In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas shows that one of the most momentous developments in the political life of the West emerged as a new practice of reading. In his view, from late in the seventeenth century until early in the nineteenth century, a set of institutions developed in which politics could be separated both from the state and from civil society. He calls that set of institutions the bourgeois public sphere and argues that its independence has since eroded. What I wish to take up here, however, is the place of reading in his narrative. Habermas tells the story of an increasing differentiation of a public sphere from state and civil society as primarily a story about new uses of texts. Newspapers, literary salons, coffeehouses, novels, art criticism, and magazines all play an important role in his account of how the fundamental structure of politics changed.

In this essay I want to pursue the untheorized implications of that


account by arguing that, in the American case, the transformation of power came about not merely by an increased volume of print, but also by a new construction of the textuality of print. I will take up three instances where a conflict over emergent ways of using print took place: a Maryland tobacco controversy, a Boston currency crisis, and New York’s famous Zenger case. In each case what happened was not simply a material change (more printing) with political consequences, but rather a fundamentally cultural change (as, indeed, all political formations are). By saying that the deployment of reading in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere was a cultural transformation of textuality, I mean that it required a new but tacitly symbolic vocabulary for understanding printed texts. So that after describing the three cases, I shall argue that the language of republicanism can be interpreted as just such a metadiscourse.

Before the middle decades of the eighteenth century, and also in ongoing contexts of customary law, the political sphere of the colonies depended on its continuity with common social exchanges. This model of the public as continuous with custom and natural order can be seen in a sermon preached in 1731 by Samuel Whittelsey, *A Public Spirit Described & Recommended*. Not untypically, Whittelsey defines a public spirit as one “that is truly & heartily Concern’d for the good and welfare of others.”¹ The sphere in which this kind of public spirit functions is daily life, and although Whittelsey goes on to discuss the specialized business of government, his central premise is always a continuity between that business and common interactions, between public and spirit. For him, the exemplary case of the public sphere is the daily practice of religion: “It is Religion that unites and ties the several members of the Society together” (PSDR 9). Far from being an impersonal sphere of political decisionmaking, publicness is a mode of sociability as subjection in an ideally nonnegotiated social order, allowing judgment, in Whittelsey’s words, to “run down as a River, and Righteousness as a mighty Stream” (PSDR 11).³ And whereas, for later thinkers such as John Adams, public activity always has a critical intention with regard to power, for Whittelsey, public activity and critical intentions are categorical opposites: “A Contrary Spirit is a Base Spirit” (PSDR 29).

To a public sphere of such a customary type, printed discourse holds a more or less arbitrary relation, capable equally of confirming or distorting the norms of public spirit. So for the early colonists, being public did not entail a special communicative context such as publication, and publishing did not have the meaning of making things public. In 1709, for example, when Cotton Mather drew up in his diary a list of resolutions for himself, he included a set of resolutions to perform “In my public Circumstances.” He resolves, under that heading, to pray and to make “careful Visits, in my Flock.” It is also in this context that he writes, “And I would compose and publish many Essayes, accommodated unto the Interests of Christianity in the Land; such as may find out all Sorts of People, in the several Ways, wherein they may be sett athinking on such Things, as may be for the Glory of God.”4 Insofar as publishing is public, it is an extension of personal visitation; what marks Mather’s entry into his public capacity is not writing as such, but rather his authoritative ministrations of which writings are only instruments. And since publication is as remote as possible from collective decisionmaking, political debate does not appear as an appropriate genre for Mather’s writing.

Indeed, expressly political publications were virtually unknown in the print discourse of the colonies before 1720. One of the rare exceptions can reinforce the point: I refer to a pamphlet precipitated by the 1689 revolution against the Andros regime in Massachusetts. It begins by wishing its nonexistence: “It is the Unhappiness of this present Juncture, that too many Men relinquish their Stations of Privacy and Subjection, and take upon them too freely to descant upon affairs of the Publick.”5 Citizenship, ideally identical here with an adherence to stations of privacy and subjection, would not in its normal course involve political publication. Of course, Puritan Massachusetts did have institutions and modes of discourse for political affairs: town meetings, magistracy, sermons, and the like. But the structure and legitimacy of these institutions depended on their continuity with the mode of sociability called “public spirit,” and thus on their not taking the form of interested debate or collective conflict resolution. Published debate could only be an index of failure in public affairs, a poor substitute for a public spirit strangely forgotten in a moment of crisis.

The Maryland Tobacco Controversy

Maryland had had printers as early as 1685, but not for political publishing. In fact, William Nuthead, who had already been forbidden to print in Jamestown some years earlier, was jailed in Maryland in 1693 for printing the proceedings of the legislature. He was then ordered never again to print anything relating to public affairs, so that he and, subsequently, his widow printed mostly blank legal forms. (When William Nuthead died in 1695, his debtors, some sixty in number, were almost all sheriffs, clerks, or justices.) By 1725, however, it had come to be understood—at least by some in Maryland—that the establishment of a public discourse would be a good reason for bringing another printer to Maryland. In that year, the Assembly decided to print its own proceedings, a task which necessitated going to Philadelphia. The book, when it appeared, bore a preface complaining that without a press Marylanders “have scarce had any Opportunity of Judging whether they were Served or Prejudiced by their Representatives; whether their Constitution was maintained or prostituted, whether their English Liberties were Asserted or Neglected by them.” Indeed, the preface continues, many delegates “who have, by an Ingenuous Honest Conversation, justly Recommended themselves to the Choice of the Electors, have not known what was the Constitution of their Country.” The preface here establishes a double perspective for the utility of public discourse: print will function for freeholders as activity in the civic sphere and for representatives as the medium of authoritative instruction. “But ’tis hop’d from this beginning and the provision that is made for having a Press amongst us, the Gentlemen of the Country will more readily fall upon this useful kind of Learning.” William Parks, the English provincial printer who was brought to the colony shortly thereafter (and who later moved on to Williamsburg and printed Typographia), depended on the political value of such thinking for the success of his press.

In 1727, shortly after Parks’s establishment in Annapolis and early

on in the tobacco controversy, he printed a pamphlet called *A Letter from a Freeholder*, responding to a letter in the *Gazette*. (Unfortunately, the early issues of the *Gazette* itself are not known to have survived.) As though to register resistance to the idea of public, printed discourse, the tract opens with an apology for its publication:

> I am very glad that a Gentleman who is a Friend to his Country, (as I am firmly perswaded the Author of the late Letter to the Printer really is) has communicated his Thoughts to the Publick, concerning a thing so much desired and so much wanted as a Tobacco-Law . . . And I am in Hopes that others, excited by the same generous Motive, will follow so laudable an Example, that by the Communication of Mens Thoughts and Sentiments to each other, such Methods may be taken for the Regulation of our Staple of Tobacco.9

For the author of the pamphlet, communication in print is not ancillary to a public sphere or a reflection of it, but rather is its ideal version. Apparently taken with the novelty of the pamphlet’s form, the author goes on:

> As I am of Opinion with the Author of the Letter, that aiming at the Good of ones Country, is a sufficient Apology for publishing a Man’s Thoughts; so am I clearly of Opinion that it is the indispensable Duty of every Man to do it, with Sincerity and Freedom; and that he ought not to suffer any private Views or Ends (inconsistent with the common Good) to byass or influence him; and that not being Master of a correct Stile, or Propriety of Expression, is no Excuse for being silent on so important and pressing an Occasion. (*LF* 4)

Here the notion that every man ought to publish reveals, of course, that the author assumes that he writes to a restricted community of white, propertied males. But in this scenario he also imagines a new set of relations among persons, discourse, and the political order, though many of these new relations are necessarily assumed rather than explicit.

Most obvious is the notion that men, who had, after all, been exchanging opinions all along in other formats, should now have a specialized discourse for that purpose. What would be the advantage of such a (meta)linguistic codification? How and to what purpose shall a public discourse be demarcated from other cultural forms and linguistic environments? The pamphlet’s rhetoric shows us first that, purged of “private

9. *A Letter from a Freeholder, to a Member of the Lower House of Assembly* (Annapolis, 1727). Further references to this text will be made parenthetically (*LF*).
Views or Ends," publicity in such a discourse will be impersonal by defi-
nition. Persons who enter this discourse do so on the condition that the
validity of their public utterance will bear a negative relation to their persons.
These perspectives could not be separated: the impersonality of public dis-
course, in other words, is seen both as a trait of its medium and as a norm
for its subjects. Moreover, a special feature of the political order will follow,
since the government could no longer remain indifferent to this independent
public discourse, but rather must regard its relation to the public discourse
as a criterion of its own legitimacy. A complex network of assumptions ap-
pears here in order to render the printing of this pamphlet normal, and for
the rest of the century the presses would creak in its elaboration.

This new set of assumptions exemplifies the transformation of the
public sphere. It was not simply a matter of an emergent reading audience
or a new genre; the people who read these pamphlets, after all, were pre-
sumably the same people who read other things, such as bills and Bibles,
before. And the political tract as genre antedates printing, as was under-
stood by its many eighteenth-century practitioners, who never tired of in-
voking their classical and early modern predecessors. What is more to the
point is that the public sphere required a special set of assumptions about
print. Indeed, it required an articulated relation between assumptions about
print and norms of a specialized discursive subsystem. For the Maryland
author and other contributors to the public discourse, the very printed-
ness of that discourse took on a specially legitimate meaning, because
it was categorically differentiated from personal modes of sociability. Me-
chanical duplication equalled publishing precisely insofar as public political
discourse was impersonal.

Before examining the principles of this discourse in detail, let us con-
tinue to pursue the Maryland author's own understanding of the new public
order. He depicts the conditions of his pamphlet's utility, appealing jointly to
the nature of representative government and to the act of printing:

It is the Opinion of some very learned Men, that something useful
and improving may be collected from the meanest Productions: The
Bee gathers honey from all sorts of Flowers to encrease the com-
mon Stock, and our Assembly is the common Hive into which every
Man's Thoughts and Sentiments ought to be carried, and in which
those that are good and useful in themselves ought to receive Life
and Vigour. . . . The Usefulness of Mens publishing their Thoughts
with Candor and Sincerity on the present occasion, will further ap-
pear by this consideration, that the Legislators may by examining
and comparing Mens Notions and Sentiments, find out all or the chiefest Advantages and Inconveniencies to the People attending a Tobacco-Law. (LF 4)

As in the 1725 preface quoted above, published debate is here presented as public from two different perspectives: freeholders are seen as actively engaged in the civic sphere by their participation in discourse, and legislators find their representative functions in that same discourse. The pamphlet claims the relevance of both perspectives in its full title: A Letter from a Freeholder, to a Member of the Lower House of Assembly. These twin perspectives of participation determine the text as an exchange between identifiable persons. Indeed, in the colonial period the most popular genres for political debate, by far, were the epistolary pamphlet and the dialogue.

Yet it should be noted that an indispensable tension is visible in the pamphlet’s rhetoric. The important thing about this pamphlet and others of its genre is that although the relation between two correspondents defines the value of participation, nevertheless, that relation cannot be adequate to the medium. The pamphlet, for example, is not a personal letter and must not be, in the conditions of the public sphere of representational politics. Writing’s unrestricted dissemination appears here as the ground of politics because in its very contrast with personal presence it allows a difference between public discourse and private correspondence. Freeholder and member alike encounter the exchange not as a relation between themselves as men, but rather as their own mediation by a potentially limitless discourse. That is why their exchange is not just written, as the pose of correspondence already implies, but also printed in the form of a pamphlet. A consciousness of the medium is carefully sustained, not only in the explicit metacommentary here, but equally in the formalized diction and mode of exposition. And that consciousness of the medium is valued precisely because it remains unreconciled with the conventions of personal exchange.

The meaning of public utterance, for both men, is established by the very fact that their exchange can be read and participated in by any number of unknown and in principle unknowable others. No catalogue of empirical readers will exhaust the implied sphere of this discourse. The resulting form of mediated relations (which is not to imply that other relations are unmediated) was to become the paradigmatic political relation of republican America. The assumptions that made it possible could doubtless be translated to oral settings, as long as people agreed to behave as though they were being supervised by an indefinite number of others, any
one of whom might occupy their own position irrespective of status. This universalizing mediation of publicity, though possible in any number of contexts, would, nevertheless, continue to find its exemplary case in printed discourse. The more powerful the political norms of the relation became, the more print discourse would seem special and important.

The surplus of the letter over the relation of correspondents is determined not as the free play of language—indeed, it requires a perfect faith in the determinacy of meaning—but as the condition of a norm. Following Habermas, we may call this norm the principle of supervision, "that very principle which demands that proceedings be made public."10 On the basis of this principle, and in the understanding that its address is a spectacular transaction, the Letter is able to conclude with a reference to communication that has the force of a threat:

Thus, Sir, I have given you very candidly my Thoughts on the Proposals for a Tobacco-Law; and I am so far from making any Apology for the Trouble I have given you, that I tell you in plain and honest English, that it is your Duty (if you find any Thing in these my Notions, or in those of any other Persons, that shall be communicated to you, useful to the Publick,) to endeavour to the utmost of your Power, that the Publick may receive the Benefit of 'em; And, that if you are byass'd by any private or partial View, prejudicial to your Country's Service, you betray the Trust those you represent have reposed in you; but I hope for better Things from you, and that you'll behave your self as becomes a good Patriot, and an honest Man; upon which Terms, and no other, You may always depend on the Vote and Interest, as well as the sincere, and hearty good Wishes of, Sir,

Your most humble Servant,

A Free-holder.

(LF 4)

There is more involved here than the cantankerousness of an anonymous author. The avoidance of privacy in the closing remarks is authoritative be-

10. Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," trans. Sarah Lennox and Frank Lennox, New German Critique 3(1974): 49–55. "To the principle of the existing power, the bourgeois public opposed the principle of supervision—that very principle which demands that proceedings be made public. The principle of supervision is thus a means of transforming the nature of power, not merely one basis of legitimation exchanged for another" (52).
cause of the principle of supervision that conditions the public sphere of print discourse. Supervision, in this cultural context, is both a legitimate threat and the immanent meaning of printedness.

The principle of supervision is a paradoxical kind of discipline. In an important sense, the public official cannot answer to it as a person by proving his godliness or his gentlemanliness, because validity in the public sphere of print discourse holds a negative relation to persons. The Letter does not threaten the Assemblyman in his person—indeed, it warns him to discount "any private or partial View." But because of this abstractness defining the norms of publicity, the same principle of supervision that disciplines the public official also appears as empowering. It gives the legislator his capacity to represent the whole of the public rather than persons. At the same time, it is balanced by a contradictory emphasis on participation. The pamphlet depicts a freeholder instructing a representative and a representative legislating for the freeholder; this component of individual participation does not disappear from the pamphlet's rhetoric even though instruction and legislation are only valid to the extent that they are distinguishable from the personal dimension. The generic pose of correspondence maintains that dimension, while the recognition of printed dissemination (i.e., the recognition that this correspondence is only a pose) expresses the negation of persons necessary for legitimacy.

As a condition of legitimation, the negation of persons in public discourse is equally important as the principle of supervision. To distinguish this specifically political assumption from the negativity of the symbolic in general, or the universality of truth claims in general, I shall call it the principle of negativity. This principle is a ground rule of argument in a public discourse that defines its norms as abstract and universal, but it is also a political resource available only in this discourse and available only to those participants whose social role allows such self-negation (i.e., to persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital). And although the negativity of persons in the public sphere appears in the form of a positive trait—namely, virtue—it is at this point in the republican tradition that virtue comes to be defined by the negation of other traits of personhood, in particular as a rational and disinterested concern for the public good.

We may find the principle of negativity explained in the language of

11. This principle may be described as a form of the negativity of democratic politics in general, as explained by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).
the time by a later contributor to the same tobacco debate. Writing in the pages of Parks's *Maryland Gazette*, one "P. P." defends himself for having published anonymously in the public controversy. He had been accused of cowardice and of insolence because he had brought forth, in what is called an "unprecedented Method," accusations against "a Gentleman"—and that "before the whole Country, in the most public Manner." 12 In a social order of deference and customary law, such action would be scandalous indeed. But "P. P." argues that persons are irrelevant in the discourse of the public sphere where, he says, assertions are assessed by readers for just reasoning. Public writing can therefore be contrasted with personal testimony, in which "it is absolutely necessary to know the Person of the Witness." "Now P. P. does not pretend," he says of himself, "to know any thing, of his own Knowledge, of the Conduct of any of the [tobacco] Merchants; what he chiefly relies on, is what is publish'd, and has been seen by the Generality of People, as have his Inferences." 13 "P. P." here validates his writing by exempting it from any link to himself, a tactic nicely amplified by the use of the third person in naming himself. It is nonetheless a personal tactic and claim, a skillful posture that can be described as a kind of cultural capital. This personal tactic of depersonalization both requires and enables a specialized subsystem of public discourse.

Curiously, "P. P." also recommends that his accuser read several publications, published under fictitious names, that, by means of their fictive personae, were able to avoid the resistance of "Personal Prejudice." This extra detail about pseudonyms reminds us of the importance of print, as it is here construed, in enabling the virtue of the citizen by the very fact that writing is not regarded as a form of personal presence. The difference between the private, interested person and the citizen of the public sphere appears both as a condition of political validity and as the expression of character of print. We have already seen that the illimitable readership of print discourse becomes important as the correlative of public supervision; here the apparent absence of a personal author in printed language has become important as the correlative of the principle of negativity.

"P. P." was forced to articulate and defend these constructions because the emergent public discourse of print was still in conflict with other determinations of the public, of personhood, and of language. Many Marylanders were newly encountering such norms of policy and discourse while

those norms were still being clarified in the course of the tobacco debate and while the institutionalization of print discourse there was not yet secure. Neither the new paradigm of print nor the new paradigm of politics took the field instantaneously, although they appeared together as they made each other mutually intelligible. Moreover, as we might guess from the prominence of imperial and commercial issues in the Maryland public debates, the emergence of the public discourse was not simply a local phenomenon. In the same period, similar events were taking place in cities such as Philadelphia and Charleston. For the gentry of the southern colonies in particular, the development of public debate in print was a way of keeping in contact with the English, and so its spread was unimpeded though gradual.

**The Boston Currency Crisis**

In Boston, however, where the customary public sphere of Puritan society was more intensely organized and where a corresponding tradition of printing was already established, the emergence of printed debate took place only in struggle. Since the brief crisis following the dissolution of the Andros regime, manifestly political printing in Massachusetts had consisted almost entirely of the governor's edicts. A newspaper was established in 1704; bearing the bold legend “Published by Authority,” it reproduced edicts of the governor and his imperial superiors, but contained virtually no local political news, much less debate. In 1714, however, a conflict arose that suddenly veered into print with the publication of a handful of pamphlets. It subsided only temporarily and returned in a more critical form by 1720, when political pamphlets were published in then-undreamed-of numbers and occupied the town's attention. Late in 1719, a second Boston newspaper was founded, followed in 1721 by a third (although it was only the fourth in all of colonial America). One writer in the latter paper observed, early in 1722, “Letters (I don't mean Learning) grow upon us daily; we have Weekly three News-Letters, and sometimes as many little Books or Pamphlets (I don't say Sermons) published.”¹⁴ These developments institutionalized the public sphere of print discourse, although of course that discourse continued to compete with other modes of legitimation.

As in Maryland, the transformation of the public sphere in Boston began in relation to the market. The central dispute in the Boston crisis was the creation of a currency; a group of merchants, plagued by a chronic

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monetary shortage that imperial policy had long aggravated, were struggling to establish a new currency of either private or colonial issue. When the Boston merchants first began planning a private bank for the issue of a currency in 1714, the attorney general viewed their project as that of an illegitimate body politic. He accordingly filed a brief in council in August of that year that produced an order that “the Projectors or Undertakers of any such Bank, do not proceed to Print the said Scheme, or put the same on Publick Record, Make or Emit any of their Notes or Bills, until they have laid their Proposals before the Generall Assembly of this Her Majesties Province . . . And that this Order be Printed in the Weekly News Letter.”15 For the council, the control of commerce belonged to customary authority. And so did print: the interdiction against printing assumes an official status for printed texts such as that of the interdiction itself. When the merchants continued to meet and discuss their plans, the attorney general published a pamphlet denouncing the scheme. Indignant that the merchants were “openly carrying on their Bank,” he argued that all such authority must derive from the crown.16

The merchants, who had already reprinted a pamphlet describing a currency scheme, began writing their own pamphlets, thus treating print discourse not as an official channel of customary authority but as a second dimension of the political—an arena of debate distinct from the constituted authority of office. In one pamphlet, they describe the interdiction against printing their scheme as “very hard, in that they were denied the benefit of the Press,” but they maintain that the ban applied only to the final proclamation of the scheme and not to the debate of its formation.17 Thus was inaugurated a new public debate in Boston; of the pamphlets that followed, many were distributed free by their sponsors and most were circulated aggressively. One pamphlet plays on that fact by beginning with a comic scene: “My good Neighbour Rusticus quite tir’d out with the dispersion of the Distressed State from Vill to Vill (like the Circulation of a Country Brief for the Common Charity) cameat last puffing to my door, and desired me to Read, and give my thoughts upon it.”18 Another writer claims to have had someone else’s pamphlet thrust into his hands on the Exchange.19 It

16. [Paul Dudley], *Objections to the Bank of Credit* (Boston, 1714), p. 3.
became common for each pamphlet to review its predecessors. By 1720, a pamphlet called *Reflections upon Reflections* could be stating the obvious when it said that “various Schemes, & projections, and Sentiments of Men (as their particular Interests, and private views have led them) have been exhibited, and almost an infinite number of Pamphlets dispersed thro’ the Country.”

That same pamphlet, however, goes on to lament the debate which its author attributes to “such furious Zeal, and Party warmth, as has ended in Enmity.” The idea of a political public of readers still seemed highly problematic. Indeed, nothing is more common in the pamphlets of the currency crisis than the theme that the debate itself manifests private and factional interests incompatible with the public good. The attorney general’s argument, for example, is dismissed by one pamphlet as representing only the “Court interest.” Another appends cautionary postscripts defining “A Character of a Publick Spirit” as disinterested and “A Character of a Private Spirit” as selfish. Each author denies having personal interests in the outcome. Moreover, each author strikes a defensive posture against the charge of party-mongering. John Colman, leader of the merchants, concludes his major pamphlet with the assertion that he is “prejudiced against no Man”: “It is the good & Happiness of my Country that lies upon my Spirits and hath Influenced me hereunto. I have no private sinister aim in pursuit separate from the good of the whole, but am animated only by a sense of the distresses of the Town and Country, for want of a Medium of Exchange.”

The anti-party theme, which was as prominent in Maryland or South Carolina or Pennsylvania as it was in Boston, has to be distinguished from the norms of a customary public. The latter were invoked by the *Boston News-Letter*’s appeal for people to shut up and lead “quiet and peaceable Lives.” Such anti-party rhetoric would seem to be a version of the same appeal, but it is peculiarly double-edged. Anti-party rhetoric appears

22. *Some Proposals to Benefit the Province* (Boston, 1720).
to invoke the earlier, customary norm of subjection insofar as it appears to oppose the existence of the debate itself. In actuality, however, it sustains the debate by providing the categories that would make an ongoing public debate thinkable. The language of resistance to controversy articulates a norm for controversy. *It silently transforms the ideal of a social order free from conflictual debate into an ideal of debate free of social conflict.* One pamphlet puts it this way:

> I wish from my heart that some Method may be found for our relief to prevent Party-making amongst us; it grieves me to see our Divisions which are daily increasing, and which tend only to our ruin; whereas if we would but Unite, and bare with one another in our different Apprehension of Things, debate Matters fairly, and lay aside all private designs, and Animosities, and believe that every Man's particular Interest is comprized in the General, and study sincerely the Publick Good, I am fully persuaded we might contrive ways to Extricate our selves out of these Difficulties, and be as flourishing a People as ever.26

This argument, apparently directed against public polemic, already presupposes the norms of public discourse—especially the principle of negativity, which appears here in the call to "lay aside all private designs and animosities." The tone suggests a conservative effort: divisions are increasing, but it is still possible to be "as flourishing a People as ever." The conservative posture, combined with the norm of unity, conceals the innovative character of the ideal of debate. The unity of this debating community will not, after all, be the same as the unity of the past society, since that society had been understood as unified only insofar as it was free of the "Divisions" that created debate.

Similarly, another pamphlet has it:

> The Gentlemen who have Printed their Thoughts on this Occasion, do (as far as I can discern) desire to see their Country in a Flourishing Trade, & Prosperous Condition, as they have seen it formerly; They differ indeed in their Conjectures about the Measures proper to be taken at this Juncture for this End; But its much to be Lamented, that Gentlemen who desire the good of their Country, can't declare their differing sentiments, about the best Means to promote

it, without falling under the Displeasure of those whom they study to serve.\textsuperscript{27}

Though intelligible in a social order in which the debate seemed, at least to the governor and council, to be the loss of all public spirit and the degeneration of authority, anti-party rhetoric bore witness to the new discursive norms that constituted both a public sphere and an understanding of print. The use of certain kinds of texts had become natural to the political world.

The restructuring of power in the struggle over models of legitimation and discourse raises the question of who the agents in the struggle were, and what their interests in it might have been. In the eyes of the governor’s party, the debate was a class problem, a view shared by the historian Gary Nash, who lays great stress on the episode. Nash sees in the currency crisis a turn toward populist politics; the pamphlets, he writes, “made direct appeals to the people, both those who enjoyed the vote and others who participated in the larger arena of street politics,” and “were intended to make politics everyone’s concern.” According to Nash, print discourse was consumed by an artisan class that was not otherwise accustomed to adjudicating political affairs. “It was testimony to the power behind the printed word,” he writes, “that even those who yearned for a highly restricted mode of politics were compelled to set their views in print for all to read. For unless they did, their opponents might sweep the field.”\textsuperscript{28}

Yet the difference between the old and new modes of politics was more than a matter of degrees of restriction. The pamphlets enact not so much a liberalization as an abstraction of the public, establishing the impersonality of its norms and the negativity of its citizens. Doubtless the transformation was motivated rather than arbitrary, and doubtless the self-understandings of economic classes were elements of its motivation. At the same time, the self-understanding of those classes—and thus their interests and nature—were at stake in the transformation. The currency dispute in Boston, like a similar dispute in Philadelphia, or like the tobacco-regulation debate in Maryland, gave a new identity to market society and legitimated new organizations of economy.

By seeing the debate as a turn toward populist politics, Nash also observes that the generalized public discourse potentially legitimated the participation of any class. This potential lay in the negativity that defined

\textsuperscript{27} Reflections on the Present State of the Province of Massachuset-Bay in General (Boston, 1720), pp. 3–4.
\textsuperscript{28} Gary Nash, The Urban Crucible (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), p. 86.
the citizen in the printed public discourse, since participation could be legitimated despite personality, faith, class, or other criteria of validity. Yet it would be easy to be misled by the potential of this principle of negativity, as it was incapable of extending itself by its own dynamic. Radical though the principle seems in retrospect, it did not in practice allow access to the public arena for women, or blacks, or Indians, or the unpropertied, or various persons classed as criminal. Indeed, it was only because of the covert identification of print consumption with the community of propertied, white males that public discourse came about in the first place. Because the same differentials of gender, race, and class allocated both citizenship, on one hand, and active literacy, on the other, freehold and discourse could coincide without necessarily entailing a liberalization of power. The posture of negation that served as the entry qualification to the specialized subsystem of public discourse remained a positive disposition of character, a resource available only to a specific subset of the community.

The principle of the citizen’s negativity, then, was not necessarily liberalizing as long as the covert distinction of the print community could be maintained, since in the new paradigm the print public could be equated with the political public. The principle of negativity, however, did mean that the constitutive distinctions of the political community had to remain covert. In situations where excluded groups were able to sustain a claim to discursive participation, the principle of negativity could be a powerful legitimating standard. In the case of Boston, the currency crisis articulated the (white male) community of the market as society; in that situation, therefore, (white male) artisans were politicized by print discourse, even though the abstraction of print remained incapable, by itself, of materially affecting lines of race and gender except by reproducing them in a masked form.

**New York and the Zenger Case**

As in Boston, the transformation of the public sphere in New York came about through the difficult emergence of a local print discourse, the difficulty of which was dramatized in a hotly contested political trial. What is particularly revealing is that it was the trial of a printer, John Peter Zenger, for seditious libel. The case has a certain notoriety in American legal history because it became the subject of nationalist legend in the nineteenth century. In this legendary history, Zenger appears as a patriotic hero fighting for American liberties and founding the principles behind the first amendment. More recently, the Zenger case has been the subject of revision among his-
torians, who are now more likely to describe him as a poor pawn in a civic feud, a tradesman hired by the Morris faction because he was convenient, but who played little more than a mechanical role in the events that now bear his name. In the old Whig legend, Zenger’s lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, was thought to have revolutionized liberty if not by inventing the freedom of the press then at least by securing it on these shores. In the current historical literature, it is sadly pointed out that prosecutions for seditious libel continued to occur on a regular basis. As late as 1798, the Alien and Sedition Acts could be passed without being impeded by the precedent of the Zenger case.29

Both the legendary history of the Zenger case and its debunking counterhistory share a set of modern liberal assumptions about the relation between the press and the law as well as about the relation between persons and political discourse. It is assumed on both sides that the moral consciences of the colonists were equipped with an idea of free and unbiased mass media. In the Whig version, the colonists are thought to have acted heroically on the basis of conscience by establishing the Zenger case as a precedent; while in modern legal history, they appear to have betrayed their shabby ignorance and moral cowardice in failing to sustain the precedent. And for both Whig history and libertarian lament, freely competitive public debate is assumed to be the natural expression of political personhood. Because of such assumptions, the historical literature typically misses the important developments in the public sphere that are exemplified in the Zenger case. If we stand back from the nationalism and preoccupation with precedent that have dominated this disagreement, it is possible to see the trial as an especially illuminating crisis in the joint transformations of print discourse and the public sphere. In particular, the trial reveals the stakes of power involved in that transformation.

The conflict leading up to the trial was one over the sources of law. William Cosby, in his turbulent and relatively brief career as governor of

New York in the early 1730s, seemed, to the colonials, determined to play the role of the despot. He laid absolute claim to the spoils of his office; he treated the courts as administering justice at his pleasure, dismissing recalcitrant justices; he tried to avoid dependence on the General Assembly and even attempted to rig elections; and he invoked imperial authority whenever customary legal and judicial procedures obstructed his plans. Such actions depended on a status-based model of legitimation that posited ultimate sovereignty in the crown—a model that until recently had been dominant in England and continued to organize many parts of the imperial administration despite the increasing importance of Parliament in English affairs. Local leaders in New York, however, had different allegiances: in part, to the traditions of common law which gave them a high degree of local autonomy and which made state administration dependent on local custom and, in part, to the abstract norms and procedures of predictability that organized the emerging society of the capitalist market. Both the norms of custom and the norms of the market conflicted at times with the status model of legitimation on which the imperial administration rested.  

To the influential group of New Yorkers led by Lewis Morris, a Supreme Court justice whom Cosby had replaced, Cosby was a threat to their own local power and, more generally, to the system of customary law on which their power was based. Morris organized an opposition and sailed for London to plead for Cosby’s removal. More consequential was the strategy of Morris’s associates, the lawyers James Alexander and William Smith: in the fall of 1733, they hired the almost unknown printer John Peter Zenger to establish a newspaper. Until that point there was only one newspaper in New York, and that was William Bradford’s New York Gazette. A contributor to Zenger’s new paper, the New-York Weekly Journal, would soon describe Bradford’s Gazette as “a paper known to be under the direction of the government, in which the Printer of it is not suffered to insert anything but what his superiors approve of, under the penalty of losing £50 per annum salary and the title of the King’s Printer for the Province of New York.” Implicit in this kind of language, of course, is a norm of public discourse, and in the long run the development of the emergent model of the public sphere would make far more difference in the structure of power than would Morris’s London lobbying efforts.

Conscious of the novelty of their opposition paper in New York, Alexander and Smith began in the Journal's first essay to offer a theory of print that would be at the same time an anti-dynastic theory of legitimacy. "The liberty of the press," they announced in the first sentence, "is a subject of the greatest importance, and in which every individual is as much concerned as he is in any other part of liberty."32 "Liberty," it should be noted, in the eighteenth century meant, specifically, civic liberty—not just freedom from restraint of any kind, but rather the power of exerting oneself in the civic sphere. The word resonated with the whole of republican political thought; even to speak of "the liberty of the press" was to treat print within a highly charged political language. The local appeal of this language was that it could articulate colonial resistance to administrative power. Alexander and Smith therefore stress that the utility of the press lies in its ability to challenge administrative abuse. Depicting an "evil minister," they argue that published reports of his actions, "by watching and exposing his actions," will bring him into censure.

What is transparent to us, but scandalous to contemporaries, is the assumption that the censure of readers is a legitimate way to coerce officials. Governor Cosby himself, in a letter to the Duke of Newcastle, referred to the "paper warr" launched by Alexander and Smith as an attempt to have the government "prostituted to ye censure of ye mob."33 One hostile writer commenting on the Zenger case condemned those New Yorkers who mis-took "the liberty of the press for a license to write and publish infamous things of their superiors."34 The disagreement here discloses a structural conflict between two sets of assumptions: on one hand, a social order in which "superiors" has a referent; on the other hand, a discursive order in which the act of reading can be equivalent to the political act of censure.

In a social order based on status, such as that of colonial New York, it did not strictly matter whether the published censure of an official were true or not. Even if true, such publication would be regarded as the defamation of a superior. Indeed, as John Peter Zenger would find out, English law held the truth of an accusation to be an aggravation of libel rather than a defense against it: since more people would believe a true libel than a false one, it would do greater damage to the esteem in which officials must be held. Long before charges of libel were filed, however, Alexander and

33. Quoted in Botenin, Mr. Zenger's Malice, p. 7.
Smith were elaborating a concept of the social use of publication that would not only legitimate but also require defamation. "When did calumnies and lies ever destroy the character of one good minister?" they ask. "If their characters have been clouded for a time, yet they have generally shined forth in greater luster." The scrutiny brought about by critical publication validates the good official.

Clearly, the assumption behind this concept of publication is the principle of supervision, and the Journal’s authors express it in a remarkably revealing sentence: "The facts exposed are not to be believed because said or published; but it [i.e., publication] draws people's attention, directs their view, and fixes the eye in a proper position that everyone may judge for himself whether those facts are true or not." While this sentence takes the principle of supervision as a presupposition, on the level of explicit content it also offers a strikingly literal trope of supervision: a drawn attention, a directed view, and a fixed eye. The sense of sight is of course not necessarily more appropriate to the public world than any other sense is; yet the optic and spatializing metaphor of supervision became, in eighteenth-century America, the dominant way of conceptualizing the public. The Journal’s metaphoric of supervision refers to a disposition of character that makes reading a valuable action. It is the specificity of reading as the paradigmatic public action that lies behind the literalizing trope of supervision. The sentence unwittingly implies that when the virtuous citizen fixes his vigilant eye upon the civic scene, what he is looking at is a printed object. And because his gaze upon the material artifact of print is equivalent, in Alexander’s words, to the "popular examination" of officials, it follows that the press in a republic with corrupt leaders is naturally an oppositional press (or, more generally, a regulative press).

The same sentence, it should be noted, exemplifies the principle of negativity, to which the principle of supervision is closely related. "The facts are not to be believed because said or published. . . ." The authority of published assertions is deferred to the validating inspection of the reading citizen. And because their authority is deferred, so is the responsibility for them. The Journal’s authors did not deny that there could be an abuse of the press, but they ambiguatated the relationship between such abuse and the responsibility of particular, authorizing persons. "I agree with [Bradford] that it is the Abuse, and not the Use of the Press, [that] is blameable," one

Journal essay says. "But the Difficulty Lies who shall be the Judges of this Abuse. . . . I would have the Readers Judges: But they cant Judge, if nothing is wrote." The same deferred authority that results in the principle of supervision here implies the principle of negativity: political assertions can be made neutrally, since their validity will be determined by the impersonal judgment of the general readership. In this important sense, publication is no longer to be considered as personal utterance.

Bradford's Gazette was quick to challenge these implications. "Is the Art of Printing less criminal than Natural Speaking?" a Gazette author asked rhetorically. "Nature has given us the Liberty of Speech, but that will not protect a Man from having his Head broke, if he gives ill Language." The governor, sharing the desire to have somebody's head broken after the Journal printed some harsh criticism of his administration and sharing the same skepticism about the negativity claimed by the Journal's authors, had a charge of seditious libel filed against the printer. Zenger was accordingly taken to prison, where he remained for a full eight months before his case came to trial. The trial itself seemed destined to uphold the governor. The judges, to begin with, were his hand-picked dependents. When Alexander and Smith, acting as defense counsel, challenged the legitimacy of the judges' commissions, the judges responded by disbarring them. Moreover, the legal case lay against Zenger. English law not only forbid evidence of truth as defense against libel charges, it decreed that the libelousness of a text was to be determined by the bench. Only the facts of printing or writing were to be determined by the jury, and Zenger's own journeyman and two sons were waiting in the court to testify that he had in fact printed the Journal. (Their testimony in any case would have been a formality; it is recorded that the jury knew Zenger to be the printer already, having themselves bought the Journal in Zenger's shop.)

Zenger's new lawyer, the Philadelphian Andrew Hamilton, in the face of this seemingly closed case, pursued an entirely different line of defense. Rather than defend Zenger on the terms constructed by the law, he conceded the relevant facts at the opening of the trial. Then, after the prosecution's witnesses had been dismissed, he began an argument that, in effect, challenged the construction of political utterance that the prose-

38. New York Gazette, 4 February 1734.
39. This is recorded in James Alexander's preparatory brief, which can be found in Katz, ed., Brief Narrative, p. 139.
cution’s case assumed. The first step in the defense was to introduce evidence about the truthfulness of the Journal articles named in the charges against Zenger. In doing so, he invoked the republican political principle that censure of an official is an exercise of virtue rather than a violation of status. But this line of defense was rejected by the court. Hamilton next turned to the jury, to whom he delivered a forceful appeal to decide not just the facts of the case, as precedent prescribed (and which he had already admitted), but the law of the case as well.

Hamilton’s turn to the jury was powerfully overdetermined. Part of its strength lay in the appeal to custom and to local tradition. The jury system, derived from the common law and allowing a high degree of local, consensual autonomy in the use of coercion, represented exactly the forms of power threatened by the growing imperial bureaucracy. Appealing to the jury to set the law, Hamilton was also appealing to the socio-political base of the original conflict with Cosby. But Hamilton’s arguments to the jury superimposed, on this appeal to custom and to local autonomy, the substantially different discursive norms of the new public sphere. He justified the appeal to the jury in the same language of deferred authority, supervision, and negativity with which Alexander had described print. The exchange is worth following in some detail in order to see how this double appeal to custom and to publicity came about.

First, Hamilton baited the prosecution by asking for a definition of libel. The prosecutor’s definition emphasized defamation, including that of language understood to be “ironical or scoffing.” Hamilton responded by seizing on the word “understood” in the prosecutor’s definition:

Here it is plain the words are scandalous, scoffing and ironical only as they are UNDERSTOOD. I know no rule laid down in the books but this, I mean, as the words are understood.

None of Hamilton’s argument so far did anything obvious to advance Zenger’s defense, and Chief Justice De Lancey conceded the apparently trivial point:

Mr. Chief Justice. That is certain. All words are libelous or not, as they are understood. Those who are to judge of the words must judge whether they are scandalous or ironical, tend to the breach of the peace, or are seditious: There can be no doubt of it.40

40. Katz, p. 78.
This exchange about interpretation set the stage for the climax of the trial. In the eloquent speech that followed, Hamilton took the already conceded point about the test of understanding for irony or for libel as an argument that the meaning of an utterance is deferred to its interpretation. He then, in effect, gave that principle a political meaning. Whereas Chief Justice De Lancey took the theoretical point to be consistent with his own role (he is clearly thinking about himself when he says “Those who are to judge of the words”), Hamilton argued that the only interpretation that could indicate irony or libel would be a socially general one. The relevant interpretation therefore had to be performed by the jury rather than the judge. “The law,” he told the jury, “supposes you to be summoned out of the neighborhood where the fact is alleged to be committed; and the reason of your being taken out of the neighborhood is because you are supposed to have the best knowledge of the fact that is to be tried.”

Now in Hamilton’s courtroom performance, the jury’s being taken “out of the neighborhood” refers ambiguously to their immediacy and to their mediation. On one hand, he was clearly referring to their local roots, their embeddedness in the norms of custom and the politics of community. On the other hand, he was referring to their representative plurality; since the jury represents the neighborhood in general, their interpretation can be taken to indicate an accurately universalizable judgment. Only in this latter sense could Hamilton’s appeal to the jury conceivably follow from his argument about interpretation, especially since De Lancey, a New Yorker, could claim as much local knowledge as the jury members. The dependence of meaning on interpretation was thus understood in the Zenger trial as requiring a universality of judgment that militated against hierarchy. The success of Hamilton’s performance, however, depended on his ability to conflate that implicit norm of abstract universality with the customary norm of local consensus. This delicate overdetermination made localism and universality indistinguishable from each other and equally opposed to the hierarchy of imperial administration.

The rest is well known: the jury returned a verdict of not guilty, the courtroom broke into cheers for Hamilton, and he was carried jubilantly into the streets. (Zenger, meanwhile, had to return to prison for another night before he was released.) Regardless of whatever role it may have had in setting legal precedents, I take the Zenger case to be representative of prerevolutionary colonial politics in at least three ways. First, it

41. Katz, p. 75.
demonstrates with clarity how the discursive norms of the public sphere required a specific understanding of print. A writer for the New York Journal in 1770 would make the connection clear in a way that had by then become commonplace: citing the Zenger case as an illustration, he writes, “Public grievances can never be redressed but by public complaints; and they cannot well be made without the Press.” 42 Second, the case shows that the new discursive norms of print were articulated as a model of legitimacy that had revolutionary potential. The universality claimed by print discourse could be extended to an understanding of society as the agent of supervision. Third, the Zenger case shows how the success of that articulation depended on an overdetermined relation between publicity and custom. For forty years after the trial, resistance to the crown would increasingly be legitimated in the abstract and universalizing norms of public print discourse, although that resistance would be mobilized in the local politics of custom—an unstable alliance that would break down after the Revolution.

Far from being a minor adjustment in the rhetoric of and about officials, the rise of public discourse was one of the decisive innovations of the modern era. It enabled nothing less than the newly important differentiation between society and the state. This distinction, the premise of so much eighteenth-century social thought, carried with it the set of related distinctions classically studied by Weber, distinctions such as that between officer and office. It is no doubt one of the main reasons why modernity and printing have been associated ever since. Yet the decisive factor was not printing in general, but rather the specialized discursive subsystem that was articulated through special conventions for print. Only by means of a public discourse could the bureaucratic institutions develop, because state and society became differentiated in the appearance of the principle of supervision, which was imaginable only when a supervising agency could be given definition in distinction from the appointed and elected officials whom it would supervise. In the juridical practices of common law, where legislative and coercive power lay in a jury system predicated on ethical unity, no such boundary could be drawn.

What is this supervising agency? The literal answer might be the freeholders, except that as the occupants of the perspective of public discourse any such freeholders are distinguished from the exercise of public office which is otherwise their capacity. In this sense, the “public,” “society,” or “the people” have only a negative existence in relation to the official

embodiment of power. Subjects find themselves as private persons within these large categories to the extent that the public discourse makes available to them their privative relation to the state.

Yet in another sense society and the public acquired a positive—though unrecognized—identity in the transmission of print. That is to say, the public was constructed on the basis of its metonymic embodiment in printed artifacts. That is how it was possible to imagine the public supervising the actions of officials even when no physical assembly of the public was taking place. By mid-century, newspapers were being published regularly in the major towns and were sustaining abstract, but local, political discourse. Pamphlets and broadsides were a familiar and normal feature of politics. In their routine dispersion and in the conventions of discourse that allowed them to be political in a special way, these artifacts represented the material reality of an abstract public: a res publica of letters. Important consequences followed both for the public and for print: unlike the public of the customary order, which was always incarnated in any relation between persons and which found its highest expression in church and town meetings, the public of print discourse was an abstract public, never localizable in any relation between persons. By the same token, print became publication in a newly privileged way, since it was only in print discourse that one could make things public for the now abstract public.

Printed artifacts, however, were not the only metonym for an abstract public. Also important were currency and commodities in general. For this reason it was not accidental that the public debates of print discourse took shape in relation to emergent forms of currency and commerce; public discourse articulated a society of which the North American colonies were only the furthest periphery, a society of commerce and regulation that had developed from the great early Renaissance fairs to the markets of international commerce. Printing in Western culture has always owed much of its character to the fact that it developed as a trade within this world of the fairs and the markets. Printers, of course, sold their products as goods and advertised other goods. They also printed the experimental new paper currencies of the eighteenth century, as well as the increasingly detailed public trade reports. Early colonial newspapers were often frankly founded for the promotion of trade, and most of the early public discourse of print is devoted to the regulation of trade.43

43. The Boston Gazette of January 4, 1720, for example, asserts that the paper's purpose is "to endeavour to advance, but not prejudice Trade"; the Philadelphia American Mercury shortly thereafter declared that "The Design of this Paper" was "to Promote
As the public discourse developed, the market and the public came to be capable of mutual clarification. The value of print and the value of currency equally required the potential for inexhaustible transmission, while the character of publication and the character of economic exchange equally required norms of impersonal relations. Public discourse and the market were mutually clarifying, then, in both their positive and negative characters: positive, because both public and market were metonymically realized in printed, mass-produced artifacts; negative, because the private subject finds his relation to both the public and the market only by negating the given reality of himself, thereby considering himself the abstract subject of the universal (political or economic) discourse.

The economy of discourse resulting from this mutual articulation, I would suggest, was the decisive feature of print capitalism. I take the term “print capitalism” from Benedict Anderson’s admirable and provocative study of nationalism; unfortunately, Anderson’s brief book leaves his suggestion relatively undeveloped and the term undefined. For Anderson, print capitalism was the historical development that made possible the emergence of transcendent, imaginary communities of nations. Observing that books were the first capitalized commodities, Anderson argues that their readers—especially the readers of novels—labor to imagine a community of which they are a part even though the identity of that community does not allow a local proximity. The community of readership is a corporate body realized only metonymically, and this imaginary community, in Anderson’s view, is the elemental form of the nation. In the articulated relation between print and capitalism that the Boston and Maryland debates illustrate, we can see that Anderson’s term is more apt than he has himself shown. The imagination of community constructs the political nation not just indirectly, through novels, but directly, in the creation of the public sphere.

Republicanism as Metadiscourse

It will have struck any historian of the period that the examples of public discourse that I have given all happen to be examples of republican rhetoric as well. In the practices of print discourse, the American creoles elaborated a public sphere by means of their elaboration of the conceptual

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vocabulary of republicanism and vice versa. Elaborating the republican vocabulary filled the need to make and remake continually a fit between the public discourse and the social world. Republicanism in this context means rather more than the republican political arguments advanced in printed debates. It is what J. G. A. Pocock calls "the language of republicanism": a conceptual vocabulary that made the whole range of republican political arguments possible.\(^{45}\) By the same token, republican ideology was also an ideology of print in that its central categories—at least in the colonial American version of republicanism—were articulated in, and thus given meaning within, the symbolic practices of publication. We have already seen several examples: the anti-party rhetoric of the Boston currency crisis, for example, simultaneously gave meaning to the practice of publishing and to the republican norm of disinterest. To honor the powerfully republican character of the arguments in the Zenger case, the city of New York gave Hamilton a gold snuffbox inscribed with republican mottoes (an act that was soon denounced from as far away as Barbados).\(^{46}\)

Historians have observed, at least since Timothy Breen’s *Character of the Good Ruler* and Bernard Bailyn’s *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, that a powerful strain of republican rhetoric, associated in England with Whig or Country traditions, began to flourish in the colonies at about the same time as the Boston currency crisis.\(^{47}\) Though the commonwealth tradition was scarcely unknown to the Puritans,\(^{48}\) in the early eigh-

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\(^{45}\) *Machiavellian Moment*. For an account of the differences between Pocock’s approach and the model of historiography it has been replacing, see Joyce Appleby, “Republicanism and Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 37 (1985): 461–67. To say that the language of republicanism was to be found on such a fundamental ideological level is not, of course, to deny that there were variations and conflicts within republicanism, nor to deny that other conceptual vocabularies were lingering or emerging in the cultures of the American colonies. No reader of Pocock’s work, for example, can fail to notice the ceaseless transformations of even the most central terms he studies. It is to say what is now relatively uncontroversial among historians: that for the colonists, the intelligibility of the political world and the possibility of action in it were constituted by the categories of a broad republican tradition.


\(^{47}\) Timothy Breen, *Character of the Good Ruler* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1970); Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins* (1967; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1970). Both historians have also registered, at least indirectly, the close relation between republicanism and print discourse. Breen, for example, writes that the Country party’s “most important contribution to the political life of New England may well have been the way it used the printing press to educate the public” (247). See also Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959).

\(^{48}\) Thus Governor Dudley of Massachusetts could complain in 1702 of the “Common-
teenth century the republican categories of Country politics rapidly took hold throughout the colonies to organize political interests and conflicts. Politics came to be conceptualized increasingly in terms of virtue and corruption, interest and disinterestedness, public and party, liberty and power. These categories were not simply those of learned argument, but, more powerfully, those of cliche and common sense.

For this reason, nearly any example from the printed debates will also illustrate republicanism; let us take a pamphlet entitled *English Advice to the Freeholders, &c. of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay*. Signed “Brutus and Cato,” the pamphlet was printed in 1722 by James Franklin (no doubt with the assistance of his then apprentice brother), and is a prime instance of print supervision in the emergent republican paradigm. It begins by noting the upcoming May elections and appeals with a rhetoric of urgency for the election of “Patriots,” “especially in the House of Representatives, who are the Guardians of the People’s Liberty.” The author is then able to add: “Remember (Countrymen) that Liberty is a Jewel of an inestimable Value, which when once lost, is seldom recovered again. . . . One way to keep it, is, to chuse good Men to represent you; such as dare boldly exert themselves for the publick Good, by making Laws that will secure you from any Attempts that may be form’d to your Prejudice by succeeding Rulers” (3–4).

The general republican sentiments are presented as obvious and nonargumentative. Even supporters of the incumbent officials could concede the praise of active liberty and the ideal of the public good. Thus the speaker says only, “Remember . . . ” Within this profession of the obvious lies a whole set of interpretive categories and normative assumptions about power and personhood. To begin with, the cliche represents liberty as imperiled by rulers and requiring rigorous civic exertion against their ever-threatening encroachment. The assumptions that make this cliche intelligible include the notions of place-holding as corruptive, of virtue as active but disinterested participation in the civic sphere, and of the opposition between general concerns and private interests. Where such rhetoric had been traditionally oppositional in the English context, for the North American creoles it could define the colonial situation in the administrative empire generally, a fact that would later be of some consequence.49

In this context, referring to the civic exertions that preserve liberty

wealthmen” in the Assembly who “so absolutely Depend for their Station upon the People, that they dare not offend them” (Breen, *Character of the Good Ruler*, p. 321).

49. This point is amplified by Bernard Bailyn in *The Origins of American Politics*. 
was also a way of thinking about the public discourse itself. Every citizen (read: white, landowning male) is assumed by the pamphlet's author to have an interest in monitoring the actions of rulers with a critical intention. Though ultimately this interest will require the election of public-minded representatives, an even clearer way of monitoring the ever-renewed threat to liberty is through discourse of the kind embodied by *English Advice* itself. This is how the principle of supervision comes into being. I have treated that principle as single principle; whereas in fact it was enunciated through a wide range of very different assertions about politics. There is a common element to these republican clichés about liberty, power, and corruption—a common element that allows us to summarize them as the principle of supervision: together they form a cultural understanding of the desirable uses of print. Republican rhetoric and the discursive conditions of the public sphere rendered each other intelligible. In the very act of giving advice about liberty and power, the pamphlet provides the categories of its own utility. In this sense, colonial republicanism can be described as a metadiscourse.

It is doubtless for this reason that the traditions of republican rhetoric most favored in the colonies were those that themselves developed as a metadiscourse of printed debate in England. The most popular republican texts in the colonies included works such as *The Spectator* and, perhaps, even more importantly, *Cato's Letters.*50 Both were periodical series, and both incorporate their ongoing—even routine—appearance in print as an assumption about political legitimacy. For Addison and Steele and, even more, for Trenchard and Gordon, political publication is far from being a deviation from social order produced by crisis; indeed, what they fear is not a society riddled with political publications, but rather a society without them. This normative routinization of print discourse lies behind the very idea of the serial essay: the first *Spectator* boldly advertised, “To be Continued every Day.” Even though colonial printers were limited to weeklies, the serial essay became almost universally adopted as the showpiece of American newspapers.

The authors of these British essays, like those of their American counterparts, devoted their labors to the elaboration of terms that would allow continuous, normal, normative publication. The character of the Spectator is himself designed for that function. Here is his famous introduction:

I have observed, that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure, 'till he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or a fair Man, of a mild or cholerick Disposition, Married or a Batchelor, with other Particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right understanding of an Author.51

Though no republican political arguments have yet been advanced, the Spectator has already established the Country posture of disinterested examination. Indeed, his nom de plume (one might as well say nom d'impri-merie) makes him almost an allegorically literalized embodiment of super-vision. The tone of the passage, moreover, is organized by the normative implication that personal identity, in all of its contingent “Particularities,” ought not to dictate the value of a writing. That implication is all the more powerful insofar as we know the subsequent details of the characters’ identity to be fictitious. The principle of the negativity of public discourse is thus made available through the Spectator’s ironic detachment from the reader’s curiosity and through the fictitiousness of the serial’s characters. And the normative character of that principle is made available in the form of the disinterest of Country republicanism.

The first Spectator essay, with the introduction of the Spectator, appeared in 1711. Ten years later, on August 7, 1721, the first issue of the New England Courant appeared, with its own introduction:

It’s an hard Case, that a Man can’t appear in Print now a Days, unless he’ll undergo the Mortification of Answering to ten thou-
sand senseless and Impertinent Questions like these, Pray Sir, from whence came you? . . . Was you bred at Colledge, Sir?

The printer’s apprentice brother, Benjamin Franklin, would repeat the same theme yet again in his Silence Dogood papers of the following year, albeit in a more graceful and inventive manner. The pressurized tone of the Courant’s introduction—the pertness of “Impertinent”—may be taken as registering the resistance to civic discourse in Boston. James Franklin’s rhetoric is the Country posture without the Country; where Addison and Steele could rely on the (assumed) class position of the gentry as a liberal vantage on the political world, Franklin from the first was forced to validate utterance in a world of print dominated by the Puritan clergy. His intro-
duction comes into focus if we remember the swagger of the authors who

defended Cotton Mather against Robert Calef in 1701: "It was highly rejoicing to us, when we heard that our Book-sellers were so well acquainted with the Integrity of our Pastors, as not one of them would admit any of those Libels to be vended in their shops." Franklin's opposition to the familiar pastors comes in the imagination of a different norm for the vending of what he prints. That imagination/action is made possible for him by the Addisonian model, but the model in turn is transformed in the articulation: it now refers not to a class position above concern—the concealed model of the gentry's liberality—but the market-society negativity which is now the condition of print and which the self-conscious artisan Franklin marshals more aggressively against social distinction than Addison and Steele would ever have done.