
Petition-and-Response and Liminal Petitioning in Comparative/Historical Perspective

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Before its deployment as a practice by insurgent social movements for mobilizing public opinion in the long nineteenth century, petitioning was a ubiquitous, relatively uniform practice with no connection to popular insurgency. It was nearly the inverse, though just as prominent, phenomenon: an instrument of state as opposed to an instrument of protest, occurring wherever rulership relied on administrative techniques for generating and deploying its authority. Humble subjects sought benevolent deployments of power in pursuit of goals that were within and not about the rules of the game. This mode of petitioning is aptly described as petition-and-response, a term of art from classical scholarship that is applicable to diverse patrimonial states across Eurasia with diverse ideological systems. The transition to modern petitioning as a repertoire for contentious politics was an extended, uneven process. It was facilitated initially by the unquestioned legitimacy of petitionary etiquette with regard to form and rhetoric, as opposed to explicit invocation of novel ideas about natural rights. Liminal petitioning had contradictory elements of deference to and defiance of power relations that diminished perceptions of novelty in novel activities that mobilized and invoked popular opinion on contentious political issues.

Petition campaigns were a preeminent repertoire for contentious politics during the long nineteenth century. The paradoxical hallmark of this remarkably widespread political spectacle was humble supplicants who contentiously invoked *vox populi* as they pursued a wide range of objectives. To the modern eye, this petitioning presents a puzzling combination of deference to and defiance of political authority. To resolve this paradox, I put petitioning in this era into its comparative/historical context. This analysis reveals the essentially liminal character of such petitioning and modifies other perspectives on the phenomenon that misinterpret it. This misinterpretation arises from anachronism, which imports our commonplace association of petitioning and protest into the study of petitioning in the past. As we shall see, petitioning before the late eighteenth century was not a primitive form of modern petition campaigns. It was essentially not an instrument of protest but a venerated instrument of state.

A prominent misinterpretation comes from Charles Tilly's conceptual framework for research on collective mobilization, which depicts petitioning as insurgency, as an instrument of protest, albeit one with rustic and modern versions. The latter arose in the late eighteenth century, when social movements acquired formal organizational features and initiated petition campaigns that appealed to and invoked public opinion. Although petitioning antedated this development, Tilly suggests there were no petition *campaigns* before the invention of modern social movements. Unlike "a petition," he argues, "a *campaign* extends beyond any single event" (Tilly 2006: 184 and see 53; 1998: 216, 221–22; 2008: 7, 44, 69–72). Campaigns link three elements: claimants, the objects of claims, and the public. Thus, whatever petitioning occurred

before the late eighteenth century was not sustained and unconnected to public opinion. It had more in common with food riots, hedge breaking, and charivari, emblematic of primitive modes of collective mobilization that are *parochial*, *particularistic*, and *local* in contrast to modern modes that are *national*, *modular*, and *autonomous* (Tilly 1995; for a compact summary see Tilly 2008; see also Tarrow 1994; Traugott 1995). This perspective offers little guidance on the practice of petitioning prior to its great transformation toward the end of the eighteenth century.

In contrast, historical studies offer richly descriptive accounts of early petitioning. As we shall see, this includes petition “campaigns” in Europe dating back to the mid-seventeenth century, although that was then an exceptional and atypical form of petitioning. These studies advance a somewhat surprising (for historians) claim, namely, that the practice of petitioning was ubiquitous. Across an immense swath of time and space in Eurasia, premodern petitioning was “a general practice,” “a global phenomenon, stretching back in time almost as far as writing” (Würgler 2001: 16; van Voss 2001: 2; and see Ben-Basat 2013: 20–23; Bercé 1987: 4, 6; Duindam 2014: 226; Ormrod 2009: 5). The practice’s generality is often inferred from its resemblance to religious prayer (Connolly 2010: 2; Dodd 2007: 284; Koziol 2003: 29; Würgler 2001: 15–16). A related argument attributes petitioning’s “ubiquity” as a consequence of “something as fundamental as the need for justice” (van Voss 2001: 10; and see Barkey 2008: 110; Connolly 2009: 48, 62–63; Dodd 2009: 237; Hauken 2004: 11; Kehoe 2007: 18; Nubola 2001: 36–37). Anachronism nevertheless persists in these historical accounts, which routinely describe premodern petitioning as an instrument of popular protest, for resisting abuses of power and other unpopular courses of action by rulers and officials.

Admittedly, before the long eighteenth century there are examples of petitioning as an instrument for insurrection. Sometimes it operated as an ideal front for masking early phases of rebellion. A notable English example comes from the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536–37), when petition campaigns in the Northern provinces initiated revolt against centralizing policies of Henry VIII. As we shall see, a central feature of grievances in petitioning was their appearances as an apolitical flow of information on local conditions. In this guise, threats of popular violence in early modern England could be carefully intimated (Walter 2006: 50–55). Still, these examples do not support anachronistic perspectives on early petitioning—its utility for concealing or intimating insurrection arose from the widely shared perception that its practice was about something other than insurrection. That perception afforded other violent opportunities, such as assassination, when petitioners approached rulers and officials. One of many lurid examples occurred in 1547, when several Italian conspirators approached the duke of Parma in his citadel “upon pretense of coming to petition” for tax relief, stabbed him, and “hung the duke up by the heels upon the battlements” (Mézeray 1683: 624–25; see also Amanat 1997: 205; Butler 1643: 137; Fuess 2011: 150, 160; Nielsen 1985; Poole 2000: 69; Richards 2002 [c. 1233]: 253). Contemporaries knew about the deceptive uses of a legitimate practice. “Howsoever a humble petition bears a fair show of respect,” observed James I, “the fair pretense of a dutiful petition” could conceal rebellious intent (1621: 5, 7).

Far from an instrument of insurgency, the premodern petition was primarily an instrument of state, across Eurasia, wherever rulership relied on administrative techniques for generating and deploying power. As the early modern era slid into the modern era, this instrument of state was adapted as an instrument of protest. But in the context of mobilizations that invoke *vox populi*, the practice and social logic of petitioning departed from antecedent traditions that not only legitimated the practice but also made it a privileged mode of communication on public matters. This privilege—in the medieval sense of the term—coexisted with norms of secrecy that prohibited expressions of popular opinion on public matters.

During the eighteenth century, the liminal nature of petitioning developed in an uneven transition from a venerable instrument of state into an instrument of protest. For clarity's sake, I refer to three modes of petitioning: (1) before the transition, as petition-and-response; (2) liminal petitioning; and (3) modern petitioning *pace* Tilly. *Petition-and-response* is a term of art borrowed from classical scholarship that analyzes interaction and dialogue between centers and peripheries in the Hellenic and Roman empires. This literature modifies agonistic models of power that analyze imperial integration as coordination that is secured by commands flowing down the chain of command. Integration was also secured by the reverse movement of deferential requests, moving up the chain, for benevolent deployments of power. For “imperial rule-giving . . . it is essential to see the entire process not as a one-sided series of pronouncements from the centre of power, but as a constant dialogue of petition and response” (Millar 1983: 80, see also 1977: 6, 244–45, 537–49; Connolly 2010; Hauken 1998; Honoré 1994; Ma 2000; Saller 2002). The term *petition-and-response* points to complexities and consequences in premodern petitioning that are obscured by anachronistic associations with modern repertoires of contention.

In what follows, I describe a general model for petition-and-response in diverse patrimonial states across Eurasia—centralized and decentralized; kingdoms, empires, and city states—with diverse ideological systems, including cuneiform and biblical law in the Ancient Near East, Hellenic and Roman cultures of benefaction, Christianity, Islam, Daoism, and Confucianism. This seemingly astounding assertion is less so in view of my stipulation that petition-and-response occurs where rulership relied on *administrative* techniques for generating and deploying power. Max Weber's stipulation about coordination achieved by orders flowing down the chain of command yields a similar assertion about the ubiquity of that activity in patrimonial states across Eurasia. My fundamental thesis is that the ubiquity of petition-and-response in patrimonial administration is no more surprising than the same for command-and-obedience.

Petitioning was not merely ubiquitous but also nearly uniform across an immense span of space, time, as well as types of premodern patrimonial states, and diverse ideological systems. It was a generic feature of premodern administration and a generative practice for its underlying power relations. Deferential requests flowing up the chain of command, for deployments of benevolent power, have the same generic and generative properties as imperative commands flowing in the opposite direction because petitioning was just as consequential for coordinating action, although it did so

from the vantage points of subordinate as well as dominant actors. From the former, it was moderately effective for petitioners who represented broad cross-sections of their societies and strategically pursued a nearly infinite variety of goals (of which remediation of unjust acts was only a subset). From the latter, the practice at least partly mitigated problems of control and monitoring of “agents” (officials) that rational choice perspectives, following Weber, identify as the key challenge confronting “predatory” patrimonial rulers (Kiser 1999; Kiser and Linton 2002; Levi 1989). Petitioning operated as an important mechanism for controlling officials, supplying information from peripheries and promoting their integration into rule by the centers. For expanding empires, it was indispensable for consolidating rule after conquest. At all times it helped to maintain order as a preeminent mode of dispute resolution—not only for abuses of power by officials but for a wider range of conflict, within families, between neighbors, from competition among subjects, high and low, for resources, for example, appointments, grants, immunities, and privileges. Its consequentiality extended far beyond the notion that petitioning legitimated power relations and operated as a safety valve for defusing popular complaints about abuses and exploitation.

Only a subset of these issues needs to be addressed to put liminal petitioning in context and resolve its paradox of deference and defiance. Leaving aside the issue of consequentiality, I describe a general model for petition-and-response as a mode of communication between subjects, official, and rulers, with regard to rules for (1) a petition’s structure, (2) its rhetoric and rationale for requests, and (3) its reception and response. Evidence comes mainly from the early modern era, although some reference to antecedents is unavoidable. I also focus on petitioning to the centers of patrimonial state power, although robust petitioning occurs at provincial and local levels, as well as in other arenas. For example, large landowners in the Roman Empire received “showers of petitions” from tenants (Hutchinson 1915, II: 211), as they did in early modern England, where “petitions were a major item of business for the lords and managers of great estates” (Houston 2014: 25). Petitioning was also “an essential element of papal government” (Linehan and Zutshi 2007: 998).¹ However, practices for petitioning to the centers of state power formed the template for requests in other arenas. The ubiquity and uniformity of these practices is best explained by administrative imperatives for control and efficiency in managing relationships among subjects, officials, and rulers, and not by references to a putatively universal quest for justice or similarities between petitioning and religious prayer. Cross-cultural variation in conceptions of justice and religious practice was enormous. Ubiquity and uniformity also were promoted by cultural diffusion. In the Near East, Aramaic and Roman practices converged in medieval Arabic petitions as Fatimid and Ayyubid scribes adopted chancery practices of the Byzantine Empire (Connolly 2010: 11–12; Khan 1990: 23–24). The analysis concludes with a comparison of petition-and-response and liminal petitioning.

1. The “vast majority of papal letters in the Middle Ages were issued not on the initiative of the pope or his government but in response to petitions . . . The system of petitioning the pope helps to explain how the papacy . . . was able to exert its authority over a vast geographical area” (Linehan and Zutshi 2007).

Petition and Response

At the dawn of the early modern era, petition-and-response was an entrenched tradition of statecraft that Europeans thought was forged by Old Testament kings. At the same time in Asia, petitioning had comparably impressive, somewhat fanciful pedigrees. In advice literature for Ottoman and Mughal rulers, it was described as a legacy of Sassanian Persia, the last Zoroastrian dynasty (226–651).² In Tokugawa Japan, the legacy cited remote precedents from China, from the Zhou era (1046–221 BC) and extended even to the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun (Fang 2009: 1106–7; Roberts 1994).

These mythic accounts embellished two hard, dull facts of state power. First, like orders, inventories, and surveys, petitions exemplify the central place of writing in the technical administration of power. In administrative records of early states, petitions figure as prominently as commands and warrants, which is why the petition is a major archival category for cuneiform, papyrus, parchment, and paper records of premodern states. Second, the activity consumed an enormous amount of time and resources. Emperors, kings, shahs, sultans, caliphs, strategoi, satraps, municipal councils, viziers, prefects, and a swarm of subaltern officials spent as much time responding to petitions as issuing commands. With regard to the first point, the longevity of the practice is astounding. Mesopotamian palace and temple administration provides the oldest records of petitionary requests (Hallo 1968: 78–79; 1981; Van der Toorn 1996: 130).³ Fifteen hundred years later, Merovingian clerks had templates for “responses to petitions” as well as for requisitions and other commands; another millennium later, Elizabethan clerks of England’s Privy Council had templates for responses to petitions (“supplications, requests, complaints & etc.”) and commands for arrests, setting prices, and other commands (Beale c. 1572: f. 6b; Wood 2006: 360). For papyrus records, petitions are a type of documentary (nonliterary) text, one of the few with “any claim to be typical, represented to some degree in all parts of the millennium from Alexander to the Arabs” (Bagnall 1995: 18). English petitions “are one of the commonest types of English-language documents to survive from the period before 1460” (Dodd 2011: 118–19).

Ubiquity

It would be difficult to overstate the ubiquity of petition-and-response as a mode of communication that linked subjects and rulers. The practice sent an infinite variety of individual and collective requests up the chain of command. The earliest known petitions in ancient Mesopotamia “were clearly the vehicle for expressing a variety of human needs” such as protection, “preferment to a higher post,” relief from debt

2. The legacy came from Fatimid and Ayyubid adoption of Byzantine practice (Connolly 2010: 11–12; Khan 1990: 8, 13n, 23–24; Stern 1962: 189–90; 1964: 7–9).

3. In Mesopotamian palace and temple administration, there were cuneiform “letter prayers” with petitionary requests as well as “letter orders” (Hallo 1981).

slavery, and confirmation of a patrimony (Hallo 1968: 78–79). In Tang China and Tokugawa Japan, petitioners complained about local officials and requested tax relief, famine assistance, and civic improvements (Fang 2009: 1112; Ooms 1996: 8, 313–15, 348–49; Vlastos 1990: 15, 27–28). Early modern guilds and other artisanal groups petitioned in pursuit or defense of economic privileges, not only in London and Paris but just as much in Istanbul and Jodhpur (Sahai 2006; Yi 2004). No exact taxonomy exists for requests in Ancient Rome that “ranged very widely and accordingly is hard or cumbersome to define” (Hauken 2004: 11). In early modern England and Venice requests presented a “vast and chaotic jumble of subjects” (Davis 1991: 183; and see Hart 1991: 19). The diverse nature of these requests is one strong reason for not equating early petitioning with protest. This petitioning in medieval England and elsewhere conveys a “very vivid worm’s-eye view” of life (Ormrod 2009: 3), animated mostly by mundane matters and not high politics.

The ubiquity of petition-and-response appears not only in its cross-cultural distribution and diversity of requests but also in the sheer volume of this activity. Medieval English Parliament rolls have responses to 17,000 petitions with requests for favors, privileges, pardons, and solutions for conflict resolution. According to Maddicott (1981: 62), “The early history of the relations between parliament and provincial England is essentially the history of the petition.” No less robust activity is recorded in records of the Ottoman Empire and in very different sociopolitical settings, for example the Dutch and Venetian republics and the Kingdom of Denmark (Davis 1991: 183; Imsen and Vogler 1997: 21; Liddy and Haemers 2013: 782; van Nierop 1997: 285n). In early Tudor England, petitioning was “one of the key mechanisms of interaction between popular politics and the state” (Hoyle 2002: 366). The same holds for southern, central, and northern Europe where “the use of the petition . . . was one of the main approaches to . . . communication between the rulers and the ruled” (Nubola 2001: 36; and see Beales 2007; Dewey and Kleimola 1970; Luebke 2004; Würzler 2001).

Uniformity

Remarkable cross-cultural similarities for petition-and-response reflect administrative constraints and imperatives. The fundamental rules—putting complaints and requests in writing that follows a concise set of sequenced structures—promoted administrative control and efficiency. Rulers and officials also fielded oral complaints and requests, but those in petitions had a larger claim for attention. Medieval Muslim rulers and officials were advised that petitions should be submitted if the issue was “comparatively important” (Darke 2002 [c. 1090: 13; and see Stern 1962: 195–98). In the Ancient Egyptian New Kingdom there were strict rules about putting requests in writing (Van den Boorn 1988: 193, 198–99). In Medieval England, similar rules were “suited to the needs of developing administrative monarchies” (Kozioł 2003: 34) as “essentially products of bureaucratic expedience” (Dodd 2009: 239). In composing ancient Greek and Roman petitions, scribes “weeded out the trivia” and

fitted a request to the proper form of a concise petition, sometimes with abbreviations used in other documents (Connolly 2009: 53; Hauken 2004: 14; Lewis 1986: 59). More efficiency came from the set sequence of sections with the essential information. Sequencing was dictated by a “primary need to have grievances [and other requests] expressed precisely and succinctly” (Dodd 2009: 239; see also 2007: 279–80, 314). The most common sequence was addressee/addressor/narrative of situation/specific request, although East Asian petitions put the addressee at the end.

Also supporting efficient administrative writing practices were wide margins and blank verso sides on petitions. In these spaces, officials used concise notations to record additional information, decisions, and, when needed, implementing orders to fulfill a petitioner’s request. Ancient and medieval administrations across Eurasia used these arrangements, which “required the very minimum of clerical work” (Baldwin 1913: 376; and see Ch’u 1969: 98; Connolly 2009: 52; Lewis 1986: 59; Reinmuth 1979: 90–93; Rustow 2010: 6; Stern 1962: 197–205). With these annotations, a petition became a mini dossier.

The ubiquity of this petitioning and the structural uniformity of petitions suggests caution in attributing this activity to a “need for justice” or to resemblance to religious prayer (see preceding text). As noted previously, cross-cultural variation in conceptions of justice and religious practices was enormous, vastly exceeding the relative uniformity in petition-and-response. This ubiquity and uniformity are more plausibly explained by imperatives for efficiency and control in the administration of early states. Additional support for this perspective on early petitioning as an instrument of state comes from cross-cultural uniformities in the rhetoric and rationale for requests in petition-and-response.

Rhetoric

Perhaps the sharpest differences between petition-and-response and modern petitions come from rhetorical rules and the rationale for requests. Petition-and-response neither invoked rights nor addressed public opinion. The recurring leitmotif that framed the rhetoric and logic of justification in petition-and-response was benevolent power. In terms of scope and uniformity, petition-and-response was comparable to related practices that invoked benevolent deployments of power, such as patronage and supplication. Paternalist protection in patron-client relations and performative drama in supplicatory acts have close analogues in, respectively, petitionary rhetoric and rituals for presenting petitions in public settings.

Effusively deferential requests in premodern petitions sought benevolent deployments of power. In most instances, we do not know if a petitioner was “truly” deferential—maintaining deferential appearances was what mattered. The very petition, as genre, explicitly denoted humility and distance in contrast to the intimacy of epistolary communication (Koziol 1992: 73).⁴ Deference underpinned the status of

4. The Roman Imperial chancellery had separate departments for issuing *epistulae* in response to letters and *subscriptions* in response to petitions (Hauken 1998: 263, 301, 303).

petitions as a privileged communicative pathway for requests going up the chain of command. English petitions exemplify general practice: opening lines launch deferential rhetoric for lordship, with “humble” requests from “dutiful” petitioners. Fatimid formularies referred to petitioners as slaves, which persisted in Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman petitions; in Old Russian, petitioners were “forehead-knockers”—the obeisant gesture of subjects (Dewey and Kleimola 1970: 284–301; Khan 1990: 24–26; Nielsen 1985: 65; Stern 1962: 191).

Deferential appearances precluded presumption, for example discourses on rights that criticized state policies. Premodern petitions took a different approach to unpopular policies. In early modern Japan, fiscal policy was the prerogative of the Tokugawa Shogunate and it was seditious to petition against prerogative decisions, yet there were many successful petitions for lower taxes due to specific circumstances: “[A]lthough village communities never questioned their obligation to support the state, they contested the amount, the timing, and the nature of particular impositions” (Sippel 1998: 220; and see Kelly 1985: 76; Vlastos 1990: 15, 32–35, 42–43). Revolt and tax evasion were not, as sociologists suggest, the only or principal courses of action by which patrimonial subjects sought to lower tax burdens (Kiser and Linton 2002: 399). The principal difference between legitimate and seditious requests in petitions was whether officials intuited intimations about an unsatisfactory relationship between petitioners and the state, which was more likely when petitions were widely publicized or presented by unruly delegations.

To preclude presumption, petitioners generally avoided “all form of grammatical expression of instruction to the addressee” (Kahn 1990: 20). Instead, they anticipated positive responses by projecting them as acts of grace that magnified the power of addressees. Assisting this projection was a pervasive trope, the “poor” petitioner, implicating positive responses as benevolent acts of charity, and also denoting the hapless condition of petitioners in contrast to the addressee’s power for rendering assistance (Dodd 2009: 230; and see Connolly 2010: 21–22; Dewey and Kleimola 1970: 285; Harries 2001: 165–66, 185–90). The rhetoric that justified requests thus came from the dominant ideologies and their enunciations of power as a source of benevolent assistance to subjects. In the Roman Empire “imperial rhetoric . . . was played back regularly in the language of petitions; the emperor (and his officials) were to be held to their word” (Harries 2001: 214; and see Millar 2006: 157). From the founding of the Shogunate to the Meiji Restoration, Tokugawa villagers did the same in petitions that invoked seigniorial benevolence (Kelly 1985: 76, 130, 144; Vlastos 1990: 152–53; Walthall 1986: 52–60). This invocation tactfully pointed to reciprocity in power relations, an implied “‘covenant’ of mutual obligations” between rulers and loyal subjects (Kelly 1985: 20; and see Koziol 1992: 55–56; Walthall 1986: 55). Petitioners routinely referred to past loyalty and services, intimating that positive responses would redound to the benefit of grantors.⁵ This

5. E.g., claiming that remediation of abusive behavior by landlords and officials would prevent peasant petitioners from fleeing and otherwise enhance their ability to pay taxes (Hallo 1968: 79; Hauken, 2004: 17; 1998: 41, 95–96; Kelly 2011: 37; Vlastos 1990: 34–35; Walthall 1986: 54, 58).

occurred in the formulaic last line in English petitions: “And your petitioner shall ever pray & etc.”—an abbreviated promise to pray for the recipient. Ancient and medieval Near Eastern petitions end with similar promises (Hallo 1968: 77; Khan 1990: 8–9, 12–13).

Reception and Response

Premodern petitioning as an instrument of state had no constitutional or rights-based footing, but there were cross-cultural norms that established receptivity to petitioning as an obligation of rulership. This obligated authorities to receive, though not necessarily grant, petitions that conformed to petitionary etiquette. Paradoxically, effusive rhetorical rhetoric invoked this obligation. In early English petitions, the initial reference to “A nostre Seigneur le Roy” signals subservience but was also “a reminder that the king had an obligation to provide justice and grace” (Dodd 2007: 285). To be sure, receptivity extended only to receipt and did not constrain recipients in deciding to grant, deny or offer alternatives to requests in petitions. However, the discretionary character of benevolent deployments of power in petition-and-response was not antithetical to its consequentiality, just as it was not in patron-client relationships, where decisions by patrons are voluntary but that did not detract from patronage’s importance as “a distinct mode of regulating crucial aspects of the institutional order: the structuring of the flow of resources, exchange and power relations and their legitimation in society” (Eisenstadt and Rongier 1980: 49, and see 56).

Like other aspects of petition-and-response, practices for receiving and responding to petitions were shaped by administrative imperatives. For reception, some rules reflected different conventions for enunciations of state power. From Europe to Central Asia, delivery of petitions commonly occurred in the context of public displays of authority that gave subjects proximity to rulers and high officials.⁶ In East Asia, enunciation highlighted power’s hidden qualities and precluded popular proximity to rulers, who did not receive petitioners in audiences, excepting notables and officials with petitions. Petitioners sometimes approached officials on the road in Imperial China and Tokugawa Japan, but this was associated with rebellion (Fang 2009: 1124; Kelly 1985: 75, 84, 111n). Another variation existed in rules for following the chain of command by initially submitting petitions to local authorities before proceeding to higher levels. In the Ottoman Empire, complaints about local officials often (and understandably) bypassed the local qadi and went directly to Istanbul (Ergene 2003: 45–51; for similar practice in Ming China, see Lin 1979: 52–53). Across Eurasia there was a tendency to follow the chain, especially if a remedy existed at the local level. In the Roman Empire, following the chain was more a custom than mandated rule. Following the chain was more rigorously enforced in

6. A notable exception was the withdrawal of Ottoman Sultans from the public gaze from the late sixteenth centuries, delegating audiences for petitioners to grand viziers and imperial councils.

East Asia (Fang 2009: 1110–11, 1113–14, 1117–19, 1123; Sang-kwön 1998: 109; Vlastos 1990: 43–51, 86–87).

In Europe and Central Asia, the norm of receptivity made petitioning a key ritual in audiences by rulers and officials. This is epitomized in Thomas Roe's account of his embassy to the Mughal court, where Emperor Shah Jahan presents himself "to receive petitions and presents, to give commands, to see, and to be seen" (Foster 1899 [1615–19], I: 106; for other Islamic rulers, see Imber 2002: 170; Rabbat 1995: 15–16; Stern 1962: 195). These rituals not only dramatized power differentials between petitioners and recipients but also helped to manage the workload with designated venues and times when rulers and officials assembled to receive petitions. Across the Islamic world, Fatimid, Mamluk, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal palaces had special balconies and rooms for audiences for petitioners (Fuess 2011: 155–56; Necipoğlu 1993: 313, 315–17). This activity occurred in other stately places, for example, before palace gates where the Fatimid Master of the Gate and the Safavid Grand Vizier routinely appeared "to enable people to present their petitions" (Floor 2007 [c. 1700]: 18; Stern 1962: 195–98). Beyond East Asia, travel by rulers was a routine occasion for submitting petitions, for example, to ancient Achaemenid rulers and their wives. For example, Artaxerxes II, instructed his wife to travel in an open carriage to facilitate the reception of petitions (Briant 2002: 191). Across Islamic civilization, receptivity to petitioners was annexed to mundane travel by rulers. In sixteenth-century Istanbul, Christians, Jews, and Muslims presented petitions to Murad III "as he moved round the city or went to and from Friday prayer, or as he relaxed in one of his many pavilions" (Boyar and Fleet 2010: 37; for similar examples see Haim 1996: 354; Stern 1964: 14; 1966: 242, 265–66). The same holds for English rulers. Petitioners sought Edward I in the midst of military expeditions, disrupted hunting by James I, who "was driven out of the field," and besieged George III at the gate to St. James palace, making it difficult for him to come and go in his carriage (Nichols 1828 I: 497; Poole 2000: 27, 29; Prestwich 1997: 164).

Advice literature for rulers commended the norm of receptivity to petitioners as a pillar of statecraft, sometimes in flattering comparisons of rulers and God. A Safavid treatise compared receptivity to petitioners and divine receptivity to prayers for which there is "no doorman or chamberlain" (Stewart 1996: 400). There was specific advice for the amount of time to devote to petitions. The *Arthashastra*, an ancient treatise on statecraft for Mauryan rulers in India, divided the ruler's day into eight periods, devoting the second to receiving petitions. Greek observers suggest this advice was followed (Mookerji 1966: 58). Islamic civilization supplies abundant evidence on practice conforming to advice for hearing petitions two days a week, which the great Seljuk vizier, Nizam al-Mulk, thought was "absolutely necessary" and was widely followed by Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk rulers in the Near East and by Timurid rulers in Central Asia (Darke 2002 [c. 1090]: 13; and see Abisaab 2004: 93; Fuess 2011: 156; Imber 2002: 155, 172; Khan 2006: 305; Nielsen 1985: 54–55; Rabbat 1995: 3, 15–16). Practice in early modern Europe also conformed to norms of receptivity. After morning mass every Venetian workday, members of the

Collegio sat with the Doge on “a raised dais . . . and for an hour or thereabouts they hold public audience and receive the petitions presented to them, and expedite the business contained in the said petitions” (Chambers and Pullan 2004: 44). In Amsterdam “it was a rule that three of the nine judges alternately were on special duty for one week; it was their task to appear at the town hall half an hour earlier than their colleagues to read petitions” (van Nierop 1997: 284).

The salience of the norm of receptivity underpins remarkable levels of popular participation in petition-and-response.⁷ Requests came from humble and privileged subjects. Early modern petitions to the House of Lords “represented a broad cross section” of English society. “Petitions requesting administration of the massive debts of the Muscovy Company took their place alongside those requesting collection of a £10 obligation” (Hart 1991: 19). In the Roman and Byzantine empires, participation extended to disadvantaged and marginal groups, to “women, slaves and criminals” (Mathisen 2004: 25; cf. Kelly 2011: 124). From the Fatimid caliphate onward, religion was no barrier to petitioning by non-Muslims in the Near East. Even an upsurge in Sunni asceticism in the Ottoman Empire, when alcohol was banned, did not preclude petitioning by despised tavern owners (Ursinus 2005: 3, 27; Yi 2004: 38, 203). Women were well, though not proportionately, represented among petitioners. In Imperial China, about a fourth of petitions with complaints were from women (Macaulay 1998: 5, 192). Only 6 to 8 percent of Ottoman petitions to the Imperial Council came from women in the early eighteenth century; but twice that proportion sent petitions to a provincial capital (Ursinus 2005: 32; Zarinebaf-Shahr 1997: 258). In late-medieval England, women were the addressors of a fifth of the 21,000 petitions for equitable relief in the chancery courts (Haskett 1996: 281–82, 286).

Further light on the administrative forces shaping premodern petitioning comes from the practices for responding to them. Most responses to requests came from high officials and subordinate personnel delegated with the task in ancient and medieval states. Responding was an extended bureaucratic practice that typically involved investigating requests, making and recording decisions, and executing orders for implementation. Seldom could rulers or officials immediately, upon reception, assess requests, so they were assigned for investigation. Instructions to referees most commonly required them to (1) inquire and report findings, (2) inquire and make final determination, or (3) inquire and arbitrate successfully or report findings. A wide range of officials performed this time-consuming work—justices of the peace, local notables, privy counselors, and courtiers did it in England. For even simple requests, there was more work after a decision, which had to be properly recorded as a warrant for performance of the action sought by the petitioner, communicated to petitioners and implementing officials, and archived with the original petition or a summary. As noted in the preceding text, much of this activity is recorded in annotations on the margins and reverse sides of petitions.

7. Equally important was widespread access to scribes, scriveners, and other literate groups that commonly wrote petitioners, *gratis* or as a paid profession, for nonliterate persons.

The administration of petition-and-response imposed a mammoth workload on officials. This is why Safavid advice literature cited divine precedent in commending the norm of receptivity: God “tire of our petitioning” (Stewart 1996: 400). The work exasperated a Seljuk steward when he entered a crowded room: “Every single person there had a petition to give me. My sleeves became full of them . . . so I threw them into a pool.”⁸ Caesar worked on petitions when he attended games at the Circus; other public appearances, such as a morning walk to the Senate, were routine occasions for being pressed to receive petitions. Much of this work descended on officials. “Handling petitions and issuing rescripts [responses] was the never-ending job of the imperial and provincial secretariats” (Harries 2001: 184; and see Connolly 2009: 52; Saller 2002: 58, 61). For medieval and early modern England, historians cite petitioning as evidence of the “day-by-day drudgery of government” (Brown 1989: 18–19) for parliaments and privy councils. The former “had, from its inception, developed mechanisms which helped alleviate the immense burden” (Dodd and McHardy 2010: xlii), and the latter “could scarcely attend to the business of state” (Dawson 1950: 629) because petitions were “the great bulk of the business” (Baldwin 1913: 375).

In summary: across Eurasia, petition-and-response was a remarkably ubiquitous and relatively uniform practice with high levels of popular participation. Practitioners sought a very wide range of goals, and not only redress of grievances, whose achievement required deployments of state power. That exercise of authority was understood, by petitioners and respondents, as a benevolent deployment of power, as was the obligation of respondents to engage this activity. Petition-and-response has many resemblances and connections to patronage—petitioning was a mechanism for requesting patronage from state actors. But unlike that more diffuse form of benevolence, petition-and-response was embedded in and shaped by technical features of the administration of state power. In that activity, the subaltern orientation to the state was neither insurgent, apathetic, nor situated in the middle as a weapon of the weak that quietly undermines state structures, *pace* Scott (1985; 1990).⁹ It was a weapon of the weak, but one premised on acceptance and relatively informed understanding of state power as a resource for assistance with an immense range of opportunities and problems.

Liminal Petitioning and Public Opinion

As an instrument of state for achieving diverse goals, petition-and-response was gradually supplanted by new practices during the late eighteenth century.¹⁰ For

8. Rebuked, the steward retrieved the petitions (Richards 2002 [c. 1233]: 186).

9. For similar criticism of Scott’s weapons-of-the-weak approach to power relations, see Darling, 2013: 7; Liddy and Haemers 2013: 780–82; Vlastos 1990: 16–18, 55–56, 65.

10. For seeking appointments, favors, and other *beneficia* from the state, petition-and-response, under the aegis of reform, came to be equated with corruption and was gradually supplanted by application forms, technical criteria, and written procedures.

expressing grievance, petitioning was acquiring multiple links to public opinion. As practice, framing petitions and gathering signatures mobilized and constituted public opinion; in print, petitions represented and appealed to public opinion. Underpinning this activity was a novel assumption that was not initially perceived as such: petitioning as a right of citizens who invoked other universal rights in support of contentious claims. As we have seen, no such assumption pervaded petition-and-response, which had no connection to public opinion. Instead, grievances were framed in terms of particular interests that were damaged by conditions directly experienced by petitioners. The closest analogy for this mode of grievance would be the standing that gives plaintiffs access to redress in a pleading before a court.

The developing connection to public opinion was an extended, uneven process, occurring at different times and places in junction with campaigns over diverse contentious issues (e.g., the abolition of slavery, the male franchise, women's suffrage, indigenous rights). It occurs precociously in the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution (Knights 2005: 116–62; Zaret 2000, 2009). Elsewhere in Europe, early phases in this development can be seen at the beginning of the next century in Germany, where signatures to strident petitions signal the assumption “that any adult male . . . could and should give his opinion freely on matters of the day”—a “fundamental shift” in Germany and elsewhere in early modern Europe (Luebke 2004: 498, 499; for similar remarks on petitioning by Dutch Patriots and in Colonial America, see Bogin 1988: 394; Te Brake 1988: 150). In Asia, a shift from deferential language of subjects to an idiom of popular rights in petitioning occurs in late Tokugawa and early Meiji developments (Kelly 1985: 20–23, 161, 211–12, 221–29; Walthall 1986: xii–xiii, 84–95). In the early twentieth century, comparable changes occur in Iran and Russia. In 1905–6, insistent petitions to the Russian Duma “became the embodiment and arbiter of the public space which the peasants, through their petitions, were entering for themselves.” In this change, “not only was the petitioning process itself transformed . . . but it in turn transformed the peasant communes’ sense of self and others” (Verner 1995: 72–73; for Iran, see Sohrabi 1999: 282, 284). This link between change in petitioning and new political identities has been detected in antislavery petitions by American women in the first half of the nineteenth-century, in the shift “from a tone of humility to a tone of insistence, reflected an ongoing transformation of the political identify of signers from that of subjects to that of citizens” (Zaeske 2003: 2).

In the English context, innovative aspects of liminal petitioning were minimized, even concealed, by the persistence of many elements of traditional petitionary etiquette. That etiquette’s performative rules made grievance by petition something other than a public, ideological pronouncement that invoked *vox populi*. Petition-and-response comfortably coexisted with communicative norms of secrecy and privilege that limited discourse on contentious topics to the charmed inner circle of ruling elites. Popular discussion of contentious issues was held to have inevitably negative consequences because contemporaries understood the issue as a choice between reasoned debate under conditions of secrecy and privilege, in “councils,” or demagogic oratory in public. The idea that irrationality inversely correlated with

social rank was a central theme in organic and patriarchal conceptions of politics. Under these circumstances, grievance in petitions appeared as apolitical flows of information on local conditions to the political center, with no claims about subordinating politics to popular will.

Liminal petitioning's paradoxical combination of deference and defiance flowed from the persisting salience of communicative norms of secrecy and privilege as well as the patriarchal/organic world views underpinning those norms. Widespread reluctance to embrace a radical critique of those norms and worldviews was abetted by the unquestioned legitimacy of petitionary etiquette. Central to this development, and its paradoxes, is the connection to printing. On the one hand, printed petitions maintained idealized appearances, with solemn title pages and self-referential descriptions of a discrete public performance: information on grievances directly experienced by petitioners, humbly delivered to the petitioned authority. On the other, the very act of printing invoked, implicitly or otherwise, public opinion by putting petitions before an anonymous audience of readers. The explicit intent to do this was occasionally acknowledged in an early phase of this development during the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution, for example in a pamphlet that commends a July 1643 petition, the first manifesto of a nascent Independent party that was intended to be "useful to the less knowing sort of men" (Anon. 1643: A2v). Whether acknowledged, this intent animated the widespread practice of printing copies of petitions for use in gathering signatures, often in a crude, unembellished edition, and then publishing another edition to the public at large. All factions in the English Revolution followed this practice, radical Levellers, Royalists, as well as Independents and Presbyterians (Zaret 2000: 217–65). These practices in the 1640s and 1650s subsequently became legitimating precedents in later petitioning, notably during the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis (1678–82), for example when Tory activists published *Vox Angliae: Or The Voice of the Kingdom* (Anon. 1682), reprinting more than 200 Tory petitions as well as the first collection of Royalist petitions that was published in 1642 at the outbreak of the English Revolution.

Initially, only at the radical margins was there was explicit support for petitioning as an insurgent device that appeals to public opinion. Leveller writers justified this activity by invoking a native right for participating in rival appeals to public opinion on setting a legislative agenda. Even in these quarters, reluctance to acknowledge innovation persisted—these rights were apprehended as an ancient legacy in "the Levellers' dreams of the halcyon days of Edward the Confessor" (Kishlansky 1982: 165). Invocation of natural rights in defense of insurgent, popular petitioning gathers some momentum toward the end of that century, in the Exclusion Crisis and Popish Plot (1678–82), although debates over the relative merits of rival petitions often turn on the issue of whether a petition exhibits the older vocabulary of grievance (Knights 2005: 154–60). A century later, reluctance to acknowledge innovation is diminished but still evident in insurgent petitioning. In competing petition campaigns over the crisis with America in 1775, English petitioners in support of colonial representation appealed "to a broader, more representative panel of public opinion," but did so in the idiom of petition-and-response, describing petitioning as an apolitical flow of

information on “the true state of public affairs” and not an activity that promoted a political party or faction (Bradley 2007: 105, and see 103, 110–11). Amidst agitation in support of radical journalist and politician John Wilkes, petitioners more boldly declaimed, “No one will deny that the meanest individual has a right . . . to advise the people [and parliament], when he thinks the situation of their affairs demands his counsel” (Anon. 1770: 1). By the 1820s, “the notion of a public petition on an unambiguously political matter had gained general acceptance.” Paving the way for this acceptance was an antecedent half century of massive petition campaigns for abolition and an expanded franchise (Pickering 2001: 371; and see Fraser 1961: 209).

As suggested in the preceding text, the connection to printing was central to liminal petitioning and its paradox of deference and defiance. That connection involved more than appealing to public opinion by putting petitions before readers. In addition, printing had big organizational implications. Massive petition campaigns were quickly mounted by circulating printed petitions for activists who collected signatures. This use of printing made petitions a flexible weapon that could respond rapidly to unfolding political developments, as in the huge, rival petition campaigns in the 1680s, which heightened the disjunction between actual practice and traditional petitionary etiquette and appearances. The same holds for massive petition campaigns by the British Chartists, which were more consequential for promoting the identity and solidarity of that movement as opposed to achieving its legislative goals.

Mass mobilization of public opinion in petition campaigns blatantly violated traditional communicative norms of secrecy and privilege. This generated unruly political talk in private places, homes, shops, and taverns where promoters sought subscribers. In such private place, the activity was analogous to the gathering of sectarian congregations, which cut across traditional parish affiliations. Petition campaigns brought together individuals united, not by ward or parish, but by opinion or, in contemporary parlance, faction (Knights 2005: 142–48). Here, too, printed appearances helped to conceal innovative practice. The printed form of petitions concealed place and provenance, deeds and words that unfolded over time in particular places as public opinion was constituted in petition campaigns. Idealized appearances in the final version had no discernible connection to factional (i.e., organizational) circumstances behind a petition campaigns (Zaret 2009: 176, 190–91).

The liminal nature of petitioning during the long eighteenth century also appears in pamphlets and newspaper reports that featured debates over the relative merits of rival petitions. In these debates, a recurring theme is whether the invocation of opinion is a humble grievance or factious libel and sedition. To attack a petition, opponents revealed real (or imaginary) details about backstage activities, for example conversations and events surrounding the gathering of signatures that discredited respectable, frontstage appearances displayed by the printed petition. Other discrepancies between theory and practice presented more rhetorical targets, such as the low social status of subscribers or their status as private persons who, unlike established councils and other corporate entities, had no authority to issue petitions on behalf of a municipality or province.

Thus, a very prolonged gestation forged connections between petitioning, doctrines of natural rights, and modern social movement organization. Developments from the end of the eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries were the culmination of antecedent innovations that occurred mostly at the level of unreflective practice as opposed to explicit implementation of novel political theories. This tension between theory and practice underlies the paradoxical spectacle of deferential petitionary etiquette in the service of defiantly insurgent agitation.

Was liminal petitioning in England similar to developments elsewhere? Certainly, yes, with regard to the big picture, the transition from an instrument of state to one of insurgency. Developments in late Tokugawa Japan do resemble initial phases of liminal petitioning in England. “Because the format of petitions remained unchanged, peasants were able to instill it with a new content and use old assumptions to justify new demands” (Walthall 1986: xiii, and see 84–95). But we need more comparative work on the process and its details. To what extent did this occur as an unreflective process? At a more reflective level, what was the salience of cross-cultural precedents arising from the global diffusion of modern conceptions of natural rights? How did contradictions between deference and defiance shape debates over claims advanced in contentious petitions? Clearly, there are abundant opportunities for new work on the venerable topic of petitioning.

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