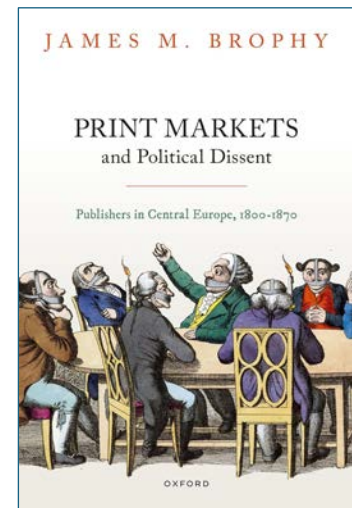


2025 Hans Rosenberg Book Prize Laudatio

James Brophy, *Print Markets and Political Dissent: Publishers in Central Europe, 1800–1870* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

The Central European History Society awards its annual book prize to James Brophy for *Print Markets and Political Dissent: Publishers in Central Europe, 1800–1870* (Oxford University Press, 2024). This landmark study reshapes our understanding of the political and cultural dynamics of nineteenth-century Central Europe. Drawing on the history of more than 300 publishers and booksellers, Brophy reconstructs the commercial and cultural networks that sustained oppositional politics. This book, the product of two decades of careful research, chronicles the “second print revolution” of 1760–1830 and the rise of mass media. It lays out the publishing landscape and how authors and publishers introduced their works to the public despite political and economic obstacles.



At the heart of Brophy’s argument is the claim that publishers were not passive conduits of ideas but “architects of a vibrant, if flawed, political public sphere” (15). Authors, publishers, and booksellers powerfully moved forward the criticism of absolute rule across Central Europe. Brophy traces their work as they brought translated texts to their readers, drew together international print markets, and created a surprisingly large number of new journals and magazines—dynamics which “accelerated the engine of public opinion” (5). He also situates these actors within the commercial and cultural networks that sustained oppositional politics, revealing how entrepreneurial strategies and political ideals intertwined to shape the contours of nineteenth-century public life.

The book offers a colorful history of printing and publishing, telling the story of booksellers’ circumventing censors, of publishers’ many strategies to evade oversight, and the relations between authors, publishers, commissioners, and bookstore owners. It provides a nuanced understanding of the profit motive for this array of actors and demonstrates the importance of a variety of publications—from books, journals, and newspapers to broadsides, chapbooks, flysheets, and other inexpensive materials. The creation of diverse publications for elite, middlebrow, and popular audiences began as a profit-driven strategy, but over time it opened new spaces for political education and debate among previously excluded groups. Brophy emphasizes how much could be learned from genres such as lexica and calendars, which not only

conveyed practical information but also could “disseminate ideological alternatives to mainstream audiences” (80). He reveals how translations became a “handmaiden” to deliver new ideas about rights and freedom to Central European publics. Alongside these acts of cultural transfer, censorship fostered its own adaptations: coded language flourished, and in an unintended consequence, produced “sophisticated readers alive to irony and innuendo and who were capable of autonomous political judgment” (191).

Yet Brophy’s narrative underscores that progress was neither linear nor secure. The optimism and dynamism of the 1830s and 1840s gave way to the repression of the 1850s, when the late-absolutist “information order” exerted its full force. Governments imposed new financial burdens and structures of surveillance on printers, driving democratic dissent to the margins and entrenching self-censorship as a routine practice. Brophy marks this decade as an “irretrievable missed opportunity for the history of democracy in Central Europe” (410). This rupture had enduring consequences, eroding democratic forms of dissent well into the Kaiserreich.

Print Markets and Political Dissent offers a compelling study of the fragile infrastructure that sustains democracy. By demonstrating that “political freedom started with the printed word” (303), Brophy underscores the power of media in struggles over rights and freedoms. In an era of renewed concern about democratic resilience, this book offers timely insights into the interplay of markets, censorship, and political agency. By weaving together cultural, economic, and political history, Brophy has written a study of enduring significance for understanding the foundations of democracy in Central Europe.

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