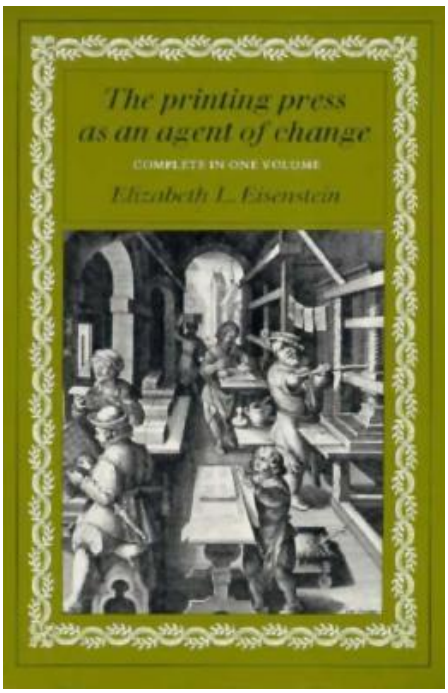

The Printing Press as an Agent of Change

Elizabeth L. Eisenstein

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The first fully-documented historical analysis of the impact of the invention of printing upon European culture, and its importance as an agent of religious, political, social, scientific, and intellectual change.

The Printing Press as an Agent of Change Details

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From Reader Review The Printing Press as an Agent of Change for online ebook

Lauren says

This book, and the footnotes therein, formed many a research topic for my graduate studies looking at the history of the book and the Protestant Reformation. This book was phenomenal in helping me understand this period.

Shinynickel says

Off Clay Shirky:

Elizabeth Eisenstein's magisterial treatment of Gutenberg's invention, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, opens with a recounting of her research into the early history of the printing press. She was able to find many descriptions of life in the early 1400s, the era before movable type. Literacy was limited, the Catholic Church was the pan-European political force, Mass was in Latin, and the average book was the Bible. She was also able to find endless descriptions of life in the late 1500s, after Gutenberg's invention had started to spread. Literacy was on the rise, as were books written in contemporary languages, Copernicus had published his epochal work on astronomy, and Martin Luther's use of the press to reform the Church was upending both religious and political stability.

What Eisenstein focused on, though, was how many historians ignored the transition from one era to the other. To describe the world before or after the spread of print was child's play; those dates were safely distanced from upheaval. But what was happening in 1500? The hard question Eisenstein's book asks is "What was the revolution itself like?"

Chaotic, as it turns out. The Bible was translated into local languages; was this an educational boon or the work of the devil? Erotic novels appeared, prompting the same set of questions. Copies of Aristotle and Galen circulated widely, but direct encounter with the relevant texts revealed that the two sources clashed, tarnishing faith in the Ancients. As novelty spread, old institutions seemed exhausted while new ones seemed untrustworthy; as a result, people almost literally didn't know what to think. If you can't trust Aristotle, who can you trust?

During the wrenching transition to print, experiments were only revealed in retrospect to be turning points. Aldus Manutius, the Venetian printer and publisher, invented the smaller octavo volume along with italic type. What seemed like a minor change — take a book and shrink it — was in retrospect a key innovation in the democratization of the printed word. As books became cheaper, more portable, and therefore more desirable, they expanded the market for all publishers, heightening the value of literacy still further.

That is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place. The importance of any given experiment isn't apparent at the moment it appears; big changes stall, small changes spread. Even the revolutionaries can't predict what will happen. Agreements on all sides that core institutions must be protected are rendered meaningless by the very people doing the agreeing. (Luther and the Church both insisted, for years, that whatever else happened, no one was talking about a schism.) Ancient social bargains, once disrupted, can neither be mended nor quickly replaced, since any such bargain takes

decades to solidify.

Anup Das says

An authentic historical account of role of printing presses in early-modern Europe
In book "The Printing Press as an Agent of Change" author Elizabeth L. Eisenstein narrates theoretical and practical dimensions of communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe. This book is divided into three parts: (p.1) Introduction to an elusive transformation, (p.2) Classical and Christian traditions reoriented; Renaissance and reformation reappraised, (p.3) The book of nature transformed. This book contains specific chapters on aspects of history of printing technologies in early-modern Europe. Printing presses helped the European Christian missionaries to spread Christianity, biblical thoughts and philosophies in continents across Asia, Africa and Latin America. This book also narrates anecdotes of formation of scientific societies and royal academies across the European countries for strengthening scientific research.

Anthony says

Her thesis is such a good one that her defence of it gets very dull. It would have been interesting to discuss why China missed out on the Enlightenment, given that they had the Printing press before Europe.

Kent says

A MONUMENT! Eisenstein manages to take three major early modern fields of development and ratchet them around the invention of the printing press. Humanism, the Reformation, and the Scientific Century all get held to a new order. What's most interesting to me is the Burkhardt enthusiasm for the individual intellect she's a little critical of (probably because his enthusiasm was mainly for Italians) is actually supported by her thoughts on the press, and the press's democratizing aspect.

Katerlio says

the tiniest start to a book-group...

Ari says

Before I read this book, I would have agreed that printing was a hugely important technology. But I had not thought very much about the details of where that effect was seen.

This is a long detailed work of history and historiography to trace why printing mattered, and to show that previous historians had understated its importance. The book is very much written to an audience of

professional historians, but I was able to follow it and was enormously stimulated.

Here are a few examples of points that Eistenstein made that I hadn't thought about before.

Scholars in the late middle ages and early modern period were fully aware that there were ancient books that had gotten lost but might reappear, full of philosophical insights and lost technical knowledge. Given that background, it's no surprise that many scholars were fascinated by the occult and hermetic literature: if you didn't know any better, you might think that the lost wisdom of the Atlantean masters was just the next thing that would come back after De Rerum Naturae. Before the 14th century, there wasn't quite the same awareness just how much had been lost; you would know that your monastery didn't have something, but you wouldn't have any way of knowing whether it existed elsewhere. After the 17th century, you wouldn't expect a lot more to surface, and you'd be much more aware of the possibility of fraud.

I had never focused on the way printing revolutionized science and mathematics. Before printing, it wasn't possible to reproduce technical diagrams or large mathematical tables with sufficient accuracy; texts were copied by monks, often based on dictation. The monks were typically not technically expert, and so the illustrations were often bad or absent. In contrast, with a printed version, you could steadily improve the plates. As a result, early modern copies of Euclid were much clearer than medieval copies, and technical writers like Agricola or Vesalius could be understood much more easily.

The usual historical narrative is "Ptolemaic Astronomy went unchallenged for a thousand years and then Copernicus offered an alternative." As Eisenstein points out, hardly anybody in the medieval world had a copy of the Almagest, most of those copies wouldn't have been very good, and even if you had that, you probably didn't have many other books. Copernicus was in the first generation of astronomers who had a copy of Ptolemy, had copies of Aristotle and of ancient books with astronomical observations; as a result, he was among the first people who actually could notice some of the problems with Ptolemy. Moreover, the succeeding generation of astronomers (notably Tycho) were the first to have *two* different major astronomical works to choose from and compare. Before printing, you wouldn't have noticed the problems with Ptolemaic astronomy and wouldn't have had an alternative, with different problems, to compare it to and stimulate creativity.

Feliks says

The most impeccable work of academia I have ever encountered from a female scholar. She conveys her subject matter better than does Rachel Carson; better than does Barbara W. Tuchman, better than does Margaret Meade. Better than anyone. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein reins supreme, so far in my experience. She commandeered this enormous historical topic and made it her own. Consummate professionalism.

Mark me: this is praise I do not give lightly. I generally dislike women authors; I don't usually find them competent. So for any woman to eke out a blue-ribbon from me, this means she went far beyond the distance I could reasonably ask from anybody else in the running.

But she is simply one of the best researchers out there. Phenomenal finesse. Eisenstein puts on a clinic on how to deliver precise, lucid arguments. Execution of the most thorough methodology throughout. She wallops this excruciatingly difficult, sprawling esoteric history. Wears kid gloves throughout.

This kind of book (by the way) is why I laugh at the internet for the piece-of-shit it truly is. No one raised on

the internet can accomplish this kind of feat. And in the reading of it, well...this kind of book separates the dilettante web-surfer from the serious reader. You can't skate or skim your way through something this big.

Take my word for it: if you're interested (and I mean, REALLY interested) in the Middle ages, the Reformation, the Renaissance...you can almost toss aside every other work you may be considering. Forget the rest and stick with the best: Elizabeth L. Eisenstein.
