

Practices and Performances: Between Materiality and Morality in Pre-Modernity, Sigtuna, 21–23 August 2014

The *Practices and Performances* conference was held on 21–23 August 2014 in the stunning surroundings of Sigtunastiftelsen, Sigtuna. It was organised by Mikael Alm (Uppsala), Andreas Hellerstedt (Stockholm), Göran Rydén (Uppsala) and Cristina Prytz (Uppsala) and made possible by funding from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ). Delegates came from different subject areas, including History, Political Science and Philosophy, demonstrating the widespread use of practices and performances as analytical categories. There were professors and senior lecturers, PhD candidates and a master student from Sweden, England, Scotland, The Netherlands, Germany, and Italy.

Over the three-day conference, twenty-five papers were arranged into four sessions. Panels were set methodologically, allowing key themes to emerge from varied disciplines and across different historical periods. The key themes can be divided into two broad groups: presentations focused on how practices and performances relate to social structures and change, and those that probed practices and performances, in some cases challenging the usefulness of these theoretical categories.

Mårten Snickare (Stockholm) discussed his research on the Colosseum as a contested site. The Colosseum is commonly known as a theatre of death. Less well known is the later use of the Colosseum as a stage for Passion Plays, the starting point for Papal processions, and a planned – but not realised – site of a Christian church. Snickare argued that there was a two-way process between the physical site and performance: performances drew on the cultural baggage of the location and in turn wrote additional lines on the narrative of Rome's spectacular Colosseum.

Sticking with the theatre of death, Alexander Engström's (Uppsala) presentation considered the funeral of Axel Oxenstierna. Engström led us through the ostentatious performance of social status, from the canons to the procession, the church adornments to the financial outlay. We were told that the cost of Oxenstierna's funeral equated to more than thirty times a

caretaker's annual salary, thus emphasising the importance of funerals to noble expressions of social status. The precise location of the church, and the adaptations made for Oxenstierna's funeral, demonstrated the importance of space and location. While we have been taken to a new geographic location and different time period, there are similarities with Snickare's research. Yet where Snickare is more interested in performances for what they tell us about how understandings of a location changed over time, Engström is interested in locations for what they tell us about performance.

Johan Tralau (Uppsala) is also interested in messages delivered through performance. This time, however, the focus was messages of morality. Tralau's presentation style and his brave, combative style of writing was a joy in itself. But it was Tralau's conclusions that grabbed my attention. He took the seeming contradictions in Euripides' Greek tragedy and dismissed former academic appraisals. He pointed to those who argue Euripides was not a philosopher but an artist, and thus excuse as simply illogical the contradictions between characters at one point eating raw flesh and at the next advocating vegetarianism. Tralau, rightly, dismissed that as lazy analysis. He later highlighted a scholar who considered the time frame – from the characters as consumers of raw flesh to vegetarians – as suitably long to allow for such a contradiction. Again, Tralau was less than convinced. He argued that this conclusion would suffice if there was even a shred of evidence to suggest people made such radical behavioural changes in Ancient Greece. Finally, he hit us with his own conclusion. From eating raw flesh to vegetarianism, cannibalism to incest, all of these behaviours were subversions of cultural norms. Euripides was using performance to subvert cultural norms in order to communicate what was considered normal in Ancient Greece. It was normal to eat cooked meat, it was normal to partner with an unrelated person, it was normal for cannibalism to be taboo.

These three presentations dealt with rather different societies in different times, but they demonstrate the various uses of practices and performances as theoretical categories. They can help us better understand the use of space, the communication of material concerns, and the articulation of moral messages. In her closing remarks, Margaret Hunt (Uppsala) observed that practices and performances are not binary opposites, but concepts that are constantly intersecting. She considered the obvious divide between presentations focused on materiality and those on morality. Hunt argued that like many categories, practices and performances are problematic. They are only useful for as long as they help to illuminate the past. That all present seemed strained to define practices and performances hints at the issues moving forward.

Are we any further forward with where to take the study of practices and

performances? Perhaps not. However, from the keynote lectures to the paper presentations, the roundtable discussions to the post-dinner chatter, all were permeated by a reappraisal of practices and performances as analytical categories. There is much to be gained from people from diverse backgrounds discussing their research, and RJ must take credit for facilitating the *Practices and Performances* conference.

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