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Review of: Howell A. Lloyd, Jean Bodin, “This pre-eminent Man of France”. An Intellectual Biography

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Howell A. Lloyd,
*JEAN BODIN, "THIS PRE-EMINENT MAN OF FRANCE":
AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY,*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 311 pages.

This book, written by Howell A. Lloyd, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Hull, an authority on medieval and early modern English and European history, joins the catalogue of the new research and publications dedicated to Jean Bodin on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of his death (Angers 1529/30–Laon 1596).¹ “Ce premier homme de la France,” as he was styled by Gabriel Naudé in 1653, he was respected by Montaigne and Pierre Bayle but was sharply criticised by Justus Lipsius and Hugo Grotius. A controversial figure, with certain obscure points in his life

– his name, being common, is a factor – Bodin provoked intense debates and disagreements among scholars.² Lloyd, discussing these differences, fills in the gap in the existing literature and offers a primarily “intellectual” biography of the sixteenth-century French philosopher as a follow-up to the collective work *The Reception of Bodin*, which he also edited.³

Lloyd gives certain biographical information on Bodin that mainly concerns his education and professional advancement, always in relation to his work and his times. The son of an affluent textile merchant, Bodin was educated by

¹ See, indicatively, Artemio Enzo Baldini (ed.), *Jean Bodin a 400 anni dalla morte: Bilancio storiografico e prospettive di ricerca; Atti del Convegno internazionale per il quattro centenario della morte di Jean Bodin, Torino, 6–7 dicembre 1996*, Florence: Olschki, 1997 and Gabriel-André Pérouse, Nicole Dockès-Lallement and Jean-Michel Servet (eds.), *L'œuvre de Jean Bodin: Actes du colloque tenu à Lyon à l'occasion du quatrième centenaire de sa mort (11–13 janvier 1996)*, Paris: H. Champion, 2004. His works have been digitised and are available online at the Bodin Project at Harvard University (<http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/bodinproject>), which also includes a comprehensive bibliography.

² In 1734, Pierre Bayle published the first critical biography of Bodin and compiled a catalogue of his works as well. Lloyd notes the relative absence of contemporary synthetic biographies of Bodin, citing, nevertheless, the research into and publications of various works of his by Roger Chauviré (1914), Pierre Mesnard (1951), Kenneth D. McRay (1962), Vittor Ivo Comparato (1981) and Paul Rose (1980). See, also, Marie-Dominique Couzinnet, “Note biographique sur J. Bodin”, in *Jean Bodin: nature, histoire, droit et politique*, ed. Yves C. Zarka, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, pp. 233–244.

³ *The Reception of Bodin*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.

the Carmelites in Angers and Paris, where he was introduced to the study of theology and scholastic Aristotelian philosophy, something apparent in his writings, while he also came into contact with Platonic philosophy. Deciding against an ecclesiastical career – indeed, he might have been accused of heresy – he left the Carmelites and continued his studies at the universities of Nantes and, particularly, Toulouse, where intense debates were taking place in academic circles among conservatives and humanists who had studied in Italy, specifically in Padua. Influenced by the French *studia humanitatis* flourishing in the mid-sixteenth century, he began his career as a writer with the publication of the Latin translation of Oppian's *Cynegetica*, richly annotated and adhering to the free translation method promoted by Étienne Dolet. As a result, he was attacked by Adrien Turneve (who published the poem in Greek) Joseph Scaliger and Hugo Grotius, while he was also accused of appropriating the work of others. Lloyd provides a detailed commentary on Bodin's translation, citing all the sources of his footnotes, which demonstrate his broad erudition, and noting the skilfulness of his translation. With this translation, Bodin took a stand in the Republic of Letters in support of *utilitas* and *honestas*, that is, of a humanistic education that would prepare citizens for public office, as he argued in the *Oratio* he delivered in 1559 before the "Senate and the people of Toulouse", in accordance with the teachings of Agricola, Erasmus and Ramus, readying the ground for the establishment of two colleges in Toulouse.

Bodin would choose to put his knowledge and rhetorical skill at the

service of the law and the "battlefield of the forum", rather than academia. While a lawyer in the Parliament of Paris, he published the *Juris universi distributio* (1578, 1580), where, drawing on Aristotle, Plato and the Stoics, he mostly treated Roman law and the universality of the law that encloses *iusprudentia* and aspires to *iustitia*. His enthusiasm for public discourses is also apparent in the *Lettre à Bautru* (1562), where he addressed philosophical and theological issues in the context of the religious and civil wars among Protestants and Catholics that convulsed Europe for a century.

Theological and philosophical issues are also discussed in the first of Bodin's five great works, entitled *Methodus ad facilem cognitionem historiarum* (1566), where he developed the relationship of history with the true religion and the interpretation of the law. For Bodin, the quest for the events and causes of the three modes of history (human, natural, divine) was not centred on authority but on reason, assisted by wisdom, prudence and the arts, especially geography. Lloyd thoroughly analyses Bodin's position on the role of God as father of nature (*naturae parens*) relative to that of Jewish, classical and modern philosophers, as well as his position on the unity and cohesion of the universe, which, drawing on Strabo and Ptolemy, couples geography and cosmography. Bodin also focused on the views of philosophers, Aristotle especially, and historians regarding the issue of *respublica* and the definition of such concepts as citizen, imperium, sovereignty, law, etc. The *Methodus* achieved his purpose: to continue his search for the "universal law" through a historical perspective.

Bodin's theoretical interest in economic issues, already evident in the *Methodus*, is also apparent in the short treatise *Response... au paradoxe de monsieur de Malestroit* (1568), where he expressed mostly ethical considerations that sought an end to abuses. His interest in politics was also manifested in the context of the religious wars when he translated from Latin into French the *Epistola* of his patron, Guy du Faur de Pibrac. Written to a Polish noble, it justified the Saint Bartholomew's Eve Massacre (1572), and Bodin amended certain passages to accord with his own world view. His views are fully presented in the magnificent *Six Livres de la République* (1576). In this, his most fundamental and successful work (11 revised editions until his death; his own, revised, Latin translation in 1585; translations into Italian, Spanish, German and English), Bodin analysed old and contemporary legal texts (780 references culled primarily from Roman law, though he also delved into feudal law, French law and the law of other countries) within a broad theoretical framework (1,087 references mentioning a total of 93 names; primarily Italian jurists of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance and, among the more recent, Niccolò Machiavelli, Gasparo Contarini and Thomas More) and using various sources (manuscripts, correspondence, treatises, legal and diplomatic texts, the Bible, classical authors). Lloyd analyses the work's structure and themes, their concepts, definitions and content (republic, citizen, sovereignty, state, magistrates, government, religion, justice, harmony) in relation to Bodin's sources, references and original thought.

The *Six Livres de la République*, which contributed to Bodin's reception by the Académie du Palais of Henri III, and the journal *Recueil de tout ce qui est négocié en la compagnie des trois Estats*, published anonymously in French and Latin in 1577, were used by the Estates General of Blois to analyse historical, legal and philosophical issues. The result was the formulation of the *Ordonnances du Blois*, the greatest legal undertaking in sixteenth-century France. However, his involvement in politics cost him, resulting in rivalries, Pibrac's displeasure and the search for a new patron in the person of the Duke of Anjou; this was, in his view, a symptom of the spiritual crisis France was facing.

This spiritual crisis would be the subject of his work *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (1580), a topic that had engaged thinkers from Aristotle to Aquinas, and was particularly timely in the sixteenth century, when witch trials were a frequent phenomenon. Bodin accepted demonism and the corporeality of demons, considered both white and black magic impious, and supported punishing witches to obtain their confession. Demonstrating no tolerance, his only concession was mitigating the torture of anyone who repented. The *Démonomanie* continues the work of the *République*, exploring the negative aspect of society and the dialectic of good and evil, highlighting the need for catharsis from the moral and spiritual threat. In 1592, the book joined the *République*, banned two years earlier, on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*.

Bodin's work would affect his professional advancement. He settled in Laon and became involved in the popular

unrest incited by ecclesiastical and other circles against Henri III, anonymously publishing the *Lettre d'un lieutenant général*, in which he took a stand in support of the will of the people and the law, because, as he had maintained in the *République*, the kings of France ascended the throne *en vertu de la loi du Royaume* rather than through election or succession. Seeking, like other humanists, such as Erasmus, to educate the sovereigns, in the late 1570s/early 1580s he published the *Consilium de institutione principis aut alius nobilioris ingenii* (originally in French), where after first counselling piety, he presented a programme with an academic content. The collection *Sapientiae moralis epitome* (1588), comprising 210 Latin moral maxims, was composed during a period devoted to educating his two sons. So too was the *Universae naturae theatrum* (1596), which owes much to Aristotle's *Physics*. It deals with the "science of nature", whose creator and master is God, while the "theatre" denotes harmony and beauty, an aesthetically pleasing repository of knowledge that has the pedagogical form of a dialogue between two characters in a student-teacher relationship. Just like his previous works, it contains more references to classical, Neoplatonic, Jewish and Arab philosophers, as well as to the Church Fathers, than to contemporary historians, astronomers, physicists, philosophers and theologians. References to the Bible increase towards the end of the work, which, however, is essentially based on the undeniable authority of Holy Scripture and divine law, while at the same time, recognising the authority of "experimental knowledge" (*Experientia rerum magistra*) and the significant role

played by motion and change. Annexed to the *Theatrum* is the *Io Bodini Paradoxon*, a text covering moral, theological and political issues, in the form of a dialogue between father and son. Included in a 1591 letter to a French parliamentarian, it provides interpretations of France's experience of the religious wars. It would be published separately in 1598, in a French translation by Bodin.

In the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis*, which, however, was published in the nineteenth century (1857), Bodin tackled the divine mode of history and compared religions, demonstrating a spirit of religious tolerance and moderation. He adopted the form of a dialogue among seven representatives of different religions, dogmas and sciences (Catholic, Calvinist, natural philosopher, Lutheran mathematician, Jew, Muslim), engaged in a friendly discussion over dinner. A narrator is also present. The central theme is harmony and peace, while familiar themes from his previous works are also repeated. The numerous arguments and proofs are based on religious sources, Christian and other, and on material from different disciplines. The *Colloquium* does not discover a universal religion – corresponding to the prototype of a universal law that had engaged the young Bodin's interest – and there is no melding of religions. Each participant retains his own religion, yet there is no conflict of religions; all contribute to supporting the effort to discover a *modus vivendi* among the communities that had prevailed after the religious wars.

Summarising, Lloyd highlights elements of Bodin's controversial personality, while seeking to strike a fair balance.

Setting aside Scaliger's unfair assessment that accused Bodin of lacking moral value (he composed the anagram "*Ioannes Bodinus, Andinus sine bono*"), he presents someone who was ambitious, reached high social circles and offices, had an impressive erudition, which he did not always utilise wisely, was a misogynist, intellectually arrogant and aggressively judgmental about other scholars, such as Aristotle, who, however, had a decisive influence on the development of his thinking. Nevertheless, Bodin possessed a high sense of justice, zealously fulfilled the duties of the positions he attained, while he frequently risked his personal safety and career in the name of his principles. Moreover, even though his *vita activa* was not as successful as expected, he was able to fulfil the goals of his *vita contemplativa* through a comprehensive literary output that led to the path of knowledge and virtue. The book concludes with a

note regarding how common the name Jean Bodin was, a catalogue of his work (contemporary and later editions up until 2016), an extensive bibliography and an index.

Howell A. Lloyd, engaging in a constant dialogue between individual and general history, clearly describes in a detailed and methodical manner the socio-cultural landscape of the period and of every city Bodin lived in; he tracks Bodin's intellectual journey closely, outlining the profile of a typical Renaissance man, who, imbued with intellectual optimism and an insatiable thirst for knowledge, frequently came into conflict with his conservative environment. This is, undoubtedly, a synthetic reference work for anyone studying Bodin and his times.

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