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Agent of Absolutism: Printing and Politics in Early Modern Europe

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Illuminations and Calligraphy by Laura Watkins and Jason Rallis

The fifteenth century marked the commencement of two trends which signaled the end of the medieval era and the dawn of modernity: the emergence of centralized monarchies and the introduction of print culture. Both trends were gradual and in their infancy in the fifteenth century, but their successive paths of development were closely intertwined. Throughout the early modern era, monarchs with aspirations of imposing an absolute and uncontested authority on their often recalcitrant subjects utilized the "new art" (*ars nova*) of printing to realize their aims. Select printers became agents of absolutism, and the craft developed at the discretion and under the auspices of the royal governments of Europe.

The spread of printing by movable type after its introduction in 1455 by the Mainz publishers Gutenberg, Füst, and Schoeffer was dramatic and revolutionary. Itinerant German printers introduced the *ars nova* to Italy by 1467, France by 1470, Spain by 1474, England by 1476, and Scandinavia by 1482. By the turn of the sixteenth century, the European printing industry had produced approximately six million books in forty thousand editions, far more publications than had been issued by scribes since the fall of Rome.

The twin powers of church and state were both excited and unsettled by this revolution in communications. Printers, as new and conspicuous craftsmen utilizing mechanical means and possessing control over the "creation" and dissemination of ideas and information, quickly came under close scrutiny. While the term "free trade" is anachronistic before the eighteenth century, printing was subjected to particularly rigid regulations once the power and potential of the press was grasped by the governing authorities of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. Their aim was not merely control, but mastery. Early modern monarchs, in their quest for power over both their subjects and the church, were duty bound not only to regulate printed opinion but also actively to direct it.

Royal authorities rationalized and justified their strict regulation of the press in several different ways. The first rationale was derived from contemporary perceptions of the *ars nova* and its practitioners. Tracts of the period depict printing alternatively and conversely as both the "divine art" and the "devil's art." These characterizations are not contradictory; royal theorists asserted that while printing was God's gift, it was likely to be abused by man if left to his own devices. Thus kings, possessing both divine and patriarchal authority in their realms, naturally included the regulation of printing among their prerogative powers. This justification is expressed well by a seventeenth-century English broadside, which asserts, upon little basis of fact, that "King Henry VI purchased the first discovery of the Art, and thereby became proprietor thereof at his own charge, whereby the same came to be taught and used in England, but for the printing of such matters only as the king licensed and privileged and by the sworn servants of the king only, and in places appointed by the king, and not elsewhere."

In both England and on the Continent, printers exercised their craft only as "sworn servants" of their sovereigns. Unlike most contemporary artisans, they were subject not only to the rules and restraints of the local guild but also of the national monarchy. Printers constituted part of the public sphere, plying a craft that was both essential and potentially harmful to the national interest. At no time was this more apparent than during the Reformation. Due to its perceived role in disseminating Protestant rhetoric and ideology, printing was tied either to the "furtherance of true religion" or the spread of "heresy," depending on the religious orientation of the commentator. Cuthbert Tunstall, friend and confidant of Henry VIII, Bishop of London prior to the English Reformation, and witness to Martin Luther's testimony before the Diet of Worms, expressed the latter view succinctly when he asserted that "we must root out printing or printing will root out us." Uniformity and conformity of religion and opinion were essential prerequisites of absolutism; thus, a king with such aspirations was compelled to bring the press under his control.

Royal governments utilized several methods of regulating the press both before and after the Reformation, though clearly these constraints were intensified after 1517. Licenses for publication had to be obtained from royal authorities or from new publishing guilds chartered by and answerable to the crown. The number of master printers per city and country was limited by royal dictates, as were their presses, employees and apprentices. Regular searches were made by royal and guild officials to ensure that conformity and compliance were in effect. Privileges, an early form of copyright, were issued by monarchs for both individual titles and general classes of publication like bibles, prayer books and grammars. In a like manner, the printers of early modern Europe became not only royal agents, but royal dependents.

From the arrival of the *ars nova* in their realms, early modern monarchs appointed royal printers to cater to the needs of both dynastic crown and national state, two interests which were merged increasingly into one. Royal printers often played a dual role in serving the crown's interests *vis-à-vis* the press. The great Flemish painter Christophe Plantin was appointed the "Proto-typographer" of Philip II, King of Spain and also ruler of an empire encompassing the Low Countries, or the Netherlands and Belgium, much of Italy, parts of France, and vast holdings in the New World. The powers and responsibilities of Plantin's position were also vast: supervision of the printing industry throughout the Low Countries, investigation of the competence and religious orthodoxy of every printer working in that area, and the production and distribution of all official publications, both of the king and of local governmental and ecclesiastical authorities. These commissions made Plantin the most prolific printer of the sixteenth century.

Official publications were both practical and polemical. Following the example of the church, which first used the press to issue indulgences and episcopal instructions, kings utilized printing to facilitate the business of governing before they experimented with printed propaganda. The "King's Printers" of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs of England, the Valois monarchy of France, and the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperors

and Kings of Spain issued series of proclamations, statutes, tax bills and receipts, currency standards, announcements, appointments, mandates, safe-conduct papers, declarations of war, peace treaties, summonses, legal notices, grants of fief, warrants of arrest, amnesties, pardons, bans against disturbers of the peace, provisions against the watering down of wine, and recognizances for alehouse keepers, to name just a few of the varied instruments of government. Some of these printed briefs resemble true forms in the modern sense, complete with "windows" or blank spaces in which particulars were written down by the royal representative. The rapid and constant production of legal and administrative documents allowed early modern monarchs to extend their reach over their realms. Royal dictates became more numerous and thus more authoritative; instead of being posted on the occasional tree, proclamations were now affixed to the doors of each and every parish church. Printing went a long way towards solving the logistical problem of communicating royal aims to the population at large, even if that population was largely illiterate. Descriptive illustrations often accompanied the printed text, as in a Tudor proclamation regulating currency, in which the margins contain woodcut pictures indicating legal coins.

onarchs seeking absolute power were compelled not only to extend their reach, but also to enhance their stature. In this capacity as well the *ars nova* was a useful tool. Throughout the medieval era, kings had claimed divine-right authority, but never so assertively as in the first centuries of print. Sixteenth-century attempts to glorify the monarchy and foster a "cult of kingship" were tentative, subtle, and indirect in comparison to the more sophisticated and systematic royal propaganda of the succeeding century. A notable exception was the propaganda campaign launched by Henry VIII's chief minister Thomas Cromwell at the onset of the English Reformation. This was a campaign designed to establish Henry as supreme head not only of the English state but also of the English church; thus, it was waged on all fronts and with all forms of print. Cromwellian tactics are illustrated well by the frontispiece of the 1540 "Great Bible" in which a Holbein illustration depicts Henry VIII handing the Word of God to Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer and Cromwell, who in turn dispense it to the crowd surrounding them. There is no doubt that this graphic illustration of divine-right authority was viewed by a large sector of the English population, as Cromwell ordered this particular edition of the Bible, and no other, to be placed in every English parish church. Religious propaganda was inherently political in the sixteenth century; thus, monarchs followed the example of the Protestant reformers in disseminating "cartoons," or printed woodcut illustrations, to advance their points of view. One famous Lutheran cartoon, *The Papal Ass of Rome and the Monk Calf of Freyberg,* depicted its title characters quite literally. Imagery as character assassination was more muted later in the century, though royal governments made use of similar cartoons to belittle advocates of opposing faiths, both foreign and domestic, and impress their ideology upon a broad popular audience. Through print, political activity became public in a modern sense, no longer the exclusive purview of privileged elites.

erhaps the most popular form of royal propaganda in the sixteenth century were accounts of royal visitations, entries and tours. Publications like Richard Mulcaster's *Quenes Majesties Passage,* a narration of an Elizabethan procession, and Abel Jouan's *Recueil et discours du voyage de Charles IX*, an account of the royal tour of France undertaken by Charles IX and Catherine de' Medici during the French Wars of Religion, were detailed, illustrated, and much in demand, the bestsellers of their day. Both tracts were sponsored indirectly by the respective crowns and published by their respective royal printers, and both authors employed the most glorious of terms to depict the royal personages. Accounts of royal entries commonly featured illustrations, presenting the sovereign with a golden opportunity to impress his personal presence upon his subjects in a revolutionary way. Previous to this application of the *ars nova*, royal portraits were viewed exclusively by those with access to court, but now all sectors of society could gaze upon the image of the king in all his glory. Royal iconography, perhaps the most effective form of propaganda in a largely illiterate society, emerged simultaneously with print culture. Histories written with crown sponsorship or encouragement constituted another form of royal propa-

ganda, albeit a more subtle one. Often tracing the evolution of England, France or Spain from feudal anarchy in the middle ages to order and prosperity in the present, such "historical" works fostered a fledgling nationalism by tying together inextricably the fates of monarch, nation, and people.

With the foundation laid, the seventeenth-century sovereigns could afford to be more explicit in their assertions of absolute authority. James VI and I of Scotland and England dispensed with the historians and apologists altogether and served as his own propagandist after he acceded to the English throne in 1603. In his *Trew Law of Free Monarchies* and his speeches before Parliament, many of which were quickly published by the King's Printer for distribution throughout the realm, James asserted his belief in the divine-right and patriarchal authority of the monarchy. James seldom refrained from advertising his belief that "the state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth. For kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods." Despite, or perhaps because of, these bold claims and assertions, Stuart absolutism was defeated definitively by two seventeenth-century English revolutions. It was in France that both the propaganda and the politics of absolutism reached their height.

ardinal Richelieu, chief minister of Louis XIII and *de facto* architect of French absolutism, believed the employment of "skilled pens" was an essential enterprise of the king, so that he might "have them write clandestine pamphlets, manifestos, artfully composed apologies and declarations, in order to lead (his subjects) by the nose." Richelieu's favorite vehicle of propaganda was the weekly *Gazette* of Théophraste Renaudot, the recipient of an exclusive privilege for periodical publication as "the journal of Kings and of the powers of the earth." The Cardinal supplemented Renaudot's propaganda initiatives by submitting copy, written by both his stable of "skilled pens" and himself, and performing wide-ranging editorial functions in order to paint the attributes and accomplishments of the sovereign in the boldest strokes and the brightest colors.

Subscribing to Richelieu's policy and following his example, successive royal ministers exploited all forms of printed material, including single-page broadsheets, pamphlets, full-length books, and the quasi-official Renaudot *Gazette*, to propel the stature of the monarchy to unparalleled heights during the reign of Louis XIV, the "Sun King," whose symbolic name, stamped on every royal publication, placed him at the very center of his subjects' existence. The king's powers and grandeur were transmitted beyond the narrow orbit of Versailles by printed proclamations and announcements informing the public of everything from declarations of war to royal births and directives ordering France's bishops to hold ceremonies of commemoration. By using the press not only to disseminate information and rhetoric but also to solicit a collective response, the king's private, dynastic interests became those of individual Frenchmen and the collective French nation. The propaganda that characterized and colored the reign of Louis XIV was not only forceful, ubiquitous, and multi-faceted, it was capable of sustaining itself. For in the words of Jean de la Chapelle, one of the Sun King's most able apologists, "it is an arrangement of Providence, which wanted to teach men that the heroic actions of Louis le Grand, somewhat similar to God's marvels, needed nothing more than the simplest mouths to publicize them." Of course the "simplest mouths" were fed by the produce of the press.

It was during the reign of Louis le Grand that the bilateral press policy of the early modern state reached its fulfillment; the printed word was both restricted and redirected to serve the interests of the public sphere, which were not coincidentally identical to those of the private king. For more than two centuries after the introduction of print, a steady proces-sion of proclamations, pamphlets, and propaganda had articulated, defended, and enlarged progressively the royal prerogative, but the *ars nova*, now not so new, would not always be so easily mastered. With the death of Louis XIV in 1715 a new age dawned, one in which the press was utilized increasingly as an opponent, rather than an agent, of absolutism.

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