1 Introduction: culture and power during the long eighteenth century

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In December 1774, seventeen-year-old Carl August, Prince of Saxe Weimar, met the celebrated young author Johann Wolfgang Goethe in a Frankfurt hotel room. The meeting was cordial, indeed the two men got along together so splendidly that, less than a year later, Goethe accepted the prince's invitation to move to Weimar, where he would spend the rest of his long and incredibly productive life.

I begin with this familiar scene – so beautifully rendered and analysed in Nicholas Boyle's distinguished biography of the poet – because it neatly captures several of the motifs in the complex relationship between culture and power in the eighteenth century.[1] First and most obvious is the persistent significance of the court, whose seductive blend of artistic possibilities and political influence led Goethe to disregard his father's opposition and take up residence in Carl August's small Thuringian state. Second, there is the new significance of public culture, reflected here in Goethe's position as literary celebrity, which had caused a member of the prince's entourage to seek out the author of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and which would make Goethe such an attractive presence in Carl August's entourage. Both prince and poet needed one another, both acquired prestige and a kind of power from the other's presence. Court and public were not just alternative sites of cultural practice, they often worked together, each reinforcing the other.

Just behind the surface of this meeting of poet and prince, court and public, we can see some of the difficulties involved in understanding the relationship between eighteenth-century culture and power. Consider, for example, how difficult it is to fit Goethe into any of the usual social categories – he remains a *Bürger* among courtiers, a courtier among *Bürger*, a civil servant, a 'favourite' and, most of all, a citizen of the republic of letters. Goethe's relationship to German nationalism is no

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[1] Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*. Vol. I. *The Poetry of Desire (1749–1790)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 194ff.

less perplexing. He is a great national poet, someone, in Friedrich Mei-
necke's phrase, who taught Germans who they were. But he was never
comfortable with national rhetoric and often contemptuous of patriotic
enthusiasts. And what about Goethe's political views? At once attracted
and repelled by power, critical of both the old regime and its revolution-
ary opponents, insider and outsider, Goethe's politics, like so much else
about him, remained elusive and unsettled. T. S. Eliot once commented
that 'Goethe was about as unrepresentative of his age as a man of genius
can be.'[2] But in one way Goethe was exemplary, and that is of the rich-
ness and complexity of the period with which the essays in this volume
are concerned.

I

The major source of inspiration for these essays is the work of T. C. W.
Blanning. Let me begin with a few words about Tim Blanning's schol-
arly career, concluding with a discussion of his magisterial *The Culture of
Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789*, which was
published by the Oxford University Press in 2002.

The first things to be noted is that Blanning is a *European* historian.
This was apparent in his first book on Joseph II, but it was much more
evident in the two books that established his reputation: *Reform and Rev-
olution in Mainz* (published by Cambridge University Press in 1974)
and *The French Revolution in Germany* (published by Oxford University
Press in 1983). It is of great significance, I think, that Blanning began
with the Rhineland. This is, after all, an intensely European place, not
least because it has been the scene of so many conflicts over regional
and national identity. By studying the Rhineland Blanning was able to
approach German history from the west and French history from the
east, confronting in the process some of the central problems of each
without being the captive of either. (What French historian, for exam-
ple, would have dared to begin a book entitled *The French Revolutionary
Wars* with the battle of Rossbach, Frederick the Great's victory in 1757?)
Blanning has contributed to both German and French historiography,
but has never been just a 'German' or 'French' historian nor has he ever
been confined by their conventional wisdoms.

Consider, for example, the quotation with which his Mainz book
begins: 'The contrast between Germany and Western Europe in modern
history has long been a subject of historical interpretation and research.'

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[2]   Quoted from ibid., p. 7 in T. C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture:
Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 98.

This sentence, from Hajo Holborn's influential essay on 'German Ideal-
ism in the Light of Social History', takes us directly to what is immediately
recognizable as the *Sonderweg*, the historiographical conviction that Ger-
many followed a 'special path' to modernity.[3] And yet Blanning travels
this path to a destination quite different from most of its adherents: he
finds not the usual failed German modernization, but rather 'the astonish-
ing ability of the political and social establishment in Germany to absorb,
adapt, and even utilize progressive and potentially disruptive forces'.[4] In
a number of ways, Blanning cuts against the grain of scholarly orthodoxy:
in contrast to German nationalist historians, he recognizes the value and
viability of the Holy Roman Empire (he was, in fact, among the first mod-
ern scholars to insist on the empire's positive role as a source of order and
stability in central Europe). In contrast to Protestant historians, he does
not dismiss traditional Catholic piety or overlook the progressive elements
within the Rhenish Church; and in contrast to a variety of democratic
and Marxist historians, he did not magnify or distort the influence of the
members of the Mainz Jacobin club. His comment on the latter issue is
characteristic:

In view of this rejection of the Revolution by most of the inhabitants of the city,
the disproportionate amount of attention lavished by historians on the Clubists is
explicable only in terms of the ease with which they can be adapted to suit various
historiographical schools.[5]

In *The French Revolution in Germany*, Blanning once again tries to drive
a stake through the heart of German Jacobinism, which, vampire like,
keeps struggling to emerge from the historiographical crypt. This book,
while narrower chronologically than his study of Mainz, examines many
of the same themes for the Rhineland as a whole. Deeply researched and
vigorously written, it documents the wanton destruction of traditional
institutions, the ruthlessness of the revolution's anti-clericalism and the
increasingly despotic face of the revolution abroad. The revolution, Blan-
ning argues, governed the Rhineland not through the power of its ideas
or the promise of its programme, but with brute force. French rule rested
on the army: 'without it, the revolutionary regime could not have lasted a
week'.[6] Here we have that familiar figure in German historiography, 'the
revolution from above', imposed not by Prussian autocrats but by French
democrats. It is not a pretty picture.

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[3] *Reform and Revolution in Mainz*, p. 1. Holborn's essay is available in *Germany and Europe:
Historical Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).
[4] Blanning, *Reform and Revolution in Mainz*, p. 3.
[5] Ibid., p. 295.   [6] *The French Revolution in Germany*, p. 206.

The next phase of Blanning's scholarship was directly about the French Revolution and the Revolutionary Wars. In part this was a natural extension of his work on the Rhineland, in part he may have been irresistibly drawn into the historiographical vortex created by the bicentennial celebrations of 1789. Blanning wrote three books on various aspects of the revolution and edited one of the best collections of articles inspired by the bicentennial.[7] His books on the Revolutionary Wars are beautifully done, examples of his range as a scholar and his versatility as a writer. *The French Revolutionary Wars* is surely the best introduction to the subject in English. These works, like his earlier books on the French Revolution in Germany, reveal the repressive violence at the core of revolutionary expansionism.

Of particular interest for an understanding of the development of Blanning's ideas is his brief survey of the revolution, published in the Studies in European History series in 1987. Designed to introduce students to the literature on a major historical topic, the volume's theme is captured by the subtitle, *Aristocrats versus Bourgeois?* From the opening paragraph the abiding presence in the book is Alfred Cobban, whose inaugural lecture of 1954, 'The Myth of the French Revolution', began a long struggle to displace the Marxist framework which had, with varying degrees of orthodoxy, shaped historians' views of the revolution's origins and meaning. Blanning clearly shared Cobban's distrust of ideological retrospection, as well as his belief in the primacy of politics.[8]

A decade later, Blanning published a second edition of *The French Revolution*. Its new subtitle, *Class War or Culture Clash?*, pointed to the tectonic shift in historiographical interest from social to cultural analysis. The Cobbanite presence remains, but it now shares space with Habermas and, perhaps even more importantly, François Furet. In a new section on 'The Public Sphere and Public Opinion', Blanning casts 'a friendly but critical eye' on political culture as an explanation for the events of 1789.[9]

Blanning's adoption of the cultural approach was qualified in at least two ways, both important for establishing the link between his studies of the French Revolution and *The Culture of Power*. First, Blanning does

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[7] *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London: Longman, 1986); *The French Revolution: Aristocrats versus Bourgeois?* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1987); *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787–1802* (London: Arnold, 1996). The edited volume is *The Rise and Fall of the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), a collection of seventeen articles on the revolution originally published in the *Journal of Modern History*.

[8] See Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[9] *The French Revolution: Class War or Culture Clash?* (2nd edn, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp. 23ff.

not abandon qualitative distinctions in assigning historical significance
to ideas and objects. Thus while he acknowledges the role of the under-
ground literature examined by Robert Darnton, he is not prepared to
replace the works of Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot with those of some
obscure pornographer or pamphleteer. Second, Blanning never loses
sight of the abiding importance of power, especially military power, in
shaping political events. Thus while he uses the work of historians like
Lynn Hunt and Keith Baker, he does not let political discourse take on
a life of its own. The hard realities of political violence and international
conflict are always present. We can see, therefore, in Blanning's critical
engagement with the rich historical literature on the French Revolution
the origins of the themes that he will so brilliantly examine in *The Culture
of Power and the Power of Culture*.

The Culture of Power is divided into three parts: 'Representational Cul-
ture', 'The Rise of the Public Sphere' and 'Revolution'. There is a certain
Hegelian quality about this triad: each stage at once replaces and sustains
its antecedent, following the dialectical process that Hegel calls *Aufhe-
bung*, a lifting up, which of course involves both retention and removal.

The opening section on 'Representational Culture' is a rare example
of historical writing that is at once a splendid introduction for the novice
and a source of surprise and delight for the expert. Blanning moves across
Europe – with particular emphasis on France and the German lands –
and across genres – with particular emphasis on music and the visual
arts. He finds just the right balance between the general and the partic-
ular, the prominent and the forgotten, sacred and profane. Despite the
richness of its material, the first section is also the most cohesive of the
three. In part this is because representational culture was a European
phenomenon, nourished by the powerful influence of Versailles, patron-
ized by a multilingual aristocracy, and created by an international elite
of artists who moved freely from court to court. But the cohesiveness
of representational culture also comes from the court itself, which rep-
resents the fusion of political and cultural authority, personified by the
prince, around whom the life of the court is supposed to revolve. 'The
whole state', as Bossuet once wrote, 'is in the person of the prince.'[10]

Something extraordinarily important happens to European politics
when this ceases to be true: when the state can no longer be represented
in the prince's person, it must be imagined; that is to say, it becomes
the projection of what we know on to what we don't, what we can see
on to what we can't. In the modern world, all political communities are

[10] Quoted in Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University
Press, 1990), p. 225.

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'imagined communities' because all of them extend beyond what we can see and apprehend. The site where the political imagination operates – and where a new kind of political culture is created – is the subject of Blanning's second section, 'The Rise of the Public Sphere'.

As the section's title underscores, Jürgen Habermas – a powerful presence throughout the book – is especially important here. As far as I have been able to discover, Habermas's name appeared for the first time in Blanning's *The French Revolution in Germany* (published in 1983), when he is listed – along with Treitschke, Marx, Barrès, Lenin and Rosenberg (an odd assortment to say the least) – as a source of categories 'from another time and place' that Blanning does not intend to impose on his material.[11] As we have seen, by the second edition of his survey of the French Revolution, Blanning had accepted Habermas's value in understanding the problem of political culture. In *The Culture of Power*, the conceptual framework has been – as Blanning tells us – strongly influenced although not dictated by *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*.[12]

In order to be transformed into a useful historical category, Habermas's idea of *Öffentlichkeit* needs three revisions. First, the chronology of his argument must be changed: the process he describes certainly began much earlier than he suggests. Second, the normative element in Habermas's account needs to be reduced – socially *Öffentlichkeit* was not, as Habermas suggests, so closely associated with the bourgeoisie, nor was it ideologically as 'progressive' and consistently secular as he claimed. Finally – and this point is made less often than the first two – the institutional dimensions of Habermas's argument need to be emphasized and the epistemological correspondingly downplayed. Within the evolution of Habermas's own thought, *Öffentlichkeit* is a stage in the emergence of the communications theory with which he tried to resolve problems of truth and value. In Habermas's original account, therefore, the epistemological function of *Öffentlichkeit* is more important than its social or institutional character. The historians – like Blanning – who use Habermas reverse this emphasis: a reversal that is already apparent in the translation of the

[11] *The French Revolution in Germany*, p. 17. There follows a long quotation from Richard Cobb, whose distrust of methodological self-consciousness the Blanning of 1983 firmly endorsed.

[12] *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962). It is significant that Habermas's book was not translated until 1989: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). There is a vast literature on the concept: for a good introduction, see the article by Dena Goodman in *History and Theory* 31:1 (1992) and the collection edited by Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), which includes some retrospective reflections by Habermas himself.

key term. The rendering of *Öffentlichkeit* as 'public sphere' (or even more clearly in the French *l'espace public*) gives the notion of 'publicity' or, perhaps more accurately, 'publicness' greater institutional weight than the German term would suggest.

Habermas's great service is to encourage us to remember that culture is not just a set of ideas or objects, but that it is an activity in which form and content have a complex relationship: the medium and the message are dynamically and creatively interrelated.[13] By making culture an activity, Habermas suggested a way to write a history of ideas that transcended both the abstractions of traditional intellectual history and the reductionist categories of Marxist analysis.

In Blanning's capable hands, the concept of a 'public sphere' becomes a way of illuminating the subtle interplay of commerce and communications in eighteenth-century culture. The core of this process was the rise of a reading public, at once the subjects and consumers of the century's great burst of literary innovation. But Blanning refuses to be trapped within his conceptual framework: he recognizes the continued importance of the court, the limits of social categories like 'the bourgeoisie' and the need to recognize the aesthetic merit of great works of literature, art and music. As in section one, Blanning is a splendid guide: clear and concise enough for the beginner, unfailingly original and provocative enough for the more experienced reader.

Blanning's final section, tersely entitled 'Revolution', is the longest, most original, most interesting, but also the most problematic of the three. There is no doubt that this section has the most difficult story to tell. The title of the section, like the closing date – 1789 – in the title of the book, sets the trajectory of the analysis towards the revolution in France. But Blanning must continue to manage the differences among the three national experiences at the centre of his account – Prussia, Britain and France. He must also retain his focus on the relationship between culture and power – unified by the court in his first section, refracted into public opinion in his second and now necessarily part of the revolutionary crisis that brought the old regime to an end.

The keystone in the interpretive arch that supports this section is nationalism. At the end of the second section, Blanning provides this forecast of what is coming: 'As the next chapter will show, this great upheaval [that is, the French Revolution], which affected every part of

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[13] Much the same idea informed the work of Marshall McLuhan, whose *Gutenberg Galaxy* appeared in 1962, the same year as Habermas's *Strukturwandel*. McLuhan, who was once so famous that he appeared in a Woody Allen movie, is now largely forgotten, at least by historians.

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Europe, did not come like a clap of thunder in a clear sky, but was a specifically French reaction to a general European phenomenon – the emergence of nationalism.'[14]

I am not sure that Blanning's concept of nationalism is sturdy enough to bear the structural weight he puts upon it. It seems to me that it works rather well in his discussion of Britain, where the monarch is able to capture the patriotic mood and create a political culture that will enable Britain to emerge triumphant from its long struggle against revolutionary France. It is also true that the French monarchy's inability to mobilize nationalism was one – but only one – of the most significant reasons for the disasters that engulfed it after 1789. Nationalism works least well in explaining the German case, where national consciousness within the public sphere has a much more complicated relationship with political authority. Throughout German-speaking Europe, the state remained more important than the nation until well into the nineteenth century.

Looking back over Tim Blanning's scholarly work beginning with his study of Joseph II in 1970 and by no means ending with his *Culture of Power* in 2002, one is struck by its variety, range and intellectual power. He writes with equal authority about operas and battles, ideas and events, social movements and great men. Throughout his work there are some recurrent themes, such as the importance of religion, the centrality of politics and the decisive significance of power, especially military power. There are recurring opinions, of which Professor Blanning has an abundant supply. And there is also a characteristic tone that is gently – and sometimes not so gently – ironic. Above all, Blanning's work is united by what William James once called 'temperament', those deeply rooted elements of character and conviction that nourish our intellectual life. Blanning's scholarship is animated by his temperament, which is – and again I take my terms from William James – tough minded enough to see the world as it is, but also tender minded enough to appreciate the importance of imaging how the world might be and, above all, sensible enough to know the difference between the two.

II

In their range and variety, the essays in this volume reflect the breadth of Tim Blanning's scholarly interests. Like Blanning's teaching and research, the essays are European in scope, extending from Britain to the Hungarian lands of the Habsburg Monarchy. Chronologically, they span the 'long eighteenth century' from Christopher Clark's account of King Frederick's

[14] Blanning, *The Culture of Power*, p. 182.

coronation in 1701 to Emma Winter's examination of King Ludwig of Bavaria's reign that ended, unhappily, in 1848. The subjects covered include music and military institutions, court intrigue and diplomatic practice, religious conflict and political ideas. While the editors have made no effort to provide a comprehensive portrait of the century, the contributions convincingly demonstrate its richness and diversity.

The essays are joined by a common interest in culture.

Although historians – since Herodotus – have long written about culture, cultural history has been significantly revitalized in the past two decades. One of the primary examples of this new vitality is the historiography of the eighteenth century and especially the historiography of pre-revolutionary France. There are many reasons for this, but the most important is surely the collapse – at once political, ideological and historiographical – of Marxism and the social interpretations it sustained. Instead of trying to establish the social origins of politics, historians began to search for its cultural sources and manifestations. This search can take many forms, some inspired by the so-called 'linguistic turn', others by a renewal of interest in religious ideas and institutions, still others by work on the family, gender and sexuality.[15] Tim Blanning, as we have seen, was influenced by these developments when he prepared a new edition of his introductory survey on the French Revolution. Their impact can also be seen in many of the essays in this volume.

Raymond Williams once wrote that 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.'[16] If 'power' is not one of the other two, then it certainly belongs on a list of the top ten. Both words have been used to refer to a bewildering variety of historical phenomena, whose importance no one would question, but whose precise meaning is persistently elusive. One is tempted to say about culture and power what St Augustine said about time: I know what they mean until someone asks me to explain them. But while no one would doubt the complexity of these concepts, we should not overlook the difficulties packed into that simple conjunction 'and', which raises the question of the relationship between the two, between the symbolic, moral and aesthetic realm of culture and the contentious, often violent world of power.

There is no simple, straightforward way to define the relationship between culture and power. Ideas, values and symbols are not merely reflections of deeper political realities, an ideological superstructure built

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[15] For an early survey of this work, see Sarah Maza, 'Politics, Culture and the Origins of the French Revolution', *Journal of Modern History* 61 (December 1989), pp. 704–23.

[16] Quoted in William Sewell, *Logics of History Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 156. Sewell's Chapter Five, 'The Concept(s) of Culture', is a brilliant discussion of the term and its uses.

to justify or conceal what really matters. Nor does culture constitute an autonomous reality of its own: the world may be many things, but it is not only a text. Beyond these extremes – in which, I suspect, few people have ever really believed – is to be found the question that recurs throughout this volume: how do people's struggles for influence and survival shape – and how are they shaped by – their language and rituals, art and ideas, symbols and ceremonies? As the essays collected here demonstrate, the best place to look for answers to this question is in those particular historical situations, where men and women struggle both to understand and to master the world around them. Understanding and mastery – culture and power – appear to be inseparable, each one enhancing or limiting the other. Our primary concern should be to see how this happens.

Although all of the essays treat some aspect of eighteenth-century culture, 'culture' turns out to be elastic enough to embrace an extremely diverse set of concerns. Roughly speaking, the authors' uses of the term can be divided into three groups:

In the first, culture is regarded as a particular sort of activity: the coronation rituals analysed by Christopher Clark, the ideas about power described by Joachim Whaley, the two Mozart operas discussed by Mark Berry and the artistic policies traced by Emma Winter. These activities do not, of course, float in the air: all of the authors link their subjects to individual ambitions, social institutions and political structures. Nevertheless, these forms of culture stand out from the institutional landscape, even as they are shaped and supported by it.

In the second group of essays, culture is used to mean a mentality, a set of deeply rooted notions about how institutions should and do work. Peter Wilson, for instance, defines 'military culture' as 'the values, norms, and assumptions that encourage people to make certain choices in given circumstances'. In this sense, culture is how particular organizations establish their goals and select alternative strategies to meet them. Hamish Scott's 'diplomatic culture' and Brendan Simms's 'strategic culture' belong in this category, as does the 'confessional conscience' manifested by the village choir in James Melton's microhistory of Hofgastein. This kind of culture often has explicit formulations – in training manuals or rules of conduct, for example – but it is most powerfully transmitted through the communal practices and intimate encounters on which every cohesive institution depends. These implicit, often routine forms of cultural communication teach people what it means to be a soldier, diplomat, British statesman or member of the Protestant minority in an Alpine market town.

The remainder of the essays use culture in a broader, more inclusive sense, that is, to refer to what some of the authors call 'political culture',