

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making space for resistance: the spatiality of popular protest in the late medieval Southern Low Countries

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Abstract

Using several cities in the late medieval Southern Low Countries as a case-study, this article deals with the relation between urban space and different forms of political protest. Urban commoners were aware of the powerful symbolism of certain places in the late medieval city and used that to their advantage during large-scale revolts. Yet the use of space was not limited to the dramatic occupations during these revolts. This article uncovers a wide range of strategies and tactics that common people used to act within given spaces to make their resistance possible. A spatial analysis of several instances of large- and smaller-scale resistance shows that space was intrinsically connected with how and when any form of resistance developed in late medieval cities. As such, the article aims to contribute to the literature on the importance of space in late medieval urban politics, in which attention to smaller-scale practices has been very limited.

The topography of revolt is essential for understanding changes in popular insurgency during the Middle Ages, yet the literature on the spatiality of late medieval revolts has long presented a one-dimensional view on the meaning of space.¹ We know that space was contested during large-scale revolts in which governments and rebels tried to occupy certain spaces in the city in order to control them. However, theoretical works and studies on other periods or other themes relating to urban space in the Middle Ages show that space could be manipulated in more subtle ways, in turn suggesting that the physical occupation of spaces was not the only way space could matter in popular medieval protest. This article will look at the multidimensional spatiality of different forms of resistance in late medieval cities. It will show that space was intrinsically connected with how and when any form of resistance developed in late medieval cities, as common people did not simply voice their discontent; they also created a space for their resistance.

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¹ S. Cohn, 'The topography of medieval popular protest', *Social History*, 44 (2019), 389–411.

Research on the importance of space in late medieval politics has long taken the symbolic meaning of certain places in the city as a starting point. Such research often builds on Henri Lefebvre's three-dimensional analytic framework of space to analyse these revolts as a contest over (the control of) space.² However, the focus on large groups occupying symbolic urban sites favours one of Lefebvre's three constitutional parts of space, namely *l'espace vécu* (representational space). This category of space is found in the symbolic meaning of sites and in how people think about certain places. The other constituents of space in Lefebvre's theory are *le conçu* (representations of space) – which refers to how space is theoretically designed with laws, regulations and in maps – and *le perçu* or spatial practices – which refers to how people use space in everyday practice.³ These three constituents of space are in a dynamic relationship, and they constantly reassert and subvert each other. Certainly, research into the spatial aspects of medieval revolts has not ignored the buildup or practical use of symbolic sites, for they were formative for the very symbolism used to explain the use of space during the revolt. Nevertheless, the focus on the symbolic aspect of space as a starting point has led to a one-dimensional view of medieval spaces of contestation. Researchers of other periods have, however, stressed that space was more than simply symbolic. Katrina Navickas has stated that a focus solely on symbolism more closely relates to the concept of 'place' rather than to that of 'space'.⁴ To examine space itself, historians have to include practice to a greater extent; as Michel de Certeau pointed out, practice creates the difference between space and place.⁵ Navickas has therefore called upon historians to examine protest within a more nuanced conception of space. As Susanne Rau notes, such a multidimensional conception of space has already proved its worth for research into street life in the pre-modern period, and remains an important way forward for spatial research.⁶

To add to the discussion of the importance of symbolic sites for late medieval urban protest, I will focus on *l'espace perçu* or spatial practices. This article will shift attention away from the dramatic alterations and occupations of space during large-scale revolts, as research on large-scale urban revolts is abundant and has amply shown how commoners used collective actions during conflicts with the city government, or with the duke or count. Instead, the article will follow a recent shift in the historiography of late medieval popular protest and will discuss smaller episodes of contestation in order to shed light on more subtle changes and uses of

²M. Boone, 'Urban space and social protest: the long tradition of social unrest in Flemish cities during the late Middle Ages (late thirteenth to early sixteenth century)', in G. Fouquet *et al.* (eds.), *Social Functions of Urban Spaces through the Ages* (Ostfildern, 2018), 111–25; an exception is the recent volume: M. van Gelder and C. Judde de Larivière (eds.), *Popular Politics in an Aristocratic Republic: Political Conflict and Social Contestation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Venice* (London and New York, 2020), especially the chapter by M. van Gelder, 'Protest in the piazza: contested space in early modern Venice', 129–57.

³H. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris, 1974); for a theoretical reflection on Lefebvre in historical research, see P. Arnade, M. Howell and W. Simons, 'Fertile spaces: the productivity of urban space in northern Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002), 515–48.

⁴K. Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016), 15.

⁵'L'espace est un lieu pratiqué' (space is a practised place), M. de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, vol. I: *Arts de faire* (Paris, 1990), 173.

⁶S. Rau, 'Street life in early modern Europe: urban form, representation, discourse, and perception', *Journal of Urban History*, 38 (2012), 369–401, at 400.

space.⁷ Historians have particularly begun to look at cities marked by an absence of large-scale revolts for examples of other ways in which commoners could express their discontent or political ideas.⁸

The limited research on small-scale resistance in late medieval cities often turns to the work of anthropologist James C. Scott for a theoretical framework. In his research, Scott brought out the myriad ways in which peasants resisted their rulers in twentieth-century Malaysia and Vietnam.⁹ However, his distinction between a ‘public transcript’, the official political discourse that was dominated by the ruling elites, and a ‘hidden transcript’, through which peasants could utter their discontent, does not apply to the late medieval urban situation.¹⁰ First, the power relations in late medieval cities were more complex and multilayered than Scott’s dichotomy of those who ruled versus those who were dominated.¹¹ Second, John Watts has shown that the discourses of what would be ‘hidden’ and ‘public’ transcripts in the late Middle Ages coincided, as commoners used concepts similar to those found in formal political communication for their subversive speech.¹² Patrick Lantschner concludes that the very concept of political protest was effectively a part of the public transcript because conflict was an integral part of late medieval politics.¹³ That does not mean, however, that Scott’s theory should be discarded entirely for research on late medieval resistance, as it does make us aware of differences in resistant actions of common people according to the broader setting. Scott did not only distinguish between the hidden and the public transcript in a discursive sense; he also asserted that resistance primarily developed in places that were shielded from the eyes of the rulers. These ‘social sites’, as he called them, could be physically hidden places frequented only by commoners, but they could also exist as separate spaces created by commoners using a coded language that was unknown to the rulers.¹⁴ Given that conflict and resistance could take place in the public space of late medieval cities, it was not confined to such social sites. The concept does, however, invite us to examine the spatial context in which resistance originated and developed and how it affected the practice of ‘public resistance’.

Here, I focus specifically on the Low Countries, a densely populated and strongly urbanized region during the late Middle Ages. The region consisted of several powerful and wealthy cities where significant social protest occurred. The cities were not fully independent city-states, as in northern Italy, but they did often gain much autonomy through ‘liberties’ (*vrijheden*) bestowed by the dukes and

⁷An inspiring case of such a micro-approach is H. Hermant, ‘Les lieux de la révolte des Barretines: de la place publique à l’espace public?’, in J.C. d’Amico and P. Bravo (eds.), *Territoires, lieux et espaces de la révolte: XIVe–XVIIIe siècle* (Dijon, 2017), 191–206.

⁸For instance, P. Lantschner, ‘Voices of the people in a city without revolts: Lille in the later Middle Ages’, in J. Dumolyn et al. (eds.), *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe: Communication and Popular Politics* (Turnhout, 2014), 73–88; C. Judde de Larivière, ‘L’ordre contesté. Formes, objets et discours de l’action politique des gens ordinaires à Venise (XVe–XVIe siècles)’, in *ibid.*, 215–32.

⁹J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

¹⁰J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

¹¹Lantschner, ‘Voices of the people’, 76–7; J. Watts, ‘Popular voices in England’s wars of the roses, c. 1445–c. 1485’, in Dumolyn et al. (eds.), *The Voices of the People*, 107–22, at 114–15.

¹²Watts, ‘Popular voices’, 115.

¹³Lantschner, ‘Voices of the people’, 77.

¹⁴Scott, *Domination*, 120.

the counts, who depended on the wealth of the cities for their wars.¹⁵ The often conflicted dynamic between the prince, city government and urban dwellers led to ever-changing negotiations over taxes and political accountability. The powerful craft guilds frequently revolted against high taxes and alleged corruption by the urban governors (the *schepenen* or aldermen). Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the craft guilds gradually succeeded in making their way into the city governments, although these did remain strongly oligarchic. In the fifteenth century, the powerful Burgundian dukes increasingly weakened the autonomy of the cities in their centralizing efforts, particularly by broadening their influence in the urban governments and levying heavy taxes. This led to a series of large-scale revolts, in which the cities were eventually beaten down.¹⁶ This context thus provides an excellent opportunity to study urban popular protest. Urban dwellers were very aware of political conflicts and were familiar with the concept of resistance to advance their own ideas and demands.

The focus on large revolts in previous research can be partly explained by the sources researchers often use to study revolts: namely chronicles, whose authors often only described extraordinary events. In this article, ‘revolt’ indicates large-scale collective actions often organized by existing organizations such as craft guilds or neighbourhood societies. Furthermore, revolts often referred to military practices, such as during warlike events like the English Peasants’ Revolt or the Ciompi Revolt. ‘Resistance’, then, will be used here to indicate smaller-scale acts of protests, mostly performed by individuals or small groups. In contrast with revolts, resistance did not mobilize large masses and did not necessarily target institutional reforms. The study of more everyday forms of resistance requires other types of sources, such as criminal records and reports of investigations into the political ‘misbehaviour’ of citizens. These provide insights into the types of public discontent that were perceived as punishable because they were illicit and disturbed the social order. The combination of these findings with what is known about the symbolic meaning of space will demonstrate that large-scale revolts did not erupt out of nowhere. Rather, urban commoners gradually made protest possible for themselves because they created space for their resistance.

Symbolic space in revolt

Late medieval revolts have long been treated as violent outbursts of an emotional crowd. This narrative was largely based on ideological presumptions and followed the discourse established by (elite) chronicle writers. However, the classic view has been refuted by researchers who have re-evaluated violence as a way of communicating grievances and who have looked for patterns in the myriad revolts throughout the period.¹⁷ For the county of Flanders, historians have discerned a ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ tradition of revolt, the former indicating revolts of cities against their princes

¹⁵B. Blondé, M. Boone and A. van Bruaene (eds.), *City and Society in the Low Countries, 1100–1600* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹⁶J. Dumolyn and J. Haemers, ‘Patterns of urban rebellion in medieval Flanders’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005), 369–93.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

and the latter indicating revolts that happened within towns.¹⁸ Furthermore, researchers began looking at who protested and why they did so. It became clear that most revolts did not consist of a large group of the 'working class', but rather involved alliances between different social groups.¹⁹ Protesters did not enact violence aimlessly but rather directed it specifically to make their demands clear.²⁰ Although the exact grievances of the revolts depended on the specific socio-political and economic context, most can be traced to two main problems: financial excesses and corruption. Over time, the demands of revolters gradually shifted from accountability of the rulers to representation in the city government.²¹

Spatially, as well, historians have supported these findings. In a more literal geographic sense, a spatial approach served to examine the social strata, networks and alliances of rebels. For instance, Alessandro Stella has demonstrated that the Ciompi Revolt of 1378 was, in fact, a revolt of different social spaces, from the slums where the Ciompi lived to the wealthy city centre.²² Likewise, a spatial approach to social networks has been used to study clusters of rebels and relationships across and between towns during revolts.²³ Other historians have looked at the spatial layout of revolts to determine the grievances of the protesters. Following Lefebvre's definition of space and earlier works highlighting the 'power of space', historians focused on the symbolism of certain places to explain why they were the focus of contestation.²⁴ Indeed, urban space could be highly symbolic. For instance, when commoners assembled in the market square with their weapons in a so-called *wapeninghe* (armament), they used the symbolism of that space to state their claims.²⁵ Town and market halls were adorned with symbolic architecture and shaped the space of the market square in which they were located.²⁶ Together, these spaces conveyed the urban identity. During conflicts over participation in the urban government or the struggle within the county, craft guilds would target specific, relevant spaces of power, often the city hall, as focal points of protest. In 1378, for example, during a conflict over the city's finances, the craftsmen of Leuven gathered at the city hall with their weapons

¹⁸M. Boone and M. Prak, 'Patricians and burghers: the great and the little tradition of urban revolt in the Low Countries', in K. Davids and J. Lucassen (eds.), *A Miracle Mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge, 1995), 99–134.

¹⁹P. Lantschner, 'Revolts and the political order of cities in the late Middle Ages', *Past & Present*, 225 (2014), 3–46, at 11.

²⁰V. Challet, 'Violence as a political language. The uses and misuses of violence in late medieval French and English popular rebellions', in J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schoenaers (eds.), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (London, 2017), 279–91, at 283.

²¹Dumolyn and Haemers, 'Patterns of urban rebellion', 375.

²²A. Stella, 'Les Ciompi à l'assaut des beaux quartiers', in d'Amico and Bravo (eds.), *Territoires*, 191–206.

²³Cohn, 'The topography', 389.

²⁴M. Boone and M. Howell (eds.), *The Power of Space in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Cities of Italy, Northern France and the Low Countries* (Turnhout, 2013).

²⁵P. Arnade, 'Crowds, banners, and the market place: symbols of defiance and defeat during the Ghent War of 1452–1453', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 24 (1994), 471–97, at 474.

²⁶C. Billen, 'Dire le bien commun dans l'espace public: matérialité épigraphique et monumentale du bien commun dans les villes des Pays-Bas, à la fin du Moyen Âge', in E. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A. Van Bruaene (eds.), *De Bono Communi. The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th–16th c.)* (Turnhout, 2010), 71–88.

and threw the aldermen accused of corruption out of the first-floor windows.²⁷ However, defenestration was not the norm and most armed gatherings were not as violent. Rebels often only occupied the streets, not the official buildings of power. After all, their primary goal was to threaten the government with their numbers and military power.²⁸ The aim of such actions was the possession of these spaces and the power they symbolized.²⁹

The contestation over these spaces also played out during processions and 'Joyous Entries', in which the parties involved played with the symbolism of the spaces through which the procession passed. During an *auweet*, a military parade of the craft guilds, in Bruges in 1488, the craftsmen mapped their route to include spaces important to them and the city.³⁰ In 1478, the Joyous Entry of Archduke Maximilian of Austria in Antwerp involved a number of plays by several organizations of the city (craft guilds, nations, etc.). These guilds not only staged the plays at important places, such as the city walls or a former entry gate, but they also used these spaces in their plays to convey specific messages to the duke.³¹ The carefully chosen routes through the city of such processions were usually decorated with symbols of the city and craft guilds. Processions have consequently been analysed as lenses into the identities of the princes, city governments and craft guilds, and also as reflections of their ambitions and agendas.³²

Social sites

The occupation of symbolic sites did not come from nowhere. Chronicles narrating these events during revolts often mention in passing that the craftsmen met beforehand in their own houses. For example, *The Diary of Ghent*, one of the main chronicles describing the Ghent revolt of the 1450s, references specific meeting sites of the craft guilds, where they met prior to assembling at the Friday Market with their arms and banners.³³ These meeting places are reminiscent of Scott's concept of a 'social site'. But were they indeed such spaces, secluded from surveillance, where groups of peers could gather and discuss freely? It will become clear that the sites were accessible to different social groups, and speech was often restricted. It is important to note that meetings and discussions as such were not necessarily illegal.

²⁷J. Haemers, 'Governing and gathering about the common welfare of the town: the petitions of the craft guilds of Leuven, 1378', in R. Oliva Herrero et al. (eds.), *La comunidad medieval como esfera pública* (Seville, 2014), 153–69, at 159.

²⁸J. Haemers, 'A moody community? Emotion and ritual in late medieval urban revolts', in E. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A. Van Bruaene, *Emotions in the Heart of the City (14th–16th Century)* (Turnhout, 2005), 63–81, at 68–74.

²⁹M. Boone, 'Urban space and political conflict in late medieval Flanders', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002), 621–40, at 621.

³⁰E. Lecuppre-Desjardin and J. Haemers, 'Conquérir et reconquérir l'espace urbain. Le triomphe de la collectivité sur l'individu dans le cadre de la révolte brugeoise de 1488', in C. Deligne and C. Billen (eds.), *Voisinages, coexistences, appropriations. Groupes sociaux et territoires urbains du Moyen Âge au 16^e siècle* (Turnhout, 2007), 119–42.

³¹K. Overlaet, 'The "joyous entry" of Archduke Maximilian into Antwerp (13 January 1478): an analysis of a "most elegant and dignified" dialogue', *Journal of Medieval History*, 44 (2018), 231–49.

³²E. Lecuppre-Desjardin, 'Parcours festifs et enjeux de pouvoirs dans les villes des anciens Pays-Bas bourguignons au XVe siècle', *Histoire urbaine*, 9 (2004), 29–45.

³³V. Fris (ed.), *Dagboek van Gent van 1447 tot 1470* (pt 1) (Ghent, 1901), 23.

Rather, they were criminalized by governments when they felt they could cause ‘uproar’.

The members of the craft guilds were not all peers; they were subjected to a certain social and political hierarchy within the guild itself as well as between different craft guilds. Throughout the fourteenth century, the guild masters formed a new middle class and monopolized the guild leadership. In several cities, they were the ones who took part in the urban government, effectively becoming a sort of ‘new elite’ in the city, relatively wealthy but distinct from the rich burghers or ‘patricians’ who had always monopolized urban politics.³⁴ A hierarchy also existed between different craft guilds. Generally, the deans of important craft guilds, such as the weavers, represented the guilds on the bench of the aldermen.³⁵ Yet commoners did not hesitate to use subversive speech against their guild leaders. For instance, in 1470, three weavers were punished by the urban court of Mechelen for trying to start an argument during the meeting of their craft. According to the sentence, they had tried to ‘disrupt the unity of the craft guild’.³⁶ In a similar setting in 1445 in Antwerp, Mathijs vanden Stalle was sentenced because he had proposed new leaders for the craft guild, demonstrating that he disliked the current leadership and wanted to replace them.³⁷ It is clear that there was little room for open discussion during these meetings; therefore, these places were not social sites as Scott defines them. They did, however, act as spaces in which resistance and revolt developed and political ideas and opinions were decided upon, before being brought into the open.

Meetings and assemblies were an essential part of late medieval revolts. Public assemblies in market squares were often preceded by more private meetings of the craft guilds or neighbourhood communities. However, insurgents regularly referred to both kinds of gatherings with the same terminology in Dutch, namely *vergaderinghe maken* (‘to hold a meeting’). By describing the revolts as ‘meetings’, the insurgents indicated that they thought of them as legitimate actions, for the craft guilds often had the privilege to gather freely.³⁸ The terminology also indicates that, for late medieval rebels, secluded meetings and open assemblies in the market were connected. An inquiry commissioned by the Burgundian duchess into the events of a revolt in Ypres in 1477 sheds light on the many secluded meetings held by several groups throughout the revolt. For instance, the revolt leaders met in their own houses or in the headquarters of the *Besant*, an officer charged with keeping peace and justice in the city. Smaller groups of craftsmen often came to the market to ask their leaders for a secluded space to meet in and were usually

³⁴Dumolyn and Haemers, ‘Patterns of urban rebellion’, 374, 379.

³⁵B. Blondé *et al.*, ‘Living together in the city: social relationships between norm and practice’, in Blondé, Boone and Bruaenel (eds.), *City and Society*, 70.

³⁶City Archives Mechelen (CAM), Judicature des échevins (JDE), no. 1, fols. 117r–118r, 22 May 1469; see also *ibid.*, fol. 66r, 8 Apr. 1448; Felix Archives Antwerp (FAA), Correctieboeken (CB), no. 234, fol. 3r, 11 Feb. 1416.

³⁷FAA, CB, no. 234, fol. 81r, 18 Jun. 1445.

³⁸J. Haemers, ‘Injury and remedy: the language of contention in the southern Low Countries, 13–16th centuries’, in B. Eersels and J. Haemers (eds.), *Words and Deeds: Shaping Urban Politics from below in Late Medieval Europe* (Turnhout 2020), 141–62, at 143.

offered a room in the house of the leaders.³⁹ This did not necessarily mean that the craftsmen had no other space in which to meet. Rather, by asking their deans for a meeting room, the craftsmen were requesting permission to hold a meeting. The craft guilds were convinced that they had the right to gather freely, as long as the meetings happened according to custom. In other words, the guild leaders upheld the right to gather freely with other members of the craft guild.⁴⁰

The seclusion of the meeting space was important. Several testimonies in the Ypres inquiry recall how attendees could hear discussions through an open window.⁴¹ In a different case, craftsmen succeeded in attending a meeting of patricians to which they were not supposed to have access.⁴² However, meeting places did not always have to be inside. In Den Bosch, in the northern part of Brabant, citizens held illicit meetings in the graveyard. In 1525, Duke Karel V repeatedly forbade meetings of commoners ‘that they would call *kerchhoff* (graveyard)’.⁴³ The sources from Den Bosch also mention other ecclesiastical sites such as churches and monasteries, which corresponds to Patrick Lantschner’s findings that the city government of Lille repeatedly forbade gambling specifically in parish churches, which he interpreted as proof of illicit meetings held there.⁴⁴ Sacred sites gave citizens a certain protection from secular governments. From the early Middle Ages, they provided refuge for convicts and criminals who wanted to escape the jurisdiction of the urban government.⁴⁵ Furthermore, monasteries were known to commoners as sites of assembly. In several cities in the late medieval Low Countries, monasteries served as intermittent meeting spaces for large groups of the craft guilds during regular processes of political participation, namely when urban councils asked for their opinion on certain policy matters.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most obvious secluded meeting space in the late Middle Ages was the tavern, which has been analysed as a political space where a variety of people met and where contentious politics manifested in the form of subversive speech.⁴⁷ In Ypres, after the revolt of 1477, several witnesses testified that they heard a group

³⁹J. Justice, ‘La répression à Ypres après la révolte de 1477: documents faisant suite à l’épisode de l’histoire d’Ypres sous le règne de Marie de Bourgogne’, *Annales de la Société d’Émulation de Bruges*, 41 (1891), 7–68, at 24–6.

⁴⁰Charters proclaimed after a revolt in Leuven in 1378 explicitly stated the condition that meetings happened according to custom, meaning with the approval of the guild leaders: Haemers, ‘Governing and gathering’, 166.

⁴¹Justice, ‘La répression’, 47.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 26–7.

⁴³N.H.L. Van den Heuvel, *De Ambachtsgilden van ‘s-Hertogenbosch voor 1629: Rechtsbronnen van het Bedrijfsleven en het Gildewezen* (Utrecht, 1946), 473.

⁴⁴Lantschner, ‘Voices of the people’, 80–1.

⁴⁵B.H. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint, and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1999); S. McSheffrey, *Seeking Sanctuary: Crime, Mercy, and Politics in English Courts, 1400–1550* (Oxford, 2017).

⁴⁶In Ghent, for example: H. Serneels, “‘Dat elc ghehouden es ter maerct te gane’: politieke participatie in de stedelijke ruimte van vijftiende-eeuws Gent’, *Stadsgeschiedenis*, 14 (2019), 87–103, at 93–4.

⁴⁷J.R. Brown, ‘Drinking houses and the politics of surveillance in pre-industrial Southampton’, in B.A. Kümin and J.R. Brown (eds.), *Political Space in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Aldershot, 2009), 61–80; C.D. Liddy, ‘Cultures of surveillance in late medieval English towns: the monitoring of speech and the fear of revolt’, in Firnhaber-Baker and Schoenaers (eds.), *The Routledge History Handbook*, 311–29. For the tavern as space of intersection, see B.A. Hanawalt, ‘The host, the law, and the ambiguous space of medieval London

of journeymen of the weavers had assembled at two instances, first at a tavern called 'The Bear' and later at 'The Little Fox', a few streets away from the cloth hall in Ypres. The journeymen used three different tables and were apparently planning on holding other meetings there. When questioned, they said they were only drinking away the profits from selling a large piece of cloth.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the importance ascribed to the event by the investigators indicates the common function of taverns as places for (illicit) meetings. In Tournai, the urban government regularly forbade all craftsmen to gather 'at taverns and elsewhere' with more than four, seven or ten people. Not coincidentally, they issued these ordinances during times of revolt in Tournai or surrounding cities, such as in 1328 or 1366.⁴⁹ Furthermore, because people from all social strata met in taverns, they were a place where conflict and subversive speech could arise. In Mechelen in 1442, a certain Hennan Luytens met Claes Waryns, who was an appraiser (*waardeerder*) of poultry for the city, in the tavern 'The Swan' and took the opportunity to settle a conflict. Hennan accused Claes of prejudice against his mother because Claes had confiscated one of her birds. He went on to threaten Claes, stating that he would not tolerate the supposed prejudice, 'even if it meant he would have to pay a fine of 100 raders'.⁵⁰ At the time, such a hefty fine was only given for grave offences. According to the sentence, Hennan thus threatened Claes by alluding to the gravity of the offence he would commit against him.

As meeting places, taverns were ideal breeding grounds for political ideas that could subsequently be disseminated. Political songs, for example, are in the sources often found in relation to a tavern. In 1489, Jan Blynde of Antwerp was punished for singing 'indecent songs' about Maximilian of Austria in a tavern. At the time, Maximilian was both emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, to which Brabant belonged, and the new duke of the Burgundian Netherlands.⁵¹ Only a year before, in 1488, Maximilian had been captured in Bruges, after a large conflict with different cities in Flanders and Brabant.⁵² Although Antwerp chose Maximilian's side in the conflict, not all residents of Antwerp agreed with the city's stance, and secluded and semi-private spaces provided a safe space for people to speak their minds. In Tournai in 1478, for example, a barber was punished because he criticized the urban government and the distribution of salt in the city in front of multiple people in his barbershop.⁵³ Similarly, a woman brothel-keeper was sentenced for talking badly about the prince and, in another instance, clients of a brothel slandered soldiers of the prince's army.⁵⁴ Such semi-public spaces could easily turn into loci of discontent.

taverns', in B.A. Hanawalt and D. Wallace (eds.), *Medieval Crime and Social Control* (Minneapolis, 1999), 204–23, at 204–5.

⁴⁸Justice, 'La répression', 39–41.

⁴⁹L. Verriest, *Les luttes sociales et le contrat d'apprentissage à Tournai jusqu'en 1424* (Brussels, 1913), 22.

⁵⁰CAM, JDE, no. 1, fol. 16r, 11 Oct. 1441.

⁵¹FAA, CB, no. 234, fol. 177r, 13 Dec. 1488.

⁵²See J. Haemers, *De Strijd om het Regentschap over Filips de Schone. Opstand, Facties en Geweld in Brugge, Gent en Ieper (1482–1488)* (Ghent, 2014).

⁵³J. Nicolay, *Kalendrier des guerres de Tournai (1477–1479)*, ed. F. Hennebert (Tournai, 1853), 393.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 390, 401–3.

Changing space in revolt: *stratégies*

Resistance did not stay indoors, however. Several punishments by urban governments show how commoners effectively caused ‘uproar’ when they brought their contentious ideas outside the tavern. In Antwerp, for example, Lippyn de Keyser was punished in 1401 because he had ‘made a run with strong words’ (*oploep ghedaen met fellen woerden*) against members of the patriciate, ‘in taverns and elsewhere’.⁵⁵ *Oploep doen*, ‘making a run’, was a term used to describe very public acts of resistance where people came together to create a commotion.⁵⁶ Once resistance moved beyond safe meeting spaces, the spatial context changed drastically. Rebels no longer found themselves in a controllable environment with a limited audience. Instead, they had to deal with the consequences of acting in a public space, and as such put themselves at risk of repression. During revolts, however, when they assembled armed on squares and in the streets, craftsmen were able to turn public spaces into safer environments, in which the government could not as easily react to their protests. Thus, commoners made a space for public resistance.

The theoretical framework developed by Michel de Certeau is useful for analysing such subversions of space.⁵⁷ In his *L'invention du quotidien: arts de faire*, he states that people shape the city by moving through it and using its spaces, and in doing so tell spatial stories ‘that do not get written down’. In short, people shaped and altered space by using it.⁵⁸ The translation of his work into English as ‘the practice of everyday life’ unfortunately omits the subtleties of the original title. De Certeau’s *Arts de faire* does not only point to daily practice, but also to *the art of doing something*. According to de Certeau, people skilfully shape their surroundings with their practice. He distinguishes two versions of spatial use: *stratégies* and *tactiques* (strategies and tactics). Strategies consist of thought-out designs and organizations of space, mostly used by those in power. Tactics, on the other hand, are everyday uses of space, through which people make room for themselves and appropriate space. Tactics are to be found in common routines and consist of chancy, sudden plays with space which invert and alter it.⁵⁹ De Certeau describes the main difference between the two spatially by stating that, whereas strategies served to create new spaces, ‘tactics had no space themselves but that of others’.⁶⁰

Translated to late medieval political conflict, strategies involved the official organization of space defined by the urban government. The demarcation of squares and the use of symbolism and grandeur to create political and ritual spaces were clear strategies to organize space. Although the concept of *stratégies* is mostly used to designate the spatial organizations by governments, I argue that the occupation of these spaces by craft guilds during revolts can also be seen as a strategy. When craft guilds took over a market square during a revolt, they made themselves

⁵⁵J. Van Den Branden, ‘Clementeynboeck’, *Antwerpsch Archievenblad*, 25 (1888), 101–465, at 396.

⁵⁶The terminology used to describe protest is discussed in Haemers, ‘Injury and remedy’, 144–8.

⁵⁷De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*; translated into English as M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1988).

⁵⁸F. Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 138.

⁵⁹De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, 57–61; see also Tonkiss, *Space, the City*, 138–9.

⁶⁰‘La tactique n’a pour lieu que celui de l’autre’, De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, 60.

the governing power of that space, albeit for a short period, and organized it in a distinctive way. The occupation of a market square with guild banners was, therefore, a strategic move with the goal of symbolically defining that space. The inquiry into the revolt in Ypres in 1477 sheds light on the effect of such strategies. In Ypres, leaders of the craft guilds strategically removed the flags of Mary of Burgundy from the headquarters of the *Besant* on the main market square. Additionally, the aldermen who usually held guard at the headquarters were ordered to move their guard to another house.⁶¹ Thus, the craft guilds appropriated the market square by moving the symbols of urban power away from the centre of the market. Afterwards, the headquarters of the *Besant* and the market became the main meeting spaces for the rebels. During the revolt, several groups assembled in the communal house to decide their strategy and demands, and craftsmen assembled in the market square to meet with their leaders.⁶²

Similarly, when craft guilds assembled in a market square with their weapons and banners during a *wapeninghe*, they did more than simply show their military power to the government; they also created a space for themselves to speak their minds and voice their discontent, with the aim of taking control of the official political discourse. This does not imply that individual craftsmen were free to shout or do whatever they wanted. During the Ghent revolt of 1452, for instance, the deans of the craft guilds decided that individual craftsmen could only speak with the permission of their deans.⁶³ Moreover, the display of the guild banners was as much an orchestrated strategy as ritual processions of the government. When the dean of one of the small craft guilds of Ghent deliberately left his guild banner in its guild house during a public rally on the Friday Market, he was publicly punished for his subversion of the craft guilds' unity. By not participating, he undermined the craft guilds' strategy to occupy the Friday Market.⁶⁴

In order to turn individual resistance into a successful political action, commoners knew that they had to mobilize a large number of people. The 1366 revolt in Namur is the perfect example of how rebels strategically tried to gather a crowd when a small conflict evolved into a larger one in the public space. The conflict started with a small yet violent confrontation between some disgruntled craftsmen and Francars Hudar, the collector of urban taxes on grain (*les loches*). The craftsmen accused Francars and his helpers of theft and confronted him one morning in the grain hall. There was a small altercation, during which one of the craftsmen tried to attack Francars with a dagger, one of Francars' journeymen fell to the ground and another craftsman threw a handful of grain in Francars' face, stating that he would rather have thrown rocks if he had any.⁶⁵ That evening, the conflict escalated when a small group of people came together at the grain hall and walked to Francars' house. The protesters decided to scale up the conflict. They tried to gather more people at the house of the tax collector, thereby giving them the upper hand and providing a 'safe space' to make their protest. Almost every witness

⁶¹Justice, 'La répression', 20–1.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³Fris (ed.), *Dagboek*, 184.

⁶⁴Peter Arnade noted the instance in Arnade, 'Crowds, banners', 486.

⁶⁵Tien, je te jeteroie plus volentiers d'une pière, si je l'avoie', J. Borgnet and S. Bormans (eds.), *Cartulaire de la commune de Namur: période des comtés particuliers, 1118–1430* (Namur, 1873), 79.

to the events stated that the leaders of the group wanted the entire craft guild to be gathered at these houses. Without the craftsmen present, they would do nothing.⁶⁶ Gathering the craftsmen in this instance can be seen as more than merely a matter of mobilization, but also as a way to make a far stronger stance against the alleged corruption of Francars. After all, the presence of a larger number of bystanders would allow the protesters to get a firmer and more lasting grip on the space surrounding the house, thereby giving them more room for contention without immediate punishment. Nevertheless, the urban government of Namur later ordered an inquiry into the events and punished the leaders of the conflict severely. The unrest was clearly perceived as a threat. Large-scale revolts ignited by frustration over imposed grain prices and taxes were not uncommon in this period, and the investigation shows that the government was worried that a small conflict could lead to a large-scale protest. Furthermore, the location of the conflict suggests that the Namurois knew that by gathering a large group at the house of the tax collector, their protest would be heard.

Changing space with resistance: *tactiques*

The incident in Namur in 1366 shows that citizens were aware they did not have the power to shape a space individually in order to protest successfully. For small-scale resistance, commoners had to resort to other ‘tactics’. *Tactiques*, according to de Certeau, are small, practically invisible, ways in which people using a certain space could – fleetingly – alter it.⁶⁷ De Certeau saw this mainly as part of leading one’s everyday life. Henrietta Moore, however, reads such tactics as ways to subvert norms and meaning through practice. Given that daily practices shaped the meaning of space, she argues that this meaning could be altered.⁶⁸ Resistance, then, happened by transgressing spatial customs. Again, the context of resistance dictated the tactics used by commoners to convey their points. For instance, criminal records frequently mention resistance occurring ‘in the presence of the law’, ‘in the presence of many good men’ or even ‘in the courtroom’ (*de vierschaar*). In this context, simply speaking up could be an act of resistance. In 1442, for example, Jan Wandelaert of Mechelen was sentenced because he had spoken up in the city’s court. In doing so, according to the sentence, he had wanted to get ‘justice above justice’.⁶⁹ By possibly airing his own ideas on the case, Jan transgressed norms because he undermined the authority of the aldermen. Challenging the aldermen’s dominance in this space was thus an act of resistance in itself. Moreover, the courtroom was a space where rebels and governors met to assert the latter’s authority. Transgressing the norm in that space was, therefore, a feared tactic.

It was not uncommon for people to be sentenced for commenting on a verdict or insulting a judge in the courtroom. In 1421, the aldermen of Antwerp sentenced Staes van den Kerthane because he had argued with the judges and implied that

⁶⁶ ‘Alons querre les fèvres et les charliers, car nous ne ferons riens sens eauz’, *ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁷ De Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien*, 60.

⁶⁸ H. Moore, ‘Bodies on the move: gender, power and material culture’, in H. Moore (ed.), *A Passion for Difference* (Bloomington, 1994), 71–85, 83.

⁶⁹ CAM, JDE, no. 1, fol. 34r, 24 Jan. 1443.

they did not know what they were doing.⁷⁰ Others regularly referred to aldermen as being untrustworthy or thieves.⁷¹ They undermined the judgement and character of the judges and did not respect their authority over the courtroom. Instead of respecting the space as one dominated by the government, in which commoners could do nothing but listen and speak when they were asked to, commoners created a ‘counter space’ with their resistance that changed the character of the space – for the slightest moment – to one of discussion and protest. Resistance ‘in the presence of the law’ followed similar patterns. By slandering governors or criticizing decisions in direct confrontation with them, commoners openly challenged their authority. In Mechelen in 1473, Joos de Schepper was fined for speaking harmful words about the city’s government in the presence of the aldermen.⁷² Similar sentences can be found in sources throughout the fifteenth century. Unfortunately, more explicit mentions of the spatial context of such instances of resistance are rare. The difference between the spatial context of the courtroom and the context implied by the term ‘in the presence of the law’ thus remains unclear. It could be an indication of a judicial space that was broader than the courtroom. For fifteenth-century Kampen, in the northern Netherlands, Edda Frankot found that public and private houses, such as inns, could serve as spaces for judicial transactions; as such, resistance ‘in the presence of the law’ might have occurred in a public or private house serving as legal space.⁷³ It seems that the exact location where resistance took place mattered less to medieval lawmakers than the presence of certain people. Still, its public character was aggravating because a public act could cause uproar and collective turmoil in the city.⁷⁴ Some sources specifically mention that acts of resistance happened in public (‘openbaerlic’) or ‘in the presence of many good men’ (‘in jegenwoirdigheit van vele goede lieden’).⁷⁵ It is important to note that we should interpret ‘public’ not as a strict place, but rather as a spatial context that related to the specific action of resistance. Shouting insults, for example, was a much more ‘public’ act of contention than saying them at a normal volume. Therefore, the ways in which commoners made their resistance public can also be considered tactics.

Urban commoners employed several tactics to make their resistance public. Easy-to-remember songs and poems, often originating in taverns, circulated widely in cities. In Venice, Claire Judde de Larivière has shown how such songs could serve as part of the mobilization of larger protest.⁷⁶ Written pamphlets and libels were

⁷⁰FAA, CB, no. 234, fol. 13v, 12 Jun. 1421.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, fol. 95r, 12 Nov. 1450; CAM, JDE, no. 1, fol. 66v, 12 May 1449.

⁷²CAM, JDE, no. 1, fol. 124r, Jun. 1453.

⁷³E. Frankot, ‘Legal business outside the courts: private and public houses as spaces of law in the fifteenth century’, in J.W. Armstrong and E. Frankot (eds.), *Cultures of Law in Urban Northern Europe, Scotland and its Neighbours c. 1350–c. 1650* (London, 2021), 173–91; for England, see Y. Kawana, ‘Trade, sociability and governance in an English incorporated borough: “formal” and “informal” worlds in Leicester, c. 1570–1640’, *Urban History*, 33 (2006), 324–49.

⁷⁴J. Haemers and C. Delameillieure, ‘Women and contentious speech in fifteenth-century Brabant’, *Continuity and Change*, 32 (2017), 323–47, at 334.

⁷⁵CAM, JDE, no. 1, fol. 66v, 12 May 1449; FAA, CB, no. 234, fol. 74v, 22 Jan. 1442.

⁷⁶C. Judde de Larivière, *La révolte des boules de neige: Murano face à Venise, 1511* (Paris, 2014), 10.

also common tools for spreading political ideas or criticism.⁷⁷ Commoners often taped these onto symbolic buildings or spread them around frequented spaces in the city. One of the best-known examples of the late medieval Low Countries was a pamphlet in Ghent posted in 1451, criticizing and threatening the aldermen, that was spread around the city hall.⁷⁸ In Venice, on the other hand, rebels chose frequented spaces such as the Rialto, the main shopping street.⁷⁹ In Antwerp in 1470, several libels were found at different places in the city: at the main graveyard, around a hospital and at a tavern. Christian Liddy has noted that church sites were often used for such libels because they served as spaces for political communication.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the only extant record of the Antwerp event is a lengthy ordinance threatening a severe punishment for those responsible.⁸¹ The content of the pamphlets, as well as the reasons why rebels chose these specific places, remain unknown. Nevertheless, when hanging these pamphlets, protesters altered the experience of the space for everyone who could see the bills.

A less anonymous, but perhaps more effective, means of making resistance public was making noise. Citizens employed well-known practices to disturb the public order. The practice of crying *alarm*, *commoengeroep* in Dutch or *le cri hahay* in Liégeois, could be used by citizens when crying for help during an attack.⁸² Rebels employed it as a way to cry out for rebellion, asking their neighbours for help because they felt they were wronged by the government.⁸³ Other tactics included sounding the bells on the belfry or drumming. In Leuven in 1378, for instance, citizens beat drums as a call to revolt against corrupt aldermen. Afterwards, the ducal charter that granted the rebels privileges and made amends contained a stipulation that, in return for these privileges, there would be no more armaments, carrying of banners in the market space or drumming on cups.⁸⁴ In den Bosch, the charter of 1512 explicitly stated that it was forbidden to hold meetings or to sound bells, to beat drums or make any other sign to start such a meeting.⁸⁵ Similarly, sounding the bells on the belfry or one of the churches was a tactic feared by the city officials. In Antwerp in 1485, the government tried to forbid the

⁷⁷J. Haemers and V. Vrancken, 'Libels in the city: bill casting in fifteenth-century Flanders and Brabant', *Medieval Low Countries*, 4 (2017), 165–87.

⁷⁸Fris (ed.), *Dagboek*, 129.

⁷⁹C. Judde de Larivière, 'Du broglio à rialto: cris et chuchotements dans l'espace public à Venise (XVIIe siècle)', in P. Boucheron and N. Offenstadt (eds.), *L'espace public au Moyen Âge: débats autour de Jürgen Habermas* (Paris, 2011), 119–30.

⁸⁰C.D. Liddy, 'Bill casting and political communication: a public sphere in late medieval English towns?', in J.A. Solórzano and B. Bolomburu Arizaga (eds.), *La gobernanza de la ciudad europea en la Edad Media* (Logroño, 2011), 447–61, 455–6.

⁸¹FAA, Privilegiekamer (Pk), no. 913, fol. 46r, 17 Feb. 1470.

⁸²D. Lett and N. Offenstadt, 'Les pratiques du cri au Moyen Âge', in D. Lett and N. Offenstadt (eds.), *Haro! Noël! Oyé! Pratiques du cri au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2003), 5–41, at 35.

⁸³J. Haemers and A. De Meyer, 'Le cri du rebelle, le cri du criminel: slogans, insultes et langage des "mal-fauteurs" dans les villes des Pays-Bas Méridionaux (XIVe–XVIIe siècles)', *Histoire, économie & société*, 38 (2019), 15–31, at 24.

⁸⁴'dat hier mede alle wapeningen, die een iegen den anderen, alle banieren dragen,...beckergeslach ende aweyte te nuyte syn ende altemale afgeleght', A. Schayes, *Analectes archéologiques, historiques, géographiques et statistiques concernant principalement la Belgique* (Antwerp, 1857), 364.

⁸⁵'noch dairtoe eenighe clocken te trecken, trommen te slaen off eenighe andere teyken te doene', Van den Heuvel, *Rechtsbronnen*, 477–8.

sounding of bells without the permission of the aldermen.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, criminal records show that citizens throughout the fifteenth century succeeded in ringing bells. In 1406, Peter Lauwart convinced the nightguards that the city was being attacked and that they should ring the bells.⁸⁷ In Mechelen, several citizens were punished for sounding church bells and ‘committing several indecencies’.⁸⁸ Normally, the clocks were used to announce the beginning and end of the working day, to mobilize the city’s army quickly or to gather the craft guilds on the market. During revolts, they were used to start a strike or hold a public meeting. Sounding bells made it possible to spread the message quickly over the whole city.⁸⁹ Making noise or hanging libels were tactics that made small alterations to the ‘normal’ sounds or sights in a certain space. In doing so, protesters influenced, often very subtly, the experience of that space for everyone present. Although some of these tactics were less intrusive than others, they were all tools of common people who sought to make space for their resistance.

Conclusion

Space mattered for revolters in the late Middle Ages. They were aware of the power and symbolism certain places in the city could bequeath and played with them during their revolts. But space did not only matter during large-scale, dramatic political conflicts. For smaller-scale resistance as well, this article has shown that altering space was an important tool for urban commoners. Ranging from secluded meeting places to direct confrontations with governors on the public market place, protest happened in many spaces and protesters adapted their resistance accordingly. The importance of secluded meeting spaces during episodes of contestation cannot be overstated. There, political opinions were discussed, resistance was developed and communal stances were decided upon. Although not as secluded and socially segregated as James Scott envisioned them, private and semi-public meeting spaces served as ‘social sites’, critical for the development and spread of resistance.

In order to bring their resistance into the open, urban commoners resorted to a wide range of strategies and tactics. Away from the physical seclusion of social sites, they needed to create a new ‘safe space’. During revolts, this was done with grand alterations of symbolic spaces, such as the occupation of the market place with weapons and banners, or the physical removal of power from such places. These strategies make it clear that protesters were very aware of the importance of large numbers of people in order to make their resistance count. When they did not have the luxury of the masses, individuals employed smaller, often more subtle, subversions to try to make room for themselves in the space of others. Mundane acts, such as talking, singing or shouting, in these spaces served as the very resistance itself.

Researchers who want to study practices of small-scale resistance in late medieval cities are often confronted with very limited information preserved in written

⁸⁶FAA, Pk, no. 93, fol. 6v, 6 Sep. 1485.

⁸⁷Van den Branden, ‘Clementyboeck’, 465.

⁸⁸CAM, JDE, no. 1, fol. 135v, 22 May 1482.

⁸⁹P. Hamon, ‘Le tocsin de la révolte: comment l’entendre? (France, XIVe – début XIXe siècle)’, *Histoire, économie & société*, 38 (2019), 101–17.

sources. A spatial perspective can help overcome this problem, because it can explain why people acted in certain ways. More attention to the spatial dimension of resistance in this vein could therefore be fruitful. Whereas late medieval revolts have been widely studied, the hidden practices that preceded them are largely ignored. Such practices could explain why some of these revolts were successful and others were not. In other words, it is time the research on late medieval popular protest turns towards the hidden conditions that made large revolts possible and brings them out into the open.

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