Places Meeting – CHE 8 June 2007

Places as Scenes and Symbols: Revisiting the Long Durée
Saltmarsh Room, King’s College, Cambridge
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Participants:

Caroline Humphrey (CH)
Maurizio Isabella (MI)
Catherine Merridale (CM)
Emma Rothschild (ER)
Ananya Kabir (AK)
Rana Mitter (RM)
Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (NSC)
William St Clair (WSC)
Pedro Ramos Pinto (PRP)

Perspectives on sites

One of the recurring themes of the meeting was the many possible perspectives on sites and history. CM introduced the meeting by elaborating on the notes distributed in advance of the meeting, highlighting some key points: The need to get away from traditional understandings of the *longue durée* which overemphasize memory and forgetting, after Pierre Nora. In the Russian case, this is exemplified by a constant reflection on the imagined memories of Mongol rule, without acknowledging either changes or continuities in the country’s relation to that past. CM suggested that memory has become ‘an overbearing category of historical analysis’. This then led to a discussion of the importance of identifying false continuities and change within longer processes. The several possible vantage points from which to examine the *longue durée* through sites were discussed, such as departing from the present, or thematically (e.g. religion). As CM asked, where should surveying equipment be placed to provide which perspective. When asked, by RM, how she viewed sites (and what the subtitle of her future book might be), CM suggested that the crucial idea was that of the Kremlin as a ‘prism.’ This issue of ‘the subtitle’ provoked considerable debate and helped the group to focus on a series of distinct themes.

MI and WSC addressed the issue of the attributed or appropriated meanings of sites over time. WSC mentioned the Parthenon as an example and MI the Vatican, particularly through the political convulsions of the nineteenth century and, in longer perspective, in relation to other sites in Rome.

AK took up the metaphor of the building as prism, which doesn’t just reflect light, but also transforms it, to suggest that buildings also have an impact on their surroundings and consumers. CH pointed to the literature on material culture and architecture, which takes this approach, looking at how the physical shape of buildings affects what happens in and around them. AK returned to this theme, contrasting the monumentality of the Taj-Mahal
with the deliberate physical separation and small, private spaces of the Sufi temples. WSC called this the rhetoric of buildings. CM added that there can be a non-intended monumentality to certain sites (e.g. the marketplace).

AK considered what literature may bring to this project, suggesting that the representations of place, both literary and visual, are further layers of the prism in relation to site. WSC added that crucial to the notion and construction of the site is the notion of the viewer: in ancient Greece most people would have only seen the Parthenon through representations in engravings, ‘buildings need viewers’, or indeed listeners, in the case of oral diffusion (ER). This in turn leads to the distinction between viewers who are ‘insiders’ to the cultural context of the building and those who are ‘outsiders’ (RM).

WSC suggested that time is not the only way to look at the interaction between a building and its environment, proposing a comparative approach involving different cultures and times, as in the case of sites as celebrations of empire.

A fundamental shift of perspective: non-places and non-sites

CH introduced another theme to the discussion by pointing out that in Mongolia, a nomadic society, there is no place as such, but there are still notions of centrality and rule. It would be interesting to apply this approach to a place that has no physical presence. CH also asked that other kremlins could be taken as site for analysis, so why the Moscow Kremlin specifically. CM suggested that other sites would have a different relationship with power, given that they are stories of growing peripherality.

RM returned to the issue of non-place to suggest a different perspective. Rather than working through sites which are established ‘brand names’, it is possible that focusing on more mundane sites can give us a view that is less distorted by all the assumptions and received knowledge that comes with a world-famous site. CM said that in some cases, like that of Russia, power is so distinct from the mundane, with rulers distinguishing themselves through culture, language and physical separation, that looking at secondary sites would indeed produce a very different picture of power, although still a valid one.

ER asked whether natural sites could be an interesting case study, giving the example of the eighteenth-century tradition of histories of the river Thames and Blackbourn’s history of water in Germany. This leads to the question of how a site should be defined for the purposes of this project. CM argued that a site should be something that is intentionally built, and intentionally built by human hands. AK argued that what constitutes a site is a much more problematic issue than Nora assumed. The construction of a site need not be physical. Again, ‘non-places’ or sites that did not make it to ‘brand names’ can tell us a lot about the processes of construction of a monument, ‘counter-monuments’ if you will.

WSC pointed out that throughout history there have always been non-monumental sites where transient physical construction is the norm, and no less important for it: the marketplace, giving the example of West African markets that date back thousands of years. Their importance is beyond doubt despite, in some cases, leaving no physical trace. RM and NSC discussed the objectives of the project, identifying a dual objective: the use of the site as a prism (the history of something through a site) vs. the study of the
symbolism of a site, and its different meanings through time. CM summarised the discussion by suggesting two types of non-sites: those that are not today considered as ‘monuments’ and those without a physical presence.

Assumptions & pitfalls

Another theme was the discussion of potential problems involved in doing history through sites. RM noted that there are challenges to the writing of longue durée history. Firstly, taking the example of China, he noted that periodisation is in itself a contentious issue and that China’s ‘long history’ is a recent construct. Secondly, professional pressures militate against bigger, deeper studies and encourage fragmentation and article-driven research. Thirdly, RM made the point that we should be careful not to take up an ‘assumption-laden’ longue durée approach, running the risk of becoming over-deterministic. RM gave the example of using Tienanmen Square to discuss modern Chinese history, which he found could be as restrictive as revealing: while it connected to the very important role of place in China, it also underplays the extent to which China has changed and the amount there is that is new. As such, for RM, a key problem is how to make that approach compatible with understanding change, without resort to structural meta-narratives.

CM addressed this issue by suggesting that place can be the analytical tool to solve this problem, since a site provides the continuity in narrative without underlying assumptions about the lack of change, bringing in a number of themes and cycles which would be more difficult if a single theme were used to analyse the longue durée. ER suggested that the device of a site that in many ways stays the same over long periods of time helps us circumvent the need to deploy these structural meta-narratives to encompass change in the object of study.

Both WSC and NSC offered notes of caution on the writing of longue durée history through sites. WSC noted that while a site can interconnect with many themes, it may not in itself be explicative of them, and this approach cannot replace looking at themes directly. NSC asked whether the choice of site is not itself a basic assumption and the imposition of some kind of meta-narrative. CM responded that using site is also a form of connecting to readers, and using their prejudices about such sites to structure an argument and bring in unfamiliar topics. For instance, a long history of the Kremlin would engage with popular assumptions regarding the Russian ‘strong state’ by showing the same site through periods of both strength and weakness.

AK issued a warning in relation to the analysis of sites through the longue durée, reaching into modernity, since we could end up talking mostly about convergence in the representation of sites through consumer culture and mass media.

RM asked where does the cultural essence of a site lie? Contrasting the fortunes of the Kremlin with the Forbidden City, RM suggested that the nature of Chinese society is perhaps less linked to place than Russia. RM asked if there was a fundamental difference between history of sites and the current trend for biographies of cities. CM argued that there is a difference in that doing history through a site means asking specific focused questions and developing an argument, such as the connection between the Kremlin and power, which is different from a more linear, descriptive, biography of place.
Future Plans

CM Suggested there should be two more meetings, some six months apart, beginning in Fall 2008. Everyone agreed that whatever the choice of publication medium, an internet presence would be important, beginning with the website hosted by CHE and then through publication in a leading journal with on-line presence.

Final round-up of suggestions on what to include

There were a number of specific suggestions:

- Marketplace – West Africa (non-monumental physical site) (Various)
- Red Fort and Sufi temples (contrast site vs. non site) (AK)
- Objects and Interiors within sites (NSC)
- The second city/the invisible city – Chungking (non-brand name site) (RM)
- The Kremlin – broad sweep of history through site (CM)
- UNESCO and the (mis)construction of site
- Rome and the Grand Tour: the site and the viewer (MI)
- Gravesend and the Thames (ER)

There were several other more speculative suggestions to be followed up:

Given the discussion on the ‘rhetoric of sites’, ER suggested there should be a contribution on architects and builders. RM suggested complementing the range with a North American site or, as AK suggested, a South American site throughout the pre-colonial, colonial, revolution and modern periods. WSC suggested Jerusalem, and the names of Sebag-Montefiore and Edward Sturton. Focusing on the Dome of the Rock, rather than other, better covered, monuments was suggested. Another possible site along similar lines would be the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. RM suggested looking at Japanese temples that have stood on the same site for centuries, but that are rebuilt every twenty years, mentioning Juliette Thomas of Notre Dame as a possible contributor. Finally, WSC mentioned the lack of a British site and suggested looking at Imperial monuments.

ER suggested drawing up a grid of possible sites and themes.