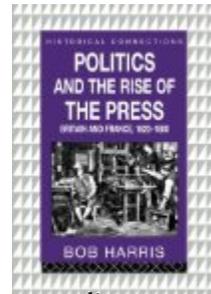


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Bob Harris.** *Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France, 1620-1800.* London and New York: Routledge, 1996. ix + 133 pp.p. \$14.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-12273-3.

Reviewed by Jeremy D. Popkin (University of Kentucky)  
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Bob Harris's short essay is the most systematic effort to date to compare the political impact of the newspaper press in early modern Britain and France. Harris, author of a book and several scholarly articles on the British press in the mid-eighteenth century, draws together recent scholarship on both press systems to reach a fairly traditional conclusion: the British press enjoyed greater freedom than the French, and played a larger political role until the explosion of 1789.

Despite his comparative ambitions, Harris in fact devotes most of the book to the British press. By "British," he means both English and Scottish (but not Irish), and he gives a balanced discussion of the provincial as well as the London papers. Harris' definition of the press is narrow: he is interested only in newspapers with political content rather than in some broader notion of "print culture." Although he gives brief consideration to the seventeenth century, his focus is on the period after 1695, when the laws providing for licensing and censorship of periodicals were allowed to lapse for good. Harris steers a middle course between historians like John Brewer, who see the newspaper press as a vehicle for the rise of a distinctively new radical public form of politics after the middle of the eighteenth century, and those such as J. C. D. Clark, who have argued that Britain remained essentially an "old regime" society until the passage of the First Reform Bill in 1832. He challenges the central thesis of the most recent general survey of British press history, Jeremy Black's *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1987), which argues that there was no significant change in the nature of the press prior to 1800, but he is careful not to overstate the modernity of the eighteenth-century newspapers or the extent of their impact.

Harris's account of the French press relies on secondary literature, particularly the work of Jean Sgard, Pierre Retat, Gilles Feyel, Jack Censer, and this reviewer. All of these scholars have challenged the traditional view that censorship rendered the French press politically insignificant prior to the Revolution. Harris does justice to these arguments, but finds that the pre-revolutionary French press nevertheless cuts a poor figure compared to its British counterpart. Total press circulation in France before 1789 was, he estimates, a third to a fifth of that of Britain, despite the latter's smaller population (p. 60). The French reading public was more socially exclusive, and there were many fewer public places, such as coffee houses, where readers could freely discuss what they read. The political impact of the French press was "on a more detached and abstract level" than the British (p. 71). The French revolutionary press appearing after 1789 did indeed have real political influence, and its extensive circulation temporarily gave France a larger reading public than Britain, but the exclusively political French papers lacked the financial resources which advertising provided in Britain and this, together with renewed political repression, soon put most of them out of business.

Harris' critique of the recent scholarly claims made for the French eighteenth-century press has some substance. The close nexus between parliamentary politics and newspapers in Britain obviously had no equivalent in pre-revolutionary France, and Harris is right to remind us that the per-capita consumption of newspapers in Britain was considerably higher than in France, even if the majority of the population in both countries was cut off from regular access to such publications. Nevertheless, Harris' narrow definition of the press, while perhaps adequate in the British context, distorts the situation on the continent. It leads him, among other things, virtually to ig-

nore the cultural impact of the French provincial press, the *affiches*, because they carried no explicitly political articles. Colin Jones has drawn attention to the importance of these publications in a recent article (C. Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review*, 101 (1996): pp. 13-40), and Gilles Feyel's forthcoming book will provide thorough documentation to support this case (Gilles Feyel, *L'Annonce et la nouvelle: la presse d'information en France sous l'ancien regime* [Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, forthcoming, 1998]). Harris downplays the role of Simon-Nicholas-Henri Linguet's *Annales politiques*, a magazine whose circulation may have topped that of any British paper of the era, and he ignores the *Memoires secrets*, a best-selling quasi-periodical collection of political and cultural gossip whose circulation was at its peak in the period 1777-84, which Harris sees as a period when the French press was reduced to political insignificance (on the *Memoires secrets*, see Jeremy D. Popkin and Bernadette Fort, eds., *The Memoires secrets and the Culture of Publicity* [Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, forthcom-

ing 1998]).

Despite these criticisms, Harris has provided those of us in French history with a useful reminder that, however lively French political culture may have been in the decades prior to 1789, it was still considerably less public and participatory than that of Britain, in part because of restrictions on press freedom. >From the point of view of press history, it is a pity that he could not extend his comparison to take in the German-speaking world, where the number of regularly published newspapers in the late eighteenth century exceeded the totals in France and England combined, but where the relationship between the press and politics was even more tenuous than in France. Such a three-way comparison would remind us that there is no simple relationship between the development of the press and the growth of representative political institutions.

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