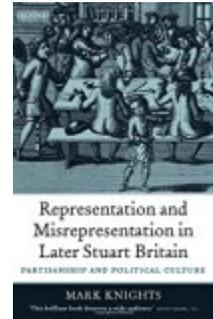


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Mark Knights. *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xvi + 431 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925833-8.

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In Defense of Oligarchy?

Mark Knights's new book is a major contribution to the history of later Stuart and (despite his title) early Hanoverian Britain. It succeeds in breathing life back into the political history of a period that had become dominated by works of cultural or intellectual history. Knights's work is, nonetheless, genuinely an analysis of "political culture" rather than high politics. This is political history informed by the "linguistic turn" and as attentive to the fluid and multivalent nature of discourse as any post-modernist could wish. Methodologically, it fits with many other works on early modern British political history which engage with Juergen Habermas's notion of the *public sphere*. However, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, is more successful than many other works on the early modern public sphere because of the way in which it directly engages with Habermasian themes of rationality and *Oeffentlichkeit*. It is also the best study that we have of what early modern British politics understood by "representation."

The scholarship on display in this work is highly impressive, ranging over archival resources in both local and metropolitan archives, as well as a dizzying array of printed material. Knights tackles sources that remain otherwise under-explored, like petitions, loyal addresses, and election advice, all demonstrating the extensive involvement of the public in the political process at this point. Indeed, at points, I found myself wanting to hear a lot more about material which Knights only has space to discuss in passing, not least about the fantastic woodcuts and prints that he uses to illustrate the text. Intel-

lectually, the book is also very broad ranging. It engages not only with the work of Habermas but also with the work of historians of science such as Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer who have tried to uncover how claims to truthfulness and accuracy were established in this period. Knights uses these insights to demonstrate convincingly how the language of politeness, like the notion of credibility, could also be discriminatory, excluding those without the social or cultural collateral to meet the demands of polite society.

The richness of the picture of British political culture developed here is not without its problems though. In his introduction, Knights justifies his lack of emphasis upon religion as a motor of public controversy (pp. 21-22), but even with this caveat in place, his book does seem, in places, an overly secularized history of politics in this period. Arguably, the focus upon party which Knight chooses has something of a distorting effect, obscuring other lines of division/demarcation. Knights also spends relatively little time in discussing the very real limitations on public debate that remained after the lapsing of the licensing act in 1695—for example the 1707 law which made it a capital offence to question the Protestant succession, under which terms John Matthews was executed in 1719. Similarly, his discussion of oaths and addresses under-emphasizes the role of these devices as political purgatives, though he does recognize some of the pressure being exerted to declare loyalty to the regime. He notes that in 1723 the Robinocracy presided over perhaps the last great exercise in public oath-taking as, in the wake

of the Atterbury plot, the people were required to swear loyalty to George I. He does not mention that the tendering of this oath, as with the association to William III in 1696, was accompanied by an attempt to drive non-subscribers (meaning political opponents) from office. Such subscriptions, under these terms, cannot, I think, be regarded as “testimony of an inclusive, consensual society” (p. 160).

Finally, though it is an excellent synchronic analysis of British political language, I think this book is less successful as a diachronic study. Knights is highly attentive to the paradoxes inherent in early modern British political discourse—the growing deference to the “public” as an umpire was accompanied by an obvious unease at the involvement of the “giddy” people in the political process, the growing importance of languages of reason and politeness was undercut by fears about the way in which partisanship encouraged artifice, dissimulation and downright lying. Yet, the focus on these tensions and ambiguities can make it hard to see what the

longer term consequences of these trends were. Knights appears to suggest in his conclusion that politeness, as a language of legitimation, had a constraining effect on partisanship, even when it was invoked for party political ends, because it enshrined values of working for the public good, moderation and politeness. Yet, surely it could also be said that the language of reason (perhaps since the early eighteenth century) has been employed more often than not as a useful rhetorical stick for conservatives to beat their radical opponents with (from the recent British political past accusations of living in “cloud-cuckoo land” and or being part of the “loony left” come to mind). The language of reason can offer a means of suggesting that those outside the political center-ground are not only wrong but also raving mad. To suggest, as Knights does, that the Whigs pushed for the Septennial Act in 1716 because they were convinced that the people had been “seduced” (p. 334) by Anglican and Jacobite propaganda and were no longer reliable judges of the public interest is, perhaps, to give Robert Walpole’s Whigs too much credit and the electorate far too little.

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