



Barbara J. Shapiro. *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000. x + 284 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3686-4.



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As A Matter of Fact. . .

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How do we explain and interpret the rise of English experimental philosophy that occurred during the seventeenth century? This question has inspired some of the best writing on the period, going back at least as far as Charles Webster's *The Great Instauration*, and has become, if anything, more relevant with the erosion of scholarly confidence in the notion of the scientific revolution. Barbara Shapiro's book will certainly contribute to the debate, for it is a complex and engaging story of the gradual construction of a culture of fact, from the early sixteenth century when the word 'fact' was occasionally used in the law courts and historical writing to refer primarily to human acts, through the Restoration, when it became central to many discourses, and referred to both human acts and to the natural world. This is a timely book, coming onto the scene as many modern scholars question the existence of a fact free from theory, and when social constructionists argue that truth, including the truth about facts and their establishment, is determined socially by communities and therefore varies significantly from time to time and place to place. While

respectful of the innovative work of Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer which established the importance of the notion of the "matter of fact" in Restoration natural philosophy, Shapiro's work challenges some of their key arguments.[1]

Shapiro rounds up the usual suspects here, Bacon, Boyle, Newton, Hook, Oldenberg, and others, but her real characters are not so much individuals as six "discourses of fact" which serve as her chapter topics. The first and most important of these is the English legal tradition. Perhaps the most original contribution of the book is her argument that the law was the earliest and most influential factor in establishing a culture of fact, and that natural philosophy only later adopted the notion. The common law clearly distinguished between "matters of fact" and "matters of law," with the former being the province of the jurors and the latter of the judges. Coke was fond of quoting the Latin maxim *ad quaestionem facti non respondent iudices, ad quaestionem juris non respondent juratores* (judges do not respond to matters of fact and jurors do not respond to matters of the law). Charged with determining the truth and forced to consider the credibil-

ity of evidence and, by the end of the sixteenth century, of the testimony of witnesses, jurors helped to define a set of standards for judging the veracity of assertions.

Once established in law, the notion of factuality began to influence other areas of English life such as historical writing. Shapiro notes several important lawyer-historians of the period, including Bacon, Clarendon, and Seldon. Though history had long been associated with both fiction and rhetoric, there was still a fundamental conviction that it ought to be concerned with finding the truth of events as they occurred, a conviction that Shapiro sees as gaining depth during the seventeenth century as historians acquired more sophistication in evaluating eye-witness accounts, historical documents, and material objects.

After law and history, Shapiro then considers travel writing and chorography. Works like Stowe's *Survey of London*, Camden's *Britannica*, and a host of county histories, fall into this genre. Later, the Royal Society would draw up guidelines for "inquiries into foreign parts" which would find their way into the *Philosophical Transactions*, forming part of a larger plan to collect accurate information about societies from the far reaches of the globe. Another discourse of fact was the popular genre of news, and its fascination with marvels and wonders. Though the English generally lagged behind the continent in the publishing of news reports, the tremendous increase in publication associated with the breakdown in censorship during the Civil Wars helped close the gap. The growing news media are important to Shapiro's story. After the Restoration, they, along with the chorographical works, "treated both human affairs and natural phenomena as facts, thus fostering the shift of 'fact' from the older legal and historical meaning of human deeds to a newer, more encompassing meaning" (p. 104).

It is only at this point, more than a hundred pages into the book, that Shapiro turns to natural philosophy, the Royal Society, and the consolidation of the notion of a scientific fact. This is significant, because her view is that the legal tradition and the various discourses of fact had already prepared the way for the widespread acceptance of a culture of fact. Bacon, the lawyer-historian-natural philosopher was key in "transforming the 'human fact' into the 'natural fact' by applying the legal witnessing criteria to particular natural events and experiments" (p. 137). By asserting the primacy of Bacon over Boyle and by arguing that the culture of fact was well established before the Restoration, Shapiro challenges the chronol-

ogy of Shapin and Schaffer. In her words, "as treated by Shapin and Schaffer, 'matter of fact' is associated particularly with Boyle, and his predecessors and contemporaries are largely ignored" (p. 142). She then goes on to question their "gentlemanly thesis," the notion that gentle status was the key factor in establishing scientific credibility and that the Royal Society reproduced the social status of seventeenth-century England by separating the "elite" experimenter such as Boyle from the common technician such as Hooke. Shapiro points out that many members of the Royal Society, clergymen, government officials, and physicians among them, would not have been considered gentlemen by contemporary standards. Moreover, she asserts that, while high social status was one factor that could and did enhance scientific credibility, "skill and experience played a greater role in the creation of the model of the scientific investigator than birth, and mutual trust and civility among investigators increased once fact moved beyond the contentious, self-interested setting of the court" (p. 166).

Shapiro then examines the way in which matters of fact played an increasingly important role in post-Restoration religious discourse. "Matters of fact" were used particularly by latitudinarian theologians to support a wide range of theological positions, including the accuracy of biblical accounts, natural theology, and various anti-Catholic arguments. In some ways this chapter seems out of keeping with the chronology of the rest of the book. While Shapiro is doubtless correct in asserting that theological arguments based on matters of fact did much to spread the notion through the broader culture, by her account it had little to do with establishment of the notion itself. By contrast, Peter Dear has seen a more creative role for some theological ideas, arguing, for instance, that different attitudes towards miracles in French and Anglican theology helped to produce a fundamentally different view of experience. Religious propositions thus encouraged a culture of experimentation in England and a more deductive and mathematical scientific culture in France.[2] A final chapter looks to the eighteenth century and examines the role of John Locke in making more general the notion of fact and rigorously incorporating it into a broader philosophical theory of empiricism.

Like many historians, Shapiro has been intrigued by the research of the social constructionists without entirely accepting their methodology. While open to the argument that social groups establish and articulate notions of truth, she finds the internal cognitive development of the various discourses of fact to be of more im-

portance in making the notion of “a matter of fact” a widely accepted one in early modern England. The experience of ordinary English people with the common law and their knowledge of the discourses and genres that she considers produced a sort of practical epistemology in the general culture, an epistemology that was neither generated completely by the gentle class nor limited to it.

This book is text-based without being focused on a few great texts. It is clearly aware of the social setting in which various claims to truth were articulated and yet it argues for the partial independence of truth claims from socio-economic conditions. It is concerned with the dissemination of ideas as well as the ideas themselves and yet clearly argues that it is possible to separate the two. (In these respects it is akin to Andrew Wear’s recent

Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680.) As such, *A Culture of Fact* well represents the richness of contemporary cultural history.

Notes

[1]. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life, Including a Translation of Thomas Hobbes, Dialogus Physicus De Natura Aeris*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[2]. Peter Dear, “Miracles, Experiments, and the Ordinary Course of Nature,” *Isis* 81 (December, 1990), 663-683.

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