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Thinking About History in the European Sixteenth Century: La Popelinière and his Quest for "Perfect History"

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*Thinking About
History in the
European Sixteenth
Century:
La Popelinière
and his Quest for
“Perfect History”*

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[Historians of the past have described history] as the eternal treasury of examples, the pilgrimage of human life, always applicable to all times, the book of kings and magistrates, the mistress of life, the link with antiquity, the life of memory, the light of truth, the witness of time . . . Still, these words of praise won't help you to understand the substance of history . . .¹

In the first two decades of the sixteenth century, a group of French jurists around Andrea Alciato at the University of Bourges, soon to be followed by historians in Paris and elsewhere, began to distance themselves from traditional views and uses of history as a discipline, namely the insatiable antiquarian curiosity about the past (especially that of the ancients) and adhesion to the traditional conception of history as *magistra vitae* as well as the obsession with the rhetorical, “stylistic” dimensions of the historical work (the traditional conception of the *ars historica*).² Bred in a climate of legal humanism with strong Lutheran undertones, they first treated Roman law not as a homogeneous corpus of legislation, but as the historical product of different historical periods, and then introduced this novel element of historicisation into all periods and all aspects of the past.³

Men like François Baudouin, Etienne Pasquier, François Hotman, Jean Bodin and Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière broke sharply with the historical thought of their time, introducing novel dimensions and interpretive tools such as historical causa-

tion, a historicist respect towards all periods and all human cultures (an all-inclusive history) and the extensive application of the principles of a newly founded historical criticism to literary as well as nonliterary sources of the past. Moreover, they felt the need to theorise new methods in historical research, each one from his different perspective.⁴ According to the established line of interpretation in the history of western historiography, their works represented “the highest point of historical consciousness before the continental Enlightenment”.⁵ By the end of the century, the self-conception of the French historical community was drastically altered, heralding trends in the nineteenth century: systematic theory, a quasi-professional authority, community sanction, a regulative code of ethics and, finally, the rise of a professional culture.⁶

Reflecting the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, the new history stemmed from the assumption that there were no medieval historians worthy of the title and, more importantly, that the narrative records of all previous eras were to be treated simply as raw material for the writing of history as they lacked the necessary problematisation:

To understand history is not to remember facts and events . . . the essence of the work of history lies in the knowledge of the motives and true causes of these facts and happenings. There is little use in a fact – even if it is truly and simply reported – if the cause is lacking and the means by which it was brought about. And yet that is all we get from the histories available to us.⁷ (La Popelinière, *Histoire de France*, 1581, 1: 3–4)

The new historians in sixteenth-century France faced history as an interdisciplinary and principally a *hermeneutical* endeavour, that required not only artistic composition but equally systematic assembly and, most importantly, critical interpretation of the evidence.⁸ In the mind of La Popelinière, author of a controversial history of France during the wars of religion and of a major methodological exposition of the new history, the historical work necessitated the presence of the historian, not as it was traditionally conceived (the passive historiographer, the scribe of God) but as a dynamic interpreter of past events:

They say that the historiographer should not give his opinion, because history must be free . . . Thus the historiographer undertakes to describe the events of this world, which are simultaneously divine judgements and decisions; he has to represent them as they occurred . . . Like the scribe of God, by whom he receives his calling . . . to preserve the memory of the most notable occurrences between men . . . (*Histoire des Histoires [HdH]*, 1989 [1599], 2: 232–33) . . . the historian’s opinion is the true and sole key to the secret and great treasures of history. Which otherwise will remain like a device or body without a soul . . . (*HdH*, 2: 235)

. . . The principal and true aim of history is to profit and please everyone. This cannot be better accomplished than by giving liberty to the historian to express his opinion and offer judgement both of his work and of the things he undertakes to recite, according to the good or bad that he will discover. And principally in these two things, that is, the

causes and motives of things, either general or particular, that he will recite . . . (*HdH*, 2: 242) . . . In sum, the true task of the historian is to understand and to make understood (*Idée de l'histoire accomplie [Jha]*, 1989, 28).

By promoting an anthropocentric interpretation of the historical past, the new history appeared to emancipate historical discourse from the grasp of theology.⁹ Moreover, new historians regarded all previous historical accounts as products of history themselves, that is culturally circumscribed; this particular view necessitated a critical approach on the part of the historian.¹⁰ More importantly, the new history, according to La Popelinière, was unmistakably a present-oriented history; it was the present that puzzled the historian and dictated his questions; history was not “a museum of things gone”; “living history” was definitely superior to the dead histories of the ancients.¹¹ New history in the spirit of La Popelinière would also break with the ancient and humanist tradition of eloquence and homogeneity of style; by incorporating uncondensed documents – primary sources – in his history of France, La Popelinière wished to offer his readers the fullest and most accurate possible account of the French wars of religion.¹²

The work of La Popelinière, a Calvinist veteran of the French wars of religion turned new historian, opens a window to the underpinnings of this historicist attitude, as well as to the antinomies of new history in sixteenth-century France. It primarily reveals a close – and, in the case of La Popelinière, a desperately contested – link between new history and the Protestant conception of history.

During the Reformation crisis, rival readings of the history of the Church brought forth a pluralism of religious history, undermining the master narrative of Christian universal history; at the same time, they engendered a major historicisation of the past, with massive investigations into the sources of medieval and early Christian history.¹³ To the Protestants, the history of the Church had a hidden message, a sense to be revealed; “events in ecclesiastical history became signs, which were integrated in a coherent semiological system and which attested to the usurpation of authority on the part of the Roman popes, as did the historical and clandestine continuity of the ‘witnesses of truth,’ the Protestant martyrs of the faith.”¹⁴

Protestant millenarianism partly stemmed from the reformers’ attack on the nonscriptural doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church; on the other hand, the equation of the Pope with the late medieval figure of the Antichrist served as the most powerful weapon in Protestant propaganda.¹⁵ Melanchthonian history projected a tripartite periodisation (the founding of the Church, medieval degeneration, final restoration), analogous to the “threefold humanist scheme of a bright antiquity, a dark middle ages, and a rebirth of new learning”.¹⁶ This would be closely followed by Protestant historians writing in times of crisis, as was the case of François Hotman’s *Francogallia*, published immediately after the Saint Bartholomew Day massacre, an impressive historical composition which called for the return to the constitutional purity of the “first Franco-gallian system of government”. The connection between the divine word and history, the development of church history within a national context, and the emphasis on the unbroken chain of witnesses, the Protestant martyrs, emerged as key attributes in Protestant historical writing.¹⁷

Present experience was the common motivation behind both the Protestant drive to return to

the remote past and discover its roots and the need to ascribe it to the providential plan.¹⁸ It is important to bear in mind that the Protestant version of the past, a collective endeavour by an international community of scholars, a “kind of Protestant Pleiade”, as described by Donald Kelley, reflected in many cases the bitter experience of war and exile. In the France of the wars of religion and especially following the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre, Calvinist anticipation of the coming divine vengeance, and the belief that this would lead to the decline and fall of the persecuting monarchical state, became a commonplace in their reconstructions of the past.¹⁹

French Calvinist martyrology not only sought to strengthen the morale of the persecuted faithful by presenting them with edifying tales of courage and heroic martyrdom for the truth of the Gospel, but it actually attempted to offer an all-embracing historical explanation for the apparently impossible situation facing the French Protestant minority, based on the providential plan. As such, it evolved in accordance with the new circumstances, integrating the increasing number of martyrs into a general history of the Church of Christ, empirically founded on the new historical sources that represented the interrogations and confessions of faith of the martyrs. Jean Crespin’s history of the martyrs gradually became a “true ecclesiastical history” in close correspondence (in its 1582 edition) with Theodore Beza’s *Histoire ecclesiastique*.²⁰

The struggle against tyrannical Rome, the seat of the Antichrist, led to the eventual collapse of commonly shared western myths, like that of the four monarchies,²¹ and bred nationalism in historical writing, especially for those non-Italian nations that had been born “barbarian”; on the other hand, history emerged as a privileged field of confrontation between rival reconstructions not only of the common Christian but also of national pasts. The reality of the wars of religion in France imposed the necessity for both rival parties to seek historical and political legitimacy for their respective causes.²² For the Protestant camp, the work of La Popelière represented by far the most conspicuous effort for a new historicisation of the French national past, this time based on the incorporation of the national catastrophe into a broader, European interpretive context that included the history of the longstanding rivalry between the Habsburgs and the Valois as well as the history of the Reformation:

There would be little profit . . . in describing the wars waged by Charles V and his son Philip against the kings of France – or the great religious revolution within the Christian world and the civil wars which ensued – if this were done . . . leaving the sources and the evolution of the hostilities between these two monarchies unexplained and the origin and progress of the Reformation a mystery (*Histoire de France*, 1: 3–4).

By going back to the Gauls as the historical ancestors of sixteenth-century Frenchmen, the new history in France promoted this nationalist spirit.²³ It proposed a reconstruction of the French national past with a cause, a precise point of view. According to George Huppert, it offered the embattled French “a new secular perspective from which to judge the past: the idea of the nation”.²⁴ Sixteenth-century French historiography was thus promoting an archaeology of French national identity; especially, the free-born, patriotic Gaulois emerged as the ideal type for the French people in Calvinist historiography following the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre.²⁵ For all their more sceptical attitude towards old and established mythologies – such as the “Trojan origins of the nation” – the new historians felt the urge for a nationally based history of France

that would promote a new collective self-understanding and, most importantly, national cohesion. And although one could argue, together with Claude-Gilbert Dubois, that the “Celtomania” of the mid-sixteenth century had matured into a critical “Celtophilia” in the work of La Popelinière, the new history was promoting an equally mythical foundation of French national identity.²⁶

From this central idea of national history stemmed the new historians’ promotion of universal history of all nations and peoples:²⁷

... A proper history will be a general, eloquent and judicious narrative ... of the most notable actions of men and other occurrences, represented according to the times, places, their causes, progress and results (*Iha*, 35–36) ... And because [history] is the narrative of times, preserved in the memory of all things and a true collection of everything that pertains to every form of state: and particularly a narrative of everything that relates to all human orders and conditions ... Besides, history must comprehend the diverse nature, habits, customs and ways of doing of the people about whom she talks. Specifically the origin, progress, changes and all other notable occurrences that happened to them ... (*HdH*, 2: 78).

The interpretive tradition of French legal humanism, combined with Protestant providential history, pushed new historians to explore historical causation in its temporal dimension, tracing the causes of events back to their beginnings in the very remote past.²⁸ In La Popelinière’s work, the equation of “causes” with “origins” reflected a new conception of historical causation, tied to historical entities and historical processes and not simply to events; to understand the history of a people one should go to their origins and specifically focus on the evolution of their institutional structure, the “form” of their state.²⁹

In this quest, anything human could be claimed as a valuable source of information for the historian’s narrative, as a truly “general history” ought to be “the representation of everything” (*HdH*, 2: 71). New historians like La Popelinière pushed their field of investigation well beyond the accepted primary material of traditional *historia*:³⁰ “The word *ἱστορεῖν* means to enquire, to know and to narrate, and it refers to all forms of knowledge ... every discourse, human, natural or divine. Even fables will be history ...” (*Iha*, 2: 23); history emerged as a federalist science, a work of synthesis.³¹ Moreover, La Popelinière’s seemingly endless collection of historical data in his proposed new history of France differed sharply from early modern antiquarianism, as he subordinated his material to the general structure of his proposed study.³² The historian was no longer a mere collector of facts; he was a critical interpreter, a true philosophical historian.³³

La Popelinière’s *Histoire des Histories* proposed to his fellow scholars a blueprint for the evolution of the historical discipline across the world, from its distant origins in folk memory to its current state. His principal task was to show that the development of history followed the same pattern everywhere in the world and, equally, that every historical culture was the product of its own circumstances. In describing the various stages of the evolution of the historical discipline, La Popelinière refrained from imposing an evaluating scheme that would point to the existence of “higher historical cultures”. Moreover, even in its more advanced stages of development, as in Roman historiography, the writing of history was socially and culturally circumscribed. La

Popelinière's recognition of the subjectivity of the historian as a producer of history made him acknowledge that "perfect history" was ultimately impossible; he tried to counterbalance this by proposing to his peers a historical method based on historical criticism.³⁴

It has been argued, principally by Zachary Schiffman, that historical relativism, evident in the work of La Popelinière and his co-workers in new history, proved to be a "disturbing intellectual phenomenon", which ultimately made new historians revert to traditional concepts and views of history, either by transcending it, like Hotman, or by trying to impose order in the anarchic state of historical reality.³⁵ The latter reaction was particularly evident in La Popelinière's "classificatory impulse", which made his history of France a "vast repository" of data pertaining to his subject. Going through the hundreds of pages of exhaustive lists of data that distort La Popelinière's narrative, the modern reader cannot feel but disturbed and indeed bored.

One could argue that Schiffman's depiction of the "unbearable weight" of historical relativism in late sixteenth-century France smacks of anachronism and reveals a quasi-linear conception of the evolution of historical thought from the ancient times to the present, in the fashion of the mainstream historians of historiography (Huppert and Kelley, principally) whom he criticises. The debate among historians of historiography has long reflected a fundamentally ahistorical, retrospective evaluation of the "historicist dimensions" in the historical production of the sixteenth century. For reasons of "symbolic capital" on the part of historians (the need to stress continuity, the link with past and long-revered historical production, despite the apparent radicalism of new proposals and methodological orientations), we are often left with the impression of a *continuum* in historical thought.

La Popelinière and his colleagues wrote at a time of crumbling certainties and of crumbling empires, real and mythical. Their microcosm was saturated with new knowledge, as a result of European colonial expansion. On the other hand, the internationalisation of the Reformation crisis and the ensuing wars of religion – which were increasingly depicted as civil wars – indeed produced a historical anxiety, a need to grasp novel realities of an unprecedented scale, in the educated milieu of the new historians, something that attests to the impressive popularity of history in France in the second half of the sixteenth century;³⁶ theirs was a *culture de robe*, and it was imbued with history.³⁷ It may have been that the principal design of the French new historians in the late sixteenth-century was to question and ultimately overthrow Italian superiority as the founding myth in European history.³⁸ It may also be that La Popelinière remained within the confines of historical critique as engagement with and not as a withdrawal, to use Antonis Liakos' remarks at the *Historein* conference, from which this volume derives. In any case, like every good historian, La Popelinière felt that "part of that process of commitment was to dissent from orthodoxies", thus claiming his "duty of discontent".³⁹

NOTES

- 1 La Popelinière, *L'Histoire des histoires: L'Idée de l'histoire accomplie*, Paris: Fayard, 1989 [1599], 2:22–23.
- 2 Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, 68; Gianna Pomata and Nancy Siraisi (eds), *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*, MIT Press, 2005, 5–12.
- 3 Donald Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance*, Columbia UP, 1970, 100–103.
- 4 Philippe Desan, *Penser l'histoire à la Renaissance*, Caen: Paradigme, 1993, 11–23.
- 5 Donald Kelley, "Historia Integra: François Baudouin and his Conception of History", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25:1 (1964): 35–57 (37).
- 6 Donald Kelley, "Johann Sleidan and the Origins of History as a Profession", *Journal of Modern History* 52:4 (1980): 573–98 (598).
- 7 La Popelinière, *Histoire de France*, 1581, 1:3–4
- 8 George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History: Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970, 32, 46–48, 59–60; Grafton, *What was History?* 68, 96.
- 9 Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *La conception de l'histoire en France au XVI^e siècle*, Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1977, 23.
- 10 Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History*, 161–62; Myriam Yardeni, "La conception de l'histoire dans l'oeuvre de La Popelinière", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 11:2 (1964): 109–126 (124–25).
- 11 Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History*, 148–150; Dubois, *La conception de l'histoire en France*, 130; Desan, *Penser l'histoire à la Renaissance*, 204.
- 12 George Wylie Sypher, *La Popelinière: Historian and Historiographer*, PhD thesis, Cornell University (1961), 68–69.
- 13 Donald Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Enquiry from Herodotus to Herder*, Hew Haven: Yale UP, 1998, 169–70; Anna Minerbi-Belgrado, *L'avènement du passé: La Réforme et l'Histoire*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004, 69.
- 14 Dubois, *La conception de l'histoire*, 32–33; Cécile Huchard, *D'encre et de sang: Simon Goulart et la Saint-Barthélemy*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007, 26–27.
- 15 Howard Hotson, "The Historiographical Origins of Calvinist Millenarianism", in Bruce Gordon (ed.), *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol 2, *The Later Revolution*, Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996, 161–64, R.W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981, 148–89.
- 16 Kelley, *Faces of History*, 170, Minerbi-Belgrado, *L'avènement du passé*, 20; Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity. Relativism in the French Renaissance*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991, 50.
- 17 Gordon, "The Changing Face of Protestant History", 14–15.
- 18 Minerbi-Belgrado, *L'avènement du passé*, 24–26, 62; Gordon, "The Changing Face of Protestant History and Identity in the Sixteenth Century", 4; David Watson, "Jean Crespin and the Writing of History

- in the French Reformation", in Bruce Gordon (ed.), *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol 2, *The Later Reformation*, 43–44.
- 19 Donald Kelley, "Martyrs, Myths, and the Massacre: The Background of St. Bartholomew", *The American Historical Review* 77:5 (1972): 1323–42 (1325, 1328–29).
- 20 Frank Lestringant, *Lumière des martyrs: essai sur le martyre au siècle des Réformes*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004, 36–38, 122–24, Huchard, *D'encre et de sang: Simon Goulart et la Saint-Barthélemy*, 58, Minerbi-Belgrado, *L'avènement du passé*, 26, 58.
- 21 George Huppert, "The Renaissance Background of Historicism", *History and Theory* 5:1 (1966): 48–60 (56); Antonis Liakos, "Utopian and Historical Thinking: Interplays and Transferences", *Historein* 7 (2007): 20–57 (21–28); Minerbi-Belgrado, *L'avènement du passé*, 62.
- 22 Kelley, "Johann Sleidan and the Origins of History as a Profession", 585.
- 23 Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History*, 38; Desan, *Penser l'histoire à la Renaissance*, 68–69.
- 24 Huppert, "The Renaissance Background of Historicism", 54.
- 25 Desan, *Penser l'histoire à la Renaissance*, 79; Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois au XVIe siècle: Le développement littéraire d'un mythe nationaliste*, Paris: J. Vrin, 1972, 109–10.
- 26 Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois au XVIe siècle*, 124–25.
- 27 Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship*, 139–40, 303–305; Huppert, "The Renaissance Background of Historicism", 59.
- 28 Zachary Sayre Schiffman, "An Anatomy of Historical Revolution in Renaissance France", *Renaissance Quarterly* 42:3 (1989): 507–533 (519).
- 29 *Ibid.*, 519–20.
- 30 Desan, *Penser l'histoire à la Renaissance*, 208–210.
- 31 Yardeni, "La conception de l'histoire dans l'oeuvre de La Popelinière", 118.
- 32 Huppert, "The Renaissance Background of Historicism", 58–59.
- 33 Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History*, 149–50.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 161–65; Dubois, *La conception de l'histoire en France au XVIe siècle*, 132–34; Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship*, 140–41; Desan, *Penser l'histoire à la Renaissance*, 212–13; Yardeni, "La conception de l'histoire dans l'oeuvre de La Popelinière", 124–25.
- 35 Schiffman, "An Anatomy of Historical Revolution in Renaissance France", 510, 532–33, Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity*, 4–5.
- 36 In his bibliographical essay in the *Annales*, Corrado Vivanti counted 657 history books published in France between 1550 and 1610. Of these 271 were first editions and 386 reimpressions. More than half of this publishing activity was concentrated in the years from 1560 to 1588. Corrado Vivanti, "Paulus Aemilius Gallis condidit historias?" *Annales ESC* 19 (1964), 1117–24.
- 37 Dubois, *La conception de l'histoire en France*, 15; Grafton, *What was History?* 231.
- 38 Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship*, 306; Kelley, *Faces of History*, 179–81.
- 39 Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, Alun Munslow (eds), "Introduction", in *Manifestos for History*, London: Routledge, 2007, 1.