Book Reviews

Massimo Rospocher, ed.

_Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe_,
€30.00.

The volume presents fourteen contributions around notions of the “public sphere.” The introductory essay by the editor and essays focusing on “Theory” by Andreas Gestrich, Francesco Benigno, and Angela De Benedictis address models of the public sphere and focus primarily on Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann. The next section, entitled “Spaces, Voices, Humors” addresses Venice (Massimo Rospocher, Rosa Salzberg), “Information and Politics” (Filippo De Vivo) and Machiavelli (Sandro Lundi). In the next section on “Publics,” Shankar Raman addresses Descartes and Sidney, Silvana Menchi the “Public Space,” and Bronwen Wilson “Social Networking.” The issue of “Opinions” is treated by Castillo Gomez, Arjan van Dixhoorn, Charles Walton, and Edoardo Tortarolo.

The subject matter addressed in these essays is that in late medieval and early modern Europe, subjects and citizens met on an everyday level to talk with each other about common concerns, including those of government, politics, religion, and discoveries. From the coming of the printing press, this was facilitated by a wealth of printed material, from broadsheets and pamphlets to books. Informal and formal arenas of debate, from taverns and the marketplace to the defense of dissertations at universities, referred to this printed material. Diaries and letter exchanges mirror the reception of these debates among common people and elite alike. The councilors of German princes did consciously take account of such debates and even attempted to address and redress information allegedly to the detriment of a respective prince. From Machiavelli through to the French Revolution, early modern commentators remarked over and over again that opinion could matter, and could matter decisively. For in the absence of a modern bureaucratic state, the little that most princes or cities had in terms of paid servants needed the constant cooperation of lay people, high and low.

Modern research has taken heed of these facts throughout the twentieth century (from Otto Waldeck’s _Publizistik des Schmalkaldischen Bundes_
(Marburg, 1909) to Elger Blühm’s “Deutscher Fürstenstaat und Presse im 17. Jahrhundert” (Amsterdam, 1982). Reading the volume at hand, two questions pose themselves: What are the new sources and insights after at least a century of research on the relation of early modern society to debates in public and published media; and what, if anything, does the terminology of public sphere, in particular within the specific theoretical framework of sociological thinking of the 1960s to 1980s, add to our understanding of the issue.

As the perceptive and well-informed introductory essay by Massimo Rospocher rightly notes, once the English translation of Jürgen Habermas’ Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit had purged his text of some of the overtly Hegelian, Neo-Marxist, and Frankfurt School critical elements on contemporary capitalist society and instead added the possibility to turn issues like men drinking in a tavern or citizens afraid that their city might be captured by the enemy into empirical evidence for a more overriding theme, namely a public sphere, publications on this topic began to mushroom. Clearly, the increasing attempt since at least the later 1950s to bring common people into stronger historiographical focus seemed to be well served by this approach. The introduction and several other contributions also stress that Habermas’ own argument, in German or English, has been found wanting in terms of its empirical claims. But to an extent, some of the contributions in this volume confirm my impression that Habermas provides the possibility to give almost any kind of social or cultural historical evidence theoretical value by selling it as an empirical rebuke to his overriding model. Whether it is useful to exploit a work that never had the early modern period as its focus and was written half a century ago to provide a target giving one’s evidence some overriding theme, is a moot point. Undeniably, major recent publications, such as Tim Blanning’s Power of Culture (Oxford, 2003), did refer to Habermas and made use of his model. But, in particular, Blanning’s brilliant book makes a case standing essentially on its own ground, with or without Habermas, the case of the crucial role of military victory for the legitimacy of any early modern regime—and the devastating consequences of defeat. It seems that in the wake of the partial disintegration of major master narratives in modern historiography, the public sphere provides a focal point for debate not least because of the utter heterogeneity of what is addressed by it. The volume at hand is an example of this situation—contributions differ radically in scope, subject matter, and method. They also show, in all their diversity, how productive research into public spheres can be, despite the utter diversity of what is researched.

Andreas Gestrich compares Habermas and Luhmann and summarizes—as so many others have done—the many pieces of critique summoned against Habermas. After providing an erudite summary of the ideas of sociologist