A MATERIAL CULTURE STUDY OF SUBVERSION: INTERPRETING ENGLISH MEDIEVAL HISTORY

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MANY studies of material culture attempt to dissect and understand the layers of meaning and interpretation that are attributed to the objects that fill peoples' lives, both the mundane stuff of everyday life and the ceremonial or sacred articles associated with crucial points in the life-cycle of a group or individual. One of the reasons that objects are so fascinating is that their physicality allows for definiteness about their intended purpose, while they also invite interpretation from the individuals and the groups to which they belong—as well as from the individuals and groups to which they do not belong. It is in these acts of interpretation that challenges to the status quo, to authority, to élites, and to stereotypes occur.

In contemporary Western European society, and for present purposes more specifically British society, where large urban spaces are shared by a multitude of groups, many people find it important to define themselves clearly as members of communities. This definition or transformation of a number of individuals—who share, for example, similar values, ideals, or traditions—into an 'interest group'

(Abner Cohen 1974), or even a community, requires the creation of boundaries. Defining boundaries in densely populated, shared spaces can be difficult, not least because boundaries in such areas are generally symbolic. Boundaries function to encapsulate the identity of a community, and as such are called into being by the exigencies of social interaction. Problems of self-definition are compounded when 'traditional' cultural signifiers or boundaries, such as body art or clothing, are transformed into commodities and then consumed and sometimes adopted by the larger population or dominant culture.

More specifically, in the United Kingdom today many 'ethnic' signifiers have become subsumed into definitions of modern Britishness. In order for symbols to maintain their symbolic significance for a given group, they need to be reinterpreted, redefined. This does not remove the object-boundary from the general view, nor does it always involve the assertion of a 'right' to exclusive use of the object-boundary, although a group may desire these effects. Rather, it allows a group to assign new meanings and judgements to the object-boundary for their own purposes. When a cross-boundary encounter occurs between one group and another, discourse is facilitated by common familiarity with the object-boundary, but this familiarity does not necessarily extend beyond the physical. Each group retains its own judgements assigned to, and represented by, particular symbols. It is important to remember that these interpretations and assigned meanings are not mechanical and frequently not overt, rather they too belong to the realm of the symbolic. It is in people's own minds that a sense of difference may be found, and in symbolism, rather than structure, that the boundaries of their worlds of identity and diversity are sought (see, for example, the essays in Anthony Cohen 1986). In this way, the subversion of what it is to be a member of a particular culture or group occurs.

In Britain, mainstream cultural stereotypes are not challenged only by members of immigrant or minority groups. As I have discovered in my own fieldwork with medieval re-enactors, there is a desire among many people to re-define what it means to be English and thereby reclaim a sense of identity separate from that of being British. Re-enactors seek to accomplish this through a reclamation of English history. While trying to re-enact history, they bring their own contemporary social experience into their activities, thereby investing 'living history' with new definitions, significances, and agendas. In this article I discuss briefly several examples of how the material culture of the Wars of the Roses is used in the twenty-first century to create boundaries in a performance of an 'authentic' English community.

At first glance, re-enactment seems to be all about the 'stuff'; a chance for grown men to hit each other with blunt weapons. For the public, the costumes, the tents, the swords, the armour, and so on, combine to create a powerful visual memory of a visit to a castle or battlefield; and these things are also integral to being a re-enactor or 'living historian'. To own, or even better, to have made all

the appropriate kit, demonstrates dedication to the group and to how a particular group is viewed by other groups and members of the public. But the entire activity, which includes the material culture, the belonging, the dressing up, the fighting, the demonstrating, and the dealing with the public, is a performance of belonging. Such a performance is more than simply role-playing in the theatrical sense, although there may be an element of that. Rather, it is a performance of culture and community. One of the unstated goals of these groups and the performances in which they participate is social reproduction. Like all forms of performance, this genre of cultural performance is an intertextual field where the politics of identity are negotiated (Kapchan 1995). Modern Englishness is rooted in the material of the past.

Re-enactment is not a small-scale activity; it is participated in by thousands of people across Britain alone. Their performances demonstrate the need within many sections of the country, and its individual nations and counties, to express cultural pride and control over the way in which specific historical groups are depicted and understood. The goal may be to rectify an untruth recorded in biased histories, or to prove that, despite common misconceptions to the contrary, in the past everyday people lived dynamic creative lives. It is my thesis that for the medieval group with whom I did my fieldwork, the re-enactment of the Wars of the Roses and the historical period serves to produce a sense of 'traditional' English community. It provides an opportunity for a community of English people to celebrate their Englishness and reinforce their shared English identity, an identity based on hundreds of years of history before the Act of Union and before the empire and global 'Britishness' of the age of Queen Victoria. For the participants, re-enacting is a hobby engaged in at the weekends and on holidays, and as such these communities are temporary in their physical form. While members may not live near each other when away from camp, the community continues to thrive through complex networks and individual actions. Groups get together once a week during the winter to make kit, practise military drills, and share ideas and the results of their research. Members speak on the phone several times a week and share gossip and news. Men grow (or cut) their hair and beards to help create the overall historic effects they wish to produce at the weekend or during the coming season.

The physical expression of this community, however, relies on a performance that itself relies on the temporary creation of small, bounded camps and the use of historically accurate, or 'authentic', material culture. The stress on the authenticity of the visible elements of a camp is important in order to fulfil at least two of the explicit aims often repeated by re-enactors: education and entertainment of the public. There is a sense amongst re-enactors that these activities are a public service, a charitable act aimed at correcting misconceptions and bringing real history to the wider world by removing it from the realm of the academics. However, it is in this implicit manipulation of material culture, familiar to the outsider through films, history books, and television, that the crux of the demonstration of

'traditional' community experience lies. The re-enactors' focus on recreating this small, temporally and physically localized community is an attempt to make 'real' the small, uncomplex, self-sufficient village of English tradition. It is not a performance that necessarily stems from a historical reality, but from a vision of what is at the core of being 'English'. It is a performance of English folklife; a performance of an 'English' community within, but distinct from, Britain.

The people who are involved in these activities are, by and large, not recognizable as members of the anti-establishment fringes. The members of the group with whom I have done my fieldwork, Company Ecorcheur, number between forty-five and fifty in any given year. The membership is approximately two-thirds male, the majority of whom are married or in stable relationships. Most of their wives and partners also take part in the group's activities, and it is not uncommon for their children to be involved as well. There are only three single women members, apart from myself. On the whole, the members belong to the upper-working- and lower-middle-classes. Their occupations include plumbing, building, security, haulage, low-level administration, and information technology. At least four members own their own businesses. About ten members have university degrees. Only one member is currently a full-time member of the military, in his case the Royal Navy. The group began in Birmingham in 1991, and continues to be based there, though the majority of members no longer come from there but from all over the South of England. By comparison with several other groups with whom I have come in contact, the composition of the membership of Company Ecorcheur seems typical, although it is unusually large.

When I first joined the group, they were initially hesitant to accept me. I was told that they have shied away from recruiting students of any sort, especially university students, and especially female university students. This is because most female students want to fight on the battlefield, which the group does not allow. (They also said that they could not take members who were Asian or Black, because they did not feel it would be historically accurate.) My American accent was another source of concern, so I was asked to try to speak in an English accent, at least when speaking to members of the public or when the public might hear me. They acknowledged that people living in the late fifteenth century would not have spoken as they do now, but as no one can be sure what they did sound like they felt that it was better to play safe. The fact that I was a student at the University of Oxford also caused concern. The old stereotypes about people who attend Oxbridge are still very much alive, and it took several weeks before they realized that I was 'normal' (their term), i.e. not rich, not afraid of getting my hands dirty, and not thinking only of myself.

One way of understanding these reservations about accepting as members people like me is to recognize how such individuals may be regarded as challenges to the boundaries established by the members of the group to define themselves as an English community. To fit me in, the soundness and flexibility of the boundaries

needed to be considered. Would I, as a female, American, Oxford student, openly challenge the boundaries, or cause them to be weakened or breached? How could I be fitted into their understandings of themselves? In my case it was relatively straightforward: the aspects that would normally have caused concern simply had to be 'covered up' or ignored. I would speak with an English accent and they would see if I would be willing to get involved with the 'dirty' aspects of re-enacting, like setting-up camp, washing-up, helping with the cooking, etc. But there is more to these boundaries than simply their physical, visible aspects and willingness to abide by the rules, spoken and implicit, of the group. The boundaries encapsulate deeper issues, and in the nature of boundaries they come to mean different things to different members of the group. In general, the main aim of the boundaries is to maintain a level of authenticity, which, in everyday parlance, is expressed as historical authenticity, but which can be understood as a gauge of how effective they have been in creating a sense of community for themselves. A discussion of the many implicit expressions and understandings of authenticity would take more space than is available to me now, and may anyway be more appropriate in another forum. What is important to note here is that the guise of historical accuracy permits the group to use material forms to construct a paradigm of 'Us', the English-born of history, and 'Them', the non-English British and the rest.

Authenticity is a standard that is applied to many aspects of re-enactment, from knowledge to movement to object. It is a flexible standard, yet it is also often a very definite boundary for the re-enactors. It is worth noting again that the objects and actions judged as authentic, or not, are symbols, and therefore ambiguous, all the more so because they are so familiar to people outside the group. Therefore, what may seem clear and obvious, such as a longbow, may be understood by a member of the public as an unoriginal weapon of varying effectiveness but understood by a male re-enactor as an object of careful craftsmanship produced and used effectively only after years of practice, symbolic of English success in foreign wars; while to a female or a child re-enactor it may symbolize a skill they have learned and practised alongside their husband or father. As Anthony Cohen (1985: 15) put it in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 'in the face of this vulnerability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. The reality and efficacy of the community's boundary—and, therefore, of the community itself—depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment'.

The classification of an object as authentic is a reinterpretation of, and in many ways a challenge to, supposedly common knowledge. Re-enactors spend a great deal of time on the internet and in libraries researching the various figures involved in the Wars of the Roses, the military tactics, and the workings of medieval society in general. They are keenly interested in the techniques involved in making and using everything: tapers, clothing, longbows, medicines, bread. They cite fifteenth-century manuscript illustrations when discussing women's hairstyles.

References are often made to archaeological records when discussing the types of glazing found on pottery or the sites of major battles. Re-enactors employ this knowledge either by attempting to make similar objects themselves or by buying period objects that they deem to be appropriately made and right for the period. Then, when they interact with members of the public, they demonstrate their personal, fully informed knowledge of these symbols, often in the process rebuffing the public's 'uninformed' opinions. Re-enactors also try to use historically accurate methods for making just about anything their resources or talents allow. This first-hand experience often leads them to make such comments as 'the historians are wrong: when I was wearing my full suit of armour, there was no way I could have managed that move'. Re-enactors see themselves as the specialists and professional historians as 'locked in the library', removed from what it was really like to live in the past. There is a constant effort on the part of the re-enactors to be taken more seriously by academics, for they feel their experiences allow for a much fuller, more dynamic understanding of history and could lead to it being more interesting as a subject. They want to show that English history was made by more than kings and parliaments, and that mainland Europe was not the only place where culture was thriving.

Re-enactment may also be seen as a challenge to the class system. In medieval times, to wear inappropriate clothes was to lie about oneself, for which one could be severely punished. This is a fact that many women re-enactors tell members of the public when describing the garments they are wearing. It could be said that re-enactment itself is about wearing clothes that create a deception. Some people decide they want to be high-status, perhaps a knight or a member of the emerging merchant class, and so they acquire the dress and trappings of such a person. Yet in reality, they may be a housewife or a builder. But the public will not know that, and do not need to know. It is quite common for re-enactors to stay in costume even after the public have gone. They are happy to keep at bay the roles, statuses, and stereotypes assigned to them by their everyday clothes by staying in costume. At multi-group events, re-enactors will wear at least part of their kit, usually a coat in the colours of their group or with its insignia, to the beer tent at night, thereby clearly allying themselves with one side and one group. When re-enactors go on to the battlefield for a fight rather than for a technical display, they wear the colours of a specific household that was involved in the Wars of the Roses, thereby creating a clearly recognizable group for themselves, but also affiliating themselves to their history unequivocally. Company Ecorcheur take on the name and colours of the Gloucester Household, allied to the House of York during the Wars of the Roses. They are proud to represent people who took a stand and fought bravely (even if they did not necessarily do so by choice). The costumes and the activities are reminders that all classes of English people were involved in major events of the past; reclaiming their history is paramount for defining a sense of Englishness today.

In the end, re-enactment is about just that: re-enacting something—a time period, a battle, the everyday life of a village or person, which someone thinks it is important to remember. Re-enactment creates traditions. Traditions allow people to remember what is important to who they are; it is a form of self-definition. Re-enactment in the recreational sense, in the sense of people dressing up in medieval costume and setting-up period camps on the sites of historic buildings or battle-fields, is also reminding those involved of what is important to them. It is, in a sense, providing a 'creation myth' of an enclosed, self-sufficient English village. Re-enactors are trying to create a community for themselves in which their roles and sense of self-identity are clearly defined, and this can be done easily by look-ing to the historical record and then reinterpreting and manipulating it in the light of their contemporary social experience. If, as Anthony Cohen (1985: 16) believes, 'the quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and sig-nificant interests, and, further, that they think that that sense may differ from one made elsewhere', then surely the creation of a community based on the reinterpre-tation of historic objects in the public domain is a pointed challenge to the status quo. This, then, is how medieval re-enactors recreate the English out of the British.

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