
The Cultural And Political Consequences Of Rising Literacy In Early Modern Europe

Upon the invention of the European printing press around 1439, the very fabric of society was destined to change. With reading materials more readily available, literacy rates throughout the continent rose steadily, allowing commoners access to new ideas, both political and cultural, beckoning in events such as the Protestant Reformation, and allowing people the opportunity to not only voice their ideas, but to be heard. A better informed populous gave rise to the exchange of radical ideas of reform. The combination of the printing press and higher literacy became instrumental in organising mass protests and revolutions. Culturally, higher literacy rates gave rise to progress in academia, allowing scholars to publish more readily available papers and research, which more people could read and interpret. This essay will discuss the role of rising literacy during the French Revolution, the English Cromwellian Parliament and the Protestant Reformation, as well as the rise of schooling and specialised professions pre and during the Enlightenment, resulting in a shift from rural to urban life.

The political consequences of rising literacy in the early modern period were two-fold, more people could read the laws and constitutions, creating the opportunity to increase political discourse. People soon found flaws in their governments and infringements upon their rights, literacy drove people to act upon those findings, raising revolutions through sharing ideas. When looking into differences between the more and less literate areas of rural France during the late eighteenth century, the less literate areas were found more likely to spring unsuccessful attacks upon rumoured invasions, whereas the more literate areas launched attacks on the civil establishments of the monarchy. This difference is important as it shows that literacy created a way to organise revolts. Literacy was paramount during the French Revolution, as well as other political upheavals such as the English Civil War, where propaganda posters and pamphlets played a large role in both the defamation and the defence of the monarchy. Newspapers can also illustrate the political consequences of literacy, in England, they were largely uncensored and widely circulated as opposed to contemporary French newspapers, which were heavily censored, featuring government approved content that was far less widely distributed. This shows literacy affecting how governments viewed their own people, during a time of dissent the French monarchy turned to censorship, showing a new fear of their subjects and the rising literacy among the lower classes. Literacy during the latter years of the French revolution can be considered instrumental during the process of restructuring the government and societal infrastructure. The circulation of new laws and information via pamphlets and declarations posted in public places proved essential to post-revolutionary France. How increased literacy was used varied depending on circumstances; during Cromwellian rule in Britain for example, Henry Townshend of Elmley Lovett composed a diary keeping careful record of parliamentary action, elections and various MPs. This proved how Townshend was able to understand the proceedings himself, and that he benefited from print culture and documents released during the time to reinforce his information, creating a comprehensive record of Cromwellian parliamentary proceedings. This kind of access to, and recording of, the inner workings of the government would never have been possible without rising literacy and print culture. Rising literacy and print culture allowed common people to engage in political discourse through new means, such as propaganda posters and captioned images. One such image being from the Protestant Reformation by Lucas Cranach, depicting Luther preaching the glory of

Protestantism, and showing the descent into Hell of Catholics. This type of imagery was commonplace during revolutions and the Protestant Reformation, allowing the spread of political ideas, keeping in consideration both those that could read, by including captions, and those that could not, as the content was mainly visual. The political consequences of rising literacy and print culture depended upon the circumstances of the nation in question. Rising literacy and print was a driving factor of the spread of revolutionary ideas and political discourse, eventually leading to the turnover of power and reconstruction of countries. It gave citizens access to the inner workings of governments, allowing people to question how they were being ruled, gaining them unique insight never before experienced by lower status members of society.

Rising literacy and print culture also had prominent cultural consequences, with the invention and popularisation of the printing press, more people could gain access to reading materials, and had the incentive to do so. Reading out loud to others became a communal or family activity, allowing lower-class members of society to benefit from print materials, even if they themselves were unable to read. Literacy was taught in two parts, reading first, with writing being considered more of a professional skill rather than a general one. Literacy had made religion more accessible, encouraging people to read the Lord's prayer by printing it on horn books, the primary teaching material for children learning to read. The reading of biblical texts had until this time been limited to those fluent and literate in Latin, primarily clergy and some nobles, excluding the common congregation from religious discussion and interpretation of the Bible. The Protestant Reformation further bolstered the reading of religious texts when the translation of the Bible into vernacular German by Martin Luther was published, suddenly including non-clergy members in religion, opening up avenues for debates and reinterpretation of religious texts. The Enlightenment also ushered in an educational revolution, with the creation of public or 'petty' schools for peasant children, within these institutions children of a lower social status could learn to read, further increasing literacy across a broader range of people. Depending on the class of the child's family and their wealth, children could be sent to schools of a higher degree. These schools taught reading and writing, mathematics and in schools such as Jesuit Colleges, English Grammar schools and Russian State Academies, other alphabets such as Greek, Hebrew, Latin and French. A rise in literacy also encouraged the pursuit of specialised careers such as apothecaries, surgeons, playwrights and scholars. This caused a shift in culture as commoners moved from an agricultural lifestyle to a more urban one, increasing sizes of towns and cities, and decreasing farming as a popular career as the early modern period continued. This shift can be considered both a catalyst of the Enlightenment and a reason for its success, with urbanised educated towns and cities expanding, giving academia a foothold in everyday life. One can also see a cultural shift in rural areas, moving from folktale-based traditions to a more rational way of thinking, as detailed in John Aubrey's assertion that rising print culture and rational thought had driven away belief in superstition. This transition from traditionalism to a more rational way of thinking as well as a pursuit of higher education and specialised professions allowed for a cultural change from a more agrarian society to an increasingly urbanised one. Overall, increased literacy rates allowed people to engage in social discourse, including lower status members of society in religious debates and spurring on educational reform.

The political and cultural consequences of rising literacy rates in early modern Europe lie predominantly in people's engagement with political and religious reform and revolution. The rises in literacy caused people's perceptions of the world to change, shifting ideas on traditional life, education and available professions. Despite their being a clear increase in literacy, most methods of data collection concerning changing rates in literacy are faulted in some respects,

such as signature counting, which often leaves out minority groups. When used in tandem with other data points however, such as movement from rural to urban areas as well as numbers of horn books printed and books published, one is able to discern a pattern of increasing literacy across Europe. This increase allowed low status individuals to not only influence their governments, but to form their own ideas and spread them. Rising literacy ushered in an era of thought revolution, educational reformation and empowerment for common people.

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