The press and the political public, 1830 – 1930

A one-day workshop in the German Historical Institute in London, 17 Bloomsbury Square

Friday, 24 October 2003

The period between 1830 and 1930 saw the breakthrough of the printed mass media in Europe, resulting in a fundamental change in the nature of the political public sphere. While after 1930 radio, film and television became increasingly important channels of communication, in the period before 1930 newspapers and periodicals constituted the prime source from which contemporaries gleaned information about political life. The parallel rise of mass democracy and mass print media raises fundamental questions about the relationship of the two phenomena. As there still is a lack of understanding of the changes brought about by the development of the mass media, and the mediation of mass politics through the media, the one-day workshop in the GHIL on 24 October 2003, organized by Bernhard Fulda (Cambridge) and Dominik Geppert (London), aimed to explore the relationship between politics, media and public in this crucial period in greater detail.

The first session focused on the two decades after the French July revolution in 1830. The beginning of that period saw the Great Reform Act in Britain in 1832, and the German liberal demonstration of the Hambacher Fest in the same year. In the eyes of contemporaries, freedom of the press and the extension of franchise went hand in hand, and many reactionary politicians sought to prevent the latter by suppressing the former. After the European revolutions of 1848, however, even continental political decision-makers resigned themselves to the existence of a ‘public opinion’ which could not be suppressed or directed, but with which they had to engage. In this context, Abigail Green (Oxford) argued that the growth of a free press in 19th century Germany went hand in hand with the growth of an official, government-sponsored press. The collapse of pre-publication censorship in 1848 prompted the development of increasingly sophisticated (and relatively successful) press control strategies by German governments, in the shape of official newspapers, semi-official newspapers and indirect government press influence. Torsten Riotte, who introduced his new research project on the German press coverage of the revolutionary events in 1830 and 1848, focused on the media rather than the government side of the equation. He suggested that it might be useful to analyse the circulation, content, style and
language of German newspapers which covered the events in France to explore the revolutionary dynamics which swept the German states in response to the developments in France.

The second session dealt with the transformation of the public sphere in Britain and Germany via the vast and rapid expansion of the press between ca. 1870 and 1914. The reform of the franchise in Britain (1867) and in Germany (1871) coincided with the emergence of a popular mass press. Within a few decades, newspapers were omnipresent and created a political mass public that was distinctly different from that of the 1850s, as evident, for example, in the contrast between British reactions to the Crimean and the Boer War. In his paper, James Thompson (Bristol) analysed the relationship between ideas about ‘public opinion’ and views of the press in Britain in that period. He not only looked at the changing shape and contested character of the term ‘public opinion’, but also investigated understandings of the press, in particular the extent to which the press was viewed as the maker or the mirror of ‘public opinion’. Moreover, he discussed the changing accounts of the respective value of the metropolitan and provincial press as well as the structural changes in the ownership of newspapers and the market for the developing mass press towards the end of the century. Frank Bösch (Bochum) focused on the increasing number of scandals, which are a striking feature of German politics in the period between 1890 and 1914. He claimed that this phenomenon could not sufficiently be explained with the traditional reference to the rise of a commercial press. Instead, he argued, it had to be interpreted as a new form of political communication which was designed to achieve political goals by breaking the existing limits of what could be said in public and what had to be kept secret.

The three papers of the third session discussed how the communications revolution of the late 19th and early 20th century affected different spheres of politics and public life. Dominik Geppert analysed how the traditional conduct of foreign policy and secret diplomacy was increasingly subject to the perceived demands of ‘public opinion’. Investigating the interdependencies between the governments and newspapers in Britain and Germany, Geppert argued that the story of the role of the press in British-German relations was, at least partly, dominated by a misunderstanding. British officials and journalists chronically overestimated the German government’s influence on the press and, at the same time, underestimated the impact which
published opinion had on official German policy. On the other hand, the German side took it for granted that British policy was largely dictated by public opinion as expressed in the press. In his paper, Dan Vyleta (Cambridge) investigated the relationship between readers and the wider public invoked by Vienna’s sensationalist press around 1900. He argued that within the illustrated press, the reading public was implicitly framed as one made up of atomised individuals who were disconnected from the public at large. While this role imposed upon the reader seemed to embrace a positive ethos of active vigilance and resistance to manipulation, Vyleta further argued that it in fact relied on the readers’ passivity and disengagement, and that the apparent educational dimension latent to the reports was no more than a rhetorical gesture. In his concluding paper on the Weimar press, Bernhard Fulda (Cambridge) argued that newspapers were considerably less influential in determining electoral outcome than most contemporaries thought. Readers treated newspapers not as political guide-books but as consumer products, which resulted in the decline of the traditional political press. Traditional political newspapers, however, exercised considerable influence on politicians who continued to believe in the persuasive powers of the press and who took newspapers as surrogates for public opinion.

Four closely related themes ran through the discussions on all the papers. Firstly, there was the relationship between decision-makers and the media: How did politicians’ ideas about the press develop? What was their assessment of the importance of the media? How did politicians’ perception of the political importance of the media change the way politics was conducted? A second complex of questions focused on the contested relationship between public and private in political life. Tensions between secrecy and publicity were a general phenomenon in this transformative period, in which the scope and limits of the public sphere were re-defined. A third recurring topic was the connection between the written word and pictorial representations (caricatures, photographs, cinema). The increasing visualization both of newspapers and politics in the later 19th century seemed to be of particular importance. A final theme of the discussions was the theoretical framework. The contributors agreed that Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, originally published in German in 1962, was still stimulating (for example, with regard to the personalization of politics) but deficient in important aspects. His description of the transition from an informed bourgeois public sphere
which degenerated through expansion into a non-political system of cultural consumption, reflected the suspicions of 1950s political sciences of ‘the masses’, and was often not borne out by historical evidence. Most participants took a more optimistic view of a historical development, which in their interpretation could not be reduced to the watchword ‘commercialization of the press’. Instead, it was suggested, it made more sense to speak of new strategies of communication, which were designed to achieve both political and commercial aims.

BERNHARD FULDA & DOMINIK GEPPERT