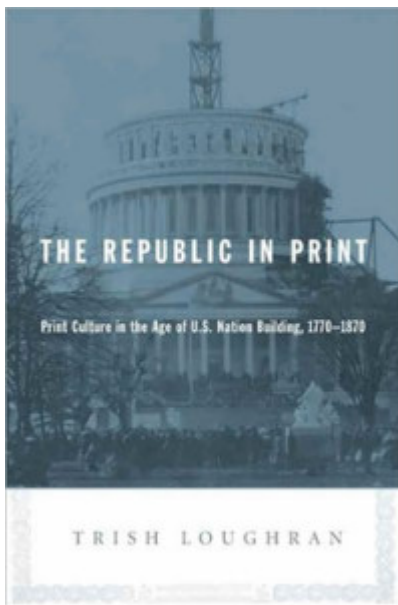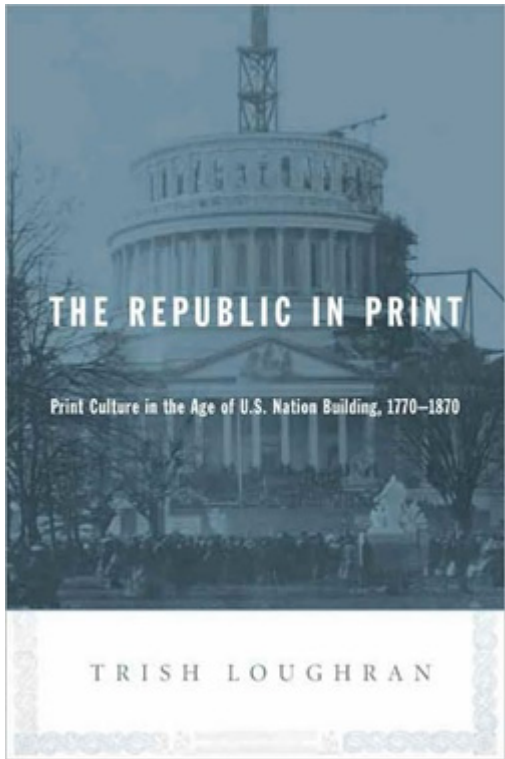# On Print and Polemics

Trish Loughran, The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. pp. xxv, 537, cloth, $45.00.

It may be bad form to invoke dust jacket blurbs in a critical review, but I'll take the risk. Jay Fliegelman calls *The Republic in Print* "refreshingly polemical." Trish Loughran's book earns that description, although my use of that phrase may not be quite as approving as the late, great scholar intended.

Loughran argues that historians, literary scholars, and cultural critics have put far too much emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between American nationhood, national identity, and print culture in the eighteenth century. Loughran asserts that for the republic's first several decades the capacity to deliver print throughout mainland North America was insufficient. That material feebleness was essential, though, because without it independence and the union would have been stillborn. The founding was only possible because the "very localness of U.S. print cultures" provided the revolutionaries in 1776 and Federalists in 1788 enough rhetorical cover to satisfy disparate American audiences (xx). But, because of lacking institutions or infrastructure, neither of these dates really matter; neither was the nation's true birthday. For Loughran, Lincoln's math at Gettysburg was way off; rather than 1776, the "real" founding was more like one score and perhaps a dozen years before the Civil War.

Before the Industrial Revolution, there was not enough paper or presses, the delivery systems (from roads to riders) were unreliable, and for much of the year, the weather was terrible. As much as Hamilton, Madison, and their fellow framers may have fantasized about an integrated nation and done their best to erect that frame (the Constitution) based on a theory of an extended yet consolidated republic, their dreams could not be realized until telegraphs, turnpikes, railroads, steam-powered printing presses, and increased literacy made all things possible. Only then could print penetrate all corners of the nation and tie it together. When that transformation finally occurred, however, Americans did not like what they saw with their new, national, industrial-strength eyes. Abolitionists were the first to put this industrialized print culture to use, flooding the South with thousands of tracts and writing novels that conceived of slavery as a national problem. This was the culmination of federalism and the real birth of America. "The golden age of U.S. nation building," though, "did not in fact lead to a golden age of U.S. nationalism but instead ushered in the era of high sectionalism" and civil war (304).

This is quite a big, startling argument. It challenges sacred theorists in current scholarship, most prominently Michael Warner and Benedict Anderson. Likewise, Loughran's take on *The Federalist*, federalism, and Federalists circa 1787-89 is just as striking, calling into question some of the best chapters Gordon Wood ever wrote. But her biggest target is Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. She argues that—given the material limitations of paper, ink, and presses, the places where the pamphlet was and was not published, and the sheer lack of reliable informational infrastructure in 1776—Paine's claims of more than one hundred thousand copies selling by the end of its first year were simply impossible. Fair enough. Historians have indeed gone a little overboard in attributing causative power to Paine's pamphlet. But Loughran takes this a step further, suggesting that these limitations "dampen[ed] the impact" of *Common Sense*, at least outside the North (55). This is more difficult to sustain given the unprecedented references to people reading the pamphlet, sending it to one another, and general notes in the newspapers like that in two Virginia papers telling how "a favorite toast in the best companies [in the Continental Army]

is 'May the INDEPENDENT principles of COMMON SENSE be confirmed throughout the United Colonies.'" At places she stretches evidence on this score.

Loughran contends that "none" of the "first generation of historians of the Revolution (including David Ramsey, Jonathan Boucher, and Mercy Otis Warren) … mentions *Common Sense* as a decisive factor in the decision to separate" (43). The inclusion of Ramsey in that list surprised me enough to pull his *History of the American Revolution* off the shelf. In the middle of a two-page exposition of the power of Paine's pamphlet, Ramsey concludes that because of *Common Sense* "many thousands were convinced and were led to approve and long for a separation from the Mother Country. Though that measure, a few months before, was not only foreign from their wishes, but the object of their abhorrence, the current suddenly became so strong in its favor, that it bore down all opposition. The multitude was hurried down the stream …" (315-316).

This problem is larger than *Common Sense*. Loughran claims that, by interrogating the material context of Paine's pamphlet—the "exemplary text of Revolutionary print culture"—she is really exposing the "circulatory spine of the American Revolution" (305-6). And, for her, the vital signs of that system are barely detectable: it is plagued by "provincial custom or colonial cunning, a muddy road or lame horse, a damaged portmanteau or dead postal inspector" (14). To be sure, these factors were all impediments to information flows in the eighteenth century. They are excellent reminders that should be kept in mind when thinking about how different their worlds were from ours. But the revolutionaries' communication networks were not as anemic as Loughran's revisionism would like us to believe.

The same could be said for the early republic.

My dedicating the bulk of this review to the Revolutionary era mirrors the book. Loughran's interpretation does not move past 1790 until the last quarter of the text. That is not to say there is nothing of merit in the last chapters. Indeed, they are stuffed with thought-provoking interpretations across a wide spectrum of the nineteenth century, especially on how abolitionists were the first to recognize the truly national print culture and on the influence that expanding markets played in bringing about calls for immediate abolition. Her conclusions about the Fugitive Slave Act as a turning point in American theories of identity and citizenship are compelling.

To return to the dust jacket, the cover image of *Republic in Print* is an 1861 photograph of the building of the U.S. Capitol, which Loughran suggests is the book's central theme. For her, the construction project of nation building was an industrial one of recent origin in the 1860s. Perhaps it might be better to view this building project as one marked by fits and starts, in which some work was accomplished in the eighteenth century, set aside, and returned to in later decades. Although the blueprints and building codes might have been revised in later decades, the earlier work was hardly razed and construction restarted from scratch. *The Republic in Print* is indeed "refreshingly polemical." It does

address very valuable questions about the relationships between a host of topics: nation, print, race, identity, region, culture, citizenship, and foundings. It is an exceptional, well-written book that combats the reader (in a good way) at many turns. But it should not be seen as the last word on this subject. It should instead spark further debate and open new avenues of research, especially on mobilization, print, and the Revolutionary era.

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