

Accordingly, the *Table Talks* are the best expression of Selden's ideas. In this series of meditations he both criticises and highlights vices, stereotypes, mistakes and habits of both society and the intellectual community, of which he was one of the most representative figures. He intends to challenge any kind of religious, political and ideological restriction on people's capacity to reason and on their freedom of speech. Selden, Caruso maintains, is one of the first thinkers of his age to maintain a pluralism of opinions, which he considers a fundamental pillar of a free and modern nation. In this respect, his direct targets are all those powers that are aimed at preventing any rational and empirical analysis of reality. Selden is an indomitable defender of the liberty of doubting, that is a 'sceptic' who can be considered, at the same time, a companion and a precursor of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume in the genealogy of modern philosophy.

A master of tolerance, Selden was also a brilliant writer. He used enlightening metaphors and persuasive comparisons, and proved his rhetorical skills effectively. This aspect of Selden's work constitutes a further important insight into a thinker who has been often overlooked by traditional scholarship because of his supposed lack of originality. Caruso claims for Selden an extreme clarity in what he wants to communicate and formulate in his writings, which contrasts with those, such as Sommerville, who consider his prose to be 'rather cumbrous'.

Caruso provides us with a well-informed, lively, and deeply meditated book, which does not simply describe, but which also tries to understand a rich selection of texts, and a large number of issues, all of which were to become crucial in future debates. A great strength of the book consists in its wide portrait of an historical period that has turned out to be essential in the formation of a new era. It helps in the re-discovery of a deeply engaged thinker, who—by means of his intellectual work and his active role on the political scene—offered a vivid picture of the century in which he lived, and who wrote supremely well about life, conscience, and politics.

Cesare Cuttica
GRC Humanities,
University of Sussex,
Sussex BN1 9QN, UK

PII: S0191-6599(02)00088-8

The social history of skepticism: experience and doubt in early modern culture

Brendan Dooley; The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MA, 1999, 213pp., price £31.00, ISBN 0-8018-6142-X.

This is a book well worth reading, though perhaps not for the reasons hinted at in its title. The core of its argument lies in an analysis of political journalism, first in the

form of manuscript newsletters, later in printed newspapers in 17th-century Italy. The argument, according to the author, bears on both the public perception of politics and the writing of history at the time. Brendan Dooley is convinced that, in both instances, the imperceptible influence of political journalism contributed to a sceptical attitude, with important consequences for the understanding of both politics and historiography.

In many respects, the latter claim is a plausible one. It substantiates some of the things we already know from the writing of other scholars on the philosophical dynamics of the *crise pyrrhonien*, on its points of contact with the development of experimental science, on its contribution to the transformation of 17th-century political language, and on its impact on the conception of historical (and religious) truth. But Dooley's specific claim, that his book brings together the history of journalism, scepticism and historiography, is perhaps overstated. It also raises the question of whether the detailed social evidence on which his research rests is capable of supporting the broad kind of statements that his general contentions require. Indeed, whenever Dooley engages directly with his more general topics, he tends to switch his register from social history to either a form of intellectual history or to a vague historical sociology. In itself, there is nothing wrong with such an interdisciplinary approach, and to be fair to the author, he explicitly claims that his is only a first attempt at a social history of scepticism; but there remains something unsatisfactory in the way in which Dooley moves from the micro-evidence on the social production and consumption of political journalism, to his macro-conclusions on attitude change and paradigm shifts. Although Dooley is careful to suggest that his thesis only applies to a small élite, whose way of thinking and attitudes can be reasonably assessed from the kind of evidence he has assembled, perhaps a more sustained micro-historical narrative, dealing with only a few of his political journalists, or a more rigorous engagement with the intellectual influences between journalism and historiography, for example, may have produced more convincing, albeit narrower, results.

These criticisms, however, should not detract from the merits of the book. In its substantive chapters, Dooley illustrates three intriguing theses, which can be isolated from his more tentative discussion of the sceptical crisis, advanced in the conclusions. The first two chapters deal with the diffusion and impact of handwritten newsletters in Italy, particularly in Rome and Venice at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Their proliferation pre-dates printing, and this in itself may be regarded as a remarkable fact. Dooley shows that technological change was at the origin neither of political journalism nor of a political public, but that a subtler dynamic between supply and demand was responsible for the genre. Newsletters developed as a prosecution of diplomatic and commercial correspondence, in response to information acquiring commodity value for both governments and private patrons. This value accrued both from the advantages that came with being informed of events and the inside stories of politics and the court, and from the astute peddling of misinformation. The latter, as the author remarks, was an intuition clearly formulated by Paolo Sarpi, who intimated that, in the impossibility of limiting and controlling information, it was more expedient to "combat

information with information". Public and private patrons formed a network of demand that, for most of the seventeenth century, could not properly be satisfied by printed newspapers. This was because handwritten newsletters more easily escaped control, allowing their writers to be more daring. Moreover, their authors were more deeply rooted in the networks of power of the time, so that printed newspapers themselves often relied on handwritten newsletters for their information.

On the supply side, in both Venice and Rome there was a relatively large group of scribes, for whom newsletter writing—often in the more mechanical sense of ‘copying’ rather than ‘composing’ it—offered the opportunity for a reasonable income, either in itself or in addition to some other jobs. The distinction between copying and composing is indeed a crucial one to grasp, since it formed an important part of the relationship between the writers and political authority. Circulation of information was not without its dangers, so that a common defense of writers was that they only acted as amanuenses, and were not responsible for the content of their newsletters. On the other hand, the facility with which information was reproduced and circulated (both in handwritten and printed form) made the writers vulnerable to plagiarism, and hence in need of some protection and regulation from the public authority. Dooley, however, considers the relationship between early political journalism and political power as intrinsically troublesome, for the very beginning of the politics of information testifies ‘a subversive undercurrent beneath the semiotics of absolutism’. Part of the evidence that Dooley brings to this argument comes from the literature of ‘ragion di stato’, but one wonders whether this should be contextualized in the politics of the Italian states of the time, rather than presented as a more general characteristic of the interface between communication and politics.

The book’s second thesis, illustrated by the progressive affirmation of printed news and their absorption of political journalism in the search for wider audiences, concerns the increasing role that written information played in political education and manipulation, so that governments felt that they had to take into some consideration the opinion of the public by justifying their actions ‘before a reasoning audience’. Dooley’s research touches here, as he himself notices, on the Habermasian thesis on the formation of the public sphere in the early modern period. There is a remarkable difference, however. Whereas Habermas’s classic work tended to stress the formation of the public’s critical faculties, of its capacity to debate and scrutinize political decision making, Dooley characterizes what he calls ‘politics new clothes’ as the result of both an increase in information and willful misinformation. Dooley’s public is ‘critical’ not merely as an effect of the circulation of news and their subjection to public debate and scrutiny, but also because the public does not readily trust the sources of information. In fact, when the latter attitude prevails, critical reason may easily turn into cynicism, producing a crisis of belief that may affect as much politics as our knowledge of things present and past.

This takes us to Dooley’s third contention, that in a century when political information started to acquire value, it became apparent that ‘actual facts about an

event were less important than the beliefs about them'. Historians, like political journalists, were in demand, for their ability to deal with the sources, for their rhetorical techniques, and for their capacity for 'invention', all of which they were able to bring to the task of constructing and repairing public myths. Dooley argues that the extension of the instrumental use that political power made of journalism to history writing contributed to the development of this as a branch of eloquence, in partial opposition to the antiquarian conception of history itself. But though this resulted in an increase in the popularity of the genre with the powers that be, it also dented the general public's confidence in the 'hired historians', thus contributing to the wider general epistemological debate on the nature of historiography and on the reliability of its methods and techniques. More generally, Dooley believes that the perceived unreliability of political and historical information greatly contributed to the sceptical crisis of the seventeenth century, so that many came to question the intentions and the good faith of governments and people in power, but also started raising questions 'about human nature and existence' at large. This is the point where Dooley sees the crisis of consciousness of historiography and politics merge with what went on in the sciences and philosophy. But, strangely, he is less aware of a more direct parallel that could be drawn between the hired historians of the seventeenth century and the baroque artists working for the very same patrons. Not only because their stylistic cipher is remarkably similar, as Dooley himself implicitly suggests, but also because historic painting was perhaps the quintessential genre of Baroque art of the 17th century, a genre aimed as much at persuasion as was the work of the hired historians. This comparison, however, puts the relationship between the hired writers and their wider public in a different perspective from the one suggested by Dooley, emphasizing their power of conviction through identification, surprise and wonder, against the more rationalistic and sceptical reading that Dooley gives of the impact of their work.

There is a final point to notice. Dooley suggests that a new historiography emerged from the sceptical crisis engendered by the attempt to manipulate political and historical information. He identifies the turning point in the pivotal figure of Gianbattista Vico. But if the story that Dooley has tried to present is one of social forces and dynamics, and not only of self-referential intellectual development, one is left wondering what social forces contributed to reverting the sceptical crisis; or whether, indeed, this crisis has never gone away, becoming increasingly acute in the course of the last 200 years. A partial answer may perhaps be found in the work of Francesco Bianchini, discussed by Dooley towards the end of the volume. Bianchini apparently maintained that 'no amount of scholarly innovation was likely to have much effect until *independent cultural bodies* could be instituted so as to ensure that at least sometimes truth would be placed before any material advantage' (p. 145, my italics). Although this is his own interpretation of Bianchini's thought, Dooley himself raises doubts on what Bianchini might have meant, wondering whether any of our present-day institutions may fit the bill. And yet, Bianchini is perhaps right. The point is not what credentials for independence institutions of knowledge and information might have, but that institutions making such a claim have

both emerged and proliferated since the early modern period. This is perhaps where we should look for the social origins of a critical, rather than simply sceptical and cynical, public—regardless of whether or not we remain sceptical on its critical pretensions.

Dario Castiglione
*Department of Politics,
University of Exeter,
Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK*

PII: S0191-6599(02)00089-X

The Cape Town intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her circle, 1907–1954

Baruch Hirson; The Merlin Press, Cape Town, 2001, xxxi + 253pp.

This fascinating if flawed work, part personal homage, part displaced autobiography and part study of provincial intellectual life in a society marked by deep social discord, is also a posthumous testimony to the remarkable career of its author, Baruch Hirson, who died aged after a long illness in 1999. Born in 1921, the son of turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants from Latvia, Hirson grew up in Johannesburg and went on to pursue a career as a physicist at the University of the Witwatersrand. During the war years he became active in left-wing Zionist politics after which he progressed through a variety of splinter Trotskyist groupings to a life in revolutionary politics. Shortly after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 he joined the tiny African Resistance Movement (whose links were to the Liberal Party and independent socialist groupings rather than the African National Congress) and was imprisoned for nine years in 1964 after being convicted for sabotage.

On his release in 1973 Hirson moved to London. During his time in gaol Hirson was able to read examples of the ‘new’ South African history which was coalescing in London, Oxford and Johannesburg at this time. Attracted by its intellectual excitement as well as its emancipatory potential, he duly turned himself into a historian and lecturer. Hirson’s academic development was inspired (guided would be too strong a word for a man who preferred to lay down rather than to toe the line) by Professor Shula Marks at London University and he became a frequent contributor to the lively postgraduate seminar that she founded and which played a central role in shaping new understandings of South African history over a period of three decades. A prodigious researcher and writer, invariably drawn to the obscure and the forgotten, Hirson became an enthusiastic historian while also running a small journal, *Searchlight*, which criticised without compromise