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Thinking problem-space in studies of revolt and archival methods

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Abstract

This article engages with Jamaican anthropologist David Scott's conceptual analytic of problem-space and maps out the potential contributions problem-space thinking can make to geographical studies of revolt and protest as well as archival methods. Scott's theory is broadened spatially through the introduction of space-time geographies scholarship and in particular the spatial ontology of Massey. I suggest Scott's theory can compliment and advance the work of political and historical geographers seeking to produce more broadly spatialised and temporalised accounts of insurrections and political protests. Problem-space thinking also develops efforts to recover subaltern voices and political motivations in such studies both empirically and methodologically.

KEYWORDS
geography, key topics, key topics, methodology, period, qualitative methods, political geography, sociology, subjects, general, subjects, geography, subjects, race and ethnicity

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper examines Jamaican anthropologist Scott's (1999, 2004) deployment and theorisation of the concept of problem-space. Scott deploys problem-space as a means for historical and theoretical analysis seeking to better understand a political action or theoretical intervention through reconstructing and interrogating the historical, political and social context in which it occurred (Scott, 2004). Scott (2004), building on earlier scholars of intellectual history (Collingwood, 1939; Skinner, 2002), contends that a given historical or political action is best understood as a response to contemporaneous conditions with any action also directed towards a particular desired future. In using

this problem-space analytic, Scott (2004) suggests we can best develop histories and theory that can be put to critical use in our own contemporary problem-spaces.

By way of an example let us consider histories of social revolution. Scott (2004, 2014) refers to Caribbean revolutions to explicate his theory in his own work. We can best understand the course and various phases of the French Revolution (decisions made by specific actors, core antagonisms etc.) if we interrogate the historical context in which they occurred and which French Revolutionary politics was a response too that is, the failings and socio-political structures of the Ancien Régime. French Revolutionary politics held greatest strategic and critical purchase in the context in which it emerged and if it was simply to be re-enacted by a revolutionary group in a different time and place then the same results couldn't be expected. Developing this, French Revolutionary history was of central importance to Marxist theorisations of revolution and revolutionary praxis. However, the Russian Bolsheviks who self-consciously studied the history of the French Revolution necessarily formulated their own revolutionary politics and strategies to fit the Russian Empire of 1917. The actions of the French Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks are best understood through examining the historical and political contexts in which they occurred. Although they are united around questions of social revolution and the destruction of monarchical regimes this core problematic is reworked and re-expressed in different temporal and geographical contexts. The analytic of problem-space attempts to capture this *situated* nature of political and intellectual intervention whilst being attuned to changing relations across space and time.

I suggest Scott's utilisation of problem-space holds much for geographers studying historical political movements and political protest. Particularly in the way his theory synergises with critical space-time geographies (Schwanen & Kwan, 2012). What I might term problem-space thinking offers a useful lens for geographers seeking to untangle the multiple trajectories that move through and constitute historical-political moments. Such a lens is particularly generative for those studies seeking to recover subaltern political histories and draw out articulations of subaltern spatial-politics from below (Kelliher, 2018) that move beyond a disarming focus on the spectacular (Griffin & Martin, 2021) or notions of spontaneity (Guha, 2009).

The paper will be structured as follows. The first section lays out David Scott's problem-space analytic and how this can be supplemented through scholarship on space-time geographies. Here I draw on Massey's (2005) ontology of space and conceptualisation of space-time trajectories. The following section discusses the generative potential in deploying a more spatially-attuned conceptualisation of problem-space for geographers both theoretically and methodologically. I focus on potential applications for studies of revolt and in particular subaltern revolt. I close the paper with reflections on the methodological applications and contributions of the problem-space analytic.

2 | SCOTT'S DEPLOYMENT OF PROBLEM-SPACE

David Scott has developed his conception of problem-space as part of a broad intellectual project concerned with postcolonial critique, revolutionary temporality and historical narrative that has proven influential across a range of critical social science disciplines (Featherstone, 2007; Neptune, 2008; Nichols, 2016). This project has been elaborated in three books; *Refashioning Futures* (Scott, 1999), *Conscripts of Modernity* (Scott, 2004) and *Omens of Adversity* (Scott, 2014). Scott develops his conception of problem-space to address what he sees as a weakness of much postcolonial critique. Scott agrees with postcolonial theorists who see that the nationalist projects emergent from the anti-colonial revolutions of the early and mid-twentieth century have been exhausted as vehicles for decolonisation. The political 'answer' of sovereignty as the culmination of anti-colonial self-determination is seen to have failed in offering a means to fully break with coloniality (Quijano, 2000). Where Scott (2004) diverges is to think through decolonisation as not a timeless and uniform 'question' that requires simply an alternative political response. Scott's contention is that the problematic of decolonisation in the 21st century is fundamentally different to the problematic of decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century. An incisive post or decolonial politics then requires critical interrogation of the

range of material and epistemic factors that constitute the condition of coloniality presently. It is this difference of conditions over time that Scott seeks to explicate and interrogate with the concept of problem-space.

Scott's (2004, p. 4) problem-space analytic is elaborated through a discursive framework of 'questions' and 'answers'. In combining this framework with a concern for the temporal and temporal dislocation he explains:

> In new historical conditions old questions may lose their salience, their bite, and so lead the range of old answers that once attached to them to appear lifeless, quaint, not so much wrong as irrelevant. In such conditions the old paths between questions and answers do not necessarily disappear; their cognitive connections may remain visible and intelligible as the norm or the convention, but the paths now go nowhere because the stakes involved in walking them have dissolved.
>
> (Scott, 2004, p. 4)

There are two points to make here before moving on to a more concrete application of Scott's conceptualisation. Firstly, Scott (2004, p. 4) states that problem-space is a 'fundamentally temporal concept' and this can be seen in his concern with 'old' questions and answers. Despite this temporal focus, I contend problem-space as an analytic holds much potential for geographical enquiry. Secondly, Scott's conceptualisation of problem-space as offering a context of intervention or answers opens up this framework to the political as understood through notions of rupture and antagonism which I discuss later. To ground the more abstract engagement with problem-space developed thus far I will turn to Scott's (2004) own concrete application of his theory.

Scott's (2004) book *Omens of Adversity* is largely structured around a close reading of Trinidadian Marxist historian James' (1963) classic anticolonial work *The Black Jacobins*. Scott (2004) compares two editions of the text using his problem-space analytic; contrasting the two problem-spaces the editions were written in and thus recasting the anticolonial 'answer' that the book poses. In the original 1938 edition, James' preface situates the book and his anticolonial history in the global conjuncture of the late 1930s—Stalin's purges, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the rise of fascism and the coming World War. James' historical and political analysis of the Haitian Revolution is inseparable from this context of his writing and James saw his text as a political act of anticolonialism. The James of 1938 sensed that anticolonial revolution was on the horizon and as a Trotskyist he hoped it would take a socialist, and anti-Stalinist, form (Scott, 2004). James saw his book contributing towards an historical effort for anticolonial and Black liberation with the decolonisation of Africa the central focus (James, 1963).

The 1963 edition of *The Black Jacobins* contained a new appendix entitled 'From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro' and as the name suggests James was now consciously repositioning the text in a new problem-space. In the appendix, James now addressed the 'question' of decolonisation in a new historical and political context: the 1960s Caribbean. James drew on his history of the Haitian Revolution to interrogate the emergence of a collective Caribbean identity with this the basis for a West Indian nationhood that was being realised through the independence of states like Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago in 1962 (James, 1963; Scott, 2004). Introducing the problem-space analytic, we can see that in 1963 James was addressing the new 'question' of West Indian independence and so reassessed his text on the Haitian Revolution to search for a new 'answer'. James was less concerned with, as he was in 1938, seeking to prove the revolutionary consciousness and capacities of the Haitian slaves with this part of an historical arc towards African liberation. Instead, he was underlining the fact that the West Indian was a fundamentally Modern subject with this the historical root of contemporaneous nation-building efforts in the 1960s. The James of 1963 was operating in a new historical-problem space and so the 'answer' he formulated in the context of decolonisation was necessarily different. Whilst this difference between historic problem-spaces is accorded to temporal shifts by Scott (2004) I suggest that any such change must also be *spatial* too as will be explained through the introduction of Massey's (2005) ontology of space later in this paper.

Whilst Scott's explication and framing of problem-space appears to be rooted in a discursive analysis, he notes problem-spaces might be thought of as generating *demands* as much as questions (Scott, 1999, 2004). This notion of demand offering a broader framing that can capture political activity beyond the theoretical and discursive. The

term demand suggests an antagonistic and potentially ruptural quality to the interventions made in and constitutive of a problem-space. For many theorists of politics and the political, 'proper' political acts are those that challenge or disrupt the established order and its structuring principles (Mouffe, 2005; Nancy, 1991; Ranciere, 2006; Zizek, 1991). I say 'properly' political in the sense that politics is conceived as something beyond 'the ensemble of practices, processes, discourses and institutions of a specific constituted political order (parties, legislative bodies, etc.)'. (Kaika & Karaliotas, 2016, p. 3). That problem-spaces are characterised by dissent and demand is important as this means that central to Scott's concept is a desire to explore the multiple and perhaps conflictual voices, actors and ideas that constitute a problem-space. Scott's theory has definite points of connection with spatial-political studies concerned with the spatialisation of dissent as the basis of political action (Kaika & Karaliotas, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2007, 2011). This is the basis for my interest in his conceptualisation and when developed is useful for geographers engaged in studies of historical conjunctures and 'ruptural' political events.

Scott's conceptualisation is primarily temporal. He is centrally concerned with the temporal shifts between different problem-spaces and the applicability of past political thought and action to new contexts 'of argument and…intervention' (Scott, 2004, p. 4). Scott builds on the work of intellectual historians Collingwood (1939) and Skinner (2002) in his theorisation. Collingwood's (1939) discussions of historical methodology centre on notions of proposition and answer whereby historical actions are best understood through recreation of the context an action occurred in and crucially through discovering the specific prompt an action is a response to. Skinner develops this conceptualisation in his studies of political thought. Political thought, and by extension action, he suggests needs to be understood in its specific context of expression and as a move seeking to advance a point in relation to pre-existing contentions (Scott, 2004; Skinner, 2002).[1]

Scott's interest in historical contingency is also indicative of the influence of Stuart Hall (Scott, 2017). The trace of Hall's conjunctural analysis is to be found in the conceptualisation of problem-space. Both theorists seek to root political action and thought in the confluence of social relations and historical processes in which they emerge. This moment of conjuncture for Scott is when specific political demands hold greatest political purchase with the passage of time and the changing of socio-spatial relations rendering past demands less relevant—think of James' editions of *The Black Jacobins* here. Hall's theorisation and analysis of conjuncture, perhaps most famously captured in his analysis of the emergence of Thatcherism in Britain (Hall, 1979), was a project shared with prominent geographical thinkers such as Massey (2005)—an ally in the British New Left (Hall et al., 2015). Such work has proven highly influential amongst political geographers concerned with analysing neoliberal crisis (Featherstone, 2015; Featherstone & Karaliotas, 2018) and theorising spatial politics more broadly (Darling, 2009). Scott's connections to Hall signal the potential of his problem-space theory for geographical scholarship.

These potential geographical affinities noted, geographers (Featherstone, 2007; Sparke, 2008) have been critical however of Scott's (2004) under-theorisation of the spatial in favour of the attention paid to historical narrative and temporal reworking. Scott spends little time interrogating problem-spaces as geographical, *spatial* formations (Sparke, 2008). He is overly concerned with the historical and philosophical frameworks actors operate through and within. Therefore, spatiality remains underexplored seemingly operating as a surface upon which historical developments unfold or as incidental to such developments. This lack of engagement with spatiality as dynamically constitutive of problem-space leads to an overdetermination of temporality and Scott's (2004) focus on historical emplotment.

2.1 | Spatialising Scott's theory

In response to the spatial limitations of Scott's theorisation of problem-space I suggest turning to work on space-time geographies. David Scott's focus on the temporality of political thought and action is amenable to the work of geographers theorising space-time who understand temporality as processual and multiple.[2] These geographers of course also foreground the inseparability of time *from space* and thus their work helps move beyond Scott's geographical 'blind spots'.

A deeper spatialisation of problem-space avoids a narrowly temporal reading of political change and conjuncture which in Scott's work (2004, 2014) leads to a tendency to periodise in his analysis. This periodisation can be seen in Scott's (2004, 2014) broad-brush assessment of West Indian nationalist and post-colonial politics that in his view moves from nationalist anti-colonialism to a radical period of Marxist and Black Power inflected alternatives to the 'ruins' of the collapse of such alternatives in the West Indies' neoliberal present. Scott's account reduces West Indian postcolonial political development to a tragic narrative arc wherein more radical decolonial alternatives were snuffed out with the contemporary West Indies 'stranded' in a period of 'ruined time' (Scott, 2014, p. 12). Scott's focus on the temporal constrains historical and political agency in his construction of problem-space—certain past tragic acts doom us to seemingly inevitable 'ruined' futures and problem-spaces (Ibid.). In assessing the dynamic geographies of connection that co-constitute problem-space *along with* time a more optimistic sense of historical and political agency can be reasserted. Space, in short, offers the possibility of forging alternative social and political relations outside of the constraints of a single teleological arc as expressed by Scott (2004, 2014).

Massey (1999, 2001, 2005) is consistently critical of the annihilation of spatial difference by singular, totalising temporalisations of the type which Scott falls into. For Massey (2001, p. 259) 'the spatial is, among other things, the sphere of the existence of multiplicity'. This multiplicity refers to simultaneously existing difference across space that is not reducible to a singular and therefore inevitable history. This simultaneity of co-existing, placed, difference therefore opens up space as a dimension constituted by dynamic geographies of connection and articulation. Space as the sphere of 'contemporaneous plurality' (Massey, 2005, p. 9) provides the necessary conditions for agency. This is because not all possible connections and interactions across space have been or will ever be made. Therefore, the spatialities of agency remain open and unfinished as there is always the possibility of genuinely new spatial interactions and relations. Massey's (2005) ontology here helps move beyond the temporal constraints and determinations of Scott (2004) wherein the conditions of action appear fixed in time or by history.

Relations across space are not uniformly equal or consensual and thus the power relations that inform these relations constitutes the political nature of the spatial and the spatialities of agency. What this means for analysing problem-space is that the conjuncture of social and political stakes and agents that constitutes a given problem-space is not some accident of history. Nor is it the predetermined outcome of past historical events but is instead the situated product of geographical relations and interactions across both space and time. Therefore, whilst Scott, successfully and compellingly I feel, urges researchers to reconstruct the conditions of the *time* in which a political act or thought was articulated we must also examine the spatial relations that informed a particular political action or theory.

Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of space-time trajectories is also important to consider and compliments the centrality of temporal shifts and contingency in Scott's theory. The particular demands articulated in a given problem-space are directed towards the realisation of desired futures (Scott, 2004). As Scott (2004, p. 43) explains, the 'horizon of expectations' envisioned from a given problem-space is open to multiple interpretations and projects and can never be entirely knowable. This openness of the political future is a condition of the simultaneous multiplicity of space wherein interrelation across this multiplicity is partial and *possible* not total. The future therefore remains genuinely open because there are new spatial relations to be made. Massey captures this interplay of the spatial and temporal in the form of the space-time trajectory (Massey, 2005). A trajectory is movement through both space and time and as Massey stresses (2003, 2005) our world is comprised of and experienced through the encounter, inflection and disuniting of multiple space-time trajectories. So, if in Scott's (2004) formulation of problem-space actors are seeking to realise some desired future configuration, the social and political changes that are desired are not solely the product of the procession of time. Building on Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of the space-time trajectory we can see that the attainment of some desired future requires the refiguring of spatial relations too. The constitution of a future problem-space then represents the interactions and conjuncture (Hall, 1979) of space-time trajectories and is not just a product of the passage of time nor the teleological outcome of past actions.

3 | APPLICATIONS OF PROBLEM-SPACE THINKING

In thinking through potential applications of problem-space thinking to academic geography it is useful first to highlight the limited engagements by geographers with Scott's (2004) work.

Tariq Jazeel (2011, 2017) engages with the concept of problem-space in thinking through the geographies of postcolonial theory and in critically engaging with recent institutional pushes to decolonsie geographical knowledge. In the former, Jazeel (2011) orients problem-space geographically to think through the politics of place when intervening critically in problem-space. Jazeel (2011) urges we understand the geography of problem-space as contexts of dispute and argument when conducting geographical enquiry. Recognising how particular places and communities are drawn into such disputes by academics and the power relations of knowledge production resultant. Relatedly, in critical reflections on the 2017 Royal Geographical Society Conference theme being 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledge' (see also Esson et al., 2017), Jazeel (2017) again mobilises problem-space. He does this to understand the conference and the wider academic geography community as being confronted by a reformulated problem-space wherein the central problem is the decolonisation of geographical knowledge. In both cases Jazeel foregrounds the need for researchers to be introspective as to the placed and political nature of their interventions and to think about how they might 'productively [unsettle] existent problem spaces' (Jazeel, 2011, p. 182).

I suggest there are applications beyond Jazeel's (2011, 2017) usage of the problem-space analytic. Jazeel's (2011) mobilisation of the concept in the context of the politics of knowledge production from a postcolonial perspective is however a resonant theme throughout the rest of this paper. I will focus on two key areas that would benefit from a spatialised conception of Scott's problem-spaces in geographical research. Namely, studies of revolt and rebellion and methodological application in archival research.

3.1 | Studies of revolt and rebellion

There are significant points of connection between geographical studies of protest and rebellion and Scott's theorisation of problem-space. Foremost is Scott's concern with revolution in the elaboration of his theory. Scott utilises problem-space thinking to analyse the events and popular accounts of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and the Grenadian Revolution (1979–1983). In both *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) and *Omens of Adversity* (2014), Scott sees revolutionary political action and thought as rupturing previously 'settled' problem-spaces and parameters of what was thought possible. Assessing the Grenadian revolution, Scott (2014) sees the collapse of the revolution in 1983 as foreclosing efforts to radically restructure Caribbean society and political-economy. The imagined future that animated the revolutionaries was rendered unattainable leaving the contemporary Caribbean in the 'ruins' of the collapse of such alternatives in a neoliberal present and a problem-space of tired ideas lacking critical purchase (ibid.). Such analysis represents Scott's overdetermination of the temporal with the dynamic geographies of articulation between Massey's space-time trajectories opening up Scott's (2014) reading.

As discussed earlier, Scott's (2004) engagement with the Haitian Revolution is developed through close reading of *The Black Jacobins*. Awcock (2020) has signalled how engagements with non-white, non-Western theorists like James who have produced studies of Black resistance can enrich historical and geographical analyses of protest that have typically relied on Eurocentric authors such as Thompson (2013) and Hobsbawm (1959). Drawing on Scott's (2004, 2014) theorisation of problem-space which is rooted in histories of Caribbean resistance to and overcoming of (neo) colonialism and (neo)imperialism and his drawing on theorists of the Black Radical Tradition (see Bogues, 2003; Robinson, 2000) can help move beyond such oversights. Geographers such as Gowland (2021) have done precisely this with his work signalling generative connections between theorising problem-space and Black Geographies. In his study of the 1969 First Regional International Black Power Conference held in Bermuda, Gowland (2021) examines the Conference through reconstructing the geographical and political-historical relations that constituted the problem-space events in Bermuda occurred within and in response to. The Bermudian problem-space was defined

by the logics and spatialities of the plantation (McKittrick, 2013) and the Black Power Conference represented an act of insurgent place-making that sought to challenge the racist strictures of colonial Bermuda. It was in such places that Black Power and aligned actors from across the globe envisioned decolonial futures. Their contemporaneous spatial-politics of place-making (Gilmore, 2007; McKittrick, 2011) was pre-figurative of these desired futures that exceeded hegemonic regimes of white supremacy characteristic of Bermudian problem-space at that time (Gowland, 2021).

The work of geographers likewise engaged in studies of insurgent politics further demonstrates amenability to the concept of problem-space. Studies by maritime geographers have long examined how political and space-time trajectories become entangled in the space of the ship. With the particular social and spatial dynamics of these often cramped vessels heightening the tensions therein.[3] Mutinies on these vessels represent a paramount form of insurgent politics. Geographers such as Featherstone (2009, 2018) and Davies (2013, 2019) point to the longer term and more broadly spatialised political trajectories that inform mutinies beyond just seeing them as disputes narrowly confined to the ship. Assessing such mutinies through reconstructing the problem-space in which they occurred aligns with these efforts to produce more relational understandings of these events. Developing more agentive accounts on the behalf of the mutineers who occupy, often literally, a subaltern position.

Featherstone's (2013, 2019) study of the Nore mutiny in 1797 and the mutinous actions of Black seafarers and soldiers repatriated to the Caribbean from Britain in 1919 highlights how previous contact with radical and anti-colonial societies in the first instance and experiences of race riots in the latter animated the mutineers. Davies (2013, 2019) studies of the 1946 Royal Indian Navy mutiny similarly points to the influence that international connections with anti-colonial movements across the British empire and the nationalist movement in India had in informing the mutineers' actions. These insurrections of course represented responses to the unjust, undemocratic structures of the ship and the maltreatment of the mutineers along class and race lines. However, in accounting for the broader politico-historical problem-space they occurred within these mutinies can also be understood as acts of anti-colonial, anti-racist or revolutionary democratic revolt. These mutinies occurred in naval vessels and in the context of forced deportations and so the insurgent demands of the mutineers attacked the broader military, state and imperial structures these vessels operated in the service of. Interrogating the trajectories of these rebellious actors also requires engagement with the desired futures that animated the particular political demands (Scott, 2004) being made. As Scott notes (2004), demands or questions made in a given problem-space are anticipatory of certain desired futures with this recognition asserting the agency of, in particular, subaltern rebellious groups and avoiding the characterisation of protest or revolt as spontaneous (Guha, 1983).

This greater temporalisation and spatialisation of the analysis of episodes of revolt afforded by the adoption of the problem-space analytic compliments efforts made by geographers to move beyond a sole focus on acts of exceptional violence in studying subaltern resistance (Griffin & Martin, 2021). Geographers studying urban insurrections have, in a sense, sought to understand the geographical and social relations that shaped the problem-space in which insurrectionary demands were made. Dikeç (2007, p. 1192) studying the 2005 urban revolts in France points to the overlapping 'geographies of inequalities, discrimination and repression' indicative of embedded socio-economic problems that characterised the problem-space in which uprisings occurred across France's *banlieues*. Likewise, Benwell et al.'s (2020) study of the 2011 urban insurrection in Liverpool emphasises the structural and political contexts of wealth inequality, social exclusion and youth unemployment that framed the insurrection and those like it across England in 2011 (Newburn, 2015). With these problems identified, rioting as a response can be seen as the articulation of a political demand to redress these issues and not acts of mindless violence. As Dikec states (2007, p. 1192), there is 'a logic of resistance' in operation with these logics structured around certain desired futures (Scott, 2004).

This point here resonates with geographical studies (Featerstone, 2009; Jazeel, 2019) indebted to the thought of Ranajit Guha and his studies of subaltern consciousness in the context of Indian peasant rebellion (1994, 2009). Guha (1994, p. 337) examined how colonial historiographies of peasant rebellion removed subaltern consciousness from history: 'insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness'. [emphasis original]. Political and media discourses

surrounding events like the England riots of 2011 (Benwell et al., 2020; Tyler, 2013a, 2013b) or those of France in 2005 (Dikeç, 2006, 2007) were quick to depoliticise these events in the manner Guha suggests. Those involved were cast as mindless thugs and/or were subject to colonial-racist narratives on 'integration'. Recognising these actions as demands responding to the central socio-economic problematics characteristic of a specific problem-space centres the agency of those marginalised groups engaging in revolt. Moreover, with Massey's (2005) conception of space-time trajectories introduced, attention needs to be paid to the longer-term personal and political trajectories that inform these logics of resistance.

3.2 | Methodological applications

Utilising the problem-space analytic also offers methodological contributions to historical geography research particularly in relation to archival studies. This contribution lies in thinking through the historical problem-space (Scott 2004, 2014) in which archival materials were produced and the constitutive role of archival materials in structuring that problem-space.

Since the 'archival turn' in the early millennium geographers have sought to enliven the archive understanding it as a subjective space providing for the active construction of social and historical meaning (Hodder, 2017; Lorimer, 2009; Lorimer & Philo, 2009; Mills, 2013). Historical geographers have thus approached archives as material and imaginary spaces with questions of motive and political intent underlying any critical engagement with the materials contained within. This approach underlies critical engagements with colonial archives in particular, from both within and outwith academic geography, with archival documents understood as always shaped in powerful ways by the spatial and temporal context of their production (Guha, 1994, 2009; Ogborn, 2011; Stoler, 2009). Particularly in their discursive content. As Laura Ann Stoler (2009, p. 39) has described, this discursive content evidences 'epistemic habits' that are geographically and historically specific and which represent a distinct expression of knowledge about an event or moment (Featherstone, 2009). This reveals the archive not to be a monolith of objective reporting on the past but a site of multiple and contested narratives (Stoler, 2009). The epistemic habits or 'common sense' assumptions and claims found in a text are constituted ideologically; shaped by the dominant worldview of the author, an author's positionality within a social system and the strategic motivation underlying the production of the text (Guha, 1994, 2009). If we introduce the theory of Scott (2004, 2014) and Massey (2005) we see that these multiple archival narratives reveal divergent readings of problem-space. From here, a document can be understood in relation to the significant political and historical events and spatial-political relations that shaped an historical-problem space. Archival documents helped shape and were shaped by the particular 'answers' that were articulated by various groups in a given problem-space (Scott, 2004). Returning back to the scholarship of Massey (2005) we can further conceive of an archival text or trace as constituting or informing the space-time trajectories that formed and moved through a given problem-space.

What does an appreciation of problem-space and space-time trajectories in the archive offer practically? Archival materials can be grouped into major typologies based on the central political and historical trajectories that constituted and informed a given problem-space. Or phrased in Scott's (2004) language, we can group archival materials based on the 'answer' they were offering up to the central problematic(s) of their time and place. As more material is gathered and analysed the normative ontological, epistemic and political claims underpinning these trajectories or 'answers' becomes steadily more apparent. Archival texts then represent discursive and theoretical interventions within problem-space. With these interventions informed by and constitutive of the political imaginaries and associated spatial-politics that actors in a given problem-space sought to articulate. Through engagement with the theory of Scott (2004, 2014) and Massey (2005) my elaboration of problem-space thinking in this article offers a deeply politicised frame of analysis for archival research. This approach emphasises the political character of interventions into problem-space which archival materials represent expressions of. Such a conceptualisation can contribute towards efforts to assert and recover the agency of subaltern actors engaged in political protest in line with the

scholarship discussed in the previous section. The recovery of subaltern voices in the archive through this methodology asserts political agency and theoretical capacity and similarly positions subaltern actors as *actively* intervening within problem-space and formulating their own 'answers' to the central problem(s) of a given time and place (Scott, 2004).

4 | CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of Scott's (1999, 2004, 2014) conceptualisation of problem-space and some potential applications in academic geography. Scott's attention to historical contingency and socio-political context in analysing past political thought and action is complimentary to geographical ontologies that see space and spatial-politics as relational (Darling, 2009; Massey, 2005; Schwanen & Kwan, 2012). I see points of connection with the scholarship of Massey (1999, 2003, 2005) and her conception of space as a sphere of multiple trajectories and as inherently political. Introducing this ontology moves beyond Scott's overdetermination of the temporal and tendency towards periodisation in his conceptualisation of problem-space and historical development.

I draw attention to Scott's work as I feel problem-space thinking offers much for geographical studies of revolt, rebellion and protest particularly in efforts to reconstruct the agency of subaltern groups. Thinking with problem-space draws attention to the broader temporalities and spatialities that shape more spectacular acts (Griffin & Martin, 2021) of insurgent violence or protest and urges geographers to think through the longer-term space-time trajectories that move through and structure such events. The historical and political contexts in which these events occurred can be reconstructed with these necessary to understand the temporally and spatially situated actions of given groups and actors. I explicated this point through reference to Guha (1994, 2009) and geographers (Featherstone, 2009) concerned with recovering subaltern histories.

Finally, I see a methodological application for problem-space thinking. A conception of problem-space as being composed of multiple space-time trajectories resonates with geographical engagements with the archive as similarly constructed from multiple narratives and trajectories (Hodder, 2017; Mills, 2013). The multiple readings of a rebellion or protest represent diverse readings of the same problem-space articulated from various positionalities. In reconstructing an event and its spatial and temporal relations the archival traces of these multiple readings and their associated historical-political trajectories can be contrasted and evaluated to develop a fuller understanding of the geographies of the event.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See Bruinsma (2020) for an extensive discussion and overview of the relevance of the work on the history of ideas, which figures like Collingwood (1939) were engaged in, to contemporary historical geography.

[2] See Merriman (2012) for something of an overview of the predominating theorisations and applications of 'space-time' as a concept in human geography.

[3] See Hasty and Peters (2012) for an overview of the geographies of the ship.

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