

How should historians talk about spatial agency?

Introduction: what does space do?

In recent years, it has become commonplace to argue that space is an important topic in the humanities and social sciences.¹ But how has this affected the discipline of history? Historical scholarship, it hardly needs to be stated, concerns the study of the past: changes in phenomena over time, temporally-specific experiences, sequences of events, questions of causation. What does it mean to integrate “space” into such enquiries? To answer this question, we perhaps need to begin with a more fundamental point: what does it mean to talk about “space”?

In its most general sense, “space” refers to an area in two or three dimensions. Historical scholarship has long been aware of “space” as an analytical category: that is, an areal framework deployed by humans to interpret the world, either within a historical period itself or retrospectively by historians.² For example, a spatial concept such as “Christendom” or “Third World” might be used in a particular period to understand the world in contextually-specific ways.³ Alternatively, a historian might establish or deploy spatial categories – the local, the global – to afford new outlooks on the past.⁴ In this article, however, I am concerned with physical space from a philosophically realist perspective – the ontological position which holds that “at least a part of reality is [...] independent of human minds”.⁵ To use the word “space” in this sense is to refer to a physical area. We might go on to talk about the characteristics which define and describe that area. We might speak, for example, about the extent and limits of the space; the emplacement and distribution of its contents; the distances and connections between its components or between it and other spaces. Our attention to such spatial characteristics is what allows us to describe, say, the ecological conditions of a savannah or a mountain, the salient features of a built environment, or the uniqueness of a single building.

Historians have, of course, long sought to recover, describe and analyse the material spaces of the past.⁶ But difficult questions still remain. Above all: what does space *do*? More precisely, do the characteristics of a space – emplacement, distribution and so on – affect entities, ideas and behaviours? Does space have agency in the sense that spatial characteristics exert influence or contribute to change? Historians have reacted to these questions in different ways. For some, spaces can be “alive with generative capacity”: space

“generates cultural references, economic and political meaning, and social forms”.⁷ The proposed link here between space, action and causation is very strong: knowing “*where* things happen is crucial to knowing *how* and *why* they happen”.⁸ For others, however, this “strong programme” for the efficacy of space is unproven. As Robert Mayhew argues, “that entities and arguments vary over space, and that this affects historical patterns, processes and change is clear, but this is no different from what the rubric of contextual sensitivity would tell any historian [...] What they might deny is that this amounts to space [...] *doing* anything, rather than the more modest claim that contexts are geographically differentiated.” For Mayhew, it is an error to “ascribe to the physicality of space – space itself – that which is actually produced by historically-traceable social and intellectual conditions and contexts, things happening in space but not because of space as such.”⁹ Space, in other words, is not “generative” of culture or social forms; instead it is human activity which frames understandings of material space.

In this article, I argue that both the “strong programme” and its counterview have significant disadvantages, principally because they can succumb to determinism and anthropocentrism respectively. My objective is to discuss how we *can* talk about the effects of spatial characteristics without making generalised or prescriptive claims about the influence of space itself. The article uses insights from material culture studies and actor-network theory to discuss ways of re-framing agency as an assemblage of human and non-human affects. Agency can thus be defined not in terms of first causes and definitive outcomes, but instead as a coincidence of occurrences. This allows historians to speak of “spatial agency” as the emplacement of affective elements, the gathering of agencies at a particular site and moment.

Spatial characteristics as causal factors

To explore the issues at stake, I want to turn to the early nineteenth-century travel writer Mariana Starke and her guidebook *Travels in Europe Between the Years 1824 and 1828* (1828). The author of a few minor plays and poems in the late eighteenth century, Starke spent seven years in Italy in the 1790s caring for an unwell relative. This experience facilitated a career as a travel writer, beginning with *Letters from Italy* (1800). Later books moved away from the traditional epistolary format of the *Letters* and adopted features closer to those of modern guidebooks: practical advice on itineraries, food and accommodation; a ratings system to rank potential attractions; and numerous “insider’s tips” on costs, useful supplies, or ideal vantage points. Starke’s successful formula facilitated

reprints, new editions and translations, and encouraged her publisher, John Murray, to develop the *Handbooks for Travellers* guidebook series which would remain popular into the twentieth century.¹⁰ In discussing Starke's book, my principal purpose is historiographical: the chosen passages help to illustrate different ways in which space and agency can be conceptualised in historical scholarship. But the guidebook format reminds us that these various approaches are not just theoretical. The book records and informs lived engagements with spaces; it allows us to glimpse – and to understand more fully – ways in which humans affect and are affected by the spaces they encounter.

Grand Tour-era travellers were consistently preoccupied by the spatial circumstances of their itineraries, drawing attention to both natural environmental conditions and human interventions in the landscape. Weather patterns, altitude, the presence and conditions of roads, the distribution of inns and stables, the local prevalence of diseases, could (and did) affect the routes and duration of a journey.¹¹ This was particularly the case around Rome, where intense summer heat, and the prevailing theory that malaria was caused by “bad air” from marshland, led many travellers to organise their trips outside the dangerous summer season.¹² Starke has firm words of advice on how best to cross the Pontine Marshes:

It is [...] advisable for Travellers in general, and particularly Invalids, neither to cross the Pontine Marshes with an empty stomach, nor till full half an hour after the sun has risen. The dew which immediately precedes sunset should likewise be avoided; and the inclination to sleep, which almost every Traveller feels, while breathing this air, should be strenuously resisted: and persons compelled to cross, previous to sunrise, or just before sunset, should be provided with a little strong punch, or powerful wine, and drink it on approaching this district.¹³

The passage argues that certain spatial characteristics – in this case the marshy conditions – directly affect human activity. The dew, the sunlight, and the air itself are said to have concrete effects on one's health, and therefore need to be mitigated by responsive actions designed to offset those effects. In short, the characteristics of this space compel travellers to adjust their behaviour; and while the recommendations may seem peculiar or ill-founded, the principle is still commonplace – it is, after all, why people wear sunscreen or mosquito-repellent. Space – or, more precisely, a spatial characteristic, either singly or in combination – is presented as an impersonal and discrete force: a direct causal factor with identifiable consequences.

The idea that environmental conditions can structure individual behaviour and societal development has a long legacy. Many ancient thinkers – Herodotus, Thucydides, Strabo and others – employed variants of the theory, and according to Clarence Glacken’s research, by the eighteenth century it had “entered every field of thought” and was used to explain a bevy of topics from public health to legislation.¹⁴ In the mid twentieth century, Fernand Braudel proposed that “human life responds to the commands of the environment, but also seeks to evade and overcome them”; while more recent scholarship has spoken of environmental conditions as “an active, shaping force” which “influences and constrains human *actions* [...and] human *intentions*”.¹⁵ For example, in a history of early medieval Kent we are told that, “underpinning all discussions, [...] are aspects of the physical landscape of the county, which have impacted on the development of both settlement and topography”.¹⁶ Some have credited early modern Europe’s emergent industry and imperial expansion to “accidents of geology that placed large deposits of iron ore and coal in relatively close proximity in England and an accident of geography that located Europe closer to the Americas than any other Old-World region”.¹⁷ It is even claimed that “it was our planet’s active geological forces that drove our evolution in East Africa”, and that “grand-scale planetary processes and events created the different landscapes and climate regions that have directed the emergence and development of civilisations”.¹⁸ These arguments assume that a given spatial characteristic – the distribution of a natural resource, the distance between landmasses – is a causal factor with traceable consequences. A similar argument is sometimes applied to human-constructed spaces. Martina Löw argues that certain sites can “retune” or affect social behaviour: one might “enter a small shop in feverish haste” but “restful music and pleasant aromas” can instead foster tranquillity and relaxation. Her concern is with mental states rather than societal development, but spatial characteristics are still effective. “Spaces”, Löw says, “can develop their own potentiality which can influence feelings”; and the “power of spaces” can “provoke moods in people, in some cases even against their will”.¹⁹

These various arguments imply that, to a greater or lesser extent, specific outcomes are “controlled by the environment”.²⁰ The formulation may not be strictly deterministic – there is not always a presumption of necessity – but it may be prescriptive, or operate according to probability or likelihood if not strictly defined laws. In some respects, the influence of spatial factors seems commonsensical: one cannot grow crops in a desert, or mine coal where coal does not exist. But constraints emerge when that influence implies patterned causation, for example in the assumption that climate drives the rise and fall of empires: “it is no

coincidence that the Roman Empire and Han Empire should spring up at roughly the same time, and last for similar periods. Both benefited from the Roman climactic optimum, a relatively warm and stable period that lasted until 200 CE. Both foundered when they tried to stray too far from the agricultural core that enjoyed the most climactic benefit”.²¹ Many scholars are extremely uneasy about causal explanations predicated on such narrow or inflexible principles.²² Aside from their analytical limitations, such ideas have also had unsavoury applications. Susanne Rau, for example, argues that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century assumptions about “the interactions between human beings and nature/the environment/space” helped to shape Nazi *lebensraum* ideology – the idea that states must continually seek additional “living space” through war and imperialism. Her analysis demonstrates rather starkly “the dire consequences that can follow from a spatially deterministic method, especially if it is politically instrumentalised and space is stylised to become a subject that is itself capable of making claims, or if metaphysical forces are ascribed to space.”²³ Seen in such terms, the notion that spatial characteristics have tangible effects is both analytically restrictive and morally hazardous.

Human action upon and within space

There are, however, other ways to understand the potential relationship between space and action. In the paragraph immediately preceding the one quoted above, Starke offers a somewhat different account of how humans interact with their surroundings:

Between Tre Ponti (anciently *Tripontium*) and Terracina lie the Pontine Marshes, (*Palus Pomptina*), computed to be about twenty-four English miles in length, and varying from six to twelve miles in breadth. Appius Claudius seems to have been the first person who undertook to drain them: Cethegus and Caesar continued the work; which, during the middle ages, was repaired by Caecilius Decius, at the command of Theodoric. Boniface VIII was the first Pope who began to drain these noxious swamps. Martin V, before his accession to the Pontifical Chair, was employed to carry on the business; and succeeded wonderfully, by making a Canal, called Rio-Martino. The Princes of the House of Medicis, and, after them, Sixtus V, made new Canals: succeeding Popes followed a similar plan; till, at length, Pius VI nearly accomplished this benevolent work; forming on the foundations of the Via-Appia, which were long hidden under water, a road justly esteemed one of the best in Europe; and draining the swamps so judiciously as to render them capable of being cultivated. French Engineers pursued the same wise measures; and Pius VII put nearly the

finishing stroke to this Herculean labour; which has so essentially purified a tract of country, whose gales, in former times, were fraught with death, that but little danger (comparatively speaking) is to be apprehended from travelling through it now, except during the months of July and August, and the commencement of September.²⁴

Starke's summary of the drainage works on the Pontine Marshes celebrates how human intervention can materially affect spatial conditions. Whereas her previous passage explained human behaviour and culture in terms of prevailing spatial characteristics, here the relationship is reversed: the space becomes a product of, or a canvas for, human endeavour. Understood in such terms, it is more difficult to suggest that spatial characteristics in themselves exert influence. Instead, the marshes' characteristics are partly the consequence of human intervention, and so any agentic responsibility can be traced to human activity rather than to space *per se*. The marshes have been "purified", and any resulting effects are largely caused by human decisions and labour.

Once again, the idea that spaces are shaped by social and cultural activity has a very long historiographical tradition. Numerous thinkers – from Pliny and Josephus in the ancient world to Gibbon and Buffon in the eighteenth century – have associated societal progress with the "mastery of nature" demonstrated by agriculture and urban construction.²⁵ Fewer historians today would countenance such a triumphant and teleological analysis; but the wider notion that space is socially and culturally contingent – and that it must consequently be understood in terms of human enterprise – remains resonant, in part fuelled by Henri Lefebvre's influential dictum that "(social) space is a (social) product".²⁶ Scholars have shown, for example, how social elites reshaped urban and rural environments to reinforce palpable and figurative power.²⁷ In his work on palaces, landscapes, cities and holy places, David Rollason identifies "the messages of power that sites created by, or associated with, rulers could send to their subjects, to visitors, to ambassadors, and to anyone who saw or entered them".²⁸ These examples hinge on intentional design, but other analyses trace how less purposely-directed social phenomena can create new spaces. Susanne Rau discusses how "new spaces originate in processes of globalization": exchanges, fonduks, hostels, markets, counting houses, telegraph stations, airports, temporary G-20 summits.²⁹

From this perspective, the notion of "spatial agency" refers primarily to humans acting upon or within a spatial environment.³⁰ To speak of the "spatial dimension of agency" is thus to evoke human action "expressed in spatial terms".³¹ For David Harvey "there are no

philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of space – the answers lie in human practice. The question ‘what is space?’ is therefore replaced by the question ‘how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualisations of space?’³² The problem with this view is that it sees space entirely in human terms. It proffers a kind of anthropocentrism in which the material world has limited significance except as a product or reflection of human behaviour. And this can provoke analytical difficulties. When we speak of, say, gendered space or royal space, we are granting anthropomorphic qualities to an environment. In such cases, a given interpretation may be “read into or onto a space *from a knowledge generated elsewhere*, and then read back off the space as if that were the source of the knowledge, and then fêted as a new evidential category”.³³ A physical site becomes a “reification of ourselves”.³⁴

Space as an influence on – and product of – human action

So far, then, we have encountered two ways in which historians can connect space and agency. One presents spatial characteristics as causal factors which can direct outcomes. The other considers space primarily in terms of human activity. Taken individually, both these perspectives have serious limitations. The first edges towards determinism by interpreting space as an irresistible force. And the second risks anthropocentrism, assuming that space is primarily a reflection of culture. Neither offers a fully satisfactory account of the relationship between spatial characteristics and human action. One apparent solution would be to combine the two approaches – to argue that the material characteristics of spaces affect human practices, just as those practices shape concrete spaces.³⁵ This argument too has a long pedigree. Early modern geographical texts routinely explore how environmental conditions and human activity affect one another, and in this respect it is unsurprising to find that Starke’s *Travels in Europe* reflects in successive paragraphs on the mutual interaction of humans and marshes.³⁶ The general principle here – that material space and human practice are reciprocally influential – remains important in current urban and environmental history. Paul Keenan, for example, explains how difficult topographical and climactic conditions influenced the construction of St Petersburg in the early eighteenth century, but also how the city was purposely designed to showcase specific interpretations of Russia and its rulers as modern, sophisticated and European.³⁷ Environmental history too is frequently concerned with the “many overlapping layers of negotiations between different groups of people and the environments they inhabited.”³⁸ Richard White, for instance, speaks of the Columbia River as an “organic machine”. It is partly a ‘social creation’ thanks to various human

interventions (“dams, hatcheries, channels, pumps, cities” and so on). But for all “we have created many of its spaces and altered its behaviour, it is still tied to larger organic cycles beyond our control”. Consequently “the dam is just as much a product of the vast natural cycles of the planet”.³⁹

The idea that material space and human practice mutually influence one another seems to lead us into a spatialised version of the structure/agency debate. Typically, this debate concerns the relationship between existing structural or patterned phenomena, and the activities of individual or collective human agents.⁴⁰ At first glance we might assume that space is a form of structure which constrains human action. But the situation is not that straightforward, partly because (as we have seen) space can also be the product of human action. If human action shapes a given space – for instance, in the design and construction of a building – that space might be evidence of human intervention and, at the same time, serve as a structure which affects further human action.

For this reason, the most useful interpretation of the structure/agency problem for our purposes would seem to be Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration – an idea specifically designed to avoid an oppositional understanding of structure and agency. For Giddens, “agents draw upon structures in order to produce actions that subsequently change or maintain those structures. Hence structures are both the *medium* and the *outcome* of agency”.⁴¹ Agents and structures are thus not “two independently given sets of phenomena”, but are instead recursively implicated with one another.⁴² This formulation has proved to be highly influential in historical scholarship to the point where “much of the best social history of the past quarter century has adopted an implicit theoretical strategy quite consistent with Giddens’s theory”.⁴³ Its utility for discussion about space is also apparent. We do not need to see space *either* as an influence on, *or* as a product of, human endeavour. Instead, spatial characteristics are *both* affective and affected, the stimulus for and the outcome of human activity. Certainly, this recursive logic is on display in various accounts of how humans and material spaces intersect. Linda Nash, for example, argues that “human agency cannot be separated from the environments in which that agency emerges”. And Nigel Thrift suggests that “any region provides the opportunity for action and the constraints upon action; that is, the base for what is known about the world and the material with which to do (or not to do) something about it”.⁴⁴

The problem, however, with this recursive approach is that it positions space in very unstable analytical territory. Any given spatial environment both directs human behaviour *and* is shaped by human behaviour: space is thus simultaneously prescriptive and malleable, strong and weak. The approach also remains anthropocentric: it is difficult to establish what space *does* beyond functioning as a constraint on, and product of, *human* agency.⁴⁵ Various wider difficulties with recursive theories of structure and agency are also well known. One particular problem is that the approach can struggle to explain change. After all, if things affect one another reciprocally, it seems probable that they will ‘simply reproduce each other without change indefinitely’.⁴⁶ Indeed, the claim that such mutual feedback loops can, in fact, effect change is “self-contradictory, since the ability of a thing to receive or process feedback entails that it is already something more than whatever it is doing right now”.⁴⁷ Another objection suggests that it is methodologically unsound to collapse structure and agency together; one needs to separate them in order to examine how they interact: “it is hard to see how one can talk about interactions among structures and agents if they were not different from one another”.⁴⁸ In short, there are considerable problems with recursive theories, and one critic is especially scathing: “the incantation that ‘structure controls actors who simultaneously reconstitute structure in turn’ is simply that – an incantation”.⁴⁹

Material agency

How, then, can we continue to talk about space and agency in a non-recursive manner? One crucial step is the need to move beyond the idea that agency is inextricably bound up with human activity. In much historical and social analysis, agency is assumed to be an attribute possessed exclusively or primarily by humans. For some, it is clearly linked to intention. Hence, agency is defined as “self-directed action”, or as “a process that allows the subject to develop a degree of will and impose it on the world”.⁵⁰ Certainly, there are various studies which explicitly seek to place intentional human activity at the centre of historical analysis.⁵¹ Other are more cautious about intentionality and seek instead to model agency from a “minimal base” which can incorporate instinct, “the flow of habituated feeling”, or actions without “elaborate intentions” or full comprehension.⁵² After all, purposes “need not be deliberate, conscious and intended”.⁵³ While this potentially extends agentic roles to animals, it still presupposes that a creature with some sort of volition stands behind forms of agency.⁵⁴

Fortunately, there is now extensive interest in refining the anthropocentric idea that agency is “a fixed human property”, and that material objects are merely the media of human thought and action.⁵⁵ Under this view, objects are not inert and passive, acting only insofar as they constrain or enable human activity. Instead, they may also be agents of change, or initiators of events: for instance, “things decay, rot, and rust”, or they may have their own mechanical or physiological processes which resist “being sped up, slowed down, halted altogether, or even reversed”. In this way, material agency is more complex than the “simple resistance of a rock lying in the way”.⁵⁶ As Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris summarise, “the clay on the potter’s wheel should not be construed as the external passive object of the potter’s intentional states, but as a functionally co-substantial component [...] of the potting experience”.⁵⁷ Objects are not “simply *reflective* of social realities”; instead, they are “*active* in constituting those very realities”.⁵⁸

Various theories about the operation of material agency have been proposed. Some theorists expand the definition of action to incorporate non-human entities. In their work on the agency of trees, for example, Owain Jones and Paul Cloke redefine agency to include: the routine processes of existence – in this case, growth, reproduction, bearing fruit and so on; the ability to effect transformation (both in the plants themselves and upon their environment); and the means to execute “embedded” purposes – a plant’s DNA ensures that it develops in certain purposeful (though not intentional) ways.⁵⁹ Others look to (non-Western) animistic ideas which are suspicious of a binary division between living and non-living, animate and inanimate. Rather than being passive and functional, “inanimate objects can sometimes have personhood, history, dynamism and movement”.⁶⁰ Another approach talks about how “objects act *en masse* to effect people”. Artefacts might, for example, themselves possess “causal properties”: particular pottery styles and metal types “have life cycles of their own” and help to organise human practice “over many human generations and not under the direct and willed control of individuals or groups”.⁶¹ Rather than objects serving simply as vehicles for human creativity and wilful activity, this perspective reverses (or at least complicates) the causal flow, so that objects themselves can produce effects and direct culture. Objects are thus “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them”.⁶²

Importantly too, some theorists stress the *combination* of agencies at work within and between objects and humans. After asserting that “the agency of matter is directly visible and

describable” – electrons, radioactive materials and so on “are real: they do things” – Andrew Pickering speaks about a “dance of human and non-human agency in which activity and passivity on both sides are reciprocally intertwined”. His various examples include natural ecosystems, human-animal interactions, and architectural design, each involving the interplay of human and non-human agencies.⁶³ Jane Bennett invokes “the vitality of matter”: “the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – [...] to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own”. Key examples include “the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods”, or the way that buried rubbish generates “a lively stream of chemicals”. Bennett develops a theory of “distributed agency”: “an understanding of agency as a confederation of human and nonhuman elements”. These confederations are “agentic assemblages”: “each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency *of* the assemblage”.⁶⁴

This theoretical interest in material agency is certainly useful for escaping anthropocentric presumptions; and the idea of an agentic assemblage – or a collection of agencies – is a crucial concept to which I shall return. But an object – be it an omega-3 fatty acid, a piece of pottery, or a tree – would seem to be rather different from a space, understood in terms of area, distribution, emplacement and so on. It is therefore questionable whether the object-based theories of material agency can alone form a satisfactory foundation for concepts of spatial agency. We need to turn instead to theories concerned more overtly with relations and connections as well as the properties and effects of things. Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) – especially as presented by Bruno Latour – offers some productive parameters: firstly, it proposes an expanded notion of agency; and secondly, it exhibits a thoroughgoing interest in relational networks, which, because they involve connections, associations and so on, can more easily incorporate spatial analysis.

Space and Actor-Network-Theory

ANT is perhaps best known for its expansive idea of what constitutes an agent – something which explains its wide use by theorists of material agency.⁶⁵ According to Latour “an actor is what is *made to* act by many others”, and “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor”. Crucially too, action does not necessarily require “the full control of consciousness” and therefore agency is not dependent on (human) intention. This definition radically expands the concept of an actor: there is no doubt that “kettles ‘boil’

water, knives ‘cut’ meat, baskets ‘hold’ provisions, hammers ‘hit’ nails”, and so “these implements, according to our definition, are actors, or more precisely, *participants* in the courses of action”. Latour is keen to avoid any suggestion of determinism: after all, baskets do not “‘cause’ the fetching of provisions” and hammers do not “‘impose’ the hitting of the nail”. Instead, causality operates with greater subtlety: “things might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on”.⁶⁶ This nuanced list of verbs stand in contrast with Latour’s stronger statement about an actor being something being *made to act*. But his approach removes any absolute distinction between the actions of humans and things, and allows those actors (including material objects) to be understood in terms of their activity.⁶⁷

This leads us to a second fundamental point: ANT is concerned with “the tracing of associations” between entities. Action itself is associational, as it cannot be understood in terms of homogenous abstract “forces” exerting unilateral influence. For example, any given action could not be explained by reference to a single overarching cause. Instead, “an action [...] collects different types of forces woven together”. According to Latour, a good ANT analysis traces these “networks”, which he defines as “a string of actions where each participant is treated as a full-blown mediator”. Mediator here refers to entities which, rather than simply passing on meanings or actions unmodified, instead “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry”. In other words, networks are collections of mediating actors, each affecting one another in complex webs of activity and influence. Latour does not use the word network literally, but rather metaphorically as a way to explain connections: “network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described”.⁶⁸

ANT therefore allows us to think about agency as a relational network comprised of persons and things.⁶⁹ But this notion of the network does not just refer to relations *between* objects; it also describes the objects themselves: “objects are an effect of stable arrays or networks of relations”.⁷⁰ This is why ANT declines to distinguish between actors and networks, arguing instead that “actors and networks become one and the same”.⁷¹ As John Law notes, “all phenomena are the effects of the product of heterogeneous networks”, and an actor is no different: it too is “a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network”. Therefore, because the attributes of actors are “generated in networks” the term “actor-network” is appropriate: “an actor is also, always, a network”.⁷²

How, then, can we apply these insights to an understanding of space?⁷³ ANT allows us to rethink agency not in terms of first causes and consequential outcomes, but as an alignment of multiple circumstances and actions. This perspective allows for the role of intention but does not require it; and it also avoids the prescriptive implications of a single cause generating a necessary effect. Agency is thus not a sequence of events leading to a defined result – a model which suggests linearity or even inevitability. Instead, agency is the coincidence of occurrences. I use “coincidence” here in the sense of “simultaneous” rather than “chance”, so that the meaning is close to what Michael Oakeshott calls the “circumstantial confluence of [...] events”.⁷⁴

ANT’s emphasis on networks also allows us to see space in relational terms; that is, to conceive of space as a collection of relations. Jonathan Murdoch argues that “spaces emerge from within networks” and that “networks draw together materials, which have their own space-times, into new configurations.” What this means is that various constituent materials (for example, objects and people, each already comprised of their own relations), come together into *new* relational networks. And the new configurations formed by those networks are also new *spaces*. In other words, Murdoch says, “networks and spaces are generated together”: “each network traces its own particular space-time which reflects both the variety of the materials used in construction and the relations established between the combined elements”.⁷⁵ A simple question arises here: if spaces are relational networks, and if objects are also relational networks, is there any difference between the two? In some respects, the problem is less paradoxical than it might appear: a building, for instance, can be understood quite easily as both an artefact and a space.⁷⁶ To use John Law’s further example, an early modern sailing vessel is clearly a material object. But it is also a network consisting of “hull, spars, sails, ropes, guns, food stores, sleeping quarters and crew.” The intersection of these components also creates a space, hence Law’s conclusion: “when objects are being constituted then this means that spatial relations are also being enacted at the same time”. The ship also participates in larger networks, notably the “imperial system as a whole, with its ports, vessels, military dispositions and, markets and merchants”.⁷⁷ Consequently, something can be both an object and a space; similarly, it can be *comprised* of relational networks, and a *component* in (larger) relational networks.

If we accept the principle that spaces are relational networks then, according to Actor-Network-Theory, spaces must also be actors. They are not actors in the sense that they channel what Latour calls “gigantic forces” – the power of nature, for example, or the abstracted structures of society.⁷⁸ Neither is space a determinant that possesses or imparts fixed qualities with necessary outcomes. Consequently, spatial agency does not lie in the fixed effects of spatial characteristics, as if they have uniform consequences or direct, guaranteed results. Instead, spatial agency denotes the ways in which certain actors and actions come together at an identifiable location. Agency thus lies in the alignment of multiple circumstances and actions, the combination of which has certain effects in a particular locale. Space, in this sense, is a “setting for interaction”⁷⁹; and spatial agency refers to the co-existence and interplay of actions at a given place and at a given time. Importantly, therefore, spatial agency is also a historical phenomenon, not just because the agencies involved are temporal and historically contingent, but also because they come together at a specific moment.

One of Latour’s own examples can be adapted to illustrate this conception of spatial agency. He argues that the design of a lecture theatre does not determine “what you are going to say, or even where you will sit”. But the theatre still contains a host of mediators – including integral features (the seating, the lighting), and objects brought into the room (the lectern, audio-visual equipment) – which interact with each other and affect how action takes place. The combination of mediating actors is what gives the space its specificity: it is made through the “mediation of drawings, specifications, wood, concrete, steel, varnish and paint”. Latour continues: “if you doubt the transporting power of all those humble mediators [...] open the doors and windows and see if you can still teach anything [...] try to give your lecture in the middle of some art show with screaming kids and loud speakers spewing out techno music”.⁸⁰ The point here is not merely that the noise and others distractions influence the actions of one human agent delivering a lecture. Instead, various human and nonhuman agencies converge in this space; and the term “spatial agency” can usefully describe the amalgamation of and connections between those actions in this location.

Agency and space are thus intimately related, but it is also important to realise that this understanding of spatial agency is not merely a demand to recognise all actions as strictly localised – that is, as specific to one particular site. In part, this is because the interaction occurring in a space is “never purely local; it is constituted, construed and configured by

distant actions”. In other words, actions taken in other places (or at some point in the past) also “bear upon the localised present”. John Law’s example of the early modern sailing vessel is illustrative here. Some of the component mediators in this scenario, such as the specific local weather conditions, are ephemeral and confined to the immediate moment; but many others – the guns, say, or the navigational charts and instruments – are not. These latter objects might stabilise past and distant actions, allowing us to speak of the “mobilisation of nonhumans across space and time”. And of course, the ship also participates in wider networks – and some, such as meteorological systems or the spaces of empire, encompass vast areas. Spatial agency, then, is not simply concerned with precise localisms. Indeed, the ANT approach which underpins my discussion is suspicious of fixed scalar distinctions. As Murdoch summarises, actor-networks grow and extend their “influence and reach beyond a single locale into other locales, tying these together in sets of complex associations. There is, therefore, no difference in kind between “macro” and “micro” or “global” and “local” actors”.⁸¹ A major objective of Latour’s analysis is to break down artificial separations between the so-called “local” and “global”: to understand apparently global phenomena as constituted of contextual “tiny loci”; and to understand how every so-called “local site” is imbricated with “other sites distributed in time and space”.⁸² Our understanding of spatial agency is similarly orientated: the agencies which coalesce and interact at a given site cannot easily be separated into large and small scales.

Conclusion: the emplacement of agencies

There are, of course, potential problems with a relational approach to space and agency. As Astrid Van Oyen says, “stating that things (or actors, or networks) are relational is indeed *trivially true*”. But problems emerge when relationality serves simultaneously as an ontological assumption about how the world works, a methodological tool for enquiry, and a means to explain historical events. Van Oyen’s conclusion is stark: “if relationality is adopted as a framework through which to approach our evidence differently – whether analytically or interpretatively – it cannot also be the outcome of interpretation. “We think in terms of relations; thus, we find relations’ will not do as a research design”. Her solution is premised on what she calls “relational constellations”. This is a way of understanding more precisely how relations are “ordered” in “sets” – achieved in part by formalising how “a thing’s possibilities for action are defined in relation *to* something (e.g. grass is edible *for* sheep)”.⁸³ But in the absence of such careful contextualisation, it is easy to see how an attempted analysis of agency could become opaque and unspecific. By conceptualising

agency in terms of networks, the precise identification of any particular agentic component could be lost amidst thickets of relational “hybridity”.⁸⁴ Furthermore, if we assume that “everything is defined purely by its relations and that the world is nothing but the total system of these relations” then we reduce things “to their mutual effects on one another, since there is no ‘substance’ [...] behind a thing’s action”. In short, one “loses all sight of the difference between what a thing is and what it does”.⁸⁵ Such a relational approach risks neglecting the materiality – the physical properties – of objects.⁸⁶ More broadly, a problem with thinking about events and objects as being “composed of a “correlation” of occurrences” is that the connections being described may be a “by-product of the procedure of such comparison”.⁸⁷ In other words, a perceived relation may be the result of an observer’s viewpoint rather than an independent actuality.

These objections are substantial but not insurmountable. By way of conclusion, I want to offer a final example which, firstly, illustrates the general approach to spatial agency I am advocating and, secondly, serves to mitigate some of these criticisms. A discussion of spatial agency, while complex, is not by necessity unspecific, or negligent of the material, or entirely framed by a viewer’s analytical perspective. In a later section of *Travels in Europe*, Starke explains the challenges of travelling around Sicily:

No regular post-roads having yet been established, Travellers (Pedestrians excepted) are under the necessity of going from place to place throughout the Island, either in a Lettiga, or on mules. A Lettiga, the national carriage, holds two persons; and is, in shape, something like the body of a Vis-à-vis. This Vehicle, provided with strong poles, resembling those of a Sedan-chair, is carried by very powerful porter-mules, as the body of a travelling carriage was, in past times, conveyed over the Mont-Cenis. Two mules go before, and one behind, accompanied by a muleteer on foot, armed with a stick, ten or twelve feet long, to guide the mules; and another muleteer mounted, and riding at the head of the Cavalcade. A Lettiga is not usually furnished with cushions to sit upon; but has a dirty lining, and a gaudy outside: it goes up and down every hill, however steep, and makes the neighbourhood resound with mule-bells; which are hung, in a triangular shape, on the back of the leading mule. The motion of a Lettiga is fatiguing, and apt to produce drowsiness; and, moreover, the country cannot be seen to advantage in these Vehicles: neither can Travellers, thus conveyed, stop when they wish it; as the mule-bells prevent the muleteers from hearing, when called to; and besides this, a chair is indispensable for getting out of, or

into, or Lettiga. The noise of the mule-bells may likewise prove an inconvenience, from impeding conversation.⁸⁸

The passage defines a unique location – the Sicilian hillsides – by describing the topographical features, fauna and cultural practices which together characterise the physical space and travellers' engagements with it. It precedes a detailed itinerary which further specifies the climatological conditions, the extent and emplacement of notable sites, the distances between them and so on; in other words, it sets out the spatial characteristics of the area. To talk about spatial agency here, we first need to set aside the less helpful models I have previously outlined. These spatial characteristics are not irresistible forces which generate fixed outcomes. The steep hills, awkward terrain and distances do not straightforwardly compel the travellers and muleteers to behave in certain ways. Neither is the space wholly a cultural product, conceived by human observation and shaped by human action. The topography cannot be understood solely in terms of the people who traverse and interpret it. And while it is tempting to combine these perspectives in a recursive fashion – to see the landscape as both affective on and affected by human activity – this is not fully satisfactory either. Such an account can preserve anthropocentric notions of agency, and risks imprecision by presenting space as simultaneously prescriptive and malleable.

Instead, the approach to spatial agency I explain here seeks to understand the coincidence of agencies at a specific site. It characterises the Sicilian hillside as an assembly of agents and actions. By Starke's account, there are numerous agents involved: technical objects (the carriage, the mule-bells, the guiding sticks); animals (the mules); people (the traveller herself, the muleteers, fellow passengers); topographical features (the hills, the terrain surface). The preceding paragraph mentions others: the air temperature, the flora, the presence of malaria. These various elements all *do* something: they modify a state of affairs; they have effects and can thus be described as agents. Moreover, the agents intersect and affect one another in a network. We might note, for example, the effects of the bells on the muleteers; the hill gradients on the mules; the carriage materials and design on the travellers and so on. These agentic networks also extend within and beyond the immediate vicinity, at smaller and larger scales. Individual components, such as the carriage and the malarial regions, are themselves comprised of other constituent agents. In the case of the carriage, Starke mentions poles and upholstery; in the swamps, constituent agents include the malaria-causing parasites themselves, the mosquitoes which serve as vectors, pools of standing water and so on.⁸⁹ And at the wider scale objects and events on the hillside are involved in far-reaching networks of

actions and effects which we might describe, for example, as weather patterns, economic exchanges, or transport systems. Pickering's language of the "dance of agency" is useful here: it encapsulates the mutable interplay of agencies at a given site.

In short, the material conditions present in the space have cumulative effects: we can speak of spatial agency in the sense that there are various agents present in *this* space. And, crucially, this spatial agency is also historically particular because it comes together at a specific moment. It might seem an impossible analytical challenge to disentangle the individual agents from one another: how to separate, in this case, the effects of the terrain, the mules, the muleteers and the bells. But trying to unravel these components fully – as if they can be entirely divorced from the network which contextualises them – is not the objective. Instead, we are seeking to understand precisely that entanglement of different agencies at a location. When we consider how these objects all interact – with each other and with the people present – we can understand the space as a coincidence and interconnection of constituent agents and actions. We can speak, in sum, about the spatial agency of this site.

In the light of this brief example, let us revisit the earlier objections to a relational approach to space and agency. Firstly, it is difficult to argue that the proposals about spatial agency presented here are inattentive to the material; on the contrary, they are founded upon the physicality of material objects. Nor is it persuasive to suggest that agencies are homogenised into a hybridised mass and are therefore completely indistinguishable. They are interrelated and entangled for sure, but the example shows that affective components which contribute to the wider effects of a space *can* be discerned and labelled. Finally, it is problematic to argue that the interconnections themselves are merely the product of an observer's viewpoint. This view returns us to anthropocentric theories of agency: it builds an interpretative perspective around a hypothetical observer and assumes any agencies identified are largely the product of his or her analysis. The approach set out here, by contrast, seeks to expand ideas about agency whilst also retaining a realist position - namely that "the external world exists independently of human awareness".⁹⁰ The question of whether we are able to comprehend that reality fully is a different philosophical problem; but various sides of that debate are compatible with the agentic ideas set out here – they differ only on the extent to which we might be able to discern all or most of the agencies present at a site.

To conclude, then, spatial agency refers to the emplacement of affective elements; the gathering of agencies at a particular site and moment. And because these specific agencies are constantly shifting and realigning in different times and places, it is misleading to speak of spatial agency as prescriptive or deterministic. Space does not have agency in itself; it is not a totemic, singular “force”. But agencies are always spatial. If we are to engage with some of the most fundamental and difficult questions in historical study – why events happen and what effects things have – then we need to recall the spatialised nature of human and non-human action, and to consider how agencies coincide at specific spaces and times.

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⁸⁸ Starke, *Travels in Europe*, 405.

⁸⁹ See Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 19-53; Sutter, “Nature’s Agents”; J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁹⁰ Harman, *Object-Orientated Ontology*, 10.