, the "Petition of Sir Ashton Lever," redirects the user to the digitization projects portal for the University of Southampton. While the movement of

digital resources after publication is not the fault of either author or publisher directly, the problem does make the reader question the longevity of the text as a research tool, and offers a further cautionary tale of issues surrounding compatibility between new and old media.[2] Of more concern are the occasional factual errors. Figure 6.5, "Surrey Institution," is erroneously attributed to only Thomas Rowlandson on page 193, though on page 207 the print is correctly attributed to both Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Pugin. Similarly, page 237 implies that the Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 was still in force in 1830, while page 239 asserts that the act had in fact expired in 1824. This later date presumably refers to Liverpool's act of 1817, which adds to the confusion. Page 223 erroneously states that the 1809 Old Price riots took place in Drury Lane when in fact they were a response to the architectural redistribution of Covent Garden theatre. Here Parolin follows a rare error from E. P. Thompson, something that would have been remedied by closer attention to Marc Baer's *Theatre and Disorder* (1992). Finally, a scholar of space must pay attention to nomenclature–it is the Museum of London rather than "the London Museum" (p. 273).

These errors are not disastrous, but the Old Price riots example is symptomatic of a wider issue with the use of secondary literature present here. As stated at the outset, the spatial analysis here is to be applauded, but it is also a clear burden upon the work. By drawing the analysis into so many diverse areas of historical and historiographical specialism the precision of the work suffers. Similarly, a reference to Clifford Geertz and "cultural frame[s]" is underdeveloped and lacks grounding in Geertz's anthropological works (p. 171). Elsewhere musings on the meaning and importance of coffee houses fail to locate themselves in a wide literature on the subject, not least that of Markman Ellis. More concerning is chapter 4, which revolves around analyses of graphic satire. This chapter offers a thorough appraisal of the secondary literature on the trade and includes a welcome cautionary tone regarding the reading of such sources. However, for a study concerned with the physicality of places, the slide away from considering the implications of the physicality of graphic satire is regrettable. Indeed, having stated that satirical prints were "[p]roduced as works of art ... intended for commercial gain and for sale to private buyers," Parolin then follows Vic Gatrell in arguing that "conjecture over circulation should not preclude the importance of prints for illuminating the past" (pp. 133,

134). While satirical prints are indeed useful tools for analyzing mentalities, it is problematic to state that they are "reflective of the political sophistication of the audience–a populace well versed in the political iconography of the day" (p. 135). As luxury products (certainly until the 1820s) sold primarily from respectable West End premises, it is erroneous to suggest they were produced to reflect the values of the "populace." Throngs at print-shop windows did not mean customers, and it is curious that scholars continually fail to question why print publishers would produce works aimed at non-consumers. The print-shop window crowd is, surely, a red herring.

Equally, the use of "populace" here is problematic, given that Parolin is surely speaking of the metropolitan populace. Indeed, this is a book about radical London, a fact stated repeatedly. Yet there remains a lingering sense throughout *Radical Spaces* that London spaces were more important than those outside of the metropolis. Take for example Parolin's concluding remarks on the Crown and Anchor tavern: "Not surprisingly Crown and Anchor came to be known as an alternative parliament, a place where the *real* representatives of the people could assemble. As we have seen, in 1842, the assembly of national delegation of the Anti-Corn Law League at the tavern was reported *Hansard*-like in the public press. At the same time, MPs deliberated on repeal a stone's throw away. It was debatable where the real power lay" (p. 281). Without doubt the Crown and Anchor was an extremely important extraparliamentary venue, but to not credit the role of radical activity outside of London shows lack of balance. Indeed, as a generation of social historians brought up on E. P. Thompson would no doubt argue, the north of England was the true locus of early-nineteenth-century counterparliamentary activity.

Analyzing sites beyond London is outside of the remit of this study, yet we might still question the decision of the author to concern herself "principally with enriching our understanding of radicalism by narrowing the lens on specific sites of radical assembly" (p. 8). By "narrowing the lens," *Radical Spaces* appears at times forced, its sites chosen to illuminate something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The sites are too formal; although their influence on the environment outside of them is discussed, they are too enclosed; and above all else they are too consciously definable. One of the strengths of spatial work is that it can draw the researcher (and hence reader) effortlessly between interconnected sites, describing along

the way the spatial nature of those interconnections. By not elucidating the spatial nature of those interconnections and by selecting spaces for their radical character, *Radical Spaces* inhibits the fluidity of what constituted a radical space. A more interesting approach, for example, may have been to complement chapters on consciously radical spaces with chapters on neutral or contested spaces such as streets, parks, and marketplaces. Even the courtroom, described during the discussion of the trial of Susannah Wright as a "radical space" when utilized as a space "to convey their message to a wider public audience," might have been appropriate (p. 87). Equally, the prisons under consideration are analyzed spatially from the position of radicals shaping that space from inside, in conflict with abstract shaping of the space from outside. Here a greater concern for the space as a whole, beyond these grand conflicts, might have provided richer insights. Moreover, little consideration is given to whether places such as prison cells were indeed of a radical's choosing; prison, and this certainly seems the case for Susannah Wright, seemed an ideal place from which to project one's message.

Finally, having said that *Radical Spaces* suffers from the need to engage with an ambitious range of historical and historiographical concerns as demanded by spatial work, I would also note how the text revolves around the writings of three historians–James Vernon, James Epstein, and Iain McCalman. While few would argue that these scholars do not deserve attention, the influence of McCalman is especially pronounced, at times hanging over Parolin's interpretations like a lingering shadow. Habermas provides another regular point of reference and reassurance, though one does wonder why Parolin's critique of his "public sphere" thesis does not lead to her discarding him entirely. This is not the place to offer a full rebuttal of Habermasian frameworks, but it must be questioned whether we need Habermas in order to interrogate space. Surely, as scholars of twentieth-century history engaged in the spatial turn (Jay Winter, Stefan Goebel) have discovered, reaching for theories of memory (Jan Assmann's writings on collective memory and cultural identity) and geography (notably Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* [1996]) is far more appropriate.

It is curious, then, that a work consciously "driven" by spatial considerations seems at odds with the spatial turn. Statements such as "Newgate both shaped and was shaped by its radical inhabitants" (p. 47) fails to recognize that the spatial turn seeks to give space meaning rather than construct an organizing concept so ubiquitous so as to be meaningless. Perhaps *Radical Spaces* seems more problematic because it is so consciously driven by spatial concerns. Robert Poole's magnificent essay "The March to Peterloo" (2006) is a successful spatial analysis of English radicalism precisely because it resists casting itself as such. Indeed, by exploring at the margins of available source material, we might argue that much of the historiography of English radicalism contains a spatial dimension. We could even go as far to say that that E. P. Thompson got there first in his seminal *Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

Radical Spaces stands somewhat apart from the historiography of English radicalism. Though providing welcome reaffirmation of recent work foregrounding radicals' use of form as argument, this ambitious study perhaps errs slightly too far towards cultural rather than social history, and by doing so fails to fully elucidate the grassroots of radicalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Radical Spaces* does provide some delicious insights into the workings of London's most iconic radical sites, but will require scholars to make similar analysis of less consciously radical sites in order to give its own analysis fuller meaning. It is a study as frustrating as it is brave, unfocused as it is intoxicating. And it is a study which, one expects, will soon be complemented by further spatial work dealing with long-eighteenth-century political locales. Perhaps only then will the true value of *Radical Spaces* emerge.

Notes

[1]. "Humanities Research Centre Thesis Wins CASS Ph.D. Publishing Prize," last modified May 11, 2010, http://hrc.anu.edu.au/news/humanities-research-centre-thesis-wins-cass-phd-publishing-prize.

[2]. See http://alasdairforrest.posterous.com/the-curious-case-of-the-changing-citation. Thanks to Ernesto Priego for the reference.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: James Baker. Review of Parolin, Christina, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in*

London, 1790 - c. 1845. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33881