Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution

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Author: Jason Peacey
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Having illuminated the production of polemical print to great effect in his first monograph, Politicians and Pamphleteers, Dr Peacey addresses its appropriation in his second, Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution. As he notes at the beginning of this important study, contemporaries were acutely aware of both a ‘popular’ – or participatory – ‘turn’ (p. 2) in mid 17th-century politics, and the pivotal role that cheap print played in this development. Thus in 1640 commentators immediately recognized the novelty and importance of the phenomenon that historians have termed the ‘explosion of print’. While some dismissed this textual tsunami, picturesquely, as mere ‘bum fodder’ (p. 2), many were alarmed that it would precipitate popular participation in the political process and, inevitably, social dislocation if not dissolution. Alongside such alarmist rhetoric, Peacey identifies alternative dispositions; practical engagement, admittedly often no more than pragmatic, but also principled defences of print’s pedagogical value. Regardless of their stance on the ‘print revolution’, however, contemporaries were ‘united in trying to grapple with what it might do to political life and popular participation’ (p. 6).

Historians too have long been fascinated by the mid-century collision of print and revolutionary politics. Thus whilst acknowledging that this field has been ‘hotly contested’, Peacey boldly claims that it has, nonetheless, been ‘inadequately conceptualized’ (p. 7). At one level then this work is a counter-blast to the receding claims of revisionism. Alongside their insistence that printed sources could not provide access to historical truth, revisionists questioned earlier assumptions about the social depth and geographical reach of early modern political culture. Print itself, and the revolutionary politics it had been associated with, were both written out of their accounts of the mid-17th century. Certainly, as Peacey recognizes, revisionism itself now occupies an increasingly marginalized position. Social historians, for instance, have demolished the notion of an apolitical (but silently conservative) ‘country’. Similarly, post-revisionists have demonstrated the importance of print in fostering ideologically-engaged publics. Whilst acknowledging these advances, Peacey takes both groups to task. Social historians, he claims, have failed to connect local and national contexts and to properly integrate print into their accounts. Post-revisionists, for their part, have been unwilling to tackle the issue of reception, whilst concentrating on explicitly ‘public’ genres within print.

This is the terrain – historical and historiographical - on which Peacey stakes out his claim. The task he sets
himself is certainly ambitious, even daunting: to prove the social depth and geographic reach of print; to uncover a participatory print culture that existed alongside the public sphere; and to demonstrate that such quotidian practices transformed social life as much as political culture. In short, he intends to put the revolutionary back into the English Revolution, and to shake-up – or, to maintain the metaphor, revolutionize – the fragmented field of early modern historiography. He builds a muscular and cumulative argument that is divided into three parts. In the first he examines the consumption of cheap print; in the second how print contributed to an understanding of parliamentary government; and in the third how print became a tool for political participation. In this manner he moves up the political chain: from information, through understanding, to action.

Thus in the opening three chapters, grouped together under the title ‘Consuming print’, Peacey deals with how print was encountered during the 1640s and 1650s. His argument is that the greater penetration achieved by cheap print changed the context for popular politics. By altering the economics of production, print transformed the marketplace for political information. This expansion in supply satisfied, at least in part, the social depths that more costly scribal publication could not reach. Consequently, as Peacey notes, this period witnessed ‘the emergence of something approaching a shared national culture of news and comment’ (p. 31; emphasis added). Whilst evident throughout the work, it is here that Peacey’s archival mastery is both most apparent and, arguably, deployed to greatest effect. Where historians have often balked at the methodological difficulties of exploring the ‘social reach’ (p. 30) of print, Peacey is able to present abundant evidence to support his thesis.

Chapter one is a methodological master class. Here Peacey demonstrates that George Thomason, the obsessive collector of printed material, was unique less in the nature of his practices than in their scale. We learn that these practices extended beyond the metropolis and the more-obviously politically-engaged, demolishing any vestigial revisionist assertions of an apolitical ‘country’. Peacey’s impressive familiarity with commonplace and account books allows him to reconstruct first the reading and purchasing practices and, second, the growing sophistication of various marketplace participants. For many Englishmen and women, buying and reading and circulating and discussing the latest news evidently became quotidian activities. He thus notes that, ‘whilst trivial in terms of cost … it is striking how much money was spent on such material … and how much energy was involved in ensuring its supply’ (p. 55).

As recent scholarship has shown, however, ownership was not the only way to encounter print in early modern England. Thus in chapter two, Peacey turns to the accessibility of print. He first shows mid-century England to have been a nation of booksellers, with representative institutions in ‘almost every town’ (p. 59). Whilst more obscure than their London and University counterparts, customers’ accounts prove that these provincial booksellers sold the self-same material. This distribution network was enhanced by itinerant pedlars, chapmen and hawkers. Responding to shifts in demand, they too rapidly switched their offering to topical material after 1640. Nor was such material inert once it entered private hands. Instead it circulated through private distribution networks and was broadcast via public reading. Finally, various forms of free publication removed economic barriers to entry into the world of print. Official publications, such as proclamations and declarations, were accompanied by theatrical public performance. In this fashion the consumption of print greatly exceeded its production; and its accessibility outstripped its ownership. These factors did not negate the influence of economic inequality but they did considerably mitigate it. Peacey thus claims that during this period there was an ‘unprecedented familiarity – and perhaps even daily encounters – with print, and the emergence of a national news and information culture’ (p. 88).

The final chapter of the opening section turns from the physical encounter with print to questions of reception. Here Peacey tackles a historiography focused on contemporary fears about the ‘credibility’ of printed news. By examining contemporary practices, he is able to present an altogether more nuanced, and considerably more plausible, picture. He thus proves that contemporary readers learned from experience, devising tactics and strategies when engaging with print. These included making use of assets and access outside of print, but also the development of critical reading practices within it. As the revolutionary decades unfolded readers displayed hermeneutical skill, a sophisticated grasp of the state’s interventions and
considerable knowledge of the industry's structural dynamics. Moreover, such practical knowledge was not
restricted to the gentry and the metropolis but was manifested across the country and society. Hence, Peacey
asserts that readers 'used print carefully, pragmatically, purposefully and strategically': the crux was less
'credibility' than 'utility' (p. 123). In this regard, contemporary practice, it seems, belied rhetoric – and
much recent scholarship.

Parliamentary government after 1640 ushered in a period of unprecedented ‘constitutional experimentation’
(p. 132). Revisionists have claimed that this political innovation generated widespread hostility and,
ultimately, alienation. In the second section, ‘Following parliament’, Peacey examines how contemporaries
responded to this situation and the critical role that print played in this process. Thus in chapter four, by
focusing on practices, Peacey demonstrates that the type of negative response identified by revisionists need
to be balanced against evidence of active engagement. This was made possible by a dramatic expansion in
the supply of parliamentary reporting. Information that had formerly been expensive and difficult to obtain
became available to an expanding audience. Moreover, the analysis provided was often highly sophisticated.
If contemporaries experienced alienation it was not for lack of information. Sidestepping sterile debates on
the perceived credibility of this news, Peacey insists historians should be concerned with its impact. Here the
issue is not the truth of such reports but their effect on contemporary perceptions and, ultimately, on political
action. Greater understanding of politics prompted a reassessment of both the parliamentary elite and, more
fundamentally, parliamentary government. This led to the public prominence of a ‘language of
accountability’, and to demands for radical reform. The latter extended well beyond the confines of the
‘political radicals’ into the political mainstream. Alienation and engagement, it seems, often went hand-in-
hand.

In the fifth chapter, Peacey turns to public access to parliament. Firstly, he details the surprisingly public
nature of the Palace of Westminster. Rather than being obsessed with secrecy, the authorities appear to have
seen public access to the Parliament as ‘inevitable’, even ‘desirable’, for the conduct of government (p. 172).
Physical accessibility was matched by access via print. Information migrated from manuscript into cheap
print – and then from pamphlets into newspapers. Consequently, the membership and proceedings of
parliament became easily accessible. Whilst such information might appear dull, it was undoubtedly ‘useful’
(pp. 172–3) for those who wished to lobby parliament – as many in this period did. Again, there seems to
have been official recognition that the public interest should be ‘managed rather than stifled’ (p. 183). This
stance survived into the 1650s – a period when historians have typically claimed the emergent public sphere
of print was shut down. Instead, the new republican regimes sought to ‘police’ and ‘formalise’ access –
physically and via print – to parliament (p. 190). The attitude of parliamentary authorities to this developing
public politics was essentially pragmatic rather than inherently hostile – and far from hysterical.

In the final chapter of part two, Peacey considers the question of accountability. This, he demonstrates,
increased across all stages of the parliamentary process. Expanding from logistical issues to more overt
campaigning, print contributed to an increasingly politicised and partisan form of electoral politics.
Thereafter MPs were subjected to ‘investigative journalism’ – particularly in relation to finances (p. 211).
Finally, the reporting of parliamentary debates was more extensive, and the response more equivocal, than
has previously been acknowledged. Whilst pamphlet accounts of speeches were swiftly curtailed, readers
continued to enjoy unprecedented access to debates through newspapers. In this instance, however, the
transition to the Interregnum did prove decisive. Indeed the suppression of printed accounts at this time gave
a new lease of life to scribal newsletters. Notwithstanding this, the effect of the increased availability of
information and opinion on parliamentary politics was profound. As Peacey notes, ‘a great many people
both inside and outside parliament … engaged in a process of rethinking the relationship between politicians
and the public, and of reconceptualising the nature of representation and accountability’ (pp. 224–5).

The third, and longest, section, entitled ‘Taking part’, is also the most ambitious. Peacey’s argument here is
that print was not solely a medium for obtaining information about politics but, critically, a tool that enabled
an unparalleled degree of participation in that arena. Thus he shifts from questions of consumption to
production and from critical readers to political actors. He argues that contemporaries across the country and
the social spectrum became adept at deploying print *tactically*, tailoring their message to different audiences as they deemed it appropriate. Here Peacey introduces a more nuanced model for the relationship between print and publicity: not all print, it transpires, was ‘public’. Furthermore, and *contra* revisionist historiography, he makes innovative, and wholly convincing, claims about the role of print and quotidian practices in transforming – often *radicalizing* – political culture and ‘political thought’ during the English Revolution.

Chapter seven, examining the economics of scribal and print publication, is an archival and methodological *tour de force*. Much ink has been spilt in recent years to demonstrate not merely the survival but the vitality of scribal texts and practices. Whilst not denying this, Peacey nonetheless produces compelling evidence that the economics of print reproduction dramatically reduced the barriers to entry to political participation, and, consequently, had a transformative effect on political culture. He then moves beyond the familiar cast of authors and journalists to focus on ‘a new breed of pamphleteer’ (p. 252) and new genres of print. Print, it transpires, was frequently used to influence *discrete* audiences rather than a general *public*. In this manner, Peacey is able to move beyond the routine conflation of print with a putative public sphere. Nonetheless – and here Peacey manages to have his cake and eat it – the move to print often initiated an unstable dynamic of escalation that concluded with exactly the type of publication that historians have recently identified with an emergent public sphere.

Chapters eight, nine and ten – dealing with petitions, lobbying and mobilization – stand together as a formidable triptych. In each case, Peacey uncovers a wealth of evidence based on material – obscure petitions, lobbying documents and tickets – that was once abundant but was more likely to end up in the house of office than the family archive. Whilst petitioning, lobbying and mobilization were distinct activities, they had much in common. With petitioning and lobbying the widespread adoption of print, as substitute for earlier scribal production, had a transformative effect on these traditional practices. It facilitated cost-effective expansion in production thereby extending their scope beyond the wealthy and well-connected to more plebeian actors. The revolutionary period thus witnessed unprecedented numbers engaging in these activities demonstrating increasing levels of sophistication. The vast majority of these petitions and most lobbying activity were directed towards discrete audiences – often, though not exclusively, MPs – rather than the general public. Peacey thus refers to petitions as a form of ‘restrained intensification’ (p. 282).

These activities were further linked by their subtext of frustration with the workings of the political system and, consequently, the tendency towards ‘tactical escalation’: a habitual, though not necessary, slippage from discrete distribution to the public domain, often accompanied by a ratcheting-up of the rhetorical register. Here we enter the world of what Peacey characterizes as – in a phrase as inelegant as it seems unavoidable – ‘multi-phased’ politics. As participants shifted from relatively private to more public printed genres – often articulated in increasingly radical language – they drew opponents into the field and, in doing so, gave rise to the now familiar public sphere. Similarly, printed tickets became an integral part of the political organizer’s repertoire. Their central role in mobilizing and co-ordinating larger groups – politicized crowds – was recognized in their frequent adoption as totemic devices: symbols of shared political purpose and common identity. In this fashion, Peacey is able to convincingly connect the *spectacular* – whether the Levellers’ mass mobilizations or the paradigmatic polemic of a John Milton – to *quotidian* practices; in the process constructing an enriched, dynamic and, yes, ‘multi-phased’ field of participatory politics.

Peacey concludes his study by re-stating his central thesis that during the English Revolution print became deeply embedded in political practice. He insists on the social depth and geographical reach of printed material and the consequent transformation of political culture: connecting the local and the national; the centre and the periphery; elites and non-elites; and discrete genres of print to the public sphere and popular mobilization. The outcome of these processes, he notes in a pregnant term, was a ‘common politics’: ‘the idea that political life became both *popular* and *shared*, even if it was not necessarily *equal*’ (p. 402). That these developments were revolutionary was confirmed in the rhetoric, and indeed the practices, of conservative commentators in the post-revolutionary period. Indeed, in a tantalising epilogue, Peacey
discusses how this revolution in practice fared in the very different political climate of the Restoration. In place of the familiar 1660 watershed, Peacey discerns ‘a permanent shift’ in the everyday practice of public politics (p. 406): the legacy of this national and participatory political culture, if not a full-blown public sphere.

How well does Peacey make his case? To this reader, his impressively-documented thesis is convincing. Indeed one of the many pleasures that *Print and Public Politics* offers is to introduce the reader to an array of characters that is positively Dickensian. The familiar names of Prynne, Nedham and Thomason are joined by Hercules Commander, German Pole, Brabazon Wallop, King Jehojadah, and a one-eyed, regicide snowman. Peacey wears this considerable learning lightly but wields it to great effect: he uses an evidential sledgehammer to crack old problems; presents a persuasive interpretation of how the nexus of printed texts and quotidian practices transformed national political culture; and offers new lines of enquiry for historians within and outside his chosen field. In the process, he convincingly reinserts radicalism back into the English Revolution, now conceived at the level of practice, reminding us of its significance. To this reader at least, Peacey gets as close as any historian thus far to writing a social history of politics for this critical period in English history. As such, this work represents another nail in the coffin of revisionism – although it will no doubt continue its zombie-like existence – whilst complementing, but also challenging, the on-going labours of social historians and post-revisionists.

So what’s not to like? The first criticism is directed at the publisher rather than the author. Having stumped up the now customary £70 for an academic monograph it seems reasonable to expect a bibliography of secondary materials – indeed at these familiarly-stratospheric levels even an extra £5 to ensure this is surely barely material. Similarly, and here the author must shoulder some responsibility, the footnotes often acquire such acronymic-density that the reader requires a Rosetta Stone to decipher them. As noted above, *Print and Public Politics* is an unusually archivally-rich study, and it would be a pity if readers were unable to pursue the many leads that it throws up. More substantively, I would express two related reservations. The first is a certain inattentiveness to questions of self-, rather than systemic, understanding. The figures that populate this book act but do not often appear to reflect: at least not upon themselves. The second concerns Peacey’s adherence to the ‘practical turn’. Whilst the focus on practices is clearly productive, like other historians who have had a ‘turn’, he at times makes totalizing claims for his preferred explanatory category. Consequently, on occasion, Peacey disregards too readily the importance of discursive contexts and rhetorical registers as determinants of political reality. These are, however, minor quibbles. Dr Peacey has produced an outstanding work of scholarship combining archival mastery, theoretical sophistication, methodological innovation and lucid exposition: *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* deserves to be widely read.

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