

INTERVIEW

Worlds of Print: The Moral Imagination of an Informed Citizenry, 1734-1835

The researcher John P. Slifko has defended a thesis and finalized the full dissertation on November 15, 2015, entitled “Worlds of Print: The Moral Imagination of an Informed Citizenry, 1734-1835” at the University of California, Los Angeles in the United States of America. Proquest published the dissertation as a bound volume, Proquest number 3725224. John P. Slifko was born in 1950 in the United States of America.

The author has granted us the following interview.

What were the reasons that led you to focus your research on Freemasonry?

My research thesis that Freemasons supported and contributed to the moral imagination of an informed citizenry through worlds of print central to furthering the inquiry, deliberated ideals and experimental acts of the maturing American Republic of democracy evolved in stages. Stage 1: The ascendancy of *Solidarity*, the labor union in Poland and a major civil and political force in the early 1980s catalyzing the rapid overthrow of the Moscow-backed Communist Party and government in that nation inspired my questions: What is a civil society? What are the origins of modern democratic civil society? How could such an organization as small as *Solidarity*, albeit a part of a growing network that included the Catholic Church, overthrow so swiftly the stifling hold of a tyrannical government? In that period and place, academics and activists were thinking a great deal about the capacity of Eastern European civil society to make positive changes in the lives of citizens, the economy, and the state. I could see their vision. Stage 2: Because I grew up in a Polish-American family in the 1950s, I was acutely aware of the authoritarianism and brutality of the Soviet block where it existed in Europe and its borderlands, including the devastating effect of Stalin’s regime on my Eastern European Slovakian and Polish family. I was vaguely conscious of the demise of civil society institutions in Germany and the collapse of the German Republic to the Nazis. I was more aware of the *Velvet Revolution*, specifically the work of the poet-then President of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel to restore, or build anew to robust levels, a civil society to overthrow the Moscow-controlled government in Prague. Havel’s father was a well-known Freemason, and the Czech history of Freemasonry is salient to a study of civil society with its clear understanding of “civil” as the antonym of authoritarianism. Stage 3: While I worked for the City Council of Los Angeles and later as a staff member of the United

States Congress, I began to form vaguely outlined research questions. Stage 4: When I attended UCLA, I examined a more focused question concerning the origins and nature of civil society in modernity with greater resources, intensity, and clarity to fulfill an M.A. in Urban and Regional Planning and a Ph.D. in geographically-integrated history, alternatively phrased historical geography.

At UCLA my reading in history for my Ph. D. began to include prominent contemporary historians of the American Revolution, works on historiography, and John Dewey's nineteenth-early twentieth century aesthetic-moral philosophy (called reconstructed ethics), involving pedagogy, communication studies, and focus on democracy and activism. Dewey knew well, often first hand, during his lifetime the history and geography of civil society in the American founding period. He was born in 1859 one year before the outbreak of the Civil War. He was aware of the importance of oral/aural, print communication and education in the establishment of American civil society; he realized the difficulties facing various publics amid rapid geographic and historical changes that included the first Industrial Revolution; he knew that there were radical improvements in technologies of newspaper printing ending in continually refined processes of mass production since the mid-nineteenth century.

From my thorough reading of Dewey's work and historians of the American Revolution Period, and from an increasing awareness of Freemasonry before, during and after the revolutionary war, my research questions grew. The research question after scrutiny remains: "What is the place of the moral imagination of an informed citizenry, print culture and Freemasonry in founding the early American republic?"

How was the term 'moral imagination' used during the maturing years of the democratic American Republic?

Drawing upon eighteenth century writers on moral life, Adam Smith, (1759) the Scottish moral philosopher and political economist argued that human sentiments or compassion—the emotion we feel for the misery of others—is central to the human moral experience. After Smith, Thomas Paine (1776) in his book *Common Sense* used the term "moral imagination" to describe the importance of deliberated and meaningful action still possible within the dire straits of a pending revolution. Edmund Burke (1789) later used the term "moral imagination" in his writings, the full context of which requires more study. There is evidence and counter evidence concerning whether both Paine and Burke were Freemasons. Conversely, the eminent philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1781) successfully argued (until the discoveries of recent cognitive researchers) that reason alone commanded the moral life. He figuratively etched in stone the commandment that, in no instance, should 'pale and weak' imagination be considered meaningful or of value in processes of moral inquiry and deliberation. His critique of pure reason aims to conduct the human

being in moral, knowledge-based, wilful actions and behavior. Whereas, the Scottish writer Smith, and the English born Paine and Burke, considered imagination essential to developing moral sentiments, a political philosophy and a sustainable economics, Kant dethroned the idea for two centuries.

Smith's sense that compassion is an important part of the ethics of experience coalesces with Dewey's subsequent sense that qualitative aesthetic-moral experience and reflection are central to ethical human inquiry, deliberation, and then action. A co-founder of Classical American Pragmatism Dewey viewed moral imagination as a "dramatic rehearsal" in inquiry and deliberation leading to action. His work is a continuum relevant both to understanding Smith, Paine, and Burke in the past and to understanding the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century human sciences, ethics, and the arts. In the treatment of moral imagination in contemporary affective and cognitive neuroscience, we see the importance of our capacity to mirror the feelings and bodily states of others and the world around us, which neuroscientists attribute to mirror-neuron systems. Nevertheless many questions remain. How can the capacity of imagination to escape be found crucial in our work to learn about the world, past, present and future, and to solve problematic situations in daily human experience, whether in professional or personal and family life. Specifically, how can imagination assist a democratic civil society? Though the study of imagination has grown considerably over the last decades, it is still in its early stages. (2016). There is a cross-pollinating effect at this time (among other disciplines) of contemporary affective and cognitive neuroscience (1993) juxtaposed with the modern philosophy of the mind, classical pragmatism in ethics (2003), Biosemiotics, epistemology, eco-ontology, (2013), the arts, and more.

What was meant by 'civil society'?

While researching my dissertation question, I also discovered more about relationships between Freemasonry and civil society. I learned that civil society and Freemasonry in Scotland, England and America had begun primarily during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Civil society and Freemasonry roots drew from older historical and cultural soil, including the Classical World, the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, and the Italian Renaissance periods. For instance, Seventeenth Century Italian Baroque ideas on Classical Moral Aesthetics, Semiotics and Philosophy of Architecture had been transmitted at first through drawings and printed texts to England and then across Europe to influence the opening years of Eighteenth Century Freemasonry. The Eighteenth Century Enlightenment saw expanded worlds of print. For example, in certain regions there occurred an explosion of newspapers that encouraged growing levels of literacy in Scotland, England, and the United States. Free and candid civil speech emerged in London in places like coffee houses, learning societies and clubs, in America in

taverns and local libraries, where rhetoric drew on classical texts from Rome, church literature, the Bible, and Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Literature. Equally significant were inquiries into political philosophers and writers such as Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, James Harrington, Baron de Montesquieu, David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Locke, and Isaac Newton, who gave birth to the New Science contending ancient and modern ideas of learning and knowledge. All contributed to what constitutes a civil society: one that reflects on experience through various critical and creative lenses.

Increasingly, I could see tenable a major thesis that Freemasonry represented very well the moral imagination and development of wider democratic civil society in the young American Republic. I grappled with meanings of moral imagination and usages of this term as agency of evolving civil society through the semiotics of language, performance, the abstract measuring of surveying tools, and printed text. Questions remain for further exegesis in my forthcoming book expanding on the dissertation.

Jürgen Habermas's path-breaking, post-World II dissertation translated into English (1989) on proto-democracy, print culture, and economics had alerted me to the new and deepening relationship between the public sphere and worlds of print in Eighteenth Century Western and Northern Europe. Additionally, new American bibliographies of printed texts revealed beyond doubt the substantial involvement of Freemasons in the world of print and letters. These formidable bibliographies were keys that opened the doors to my dissertation focus. Given this focus, I built chapters around a series of Patriot printer-journalists in America who were also Freemasons. My thesis is that Freemasons represented through print culture the transactional process of the moral imagination of an informed citizenry in wider civil society as it engaged in manifesting ideals of an evolving democracy.

My selected list of representative eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biographies of Freemasons involved in worlds of print begins in Philadelphia with Benjamin Franklin, named the Father of American Printin, and ends in Baltimore with Hezekiah Niles printer of the *Niles Register*, which became the original *New York Times*, the first national newspapers in America. Between Franklin and Niles are the selected biographies of other Patriot printer-journalists and publishers who were also Freemasons in young America. A majority of Freemason printer-journalists needed to be omitted because of time and space constraints.

My aim was to take significant steps in the study of the moral imagination and the origins of the ideal of an informed civil society so necessary to a healthy and functioning democracy in early American history. I noticed that the social tools and sign-making of oral/aural speaking and listening, the literacy, the semiotics and tools of material print, the measurements of surveying tools, and embodied performance were transactional, before, during and after the American Revolution. Moral imagination was a major agency of the American Revolution.

To summarize: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Freemasonry became my focusing lens to examine the origins of ideological inquiry, deliberation and problem-solving shaped by moral imagination in early American civil society. For early American Freemasons and for the emerging wider community, printers, publishers, journalists, and book distributors were producing and expanding the range of print vehicles such as newspapers, pamphlets, declarations, local library constitutions and more. Literacy was increasing. A driving force was the moral imagination of an informed citizenry deemed necessary to the Republic. An expanding geography and an expanding world of print through time proves essential to understanding the original circumstances and fashioning of the American government, economy, and civil society. Human agents in often fiery deliberation used the agency of the moral imagination imbricated in the semiotics and tools of print, plain-speaking language and oratorical performance to spark and shape enduring sign-posts of freedom and commitment to the public interest. These informed civil agents integrated semiotics in new iterations of human meaning and valuing. Foremost of these is the deliberated, printed, circulated and performed Declaration of Independence followed equally by the Bill of Rights and the American Constitution. These “landmarks” of the Revolution constitute the moral imaginations of an informed citizenry individually and collectively situated in a geographically-integrated history. The individual and group of Freemasons and citizens, and those struggling for citizenship, speak as agents of aesthetic-moral imagination through inquiry, reflective discourse and dramatic rehearsals of many possibilities, culminating in choice-making.

A sometimes robust, yet often fragile network emerged essential to fending off any abuse of power or corruption in the new republic. Civil society and its elites imagined the practical need of the new polis for scientific institutions, a free press, and experiments in education. An important agency and legacy of early American civil society was the moral imagination to champion an informed citizenry, resulting in the hotly debated need for political parties, the ideal forms of the institutions of government, and the promotion of the printing industry. The ascendancy of print culture made clear the need for free speech and free press, the post office, eventually the Telegraph, the expansion of roads, waterways, and railroads, and the championing of education from primary schools through technical colleges and universities.

What were the sources you used?

At first, I used Kent Logan Walgren’s *Freemasonry, Anti-Masonry, and Illuminism in the United States, 1734-1850, a Bibliography Vols, 1 and 2*, American Antiquarian Society, 2003. Following that, I found Larissa P. Watkins’ *American Masonic Periodicals, 1811-2001, A Bibliography of the Library of the Supreme Council, 33**, S.J. Oak Knoll Press and *The Library of the Supreme Council, 33**, S.J., 2003. These bibliographies

demonstrated clearly the close relationship of worlds of print and Freemasonry in new America and pointed the way to digital access to some of the original materials.

It became necessary, in my judgment, to read secondary sources selectively such as portions of seasoned historians of the American Revolution, notably J.G. Pocock (1974), Bernard Bailyn, (1992), and Gordon Wood (1993). These historians deepened my understanding of the history and Atlantic context of the war and historiography. However, in the dissertation, I have barely begun to absorb their collected works. My intention for the book stemming from the dissertation is to understand and acknowledge their collected works in much greater depth and breadth. Margaret Jacob, one of my committee members and a remarkable scholar of the history of European Freemasonry, science, and religion, introduced me to the deep interrelationship between Freemasonry and civil society as a laboratory in initial inquiry and efforts toward democracy. Her writings are invaluable to my work at hand. Equally important is the work of the historian James T. Kloppenberg (1996) who inspired me to study the Classical American Pragmatism of John Dewey. Kloppenberg's profound scholarship on the struggle for self-rule in European and American thought (2016) influenced me as I read more deeply in history and examined original sources. His scholarship is of great importance to the period I cover in my dissertation and will be an essential resource in my book manuscript.

What were the main difficulties you encountered?

I faced three challenges. First, due to a personal medical situation and problems in my immediate family over a period of years, I lacked the financial resources and time to travel to examine original sources. My health condition eventually made it impossible to accept the responsibility of teaching classes.

Secondly, the act of matriculating in seemingly different fields of study, History and Geography, was a significant difficulty. Whereas historians consider a close look at original sources crucial to methodology, geographers consider that less important. Similarly, whereas contemporary geographers consider 'place' and 'space' a troublesome conceptual binary, historians suspect these concepts are theoretical and are not interested in theory. Cultural geographers study the reality of geographic "place" as embodied by the individual and the community through communication in a local situation or environment. They find the existence of geographic "space" as a more abstract network of flows, such as the interlacing of the American nation by the postal system, by the interstate highway system and by the global digital connectivity in contemporary cultural geography. These concepts—specifically the concept of geographic place—were and remain of interest to my two committee members, J. Nicholas Entrikin and Michael C. Curry in the UCLA Department of Geography. At the same time, I was working with another committee member in the UCLA Department of History, Margaret Jacob, whom I mentioned earlier.

Though these two distinct disciplines are related, my task was to learn what historiography and the writing of history meant in fact and to align that learning with the study of geographic “place and space.” My care was to learn where these two disciplines, my research interest, and the full range of my academic board members’ scholarly interests could intersect.

Thirdly, the age difference between my fellow graduate students and me, combined with the fact that I lived a great distance from the UCLA campus, restricted our dialogue, which I considered paramount to my graduate studies.

How did you surmount them?

Firstly, I surmounted the difficulty of traveling to examine first hand-sources by encountering them in the UCLA Graduate Library. These first-hand sources included digital collections of early American newspapers. Additional first-hand sources existed in the region and were examined in the Getty Museum and Library and the Huntington Library. I examined primary and secondary sources to understand the interlinked biographies of Patriot printer-journalists who were Freemasons in the early Republic.

Secondly, I surmounted the difficulty of integrating History and Geography by synthesizing my inquiry, allowing me to examine in local place the communication networks across space created by the interlinked biographies of Patriot printer-journalists who were Freemasons in the early Republic. Their intertwined stories reveal the geography of space through time as a network of narrative texts and textures. Texts and textures offered a winding but yet sometimes taut chain of (proto) democratic concerns with the founding and fashioning of the American government, the economy, and the education of human agents and their agency—the moral imagination of an informed citizenry. I integrated my inquiry by defining and demonstrating the felt, qualitative embodiment of the aesthetic-moral imagination (and critical thinking) within the individual at work in a democratic colloquy to inspire, debate and collaborate with an informed citizenry in both temporal flows and landscapes. Finally, I embraced Dewey’s understanding of how History and Geography link through imagination.

Dewey found that imaginative vision strengthens formal education in history and geography by teaching the near and far in time and space through human stories in their cultural and material landscapes. Such stories and images help develop habits of imagination for a new generation of children in a culture of ideally open-ended deliberative democracy. The imaginative approach to history and geography, as well as fact-finding, was vital to Dewey’s pedagogy. I can quote him from memory when he wrote: “Geography and history are the two great school resources for bringing about the enlargement of direct personal experience. ... There is no limit to the meaning which an action may come to possess. It all depends on the context of perceived connections in which it is placed; the

reach of imagination in realizing connections is inexhaustible.” Most beautifully he wrote “... when the familiar fences that mark the limits of the village proprietors are signs that introduce an understanding of great nations, even fences are lighted with meaning. ... We realize that we are citizens of no mean city in discovering the scene in space in which we are denizens and the continuous manifestation of endeavor in time of which we are heirs and continuers” (Dewey, 1915). Germane to Dewey’s pedagogy was also his belief that the current generation draws on the past and must transfer their learning and experience—always changing but anchored in elements of tradition—to the next generation.

Dewey, the philosopher, pedagogue and democratic activist deepened my understanding of geographic “place” as a balance between the familiarity of felt embodied communication and the sometimes changing weave of the interacting individual, community, locally built circumstances and natural environments. Furthermore, he showed me the inescapable significance of more abstract sign/symbol making in communication across networks in space, not only during the modern period, but also in the early American Republic, which experienced the widening geography of space embodied by the postal system’s internal mechanics, semiotics and external expansion.

Dewey showed me how human experience is integral to temporal flow and integral to the geography of place and space in uncertain, sometimes nurturing, sometimes wounding situations. What can be accurately termed Dewey’s Biosemiotics/ideas on integral communication, *avant la lettre*, points the way out of the binary of place and space in Geography. Though the binary was helpful, it is now being reexamined. Lived human experience is multidimensional, embodied and a matter of integrated communication for the individual and group in an environment. In actual human experience (per Dewey and his colleague C.S. Peirce, 1923), the semiotics of (i) feeling, (ii) embodied moral imagination and (iii) symbolic reflection integrate holistic, qualitative daily lived experience, craft, work, ethics, the sciences, the arts, and the ostensible binary of place and space. Essentially, Dewey psychologized and embodied the very abstract threefold semiotics of the mathematician, logician, philosopher, surveyor, and scientist, Peirce, the founder of modern semiotics.

Thirdly, I surmounted the isolation caused by illness, age and distance from campus by simply enduring it.

What major historical problems has your work resolved?

The following question expresses a major historical problem: Where, when and how were early American Freemasons and wider civil society related, if they were, at the origins of the American Republic? At the least, I have begun what now calls for a much larger empirical and conceptual study of civil society, print culture and Freemasonry at the founding of the American Republic. To resolve this problem, or lacuna, I located the

origins of modern civil society largely in Scotland, England, the Golden Era of the Dutch Republic, the cities and philosophers of the Italian Renaissance, and America at the intersection of print culture, oral/aural experience, and embodied performance. Communication in the local community, in nation-building, and in Eighteenth Century Cosmopolitanism are multifaceted and linked affairs where different media overlap and are transactional in an international republic of letters. At the origin of civil society in the Anglo-American story, there was a growing moral imagination of an informed citizenry at work, choosing various media, mechanisms and civic action to check the centralized power and authoritarianism of government. The moral imagination was civil society's agency of inquiry and deliberation applied to examine a range of problematic situations emergent in the discourse of politics, economics, and the civil sphere in an effort to fulfill the ideal of democracy.

Please, could you summarize the essence of your thesis in two lines?

At the origins of modern democratic civil society in the early American Republic of democracy, the essential human agencies and principles of informed citizens were inquiry, freedom of press, speech, assembly and religion, deliberation, and moral imagination. Serving these agencies and enshrined freedoms was a burgeoning print culture, an essential catalytic ingredient of communication in the opening moments and development of American civil society made possible, in no small part, by Freemasons and their care to educate the moral imagination.

What were the lessons, at all levels, personal and professional, that you have deducted from your research experience?

One lesson, at a personal level, is my deeper valuing of democracy as a learning culture that examines the problems of the birth and contingent development of the United States with relevance to diverse places around the world. I have seen as well the fragility and failures of democracy, which urge me to study further democratic/open communication, pedagogy and activism in an always-troubled world.

What are your professional plans?

Due to an ongoing medical situation, it may not be possible for me to be responsible for teaching classes at the university level. The loss of an academic future is unfortunate. However, I am currently re-writing my dissertation as a book manuscript for a university press, writing scholarly articles for top-of-the-line journals, and I am a founding member on the Board of Directors for some relevant non-profit organizations, including the Hannah

Mather Crocker Society, Notre Dame. Crocker is an overlooked, but soon to be discovered founder of modern feminism in young America. Practical, she was enthralled in a dramatic rehearsal of possibilities for women's education, their overall advancement in civil society, and their potential place in governance during the newly formed American Republic. She very likely was America's first female Freemason and head of St. Anne's Lodge—a learning society—in Boston, Massachusetts.

Would you like to highlight an aspect that has not been covered and you consider worthy of review?

My dissertation on worlds of print, moral imagination, and the human agent and agency of Freemasonry is a first step in a much more extensive study that must be undertaken on the relationship between the text, the spoken word, embodied performance and Freemasonry in the American Revolution and across large parts of the globe over time. I am examining with others the possibility of a major set of panels in a range of possible different international conferences *in statu nascendi* scheduled in 2018. Ideally should follow, in my opinion, a Special Issue of the *REHMLAC+ Journal*, on “Worlds of Print and Freemasonry,” and a Special Issue on the same topic by the *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*. “Worlds of Print and Freemasonry” is a draft title. There is an enormous amount of material to address in comparative and global studies of Freemasonry, moral imagination, and worlds of print now and in the future. I want to mention one other thing. An important new five-volume book set entitled *British Freemasonry* has just come out with Róbert Péter (general editor) and individual volume editors Cécile Révauger and, Jan A.M. Snoek. This massive work is a facsimile collection of original printed documents and commentary with some material emerging for the first time. Besides the remarkable content, the work establishes a methodology that can be utilized in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere concerning print culture and Freemasonry. This new major publication needs follow up with all due speed in the United States, wider Western Hemisphere, and in other geographies. Finally, I am working with others on a proposed academic book series on the Anglo-American experience in Freemasonry.

This interview took place on October 30, 2016.

Authors of the Interview: Ricardo Martínez Esquivel and Yván Pozuelo Andrés, Director and Editor *REHMLAC+*.

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