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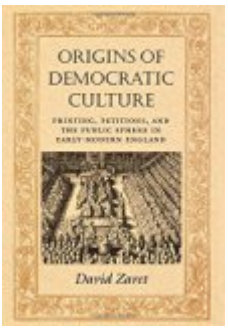
David Zaret. *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. 288 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-00694-9.



Reviewed by Mark Knights

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Petitions and the invention of public opinion

Zaret's claims are bold and exciting ones. He sees the "origins of democratic culture" in the communicative revolution brought about by print, and particularly by printed petitioning, in the mid Seventeenth century. Central to his concern is the emergence of public opinion, which he sees as the key to that democratic culture. He is therefore addressing the continuing debate about the creation of a public sphere, rejecting Habermas's suggestion that it had its origins in late Seventeenth century and early Eighteenth century commercial life. Instead, Zaret suggests, the character of the early public sphere has been misunderstood, because the structural impact that print culture had on customary attitudes has been neglected. Thus at the beginning of the Seventeenth century popular participation was very limited and governed by rules which imposed secrecy and deference; but print -- and in particular the publication of petitions in the 1640s -- was to transform the situation so that something recognisable as "public opinion" could be invoked. The book thus locates a transformation in the public sphere in the mid Seventeenth century. Zaret also concludes that the Habermasian stress on a "bourgeois" public sphere is wrong, for "use of printed petitions to constitute and invoke public opinion occurs in the middle of the Seventeenth century, when it was neither limited to urban areas, reliant on state bureaucracy, nor oriented principally to economic debates. The ineluctable conclusion, then, is that the emergence of a public sphere has few, if any, direct links to anything ^Ñbourgeois,'" though he admits indirect links such as the capitalist organisation of printing (p. 32).

In arguing for a transformation in communicative practices caused by print, Zaret charts the proliferation of scribally produced separates and newsletters in the early Seventeenth century. But, he suggests, these only reached a wealthy audience and did little to dent the culture of secrecy in which monarchs forbade discussion of state affairs by "vulgar persons or common meetings," as the 1620 proclamation put it. Similarly before 1640 petitions as a vehicle to express grievances were a "privileged form of information ... devoid

of any intimations about the supremacy of popular will in politics" (p. 59). By focusing on petitions Zaret hits on a very important topic. As he points out, petitions were used for a vast array of different things -- supplication for office, alms, relief from debt, or for justice, to name but a few. They were embedded in the structure of politics, for grievances were expected to be presented in a petitionary way. But prior to 1640 petitioning was restricted by deferential rhetoric and protestations of spontaneity which eschewed claims to popular supremacy. Even in the 1640s these rules continued to apply, and helped petitions avoid the accusation of being faction driven, though discrepancies between "rhetorical appearance and reality" began quickly to be apparent, not least because organising mass subscriptions required careful planning and co-ordination. Other traditional rules for petitioning "limited expressions of grievances so that they appeared as an apolitical conveyance of information" (p. 96).

The 1640s shattered some of these rules. Until then "many traditional precedents existed for political communication, but restrictive norms of secrecy and privilege in prevolutionary England precluded a public sphere in politics." In the 1640s, however, a vigorous print culture "was a prototype for democratic models of the public sphere because it fostered discourse oriented to a virtual community to which widespread, though not universal, access existed. Transcending direct contacts between speakers and listeners in oral communication, and vastly exceeding the ability to reproduce texts by scribal publication, printing and print culture established a context in which it was possible for public opinion to be a factor in politics" (p. 133). These developments led to "the imposition of dialogic order on political conflict" and hence to the first political public sphere. But the subversion of the norms of secrecy were not embraced. Although each side appealed to public opinion, neither was prepared ideologically to embrace the new public. Paradoxically, Zaret notes, the "invention" of public opinion was an innovation disclaimed by its practitioners. Public opinion "as a practice ran ahead of its expression in formal theories" (p. 39).

This "paradox of innovation" is the central concept that Zaret brings from sociology to bear on his analysis, as a way of explaining why it is wrong to look for explicit expressions that contemporaries embraced change. The paradox is therefore also central to his important argument about petitioning. Petitions were both propaganda (linked to print) and reflections of opinion, invoking a traditional right to express grievances in order to justify the breach of traditional secrecy norms. Printing petitions was the dialogic order par excellence, with petition meeting with counter-petition and counter-petition meeting with rebuttal. Such a debate invoked and created a public sphere, but violated the normal rules of petitioning even though such rules were not disowned. Petitioning thus becomes "a signal instance of the paradox of innovation" (p. 253). Nevertheless "when they confronted the problem of competition between rival petitions, some contemporaries invoked consent, openness and reason as criteria of the validity of opinions" and were thus separated by only "a very thin line" from "democratic principles" (p. 262) such as free speech and the centrality of public opinion as the ultimate ground of legitimacy for a legislative agenda.

Zaret's work is important and thought-provoking. It is refreshing in its ability to stand back from a historical debate and discern structural shifts, an approach which may not be fashionable but which can be invigorating. Thus his insights into the petitioning process are innovative and very valuable. They go beyond an analysis of the importance of petitioning at a certain time to an attempt to get at the heart of how the petitioning process was instrumental in changing the political landscape. Printed petitioning "not only increased the scope of political communication, but also altered its content" (p. 217) and became "a means to

constitute and invoke public opinion" (p. 220). Such ideas are fertile ones. Similarly he highlights how important print was in structural change: for example, writers could invoke public opinion; print changed how people wrote; printing itself became a political tactic; and news reported crisis after crisis, creating an impression of crisis.

The argument that structural change occurred is right, and the 1640s was obviously a crucial decade in determining a shift, but Zaret perhaps oversimplifies the degree of novelty in his desire to make his point. Thus the idea that in the early seventeenth century "popular participation in political discourse was limited to the receiving end of symbolic displays of authority" (p. 7) is not one that would find ready acceptance amongst social historians of early modern England. More importantly, while Zaret admits that "religious controversies in pre-revolutionary England provide evidence of print culture as a prototype for the public sphere" before the 1640s (p. 165) and that the developments associated with religious debate therefore helped pave the way for an expanded political public sphere in the 1640s, he refuses to recognise a fully-fledged, religiously-created public sphere. Zaret thus talks of a "nascent public sphere in religion" (p. 170) which remained limited by its concentration on "specific religious controversies" rather than debate "over the nature and purposes of the political authority that enacted those policies" (p. 173). Yet Zaret surely minimises the importance of religious debate as a creator of the public sphere, and maximises the distinction between religion and politics.

Zaret is in effect arguing that the public sphere in which he is interested -- the political one -- was more important than a religious one that preceded it and so defines the public sphere as purely political. Yet a religiously created public sphere could be created well before the mid-seventeenth century, even if it was at times only short-lived. For example, in 1584 petitioners lobbying for a more radical religious policy took advantage of the enlarged space created by the government-sponsored attempts to promote a nationwide bond of association (which incidentally appealed to a concept of public opinion) to promote petitions which could be presented to Parliament.

Similarly, Zaret's conclusions about the trajectory after 1660 also seem over-simplified. He sees in the scientific impulse and the push for a rational religion a "growing confidence in public reason" (p. 272) even though such attitudes were the often the preserve of a minority which was often worried precisely because the mass of the people seemed irrational. The point is important because it qualifies the idea of structural change. Once created the Zaretian public sphere apparently retains its robustness in a progression towards modern rationality; but even in the years immediately after 1660 we can find government-sponsored attempts to narrow the public sphere and, even when these ultimately failed, an early public sphere that displays vulnerability and fragility. The public sphere was not an entity, but had to be constantly renewed through the process of public debate; it therefore enlarged but also contracted at certain times. Structural change could not be a one-off process in the 1640s.

Zaret may have simplifed his ideas because he uses the mid-seventeenth century communicative revolution as a stick to beat revisionists, Marxists and post-modernists. Revisionist historians are chided for their divorcing historical scholarship from social science and theory, "especially when it involves uncovering the roots of modernity in the soil of seventeenth century history" (p. 19). Sociologists, he suggests, can teach the historian a thing or two, since public opinion is a concept in which they are well versed. There is, of course, a good deal of sense in this, though the statements appear to neglect some of the ways in which historians have already heard his message. Indeed, historians' participation in the debate about the public sphere is surely a reflection of such interest in sociologists' work.

But "the roots of modernity" concept causes its own problems for Zaret's analysis. He suggests that the "appeal to public authority is the ultimate source of authority in democratic polities for setting a legislative agenda" (p. 21), even though this important dimension is never explored in the subsequent analysis. There is no discussion about the conceptual sources of authority in early modern England in a way that would sustain this argument; nor is the way in which public opinion interacted with the legislative process ever considered. Two important "foundations for modern democracy" are therefore omitted from the discussion. Similarly his dismissal of the "unsustainable distinction between elite and popular cultures ...a view long abandoned by historians" (p. 33) is never explained and is also questionable. This is important because his claim that the public sphere was not bourgeois hangs on the participation of the masses in print culture.

But despite its slightly overdrawn argument this is a book of real importance and substance that should stimulate debate and invite historians and sociologists to pay more attention to each other's work.

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