NEWS, POLITICS AND PEOPLE, 1603-1714

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The 'long seventeenth century' (1603-1714) was a period of revolution and profound upheaval. It witnessed civil wars (1642-6, and 1648), the trial and execution of Charles I (1649), and the 'Glorious Revolution' (1688-9). The latter saw James II flee from England, and the invasion of his son-in-law the Dutch Stadtholder, who became William III, and who helped to sustain a Stuart dynasty until 1714. Such upheavals saw a bewildering range of constitutional innovations, from the creation of a 'regnal union' after 1603, which brought England, Scotland and Ireland into a multiple monarchy, to the formal union between England and Scotland in 1707. Governmental experimentation included a brief period of republicanism (involving regicide, and the abolition of monarchy and the House of Lords) before the creation of a protectorate under Oliver and later Richard Cromwell, as well as the failed attempt to legislate against the succession of one of Charles II's sons (the 'Exclusion Crisis'), and finally an Act of Settlement (1701) which shapes the English monarchy to this day. Historians have long recognised, however, that the story of this dramatic period involves more than merely kings, queens and Cromwells, and if constitutional experimentation involved profound questions regarding the nature and power of monarchy, it also involved arguments relating to the role of Parliament, the nature of political representation, and, by extension, the political role of 'the people'. As such, the State Papers represent a hugely valuable source of information for the ways in which members of the public participated in political life, the constraints placed upon them, and the possibilities offered by two profoundly important developments: the 'print revolution' and the 'news revolution'.[1]

The public's ability to engage with political and religious issues, and with current affairs, had always been highly controversial, not least to the extent that it involved those from the 'lower orders', and seditious speech in taverns and alehouses was a perennial concern,[2] as were political libels, like those displayed upon St Paul's Cross in the late 1620s.[3] Popular political discourse became even more disturbing in the age of print, and frequent attempts were made to enforce press censorship at both a general and a specific level. The success with which successive regimes controlled the press, and the rigour with which they sought to exercise power, remains contested, but it cannot be doubted that periodic attempts were made to tighten regulations, as in 1637.[4] In addition, any number of episodes could be highlighted to demonstrate that efforts were made to suppress specific works which displeased the

authorities, such as Sir Walter Raleigh's *History*.[5] The authorities investigated sermons which seemed to justify the overthrow of tyrannical monarchs, such as those delivered by John Knight in 1622,[6] and the investigation of unwelcome printed pamphlets could be remarkably detailed and sophisticated. Books such as William Prynne's notorious Puritan treatise, *Histriomastix* (1634), were read very carefully for evidence of seditious beliefs, and notes were taken on offensive passages.[7] Officials also interrogated printers and booksellers in order to discover the mechanisms by which works were financed, produced and distributed, as happened with provocative historical works such as *A View of the Long Life and Reign of Henry III* in 1627,[8] as well as any number of Puritan works by Prynne and his friends.[9] The inclusion within the State Papers of many manuscript pamphlets, such as those by Sir Robert Cotton,[10] or by Prynne,[11] as well as a plethora of printed pamphlets dealing with political and religious themes, reveals the efforts made by the authorites to police the topical and polemical texts which were in circulation, as well as the difficulty of their task. During the Scottish rebellion of the late 1630s, for example, the government became disturbed by the circulation of covenanter propaganda in England, both in manuscript[12] and printed formats,[13] and in 1640 Charles I published a proclamation against the distribution of such material.[14] Another significant issue upon which the archive sheds light is the tendency for opponents of specific regimes to engage in printing and publishing overseas, and for governments to try and investigate such practices, as happened regarding the production of Puritan texts in the Low Countries in the late 1630s.[15] Moreover, to the extent that a system of pre-publication censorship operated for most of the seventeenth century, individual works could be subject to more or less draconian editing, as Richard Ward found to his cost,[16] and even authors supportive of particular regimes could be dissuaded from publishing in order not to foment further debate.[17]

Successive regimes also sought to ensure that their own message reached a national audience, and appointed official printers, such as Robert Barker, who could be relied upon to produce proclamations and declarations for distribution across the country.[18] For many such individuals accounts, or petitions for payment, survive in the archives.[19] The official archives also shed light upon the ways in which official statements were drafted, enabling historians to understand the political and administrative process, and those involved, not least for texts such as Charles I's declaration against the Scots in 1640.[20] After the establishment of the republic in 1649, meanwhile, it was recognised that specialist propagandists were needed, and the archives reveal the hiring and retaining of authors such as John Milton and John Hall,

who received payments for their labours, and who were commissioned to compose specific works.[21]

Not the least issue which concerned the authorities for much of the seventeenth century was the emergence and development of a thriving news culture. Before the 1620s, news had tended to circulate largely through official channels, or through private letters, whether in the form of correspondence between friends in order to relay political news for Westminster,[22] or in terms of the commercial newsletters to which it was possible to subscribe, from men such as Edmund Rossingham.[23] The outbreak of the Thirty Years War in 1618, however, encouraged the development of printed newspapers, or corantos, and although these focussed on European rather than domestic news, they nevertheless troubled the authorities. One official complained in 1621 that, although the government had passed a proclamation against the public discussion of matters of state, this was being ignored, and corantos were proving immensely popular.[24] Although men such as Thomas Pory argued that the government should exploit the new medium for its own ends,[25] such advice was ignored, and the government suppressed printed newspapers in 1632.[26] Such measures could not quench the thirst for news, however, and in the 1630s the government expressed concern at the activities of men like Thomas Cotton of Bergholt in Essex, who received regular supplies of news from a 'peevish intelligencer' in London, and who then read it aloud on market days in the streets of Colchester.[27] Eager to capitalise on the popular demands for news, entrepreneurs such as Nathaniel Butter, Nicholas Bourne, Walter Waldner and George More sought permission to operate licensed newspaper businesses in the 1630s,[28] but the industry did not thrive until the civil war era, first in the form of weekly manuscript newspapers, such as 'Diurnall Occurrences',[29] and then in the form of printed 'gazettes' and 'mercuries'.[30]

The rise of the newspaper, however, was somewhat faltering. Having thrived in the 1640s, when numerous competing titles appeared every week, the period after 1649 saw concerted efforts to bring the industry under state control. Some of the most important journalists of the age, such as Marchamont Nedham, were hired to write official newspapers (1650),[31] while unwelcome titles, such as *Perfect Occurrences*, were investigated and suppressed.[32] By 1655, legislation passed by the Cromwellian government had created an official news monopoly,[33] and although such control collapsed in the late 1650s, it was successfully reimposed after the Restoration, when the government made Sir Roger L'Estrange 'surveyor of the press'. L'Estrange had power to suppress seditious pamphlets and to license official news,[34] and he

and his agents proved effective at investigating and prosecuting those involved in printing and selling illicit books, such as John Starkey,[35] and demonstrated a determination to license those 'hawkers' who sold pamphlets and newspapers in the streets. In addition, L'Estrange was also an accomplished propagandist, although his dominant role in such activity after 1660 was undermined by the arrival of the official and hugely successful *London Gazette* in 1665, which he did not run.[36] With printed news so tightly controlled after 1660, customers turned to new kinds of manuscript newsletter, only some of which were controlled by the government.[37] When printing controls temporarily lapsed, such as during the Exclusion Crisis, newspapers quickly resurfaced, and became important tools for both Whig and Tory parties.[38] The medium eventually became a permanent, and indeed daily fixture, after the licensing laws fell into disuse in 1695, albeit the industry remained susceptible to official control, not least through the Stamp Act (1712).[39] During the period after 1660, moreover, official concern regarding the circulation and discussion of news was exacerbated by the proliferation of coffeehouses, where customers could often read the newspapers to which proprietors subscribed. This helped to ensure that attempts were eventually made to suppress, or at least license, such establishments,[40] just as the government sought to monitor the growth of political clubs, given the concern that these too might become focal points for political agitation.[41]

Printed pamphlets and news, however, provide only one way of exploring public and 'popular' politics during the Stuart era. Another important means of taking part was through petitioning, not merely as individuals approaching political authorities with specific grievances, but also as part of larger campaigns which involved the gathering of large numbers of signatures.[42] Such concerted action was evident from the so-called 'millenary' petition presented to James I shortly after his accession in 1603, and is well documented during the religious debates of 1640, when Archbishop William Laud was keen to investigate the coordination of petitioning campaigns in London,[43] and when documents providing advice on how to organise petitions were circulated.[44] During subsequent decades, a succession of regimes expressed concern that largescale petitioning campaigns were carefully organised by political grandees and political parties, and the Exclusion Crisis certainly witnessed the emergence of 'monster' petitions which involve considerable efforts at planning and coordination.[45]

Part of the reason for official concern regarding such campaigns was that they might easily lead to less polite forms of political activity. Popular disorder was a perennial fear in the early modern period, and was evident from apprehension about the possible effects of allowing large numbers of people to gather in one place, whether for theatrical performances, as in Canterbury in 1636,[46] or more obviously for unauthorised religious 'conventicles'. The government of Charles I was certainly worried about these in 1626, not least because they involved 'the meaner sort of people', were supported by Puritan grandees such as the Earl of Warwick and Sir Robert Harley, and were attended by firebrand preachers such as Hugh Peter.[47] Later, in the 1650s, sectarian congregations were even the subject of undercover surveillance by government agents.[48] Equally disturbing were political gatherings, and the posibility of political disorder, whether in terms of the large crowds which turned out to demonstrate support for imprisoned Puritans such as Prynne in 1637,[49] or 'factious' and 'tumultuous' behaviour at parliamentary elections, as at Sandwich in 1640,[50] or even riots like those which took place in Southwark after the dissolution of the Short Parliament, which resulted in detailed investigations, and the last ever just of judicial torture in England.[51] After 1660, concern about the possibility of riots and crowds was also tinged with apprehension regarding the possible role of old Cromwellian soldiers as agitators.[52]

What became increasingly clear to the authorities, and what emerges from the archives, was the possibility that street agitation, like petitioning, could be organised and manipulated 'from above', and that it could be fomented through print and propaganda. It became clear, in other words, that the medium of print, which was so useful to the authorities for mobilising supporters, as Charles I with a proclamation in order to raise military forces in 1642,[53] could be put to the same use by political dissidents. The rebels who rose against Parliament in Kent in 1648 produced a printed broadside justfying their cause and rallying support,[54] and it became clear in 1649 that print could be used in order to gather crowds in order to attend Parliament and judicial proceedings.[55] The use of such tactics by radical groups such as the Levellers led the republican regime to take action against anyone attending their meetings or subscribing to their petitions,[56] and in 1653 the commonwealth regime became particularly perturbed by the appearance and circulation of a printed text, the *Charge of High Treason*, which sought to foment an armed uprising against the government.[57] In 1670, the Restoration regime found clear evidence of texts which were designed to mobilise apprentices to take part in armed gatherings to protest against foreign workers, timed for May Day,[58] and in 1683 printed manifestos were thought to have been used to foment plots against the government.[59]

Not all uses of print, and not all forms of popular politics, were so inflammatory, and what emerges from the archives is the degree to which pamphlets and printed texts became a key means by which ordinary citizens engaged with the authorities, in ways which may not have been open to them in earlier generations because of the prohibitive cost of producing and distributing manuscript texts. From the mid-1640s, printed literature was produced in order to influence elections, both for Parliament and in particular towns,[60] and the phenomenon became increasingly important after 1660.[61] What is also striking about the period, and about the official archives, is just how familiar even humble individuals became with the print medium, and how willing they were to appropriate it for their own ends. This meant the printing of petitions, like that produced by William Prynne's servant, Nathaniel Wickens, in 1639,[62] and of lobbying documents, by both individuals and corporate bodies, such as the Cinque Ports.[63] Such texts could be distributed more or less freely, not least to individual MPs, in order to secure relief upon grievances, and in order to influence the legislative process, and although more traditional manuscript texts continued to be produced, such as those by the reformer Henry Robinson,[64] print made direct political participation much more accessible to humble individuals and economic interest groups, such as poor cloth workers.[65] Beyond the headline-grabbing revolts and uprisings by which the Stuart period was marked, these developments suggest a very quiet but highly significant political revolution, in terms of both representation and participation, and developments which represent a significant legacy of the civil war era.[66]

Citation

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Notes

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