

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Elizabeth L. Eisenstein. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xxi + 794 pp. \$54.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-29955-8.

Reviewed by Shannon E. Duffy (Department of History, University of Maryland-College Park)

Published on H-Ideas (June, 2000)

The Unacknowledged Revolution

Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.

Elizabeth Eisenstein's comprehensively-researched 1979 book is a study of the first century of printing, particularly the period from 1460 to 1480, when printing presses went from rare to common, and as a consequence changed the way knowledge was preserved and conveyed. It is primarily a work of synthesis, although Eisenstein displays a masterful knowledge of the relevant primary materials. Her goal is to show how intellectual and social reactions to the new print technology had long-term and frequently unintended consequences, and, as a result, why this period marked a crucial turning point in western history.

Eisenstein's thesis is that the capacity of printing to preserve knowledge and to allow the accumulation of information fundamentally changed the mentality of early modern readers, with repercussions that transformed Western society. Ancient and Medieval scribes had faced tremendous difficulties in preserving the knowledge that they already possessed, which, despite their best efforts, inevitably grew more corrupted and fragmented over time. With the establishment of printing presses, accumulation of knowledge was for the first time possible. Rather than spending most of their energies searching for scattered manuscripts and copying them, scholars could now focus their efforts on revision of these texts and the gathering of new data. New observations from a widely scattered readership could be included in subsequent editions. According to Eisenstein, the shift to printing reversed the whole orientation of attitudes towards learning. The passage of time no longer inevitably brought with it a lessening of knowledge. Furthermore, at the new print shops, scholars, artisans and translators from various nations and religions found themselves working

together, and cooperating in a new, more cosmopolitan environment which encouraged questioning and individual achievement.

The book has three main sections. In the first section, Eisenstein explains why print culture represented such a fundamental break with the past. In the other two sections, she examines the impact of printing on the Renaissance and its revival of classical literature, the Protestant Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. Eisenstein stresses the interrelated nature of cultural developments within these three areas of study, which she believes are too often kept separate by modern historians. She also emphasizes her belief that historians have underestimated the role of the printing press, due to their focus on its impact only as it pertained to the dissemination of "new" ideas.

In the first century of printing, much of the printers' output was the same inherited texts that scribal work had produced. But the most important feature was not that the literature was new, but rather that readers for the first time could see multiple texts together and compare them. The body of knowledge preserved by scribes was scattered and incomplete, with authorship of specific texts obscured, magical incantations intermixed with scientific observations, and classical literature interspersed with Christian writings. Under such circumstances, it was possible for manuscript readers to imagine that the past minds of antiquity had possessed a much more complete understanding of the world, which had been fragmented and degraded over time. During the first century of printing, the collection and revision of this scattered corpus was the primary goal for most scholars. The assumption, both with regard to biblical writings and to

classical treatises on science, was that each revised work that further sorted out the jumbled legacy would help make this wisdom clearer. But revised editions of scripture, which took increasing advantage of the greater linguistic learning available in printed language dictionaries, revealed inconsistencies and ambiguities in the texts which could not be easily resolved. Laying inherited scientific works side by side for the first time also pointed up discrepancies and contradictions. At the same time, the new ability to convey maps, charts, and pictures in a uniform and permanent way meant that older theories in cartography, astronomy, anatomy, and botany could be checked against new observations.

The use of this new technology produced unexpected results. How the differing reactions to the changes brought about by printing shaped subsequent European society is most clearly seen in Eisenstein's extended discussion of the role print culture played in shaping religious debates before and after the Protestant Reformation. There had been many earlier heretical movements within the Catholic Church before Luther's posting of his 95 theses. But the dissemination and greater permanence of print culture allowed his challenge to have a much greater impact. Moreover, the competitive nature of the printing industry, which was driven by a desire for sales, provided a new, more public outlet for controversies, and insured that what began as a scholarly dispute between theologians gained an international audience. Reformation impulses and the printing industry fed off and accelerated one another in an age where religious materials were popular sellers.

Differing Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards print culture resulted in two widely divergent historical paths. In Protestant lands, approval of vernacular bibles led to encouragement of greater lay literacy and a closer tying of biblical lore with developing national cultures. In Eisenstein's view, the differences in Catholic and Protestant reactions to printing were not due solely to theological differences, or to Protestants being more enlightened or trusting of their congregations. Some individual Protestant leaders were hostile to the changes wrought by printing, particularly the wider dispersal of controversial books to lay audiences. But areas under Protestant control were generally less able to implement censorship of the presses than the more centralized governments of Catholic areas. One of the most important events in the shaping of early print culture was the successful rebellion of the Netherlands. In their small, semi-autonomous provinces, numerous printing presses sprang up that operated relatively free of censorship, and provided an outlet for authors, even within areas

held by the Counter-Reformation. Books coming off the clandestine presses proved impossible for the Counter-Reformation to block, with significant impact for both religion and science.

While the main focus of *The Printing Press* is limited to a relatively small group of already-literate elites, Eisenstein believes that the changes which print culture brought to the early modern world eventually transformed Western society at large. By focusing on a fundamental shift in mentality, which came about due to a basic change in communication and collective memory, and the advent of uniform duplication, Eisenstein's book anticipates many areas of interest in recent intellectual history. Her conception of a cosmopolitan "Republic of Letters" created by the new printing technology that transcended national borders has been carried on by historians of the Enlightenment and eighteenth-century thought such as Dena Goodman.[1] Her emphasis on the need to look at the impact of the clandestine book trade operating on the periphery of the Catholic dynasties has also figured prominently in the works of Robert Darnton and Jack Censor, and in her own more recent work on eighteenth-century France.[2]

On the other hand, Eisenstein in 1992 expressed frustration that many of the artificial borders in intellectual history that she had tried to bridge in *The Printing Press* still dominated discussions of European development. Studies of Renaissance and early European print culture generally remain unrelated to work on the Enlightenment tradition and eighteenth-century thought.[3] Furthermore, while she applauded the recent interest in the production and dissemination of books, including the investigation of printed materials which were formerly considered too "low-brow" to merit academic interest, she remained dissatisfied with the continuing split between the history of ideas and the history of book publication. According to Eisenstein, recent work on the printing industry, such as that done by Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier, has greatly expanded practical knowledge of book production, but these studies generally treat books chiefly as a commodity, with little reference to the ideas they contain, or the views held by their propagators.[4]

Eisenstein's approach in *The Printing Press* still holds potential as a promising approach to some of the more vexing questions of European early modern history. While her interpretation idealizes somewhat the figure of the early printer and his print-shop, looking at the differing reactions to this new mode of knowledge dissemination as well as the individuals engaged in this new

business continues to provide a concrete and challenging starting point for discussing the cultural and intellectual transformations of the early modern era. As she noted in her conclusion, “[t]o ask historians to search for elements which entered into the making of an indefinite ‘modernity’ seems somewhat futile. To consider the effects of a definite communications shift which entered into each of the movements under discussion seems more promising. Among other advantages, this approach offers a chance to uncover relationships which debates over modernity only serve to conceal” (684).

Notes

[1]. Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[2]. Jack Censor, and Jeremy Popkin, eds., *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987); Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary*

France (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *Grub Street Abroad: Aspects of the French Cosmopolitan Press from the Age of Louis XIV to the French Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[3]. Eisenstein, *Grub Street Abroad*, p. 2.

[4]. *ibid.*, pp. 22-32. Among the works cited by Eisenstein are Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), and *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, tr. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: 1987); and ed., *The Culture of Print*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton, NJ, 1989).

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Shannon E. Duffy. Review of Eisenstein, Elizabeth L., *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4277>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.