

# Republican Citizenship, Ethics and the French Revolutionary Press 1789-92

*This paper examines the role of the revolutionary press in France in the realisation of the Enlightenment notion of "public opinion". The press, it is argued, saw itself as advancing civic republicanism based on public service as opposed to the liberal, individualistic ethic of today. Exploring the relevance of Habermas's theories of discourse ethics and MacIntyre's notions of "communitarianism", the paper argues that the revolutionary press promoted a "democratisation" of honour. The conclusion draws on the theories of Sandel to argue that newspapers provided the crucial narratives by which people made sense of their condition and interpreted their shared experiences at a time of revolutionary upheaval.*

Keywords: French revolutionary press, civic republicanism, ethics, citizenship.

## Introduction

The simultaneous revolutions in politics and communications in France from 1789 to 1792 demonstrate how the press can influence public debate, for newspaper reading was a form of voter participation in politics (Reynolds 1971: 256–263; Wilke 1989: 375–391). The scale of newspaper influence mushroomed temporarily to such an extent that the press was taken seriously as a major force within society. In all, 2,000 titles appeared between 1789 and 1799. Newspapers were used as a vehicle to change society via political campaigns and rival claims to representation by the winning of votes. This was a new feature of the democratic political process (Furet and Ozouf 1989).

Contemporaries grappled with a moral vision of politics concerned with how to construct

a genuine democracy through forms of participation that placed duty before rights. Public obligations were the only means of ensuring the very liberty that citizens appeared to be giving up by their discharge of "civic virtue". Under civic republicanism, freedom is incorporated into a polity with protection before the law, making it both social and synonymous with citizenship, which itself is achieved via order and civic virtue. "Republicanism in the eighteenth century is the project of restoring a community of virtue" (MacIntyre 1981: 220).

## The 'Ancien Regime', the Enlightenment and changing political morality

Before the revolution there had been only one official daily paper, the mainly cultural rather than political *Journal de Paris*. Consequently, the printed word became a huge underground industry, largely produced abroad. Despite the harsh environment of censorship, a deluge of clandestine pamphlets against the clergy and the aristocracy helped to encourage a revolutionary mood. Research into the influence of the press has revealed that newspapers still assisted in the general loss of faith in the monarchy before 1789, despite restrictions on them (Censer 1994: 213–214).

While some pamphlets and exile journals such as the high quality *Annales politiques, et littéraires du dix-huitième siècle* dealt with politically radical and controversial subjects such as the slave trade and colonialism, many of these illegal publications were frequently strident, ribald, defamatory and pornographic (Darnton 1971: 101).

After the outbreak of revolution, the press took every opportunity to decry aristocratic decadence in graphic detail, but morals on the revolutionary side became decidedly puritanical. The term "citizen" was used in preference to the word "subject" from the American and French revolutions onwards. As MacIntyre comments: "It is not difficult to see in this a re-making by societies of democratically inspired craftsmen and tradesmen of the classical ideal" (1985: 238). The role of politics now took on a new moral purpose: "to purify expression (of the collective voice), to correct the multiple forms of aberration" (Bates 2002: 99) as the press began to wrestle with the implications of the new ethics.

The revolution had the effect of bringing the eighteenth century Enlightenment notion of "public opinion" into sharper focus. Indeed, what Habermas has called the "bourgeois public sphere" (1989) was designed to help citizens develop, as public consumption, a form of individual literary rhetoric for a Kantian style use of reason. Conversely, lack of reason, especially when expressed as a lack of political integrity, was considered dishonourable.

Habermas also argued that "public opinion", in its classical bourgeois form, acts as an intermediary between natural law as an abstract principle and the enactment of legislation as a form of practical sovereignty (Habermas 1989: 140, 237–238). Newspapers became brokers in this process within the emerging public sphere. If the principle influence of the revolutionary press was that of communitarian civic republicanism, how did this evolve? Newspapers provide the best record of this change in attitude, for they had "the vocation of measuring the new era and defining its rhythm" (Rétat 1985: 142).

#### **Newspapers and the landscape of participatory democracy**

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, the previous lack of freedom and practical experience in public affairs meant that "political ferment was canalised into literature, the result being that our writers became the leaders of public opinion and played for a while the part which normally in free countries, falls to the professional politician" (1955: 142).

The aim of newspaper writers was to recreate the drama of debate in the Assembly, as if the reader was there. Good practice in journalistic ethics had been defined in July 1789 by the editor of the *Bulletin nationale*, who maintained that the reader should "follow the progress of opinions, discuss them himself and believe himself to be actually participating". This was essential now that the people were in charge.

As editor Loustallot wrote in *Les Révolutions de Paris* newspaper (of 19-25 September 1789): "Our representatives are not, as in England, the sovereign of the nation. IT IS THE NATION THAT IS SOVEREIGN." Habermas tends to discuss sovereignty in the context of its longer-term relationship with the development of the nation state and not in terms of its manifestation within a potential ethics of citizenship. "The sovereignty of the people was, of course, a diffuse battle cry, which was unfolded in the constitutional debates of the nineteenth century. In its various thought motifs flow together: the sovereign power of the state appears as the expression of a new principle of legitimation, of the domination of the third estate, and of national identity as well" (1979: 192). Admittedly, revolutionaries were still pioneering concepts of sovereignty, described by Cobb as "vague gropings at theories" (1997: 23). But for the press, the importance was crucial. Power invested in the sovereignty of the people was largely ideological: this meant that the responsibility for its definition lay with writers. As Furet says: "Language was substituted for power, for it was the sole guarantee that power would belong to the people, that is, to nobody" (1981: 27).

Since the collapse of the old regime,

secrecy was considered counter-revolutionary, so the French insisted that all politics had to be carried out in public to be legitimate. From 1789 through to 1799 when Napoleon made himself dictator, law-making was conducted in public assemblies open to the people. Most contemporary journalists were also leading politicians, such as Robespierre, Marat, and Hébert. All were propagandists who knew what was going on within parliamentary circles because they mixed in them. Stylistically, the political rhetoric of newspaper articles was oratorical, intended for reading aloud and therefore almost indistinguishable from the discourse of parliamentary speeches.

Attempts at participatory debate in politics are given a theoretical role model by Habermas in his "discourse ethics". Discourse ethics expresses our moral intuitions in so far as these impinge on the process of discursive justification of norms. Furthermore, the emphasis on normative consensus rather than on abstract universalism means that a discourse ethic can include the more universal structural aspects of ways of life relating to communicative action itself (1990: 116). As Held points out: "Habermas would argue that he is less concerned with particular theoretical and value positions which are relative to social and historical contexts, and more with the conditions for the possibility of argument as such" (1980: 397). Nevertheless, in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas places his theory of discourse ethics in to a theoretical context of the historical development and evolution of human societies, reconstructing it as a learning process influenced by Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1971) and Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1981; Habermas op.cit: 8, 33-42), along with historical materialism adapted from Marx. This procedural model for language provides "transcendental" guarantees of the rules of speech which assume people will make a rational choice about how to operate when, in fact, the existence of culture means there are always elements of irrationality that still remain. (McMylor 1994: 171; Held 1980: 331).

#### **The communitarian approach and the revolutionary press**

Thus discourse ethics has provoked considerable debate between those who favour a Kantian concept of universalisability and "contextualists" or "communitarians" who argue for the embedding of moral principles in cultures and ways of life where these become both objects and sources of moral value (Outhwaite 1996: 178; Benhabib and Dallmayr 1990; Baynes 1992). In terms of its historical specificity, it is probably more appropriate to measure the French revolutionary press against the latter

communitarian approach. This is defined by Sandel: "For a society to be a community in the strong sense, community must be constitutive of the shared self-understandings of the participants and embodied in their institutional arrangements, not simply an attribute of certain of the participants' plans of life" (1996: 173).

MacIntyre's work has similarly been called "communitarian", although it is a label that he himself rejects (MacIntyre 1994: 265). Although his communitarianism is specifically neo-classical and anti-liberal, thus not linked to liberal pluralism, the kind of community envisaged by MacIntyre in later writings encourages a discourse comparable to the ones that took place in the pages of the French press, presupposing deliberation, argument and insisting that citizens can put into doubt "what has hitherto by custom or tradition been taken for granted" (MacIntyre 1998: 241).

Part of the reason that ethical models are difficult to apply is that the revolutionary mentality, as Cobb points out, was never a body of doctrine or a carefully reasoned philosophy of life (1997: 7). There were political and moral standards, but these were soon put under pressure by the speed of events, foreign invasion and intolerance of dissent, all of which are all dealt with later. The most dramatic change that took place was in the power of print media to influence events as they were happening – by being part of them. Newspapers in that period provided a "feedback mechanism that stimulated and intensified the rising level of revolutionary fervour" (Wilke op cit: 387). Therefore newspapers were not only the "child" but also the "father" of the revolution (Gilchrist and Murray 1971; Popkin 1990).

The press also helped form a new revolutionary culture: a Declaration of the Rights of Man and a constitution, new administrative systems, the defeat of the church, a different currency, map, calendar, weights and measures, even new forms of address, including revolutionary celebrations or fêtes. Through their language and symbolism such events were experienced as communications events aimed at encouraging like-minded feelings amongst the participants (Wilke op cit: 388; Ozouf 1988).

During this era of active street culture newspapers were often pasted up as bills in public places, then pasted over by rival newspapers. Ideas were disseminated via handbills and posters, via public reading sessions which helped the illiterate to develop political awareness, and through fierce discussion in the streets, in clubs and in other public places. Within this climate, the press helped to encourage and co-ordinate the emergence of a democratic movement in many Paris districts. Detailed historical research on the march of the market women from Paris to Versailles to fetch the royal family back to Paris,

for instance, concludes that the press "not only prepared the disturbances and made them possible, but also gave them their shape and purpose" (Rudé 1958: 22; see also Mathiez 1998: 41-3). Thus newspapers "reflected the diverse strands of public opinion and, at the same time, helped to form them" (Gough 1988: 235).

By 1792, political societies were overtaking the press as the main forums for policy formation. Although the majority of journals were pro-revolutionary, perhaps it was inevitable that, like the clubs, they too would become a forum for disputes between rival groups and tendencies seeking to influence the people.

#### **Towards an ethics of citizenship**

Journalistic progress was linked to the difficult evolution of the political process and the moral vision of politics that it traded in was concerned with how to construct a genuine democracy through forms of participation that placed duty before rights. The emphasis of civic republicanism on virtuous public service differentiates it from modern liberal individualism. The press saw itself as a moral agent dedicated to the distinct normative end of civic virtue. "The revolutionaries were optimists; they were convinced that they were in the process of creating not only a new form of society, but also a new revolutionary man, virtuous, serious, patriotic" (Cobb op cit:18).

#### **The unwritten journalistic code of revolutionary honour**

Citizenship and public probity came to acquire the highest value. Influence over the formulation of public opinion carried responsibility, but, as William Reddy has demonstrated, it revolved around an invisible code of civic "honour" (1997). According to Brissot, who was influenced by the British and American informational style, journalists should retain their independence by never dining with dignitaries and people in power or being dependent on information from just one person or source. People should be judged by facts and opinions, not by gossip and speculation. Journalists should have knowledge of the good political practices of ancient democracy (for the Greek city states were a model) and should seek to expose the way that the aristocracy in France undermined the new system by their corruption (1791).

Classical analogies abounded as part of the republican ideal. In 1789 journalist Camille Desmoulins had waxed: "Here I am a journalist, and it is a rather fine role. No longer is it a wretched and mercenary profession, enslaved by the government. Today in France it is the journalist who holds the tablets, the album of the censor, and who inspects the senate, the consuls and the dictator himself" (*Révolutions de France et de Brabant 1789*). A few years later, Brissot was to berate Desmoulins publicly for his lack of

journalistic ethics in a three-part series of articles (1791: 656, 657, 659) yet Desmoulins' prose is the most eloquent of the period.

In 1789 writing was considered to be a vocation not a business, so there was a scepticism about the ethical implications of writing for hire. The concern was that a writer would lose public honour if his (or sometimes her) work was not consistent. Increased demand for newspapers led to an increase in demand for prose, but the "democratisation" of honour made even the lowliest hacks anxious about the consistency of their political positions. The sudden growth in the newspaper industry had only exacerbated the problem. For example, Marat noted that any person who had managed to get one article in the *Gazette* and wanted to "make it" could then proceed to "try and make a fortune by launching a newspaper. Empty headed, with no contacts, ideas or views, he goes in to a café to pick up gossip, the allegations of public enemies, people's moans and the complaints of the underdog, then goes home with his head full of this mishmash that he puts on to paper and hands to his printer for circulation the following day to the idiots who are stupid enough to buy it. That's the output of 99 per cent of these people" (*L'Ami du Peuple* No.382, 25 February 1791).

Journalists could face public shame, yet the nature of basic honour was never defined. For instance, Marat's commentaries on the assembly were aimed at exposing certain deputies' treasonous intentions, and also at mobilising the people against them. Unwritten ethical codes, however, clearly did not extend to literary method, truth or accuracy. For instance, the writer Hébert, euphemistically dubbed the "Homer of Filth", was originally against the execution of the King but eventually called for the "monster's blood" in his satirical journal *Le Père Duchesne*, which stretched to 368 editions.

Hébert complained that it was such a long and complicated business to "knock off a tyrant's head: yes, damn it! The traitor Louis, shut up like an owl in the Temple tower, would not be so complacent there, if he did not have a strong following in Paris. Already, damn it, they have tried more than one surprise attack to release him.....It must not happen that the greatest scoundrel that has ever been should remain unpunished. It is good that the sovereign people become used to judging kings" (*Le Père Duchesne*: Hatin 1859: V1, 516-517). He believed that "you must swear with those who swear", admitting that he did not write for the ladies: "anyone who appreciates frankness and probity will not blush at the 'foutres' and 'bougres' that I insert here and there with my joys and my angers". The style had instant appeal to "sans culottes" readers because it was well suited to reading aloud for those who were illiterate.

### The problems of pluralism and dissent

From 1789 to 1799 newspapers with their libel, sedition and insults, form a record of one of the most passionate periods ever (de Monseignat 1853: 235, 239). During this period there was no distinction between "comment" and the factual reporting of events so the latter could easily become self indulgent slander or support for a faction. Every editor wanted to influence both the assembly and the people, but their political opinions as stated in their journals, differed. Hence as press freedom evolved in France, it became a double edged sword at the same time as its educative role was overtaken by a less restrained and uncontrolled war of ideas. As François Furet commented: "It [the revolutionary press] strove for power, yet denounced the corruption power inevitably entailed" (1981: 49).

If the price of democracy is eternal vigilance, then the price of newspaper freedom was inevitably a critical and damaging press. In particular, the counter revolutionary press had a number of the most talented journalists as well as substantial financial backing and, in some cases, subsidy from the King's Civil List (Murray 1986). The royalist newspapers fought their battle ruthlessly on the revolutionaries' territory. Royalist papers such as the *Ami du roi* portrayed the assembly as divided and disorderly, whilst the satirical *Actes des apôtres* thought it mad. The continuous slander of the newspapers, the venting of grievances and the publicity in support of various factions, all had the disconcerting effect of keeping France, and especially Paris, in a state of permanent unrest and incipient revolt (Popkin 1980).

The overthrow and arrest of the King heralded a new phase of radicalisation of the revolution, but during 1792 complete newspaper autonomy became threatened by the Terror and the victory of the Montagnards factions over the Girondins. Across the political spectrum journalistic nationalism induced by war became evident, tending to clash with the intrinsic universalism and egalitarianism of the Revolution. The enormity of the problem helps to explain the decline of democracy: by the spring of 1793 France was faced with the combined forces of Austria, Prussia, Britain, Holland, Spain, Naples, Rome, Venice and Sardinia. The Revolutionary Wars destroyed many of the earlier progressive measures passed by the Assembly and imposed an unbearable pressure on the new republic.

The problem in retrospect seems to be that Europe had not yet embraced the modern day democratic concept of plurality of expression. Instead, diversity was seen as a threat. Unlike America and Britain, constitutional initiatives in France had not created any formal space for dissent, although revolutionary leaders tried to create one. "Absolute, the sovereignty of the people excluded pluralism of representation

because it assumed the unity of the nation" (Bates 2002: 110).

The process then entailed creating a series of enemies: aristocrats, the monarchy, counter revolutionaries, which in turn facilitated the creation of a sense of national unity in opposition. Thus, in the eyes of contemporaries stability was associated with unity, which was threatened by dissent. Dissent had to be eliminated because it divided society into hostile factions, represented and articulating their views in diverse newspapers. Therefore, the Terror could be interpreted as an erroneous attempt to re-establish this unity. "Criticism and dissent are always paramount, the indicators of a healthy society, but when unlimited they destroy the virtues and end all chance of securing the good.....when political authority...goes beyond its limits and tries to initiate an unrestrained politics of virtue, the outcome is invariably oppression, what (sic) poisons the well-spring of legitimacy and destroys unity" (Breen 2000: 8).

### Conclusions

In theory, civic republicanism is a relatively neutral idea around which we can organise the politics of a pluralist society, even if this challenge was not totally successful in 1789–92. In the early years of the French Revolution, political morals approximated to this perspective of liberty, but ironically the journalism practice that was underpinned by it eventually conspired, along with events, to undermine the ethic. Yet French revolutionary newspapers were essential as a forum for discourse. As Sandel argues: "Political community depends on the narratives by which people make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; at its best, political deliberation is not only about competing policies but also about competing interpretations of the character of a community, of its purposes and ends. The loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowerment of the human subject, for without narrative there is no continuity between past and present, and therefore no responsibility, and therefore no possibility of acting together to govern ourselves" (op cit: 351).

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Translations of all French language sources cited in the text are the author's own, with the exception of de Tocqueville.

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